

Engage360, Ep 26 | Part 1: Theological Approaches to Suffering and Happiness

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hello again, this is Don Payne, your host and welcome to Engage 360. We're glad you're back with us or perhaps with us for the first time. I for one am profoundly grateful for what we enjoy in many Western societies as a result of advances and expertise in various sciences, both research and applied. Now, that's one reason that many things work better and more safely here than in some other parts of the world. With that acknowledgement, however, gains in various sciences seem to have contributed to a deeply rooted cultural insistence and expectation that all problems should be solvable. There's something wonderful about that. Something even deeply human about the ability to solve problems, especially with the creativity and the ingenuity involved in that. But as an embedded and widespread popular expectation, it takes various forms like the demand for clear, quick, simple, accessible answers to deeply complex dilemmas. It looks like impatience with process, intolerance of mystery and ambiguity. And in a Christian version of that, looks like frustration and anger at God, when God sort of the ultimate scientist does not quickly or satisfactorily solve our problems. So suffering, especially long lasting and intense and unresolved suffering, is a widespread case study in this and suffering can foster even within committed Christians a disheartening ambivalence about God's power, God's goodness, God's love, and God's personal, caring, attentiveness to our lives. So we're going to embark on a two episode consideration of suffering, not to glamorize it or wallow in it, but to stretch for a more, I guess experientially honest and biblically and theologically textured approach to suffering. And that then will be the platform for a third episode in which we build on the first two, to consider a theology of happiness and joy. Now, the intent and the approach will not be to polarize suffering and joy, but to show what they share in the fabric of a redeemed life lived in God's grace. Now, that's a really long preamble to the introduction of our first guest for this little series. She is a 2017 graduate, an MA graduate of our clinical mental health counseling program here at Denver Seminary. And prior to that, a graduate of Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. I first met KJ Ramsey in a theology course I taught a few years ago, and realized pretty quickly that here was someone whose passion for theology was propelled by the pathos of her own journey of suffering. It was not mere intellectual or nerdy curiosity as much as I do love theological nerds. So KJ, welcome to Engage 360.

KJ Ramsey: Thanks for having me. It's really good to be with you.

Dr. Don Payne: We are very glad you're here. I do remember, this is a total sidebar, but I do remember being on the campus of Covenant College many years ago and I wonder if they still have that rubber floor on the gym. Is that still a thing there?

KJ Ramsey: I don't think the floor is rubber. I think it is. I think it's just wood now. Well when I was there. I graduated 10 years ago, so.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well I was there probably 40 years ago, or more or less.

KJ Ramsey: It probably looks very different now.

Dr. Don Payne: I heard. Well, yeah, it's a beautiful campus, beautiful campus. And I just remember this blue and white rubber floor in the gym.

KJ Ramsey: Yeah, that's funny.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Which was really set up for knee injuries. There's no supply. There's no give to it. Well, anyway, I wanted to wanted you to hear from KJ in part because she has just completed her first full length book and it's on the subject of suffering and will be forthcoming. I think this May 12th from Zondervan, under the title, *This Too Shall Last*. Now I've wrote a few books by first time authors and I have to say that this is one of the more well-written books I've read in a while, and I hope our conversation today will prompt you to get a copy, maybe even pre-order a copy from Zondervan and dive into it. It may be a courageous and gutsy read for many, but it will be well worth it if you are beleaguered of thin and impatient, and ultimately unsatisfying approaches to suffering. So I want to encourage you to get her book. Now, I want to, before we go any further, let me remind you that full text transcripts of all of our episodes are available on our website. So even if you listen to Engage360 on a different platform, you can go to the Denver Seminary website, denverseminary.edu, go to the podcast section of that and you will find an icon by each episode that will take you to a full text transcript of it. And remember also that you can always write to us with comments or questions at podcast@denverseminary.edu. So KJ, give us first a few high points of your journey, just to give us kind of a landscape of how you enter this conversation about suffering.

KJ Ramsey: Yeah. So, you know, I usually start this part of my journey to writing a book about suffering, which like why would anyone choose to write about suffering? Because when you write about something, you have to experience it more deeply. But that's an aside. I first got sick 11 years ago, as a junior in college. And my life went from being fairly average, very fast paced, involved, active to within a matter of days I couldn't walk and I couldn't open even my Bible, and that pain never left. And disease became a lasting part of my story. And really though that pain that started 11 years ago that I've had every day of my life since, has actually helped me get in touch with the suffering that is throughout my entire story and the wounds that I've experienced from childhood on. And by getting in touch with that and really acknowledging the pain in my story, that's also invited me into more joy and the presence of God. That's always been with me and is with me now. So that's, I guess some high points, sort of.

