

“Losing Season”

Psalm 23

What do we do, where do we turn, when we get the worst news possible?

Kate Bowler is one of two Duke Divinity School graduates who were invited to remain on the faculty after their graduation. She is young, brilliant, faithful, a mom, a wife, and a cancer patient. In her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason – and other lies I’ve loved*, Bowler confronts her own mortality after being diagnosed with Stage IV cancer.



In the book’s preface, Bowler writes:¹

Every day I prayed the same prayer: *God, save me. Save me. Save me. Oh, God, remember my baby boy. Remember my son and my husband before you return me to ashes. Before they walk this earth alone.*

I plead with a God of Maybe, who may or may not let me collect more years. It is a God I love, and a God that breaks my heart.

Anyone who has lived in the aftermath of something like this knows that it signifies the arrival of three questions so simple that they seem, in turn, too shallow and too deep.

Why? God, are you here? What does this suffering mean?

Those are the right questions, but they defy easy answers – and we want answers, we demand to know “Why?!” We invent answers, if only because they are answers. And they can be so harmful. “God needed another angel.” Really? (PLEASE do not ever say that!)

Most of us wrestle with how best to help those who have been given life-threatening prognoses. What do we say? How do we help? It is not easy and, too often, we say and do the wrong thing. In the appendices to her book, Bowler performs a valuable public service. She provides us with lists of what we should *not* say when someone we love is devastated and what we should say. I appreciated these lists so much that I decided to include them in this study. So, with apologies to Dr. Bowler for copying such a long excerpt from her highly recommended book:

ABSOLUTELY NEVER SAY THIS TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING TERRIBLE TIMES: A SHORT LIST

1. **“Well, at least...”** Whoa. Hold up there. Were you about to make a comparison? At least it’s not...what? Stage V cancer? Don’t minimize.
2. **“In my long life, I’ve learned that...”** Geez. Do you want a medal? I get it! You lived forever. Well, some people are worried that they won’t, or that things are so hard they won’t want to. So, ease up on the life lessons. Life is a privilege, not a reward.
3. **“It’s going to get better. I promise.”** Well, fairy godmother, that’s going to be a tough row to hoe when things go badly.
4. **“God needed an angel.”** This one takes the cake because (a) it makes God look sadistic and needy and (b) angels are, according to Christian tradition, created from scratch. Not dead people looking for a cameo in *Ghost*. You see how confusing it is when we just pretend that the deceased return to help you find your car keys or make pottery?
5. **“Everything happens for a reason.”** The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I’ve had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons. So, if people tell you this, make sure you are

¹ Bowler, Kate. *Everything Happens for a Reason*. Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

there when they go through the cruelest moments of their lives, and start offering your own. When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.

6. ***“I’ve done some research and...”*** I thought I should listen to my oncologist and my nutritionist and my team of specialists, but it turns out that I should be listening to you. Yes, please, tell me more about the medical secrets that only one flaxseed provider in Orlando knows. Wait, let me get a pen.
7. ***“When my aunt had cancer...”*** My darling dear, I know you are trying to relate to me. Now you see me, and you are reminded that terrible things have happened in the world. But guess what? That is where I live, in the valley of the shadow of death. But now I’m on vacation because I’m not in the hospital or dealing with my mess. Do I have to take my sunglasses off and join you in the saddest journey down memory lane, or do you mind if I finish my mojito?
8. ***“So how are the treatments going? How are you really?”*** This is the toughest one of all. I can hear you trying to understand my world and be on my side. But picture the worst thing that has ever happened to you. Got it? Now try to put it in a sentence. Now say it aloud fifty times a day. Does your head hurt? Do you feel sad? Me too. So, let’s just see if I want to talk about it today because sometimes, I do and sometimes I want a hug and a recap of *American Ninja Warrior*.

GIVE THIS A GO, SEE HOW IT WORKS: A SHORT LIST

1. ***“I’d love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?”*** Oh, thank goodness. I am starving, but mostly I can never figure out something to tell people that I need, even if I need it. But really, bring me anything. Chocolate. A potted plant. A set of weird erasers. I remember the first gift I got that wasn’t about cancer and I was so happy I cried. Send me funny emails filled with YouTube clips to watch during chemotherapy. Do something that suits your gifts. But most important, bring me presents!
2. ***“You are a beautiful person.”*** Unless you are of the opposite gender and used to speaking in a creepy windowless-van kind of voice, comments like these go a long way. Everyone wants to know they are doing a good job without feeling like they are learning a lesson. So, tell your friend something about his life that you admire without making it feel like a eulogy.
3. ***“I am so grateful to hear about how you’re doing and just know that I’m on your team.”*** You mean I don’t have to give you an update? You asked someone else for all the gory details? Whew. Great! Now I get to feel like you are both informed and concerned. So, don’t gild the lily. What you have said is amazing, so don’t screw it up now by being a Nosy Nellie. Ask a question about any other aspect of my life.
4. ***“Can I give you a hug?”*** Some of my best moments with people have come with a hug or a hand on the arm. People who are suffering often—not always—feel isolated and want to be touched. Hospitals and big institutions in general tend to treat people like cyborgs or throwaways. So, ask if your friend feels up for a hug and give her some sugar.
5. ***“Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard.”*** Perhaps the weirdest thing about having something awful happen is the fact that no one wants to hear about it. People tend to want to hear the summary, but they don’t usually want to hear it from you. And that it was awful. So, simmer down and let them talk for a bit. Be willing to stare down the ugliness and sadness. Life is absurdly hard, and pretending it isn’t is exhausting.
6. ********Silence******** The truth is that no one knows what to say. It’s awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People’s weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote to me with his policy: Show up and shut up.

The LORD is my shepherd...thanks be to God!

Daily Bible Readings - More psalms for comfort and hope

Monday	Psalm 6	A prayer for deliverance from grave illness
Tuesday	Psalm 27	A song of confidence
Wednesday	Psalm 31	A prayer for deliverance
Thursday	Psalm 34	A prayer for deliverance from trouble
Friday	Psalm 41	A prayer for healing
Saturday	Psalm 88	A prayer for help when despondent