



Kelly M. Kopic (PhD, King's College) is professor of theological studies at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He is the author or editor of numerous books including *A Little Book for New Theologians*, *God So Loved He Gave*, *Communion with God*, *Mapping Modern Theology*, *Sanctification*, and *Pocket Dictionary of the Reformed Tradition*.

Not a Justification for Suffering

This book will make no attempt to defend God. I will not try to justify God or explain away the physical suffering in this world. Instead, I wrestle with nagging questions about our lives, our purpose, and our struggles. How should we live in the midst of this pain-soaked world? How do we relate to the God whose world this is?

If you are looking for a book that boasts triumphantly of conquest over a great enemy or gives a detached philosophical analysis that neatly solves an absorbing problem, this isn't it. Instead, this book aims to invite you into a larger conversation, a conversation greater than my family, and a struggle bigger than your pain and doubt. For while our pain or the suffering of those we love may cause us to feel isolated, these challenges remind us that we are actually part of the much larger stream of humanity. A stream that is all too familiar with physical pain.

– Taken from chapter one, "Hard Thoughts About God"

Kelly Kopic opens his most recent book, *Embodied Hope*, with these poignant words on faith, suffering, and God. Often, in Kopic's field of theological study, suffering is viewed in a cold, matter-of-fact, detached fashion. It's a puzzle or a game. But in his book, as well as in the following brief interview, Kopic explores the true example of Jesus, provided in his embodied existence, by drawing on the very recent experience of his own family's pain and suffering.

What made you want to put words to the pain your family went through?

Kelly Kopic: In the prelude to the book, I explain how my wife went through breast cancer in 2008 and since 2010 has dealt with daily chronic pain. As we have faced this terrible difficulty, others have consistently been brought into my life who deal with physical pain as well other forms of suffering.

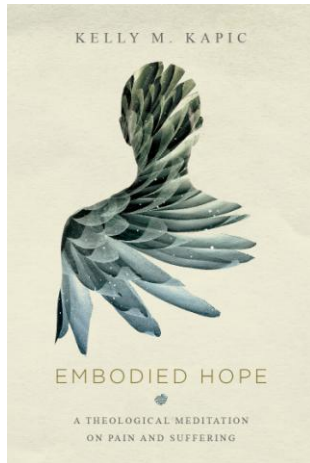
These experiences forced me to give sustained reflection to the problems of pain, thinking through them in terms of Jesus, the Gospel, and what it means to live as Christians in a pain-filled world.

Why is our current view of suffering and happiness as Christians flawed?

Kopic: One example is evangelicals whose approach to pain and suffering is simply, "be happy, God is good and will make everything ok." This approach is very shallow and unable to ground pain and suffering in a robust theology. This promotes an overly individualistic conception of faith that often greatly struggles to make sense of the challenges of chronic pain and thus leaves people wondering why they are so angry with God or if they have lost their faith, for example. They need to discover the power of community as well as the legitimacy of lament and their bodies.

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Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering

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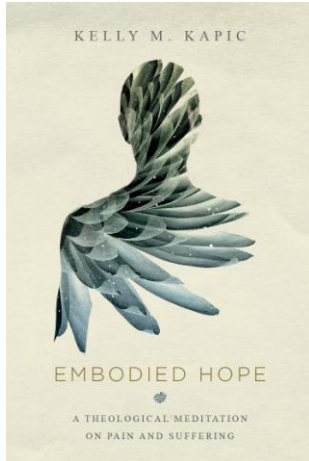
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Why is lament important?

Kapic: Certain conservatives, especially in Reformed circles, affirm the sovereignty of God but then use this to flatten everything else out. There is no real space for lament, for wrestling, for struggle. I affirm a *Christ-centered* sovereignty, which I believe looks and feels different, allowing those in pain to let Jesus' tears and blood reshape their view of sovereignty. Too often some Christians speak of sovereignty like it is a huge game or math problem for God, making God appear unconcerned or apathetic. Through extended focus on Christ's life, death, and resurrection, I hope to reshape those views.

Why will people resonate with your story and theological approach?

Kapic: I have heard from many who have heard or read this material that they believe there is a freshness to it. Part of that is the strong focus on our bodies, both as gifts from God but also as suffering from a fall that affects not simply "sin," but our physicality. We hurt. We die. And then I talk about Jesus, but hopefully not in a superficial way. Rather, I focus on Jesus' physicality, on the importance that the Son of God took on human flesh and that he died. Literally. That he knows not just temptation, but pain and hurt. But Jesus is not just sympathetic, he does something about it: he died and then rises! He overcomes death that we might one day be truly healed. Not just our "souls;" he will heal us in our totality. The dead will rise. There will be no more pain, suffering, and death.



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“We had gotten through the hard thing.”

