

Kate Bowler is a seminary professor and author who teaches at Duke University, at their divinity school. She went to Duke for her undergrad and after graduating from Yale Divinity School, she got the job of her dreams to be hired by her alma mater. Then she and her husband had their first child. Life was perfect. Then came the cancer diagnosis. It was stage 4. Terminal. There were treatments, but it was becoming clear that the conversation had to shift from “would she be cured” to “how can we do everything possible to keep this at bay as long as possible.” It completely rocked their world.

One day, a well-meaning neighbor came to their house while Kate was still in the hospital. The neighbor was trying to console her husband, and said to him: Well, you know, everything happens for a reason. To which her frustrated husband replied: I’d love to hear it. “Pardon?” came the reply. “The reason my wife is dying, I’d love to hear it.” He waited. The friend stammered a response, handed him a casserole and then left.

Kate ended up writing a book whose title is based on that interaction—it’s called *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. It is honest, and sad, and also hilarious, and actually very helpful. She talks about other things not to say to someone in a health crisis, in a wonderfully snarky way, in the appendix of her book. Like “It’s going to get better, I promise.” She’s like, “Well fairy godmother, that’s going to be a tough row to how when things go badly.” -Or this one, “How are you really, how are the treatments going?” She says this is tough, because she knows people are trying to connect. But here’s her response. She says: picture the worst thing that ever happened to you. Got it? Now try to put it in a sentence. Now say it aloud 50 times a day. Does your head hurt? Do you feel sad? Me too. So let’s just see if I want to talk about it today because sometimes I do and sometimes I want a hug and a recap of American Ninja Warrior.

And then she provides a helpful list of things *to* say:

1. I’d love to bring you a meal next week, can I email you about it?
2. You are a beautiful person.
3. Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard. And then the final one is this.
5. ...that’s right. Silence is ok too.

She says that pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People’s weird, suffering bodies are awkward. Take the advice of one friend who says his policy is this: Show up and shut up.

The book grew out of an article she wrote that was published in the NY Times not long after her diagnosis and she began receiving all sorts of letters and emails from people all over the theological spectrum.

Some people wanted her to know why she was suffering, that it was her sin that was the cause of her illness.

Other people just took the opportunity to share their own story, and some explained that their own suffering robbed them of their faith entirely. One note read this way:

“I find it comforting to believe the universe is random because then the God I believe in is no longer cruel.”

This is understandable. And as I have observed people in their pain, I see that pain and suffering has the potential to do 2 equal and opposite things to people: it can send them away from God, and it can also draw them in.

My wife and I were at a crossroads when we faced the most difficult tragedy we had dealt with early in our relationship. We weren't married yet, still in college. Heidi's mother, whom she was very close with, was ice skating on a day off from work, slipped, hit her head and immediately went into a coma. Despite our fervent prayers and the prayers of hundreds of people all over the country, she died 13 days later. It was devastating.

What were we to think? Why did this happen? There were many times when we asked these questions.

And to be honest, logically speaking, the first category (of people who are pushed away from God as a result of suffering) makes a lot of sense to me. If we are to believe that God is all-loving *and* all-powerful as the Bible talks about, then why would a loving God who is able to keep us from pain—why does he allow it? We knew that God was able to heal Heidi's mom, so why didn't he?

If he has the power to alleviate suffering, why doesn't he?

I've seen this in the lives of those around me too. I have a friend who grew up as a strong Christian and through his graduate work in the fields of biology and virology, began to grow very angry with a God who would allow such deadly things like viruses and disease to exist and to cause such harm. When I spoke with him last, he hadn't been to church in years. Suffering can and does cause people to walk away from their faith.

And then there is another category of people—those who draw nearer to God in the face of pain and suffering. Kate quotes someone from that category in her book. A woman Carol who was recently diagnosed with cancer. She says this: I have known Christ in so many good times, and now I will know Him better in his sufferings.

These people amaze me. Let me give you some other examples.

10 years ago, I spoke on this topic at church, and a friend of mine who was dying of cancer, walked by me. I didn't want to see her. I didn't think I had any right to even address this topic for her, given how much she had suffered and how little I had. But before I could walk by her, she stopped me, and she said: "Oh Syler, God was speaking to me with your words. Thank you so much." I was blown away by her faith, I still am.

-Then there's people like Joni Eareckson Tada, who was injured in a diving accident and has been a quadriplegic for the past 50 years. After a period of anger, depression, and doubt, she emerged as a strong Christ-follower. She learned to paint using a paint brush in her teeth, has written over 40 books, and is an advocate for those with disabilities.

-I think of my friend Cameron Cole who is a youth pastor in Alabama, whose 3 year old son Cameron Jr died suddenly, they still don't know why. He didn't lose his faith, but

saw God provide for him in the midst of his grief. He wrote a book that came out last summer, that I would highly recommend to anyone going through grief called *Therefore I Have Hope: 12 Truths That Comfort, Sustain, & Redeem in Tragedy*.

