

ULTIMATE TRAINING SERIES

BETTER > BITTER

HOW DO I DEAL WITH SUFFERING?

PREFACE	v.
INTRODUCTION	2
The Reality of Suffering	
CHAPTER ONE	6
Reasons for Suffering	
CHAPTER TWO	15
Responses to Suffering	
CHAPTER THREE	24
Redeeming Our Suffering	
CHAPTER FOUR	32
Rejoicing in Suffering	
CONCLUSION	41
Refined by Suffering	

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BIBLE STUDY	44
<i>A Six-Week Bible Study on the Better > Bitter Principle</i>	
WEEK ONE	46
The Approval of Others	
WEEK TWO	52
Blindsided	
WEEK THREE	58
Undeserved	
WEEK FOUR	63
Can't Catch a Break	
WEEK FIVE	68
Forgotten and Alone	
WEEK SIX	72
Seeing the Light	

PREFACE

This is the fourth book in the Ultimate Training Series—a series aimed at unpacking the five principles taught predominantly at Athletes in Action®’s Ultimate Training Camp®. These five principles are part of a unique curriculum developed by Athletes in Action staff over the last 45 years. They will give you a biblical framework to help you see sport as an opportunity to worship God, so that you can participate in sport in a way that honors him.

“The Principles” are the gospel applied to sport, experienced through sport, and spoken in the language of sport.

Each principle takes a different story from the Bible and applies the principle from that story to sport and competition. They cover topics like worship, idolatry, motivation, identity, growth, pain, and perspective.

The beauty of these principles is that they come directly from God’s Word and apply to life beyond sport as well. Don’t limit them to your athletic career. Apply them to your studies, business career, relationships, finances—every area of life.

INTRODUCTION

The Reality of Suffering

Abbey Cooper toed the starting line of the 5,000 meter semifinal at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The top runners would go on to race in the finals, and a shot at an Olympic medal, a few days later. Abbey was no stranger to championship racing. She won seven NCAA titles while running for Dartmouth College. A medal wasn't out of the question.

The semifinal started smoothly. But midway through the race, Nikki Hamblin of New Zealand stumbled and fell to the track. Abbey, who was tucked in behind Nikki, tripped over her and fell hard to the ground, tearing her ACL and meniscus in the process.

Abbey and Nikki lay helpless, in an emotional and physical wreck, as the pack—and their dreams—raced away. Nikki appeared content to stay down, realizing that her shot at the final vanished with each step her competitors took. But Abbey rose to her feet, wobbling.

What she did next has replayed across screens all over the world since the 2016 Games as the model of the Olympic spirit. Instead of hopping off the track, or even continuing the race on her own, she chose to help Nikki to her feet, encouraging her to finish the race.

The last half of the race was a grind. The two women set off together, but Abbey soon collapsed again because of her injured knee. Nikki returned the favor by helping her back up, and Abbey managed to limp to a last place finish, a full two minutes behind the other competitors. But she crossed the finish line with a huge grin and her arms raised as if she had won. Then she approached Nikki and the two shared a tearful and oddly joyous embrace.

How is this type of perspective possible?

After the race, Abbey, who was honored with the International Fair Play Award by the International Olympic Committee and the Jack Kelly Fair Play Award from the U.S. Olympic Committee, said:

Honestly, everything just happened so quickly. There was no time for decision making. It was just instinctual, automatic thought and that truly assures me that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that allowed me to respond in that way. My heart had just been prepared. And that explains the action of us helping each other up and all of that. Because if I took time to think about it really, I would have been devastated.¹

We'll circle back to Abbey's statement that "my heart had just been prepared" at the end of this book.

Pain and suffering seem to be intrinsically linked to human existence. It was once said that at any given time you're either entering a trial, experiencing a trial, or exiting a trial in your life. Those sentences probably bring up scars from your past: loved ones who died unexpectedly, shattered and abandoned relationships, betrayal, injuries, sickness.

Maybe you didn't fall during the Olympics, preventing you from winning a medal. But you've experienced an injury. And you've probably experienced what it feels like to fall short of a long-pursued goal. The point is not to compare trials with one another, but to point out that we all have them. They just come in different forms for each of us. We can even step outside of sport when talking about trials and setbacks.

Life is hard.

Let's pause for a moment and define a few terms before moving forward.

