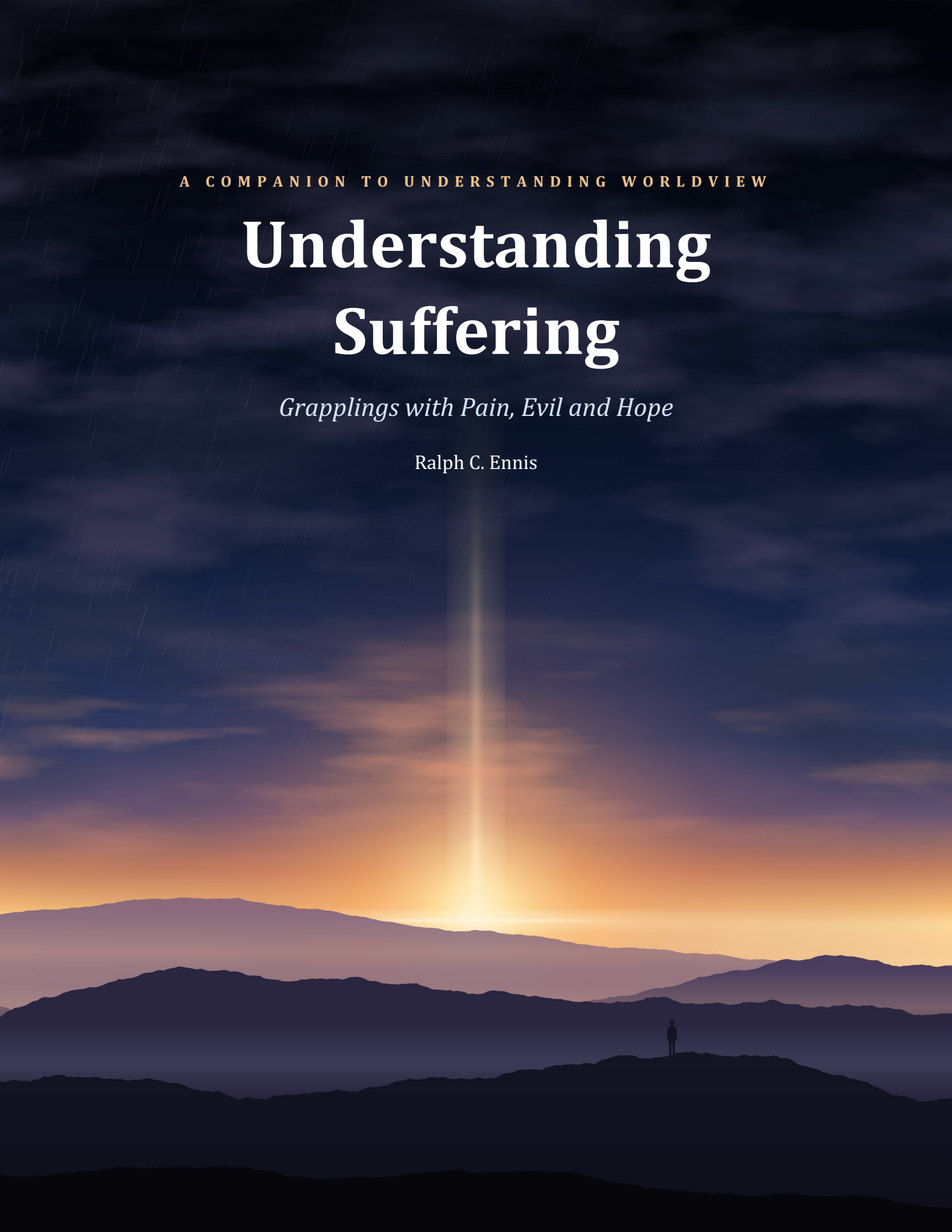


A COMPANION TO UNDERSTANDING WORLDVIEW

Understanding Suffering

Grapplings with Pain, Evil and Hope

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Contents

Why, God? 1
- A World That Groans 2
- Not the First to Ask 2
- The Road Ahead 3

How Our Age Answers Suffering—and Why the Answers Fall Short 4
- Answer One: Suffering Is Simply Meaningless 4
- Answer Two: Suffering Can Be Engineered Away—or Numbed 4
- Answer Three: You Get What You Deserve 5
- Answer Four: Suffering Is an Illusion—So Detach 5
- What the Answers Have in Common 5