-One more. Some of you might remember a story from about 25 years ago. Pastor Scott Willis and his wife Janet and the six youngest of their nine children were in the family minivan on Interstate 94 south of Milwaukee when their vehicle ran over a metal object and burst into flames. The parents survived but the 6 children died. The whole tragedy was then made worse when it was discovered that the driver of the rig that was responsible for the faulty piece that fell off got his license illegally by bribing someone at the Illinois DMV. The guy never should have been on the road.

Throughout the ordeal, the Willises, when interviewed, never stopped talking about how their faith in God sustained them. On the 20th anniversary of the accident, Scott made this statement:

"We can praise God even when we don't know why, because of who he is and what he has for us. It's not the end for us. We will see those children."

So what's going on? How do some people find hope and purpose in suffering, while others conclude it's all just random and cruel?

It's our topic for today, namely: Why does God allow pain and suffering? And what can we learn from people like the Willises and my friend Cameron and others who seem to have had their tragedy push them towards God rather than away from him?

I'd like to start by having you turn in your Bible to James 1.

I'm going to start with a quick explanation for the presence of evil in the world. There's a category of evil in the world that exists simply because God has given us the ability to make our own choices. And while many of us choose God, many others choose evil.

And the blame for that does not fall on God's shoulders, but on ours. James 1 says this: *JAS 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*

So this category of suffering is when God gives us free will to choose good or to do evil, and some people choose evil and it causes pain. I don't mean to oversimplify it, but it's a lot easier for me to recognize that people were tempted by their own evil desires, and chose to cause pain.

There's more that could be said, but I want to spend most of my time today on the one that's a lot harder, and that is the presence of suffering that's *not* brought upon by evil human choices.

I remember reading a column in the newspaper a number of years back (can't for the life of me locate it), but this person wrote an analogy that has stuck with me. He said: imagine that you come upon a large house, and inside that house, you see some rooms

with people living lavishly. In other rooms, the people have modest accommodations. And in the majority of the rooms, the people are living in absolute squalor, very little to eat, and terrible conditions. What would you think about the owner of that house? In other words: any God who would treat so many of his children so unfairly doesn't really appeal to him.

People stumble over this because of the pain and the anger that they feel by this inequity and they abandon God because they can't make sense out of it. The problem is that we don't necessarily find answers to these "why" questions. I am not going to pretend to have all the answers (in fact, you should immediately distrust anyone who says they have the answer), but I have 1 observation before I make 5 points.

It's that the Bible is full of examples of godly people who suffer.

- Adam and Eve had to deal with the tragedy of having one of their sons murdered by the other.
- Jacob suffered the loss of having a treasured son apparently killed.
- Joseph was sold into slavery and languished in prison.
- The Israelites live as slaves until Moses rescues them.
- In the book of Ruth, we remember the happy ending, but forget that the story opens with severe famine, and then the death of Naomi's husband, and her two sons.
- You have the Babylonian captivity and the persecution there.
- Not to mention Job. You can't preach a sermon on suffering and not mention Job.

And then we get to the New Testament. Jesus, fully god and fully man, enters the world. If there ever was a righteous man who deserved not to suffer, it was Him. And yet he was born in a barn, raised in modest surroundings, lived a nomadic life during his ministry years, endured the death of his good friend and cousin John the Baptist, was tried unjustly, and was killed in one of the most gruesome manners possibly conceived. Then the apostle Paul, one of the most influential early Christians, wrote almost half of the books of the New Testament, this man Ananias has a vision and God tells him this (Acts 9:15)

"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. (how did God decide to let his "chosen instrument" live his life? Here's how) ¹⁶ *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*"

Contrast that, then, with a category of Christians who mistakenly claims that God *doesn't* want you to suffer, that he wants you healthy and wealthy. You name it, you claim it, it's yours. You are one good prayer away from every good parking place you ever needed and every earthly blessing you can ask for.

Now God is good and he does give his children good gifts, but these folks who would be in the category of a prosperity church, in my opinion, are reading their Bibles selectively. I don't have time to go into details, feel free to follow up with me later if you'd like to hear more but the bottom line is that:

Suffering is a part of life, for the godly and the ungodly, and the Bible is clear about that. Just as the Bible says that God sends the sun and the rain to shine on the good and the wicked.

And then the last thing I want to say before I get to my 5 points is this: I'm going to be talking about what I would say are some purposes of suffering. That is not the same thing as saying that God is happy that bad things happen to you. Our world is broken and God grieves with you as you grieve.

My final point will address this more, but esp if you are in the midst of suffering right now—this may not be easy to hear. If you need to just zone out and listen to this later when you're not in the midst of a crisis, I totally understand that. Here are the 5 points.