Trial: something circumstantially difficult that happens to you

Suffering: the pain that you experience as a result of a trial

Pain: something you feel that hurts

Our experiences in sport fit within those definitions. Injuries, losses, benchings, bad calls, slumps, coach/teammate tension, and more—these all fall under one of the three categories above.

Sometimes it feels like sports invent new ways for us to suffer and experience pain.

How could Abbey Cooper ever have predicted that she would win seven NCAA titles, make the U.S. Olympic Team, fall in the Olympic 5,000

¹ <https://usopm.org/abbey-dagostino-cooper-uses-her-story-to-share-olympic-values/>.

meter semifinal, help her opponent up, limp to the finish line, and be remembered within the track community for that moment? Knowing what she knows now, would she wish that her Olympic experience had ended differently? Would she have traded the chance for a medal willingly, knowing that the legacy she'd leave by falling and serving an opponent would most likely prove to be the greater one? Would you choose differently if given that option? How would you respond in similar circumstances?

Suffering is guaranteed in life. It's guaranteed in sport.

What are we supposed to do about life's hardships? More importantly, what is God's role in them, and what does he expect us to do about them?

**SUFFERING IS
GUARANTEED
IN LIFE. IT IS
GUARANTEED
IN SPORT.**

That's the purpose of this book. It's about dealing with pain and suffering in sports—and life—in ways that honor God—just like Abbey did.

Our playbook for facing hardship comes right from God's Word. It's the story of Joseph, found in Genesis chapters 37-50—a surprisingly large section of

Scripture devoted to one person's life. The amount of detail we are given is fascinating. Joseph's life serves as a master class on dealing with pain and suffering in a way that glorifies God. If you're unfamiliar with the story, you might want to take some time to read those chapters right now.

JOSEPH: LESSONS IN SUFFERING

Joseph was his father's favorite son. His twelve brothers knew this and despised Joseph for it. To be fair to them, Joseph didn't do himself any favors—he spoke poorly of the others and wasn't shy about telling them about his dreams, which indicated that one day he'd rule over them. Unsurprisingly, Joseph's brothers became angry and jealous. And what they did next definitely disqualified them from any future hopes of winning brother of the year.

While his brothers were working far away from the home, Joseph's father, Jacob, sent him to find them and report back on how they were doing. His brothers saw Joseph approaching from a distance and made a plan together to kill him.

Luckily for Joseph, they changed their mind. Unluckily for Joseph, they sold him into slavery instead.

Joseph was shipped off to Egypt and became a slave to a man named Potiphar, who was the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Despite this unfortunate circumstance, Genesis 39:2 tells us that "The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man." Potiphar put him in charge of his whole house, and the household experienced great blessing.

But just as things were trending in the right direction, Potiphar's wife accused Joseph, falsely, of rape. Joseph was sent to prison and forgotten about—by everyone except God. Genesis 39:21 says, "But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison." As before, Joseph was given a position of oversight, this time over the other prisoners, and God's blessing again followed.

Years later, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had a disturbing dream that no one could interpret or explain for him. Luckily for him, one of his servants remembered a prisoner (Joseph) who could interpret dreams, as Joseph had done for this particular servant in the past. Pharaoh summoned Joseph and was so impressed with his God-given insights that he removed him from prison and elevated him to be governor over Egypt, second in command behind only Pharaoh himself.

Joseph had discerned that Pharaoh's dream was God's way of revealing that seven years of productive harvests would be followed by seven years of famine. Armed with God's wisdom and insight, Joseph wisely stored up grain in Egypt during the seven good years. When the famine struck, Egypt had enough to provide food for themselves as well as to help other famine-stricken nations. And it just so happened that Joseph's brothers showed up in Egypt one day to buy food, completely unaware that Joseph was standing in front of them as governor. Joseph's dream had come true.

After initially withholding his true identity from his brothers, Joseph finally revealed himself. His brothers were understandably terrified. But Joseph was quick to reassure them that it was God's plan.

This book is not entirely centered around Joseph's story, but we will occasionally parachute into this narrative and learn from Joseph's response to various trials.

Understanding why suffering exists is the starting line to shaping our response when it inevitably comes knocking at our door—and it's what we'll explore first.

