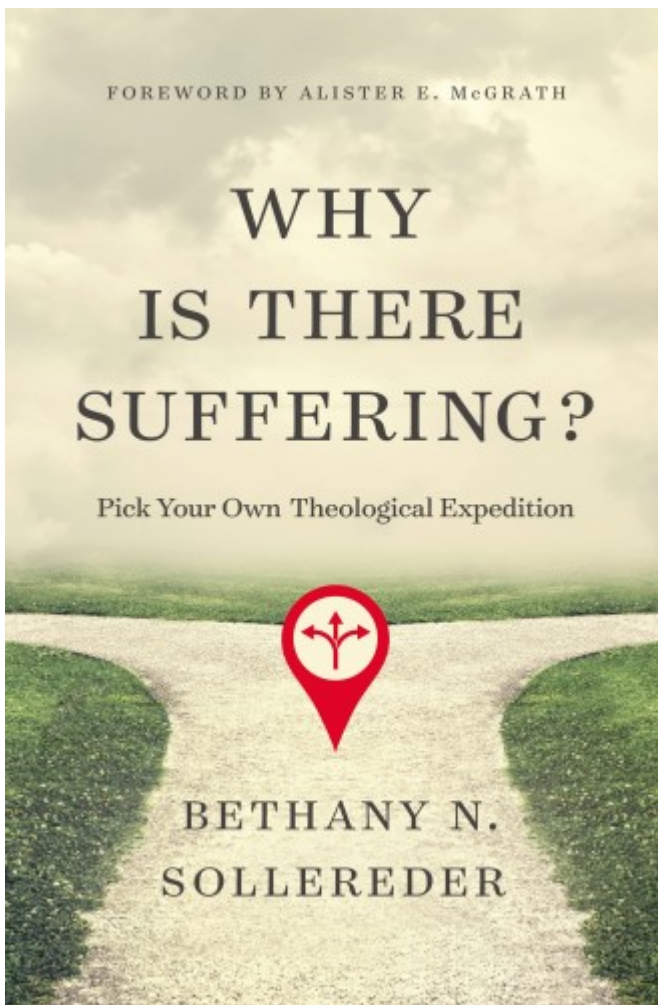


A theological exploration in the style of a Choose Your Own Adventure book

Bethany Sollereder explores different approaches to understanding suffering—and enacts one.

by [Cornelius Swart](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue

In Review



Why is there suffering?

Bethany N. Sollereder
Zondervan

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In his book *Transdisciplinary Systems Engineering*, Azad M. Madni defines elegant design as that which “focuses on the total [user] experience and exploits systems thinking, probing and questioning.” Elegant design “encourages exploration” while using “appropriate analogies and metaphors to simplify system architecture.” Madni could just as well have been describing the ingenious architecture of this book by Bethany Sollereeder, a theological exploration that follows the structure of a Choose Your Own Adventure book.

Why Is There Suffering? is less a theological discourse than a thought exercise in which the reader is the object of their own experiment. Using the format of the famous 1980s children’s books (and more recent Netflix shows), Sollereeder guides the reader in traveling down various theological pathways that explore theodicy, the question of why suffering and evil exist. Different paths lead to different conclusions: God cocreates the world with us (chapters 9, 11, 17, 23, 26, 28), there is no God and/or God is impersonal (chapters 13–22), there is an afterlife (chapters 30, 34, 40, 41), and so on. Sollereeder intends the book to be a “lighthearted adventure” through a “heavy topic,” one in which the reader has an opportunity to resonate with different views in unexpected ways.

At first blush, this book might make excellent reading for an adolescent whose emerging free will urges them to have some choices over their own learning. Sollereeder never portrays suffering or evil in specific ways: there are no graphic illustrations of violence or references to real-life tragedies like school shootings or natural disasters. The paths exploring animal salvation might even have been written with younger audiences in mind.

But adolescent learning is only one of many uses for the book. Sollereeder, a postdoctoral research fellow at Oxford University, delves into deeper territory as well. To explore that path, however, we must look to the end of the book, and doing so might spoil the surprise for some readers. So the first choice in your exploration of *Why Is There Suffering?* begins now, as you decide whether to stop reading the review here or continue on.

Good choice. Sollereeder explains in the afterword that the deeper premise of *Why Is There Suffering?* is this: the act of learning about multiple (and often conflicting) theological views might, in and of itself, relieve your own suffering. You might suffer less if you hold more than one theological view of why pain exists.

This thesis is influenced by research gleaned from the field of cognitive behavioral therapy and from the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College. CBT holds that a person's cognitive framework, or how they think about a given thing, influences their emotional responses to that thing. If someone says something rude to you, for example, you might think they are a bad person and get offended—or you might think they are having a bad day and feel compassionate toward them. CBT aims to alleviate psychological distress by having the patient examine the cognitive lens through which they view the world.

In the same way, a person's theological views can either dampen or amplify their own experience of suffering. Sollereeder cites a study in which two sets of subjects were given electrical shocks. "Christians looking at a portrait of a biblical figure (in this case the Virgin Mary) felt less pain than their atheistic counterparts." Christians literally felt less pain when they were engaged in their beliefs while suffering. Conversely, someone who lives through a natural disaster may feel more pain than necessary if they believe these events were the act of a vengeful God. Theology is not simply speculation, Sollereeder asserts; it has a real impact on people and how they suffer, for good and for ill.

As with CBT, the more divergent or varied views one can hold about a particular event, the less emotional distress one might feel about that event. *Why Is There Suffering?* began as a project when the author asked herself, "How could I help people think about their views of God in a similar way to how CBT investigates how people think?" In this light, the book is less a playful survey of religious philosophy and more a therapeutic exercise at the intersection of theology and what Sollereeder calls the "psychology of pain."

There needs to be a certain amount of cognitive dissonance in order for a reader to reappraise their theology. Simply reading a universalist view of salvation and a view of spiritual warfare in a detached side-by-side comparison might not do the job. The value in *Why Is There Suffering?* appears to come by following a decision tree that leads to a conclusion you might not agree with. Choosing your own adventure gives you an opportunity to walk a mile in someone else's theological worldview, whether it's the belief that God saves everyone in the end or the certainty that there must be a battle between good and evil afoot in the cosmos.

When you participate in the decisions that lead to divergent paths, you get a greater opportunity to reconsider your own views. You might see atheist and agnostic

arguments as divinely elegant. On the other hand, you might see some traditional one-size-fits-all theologies, as the author does, as overwrought “Rube Goldbergs” that are too general to be of any specific use. “You can always weave a narrative of good eventually if you are far enough away from the one who is suffering,” she states. In this way, Sollereeder hopes to relieve suffering by deconstructing the reader’s belief system in a way that creates space for multiple views to arise in the mind when real suffering occurs.

There is an elegance to *Why Is There Suffering?*—an elegance in Madni’s sense of the word. The book allows for an exploration in which both good and bad ideas are an equally necessary part of the journey. The beautiful music and sour notes of these theologies are part of a design in which our freedom to choose is the means by which there is comfort in seeing a bigger view of the cosmos. This might be the reason why the book’s decision tree, the map of its metaphorical landscape, the table of contents, and the explanation of the psychology of pain are all in the back of the book rather than the front.

You can’t know where all the paths lead at the beginning. If you did, there would be no free will at play when you started. And like Paul’s metaphor of the darkened glass (1 Cor. 13:12), this book may be designed as a journey you will not fully understand until it is over. Perhaps that elegant design is the author’s ultimate illustration of a theology of how God’s plan, our free will, and the divine mystery all interact to comfort us during times of pain.