The Questions Suffering Asks 7
- The Many Faces of Suffering 8
- How to Weigh an Answer 8

The Biblical View: A Story That Holds Our Pain 9
- The Story in Four Acts 9
- How the Story Answered Sam's Questions 10
- 1. Justice: Is It Fair? 10
- 2. Love: Does God Feel My Pain? 10
- 3. Power: Why Doesn't God Stop It? 11
- 4. Wisdom: Does God Know What He Is Doing? 12
- 5. Goodness: Can Pain Be Good? 13
- 6. Joy: Can I Ever Be Glad Again? 13
- When Suffering Has a Name 14
- Why the Picture Holds Together 15

Back to Sam 16
- For Those Who Walk Alongside Sufferers 16
- Questions for Reflection 17

Notes 18

About the Author 19

PART ONE

Why, God?

A year has passed since Sam first prayed, "If You are there, I want to know You." He still lives in the apartment that looks out on the parking deck. He still goes to the Tuesday group, where a handful of men are reading their way through the Gospel of John. He prays more than he used to. Some nights it feels like conversation. Most nights it feels like talking into a dark room.

Then, on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon, his phone rang. Ethan, his college roommate and the funniest person he knew, had died by suicide. That night the group happened to be reading John 11, the death of Lazarus. When Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21), Sam got up and walked out.

Marcus found him in the parking lot. "Write it down," he said. "All of it. Say it to God, not just about Him. Job did. David did. He can take it." So Sam bought a cheap notebook. His journal would run across several years. The first entry came out in one long burst.

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

I'm angry. If bitterness is unresolved anger carried for a long time, then I'm bitter. I'm mad that life doesn't work the way I want it to. Little things set me off: the car that won't start, the gridlock when I'm already late, the neighbor's dog barking at 2 a.m.

And then there's the big stuff. Every time I open my phone: shootings, hurricanes, famine, wars nobody can even explain anymore. Children, always children. Why, God, do people have to suffer?

Everybody I know has lost someone on the road. Jordan from my high school was killed by a drunk driver at nineteen. A guy from my dorm took a dare and will never walk again. And now Ethan. Why couldn't he hold on? Why didn't You hold on to him?

I'm mad about rape and abuse and children sold for sex, and I'm mad that I've gotten numb to it. I'm mad that families are such a mess. Homes that are supposed to be safe aren't. Mine came apart when I was twelve, and part of me is still standing in that kitchen.

Why do we have to die at all? Why do some people get sick and stay sick for years? Can't You heal them? I can hardly watch the news anymore. Some of the stories are too much like mine. So I scroll past. I go numb. I stuff it.

I suppose You think all this is good for me. My definition of "good" isn't the same as Yours. And I'm mad at myself, because my stuff seems so small next to what other people go through. God, can You help me make sense of any of it? I can't carry this anymore.

In *Understanding Worldview* (Part Three) we named six sets of questions every worldview must answer. Tucked inside the fifth is a short one: Why is there pain and suffering? For many people it is

not one question among many. It is *the* question, the one that decides whether faith in God is possible at all.

Suffering poses two problems. The first is intellectual: How can a God who is both good and all-powerful allow so much evil? The second is personal: How can I trust Him when it hurts this much? Philosophers argue about the first. Sufferers live inside the second. A worldview worth holding has to speak to both.

C. S. Lewis wrote a book-length defense of God's goodness, *The Problem of Pain*. Two decades later, after cancer took his wife, he wrote a very different book. "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God," he confessed. "The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him."[1] That is Sam's danger too. He has not stopped believing in God. He is beginning to wonder whether God is good.

> If you are carrying thoughts of ending your life, or grieving someone who did, please don't carry it alone. Call or text **988** to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you have experienced sexual assault, the National Sexual Assault Hotline is available at **800-656-4673**.

