

*What Does the Bible Say About Suffering?*

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*"God knows about suffering. God cares about suffering.*

*God is at work in the midst of suffering. God is at work against suffering.*

*God reigns over suffering.*

*God suffers.*

*God will one day declare final victory over suffering."*

## Why Does God Allow Suffering?

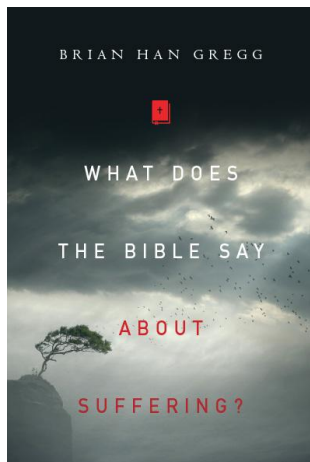
We all face suffering. And in our pain, we long to know why God allows grief and hardship into our lives. *What Does the Bible Say About Suffering?* addresses this perennial question, laying out twelve easily comprehensible perspectives on suffering based on Scripture:

- The "Two Ways" approach: God blesses the righteous and condemns the wicked.
- Suffering results from the sinful choices of others.
- God can take evil acts and use them for good, as with Joseph.
- Suffering as the work of Satan.
- Sometimes the reason for suffering will remain a mystery to us, as for Job.
- Suffering with an eschatological perspective recognizes that God will have victory over Satan and sin, suffering and death.
- Suffering plays a role in our spiritual growth and development.
- Suffering can test our faith.
- Christ is made known through our weakness and frailty, as in Paul's analogy of "jars of clay."
- God comforts us in suffering, and we can then comfort others.
- We are to model our lives after Jesus' suffering, service and sacrifice.
- We rejoice in our suffering for others' sake as we work with God in his redemptive plan.

In Brian Han Gregg's work with undergraduates, he found that people often hold only one view of suffering, though the Bible offers many. Because suffering has many dimensions, forcing one answer onto every experience can harm us spiritually and emotionally.

"The Bible's approach to the problem of suffering makes it clear that discernment is necessary every step of the way," Gregg writes. "If the Bible offers a range of perspectives on God and suffering, then we *must* be willing to sort and weigh them when we are faced with difficulty."

*What Does the Bible Say About Suffering?* expands our understanding of suffering's place in our lives. Engaging the twelve perspectives deepens readers' discernment of the suffering they and others endure.



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## There's No Single Reason for Suffering

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There is no *single* way forward. The Bible includes a number of different responses to the problem of suffering, and we do ourselves and the Bible a great disservice by adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Imagine that the biblical witness is a talented choir. Members of a traditional choir are assigned one of at least four parts: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. When the choir performs, some songs are sung in unison—a powerful melody that moves and grows in momentum. The proclamation of the good news of Jesus is such a melody. When it comes to suffering, however, the Scripture's approach is more like a complex harmony. The convergence of voices weaves a pattern greater than any single melody. There are even moments of dissonance—adding to the complexity and mystery of the music. Certainly we have the ability to pick out a particular line in the music. We can focus in on the altos, for instance, in order to appreciate their contribution; in fact, a full appreciation of the music demands that we isolate and consider the various lines. However, it would be disastrously misguided to assess the music solely on the basis of any single line.

It is critical that we understand this point. Time after time, I have had conversations with people trying to come to grips with the problem of suffering who are stuck on *one* biblical response to the problem: they are only listening to the sopranos! This may simply reflect our desire for simplicity. We often find it easier (and perhaps safer) to internalize a particular explanation of suffering and apply it to the circumstances of our lives and world. . . .

It would appear that, much like real singers, we are all attuned to more naturally sing and hear certain parts. While there is nothing wrong with having a predisposition, it underscores the need to fully understand and appreciate the full scope of the biblical witness about suffering. If we fail to grasp the full extent of the "music," it will lead to two negative consequences.

First, it is likely that we will be confronted with suffering that cannot be adequately understood through a single approach. When the complexity of suffering rears its head, we will find ourselves ill equipped to deal with the ramifications. We will be robbed of the hope, peace or logic in which we found solace, left to flounder in uncharted waters. A fuller understanding of what the Bible has to say about suffering can be a much needed lifeline in such situations—broadening our perspective and enabling us to make theological sense of our circumstances in a new way.

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# BOOK EXCERPT

**Brian Han Gregg**, (PhD, University of Notre Dame) is associate professor of biblical studies at the University of Sioux Falls in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He is a contributor to the *Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* and *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric*. He has ministry experience in college and missionary work with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship as well as experience in pastoral ministry in California, Indiana and South Dakota.

Second, if we cling to the notion that our own particular conception of suffering represents the fullness of truth, we will be inclined to judge those around us. We will be like Job's friends: certain that our answers are sufficient, unable or unwilling to grasp the mysterious complexity of God and suffering. This would be like thinking that a single tool is effective for every task. We may be convinced that the chainsaw is the perfect tool for every job, but we still look silly trying to hammer a nail with it. Worse, someone might get hurt in the process! This happens in the church over and over again when we jump to dispense "wisdom" and "advice" to those in crisis. Often, we do more damage than good simply because we have failed to consider the crisis in light of the full biblical witness. Instead, we resort to our favorite slogans:

"God is punishing you for your sin. Repent and he will restore you."

"It's all part of his plan. Just wait and you will see his purpose in this."

"Satan is attacking you. You need to pray for spiritual protection against him."

"You just need to let go and let God take care of it. Trust him."

The Bible's approach to the problem of suffering makes it clear that discernment is necessary every step of the way. If the Bible offers a range of perspectives on God and suffering, then we *must* be willing to sort and weigh them when we are faced with difficulty. While it is true that several of these perspectives might be relevant in a particular scenario, it is also true that some of them will *not* apply. Some of the biblical options are mutually exclusive. This makes it even more obvious that we must spend time with Scripture, in prayer and in conversation in order to discern the best way to interpret the suffering involved in a given situation.

– Taken from the introduction