
Introduction

Jimmy Buffett died while I was working on this book. For readers unfamiliar with Buffett, he was a songwriter, singer, entrepreneur, and cultural icon for the last four decades. His music seemed to defy categorization. But everyone agreed that Buffett's songs were about a lifestyle that celebrated escaping reality, usually to a tropical paradise. His fans, known as 'Parrot Heads,' were cultish in their affection for the man. And they made him fabulously wealthy. At the end of his life, his net worth was north of \$1 billion.

I grew up going to the coast of North Carolina for summer vacations. I can remember winding, sandy, two-lane byways, peppered with roadside stands selling fresh seafood. Jimmy Buffett was the soundtrack for these annual pilgrimages to the beach. His music was a part of my childhood and early adulthood for as long as I can remember.

Shortly after his death, I came across an article from a philosophy professor trying to make sense of the Buffett phenomenon. He put his finger on its essence. ‘Half troubadour and half travel agent, Buffett has long been in the business of selling escape ... To love the music of Jimmy Buffett, in other words, is not to love life. It is to pessimistically admit that life is difficult and that it needs to be escaped every once in a while just to be endured.’¹ The author then made a comparison between Buffett’s brand of escapism and the nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s argument that ‘good art grows from a recognition of the difficulties of life, and it endeavors to respond to them by offering a momentary respite from its otherwise relentless slings and arrows.’² Having spent most of my academic life studying philosophy, I admit this comparison caught me off guard – in a good way (kudos to the author for bringing Germany and Key West, Buffet’s unofficial headquarters, together!)

But I had some questions. For example, would the sophisticated Schopenhauer have recognized Buffett’s

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1. Drew M. Dalton, ‘Jimmy Buffett, the “Parrot Heads” and the “Escape to Margaritaville:” A pessimistic 19th century outlook on hedonistic 20th century life,’ <https://fortune.com/2023/09/10/jimmy-buffett-parrot-heads-escape-to-margaritaville-philosophy/amp/>, accessed September 13, 2023.
 2. *ibid.*

hit, ‘Why Don’t We Get Drunk,’ as good art? I have my reservations.

All the same, I am certain that this professor was correct that Buffett built his empire on selling songs about escaping reality. I am also sympathetic to Schopenhauer’s pessimism. We all know life is hard, and we welcome any relief we can find from its difficulties. So the analogy was fair.

What does that article have to do with what we’ll study in this book? Both Buffett and Schopenhauer recognized that life is full of suffering, and both offered ways to cope with this difficult reality. This book tries to offer a different answer.

No one who reads what follows will think, ‘I can’t relate to that topic.’ I don’t say that out of an inflated sense of my abilities as a writer or because of an overheated ego! I say that because I think the title reveals maybe the most challenging question we will ever ask: ‘Why do I personally experience evil and suffering?’

A previous book in this series explained (very well, in my opinion) a Christian answer to the *philosophical* problem of evil and suffering. In what follows, however, we will focus on the *personal* side of the problem.

Here is a good place to introduce a concept that will shape everything that follows: all of us are living out some kind of philosophy, whether we realize it or not.

So the personal and philosophical problems of suffering and evil always overlap.

But the personal problem of evil and suffering just feels, well, more *relevant*. Philosophical issues can seem theoretical, impractical, and speculative (although we'll see that this isn't the case). By contrast, suffering and evil hit us daily, wherever we are, whoever we are. Life's calamities are no respecter of persons.

For example, pick up your phone and open a news app. What do you read? Evil and suffering, with just enough of those annoying ads to take your mind off the horror of it all, even for a moment. Reflect on your past week. What did you experience? Evil and suffering, to some degree. Think about the conversations you've had in the last few days. Once again, I would wager that the people you spoke with experienced evil and suffering at some point, however small or large. None of our lives are left untouched by these awful realities.

Still, as I hinted at above, we all have a philosophy of life, so, at some level, we are already answering the question of personal suffering and evil. These answers are shaped by what we think the world is like, what we think is fair, what we expect out of life, and so on – all inescapably philosophical considerations. So, while philosophical concepts can appear irrelevant, they have massive practical implications.

Given the fact that we're trying to deal with personal suffering and evil from some philosophical position or another, let's ask another question: are our answers *working*? Are we finding peace and even joy in the midst of our trials? At this point, an irritated voice in our head demands, 'How can anyone find peace, let alone joy, when life is so hard?!'

If that's our response, then maybe our answers aren't working. Maybe you've tried methods, techniques, or read other books to alleviate the pain of life, all to no avail. I can't promise this book will change your life. But I can promise that the responses given here will be grounded in the Bible, which *can* change your life.

The Bible offers answers most people don't take the time to consider, so I would simply ask for your patience as you read. Keep an open mind to the Bible's point of view, because it has *a lot* to say about our afflictions. After all, it is a record of ordinary people, like you and me, who faced crushing circumstances and ended up praising God despite them. That sounds like a new, very attractive way to cope with life's difficulties!

Even so, we may find ourselves skeptical, even cynical, at the thought that the Bible could help us. Finding comfort in the midst of our trials and tragedies may seem like a hopeless fantasy – like that vacation you daydream about, but know will never happen. But the

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Bible assures us that such comfort is not a fantasy. It is not out of our reach.

Besides, skepticism and cynicism are no way to go through life. The Scriptures offer us a better way, holding out the promise that we can make joy and peace our new normal, come what may.

I want to make that case in what follows. We'll start in chapter 1 with a brief overview of some basic biblical principles that can help us answer this question. In chapter 2, we'll look at some alternatives to the Christian perspective and see if they help us. From there, chapters 3–5 examine what the Bible says on certain issues, from depression to death to disabilities. Of course, we won't be able to cover every conceivable problem we might face. But we'll try to give attention to the ones that weigh so many of us down. Chapter 6 addresses some of the most frequently asked questions related to this question. Finally, chapter 7 concludes our study with a uniquely biblical presentation of how to live in a world beset by evil and suffering.

My goal, therefore, is simple and ambitious. I want us not just to *survive* when suffering and evil come our way. I want us to *thrive* amid them.

That's a lofty aspiration! But I don't think it's unreasonable. I've been a pastor for almost twenty years now and I can attest, both from my life and the lives of

countless others, that God can give us joy, despite our circumstances. I've witnessed people live as I described, in real time. I'm constantly amazed by their faith, confidence, joy, and hope when tragedy strikes.

Responding with hope and joy are not just for the spiritual elite, however. You too can begin to live like this. All we must do is listen to God – the personal, powerful, caring heavenly Father of Scripture – speaking to us in His Word. That's what we'll try to do in this book – listen and learn from the One who made us, knows us, and cares deeply about our hurts and heartaches.