She didn't just tell me. I was at home with the kids and she was at the grocery store. The kids played; I messed about the house, picking things up and preparing for dinner. But then, out of nowhere, I was struck with a deep panic. Something was wrong. Suddenly I felt that Tabitha had been gone a bit too long, and I was overcome with strange fears. We had been seeing doctors and going through exams, but, for whatever reason, in that moment these were not the things that came to mind. I tried calling her phone; no answer. I texted. Nothing. Called again—nothing. My initial fears grew exponentially, and without explanation I told my three-year-old daughter and five-year-old son, “Get in the car, hurry.”

We started to rush down Lookout Mountain—I knew I would find her car wrecked and thrown from the road and her life in great jeopardy. As I sped down, I held my breath at every bend waiting to see the ambulances, to hear the sirens, and to smell the smoke. But then, halfway down the mountain, I saw her driving up in our other car. She gently waved and pointed back up. A deep relief swept over my body. She was okay. No accident. As soon as I could, I turned our car around and headed home.

After the fear that had gripped me I was surprised and relieved to find her calm. We ate a nice little meal, and then she sent the kids off to play in a different part of the house. Sitting me down, she waited till then to tell me the news. She had received the call, and the doctor confirmed she had cancer. While she had been sitting alone in the parking lot of the grocery store with the doctor's voice in her ear, it had started to lightly rain, as if the gentle tears of God were falling upon her.

She had waited, learning long ago a truth she has often repeated to me—“It is always best to tell a man hard things after he has eaten.” Well, she had held it together and cared for the family, but now it was time to face reality. Our lives were forever changed. Cancer had infiltrated our family and stricken my wife. There we sat with no answers, not even much energy for questions, just the first waves of grief at what all this would mean. Something terrible had happened on June 9, 2008. It wasn't a car accident, but it did feel like a massive pile of wreckage was threatening to crush us under its weight.

After cancer was detected, I watched my wife courageously and gracefully go through the diagnosis, the surgeries, and the treatments that followed: she would add that she did it imperfectly. Even as I watched her, I was unprepared for the weight of that watching, for the weight of walking beside a suffering one.

Eventually she was declared cancer free. That does not mean scar free or unchanged, but we were thankful. She returned to more normal patterns, actively centering our family, ably engaging in her role at an international humanitarian organization, even enjoying running and hiking with the kids again. We had gotten through the hard thing, and God had preserved us. So much to be thankful for, even amid the challenges.

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But then in May 2010 Tabitha called me from the side of the road. She had just been meeting with some pastors about the possibility of planting churches in Haiti. (This was after the devastating earthquake of January 2010.) With uncertainty in her voice she explained, “I’m not sure I can drive home. I don’t know what’s happening, but there are shooting pains up my legs when I press the clutch or brake.” New fears and no good answers. A brain tumor? Multiple sclerosis? What was happening to her body now?

It took us over six years, but we finally got a diagnosis from Mayo Clinic. Tabitha has connective tissue disease, a condition in her experience characterized by debilitating pain in all four limbs, in her hands and feet. It has not eased through the years; it is slowly moving further up her limbs and remains a daily, even hourly, presence in her and our lives. Somewhere along the way, she also developed a rare disorder called erythromelalgia, or “man on fire” syndrome. Mayo Clinic confirmed this diagnosis as well and the doctor visits and treatment trials continue.

Most people who see her would not guess that this most active and able woman has at times been bedridden or at least severely restricted by her pain and ever-present fatigue. She doesn’t like to draw attention to it, which we wrestled through as we debated if we should do this book. Her pain has meant significant changes to all areas of life, from family to church, from work to leisure. If people ask her what has been harder, cancer or dealing with chronic pain, she would certainly say that, in her case, it is the chronic pain. Night or day, there is no getting away from it, like an unwelcome companion who simply will not leave.

Professionally, I am trained as a theologian. I work at a liberal arts college beautifully tucked away on Lookout Mountain, Georgia, overlooking Chattanooga, Tennessee. Although I have a PhD, I find that I rarely know what I think – really think – about something until I have had to write about it. Only as I meditate on Scripture, listen to others, read the reflections of those from centuries past, raise questions and grapple with implications of what I believe, and anticipate objections – not only from others but from my own heart – only then, as I start to put words on the page, do I begin to gain a sense for what I think, even how I feel about something. This may sound strange to others, but it is commonly my experience.

Therefore, I have aimed to wrestle through some of these questions in a more public manner. This has greatly helped me, and our prayer is that it may prove useful to others in some small way. But the truth is, writing like this is not easily accomplished without violating certain sacred spaces for my family. So, while we have been persuaded that allowing readers to know a certain amount of our personal struggle might prove helpful, this book will not be an autobiography, though we must confess from the start it is deeply personal. How can we think and wrestle through these challenges in any other way? It is necessarily personal.

– Adapted from “A Necessary Prelude”