Everything Happens

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The problem of suffering is one of the greatest challenges for the minds of all believers, and the logical and moral problems it poses are perhaps the greatest sources of unbelief for many. While theologians have consecrated volumes to this complex subject, our popular desire for answers and reasons result in a shallow set of commonly repeated tropes—that everything happens for a reason, that God has a plan, that it's all for the better.

Considering the spirit of our age, one in which faith is most often presented as a solution for hard questions rather than a space held for inquiry, it is not surprising that our churches buckle beneath our need for answers to life's big questions. The incessant modern search for cause and effect does not stop at the church doors. The easiest, most common explanation we hear for suffering is thus a utilitarian one: that God utilizes suffering to get us somewhere, that it is a tool by which he shapes and teaches us, and a medicine without which we would not recognize our need for him and his goodness. In other words, suffering is somehow rational, at least within God's own mind, and one day it will all make sense.

Whether or not God truly has a purpose behind our suffering is theologically disputable, but pastorally its rationale works well in our individualistic culture, where everyone gets his due and to be is to strive. And as any person going through a hard time can tell you, this message of cause and effect, of suffering for the sake of a better tomorrow, is ubiquitous. Its form and context change, but the message remains the same: God, or the universe, has a plan for you and your suffering. So when I was going through a particularly dark and difficult time myself and struggling with the incessant repetition of these messages, a friend asked me whether I'd heard of Kate Bowler.

Bowler, a religion professor, while dealing with her own tragedy, made it her mission to open a public conversation around illness, death, and suffering. More specifically, she set out to take a good look at the simplistic and often dismissive platitudes that our Christian culture, along with the broader American landscape of positive psychology, offer up so freely. I looked her up, started listening to her podcast, and read her book *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*. I found her reflections a welcome place of refuge in a culture where personal power and positivity are doctrine, and the Church is largely on board.

A historian of religion who wrote the first comprehensive history of the prosperity gospel,

Bowler projects all the enthusiasm and chipperness one expects of a North American woman with a media presence. Yet her refreshingly intelligent sarcasm cuts through the bubbles, right to the heart of suffering. Her story goes like this: Bowler is a thirty-something-year-old graduate student of religion at Duke Divinity School. Upon finishing her PhD on the prosperity gospel, she secures a professorship at her alma mater, a book deal for her thesis, and becomes a happy mother. She then learns that she has stage four colon cancer and will not be cured. In her book and podcast she explores living with a terminal illness in a world that is always promising a better tomorrow. She recounts the story of her life and diagnosis and how it intertwines with her research on the world of "prosperity Christianity."

The subject of Bowler's case study is mainstream American evangelical Protestantism. While her book successfully brings to light the delusions underlying this branch of Christianity that infects so much of American culture (and vice versa), I had hoped for a deeper theological dive into suffering from a Duke Divinity professor. Yet she is a historian, not a theologian, and perhaps she humbly considers such speculations beyond her domain. Why we suffer and where God is in the midst of it all are questions she doesn't try to answer. What she makes clear is that the suffering person deserves love and compassion, not speculation or judgment, that prosperity is no sign of God's favor, nor suffering in any way God's attempt to instrumentalize our lives for the good. For Bowler, happy endings are the stuff of fairy tales, not faith.

By Bowler's definition, the so-called prosperity gospel makes the "bold central claim that God will give you your heart's desires; money in the bank, a healthy body, a thriving family, and boundless happiness." It is "a theodicy, an explanation for the problem of evil. It is an answer to the questions that take our lives apart: Why do some people get healed and some people don't? Why do some people leap and land on their feet while others tumble all the way down? Why do some babies die in their cribs and some bitter souls live to see their great-grandchildren? The prosperity gospel looks at the world as it is and promises a solution. It guarantees that faith will always make a way."[1] Essentially, the prosperity gospel offers a consumerist explanation to the burning challenge of evil and suffering in the world created by a just and merciful God: strong faith and hard prayer will be rewarded, and if they are not rewarded, they were not sufficiently strong and hard. It envisions a transactional relationship with God which serves to provide a simple answer to questions that otherwise have no answers within the human system of reference.

Bowler's reflections alongside my own questions naturally led me to consider the place of suffering in my own tradition. It could be tempting to exclude the Orthodox Church from this shallow vision of God and human suffering that Bowler describes. After all, we Orthodox love to preach suffering, and proudly preserve the rightful place of the cross in our tradition. We certainly don't preach "name it and claim it," and are better known for our long faces and downcast eyes than Colgate smiles. And yet this God who will supposedly save us from the vicissitudes of an unforgiving world if we learn to

[1] Kate C. Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018), xi–xiii.

believe strongly enough, pray hard enough, and do all the right things sounds all too familiar, as does this life in which all will be well once we understand God's plan behind our suffering.