Dr. Don Payne: When we talk about suffering, what are we talking about that that word is such an elastic word and people use it I suppose in a lot of different ways. But can you break that concept down a little bit for us in light of some of the different ways people use the word?

KJ Ramsey: Right. So when I talk about suffering, one of the ways that I'm talking about it is basically when we experience any pain, pain of any kind, so from emotional, mental, physical, spiritual pain, it actually triggers the same neurobiological process in our bodies. And we experience that pain as a threat to our existence. And so suffering happens when we feel our personhood is being threatened, that our existence is being threatened. And really on a visceral moment to moment, mundane level, you're not going to think, my existence is being threatened, but you feel right. But you feel, you feel like you're becoming less of a person, you feel that you're losing your sense of agency and that others are going to see you differently than you see yourself. And that is, that's very vulnerable. So that's one of the main ways that I talk about suffering.

Dr. Don Payne: I remember that section in your book when you talked about personhood and that sense of our personhood being threatened by suffering. And I had never really thought about it that way. I was really captivated by that and it, but it made a lot of sense that there's something at the, you know, at the deepest roots of who we are that feels at risk when we suffer, whatever that is, even if we don't have words for it. So I appreciate the words you put to that.

KJ Ramsey: And I think what happens, it's, it's actually an invitation to our real personhood. So in a culture like ours that's really individualistic and where there's a high emphasis on self-sufficiency, suffering is experienced as a threat to that sense of self, the sense of self that can do everything on its own and have a high sense of agency. And actually in Jesus Christ, personhood is about interdependence. And so suffering in disrupting that sense of self that is self-sufficient, is inviting us into connection and relationship with one another, which is what we were all made for. So suffering becomes an invitation instead of just a threat.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, I would imagine that in your own journey, and particularly in the journey of writing the book you've had to identify or had to deal with a number of misconceptions about suffering, maybe some of your own misconceptions, certainly misconceptions that others have. Talk to us a bit about that. What are some of those misconceptions that float around that need to be challenged or corrected?

KJ Ramsey: Yeah, so I've think I've been dealing with misconceptions about suffering almost every day for the last 11 years because especially in the church we think of suffering and illness, mental health issues. We think of them as indicators of a lack of faith or of an issue with your character. And I think that itself is one of the big misconceptions of suffering. We have taken cues from maybe small parts of scripture instead of the whole Canon of scripture to inform why bad things happen to every person. And so a misconception really is that suffering is the fault of the sufferer. And that our first impulse when we see suffering in

someone else should be to ask them if they've prayed for healing or if their sin to repent of. And that is actually not the way of Jesus. So that's the big misconception that I, I run into over and over. I can't tell you how many times I've had people come up to me and ask if I've prayed for healing as though in 11 years I've never prayed for that myself.

Dr. Don Payne: That sort of raises the theme of grace and to healing. And I think I've said this before on another episode. So, I won't retell the whole story here, but I had a chaplain, a paraplegic chaplain, some years ago make a distinction for me between being healed and to being cured. And as a paraplegic he said, he realized that in this life he would never be cured. He would never walk again. But he said, I can be healed. And that that opened up a lane of discussion, a lane of reflection for me that I had never had before. Always assuming that to be healed means, Oh, it goes away. But there is grace, there is healing that comes even if things go on. And you say quite a bit in your book about grace. I have a few things outlined here. And one comment you make is that about grace not necessarily fixing our pain. Can you say more about that?

KJ Ramsey: Yeah. Well tend to think of grace as rescue. That grace alleviates our problems and makes everything feel better. But grace can actually be, pain can be a grace.

Dr. Don Payne: What do you mean by that?