A World That Groans

Sam's anger is not unusual, and neither is the suffering behind it. The numbers are so large they can numb us, but every one of them is a person:

- Drunk driving killed 11,904 people in the United States in 2024, nearly a third of all traffic deaths.[2]
- 48,824 Americans died by suicide in 2024, about one every eleven minutes.[3]
- At the end of 2025, about 117.8 million people worldwide had been forced from their homes by war, persecution and violence.[4]
- Nearly one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime.[5]

Young adults feel the weight of these questions sharply. Barna found that non-Christian teens and young adults are more likely than older non-Christians to call the problem of evil and suffering a "deal breaker" for faith.[6] Much of what they hear from Christians does not help: quick answers, cheerful slogans, a Bible verse pressed into an open wound. Some of it makes things worse.

Not the First to Ask

Sam worried that his anger would offend God. The Bible suggests otherwise. Its pages are full of people who said what Sam was saying. Job cried out, "I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 7:11). The prophet Habakkuk demanded, "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?" (Habakkuk 1:2). Dozens of psalms are laments, more than any other kind of psalm. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1).

And on the cross Jesus Himself prayed the opening words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

The Bible does not hush the question of suffering. It hands sufferers the words to ask it. Honest complaint, addressed to God, is not the opposite of faith. It is one of faith’s oldest forms.

The Road Ahead

This booklet follows Sam’s journal. Part Two looks at the answers our age offers for suffering and asks why each falls short. Part Three names the questions suffering raises about God and the many forms suffering takes. Part Four, the heart of the booklet, explores the biblical story as a story that holds our pain, and traces how it answered Sam’s questions one by one. We close by returning to Sam, and to those who want to walk alongside people who hurt. Readers who have not yet met Sam can begin with *Understanding Worldview*, and groups can use the *Head & Heart* reflection guide, which covers this paper in Sessions 7–12.

PART TWO

How Our Age Answers Suffering—and Why the Answers Fall Short

Sam's culture has answers for suffering, too. He heard them at Ethan's memorial, in his sister's texts and in the podcasts that filled his commute. Few were announced as worldviews, but each made a claim about what pain is and what to do with it. Each contains a measure of truth. None can carry a grieving person through the night.

Answer One: Suffering Is Simply Meaningless

> At the reception after Ethan's memorial, an old friend from college put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "The universe doesn't care, man. Stuff happens. You have to make your own meaning." Sam nodded. On the drive home it sounded hollow. His anger needed somewhere to go, and the universe had no address.

In a purely material universe, suffering is not a problem to be solved. It is simply what happens when atoms collide. The biologist Richard Dawkins put it bluntly: at bottom the universe shows "nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."[7] There is a stark honesty in that view. It refuses easy comfort.

Why it falls short: If there is no good and no evil, then Sam's outrage is a malfunction, and nothing that happened to Ethan was *wrong*. It was only unfortunate. Yet no one can live that way at a graveside. Our protest against suffering assumes a standard that suffering violates. Lewis recalled noticing this while he was still an atheist: "A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line."[8] Sam's anger was not proof that God is absent. It was evidence that he knew the world was not as it ought to be.

Answer Two: Suffering Can Be Engineered Away—or Numbed

> For months after the funeral, Sam played video games until 3 a.m. and drank a little more than he used to. A coworker sent him a link to a mood-tracking app. It helped him sleep. It did not help him grieve.

Our age treats pain mainly as a technical problem. Medicine, therapy and technology have relieved enormous suffering, and Christians should welcome them gladly; Luke, who wrote about a quarter of the New Testament, was "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14). Some technologists now dream of ending suffering altogether. Meanwhile millions manage pain the old-fashioned way: with screens, substances and busyness.

Why it falls short: Technology can lessen pain, but it cannot tell us what pain means or heal a wounded soul. Numbing does not discriminate. When we deaden grief, we deaden joy along with it.

Scripture says there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4). Grief that is never felt is never healed.

Answer Three: You Get What You Deserve

> "Maybe it's karma," Sam's sister, Maya, texted. "The universe gives back the energy you put out." That same week a preacher in his feed promised that enough faith would bring health and wealth. Sam thought of Ethan. He thought of the toddlers in the war footage. What had they put out?

