A Narrative Guide for Sceptics and Sufferers
By Dan Paterson

Exploring...
Why do we need to make sense of our suffering? How do different worldviews make sense of suffering? Does suffering disprove God's existence? Can I trust a God who allows me to suffer?
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The Australian culture is a challenging context for the church. We need reliable guides to get our bearings and map the territory. We need new words and new ways to Traverse the gulf between our local church and the surrounding culture. Traverse is the Malyon Centre for Bridging Church and Culture. It provides training and resources to Christians so they can close the gap between their Aussie culture and their own church and life.

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The wounded traveller:  
the journey of one Real Person  
to make sense of their Real Pain

Suffering is by far the most enduring challenge to my Christian faith. I’ve written this booklet with sceptics and sufferers in mind, knowing that suffering is enigmatic in its dual capacity to draw some towards God and repel others away. It raises a logical conundrum: How could an all-powerful and all-loving God allow so much suffering in the world? It also raises a deeply personal question. How could I ever trust a God who lets me suffer? Reading my attempts to speak to these questions I confess that you’re bound to be disappointed. There is simply no way that I could hope to exhaust the deep wells that Christians have dug over the centuries in responding to this question theologically, philosophically, and pastorally.¹ Some of you, though, are thirsty—you have questions of the heart and of the mind—and my hope is to draw out just a taste of these wells so that you might be refreshed and helped on your own journey to make sense of suffering. Be aware that although the journey described in this booklet is fictional, the painful stories are a real window into the experiences that sparked my own search to make sense of suffering. Each section will have some conversation questions so you can travel through it with someone else.

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¹ Check out the suggested reading list on page 15.
PARADISE LOST: THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

At only 9 years of age my life was thrown into a confusing chaos. Having grown up in the West I had been unconsciously imbibed with a sense of immortality. Our cultural *zeitgeist* had taught me to pursue pleasure and eschew pain at all costs. That is, until, like so many around me who have bought into this naïve advertising, my life was devastated by a painful collision with reality.

Whilst returning from a family holiday my dad was navigating our van through thick fog along the scenic of the NSW Blue Mountains. When a truck appeared from the mist and pulled out in front of him on a single lane road, dad was faced with the impossible decision to either steer towards the truck or towards oncoming traffic. He chose the truck. Misjudging the force, the corner of the truck crumbled the passenger side of the van, colliding with my mum’s head and pinning her legs under the wreckage. As time seemingly stood still in the aftermath, the image seared into my memory is of that of my mum slumped over in her chair, her face smashed and bloody, and her body eerily still.

Sparing the details, my mother has never fully recovered from the physical and emotional trauma of that crash. In this life she never will. I spent my childhood and teenage years watching her battle her disability. She struggled to regain a sense of identity, purpose, and dignity, often-falling prey to the dark thoughts that swarmed after any perceived shortcoming. She has scars, and by loving extension, all the people around her share them. So what do we do with them? How do we make sense of *her* suffering? How do you make sense of *yours?*

A JOURNEY TO FIND ANSWERS

Making sense of suffering is never just an intellectual exercise. It certainly wasn’t for me. For those with scars it pulls at the heartstrings in the most profound and painful of ways. At 9 my simple belief in a God who loved me and had a wonderful plan for my life shattered into a million pieces. With every subsequent experience of tragedy, death and suffering, my mind and my heart were forced asked a question that I increasingly could not escape… *Why?*

Does this question have an answer? Some say yes. Others say no. What do I believe? Well, I think hidden within this question are more questions…

*How do different people make sense of suffering?*
*Does suffering disprove God’s existence?*
*Can I trust a God who lets me suffer?*
There are libraries of books that address these questions in far more depth than I ever could. I don’t simply want to add to the pile. I want to speak to these real questions for real people with real pain. How? I’m going to embark with you on an allegorical journey. Given the scars I’ve accumulated in life, let me assume my true name in these fictional travels—the wounded traveller. You can take whatever name you like—sceptic, sufferer, realist, rationalist, or romantic. Feel free to rebel and reject my labels if you must.

In our journey to make sense of suffering, where do you want to stop first? Should we nail our objections to Christianity’s door? No. That path seems too well travelled. Let us first explore how others seek to answer the why question. With passports in hand, and with no intention to misrepresent the heart and views of those whom we encounter, let’s set out together in a bid to find answers to the question of suffering, and, if the universe allows it, hopefully hope.

**CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

Do you believe there are answers to the why suffering question?

How has suffering impacted your own life? What painful memories do you have, and how do you make sense of them?

