

A photograph of a church entrance. The central focus is a teal-colored door set within a large, arched stone frame. The door has a gothic-style design with a pointed arch at the top. The surrounding walls are light-colored and show signs of wear. In the foreground, a white cross is painted on the dark, wet pavement. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Beyond the Brokenness

HOW CAN CHRISTIAN AUTHORS PORTRAY
THE DARKNESS AND SUFFERING OF THIS
WORLD WITHOUT LOSING SIGHT OF HOPE?



Introduction

We live in a world so marred by sin that Scripture describes it as “groaning in the pains of childbirth until now.”

But are we depicting that honestly in the stories we write?

Sometimes critics complain that Christian fiction makes the world seem tamer than it actually is. They accuse us of photoshopping reality because the imperfections we see around us make us uncomfortable.

Now, we don't believe in broadbrushing an entire genre since many skilled Christian authors don't try to touch up everything that's unpleasant. But rosiness is difficult to avoid without falling into the opposite extreme: darkness so deep that hope gets lost.

That's why we wrote the articles contained in this e-book, which were originally published as a series on our blog in November 2020. We wanted to explain how Christians can portray brokenness in a way that acknowledges both human depravity and God's grace.

We pray that our thoughts help you address challenging issues with truth and care in the story you're currently crafting.

-Josiah DeGraaf
Story Embers Editor-in-Chief



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Chapter One – Life Isn’t a Hallmark Film, and Christian Storytellers Shouldn’t Pretend It Is

By Josiah DeGraaf, Editor-in-Chief

Most writers are familiar with the staples of the Hallmark formula. A nice guy and a nice girl visit a nice town with mostly nice citizens, and after a few minor misunderstandings and slip-ups, they discard the cruel world of business and money to find love at a nice dinner party. Bonus points if it’s set during Christmas.

Hallmark films aren’t objectively bad or wrong. We all need an avenue of pure entertainment, and while mine is superhero flicks, yours could be Hallmark. No shame in that.

However, stories that focus on the rosy sides of reality are rarely compelling or memorable. They’re predictable—and indistinguishable from other patented plot lines. Just like Hallmark films.

Although lighter fiction has a place in today’s market, I’d argue that we need more stories tackling the gritty sides of reality from a Christian perspective. We explored this two years ago with our Tricky Subjects series.¹ And this year we’re addressing it again from a new angle based on the eleventh resolution of our Christian Storytellers Manifesto: “We resolve, in light of God’s ultimate victory in our fallen world, to paint traces of hope in even the darkest situations.”²

Because here’s the crux: you can’t write poignant portrayals of hope unless you’re prepared to step into the world’s brokenness.

When Christians Paper Over Hurt

As Christians, we believe in the power of redemption. But due to a misapplication of Philippians 2, a sunny outlook, and a desire to avoid corrupting ourselves with filth, we sometimes rush to show the

¹ “Tricky Subjects for Christian Storytellers,” Story Embers, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/tricky-subjects-series>.

² “The Christian Storytellers Manifesto,” Story Embers, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/manifesto>.



beauty of rebirth without first showing the ugly state of humanity. In our well-intentioned efforts to celebrate God's grace, we slip into two main traps.

The first is a focus on simple problems. Accurately depicting mental illness is hard. Treating depression and anxiety as strictly a spiritual matter is less complicated. Dealing with sexual abuse is uncomfortable. "Smaller" sins are less disturbing. Why give characters serious transgressions if they can wrestle with white lies instead?

Minimizing human depravity (and the pain it causes) streamlines the transition to redemption. But it leaves little for readers who *do* struggle with malignant sins to learn from. They need stronger examples than cartoon villains. Neither is redemption as meaningful without a panorama of the impact that separation from God has on the world.

That's why Scripture doesn't take this approach. It tells us that all have "fallen short of the glory of God,"³ possess "hearts that are deceitful above all things,"⁴ and wield tongues that are "set on fire by hell."⁵ And it depicts that accordingly. Jacob is a thief. The Israelites commit genocide against the tribe of Benjamin. David uses his authority to coerce a woman into bed with him.

The sins are deep, not shallow. But the brokenness and darkness undeniably proves why we need a Savior. Because let's be honest: If life resembled a Hallmark movie, would we really need Jesus?

The second trap is attached to the first, and it's a focus on simple solutions. We enjoy happy endings where the protagonists demolish every obstacle, straighten out their flaws, and ride off into the sunset. Poetic justice may lead to that outcome. But we also risk lying about reality.

After all, life rarely hands us simple solutions. Some Christians wrestle with doubt for years. Some people suffer from mental illness their entire lives. Sometimes heroes fail.