The idea that suffering is always payback is ancient. In Eastern religions it is called karma. In parts of the church it appears as the "prosperity gospel," which teaches that faith guarantees health and wealth. Job's friends held a version of it: "Remember: who that was innocent ever perished?" (Job 4:7). It contains a truth. Our choices do have consequences (Galatians 6:7), and some suffering is self-inflicted.

Why it falls short: Jesus flatly rejected it. When His disciples asked whose sin had caused a man's blindness, He answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents" (John 9:3). When a tower fell and killed eighteen people, He denied that they were worse than anyone else (Luke 13:4–5). At the end of Job, God told the friends, "you have not spoken of me what is right" (Job 42:7). And the most innocent sufferer in history died on a cross.

Answer Four: Suffering Is an Illusion—So Detach

> Sam tried a meditation app. A calm voice told him to observe his pain "without attachment." A popular stoic podcaster advised controlling what he could and feeling nothing about the rest. It quieted him. But it seemed to ask him to love Ethan a little less.

Buddhism teaches that suffering arises from craving and attachment, and that release comes by letting go of desire. Other traditions call the world of pain an illusion. Modern Stoicism, popular among young men, counsels mastery over emotion, and the culture of "good vibes only" urges us to stay positive. Each holds a truth: our desires can be disordered, and calm is a gift.

Why it falls short: The price of ending suffering by ceasing to love is too high. Jesus did not detach. Standing at the tomb of Lazarus, knowing He was about to raise him, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Love makes us vulnerable, and the Bible does not ask us to stop loving in order to stop hurting. As Lewis wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable."[9]

What the Answers Have in Common

Each answer solves the problem of suffering by giving up something we know to be true. The first gives up the reality of evil. The second gives up the meaning of pain. The third gives up the innocence of many who suffer. The fourth gives up the worth of love. The biblical worldview refuses to give up any of them: God is good, evil is real, pain matters and love is worth the cost. That is why it cannot offer a cheap answer, and why its answer, when it comes, is worth hearing.

> And so, Sam realized that every answer he had been offered asked him to stop feeling something he knew it was right to feel.

PART THREE

The Questions Suffering Asks

Weeks later, Sam's anger turned from the world toward God Himself. His second journal entry read like an indictment.

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *God, my bitterness won't go away, so now I'm questioning Your character. I question Your justice: how can it be fair for You to allow these things? I question Your love: if You love us, why don't You protect us? I question Your power: can't You stop people's pain? I question Your wisdom: couldn't You come up with a better plan? I question Your goodness: is all this suffering really good? I question Your joy in my happiness: does it make any difference to You?*
>
> *Yet somewhere deep inside I want to believe that You are just, loving, powerful, wise and good, and that You delight in me. Every day I wear a mask, and people think I'm happy. Please help me. I think You're the only One who can. My fear is that You won't.*

Philosophers have long framed the problem in a famous dilemma, restated by David Hume in 1779: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"[10] Sam's six questions sharpen the dilemma and make it personal.

Six Questions Suffering Asks About God

What is in question	The question	How Sam asks it
1. God's justice	Is it fair? Why do the innocent suffer while the guilty prosper?	*"How can it be fair for You to allow these things?"*
2. God's love	Does God care? Does He feel our pain?	*"If You love us, why don't You protect us?"*
3. God's power	Can God stop it? If He can, why doesn't He?	*"Can't You stop people's pain?"*
4. God's wisdom	Does God know what He is doing?	*"Couldn't You come up with a better plan?"*
5. God's goodness	Can anything good come from pain?	*"Is all this suffering really good?"*
6. God's joy	Will I ever be glad again? Does God delight in me?	*"Does my happiness make any difference to You?"*

The Many Faces of Suffering

Suffering is not one thing. Over the years Sam's journal touched nearly every kind, and each kind raises the questions differently.