KJ Ramsey: I think pain can alert us to a need for God, a need for others. And I'm not saying that suffering is a gift. I don't go there. I'm saying that grace is, pain can be an invitation to remembering the God who came and chose to suffer and the God who is with us even now. And sometimes when we place such an emphasis on seeking relief and seeking even healing of all of our problems, immediate healing as in healing of diseases, healing of disorders, we miss out on allowing ourselves to relax into the truth that God is already with us and is strengthening us to endure here and now. That is grace.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Yeah. I love the theology behind that because when you talk about grace, at least in the reformation traditions, there has a, on our best days there, there's a been an emphasis that you cannot, or we cannot separate grace from the presence of God. That is, grace is not some kind of an independent or discrete substance that God dishes out in measure. But grace can, grace is in some, maybe mysterious respect, the very presence of God. And I picked up on that a good bit in your manuscript that you talked about suffering as an invitation to the presence of God, and experiencing grace in that way.

KJ Ramsey: Grace is what is always around us, it is surrounding us. It is underneath us. It is through us. It is in us. And it's between you and I, as we talk right now. Grace is God's presence that is always here. And I think suffering is actually something that helps us wake up to the reality that grace, it folds our lives every moment of every day.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Here's the comment I was looking for. You said, "I've come to see that living with suffering that lingers can mean more fully receiving God's presence that lasts." That's a great way to put that.

KJ Ramsey: Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: It kind of reminds me, this may sound very trite or cliché, but it, it reminded me of the apostle Paul's comment in 2 Corinthians 12:9. Where I mean it's a pretty well known narrative where he has some kind of affliction, never names it, prays three times for God to remove it. God says no, but in saying, no, God said, my grace is sufficient for you. And I have, I've come to be convinced that what he is essentially saying is I am sufficient for you and I am sufficient for you even if this does not go away.

KJ Ramsey: Right. And I think what's really important for listeners to know is we're not just saying God's grace is sufficient and that remains words on a page or some slogan that we live our lives by, God's grace is sufficient means experiencing that in our bodies right here and now, through our emotions as messengers that are taking us to pay attention to the heart of God here. The gaze of God towards us and experiencing our relationships as places where we can learn how to trust and receive the truth that we are loved by God. So God's grace is sufficient, actually has to become embodied and relational. And we, the way to experience God's grace as sufficient is experiencing our bodies as places where he is present in our relationships as places where there will be grace.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I love the way you talk about that in your book. And that really does transform, just in some ways, the way we think about hope.

KJ Ramsey: Absolutely.

Dr. Don Payne: Because to live by hope, I mean nobody can live without hope, but what we mean by hope makes quite a bit of difference. If that hope, for example, is fixated on a particular outcome that you know, may or may not be realized, but we still have to have hope. So how has that reconfigured what it means for you to live by hope or to have hope?

KJ Ramsey: Yeah, it's reconfigured to living with suffering that lingers has reconfigured hope for me in a couple of ways. There's both the redefining what I am hoping for and then there's the means of maintaining hope. And so I love to talk about both of those things. The redefining of hope is I've had to explore the story of scripture and remember that my hope is for the kingdom of God and that is here, that is already, and it is not yet. And so the redemption of my body and of this whole world is what I am yearning for. And when I feel the pangs of death and decay in my body with my disease, I am yearning for new creation. And that becomes a place of hope. And I know that it is coming. So my healing is coming. Your healing is coming and I've had to redefine hope every day to remember what I'm really hoping for. I'm not looking for the erasing of my problems right here

and now I'm looking for the redemption of this whole world. And that makes my small story part of something much larger, which also means that my small pains can be part of this much deeper, larger joy. And the second part is the maintaining of hope. When you start to see that God made us to be interdependent, you can start to claim the relieving truth that you can't actually maintain hope on your own. And you need other believers to have hope on your behalf, to strengthen you when you are weak. And so my weakness and your weakness become places where you can experience the communion of Christ with another believer strengthening you. And so I talk a lot about in my book how when my faith is fragile, others can have faith on my behalf. And I asked them, I need you to pray for me. I'm feeling hopeless. I don't see how my story is more than suffering and they remind me of the truth. But they also pray for me in ways that I don't even see and know. And that is what reignites my hope.

Dr. Don Payne: I love the way you said that because it kind of brings back to mind this nifty little theological word we love to use "vicarious," where someone else does something in our stead. Now, we'll typically, you know, theological circles. We will talk about vicarious as applying to Jesus, his work vicarious for us. But there's a sense in which I think I hear you saying that other believers do a sort of vicarious work for us. Not merely praying for us or praying about us, but praying on our behalf when we don't have anything in the bucket to pray. We got nothing left. We got nothing and we can't even pray on our own and they do the praying on our behalf. Is that what you're?