If our stories *always* have a positive denouement, are we exposing readers to the light of Christ? Or are we exchanging the true gospel that puts our final hope in heaven for the prosperity gospel that turns our hope earthward?

Without clear representations of the fall's continuing effects, why would we yearn for change?

³ Romans 3:23, ESV.

⁴ Jeremiah 17:9, ESV.

⁵ James 3:6, ESV.



When Christians Embrace the Grimdark

When writers recognize the issues of concealing unpleasant truths, sometimes they swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. I once read a book that deliberately defied the conventions of the Christian fiction genre. But its edgy elements didn't compensate for the lack of a solid narrative or theme.

This mistake isn't limited to the Christian market. At the risk of upsetting certain fandoms, Christopher Nolan's phenomenal Dark Knight trilogy left movie studios with the wrong impression: that superhero films need to be brooding and ultra-realistic. Unfortunately, sepia tones and somber soundtracks don't guarantee that a movie will be a hit.

At a deeper level, however, darkness isn't necessarily more realistic!

I don't deny that horrifying crimes happen every day. Sexual abuse is perpetrated and covered up in churches, and countless people are trapped in the human trafficking industry. But those *aren't* the only facets of our world. Fixating on the grimdark is as deceptive as dwelling on rainbows.

Scripture states that the world groans in anticipation of restoration. Stories that begin and end bleakly present a nihilistic view. A refusal to infuse hope into the darkest situations is a refusal to depict God's reality accurately.

But if we can't paper over hurt on the one hand or embrace the grimdark on the other, where is our Aristotelian middle?

When Christians Rely on the Power of the Cross

Encouraging writers to include both hope and darkness in their stories would be easy. But difficult questions don't deserve simple answers.

Instead, the cross and resurrection *define reality*, lending balance to our stories. No event could be more triumphant than Christ shattering the bonds of death, loosing the prisoners, crushing the dragon's head, and cracking open our stone-cold hearts. Or more brutal than the execution that placed Him in the grave to begin with.

Sometimes we forget the gruesomeness of the cross because the symbol is so prevalent in today's culture. However, Frank Turek vividly reminds us in his article for the Christian Post: "Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed, and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the



lungs but it cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath... Now begin hours of this limitless pain, cycles of cramping and twisting, partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber.”⁶

Turek prefaced his article with a warning that many of his descriptions would be graphic and demand discretion. Yet this incomparably unjust, pitch-black moment gave birth to radiant hope. Why?

Because the greatest hope emerges from the greatest sacrifice.

That’s the secret to blending hope and darkness in a distinctly Christian way. Sacrifice allows Beowulf to defeat the last monster. It pushes Raskolnikov toward repentance in *Crime and Punishment*. It frees Matt from his hero syndrome in *The Promise of Jesse Woods*. It emboldens Frodo to destroy the Ring. And it enables Jean Valjean to bring his daughter happiness in *Les Mis*.

Look at the most moving endings ever written, and whether the story is Christian or secular, you’ll notice the eminence of sacrifice. Consciously or not, all of us understand the magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice and how it’s the perfect combination of darkness and hope.

Resisting the Temptations of Humanistic Hope

As we try to sprinkle hope into our stories, sometimes we misrepresent it. In common parlance, “hope” is a synonym for “want.” “I hope I’m accepted into this college.” “I hope we win the match.” “I hope we’ll find a quick vaccine for COVID-19.” Yet as Minneapolis pastor John Piper points out, biblical hope is not a mere wish but confidence in God’s promises.⁷ Because reality is designed to eventually reward righteousness and punish evil, hope shouldn’t result from chance.

Neither should hope be founded in human goodness. Many stories suggest that happy endings are inevitable because of humanity’s innate virtue. Of course, Scripture declares that this is false: human nature is inherently corrupt and true hope comes from *God and His promises*. When writing for the secular market, we may be unable to refer to God directly. But we can still emphasize the presence of grace. When our characters choose rightly, not because they’re naturally good but because they receive grace, we’re alluding to the hope that flows from Scripture.

⁶ Frank Turek, “What Was the Crucifixion Like?”, Christian Post, last accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/what-was-the-crucifixion-like.html>.

⁷ John Piper, “What Is So Important about Christian Hope?”, Desiring God, last accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-so-important-about-christian-hope>.



One example is the book of Esther. While the work never mentions God, grace surrounds Esther as she gradually builds the courage to approach King Ahasuerus. Alternatively, in Steven James' excellent thriller *Rook*, the protagonist is reluctant to forgive the man who tried to violate his daughter. But over the course of the novel, he learns to quell his anger and vengeance—not because he's noble in heart, but because of grace. Character arcs remind us that our good deeds are credited to forces outside our control.