Kinds of Suffering

Kind	Examples	Where Sam met it
Evil done by others	Violence, abuse, war, crime, betrayal	A friend's assault; war footage on his phone
Natural evil	Disease, disasters, accidents	Cancer in his small group; a near miss as a toddler
Broken relationships	Divorce, abandonment, loneliness	His parents' divorce when he was twelve
Loss and grief	Death of loved ones, suicide	Jordan, killed by a drunk driver; Ethan
Suffering we cause	Consequences of our own sin and folly	His temper, and the people it hurt
Inner suffering	Shame, depression, anxiety, numbness	The mask; never feeling "good enough"

Different kinds of suffering call for different kinds of care. A grieving widow needs presence before she needs an explanation. A victim of abuse needs safety and justice before anyone speaks to her about forgiveness. Good answers pay attention to the wound.

How to Weigh an Answer

The tests from *Understanding Worldview* (Part Three, "How to Weigh a Worldview") apply here too. **Coherence:** can the answer hold together God's goodness, God's power and the reality of evil without denying any of them? **Correspondence:** does it match what sufferers actually know, that evil is real and pain matters? **Livability:** can it be lived at a hospital bed or a graveside? **Completeness:** does it speak to every kind of suffering, or only the convenient ones? No worldview removes every mystery. The question is which one lets us face suffering honestly and still hope.

PART FOUR

The Biblical View: A Story That Holds Our Pain

The Bible does not offer a formula that makes suffering tidy. It offers something better: a true story in which suffering is real but not original, terrible but not final, and entered by God Himself. Seen within that story, Sam's questions do not vanish, but they change shape. *Understanding Worldview* tells this four-act story in full in its Part Four; here we read it with suffering in view.

The Story in Four Acts

CREATION → FALL → REDEMPTION → CONSUMMATION

Act One: Creation—A World Without Tears

The story begins without suffering. God made a world He called "very good" (Genesis 1:31), with no death, no grief and no fear. Suffering is not woven into the fabric of creation. It is an intruder. That is why our protest against it is right. God Himself "does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men" (Lamentations 3:33).

Act Two: The Fall—How Suffering Entered

When the first human beings rebelled, choosing to be their own gods, suffering entered the world. Within a generation, a brother murdered his brother (Genesis 4:8). People began to hurt people, which is moral evil. And creation itself was "subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20), producing disease and disaster, which is natural evil. God gave human beings real freedom and did not remove it, or its consequences, after the Fall. Behind human evil stands a real enemy. Lewis described our world as "enemy-occupied territory."[11] Not every suffering can be traced to a particular sin; Jesus denied that it could (John 9:3). But all suffering can be traced to a world that has turned from its Maker.

Act Three: Redemption—God Enters Our Pain

God did not explain suffering from a distance. He entered it. Isaiah foresaw the Messiah as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus wept at a friend's grave. In Gethsemane He said, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matthew 26:38). On the cross He endured injustice, torture, public shame and the cry of abandonment, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). He bore it for us: "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5).

John Stott once wrote, "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross," and asked, "In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"[12] The cross does not explain every suffering. It shows us what God is like in the middle of it. And three days later the resurrection announced that suffering and death do not have the last word: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Act Four: Consummation—Every Tear Wiped Away

The story ends with a promise. "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" (Revelation 21:4). Every wrong will be put right. Paul, who was beaten, shipwrecked and imprisoned, could write, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Lewis imagined that heaven, once reached, "will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory."[13] Suffering will not simply be forgotten. In ways we cannot yet imagine, it will be redeemed.

How the Story Answered Sam's Questions

Sam kept writing. His journal over the next several years traces the six questions, not in a straight line but the way real people move: two steps forward, one step back.

1. Justice: Is It Fair?

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *I'm thinking about justice today. If I had made a perfect world and someone polluted it, I'd go after them. I'd have them arrested and make them pay, and if that didn't work, I'd wipe out the whole bunch and start over. But if Your sense of justice were like mine, You would have destroyed the human race. Now that's scary, and just. Since You didn't, You must love us, even though every day I make the same choice Adam and Eve made: to be my own god. Is it mercy that You hold back?*

Sam had stumbled onto something important. We want justice for others and mercy for ourselves. Scripture insists on both. God's justice is certain, but it is often delayed, and the delay is mercy: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9). No abuser, tyrant or drunk driver escapes His notice. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). That promise frees victims from carrying revenge, though not from seeking justice through rightful authorities (Romans 13:4). At the cross, justice and mercy met. Sin was judged in full, so that mercy could be offered to all.