1. Suffering gives us the proper perspective.

1 Peter 4:1 says this:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin

When we suffer, our fascination with sin tends to wane. The important things in life begin to matter more. When you're faced with a life-threatening illness, no one says:

Now I must get my air ducts cleaned, or

I have been gossiping far too little, or

It's time to start playing a lot more video games.

No, what matters most gets brought to the front. The people you care about, the wrongs that need to be righted. Suffering puts that in its proper perspective.

Observing the suffering in others does something to us as well. I have a friend who's kind of a jerk. Pretty selfish, pretty arrogant. And yet...in his free time, he devotes himself to an organization that helps children with cancer. Why? Because you can't see the suffering of a child and not be moved. You can't casually look on at the suffering of others and not be changed. It changes our perspective.

Recently I was watching the show Shark Tank, which is where inventors and entrepreneurs go before rich people to see if they'll invest in them. And what makes it entertaining is how cutthroat the investors are. A lot of them are mean and call the people cockroaches and so on. But I watched an episode this season where a family of 3 kids came on, ages 15 to 24, and explained that they were going on the show for their dad who had invented a special cutting board. He had been a chef for a firehouse in NYC, but had died from cancer as a result of exposure related to 9/11. Their mom had died of breast cancer a few years before that. So here were these orphans taking their dad's dream in front of them. Most of the sharks, usually calm and composed, ruthless in their pursuit of money, was now moved to tears. They did something that hasn't ever happened before. They decided to all 5 invest in the company, and then to donate their profits to a charity that supports firemen affected by 9/11. The suffering they observed changed them.

Suffering engages our heart in a way that nothing else does, and it changes our perspective.

2. Suffering reminds us that we are not the center of the universe.

I am reminded of the line by the great theologian Daffy Duck, who gets Bugs Bunny to be the Abominable Snowman's pet instead of him, at which point he then says the following:

“Poor old Bugs. But, anyway you look at it, it's better HE should suffer. After all, it was me or him, and obviously it couldn't be me. It's a simple matter of logic. I'm not like other people, I can't stand pain, it hurts me.”

We think we're the ones to be immune from suffering. That's for other people. In fact, in this country, our assumption is that we deserve a life *free* of suffering. You travel to other places and they say: well of course you're going to suffer. That's what life is. Life is full of joy and full of suffering, and you should expect both. Life is hard, but God is good.

Not here. We think “If God is good, then my life better be awesome.”

We think we deserve health and wealth and prosperity and a long life. We think we are owed 80 to 90 years of pain free life, and when pain or disease or hardship comes along, we get frustrated. Annoyed. Self-righteous. We look around and say: how come *he* doesn't have to deal with what I deal with? How come *she* doesn't suffer like I'm suffering.

Life is hard, so God must not be good.

God will sometimes bring suffering into our lives so that he can get our attention. It's a kind of portal to move us closer to God.

CS Lewis' famous quote is worth quoting here even if it's the 70th time you've heard it. “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

When we see suffering as an obstacle to the pain-free life we think we're owed, we are displaying that God is not at the center of the universe.

If you and your happiness and your joy are at the center of the universe, then to have anything take away from that happiness appears to be ridiculously unfair, and will cause you to shake your fist at God.

But the reality is that God is at the center of the universe, and not you. And there are a million things going on around the world right now that have nothing to do with you. Life makes sense only when God and not we are at the center of the universe.

Because we have to hope in *God*, not in our *circumstances*. When we hope in anything other than God, it's about as helpful as hoping in a roulette wheel. Eventually, the roulette wheel is going to let you down. So will your circumstances.

3. Suffering allows us to be the hands and feet of Christ to those who suffer.

If I had the chance to respond to the columnist's analogy about the home he finds with rooms in different states, I would say: the only difference would be if you knew the owner. And if you knew the owner of the home to be a good person.

Your response might be: well why aren't the people who have a lot and are cared for, why aren't they taking care of the people that need the help?

Let's take it a step further.

In fact, we do live there, and as one of the residents of the nice rooms (and if you own a car, you are in the world's top 10% of wealth), the owner says to us: I need your help. People living in these other rooms need *your* help to alleviate their suffering. Will you help me?

This is what inspired a man named Gary Haugen. Gary was working for the justice department in 1994 when the genocide in Rwanda took place. He was sent there to investigate it and was torn to pieces emotionally to think that this kind of injustice could take place, and no one was doing anything about it. So he resolved when he got back to the US that he would contact whatever the Christian justice organization was that could do something about it. And then he realized that there *wasn't* a Christian justice organization—and he realized that God was calling him to start it. That organization is called International Justice Mission, based out of DC.

And so over the last 20 years, IJM has opened offices literally all over the world, hired lawyers to go into these dark places where injustice was the norm and has been bringing justice, to about 45,000 different people.