What are your hard questions that you would ask different religious leaders if you had the chance?

What are the sorts of problems that suffering poses to belief in a God, gods, or no God?

If we’re trying to be honest and be aware of our biases from the beginning, what kind of answers are you hoping for at the outset of this journey?
HOW DO DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS MAKE SENSE OF SUFFERING?

Christianity is not the only belief system on trial. Suffering poses a challenge to every worldview. No matter who you are, or what beliefs you’ve grown up to adopt, you must make sense of suffering somehow. So let me begin with a question...

How does what you believe explain the experiences and innate expectations of the sufferers in this world? How do YOU answer the why question?

ROUND THE WORLD: Suffering Through Different Eyes

Suppose we travelled to Thailand and were to walk into a Buddhist temple of the Theravada tradition—the one most closely linked with the teaching of Gautama Buddha. If I expressed my suffering to the monk, what would he say? Well, if he held to the four noble truths, he would start by saying that my suffering is really an illusion. I only appear to suffer, and this because I’m too attached to my mother, and to this world. Desire is the cause of my suffering. Because I care about my mum, because I love her, this is why I suffer. His counsel to me would be to ignore the suffering around me, to shed myself of all desires and connections to the world, and to seek oneness with the universe by denying my very existence. In short, he would say that my suffering is not real.

Suppose, deeply confused by my non-existence, we then travel to Oxford to meet with the high priest of new atheism, Professor Richard Dawkins. If I relayed my story to him, what do you think he would say? Judging from his naturalistic worldview and from his writings, he would say that my suffering is meaningless. There is no rhyme and reason; it is merely bad cosmic luck. After all, as he says in his book River Out of Eden, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” Although he may seek to console me, ultimately he would admit that my suffering has no purpose; nor is it evil, or wrong, for me to experience. In this pitiless, indifferent universe, suffering is just a brute fact that I have to put up with. And because my

2 Richard Dawkins, River Out of Eden (Great Britain, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 133.
life has no ultimate purpose, if suffering gets too hard to merely medicate or ignore, why not just tap out? If my suffering seems too acute, then my only hope for relief is the deafening silence of annihilation at death.

Suppose, deeply saddened by the purposeless and inevitability of my suffering, we then travel across to India and step into a Hindu temple. If I relayed my suffering to a Brahman priest, what do you think he would he say? Well, according to the teaching of the Vedas, he would tell me that my suffering is ultimately *deserved*. The karmic cycle of reaping what you sow—whether in this life or the next—assures that my suffering stems from evil I committed in a former life and that enduring, rather than seeking to relieve or heal it, is the only means of cosmic penance I have of gaining a better reincarnation.

**EMOTIONAL DISSONANCE: Confused by Alternative Options**

Everyone suffers in some way, at some time. And everyone, eventually, has to explain its presence in their life somehow. It presents a challenge to every belief system - no one is on neutral footing. But I’m left confused. Could suffering really be an illusion? Could it really be meaningless? Could it really be deserved?

None of these answers really resonate with my experience, or gels with my innate expectations about how things *should* be.

So what about the person who doubts any belief system can provide an answer? Let me ask the *sceptic* a question…

*How has getting rid of the Christian God made any more sense of suffering, or given any more hope for coping with or confronting it?*

**CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

How do you react to the answers that the other worldviews in this chapter offer in response to the *why* question?

Suspending the truth question, do you feel like these answers make sense of the contours of the human heart?

Does getting rid of God solve the problem of suffering?
DOES SUFFERING DISPROVE GOD’S EXISTENCE?

So let’s try going somewhere different: Does Suffering Disprove God’s Existence? Suppose this wounded traveller is ready to ask some tough questions of the Christian faith. Being an educated person, I know too well that suffering doesn’t just provoke questions of the heart; there are intellectual objections banging on the Christian door. So, before being willing to listen to some pastor explain suffering through the lens of the Bible, I travel to the office of a Christian philosopher to test the intellectual waters? After being welcomed into a room that smells of danky books and cheap scotch, I take a seat in one of the empty armchairs—this wounded traveller is set for a conversation with the Christian philosopher.

As best as I can I blurt out how, in my thinking, it seems that human suffering disproves the notion of the Christian God. Take Epicurus’ infamous trilemma for instance. In poetic prose, this ancient Greek materialist was perhaps the first to pen the intellectual problem of evil and suffering.

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is God able to prevent evil, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

I mean, common sense tells us that, as one insignificant speck of dust in the vast universe, surely the magnitude and seemingly gratuitous nature of suffering on this earth disproves any notion of a loving and powerful Creator. To me, suffering is the final nail in God’s coffin. After a ten-minute tirade, I think I’ve proved my case. So why does my philosopher friend stare back at me seemingly un-phased?