Christian stories reveal hope—not through human integrity or coincidence but through the mystery of grace.

Identifying Our Personal Calling When Portraying Hope and Darkness

Though I'd prefer to talk more about including sacrifice than achieving balance, each writer needs to determine what amount of hope and darkness she's willing to put on her own scale.

Lest we assume, however, that all Christian authors need to pursue the same equilibrium, Scripture indicates otherwise. Multiple books are bundled into the Bible, and each one balances hope and darkness differently. In 2 Kings, kingdoms fall due to their sins and hope for Israel rises in the figure of Jehoiachin. In Ruth, the young widow's commitment to providing for herself and her mother-in-law leads her to a husband. In the final pages of Judges, hope fades among the unspeakable wickedness. And in Luke, Christ conquers death and ascends into glory.

Each of us needs to form our own convictions as storytellers. Do we follow Dostoevsky's path in *Crime and Punishment*, placing ourselves in the POV of an axe murderer? Do we imitate Austen, who doesn't deal with glaring immorality in *Pride and Prejudice* but demonstrates our ability to overcome hidden faults? Do we take Endo's approach in *Silence*, grappling with God's apparent absence and the smallest shreds of hope? Or do we chase after Rivers in *Redeeming Love*, showcasing the full redemption we'll experience at the end of time?

Our manifesto urges writers to paint traces of hope in the darkest situations. But every author and book requires a unique application. Because the implications of this resolution are so vast, we'll continue to delve into it through the following chapters:

- In chapter two, Daeus will explore how Christian authors should portray suffering.
- In chapter three, Rose will examine how Christian authors should address trials of faith.



- And in chapter four, Gabrielle will explain how Christian authors should approach bittersweet endings.

Looking Ahead to the Second Coming

J. R. R. Tolkien's letters say that all stories point toward eucatastrophe—the “sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears.”⁸ We only recognize our need for that moment when we walk through darkness. But we only understand the significance of eucatastrophe when we catch glimpses of hope and victory.

We need stories where characters resolve their problems to remind us of our heavenly hope. But we also need stories where characters never escape their struggles to remind us that in this life we'll have trouble.

As Christian storytellers, we have the privilege of depicting the world with honesty: warts and all, but also joys and all.

Reality is far darker yet also far richer than we realize.

Let's depict *that* with our words.

⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 100.



Chapter Two – How Should Christian Authors Depict Suffering?

By Daeus Lamb, Community Manager

Books were history's first long-range torture devices, subjecting readers to vivid renditions of holocaust, suicide, doubt, and betrayal. As the worlds and characters shatter, so do our hearts.

But can we write about such situations without creating emotional scars? Should we even try?

While writers often joke about torturing their *characters*, torturing *readers* is not a laughing matter. Improperly depicting suffering may embitter people who are experiencing similar struggles. Even worse, hopeless stories can leave the audience depressed.

Yet portions of the Bible are wrought with anguish, and sometimes the darkest moments give us the courage we need in times of trouble. Through these examples, we can discover how to maneuver the unwieldy tool of suffering so readers are edified, not petrified.

Lessons from Scripture on Visceral Suffering

As a refresher, the Bible can be gut-wrenching. After Judas turns Christ over to the high priests, he grovels under the weight of his sin, frantically confesses, hurls down his blood money, and hangs himself. Children are dashed on rocks and burned alive. David's adultery leads to his son's death. Citizens starve to the point that they eat their own children. A woman is raped, then cut up into twelve pieces to incite the land to war.

If we believe the Bible is inspired, we must allow depictions of suffering.

But wait. While the Bible can be relatively graphic, it tells stories in a distant, omniscient style that rarely provides enough time or details for us to develop a strong connection with any of the characters. We might feel disturbed, but not as intensely as we would with a novel.

If we care about our readers, shouldn't we keep their distress to a minimum?



Not necessarily. When we don't plumb the depths of pain, we lose three opportunities to have a lasting impact.

First, suffering teaches powerful lessons. Most misfortune is either the direct or indirect result of a bad decision. For instance, Jacob deceives his father and steals from his brother. Years later, he receives poetic justice when his father-in-law deviously weds him to the wrong woman.

The magic of stories is that readers will follow characters down roads they haven't yet traveled themselves. When the path is destructive, the consequences must be memorable so that readers never want to repeat the character's mistake.

Secondly, suffering prompts difficult questions. Where is God amidst tragedy? Why are humans so wicked? When the misery is palpable, readers are more likely to hang on as you explore uncomfortable topics. Otherwise, how can they grapple with the hardships of living in a fallen world?