1

REASONS FOR SUFFERING

Sports are beautiful. But they're also broken. In that regard, you could say sports reflect our human nature. We're made beautiful in God's image and at times experience the joy God intends for us. Yet, at the same time, there's a brokenness within each of us—a consistent nagging that things should be better than what we often experience.

A resource from Cru®, Athletes in Action®'s parent ministry, called Backstory expands on this reality:

Instilled in us is a longing for the ideal world and perfect intimacy for which we were created. We sense that the evils of war and rape and death are alien to our existence. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed, we are confronted by an "eternal oughtness:" that the world is not as it ought to be, that unconditional love and perfect peace are forever elusive.

We'll examine more about the presence of suffering through Joseph's story in chapter two, but we need to first rewind the biblical tape back to the beginning and understand why suffering exists in the first place. It's in Genesis that we discover the genesis (beginning) of pain.

A (REALLY) BRIEF THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

The first two chapters of the Bible are Genesis 1 and 2. The content here is commonly referred to as the "creation narrative." We're introduced to a God who creates and commends everything he creates as "good" (Genesis 1:1-25). The apex of his creation is Adam and Eve. We're told that God creates them both in his own image (Genesis 1:27). He puts them in a garden and instructs them to make babies, explore and inhabit the wide world, use its resources to bring about a flourishing life and expressions

of worship to God, as well as to cultivate, preserve, and sustain the earth. As the sun set on the final day of creative activity, God categorized it as "very good" (Genesis 1:26-31).

Genesis 2 expands a bit on the narrative and shows God giving Adam this command:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (Genesis 2:15-17).

The picture painted on the canvas of creation in these two chapters is one of shalom. It's beautiful, rhythmic harmony with God and his creation. It's relational perfection marked by intimacy, beauty, and oneness. Whatever ideal we have in our heads of how life "ought to be"—this is it. But it doesn't last long.

Genesis 3 shows us that we have an enemy. Satan, disguised as a serpent, persuaded Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:1-5). Satan called God's character into question and implied that he was holding out on Adam and Eve, in spite of their closeness with God and experience of his goodness. Eve believed the lie that life outside of God's boundaries was better than life within them. She believed the lie, fed to her by Satan, that eating the fruit would enable her to become like God. So she ate. Adam then does the same (Genesis 3:6). They tasted God's goodness more deeply than anyone, but still turned their backs on him.

In this trajectory-altering moment, shalom is broken and chaos takes root. For the first time in history, sin enters into the world through mankind. It's worth noting that sin is more than an "oops, my bad." It's cosmic treason.¹ As created beings made in God's image and called to act like him, it's traitorous behavior on our end to knowingly defy his standards.

Treason of this magnitude has cosmic consequences. Adam and Eve's rebellious choice to sin bled through the entire canvas of God's creation, staining everything. One of its many consequences was that life would become a hard struggle in every area (Genesis 3:16-19).

1 R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale; 1988), p. 116.

Pastor and author Tim Keller describes it this way:

Human beings are so integral to the fabric of things that when human beings turned from God, the entire warp and woof of the world unraveled... We have lost God's shalom—physically, spiritually, socially, psychologically, culturally. Things now fall apart.²

We learn later in the Bible that their sin didn't just make life difficult, but it:

1. Separated them from God (Genesis 3:22-24).
2. Was imputed (passed on) to us, causing us to be born sinful (Romans 5:12).
3. Causes us to sin (Romans 3:23).
4. Separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2).

That's the genesis of the pain and suffering we experience today. Pain exists because the world we live in—at every level—is fractured and stained by sin.

THE CURSE REVERSED

Are you ready for some good news? In the same way that sin was imputed (passed on) to all of us through the sin of one person, we have all been given access to a clean slate before God because of one person as well (Romans 5:19). His name is Jesus Christ.

Cosmic treason requires cosmic payment. Jesus Christ, Son of God, fully God and fully human, offered himself as a sacrifice on our behalf.

COSMIC TREASON REQUIRES COSMIC PAYMENT.

This is what separates Christianity from every other religion. We can't work our way into God's favor. Goodness is not required as payment to counterbalance our sins. The only sufficient payment for sinning against a holy God is death.

So instead of God condemning all of humanity to death and eternal separation from him, he condemned himself through Jesus. He substituted himself for us and died on our behalf. After three days, he rose from the dead, proving that he is God and giving death

its first significant loss. His death and resurrection provide hope that the curse of pain, suffering, and separation as a result of sin will one day be fully reversed.