After first acquiescing to the rhetorical force of Epicurus’ trilemma, the philosopher offers to point out some problematic assumptions lurking beneath the surface. Staring straight at me, he offers this challenge: “If your assumptions are untrue, would you really want to know? Would you be willing to lay down arms from the assault on God’s door if your weapons prove powerless?”

I wasn’t expecting to find my heart examined. I thought this was God’s trial—he should be the one in the dock! And yet I’m forced to examine whether my search is genuine—do I want to know the truth, or do I want to use my objections as a shield? Cautiously, and curiously, I accept the philosopher’s challenge. I’m willing to hear, and not just listen. And so, addressing three of Epicurus’ hidden
assumption in turn, the philosopher reveals how each one either crumbles under scrutiny or ironically ends up pointing towards the existence of the very God Epicurus sought to disprove.

ASSUMPTION #1: An All-Powerful God Can Do Anything

Here the philosopher quips that apart from schoolboy theologians, no one seriously believes that God’s omnipotence has no logical boundaries. Doing what philosophers do best, he starts to point out the flaws in my thinking by asking questions: *When the Bible declares that all things are possible with God, what do you think it means by “things”? Can God create a square-circle? Can God create a rock so big he cannot lift it?* Myself having heard these sarcastic quasi-questions before, the philosopher explains that they describe abstractions that are not really *things*. Each one denies the very thing it describes, such that their actualisation would require creation to collapse into absurdity. Being logically contradictory, these are not *things*, they are nonsense, or what CS Lewis describes as *intrinsic impossibilities*. Although God’s omnipotence means he can overcome *natural impossibilities*, like raising the dead or calming the storm, no amount of appeal to divine omnipotence can translate nonsense into the realm of reality. The logic of God’s mind shapes the boundaries of omnipotence, and the nature of God’s character shapes the exercise of his omnipotence. God cannot create *intrinsic impossibilities* like a square-circle, nor will he sin by betraying his own character. Simply by defining omnipotence, then, the philosopher has shown me that Epicurus’ first assumption is proven false. But that’s only the first domino to fall.

Assumption #2: An All-Loving God Would Choose A World Without Suffering

It seems axiomatic to me that a loving God would not want his creatures to suffer. Surely, then, Epicurus’ second assumption is solid! Again, though, the philosopher shows his stripes by re-framing the assumption into a question: *What reasons could a loving God have for choosing a world with suffering?* Staring me straight in the eye, my ad hoc tutor asks, “*What if suffering is the cost for you to exist?*” After all, what kind of beings would we be if we lived in a world where we either had no choice, or where there were no consequences to our choices?

Let’s talk about a world without choice. Alvin Plantinga, the eminent Christian philosopher, argues that perhaps suffering is an inescapable consequence of creating creatures with the capacity to love. God is for *love*, but to create beings that *can* love he must give them significant moral freedom. Simply put, love requires *choice*. Imagine a world where, rather than me wooing my wife such that she fell in love with me freely, instead I put a gun to her head and forced her to say her marriage vows. Such an act of coercion would instantly remove

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the meaning behind her choice, leaving my relationship with her as merely an empty shell. What if it is that God doesn’t want robots or automatons? Perhaps he wants people capable of experiencing the gift of love, even at the cost of suffering. It seems to me that a life without choice is devoid of any love or meaning, so even we, as the creatures who suffer, wouldn’t truly choose that world either. Plantinga calls this the Free Will Defence.4

What about a world where there are no consequences to our choices? Imagine a world where every time you made a choice that would result in suffering for you or another, God intervened. You trip and are about to hit the pavement, so God changes it into a marshmallow pillow. You are accidentally pushed into the burning coals of a campfire, so God miraculously transforms it into fairy floss. I mean, in this kind of imaginary world it’s impossible to see how God intervening to save one person from suffering would not, as an inescapable result, bring suffering on another. What would happen to some poor car sharing the pavement that turned into a marshmallow? What would happen to those people being warmed by the fire? It seems to me that a neutral world operating with law-like function provides the necessary medium for us to relate as individuals in community. CS Lewis called the Natural-Law Theodicy.5