Lastly, suffering comforts readers who are hurting. Your story may be the only chance they have to meet someone who empathizes with their circumstances. Make sure the character's reactions and coping mechanisms ring true on every level.

You may have noticed that two of these principles are easy to flunk: writing suffering that wrestles with challenging questions, and writing suffering realistically. I'll address realistic suffering in my third section, but for now I'll outline the pitfalls to avoid when using suffering to point readers to spiritual truths.

Lessons from Scripture on the Reason for Suffering

The world staggers under platitudes about suffering. The truth is simpler and more mysterious. As I've mentioned, suffering usually ripples out of foolish choices. But sometimes the wicked bask in happiness and prosperity while the righteous wallow in sadness and poverty. The book of Job examines this enigma.

Job and his friends exchange theories about why he's being punished until, finally, God comes down to end the argument. Curiously, He brings *no* explanation. His answer is far better: Himself. His glory and sovereignty are the light by which we see. He, alone, is enough.

This makes our job as Christian storytellers both easier and harder. What could be more complicated than conveying an impression of the Almighty? Yet what could be more freeing than knowing we don't have to rationalize all the evil in this world? By inference (Romans 8:26), God Himself groans for the suffering on earth. Perhaps groaning is how we make sense of disaster. A paradox, to be sure.



This doesn't mean we can *never* explain suffering. Suffering *frequently* arises from our sins. Unconditional love *can* soothe our wounds. Even if justice seems absent on earth, it *will* come in the final judgement.

However, these truths, if isolated, are leaky bandages. What is justice without an understanding of holiness? What is love without the One who *is* love? The wisest fiction reaches for, even if it doesn't quite touch, a sense of God's presence, either by directly including Him or alluding to eucatastrophe, providence, and the dichotomy between holiness and grace.

If we wish, we can even skip the catalysts for suffering and go straight to the answer that remains when all others fail: God's existence and worthiness of worship. None of us have actually beheld God, so we'll stumble, but since we have a relationship with Him, profound art in this vein may be within our grasp.

Depicting Suffering Realistically

In a trendy YA novel, the protagonist yells "Noooooo!" at a loved one's death, then spends the next six chapters wailing internally. In a squeaky-clean, moralistic novel, the children respond to adversity with sappy optimism, unlike the faithless adults around them. These kind of books make me doubt that the authors understand suffering.

You, of course, are determined to do better. But you're sweating under the pressure. *Eighty percent of my characters go through trials I'm not even remotely familiar with! What if my scenes seem fake?* Thankfully, if you've ever navigated a rough season in your life, you're capable of writing about various types of suffering. You don't *need* to be a refugee to walk in your character's shoes. Combine your unease about political events with the time you moved across the country, ran out of gas in the middle of nowhere, and had to accept help from a stranger who resembled a thug.

You don't *need* to be the parent of an estranged child to imagine the heartache. In fact, you don't even need to be a parent at all. Remember when you mentioned *Where's Waldo?* to students two years younger than you, and they stared at you as if you were elderly. Remember your identity crisis when a younger sibling grew independent and no longer needed you. Remember when a friend spat insults at you and stirred others up against you because of a misunderstanding.

This is generic advice every writing instructor peddles, but I want to take it one step deeper. Don't merely reconstruct your characters' emotions from fragments of your own. Dig into the past (yours and theirs) and consider how it could affect their behavior in the present. The past is where half the pain of suffering tends to originate.



Let's say you're trying to relate to a character who's recently been paralyzed. You can shuffle through your memory for a moment when you felt helpless, but don't stop there. What triggered the emotion? Perhaps the crumbling of a dream that could have changed the world, or criticism from family for not being as successful in a job as they expected. Maybe another burden was dragging you down as well, such as a besetting sin, and the dual disappointments fed off of each other. Likely, a conglomeration of issues contributed to your feeling of helplessness.

When you craft characters, shamelessly steal from your own backstory to flesh out theirs—not to be biographic, but to fuel your inspiration.

For suffering that corresponds with your own, this may be enough. However, research is always beneficial. These days, everyone with a problem is plugged into a support network. You can stalk online groups and forums or request admittance to investigate further. People share their struggles in books, blogs, and on YouTube. Train yourself to think like them.

But what about antagonists? Does this apply to them?

Climbing Inside the Bad Guy's Mind

In one of G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown detective stories, the priest is asked how he solves such thorny cases. His reply is shocking: he committed them all. But what he's implying is that he steeped himself in the rationale of the criminals so he could trace their actions.

To that, many Christian writers gulp.

Depending upon your level of sensitivity, you may opt to stay out of a psychopath's head, but you mustn't eschew realism. A full picture of suffering should cover both victims *and* perpetrators.