One day, when God finishes his redemptive and restorative work, creation and our experience will be even greater than the shalom Adam and Eve experienced in the garden. But until then, we'll live with this "eternal oughtness"—that things shouldn't (ought not) be this way.

While sin is the main reason for the existence of pain and suffering, the topic deserves much more than a simple "sin is the answer." If Jesus's death and resurrection paved the way for a restored relationship between mankind and God, why do pain, suffering, and trials still exist in the world? It's a good question.

DIDN'T JESUS FIX EVERYTHING?

Perhaps a sports metaphor will bring necessary clarity. Imagine this scenario—maybe you've even experienced it first hand:

It's a rivalry game. Not a "these teams bring out the best in each other" type of rivalry, but one that usually ends in bruised bodies, bruised egos, and ejections. The game is played at your rival's stadium, with hostile fans elevating the tension. Within the first couple of minutes, it looks like another classic back-and-forth battle. But then your team goes on an incredible run, putting an insurmountable distance between your score and your rival's. By halftime, the game is effectively over. Both sides know it. But the second half still needs to be played. Your coach gives you very specific instructions to "stay aggressive, be disciplined, work as a team, and whatever happens, don't retaliate." You continue to extend your lead through the second half, and, knowing they can't win through the final score, your rival begins trying to "win" through other tactics. They foul. They cheat. They chirp. They do everything humanly possible to get under your skin. They've been embarrassed and attempt to save face as the game continues. Victory for them now becomes pain and suffering aimed at you. In the end, you know your team will win, but your rival will inflict as much pain as they can until the buzzer. Your coach's halftime speech reverberates in your head as the frustration mounts: "stay aggressive, be disciplined, work as a team, and whatever happens, don't retaliate."

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), p. 170.

This is the other layer of pain and suffering. Both exist because sin entered the world and both continue to exist because we have an enemy looking to inflict as much damage as he can while there's still time left on the clock.

Yes, Jesus's death and resurrection has reconciled us relationally to God—provided we confess our sins and declare with our mouths that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9). Victory has been secured.

WE AREN'T INVOLVED IN A MERE GAME. WE'RE IN AN ETERNAL CONFLICT.

But we still need to play out the remainder of life. And until we're called home to be with God, we have an enemy who knows he has been beaten and is trying with all his might to distract us from that reality.

We aren't involved in a mere game. We're in an eternal conflict. Victory for us is not simply avoiding the temptations of Satan, but advancing the message of the

gospel by telling those around us the good news that Jesus made a way for a restored relationship with God.

WHO IS THIS ENEMY?

Satan convinced Adam and Eve that God was holding out on them, that he couldn't be trusted. In a moment of weakness, they believed the lie of the devil over the truth of God. To this day, we experience the effects of that choice. And to this day, the devil is still prowling around trying to destroy us and everything we love through his lies (1 Peter 5:8). While he is defeated (Revelation 20:10), he is still devious and clever in his schemes against us.

We need to be ready.

How do we guard ourselves against the devil? It starts with knowing more about who we're up against in this spiritual battle.

Satan Is God's Enemy

He continues to stand against all that is good and all the blessings God has for his people. The apostle Paul encourages Christians to put on spiritual armor to fight this enemy. In Ephesians 6:11-12, he says:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

In Revelation 12:9 and 20:2-3, we find war time imagery of Satan as a dragon being defeated by God.

Satan Has Limited Power, But His Influence Is Great

Though Satan's ultimate demise is already secured because of the cross and resurrection of Christ, God still allows Satan to have influence in the world for a period of time. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18, Paul referred to Satan's influence against his efforts to visit the church at Thessalonica: "we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us."

Satan's Mission Is to Steal, Kill and Destroy

He sets himself against you and what God has for you. He does this both overtly, by tempting you into choosing sin, and covertly, by lulling you into a lifestyle where you become comfortable and neglect to faithfully depend on God.

Athlete, consider this: if you spend the bulk of your days thinking about, training for, talking about, and playing your sport, do you think the devil ignores that part of your life and focuses on something else? Maybe. We can't say with certainty how he attempts to steal, kill, and destroy each of us (John 10:10), only that he is committed to these endgames. If sport takes up the majority of your time and focus, wisdom would suggest that sport would be a focal point of his strategic initiative to sabotage your soul.