There is a deeper problem, though, with any hypothetical no-suffering world. You’re not in it! Think about it. If people hadn’t bumped into each other as they had; if suffering were not a part of this world’s BIG story; not only would people not end up forging their character and courage through the flames, but you would never have made it onto the stage of planet earth. The events of world history conspire to bring you to a point of being able to hear and weigh the validity of these words. Without suffering, your parents would never have met as they did or have conceived you when they did. Were conditions even slightly different, one of the other 8,000,000 sperm may have won the race over you. So, you ask, why did a loving God choose a world with suffering? Perhaps it is because he wanted to love YOU! He wanted to pursue relationship with the very person hearing these words, with all of your complexities, experiences, and quirks. The very reason you can ask If God, Why Suffering, is because God chose you; he intended you; he loves you. You are no accident. Oxford philosopher Vince Vitale calls this the Non-Identity Theodicy.6

As I sit there grappling with these ideas, the philosopher hands me a giant tome and tell me that these are only a few of the many plausible reasons why a loving

God might choose a world with suffering. He then leans in to ask me a personal question... *Should you expect to have all the answers?*

If God is all-wise and all-loving and all-powerful, could he not have reasons that we, as finite beings, are simply unaware of? Just because we don’t see them doesn’t mean they are not there. In fact, even from our limited perspective, the gift of retrospect allows us to see at least some ways that our past suffering can serve a meaningful purpose. When a parent inoculates a child, does not the allowance of momentary suffering produce a greater good for the child, even when from the child’s limited perspective they don’t understand why the parent allows their suffering? Could it not be that we are simply not in an epistemic position to know whether God has morally sufficient reasons to choose a world with suffering?

Sitting there with my head reeling from all this intellectual stuff, the philosopher asks if he can try to simplify it down. I nod, thankfully. Then he points to one final assumption in Epicurus’ trilemma...

**Assumption #3: Suffering is evil or wrong for humanity to experience**

As I listen he unfolds something I’ve never noticed. *Why do we question justice when those who seem good to us suffer, and those who seem evil thrive? Why do we call it evil when the weak are oppressed and suffer at the hands of a political regime? Why do we describe suffering in moral terms of good and evil, or right and wrong?* Does not this reaction betray our expectation, not of an atheistic world, but of a Christian one? Curious, I motion for him to explain.

If we believe good and evil exist then we must posit a moral law by which we distinguish good from evil. And yet to posit a moral law we must posit a moral lawgiver, which leads us to God. Without God there is no moral lawgiver; without a moral lawgiver there can be no moral law; and without a moral law there can be no good or evil. The argument, then, that evil disproves God’s existence self-destructs. Epicurus’ assumption borrows from a world of God’s existence to try to disprove God’s existence.

Furthermore, *why, in the face of immense suffering, are we convinced that this is not the way the world should be? Where does this belief come from?* This seemingly innate response—that this is not how things *ought* to be—betrays the Christian expectation that suffering is not how things were originally created, nor is this how things will be in the future. You see, it is a Christian world, not an

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7 This approach to *Theodicy* is called Skeptical Theism.

8 See Ravi Zacharias and William Lane Craig for a defence of the Moral Argument for God’s Existence.
atheistic one, that makes the most sense of our innate expectations and reactions concerning suffering.

**THE FINAL HURDLE: From Philosophy to Faith**

The philosopher’s answers give me a lot to think about. Although my sceptical argument that suffering disproves Christianity seemed convincing at first, it simply crumbled under further examination. So why do I still reject Christianity? Why are the answers of the philosopher, which make some sense intellectually, still so existentially dissatisfying? Perhaps the driving reason why my suffering has led this wounded traveller to reject Christianity is not so much a logical one, but rather an emotional one. Do I not, in my darkest moments of confusion and frustration, cry out, “WHY?”

As I’m leaving his office with a lot to chew on, my philosopher friend’s final words to me strike that scary balance between illumination and confrontation…

“To whom are you asking WHY? It seems to me that we rarely question or get angry at a non-existent being; we get angry with a real one whose actions we do not understand. Perhaps your true dilemma is one of trust. What would it take for you to move from philosophy to faith?”

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**CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

Do any of the philosopher’s responses pique your interest?

What other response have you heard Christians give in response to the intellectual problem of suffering and evil?

How do the limitations of our human perspective play out in this question?

Are intellectual answers to this question ultimately satisfying for you? Why/why not?

Do you agree that the heart of this question is one of trust?
CAN A WOUNDED TRAVELLER HAVE FAITH IN A LOVING GOD?

It’s time for the final stage of our journey—the homecoming. If other worldviews don’t make much sense of suffering, and if our expectations and experience of suffering don’t disprove but rather point towards God’s existence, can I as a wounded traveller ever have faith in a loving God?