Fortunately, you don't have to condone a villain's evilness to depict him honestly. Villains can be repugnant, like the revolutionaries in *A Tale of Two Cities*. They may appear outwardly attractive or sympathetic, but dramatic irony can reveal their erroneous ways, like the Mule in *Foundation and Empire* who, because he feels unloved, attempts to conquer the galaxy but cements his loneliness instead. Lastly, they can be portraits of grace, like the real-life prison guards who, after conversion, beg forgiveness and reconcile with the prisoners they tortured.

Even so, getting close to a villain's ickiness (and possibly being contaminated by it) is still unnerving. Horror can be crippling, and vileness can be contagious. However, horror can also warn and teach, and vileness can disgust and bring sobriety. What causes these different reactions?



Simply put, unmitigated horror warps your perspective. When my sister accidentally clicked on a spooky conspiracy theory video, she went feral and had stomach pain all afternoon. I had to reassure her that the video manipulated her emotions with audio-visual effects, its point was unproven, and it lacked hope, which a Christian can never lose. Despite my skepticism, though, I couldn't completely shake the aura of doom. Even if the video's predictions *had* been correct, it evoked nothing except dread.

Horror should lead back to wisdom. Never treat realism as an excuse to flaunt evil. Real people live and die without hope. Is that the message you want to communicate? Instead, weave dramatic irony, instances of love and joy, overarching purpose, and other positive threads through your novel to transform the brokenness into beauty.

The Tell-Tale Heart is (debatably) an example of horror that convicts. It's a murderer's account of his sadistic deed and how it drives him mad. (However, some might argue that his lust for blood negates the theme that crime doesn't pay—it depends somewhat on your perspective.)

Regrettably, good intentions often go awry when authors give readers a reason to hope, then bury it. Just as a misplaced flashlight offers no help, misplaced hope offers no relief. Be especially careful with your endings. Perhaps you promise hope later in the series, but if the ending of book one is too gloomy, it will *feel* more like a letdown than a cliffhanger.

Vileness and anguish should be depicted realistically, whatever your situation calls for (and part of that is your target audience's maturity level). The trick is not to whitewash reality while also infusing enough hope for readers to push through to the other side.

Facing Tribulation

"I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one."⁹

Suffering is of this world, and that's no fluke we should hide from. But we have a much more valuable commodity to spread than happiness.

We have hope.

⁹ John 17:15, KJV.



“You will keep him in perfect peace [literally *shalom shalom*, basically peace to the power of two], whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”¹⁰ Remember how I said that the biblical answer to suffering is the pursuit of God’s presence? The invitation in this verse should *excite* us to write about suffering and its solution.

Be bold. Be honest with yourself, and let your weaknesses, griefs, and inner questions fuel your portrayals of authentic suffering. Place yourself in the victim’s and perpetrator’s shoes. And embrace all the learning ahead, because the books we write shape who we become.

Are you ready?

¹⁰ Isaiah 26:3, ESV.



Chapter Three – How Should Christian Authors Depict Trials of Faith?

By Rose Sheffler, Staff Writer

Since the rebellion in the garden of Eden, our souls have longed for wrongs to be righted and life to be whole. Happy stories aren't heaven on earth because they ignore our brokenness. One of the most challenging aspects of the human condition is when we fall into hardship, where we begin to question who we are and why God has seemingly forsaken us.

If we draw deep fault lines in our characters, our stories will become shadowy arenas where faith is put to the test. Readers need to know that doubt is a symptom of being human, but it's not without cure.

Trials of faith are transformative, yet often fraught with pain. Glossing over these struggles strips reality of truth and hope, leaving only devastation. When a person is raging against the cruelty around her, she needs the reassurance that she isn't alone.

How are we, as Christian storytellers, supposed to write about the doubt and despair that suffering stirs up? How do we show a character shaking her fist at God in a realistic but also redeeming way?

Lay the Foundation

Your character's worldview is the hidden foundation of her identity, influencing her every thought, emotion, and choice. A trial of faith demolishes those beliefs through an onslaught of doubt and despair. The possibility of fallacy is scary for anyone because it imprints a question mark on everything they've valued prior to that moment.

A crisis of faith is inseparable from a character's arc. At the beginning, characters act on a set of assumptions that are wrong. As the story progresses, their fears and problems gradually back them up against a wall where they have to determine whether they should stay on that side or climb over the top.

The object of our faith defines how we think. It can be as simple as faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, or as complex as faith in the resurrection of the dead. Dig into your character's worldview and try to pinpoint one or two convictions that fuel her decisions and understanding of herself.