Books such as Elder Thaddeus's *Our Thoughts Determine our Lives* have turned up as an Orthodox parallel to Oprah's favorite, *The Secret*. Superstition around consecrated objects and their powers over material reality, along with "magical" formulas for prayer, abound. The implication is that purifying our hearts and minds will not so much bring us closer to God as provide control over our chaotic lives.

William Blake, *Job Rebuked by His Friends*, 1805–10. Watercolor. Morgan Library & Museum.

This narrative of cause and effect creates a culture of judgment. For a church community, the other's suffering should always make us uncomfortable, disrupt our lives, elicit empathy. A suffering person should feel at home in church, enveloped in God's love and the love of the community. Yet instead, far too often, Christians of any faith tradition will confess that during a time of acute suffering, church was one of the hardest places to be. Churches too easily become gathering places for those who have agreed on certain norms to congregate and feel normative together. A certain kind of family, with certain kinds of children, become the "good news" of God's perfecting grace.[2] Therefore, the disruption of these norms risks alienating the suffering person further.

Moreover, the Orthodox Church has its own brand of the prosperity gospel. I will call it "triumph theology." We always hear about the triumphant Church, the triumphant cross, and that theological narrative extends to the once-triumphant Christian empire, mourned by more than a few nostalgic souls. Apparently, all will, or should, end in triumph even in this world. While the deeper Christian narrative of triumph is complex, the message we hear is too often distorted to take on a worldly or political meaning. Suffering is presented as the necessary preface to triumph, and the line between suffering and striving is blurred to legitimize or explain the former.

Another fallacy is to present our spiritual practices as a means of ascending to a level of transcendent peace that covers over pain, rather than a means to get closer to God who can abide in and through pain. Perhaps it is a result of current cultural influences, but it seems that the injunction to "seek peace" threatens to replace "seek God"—a path that is not necessarily peaceful. No matter how hard we pray, death and loss aren't peaceful, cancer isn't peaceful, and so many people are fighting hidden wars that cannot be reframed in peaceful terms. The popular idea that one can have peace at any time, in

[2] Ibid., 20.

any circumstance, risks blinding or numbing ourselves to others' painful circumstances.

Even Great Lent, a time set aside by the Church to help us confront suffering, and thereby grow closer to Christ, too easily transforms into a self-improvement project, not so different from those promoted by our self-help culture. One need only take a quick look at the Orthodox blogosphere to discover all the ways one can "improve" herself during Lent. Better self-discipline and improved daily habits are once again for sale. And this time you get some heavenly brownie points too! Not only does this culture fail to speak to the suffering who feel no need for a special forty-day suffering plan, it risks alienating them further.

So how do we talk to someone whose pain is just pain? Whose loss is really loss? When their incurable disease will end in death? The person for whom the Paschal refrain "Christ is risen from the dead" only conjures the memory of a child who will not? I worry that we have lost this language of real suffering and replaced it with a purely metaphorical one that joins in with the ever-triumphal narrative of our culture or promises that we can all learn to float three feet above our circumstances. One might argue that I am missing the deeper theological meaning of such refrains, their paradoxical nature, or that I deny that the deep peace of God can accompany us anywhere. I do not. Yet my point remains: our liturgical language and practice may run deep, but too often our pastoral and communal messages have become cliché. As a church, and as individuals, we are too hasty, too thoughtless, in applying the language of triumph and resurrection, or peace and transcendence, to the plight of the suffering. We have lost our capacity to sit in the darkness, and to sit in and with the darkness that our brothers and sisters inhabit.

These eternal questions, of why we suffer, and what happens to us when we suffer, are questions for which humans may never find a satisfying theological explanation. And this may even be for the better. Perhaps these questions will ever be shrouded in mystery and we are best off leaving them at that. One thing is clear to me, though: the suffering person, the fragile person, occupies sacred space, and as such should be at the center of our Christian practice and conscience.

So let us join with Ms. Bowler in eschewing a culture of triumph and prosperity that threatens to encroach upon the deepest aspects of our faith and personhood. We must return to and confront the suffering within ourselves and others in real and concrete terms, and learn to be shaken by the very real struggles of this world, so that we may dwell always and everywhere with the Christ who is meek, and lowly of heart, and with whom we might, at last, find true rest for our tired souls and bodies (Matt 11:29). ✠

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