KJ Ramsey: Yeah, and I think we have this, we're just so used to thinking of ourselves as independent beings who are responsible for how much faith we can have and it's a myth. I am not just an independent person. I am inextricably united to Jesus and I'm also inextricably united to his body and my personhood is part of having relationship to other believers. And so on a really practical level that means that my ability and capacity to have faith in Jesus when things are hard is actually not just mine. It's yours too. And when you have faith that I will be hidden in the love of God and secure in God's love that in a very mystical but also I think physiological way strengthens me to be sustained in suffering.

Dr. Don Payne: I have had at least one very memorable experience of that. Now, this is probably, it has been over well over 20 years ago, but at a particularly dark and despondent time in my life when I had to share with a small group that I was leading that I didn't, I couldn't even teach them anything. I had literally nothing to bring to the table and I didn't even understand why. And one of one of my very dear friends who was in that group said to me, don't worry about praying. We will pray for you. And again, not meaning they we're going to pray for you but we'll, we'll take care of the praying. You just relax. And that was inexplicably live-giving, vicarious work.

KJ Ramsey: And I think what I have learned through my own story of suffering, the story that includes suffering is that is actually, that is the Christian life right there. And that is actually what, that's the invitation of discipleship for all of us. But when we have suffering that's in our face and that's long lasting, we get a steady

invitation to go there in a way that in Western culture we are prone to avoid like the plague.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh yeah, yeah. Well, and that changes our understanding of the church even when the church can be the source of the suffering as often as it can, the church becomes the very place of healing for it at the same time.

KJ Ramsey: Right. And I try to, in my book talk about broach this pain because it's often relationships with one another in the church where we experience some of the most visceral pain. And I'm also saying that it's relationships in the body of Christ where we will experience our greatest healing and our greatest joy. And that is attention. And that is real. And I talk to readers every single day that are afraid to try to trust other Christians with their pain and their suffering. And it's, it takes courage. And I think this is where the idea of repentance and courage come in that we, because of the gospel, we have Christ in us. We have the spirit who raised Jesus from the dead in us. And we have to try turning every single day again and again towards one another as people who might be able to offer grace. And I think part of that means having to get better about assessing who is safe and who can receive your story well. But there's this process and there's this I think real challenge for sufferers, for people like me, for people with diseases, disorders, long lasting grief, divorce, all of the things that we walk through to turn towards the people in their life and in the church as sources of grace. And to not do that one time, but to try again and again to turn towards them, I think is a scary, risky thing that is worth all of our effort.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I think you mentioned the word discipleship. And there really is a connection with discipleship where the, the pattern of our lives is sort of re-habituated in these different directions. And so it doesn't take place one time. It's not a one and done or a one off. But we're habituating ourselves to come to others.

KJ Ramsey: Absolutely. And I talk about this too, this is actually, so habituating yourself to turn towards others and really to also to turn towards yourself with gentleness, with kindness, to turn towards God like he's actually present and that he actually loves you even if you don't feel it. That process of turning and trying again and again to receive grace, is what will rewire your brain towards health. And so God actually knit into the fabric of our being a way that when we repeat actions, and when we are, we use our attention. We pay attention to our lives as places where God is present. When we do that again and again, it is what restructures our brain. And so even though we will all die, unless Jesus returns soon, even though we are all going to die, there is a healing and wholeness that can take place for all of us as we continue to turn towards ourselves, God and others as places of grace, it actually changes our brains.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, right? That's the healing when there is no curing so to speak. But there is healing at a far more profound and far deeper level or more deeply human level.

KJ Ramsey: Right. And then you're, the habit of your heart becomes different. So the habit, as you turn towards yourself, you turn towards God and you turn towards others as potential places of grace. And you look at the world with open eyes and with some trust, as you do that again and again, the, the habit of your heart actually changes and you become more capable of receiving grace here now. It becomes your posture. It becomes the air that you breathe and it's, I really think your old self is dying away and your new self is starting to live and be what is operable and what is controlling you. It's coming to be awake to the spirit of God in you, making you new and then offering grace to others. You become a place of grace for others.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Beautifully said. I know that your book grew out of your own journey. I'm curious how writing this book affected your journey. How long did it take you from beginning to end?