When the nation of Israel is sent into captivity, it upsets their confidence in God's promise to King David that one of his sons would always sit on the throne. As God's chosen people, they didn't expect to be judged for their sin. Similarly, your story's theme will become the framework for your characters' worldviews. A trial of faith must attack an integral belief, bringing it into sharper focus. Like gravity, the footholds for a character's worldview are usually imperceptible until they start to crumble.

To wage a compelling battle with doubt, you must first establish the foundation of your character's faith. The movie *Signs* drops us into the aftermath of grief: Graham is a priest who abandoned his calling when his wife died. Each scene carries more weight as we learn who he used to be and the sense of purpose he lost when his faith in God shattered. Whether you reveal a character's foundational faith in flashbacks, like in *Signs*, or straight from the first scene, his present crisis must be clearly tied to it to be meaningful.

Shake the Foundation

Once you've built foundational beliefs and themes into your story, set off an earthquake. Characters who openly question God's goodness prove that trials can be endured and overcome.

As Christian storytellers, we shouldn't shy away from these internal (and sometimes external) arguments. When we do, we imply that people of faith are infinitely calm and secure, which is impossible this side of heaven. Uncertainty is excruciating. If we flip a character's world upside down, and he's relatively unfazed, we're cheapening his circumstances. A torrent of negative thoughts and emotions follow on the heels of pain. A part of the character's identity has cracked, and we need to be courageous enough to let him respond naturally.

Some of the greatest people of faith cried out in protest as they faced bereavement and persecution. King David, while being chased by Saul, wrote raw psalm after raw psalm. C. S. Lewis, after cancer took his wife, poured out his heart in *A Grief Observed*. Job, upon watching his family, health, and possessions evaporate, regretted his birth. We believe hope can be found in the darkness, but anticipation of our future resurrection doesn't ease our current struggles.

In Daeus's chapter, he explained how to make suffering meaningful instead of arbitrary. When developing a story with a trial of faith, the specific ordeal your character undergoes will alter the doubts he grapples with. Even a small tragedy can be powerful if it harms something important to him. Don't just throw disaster after disaster in his path. A crisis of faith is an event that triggers difficult questions aimed at his foundational beliefs.



In *Signs*, the sudden and senseless death of Graham's wife pushes him to abandon his vocation as a priest. As the movie unfolds, he becomes more and more plagued with questions: Why did this happen to him? Why would God allow it? Does his suffering hold any purpose or hope?

If you fully understand your character's worldview, you can discover the appropriate catalyst for his crisis of faith. What drives him? What does he take for granted? What catastrophe could pull his world apart? When Graham's wife is killed, he can't reconcile it with his belief that *everything* has a purpose, so his faith collapses.

The Dark Night of the Soul

Now that your character's faith is wavering, the next step of his journey should lead him into pitch blackness. But no matter what storm comes to defy the truth, it will prevail.

In *Signs*, Graham's dark night arrives with the aliens who threaten the rest of his family. A particularly poignant scene is when Graham tries to save his asthmatic son and says, "Don't do this to me again. Not again. I hate you."¹¹ He's not only railing against the invading aliens but also God Himself. If suffering lacks a reason, then he has countless reasons to despise God.

Every character has a Gethsemane, a place where they must confront deeply ingrained beliefs and the terrible possibility that they've been living a lie. Walk your characters through these valleys containing trials of endurance, abandonment, loss, or even a combination of the three.

Trial of Endurance

All of us have waited and waited and waited for a promise to be kept, our faith flickering more with each day that passes. In fiction, the effect is the same: a delay is a test. Not only must a character have faith in the outcome but also the perseverance to pursue it. The longer the lapse between the promise and the fulfillment, the easier doubt creeps in.

In the book of Genesis, a righteous man named Noah receives a revelation that God has chosen him to save a remnant of humanity from a worldwide flood. But what happens next? Noah builds his ark—and not a drop of water falls from the sky for almost one hundred years.

Another man named Abraham obeys God's call to leave his homeland. He's told that he'll beget a son whose descendants can't be numbered, but considering his age, that seems impossible. As time stretches

¹¹ *Signs*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan (Touchstone Pictures, 2002), DVD.



on, he makes the mistake of attempting to find a “solution” to his wife’s barrenness. Ultimately, because the prophecy extends beyond his life span, he sees only a partial fulfillment of it in his son Isaac.

Every person, every character is living or working for an ideal. Begin by identifying that goal, even if it’s small. Next, imagine what could cause your character to become skeptical that her effort and pain is worthwhile. Writing stubborn characters who soldier through is easy. Depicting inner conflict is harder but far more compelling.