Imagine this wounded traveller, disillusioned with other worldviews, and wearied by all the logic of the philosophers, finally returned home only to find Jesus sitting on my couch. He was waiting for me. Strangely as I open my mouth to recount my story he motions to be silent. I already know. With eyes full of compassion motioning for me to sit, and myself feeling confused and weary, I slowly recline as he opens the book of Scripture, or better put, the book of his own suffering. What do you think Jesus will say to my story? Does this Christian faith offer any answers or hope? Can I ever trust this man before me, who clasps his tome with rugged and scarred hands?

A SEA OF SOURCES: What Jesus Could Say

There are a number of places Jesus could point me in the Bible. He could point me back to the origin of suffering, stemming not from God’s good design but from our corruption of it. He could point me back to his alleviation of suffering, where in his first coming he healed those around him, and treated suffering, sickness, and death as enemies of humanity. He could point me forward to the eclipse of suffering, where in the final pages of the Bible it paints the picture of God’s future kingdom where the sting of suffering will be removed—“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). But I don’t think Jesus would lead with these; he’s not one for offering mere pie in the sky when we die.

He could explain why he allows us to suffer, redeeming our afflictions to serve a momentary purpose in his plan. Perhaps suffering alerts us to our brokenness of the world, serving as God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world to our need for rescue. Perhaps suffering serves to quiet a proud or distracted heart, causing us to cry out and ask the big questions in life. Perhaps suffering serves to forge our
character, fashioning us with our cooperation to become heavenly rather than hellish beings. Perhaps suffering serves to evoke our compassion and empathy, teaching us to know and care for our companions through life’s journey upon this spinning blue planet. But I don’t think Jesus would lead with this stuff either.

He could express how much our suffering grieves him, despite its momentary purpose. Is it not the case that every tear we shed is borrowed from His divine eye? All these things are true, and would probably have been to me more precious answers than those given on my travels. Still, however, I don’t think they would grace his tongue.

**DIVINE SUFFERING: A God with Scars**

The truth is that words come cheap. As a sufferer my deepest need is not an explanation of his love, but a demonstration of his love. So, opening his hands, revealing the scars of his crucifixion, here’s what I think Jesus would do. **He would point me straight to the one moment in history where God demonstrated, once for all, the depths of his love by embracing my suffering on the cross.**

Here’s the truth I’ve stumbled upon. When we hurt, we don’t need a philosopher; we need a friend. One who understands us; one who knows the pain of our path; one who has not been destroyed by its snares; one who offers us hope of a light ahead.

As I sit with Jesus on my couch my heart awakens to what truly held me back. As a wounded traveller, I’m not sure I could ever trust a glorified God if He wasn’t also a crucified God. The old Dostoyevsky tale floods my memory, “No other God has scars!” Curiously, this Jesus before me is not untouched by the suffering of the world; he entered it to redeem us, and to make our suffering mean something. So turning to me, and to you also, Jesus asks a searching question…

*Cannot a wounded traveller trust a wounded healer?*

**CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

Do you find anything about Jesus’ possible responses compelling?

Would you agree that some suffering can be seen to have a meaningful purpose?

Is it significant that the Christian God is pictured as crucified/suffering/scarred in the Bible’s BIG story?

Does anything else make more sense of our experience and expectations concerning suffering than Jesus’ answers?
WHERE TO NEXT?

Suffering gets no easier when we get rid of God, but billions of Christians, can testify to the experience of encountering Jesus as wounded travellers. For the sceptics out there, can I submit that, although God has not revealed to us all the answers, through the cross we get the image of a God who comes close to embrace our pain. When I read the New Testament and encountered this kind of God, I knew that I could trust him. Don’t just make war on Christianity’s door with your sceptical weapons. Examine the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps in doing so you’ll find its time to put down your weapons and, without knowing everything, step through that door into a relationship with God that brings healing and hope to your life.

For the sufferers out there, can I encourage you with my experience? God doesn’t always alleviate our external circumstances, but he changes us to become more like his Son. He gives you the resources to cope with and confront suffering through his comfort, the promise of an eternal future, a pattern of life in opposition to evil, and a spiritual family to walk with you as you suffer. And can I offer you this image. Jesus’ scars became the very sending symbol he gave his disciples. In John 20, appearing in a locked room, Jesus extended his scarred hands, “As the Father has sent me, so I send YOU!” The promise of walking with God is that he can take the greatest evil committed against you in your past and use it to being help to others. Your scars can assist in the healing of others.

SUGGESTED READING?

Popular:
4. C S Lewis, A Grief Observed (Great Britain, Coll

Academic:
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