

EXCERPT



Shaped by Suffering *How Temporary Hardships Prepare Us for Our Eternal Home*

February 4, 2020 | \$18, 264 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4592-7

How Trials Prepare Us for Eternity

How exactly God uses suffering to shape us, purify us, and conform us more to the image of his Son is, to a great extent, a mysterious process, but the Scriptures as a whole and my focus text of 1 Peter in particular give us some good clues about how this process works. I (Ken) hope you will come to understand better why so many sufferers declare, in so many words, “I would never have chosen this trial, but I also would never trade it for an easier path because, through it, God has changed me for the better.”

The qualities we most admire in people are seldom forged in times of ease but in times of adversity. All the heroes of the faith suffered in some way, whether in an internal or external sense, chronically or as a result of a single crisis. Some suffered even to the point of death. While no sane person eagerly runs into the arms of suffering, believers in Jesus today often avoid it at *all costs*. Our most earnest prayers are too often, “Take this painful thing away” instead of “Use this for your glory” or “Keep me safe” instead of “Embolden my faith in this danger or threat.” This book takes a hard look at our perspective on suffering and challenges us as believers (myself included) to see it more as God would have us see it: from an eternal perspective.

Suffering has a universal nature, which is why it can be so comforting to talk and listen to a fellow sufferer. As believers, we also share the same certain outcome—eternal glory in the presence of God.

At the same time, suffering is deeply personal. Among members of the body of Christ, adversity takes as many forms as there are believers. All of our experiences with suffering are unique—yours, mine, and my coauthor’s—“Each heart knows its own bitterness” (Proverbs 14:10). As a result, with a book like this you’re likely wondering, *Do the authors themselves know what it’s like to suffer?* Let us divulge a little of our own personal backgrounds now, knowing that more about each of us will come out in other parts of the book.

I (Ken) have primarily endured a variety of nonphysical adversities so far in my life, including relational difficulties and mental sufferings. Discouragement is one of the devil’s most effective tools, and it’s one I’ve battled in ministry. Misunderstanding of my ministry’s direction, among other difficulties, has plagued me recently.

Perhaps my greatest struggle, however, has been witnessing the decline in my wife’s health. While I worked on this manuscript, Karen was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Thankfully she has the mildest form, but it’s still a difficult path to walk. Her latest diagnosis was piled on top of years of chronic pain she has endured, dating back to a near-death vehicle accident in her early twenties (not coincidentally, that accident was also the moment she first called out to Jesus). After praying for some time for healing for various symptoms, Karen and I were both discouraged to receive news about her Parkinson’s. As a husband, it often feels more painful to stand by and watch my wife suffer than it would be to take her suffering upon myself, yet I recognize that I cannot fully understand the depth of her struggles—or anyone else’s—and I suspend judgment (a concept I owe to Os Guinness) as we endure this time of worsening trial.

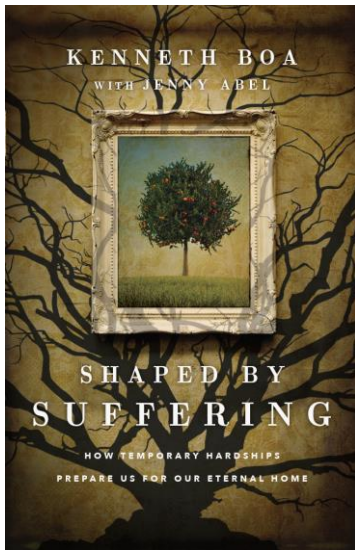


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800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com



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All of these experiences, together, have made me more keenly attuned to the mystery and complexity of suffering. God has used spurts of adversity to humble me and teach me the importance of his grace, of relying on him, of “numbering my days,” and of cultivating a grateful attitude no matter the circumstances.

Jenny, my coauthor and editor, brings a different perspective that has enriched this manuscript. I will let her speak directly.

My suffering has taken various forms since I was little, ranging from internal fears resulting from multiple moves as a child (I was never in one school more than three years in a row) to financial strains in my family when I was young to a period in my late teens and twenties when I endured severe panic attacks and anxiety issues that encompassed both internal and physical aspects.