The most crucial moment in a trial of endurance is when the character must either give up or go on. The former tends to be more moving, but whatever you decide, resist the temptation to erase all of your character’s problems and insecurities in one sweep. You’ll suck the power out of the struggle. Her goal might never be obtained, but her choice to quit or continue will transform her—and speak to the audience.

Trial of Abandonment

Like a trial of endurance, abandonment convinces a character that she’s forgotten. As communal beings, separation from others damages our mental health. When we’re shunned and betrayed, we question our value. In the novel *Hatchet* and the movie *Castaway*, a series of horrific accidents isolate the main characters from civilization, forcing them to survive in hostile, uninhabited territory. The conditions are so dire that they contemplate escaping through suicide.

While hanging on the cross, even Christ Himself moaned, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹² Nothing rattles faith like being alone. Jesus knew He would die and rise again, yet that didn’t reduce the agony of His Father turning His face away.

If you include a trial of abandonment in your story, first evaluate who your character is in relationship to her community. What ugly thoughts will surface once she’s bereft of distractions? Does she possess a strong enough will to counter those lies? Abandonment is a kind of death that causes a character to grieve in stages: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, searching, and, finally, acceptance. An effective trial of abandonment provokes a fundamental shift in your character’s psychology. Afterward she will not and cannot be who she was before.

Trial of Loss

As Christian storytellers, we must strive to represent the reality of losses that don’t make sense. Suffering may not be connected to a person’s actions at all, and the flavor of injustice is pungent. Our hearts crave reparation. Sadly, however, sometimes those pleas go unanswered.

¹² Matthew 27:46, ESV.



The story of Job is disturbing because, despite the man's righteousness, God allows Satan to destroy his household and health. Such suffering is unthinkable to many of us. Job bears it admirably, even when his three closest friends urge him to repent of the grave sin he must be harboring. Knowing that he's innocent, he clings to God, yet demands an explanation. When God finally appears, He doesn't explain Himself. He only reveals Himself.

Remember that a trial of loss must have a meaning, even if it isn't immediately obvious. As Christians, we believe that brokenness is temporal—one day all will be restored. Rather than needlessly afflicting your character's loved ones, security, and health, concentrate on the message you want to convey. Simple solutions and neat happy endings will fall flat after heartbreak. Loss can't and shouldn't be eliminated by the end of the story. Your goal is to guide readers through the night and toward the dawn of hope.

Hope Comes in the Morning

Depicting trials requires a firm grasp of our faith and awareness of how suffering challenges it. We must proceed with caution, because the line between doubt and despair is thin. Truth is unchanging no matter how many questions bombard it, and readers need to see its light after they wade through doubt alongside a character.

Hope is found in the patience of Simeon, who spent his life awaiting the Messiah. Hope is found beside Christ in the garden and on the cross, when the world spewed hatred at God and was redeemed. Hope is found in the death of Lazarus, who rotted in a tomb for four days before Christ resurrected him. And in *Signs*, Graham finds hope in the random facts that weave together to save his family.

A person who wrestles with doubt and despair isn't losing hope—he's fighting to find it. Suffering inevitably touches us all, and we can comfort readers with stories of characters who sink into doubt but don't drown. Without hope, the suffering in life would be unbearable. Through sacrifice and grace, hope is born into our stories, turning suffering into something beautiful.



Chapter Four – How Should Christian Authors Depict Bittersweet Endings?

By Gabrielle Pollack, Social Media Manager & Staff Writer

All of us are experts at sad stories. We've read novels that schooled us in death scenes, betrayals, fractured relationships, and harrowing pasts. These examples taught us that tormenting the protagonist is easy: just thwart his deepest longings. Then we can type "the end" and congratulate ourselves for accurately reflecting our fallen world.

But the *real* sad story is how untrained we are in the art of weaving meaning into tragedy.

Writing catastrophe without a purpose in mind only adds to the shocking headlines, decontextualized statistics, and growing danger of our society. Pain for pain's sake is useless. Pain for drama's sake is cruel. And pain for realism's sake, while closer to our goal, doesn't instill readers with the hope we have in Christ.

As Christians, we understand that pain twists, molds, and shapes. Sometimes it casts us at the feet of God. Sometimes it drowns us in sin. But it always leaves us in a better or worse state than before.

If we've resolved to paint traces of hope in dark endings, this is where we'll find it: in the change pain forges in the human heart.

Unexpected Tragedy Disillusions Readers

Effective bittersweet endings are never a surprise. Readers must sense that disaster is looming. After all, they spend the entire book rooting for the protagonist. If he suddenly loses what he was pursuing in the final chapter, they'll feel like his effort was futile. Unless his actions affect his fate, he can't experience poetic justice, and without it, readers will be blind to the story's purpose. They need time to process the tragedy *before* it happens, and that requires intentional foreshadowing.