2. Love: Does God Feel My Pain?

> A few years later, Sam married Elena, whom he met on a church work day. Marriage taught him things about love he had never learned from relationships that ended.

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *Now that I've married a soul mate, I'm beginning to understand love a little more. Love is a choice of the will. Love is an emotion with great power. Love is a commitment that lasts. Love is a jealousy that both holds on and sets free. Love is a mystery. I can't find a law anywhere that says You have to love me, so You must have chosen to.*
>
> *I remember an experiment where ordinary people, told by a man in a lab coat to shock a stranger, kept raising the voltage. Are You like that? Will You love me one day and shock me into obedience the next? Don't You feel my pain?*

The experiment Sam remembered was real. In Stanley Milgram's study at Yale, nearly two-thirds of participants obeyed instructions to give what they believed were dangerous electric shocks.[14] Many people imagine God like the man behind the glass, coolly watching. The Bible paints the opposite picture. When Israel suffered in Egypt, God said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people … I know their sufferings" (Exodus 3:7). A friend showed Sam another verse: "In all their affliction he was afflicted … in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9).

That verse undid something in Sam. He had resisted believing that God felt his pain, because a God who felt it and did nothing seemed worse than a God who did not feel it at all. But God *did* act, at the cross, at unimaginable cost. Jesus is a high priest who is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15). God keeps count of our tossings and puts our tears in His bottle (Psalm 56:8). Sam wrote in the margin: "You were listening all along."

3. Power: Why Doesn't God Stop It?

> When their daughter, Lily, was born, Sam discovered what it means to hold power and choose not to use it.

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *Now that I'm a parent, I understand Your power a little better. So many times I've wanted to rescue Lily, and chose not to, for her own good. I know You could end all pain in an instant. Yet You don't. Does it have something to do with Your being a parent too?*
>
> *Some things still don't make sense. Why did You keep that car from running me over when I was three? Why did Jordan have to die? Why did a nine-year-old boy happen to see Lily at the bottom of the pool last summer and pull her out? Why didn't You protect my friend from being raped? Where were You? Why do You rescue one time and allow death the next?*

God's power is real, and His restraint is not weakness. Scripture points to several reasons for it, without claiming to explain every case. He made real persons with real freedom of choice, and a

world where He blocked every evil choice would be a world without real love. He didn't make us to be robots without free will. He sustains a world of dependable natural laws, which makes human action meaningful. He is patient, holding back final judgment so more people can turn to Him. And He is at war with a real enemy whose defeat is certain but not yet complete.

Why one person is rescued and another is not remains a mystery Scripture does not solve. When Peter asked about another disciple's future, Jesus answered, "what is that to you? You follow me!" (John 21:22). Sam's question about his friend's assault deserves a careful answer, and we return to it below. God was not indifferent. He hears the cry of the oppressed, and His anger burns against those who harm the vulnerable.

4. Wisdom: Does God Know What He Is Doing?

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *I've been reading Job. You talked with him a long time after his life fell apart: disease, financial ruin, the death of his children, friends who didn't understand. You asked him about the stars, light, the sea, snow and mountain goats. He couldn't answer. Now I think You wanted him to see that Your wisdom, though he couldn't understand it all, was best. So much more is going on than meets the eye. For now I'm learning to be content with the part of Your wisdom I can see: people in love, leaves changing color in the fall, the taste of an apple, the sound of a baby crying to be fed.*

Remarkably, God never told Job why he suffered. The heavenly scene at the start of the book was never explained to him. Instead God gave Job something better than an explanation: Himself. "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). Paul wrote that God's wisdom is being displayed even "to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:10). "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways" (Isaiah 55:9).

Scripture shows God weaving evil intentions into good outcomes. Joseph told the brothers who had sold him into slavery, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Paul does not say that all things *are* good, but that "for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). Some things remain hidden: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Trusting God's wisdom does not mean understanding everything. It means trusting the One who does.