Most significantly, however, my husband and I (married since 2004) experienced more than a decade of unexplained infertility. The depth of despair and grief that trial brought us drove me to my knees—into the open arms of the heavenly Father—with a sense of desperation I never had before. As an overachiever and an overanalyzer, the lack of control and lack of understanding of the *why* of this trial were agonizing. *If only I knew how this ends*, I often thought and prayed during those physically and spiritually barren years in which the Lord often seemed silent. However, increasingly, in recent years he seemed to respond, *If you knew, how would you learn to trust me?* I could see my self-will being conquered one day at a time—slowly replaced with his “good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). It was an agonizing but necessary process that only came about with the passage of time.

Ironically, just days after Ken and I finished the first draft of this book, to my complete surprise, I learned I was with child. The years of pursuing medical options had long since ended; I had begun to pray with more frequency (especially while working on this book), “Lord, make me content as a childless wife; help me be fruitful in the ways you desire!”

The miracle of this child is too great for words, and yet it’s much more than a child that I have received from God. The lessons he’s taught me, the cultivation of trust, and the deep intimacy with Christ gained in that waiting period are priceless and well worth every ounce of pain—pain which has shaped me and still brings tears to my eyes. My prayer is that my suffering (past and future) continues to shape me *and* be used by God to minister to others. The process isn’t over.

This book presents no rosy picture of suffering, nor does it resort to trivial, simplistic explanations for the reasons why we suffer. The primary goal is to help you see how God wants to use your sufferings to enlarge your perspective and lift your gaze to the One who suffered and died for you, who walks with you in your suffering, and who is coming again to set everything aright *forever*. That day is coming, and we’re called to prepare for it.

—Taken from the introduction

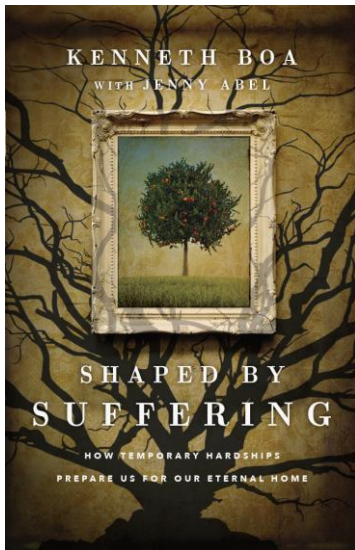


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Q & A



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Is the Church Confused About Suffering?

What experiences led you two to write this book together?

Ken Boa: Having an eternal perspective rather than a temporal one is vital for living a Christian life and for living in hope. Having written two previous books dealing with an eternal perspective, I wanted to go deeper in exploring the biggest challenge to cultivating such a perspective—adversity of all kinds. As it turns out, it's often our hardships that become the very vehicles by which God turns our eyes on him rather than on the empty promises of this world. I also was motivated to write this book because of our current context. For one, the church's theology on this topic is increasingly confused and too often trends toward a prosperity gospel message. Furthermore, as Christians in America (and other countries) face the increasing prospect of persecution, I wanted to help prepare believers with a biblical outlook on the suffering they will encounter.

Jenny Abel: I was motivated to assist Ken with this book primarily because of my own experiences with suffering and because of how I've seen other believers respond to suffering; as an almost-millennial (born in 1980), many of my peers and those a little younger than me have grown up in relative comfort and ease, with new innovations and conveniences that often enable us to avoid pain or hardship. With people increasingly self-absorbed, an entitlement attitude is pervasive, and we too quickly forget it's God who has authority over our lives, not us. Suffering interrupts self-absorption, but unfortunately, most people aren't encouraged to see those difficulties through a biblical perspective. Younger people need and deserve a more robust view of suffering (and how God uses it) than today's platitudinous "name-it-and-claim-it" theologies offer. I desperately want people to remove the "cultural blinders" and see the radically different mindset of the early Christians and realize that suffering on earth is not the worst thing that can happen to us; in fact, sometimes, it's the best thing that can happen to us even though we wouldn't have chosen it for ourselves.