We all aren't going to start international organizations, but we can all do what Mother Teresa says: "not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

We can all agree that we are not going to be content living in comfort while our sister in the room next door is suffering. We are going to be part of helping. And maybe today, you would be willing to do that for a child, and you can look into that in each of the lobbies.

That's our job. In fact, we'll be judged, Matthew 25 says, based on how we did or didn't respond to the suffering we find around us.

It's easy to shake our fists at God and say: why aren't you doing something? Where are you? God says—where are *you*? Why aren't *you* doing something about it?

So suffering allows us to help others.

4. Suffering points us to heaven.

Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

When we suffer, it reminds us that this life is not all there is. There will be a day when every tear is dried, when suffering is done. That is great comfort for those in the midst of

suffering. Our suffering ends in heaven and our longing draws us closer to God as we long to be with him in that place.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who I mentioned earlier, recently wrote this in an article in CT. She says this, commenting on this verse from 2 Cor.

Stuck in a wheelchair and staring out the window at the fields of our farm, I wondered, *Lord, how in the world can you consider my troubles “light and momentary”?* *I will never walk or run again. My back aches. I’m trapped in front of this window.*

Years later, however, the light dawned: The Spirit-inspired writers of the Bible simply had a different perspective, an end-of-time view...

When God sent a broken neck my way, he blew out the lamps in my life that lit up the “here and now” and made it so captivating. The dark despair of total and permanent paralysis that followed wasn’t much fun, but it sure made heaven come alive. And one day, when our Bridegroom comes back—God is going to throw open heaven’s shutters. There’s not a doubt in my mind that I’ll be fantastically more excited and ready for it than if I were on my feet.¹

Those who suffer understand more than anyone that “no eye has seen, no ear has heard,” what God has prepared for his children in the life to come.

So, suffering gives us the proper perspective, it helps us put God at the center, it allows us to be the hands and feet of Christ to others, it points to heaven, and finally...

5. The incarnation is proof that God joins us in our suffering.

Incarnation: God in the flesh, coming to earth in the form of Jesus. It’s proof that He joins us in our suffering.

This may be unsatisfactory for some. If God *can* take away our suffering, He should. And if he doesn’t, then he’s worthless.

God doesn’t seem to address that very normal human request, and instead says: I did suffer, and I understand your suffering, and I will be with you in your suffering.

Jesus could have lived any life he wanted to. A life of ease even. But that’s not what he did. He suffered, in fact, on our behalf.

He showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that He understands what suffering is all about.

We have this amazing moment recorded for us of Jesus the night before he was killed.

He cries out to God in the garden to take it away. When faced with the prospect of suffering, he asked “*Please no.*” On the cross, using the words of Scripture, he cries out to God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus is feeling what many of us have felt. He doesn’t cry out: don’t worry, everybody.

See, I’m going to rise in a few days, so why even get worked up?

No. He cries out about his feeling of abandonment. He’s honest with his feelings. Honest about the real pain that suffering in this world brings. And then he is faithful.

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2018/november/joni-eareckson-tada-suffering-helps-me-see-heaven.html>

If Jesus, the God-man, has set us this example, then so should we follow.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is a professor at Yale who lost his 25-year old son to a climbing accident in 1983. He wrote the book *Lament for a Son*.

The first half of the book is just that, a lament for his son. Towards the end, he begins to talk more about how his faith in Jesus comes to bear on the situation. He says this:

God is not only the God of the sufferers, but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God.

To redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved son to suffer *like* us, through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil.

Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.

Instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it. And likewise, then Jesus invites us to participate in His kingdom, by what? Reveling in his glory? Sharing in his good gifts? Sometimes yes. But also, by sharing in his suffering.

The good news is that we are not alone in our suffering; we have not been abandoned.

Many of you know the passage from Philippians 3:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Sharing in his sufferings? Becoming like him in his death? Did I sign up for that? That's what life is about.

The problem is that there is suffering with or without our belief in Jesus.

Atheism doesn't remove suffering from anyone's life. If my wife had chosen to not believe in God because of her loss, it would not have lessened the pain. God became her foundation and her refuge.

And when we are willing to embrace that suffering, we find God is there, even in the midst of our greatest suffering.

Wolterstorff goes on to say this in his book:

God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering sinful world is to suffer.

God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering. The one who does not see God's suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love.

So suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is.

Suffering is the meaning of our world. For love is the meaning. And love suffers.

The tears of God are the meaning of history.

But mystery remains. Why isn't Love-*without*-suffering the meaning of things? Why is *suffering*-love the meaning? Why does God endure his suffering? Why does he not at once relieve his agony by relieving ours?

There is no answer to that question.

But the reality is that we live in a world of suffering, and our God is here with us, in the suffering, to love us and strengthen us, to give us what we need to find healing and wholeness and to work to relieve the suffering we find around us.