Satan Shouldn't Be Used as an Excuse for Your Own Poor Choices

When you stay out all night before an exam that you haven't prepared for, you can't say, "the devil is just trying to stop me from doing well in school." No. You chose to stay out and party, and now you have to deal with the consequences.

OTHER SOURCES OF SUFFERING

While it's important to understand that Satan continually uses suffering as a weapon against us, it's also worth the reminder that suffering is complex and comes at us from many different directions:

Personal Choices

As we just mentioned, sometimes suffering is a result of your own choices. One could argue that Joseph tee'd the ball up for his brothers' ensuing hatred. Genesis 37:5-8 describes how Joseph had a dream insinuating that his brothers would one day bow down to him. Recognizing his position as one of the youngest brothers, Joseph's voice of reason should have said, "It's probably best not to tell that to them." But what did he do? He told them. Twice, actually. He had a second, similar dream, and told his brothers about it too (Genesis 37:9-11). Now, was that sinful? No. But his choice to not "read the room" put him in the crosshairs of his brothers. Sometimes the decisions we make, whether sinful or not, lead to unwelcomed trials and consequences.

Others' Choices

Sometimes suffering comes into your life as a result of the decisions other people make. Joseph's brothers gave in to their jealousy and, instead of killing him, chose to sell him into slavery (Genesis 37:18-28). That's an extreme form of suffering caused by others' choices, but we experience variations of this today: parents divorcing, friends betraying, a competitor's vengeance, a coach's ire, even referees' bad calls. The list could stretch for pages.

Uncontrollable Circumstances

Suffering also occurs because of circumstances that aren't directly related to any choice at all: injury, sickness, accident, and so on. The COVID-19 pandemic affected athletes all over the world, causing suffering in innumerable ways.

Pain, suffering, and trials exist because we have a sin nature (we're naturally bent toward displeasing God), we live in a fractured world, and we have an enemy who knows he's defeated and is in full-on rage mode

until Jesus returns. Our souls long for a Genesis chapter 1 and 2 experience—life in the garden with perfect harmony between us and God, us and nature, and with one another. But the reality we experience, for now, is this life outside the garden. In essence, our life is one extended "away" game. Understanding that is the first part. But then what? What do we do? How do we respond? We'll unpack some God-honoring responses to suffering in the next chapter.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

How have you experienced both the beauty and brokenness of sport?

Do you think your day to day perspective would change if you viewed it through the "rivalry game" metaphor? If so, how?

2

RESPONSES TO SUFFERING

What did you learn about the enemy (Satan)?

How have your personal choices brought unwanted suffering or pain?

When was the last time someone else's actions brought pain and suffering into your life?

The Virginia Cavaliers men's basketball team entered the 2018 NCAA Tournament as a number one seed. They had lost only two games all season, making them one of the favorites to run the table and win the NCAA championship.

Then they lost in the first round to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County—the first time in college basketball history that a sixteen seed defeated a number one seed.

The following year Virginia did win the title. As he reflected on the adversity generated by his team's historic loss the previous year, Virginia coach Tony Bennett said, "If you use adversity right, it will buy you a ticket to a place you couldn't have gone any other way."¹

But how do you "use adversity right?"

How do we respond to suffering? More than that, how do we do it in a way that honors God?

The answer is easier to type than it is to live: we run to God, not from him. We lean into him instead of keeping him at a distance. We trust that he knows what he is doing even when we feel like we could run our life better.

As we saw in chapter one, the idea that we can run our lives better than God is not a twenty-first century idea. It's one that every single person has fallen for, all the way back to Adam and Eve. Yes, living this way is hard. And we need a lot of help to succeed in doing so.

God knows this. It's one of the reasons he sent his Holy Spirit to take up residence in your heart (assuming you have trusted in Christ's finished work on the cross as the foundation of your salvation). As we learned in

**HOW DO WE
RESPOND TO
SUFFERING...
IN A WAY THAT
HONORS GOD?**

¹ Bennett's quote came from a TED talk he showed his team earlier in the season (<https://sportspectrum.com/sport/basketball/2019/04/01/virginia-coach-tony-bennett-follows-fathers-faith-filled-footsteps-into-final-four/>).