

Ever since the ancient revolt, suffering has been woven, with perplexity and pain, into the fabric of human experience. We all live and move and have our being amid Eden's wreckage. Affliction and evil—universal as they are real—haunt us, stalk us, plague us.

In a recent lecture delivered at Houston's [Lanier Theological Library](#) titled "Going Beyond Clichés: Christian Reflection on Suffering and Evil", Don Carson proposes six pillars to support a Christian worldview for stability through suffering. "A Christian worldview rests on huge, biblically established, theological frameworks—all of which have to be accepted all of the time," the research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and author of [How Long, O Lord?: Reflections on Suffering and Evil](#) explains. "And this massive structure is stable and comprehensive enough to give you a great deal of stability when you go through your darkest hours." His proposed pillars aren't cute musings, in other words, but crucial bulwarks.

After differentiating

- A. "natural" evil (e.g., tornados),
  - B. "malicious" evil (e.g., sexual assault), and
  - C. "accidental" evil (e.g., a bridge collapse)—and
  - D. observing that this isn't a uniquely Christian challenge ("No matter your worldview, you must face the reality of suffering and evil")—
- Carson proceeds to reveal the six pillars.

## **1. Insights from the beginning of the Bible's storyline.**

The scriptural narrative opens with God crafting a world of breathtaking beauty and unfathomable goodness. Paradise pulsates with order, harmony, wholeness, and life. But this garden scene is short-lived. Indeed, in contrast to other worldviews such as Hinduism and dualism, the Bible insists we are now dwelling in a Genesis 3 world marked by sin, suffering, death, and decay. Concerning Jesus' reflection on suffering in Luke 13, Carson observes: "What Jesus seems to presuppose is that all the sufferings of the world—whether caused by malice [as in [Luke 13:1–3](#)] or by accident [as in [Luke 13:4–5](#)]  
—are not peculiar examples of judgment falling on the distinctively evil, but rather examples of the bare, stark fact that we are all under sentence of death."

## **2. Insights from the end of the Bible's storyline.**

The believer's ultimate hope is that the created order—now so disordered by the effects of sin—will one day be set right ([Rom. 8:18–25](#)). In Christ the King, everything sad will become gloriously untrue. Properly understanding and anticipating the story's end, then, helps us to eschew a naïve (and ultimately crushing) utopianism now. As Carson reminds us, “We have just come through the bloodiest century in human history. This is a damned world. Human life has never been, is not, and will never be ‘perfectable-so-long-as-we-get-our-politics-right.’”

### **3. Insights from the place of innocent suffering.**

“Job 42 is to the rest of Job what Revelation 21–22 is to the rest of Revelation,” Carson observes. “Not only is justice done, it's also *seen* to be done.”

Until the curtain drops, however, we live in “all kinds of ambiguities where we do not know the mind of God—and we dare not act as if God owes us detailed explanations.” There are times when the godliest thing we can do is say with Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him” ([Job 13:15](#)). Indeed, Carson suggests, “God wants our trust [even] more than he wants our understanding.”

### **4. Insights from the mystery of providence.**

Here Carson sketches a brief defense of compatibilism in which he demonstrates two scriptural tensions: (1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions to mitigate human responsibility, and (2) men and women are morally responsible creatures, but their moral responsibility never makes God absolutely contingent.

### **5. Insights from the centrality of the incarnation and the cross.**

God was not blindsided by Calvary ([Acts 2:23](#); [4:27–28](#)). In fact, because of his supreme sovereignty, Christians can proclaim that the cross was a throne. With mystery and glory, the bleeding Nazarene reigned from where he hung. Christianity is uniquely comforting because only the Christian God plunged into the suffering we experience. As Edward Shillito once wrote in a poem titled “Jesus of the Scars”:  
“But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak / And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.”

### **6. Insights from taking up our cross (learning from the persecuted global church).**

Though we often think of suffering primarily in terms of “cancer or old age or poverty or war,” Carson notes, the New Testament texts that most commonly speak of suffering have to do with *Christian* suffering—“and they are remarkable” (see, for example, [Acts 5:40–42](#); [Rom. 8:17](#); [Phil. 1:29](#); [3:10](#); [1 Pet. 2:20–23](#)). As he observes, “There have been more Christian conversions since 1800 than in the previous 1,800 years combined, and there have been more Christian *martyrs* since 1800 than in the previous 1,800 years combined. And to this you have been called [[1 Pet. 2:21](#)].”

A robust theology of suffering is necessary but not sufficient, Carson insists, for at least two additional attitudes characterize mature Christians: (1) they admit their guilt before God and cry to him for renewal and revival (see, for example, [Neh. 8–9](#)), and (2) they are quick to talk about the sheer goodness of God.

To be sure, Carson’s framework is *not* necessarily the most helpful thing to offer someone first entering the throes of terrible suffering. “You’ve just been diagnosed with Stage 4 Melanoma; do you want this lecture?” he asks. Of course not—and you shouldn’t. The importance of relational sensitivity and tangible compassion in the midst of crisis cannot be overestimated. Moreover, when the immediate needs are concrete (e.g., water, security, shelter), God’s people should be quick to respond in love.

Every believer, Carson concludes, would do well to ponder these six pillars prophylactically—*before* the evil days come. Only then will we be best positioned to face the complexities of suffering with stability, humility, compassion, and joy.