5. Goodness: Can Pain Be Good?

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *I'm changing the lens I look through. Thanks that You can use my pain to shape my character. Thanks that I suffer only a fraction of what Jesus suffered on the cross. Thanks that You're helping me take off the mask and face my shame. Thanks that I can comfort others who've had the same kind of pain. And, hard as it is to say, thanks that there are many things I can't understand. I'd be crushed under the weight of all that knowledge. I believe with time I may befriend the thorns I experience daily. But not yet.*

Here a distinction matters. Evil is never good. Abuse, war and cancer are enemies, not gifts. But God is able to bring good out of evil without calling evil good. When Joni Eareckson Tada was left a quadriplegic by a diving accident at seventeen, a friend gave her ten words that changed everything about her suffering: "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves."[15]

Scripture names some of what God accomplishes. Suffering "produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3–4). It trains us (Hebrews 12:11). It equips us to "comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). It teaches us that His grace is enough and that His "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). And it wakes us up. Lewis called pain God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[16]

These truths are medicine for our own wounds. They are not missiles to fire at someone else's. A grieving mother does not need to hear that "everything happens for a reason." She needs someone to sit with her. In time, she may find the reasons for herself.

6. Joy: Can I Ever Be Glad Again?

FROM SAM'S JOURNAL

> *Joy! For so many years it seemed so elusive. Then one day I found the courage to face the shame underneath my bitterness. I've always felt flawed, defective, never quite good enough to make the grade, to be loved. Now I realize You were never grading me! If You, the God of the entire universe, love and accept me just as I am, who am I to argue with You? I knew in my head that You took away my guilt because of Jesus' sacrifice. I just couldn't understand that You had also dealt with my shame.*

Sam discovered what many sufferers find: beneath long-held bitterness often lies shame. Bitterness feels like strength, but it is a slow poison. Scripture warns against letting a "root of bitterness" spring up (Hebrews 12:15) and counsels, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26).

Jesus endured the cross, "despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2), so that our shame could be lifted. God is not merely tolerating Sam. "He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love" (Zephaniah 3:17). The Bible even calls God jealous (Exodus 34:14), but His jealousy is not like ours. It is a fierce, protective love that will not let go of those He treasures. Christian joy does not deny sorrow. Paul described himself "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). Joy and grief can live in the same heart, because the story is not over.

When Suffering Has a Name

The biblical story speaks to every kind of suffering, but it speaks to each one differently.

Grief and death. Death is "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26), not a friend to be welcomed. Christians grieve, but not "as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus wept at Lazarus's tomb even though He knew what He would do next. Tears are not a lack of faith.

Loss to suicide. Those left behind often carry guilt and unanswerable questions. They need patient company more than explanations. Scripture gives no basis for the cruel claim that a believer who dies this way is beyond God's mercy, for nothing "in all creation" can separate those in Christ from His love (Romans 8:39). And anyone who is struggling today should reach out for help now.

Abuse and sexual violence. Abuse is never the victim's fault, and the shame belongs to the abuser. Jesus reserved some of His fiercest words for those who harm the vulnerable (Matthew 18:6). Safety and justice come first, which means reporting abuse to the authorities. Forgiveness, when it comes, never requires returning to danger or keeping silent. Healing often takes time and skilled help.

Broken families. "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in" (Psalm 27:10). God is "Father of the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5), and the church is meant to be a family for those whose families have come apart.

Illness and disability. God sometimes heals now. He will heal fully in the resurrection, when Christ "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Doctors and medicine are among His gifts.

Disasters and war. These are signs of a groaning creation and a fallen humanity, not of special guilt in those who suffer (Luke 13:4–5). Christians respond by running toward the need and working for peace (Matthew 5:9).

Suffering we bring on ourselves. Consequences are real, but so is forgiveness: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Depression and despair. Psalm 88 ends in darkness, with no resolution, and it is still in the Bible. When the prophet Elijah asked to die, God gave him sleep and food before He gave him a word (1 Kings 19:4–8). Counseling and medical care are not a failure of faith.

Why the Picture Holds Together

The biblical story does not answer every "why." But it holds together what every other answer lets fall apart.

It takes evil seriously. It calls evil an intruder in a good world, not an illusion, an accident or a deserved punishment without hope of mercy.

It lets sufferers speak. It gives us laments, complaints and questions, and it treats them as prayer.