KJ Ramsey: Well, it's, I always struggle to answer that because there's like, you know, this, there's so many parts of the process from like pitching it to publishers to even before that, having the idea. So from when I actually started writing my manuscript after I got my contract to turning it in to my publisher was from January of last year to July, the beginning of July. So it wasn't that long. And yeah, the way that writing it actually affected me was large. I was going through, and you'll read about this a little bit in the book, but I was, we were going through the hardest season of my life, of our life, my husband and I. And I honestly, even though I've wrestled with all of this for over a decade, I felt like, really, God, really, you're going to let more bad things happen to us. And I had to put everything on the table with God and to ask my hard questions again and wrestle with him. And there was a point in the writing of my book when I actually stopped writing for three whole weeks and said, I'm not going to write another word until I believe everything that I'm saying again and I know that you're going with me.

Dr. Don Payne: Very honest, and we appreciate that.

KJ Ramsey: Oh, it was real and that's I think what's important to share because suffering will remain in many of our lives and we don't ever, I don't think we arrive at a place of full peace with it, and I am going to have times in my life again when I have to wrestle some of my pride and expectations to the ground so that I can know that God is here with me now. And I've, I'm really glad that I felt that broken while writing this because it reminded me, this is actually the story I do want to tell. It's that sometimes suffering stays in our lives, but God really is present in his grace really is sufficient, and his people were what strengthened me out of that hole that I was in.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, that's one of the reasons your book I think is so valuable and will be important for a lot of people is because you didn't really, you didn't merely write about suffering, you wrote through it. And there is a deep honesty to all of that, which I really, really appreciate.

KJ Ramsey: Thanks.

Dr. Don Payne: Tell us a little bit quickly about your ministry. I know you have a counseling practice, but you're also kind of on the circuit now, I guess, right? I mean, this is just one of many podcasts, maybe a jillion podcast. Not only your own, but, and you're a guest on a lot of podcasts about this. So just tell us a little bit about some of the things you're doing and how people can access, you know, your website and you if they want to talk further to you.

KJ Ramsey: Yeah. So I love getting to share about God's presence with us in our ordinary lives. And I do that through my writing. You can find everything at KJRamsey.com and then I'm on basically all social media at KJ Ramsey Writes. And my favorite is Instagram. I share stuff basically daily there, reflections on life, things that I'm finding beautiful. I think the beauty in this world is a big part of how God shows us himself and comes to us. So I like to share a lot of beauty. But and then yeah, I have a podcast called, *This Too Shall Last*. Same name as my book and I love to get to share both through that and invite guests onto it that talk about the hard things in their lives. And basically I just love getting to share about the grace of God that's with us even in the middle of hard things. And I do it every opportunity I can get.

Dr. Don Payne: I can tell, we can tell. Well, one of my key takeaways from all of this is that theme of grace, that that basically whatever, whatever form anybody's suffering takes, everybody suffers in some way, maybe different levels of intensity, different iterations. But life in a fallen world as fallen people is a life that involves suffering, full-stop. And everybody, even those who may, you know, give the appearance of competence and being on top of the game and having it all together, and being unperturbed by, you know, the stuff of life. Everybody suffers, which means everybody has to live by God's grace, full-stop. That's one of the gifts you've given me in all this.

KJ Ramsey: Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: Let me commend again, KJ's book to you. It's called *This Too Shall Last*. It will be out this May from Zondervan. So make sure you get a copy and I want to again, put in a plug for that as, I think one of the, one of the better examples I've seen recently of theological richness, brutal honesty, and something that's just really well written and a joy to read. So, you will, I don't think you'll be disappointed by this. The second part of our series will be next week, where we will have a chance to interact with Dr. Doug Groothuis. Some of you know Doug's story and we're going to have a chance to interact with him about that story, as he told it in his book, *Walking through Twilight*. So I won't say anything more about that now, but I do hope you'll be with us again next week to interact with Dr. Doug Groothuis. I'm Don Payne your host. This has been Engage360 from Denver Seminary. We have really been privileged interacting with KJ Ramsey this week and are grateful for her time and for the work, for making her journey available to the rest of us as a means, an instrument of God's grace. KJ, thank you again.

KJ Ramsey: Thanks for having me.

Dr. Don Payne: I hope you'll join us again next week. Take care.