A lot of discussions and books have centered on the question of suffering. What unique perspective does *Shaped by Suffering* provide?

Ken and Jenny: Suffering of all types is often the redemptive tool God uses to shift our priorities and focus, to forge Christlike character in us, and to prepare us for eternity with him. Our approach is distinctive in that it is tethered to the epistle of 1 Peter, often called the "Job of the New Testament," and focuses more on the Christ-forming purpose of suffering rather than on coping with and enduring suffering. (It also is not a theodicy, exploring the theological "why" of suffering, on which many suffering books focus.)

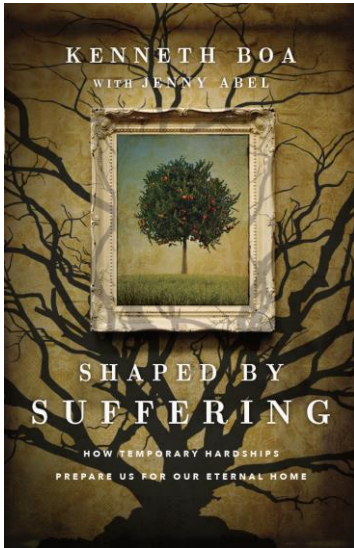


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What messages about suffering do you hope to convey to readers?

Ken and Jenny:

- Suffering will make you either bitter or better; it's our response to it that matters more than its content.
- Suffering is a required course in the university of life—it's not optional—but it's relatively brief in comparison to eternity.
- Christ is our example in our suffering—the One we're to imitate; he suffered sinlessly, silently, and as a substitute.
- In the context of our suffering, we're called to submit our lives to God's authority, and to the human authorities he's sovereignly placed in our lives, trusting that he has the best plan for our lives.
- Suffering is not only how we are shaped personally, but it's an important way God uses us to minister to others who are also undergoing hardship.

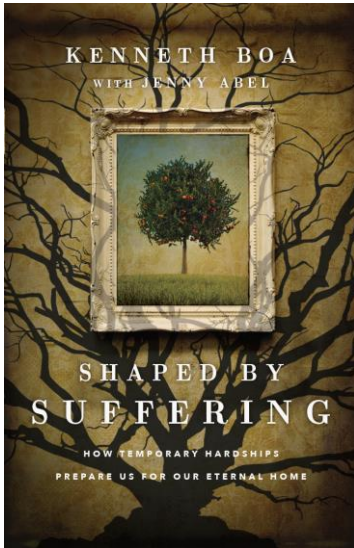


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“This book is superb—rich, deep, wise, and warm. It fills a glaring gap in responses to the challenges of suffering and will be read as God’s great hug for all who are in pain.”

Os Guinness, author of *Carpe Diem Redeemed*

Kenneth Boa and Jenny Abel



Kenneth Boa is an author, a speaker, and president of Reflections Ministries, Omnibus Media Ministries, and Trinity House Publishers. He is the author of over fifty books, including *Conformed to His Image*, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, *Rewriting Your Broken Story*, and *Life in the Presence of God*. He is a contributing editor to the Open Bible, the Promise Keepers Men’s Study Bible, and the Leadership Bible, and is a consulting editor for the Zondervan NASB Study Bible.

Boa earned a BS from Case Institute of Technology, a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary, a PhD from New York University, and a DPhil from the University of Oxford. He teaches a weekly Bible-and-faith study at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where he resides with his wife.

Visit his website at kenboa.org.
Follow him on Twitter: [@kennethboa](https://twitter.com/kennethboa).



Jenny Abel is an editor and a writer for Reflections Ministries and Omnibus Media Ministries. She coauthored *A Guide to Practicing God’s Presence* with Kenneth Boa and edited *Life in the Presence of God*. She is a freelance writer and editor through Jenny M. Abel Editorial Services and has over fifteen years of experience in editing, writing, and communications. She previously worked in development and wrote for the president at the College of William & Mary, where she was assistant director of donor communications. Prior to that, she handled communications for an international ministry, served as associate editor and freelance writer for a regional family magazine, and worked for two legal offices. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with her husband, Robert.



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