

You Don't Need a Decoder Ring Each Time You Suffer
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We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. *Romans 8:28*

Nicole suffered a devastating romantic disappointment, and she was hurt and angry — angry at the young man who had broken things off and angry at God, even though she was trying to behave in the “right” Christian way. She had asked to meet me (Liz) for coffee to help her figure out what lesson she was supposed to learn. I worried more about the disruption in Nicole’s relationship with God than about her romantic heartache.

In looking for a decoder ring for her heartache, Nicole, like many of us, absorbed a way of thinking that sounds biblical but isn’t. In fact, “Everything happens for a reason” has become so ubiquitous it has drawn pushback. The phrase has similar verbiage as Romans 8:28 (above), but it empties the verse of its substance, replacing it with a cheap and easy bumper-sticker theology. Regrettably, it confuses cause with purpose and assumes we can decode God’s intentions.

Asking why God caused or allowed suffering quickly gets us into complex tangles. Often referred to as theodicy, a “defense of God,” this idea names our cultural obsession to find an answer for pain. Defaulting to some version of “Everything happens for a reason” is a vague way to imply that God is in control and has good intentions. But it isn’t psychologically or theologically helpful.

As we’ve found in our research, those who suffer are not primarily asking why questions but how questions. We interviewed 81 Christians with past or current cancer diagnoses, and when we asked whether they struggled with why they got cancer, many of them replied, “Why not?” Instead of asking why questions, they were trying to figure out how to get through the week.

In another study, we asked a large sample of practicing American Protestant Christians going through suffering how much they endorsed some of the most popular theological explanations. These included the idea that God exerts control and plans for every detail of our lives (“Everything happens for a reason”); the assumption that obedience to God always results in success, prosperity, and freedom from suffering; and the belief that God allows suffering to cause us to grow. We expected that holding theological beliefs that answered the why question would help. But that wasn’t the case. Most of the proposed theodicies were irrelevant to people’s suffering. Two of the theodicies correlated with worse outcomes: The more people believed God controls every detail of our lives and the more they saw God as allowing suffering to make them grow, the more distress they showed. When we try to comfort others by explaining why God allowed their suffering, it may add to their distress.

This doesn't mean God never uses suffering pedagogically (to teach) — Scripture clearly shows that he does (Heb. 12:7–11). But there's a vital difference between God's ultimate purposes and our attempts to decode the meaning of each trial. Instead of focusing on defending God's actions, we should help people to see that God is present in their suffering and will never leave or forsake them, no matter how bad it feels. Even unto death, God remains with them and works to redeem the suffering.

That doesn't mean we can't help those who suffer. Instead of focusing on the why, we can focus on the how and the what for. After all, the Bible says very little about why God allows suffering, but it does provide abundant resources for how to go through it. Questions like "How is God showing up?" or "What might God be up to?" are most helpful. Saying God has a purpose for suffering neither negates divine sovereignty nor means the point of suffering is a lesson. A believer's suffering is not meaningless. This is different from saying God has directly caused the suffering, thinks it's good, or has some immediately discernible purpose.

The participants in our surveys revealed helpful insights into pastoral care. They saw that God could take their suffering and turn it into something good. This didn't require them to call the suffering good or to adopt clichés in place of good theology. As one participant said, "Instead of saying, '*Why is this happening?*,' I said, '*What do you want me to do with this?*'" That turn from asking why to affirming, "God is with me in the suffering, so how should I respond?" made all the difference.

What characterizes those who come through suffering well? Earlier, we noted that most (about two-thirds) of our interviewees did not struggle with questions about why their maladies happened. They leaned into God's loving control over their circumstances, reporting experiences of God's availability and nearness. They also had intellectual humility about both God's reasons and his purposes for allowing their cancer. Those who weathered their diagnoses best weren't those who had found "the reason." They were those who reacted like the participant who concluded this: God has brought me through this cancer for a reason. And I don't understand it. I don't really have an answer as to why I think I got cancer. But I have a closer relationship now with God. I understand where my home really lies but it's not going to matter, because in the end I'm going to be with the Lord. What I think I'm going to need to understand may not be that important when you get there.

This is the intellectual humility — and relational confidence — that carries believers through. This is also why the best preparation for our suffering is not to study philosophical treatments of theodicy but to grow in intimacy with and healthy dependence upon God.

If you're in Nicole's position, suffering and searching for the lesson, give yourself permission not to know. God's purposes may be larger than you can see, longer than your lifetime, or simply not yet revealed. Trust that not knowing the purpose doesn't mean there isn't one. What God has revealed is his desire to draw you closer to him — and his desire to be present in your suffering, loving you and working all things (even terrible things) toward the good of making you more like Jesus and in this way helping you experience how "wide and long and high and deep" is his love in Christ (Eph. 3:18).