It puts God inside our pain, not above it. In Jesus, God has suffered injustice, grief, abandonment and death. As Betsie ten Boom told her sister Corrie in a Nazi concentration camp, "There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still."[17]

It promises justice and restoration. Every wrong will be answered, and every tear will be wiped away.

It can be lived at a graveside. It allows us to weep and hope at the same time.

It does not hand Sam a complete explanation. It hands him a Person: a God who is just, loving, powerful, wise and good, who has suffered with us and for us, and who will one day make all things new.

CONCLUSION

Back to Sam

> Years after he bought that cheap notebook, Sam wrote an entry that was short.
>
> FROM SAM'S JOURNAL
>
> *God, who is just, powerful, wise, joyful and the jealous Lover of my soul, You have adopted me into the family of those who follow Your Son. "You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15). And dear loving God, thanks for listening to my raging!*

> Sam still has questions. He does not know why Ethan could not hold on, or why Jordan died and Lily lived. Some days the old bitterness flares, and he has learned to bring it to God sooner. But he no longer prays into a dark room. He prays to a Father.
>
> Last winter Walt, the retired Marine from the Tuesday group, died of cancer. Sam sat by his bed near the end. Walt's eyes held tears and hope at the same time. Sam realized he was watching what his journal had been reaching for all along.
>
> Not long after, Lily found a dead bird in the yard and asked why it had to die. Sam knelt beside her. "Death is sad," he said. "God is sad about it too. And one day He's going to fix everything." She took his hand, and Sam remembered a line from his own journal: "I'm taking hold of Your hand."

For Those Who Walk Alongside Sufferers

Readers are urged to "find a friend or two" to talk with as they grappled with pain. Sam found Marcus. Every sufferer needs someone like that. A few principles can help:

- **Show up, and stay.** Job's friends did their best work in the first week, when they sat with him in silence "for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13). They did their worst when they started explaining.
- **Weep with those who weep** (Romans 12:15). Presence matters more than answers. Listen far more than you speak.
- **Make room for lament.** Do not police a sufferer's anger. God can take it, and so can you.
- **Avoid clichés.** "Everything happens for a reason" and "God needed another angel" wound more than they heal.
- **Help in practical ways.** Bring meals, give rides, remember anniversaries of a loss.
- **Know when to bring in others.** Thoughts of suicide, abuse or deep depression call for professional help and, where needed, the authorities.

- **Point to Jesus gently, and in time.** The best comfort is not an argument but a Person who has suffered too.

The church will be most believable to a hurting generation not when it explains suffering best, but when it suffers alongside people best.

Questions for Reflection

These questions are meant to be discussed with a friend or two. For complete 45-minute discussion sessions on this paper, see Sessions 7–12 of *Head & Heart: A Reflection Guide for Understanding Worldview and Understanding Suffering*.

- What suffering in the world, or in your own life, are you angry or numb about? Whom do you talk to about it?
- Which of Sam's six questions about God's justice, love, power, wisdom, goodness and joy is hardest for you right now? Why? Do you like God as revealed in the Bible?
- Do you think we deserve a pain-free life? What would it look like for God to give you justice? To give you mercy?
- Does receiving love come easily for you? Why or why not?
- Does it feel safe to you for God to be powerful? Do you like the reality that God is God and you are not?
- Do you relate to Sam's sense of never being "good enough to make the grade"? How might God's welcome change that?
- What questions remain that may stand between you and God, the Lover of your soul?

Notes

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Sam is a composite character, first introduced in Understanding Worldview *(2026). His journal entries are adapted from the author's* Grapplings: Why Do People Suffer So Much? *(2015), itself adapted from* Dear God: We Need to Talk about Pain and Suffering *(2004). Though not taken from the author's personal journals, they mirror his own struggles with pain and suffering through the years, and how God met him in them.*

Companion resources: Understanding Worldview: Keys for 21st-Century People *(revised edition, October 2026) introduces Sam and sets out the biblical worldview that this paper applies to suffering.* Head & Heart: A Reflection Guide for Understanding Worldview and Understanding Suffering *(October 2026) offers twelve 45-minute discussion sessions on both papers.*

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