I hate to spoil *A Monster Calls*, but it perfectly demonstrates how to depict suffering. Secretly, Conor knows his mom won't win her battle with cancer. He's only thirteen, and the wait is wearing him down. Part of him wishes it was over. He hides this from adults and readers alike until a visitor, the monster,



coaxes it out. The confession breaks Conor, but it also frees him. Before his mom passes away, he's able to admit that he doesn't want her to go. Only then can he finally accept the inevitable.

When characters have no chance to grieve and recover, readers don't either. Shoving healing into the last few chapters is risky, if not downright impossible. Healing is a journey, and half a dozen pages isn't enough space to foster emotional investment in a new quest. The rushed resolution will damage readers' trust and put a bad taste in their mouths. Anger or despair shouldn't be the emotion that lingers with them after finishing the book. They should be as transformed through the protagonist's arc as he is, so the tragedy mustn't be tacked on.

Compelling Tragedy Is Foreshadowed

In the most impactful stories, the protagonist doesn't get what he *thinks* he needs. During the turmoil of the third plot point, he comes face to face with his *true* need, and his entire perspective shifts.

When Conor realizes that his mom's cancer is incurable, he rages at the monster. Instead of listening, the monster drags out the source of Conor's inner conflict: his secret wish that his mom was already gone so the pain would be too. It doesn't alter the outcome, but it helps him open his heart and express love to his mom, which touches readers with hope.

This is the most moving moment in the story, but it only succeeds because readers have been primed for it. The author never announces that Conor's mom will die, but she weakens day by day, and the adults in Conor's life dance around the subject. When she can't hang on any longer and Conor says goodbye, the release is therapeutic both for him and for readers.

How Do You Choose the Right Tragedy to End a Story with?

In *A Monster Calls*, the tragedy is tied to what Conor wants (for his mom to stay) and needs (to let her go). Those two dichotomous factors are the building blocks of all character arcs—and, unsurprisingly, anguish.

Once you've identified what your character wants and how he's straining to reach it, you can tailor a tragedy to his arc. The news that Conor's mom won't survive jolts him out of his unhealthy coping mechanisms and pushes him to share his feelings, exchanging what he wants for what he needs. That's the influence tragedy should have on your characters.

Perhaps your character wants someone who will never abandon her because she had a lonely childhood. When she starts dating, she relies on her boyfriend to ease all her anxieties, but that turns their



relationship toxic. Getting fired from her job won't teach her to be less paranoid, and neither will persecution or a tornado that destroys her apartment. Those incidents, though distressing, aren't related to her fear of being alone. But if she discovers her boyfriend is cheating on her, she'll be confronted with the truth: she can't depend on another person for happiness.

After tragedy befalls a character, she has two options: remake herself, or dissolve under the weight of sorrow. Her choice represents two different realities: one with Christ, and one without.

Tragedy with Christ vs. Tragedy without

A Monster Calls isn't Christian fiction. No one speaks about God, attends church, or listens to a sermon. Nonetheless, beautiful, tear-jerking stories like this still contain hints of redemption.

However, another kind of tragedy exists. Characters undergo trauma and seek their own solutions to pain that drag them deeper into the mire. Instead of being reformed, the characters degenerate. These endings emphasize humanity's dire condition without Christ's intervention.

Reimagine the lonely protagonist's situation with her boyfriend. Gradually, her worries increase that he's going to break up with her. When he doesn't promptly reply to her texts, she demands an explanation of where he's been. And when he's out of the room, she flips through his call history. As she suffocates him, he revolts. When she uncovers his dishonesty during the third plot point, she becomes even more desperate and picks a fight with his new girlfriend.

Conor grows through his ordeal. But this character looks like she's headed for destruction. Conor's ending was stained with redemption. This character's ending is accurate to real life, yet full of misery.

Not all Christians are called to write heavy tragedies. But these stories carry value because they address another side of the human experience. Like redemptive stories, they dive into the darkness, except the hope they bring to the surface is in the form of a warning.

Tragic Endings Convict Readers

Characters like Conor are reborn through pain, often with the help of mentors and friends. But characters who latch onto lies devolve into misshapen, bitter individuals, and the consequences of their stubbornness weigh on readers.



Though the middle-grade novel *Inkheart* has a happy ending for most of the characters, Dustfinger becomes trapped in our world, and the separation from his home and loved ones hardens him. Because he refuses to love again, he prioritizes his agenda over everyone else's safety.

In *A Monster Calls*, Conor has a guide: the monster. In *Inkheart*, Dustfinger has Mo and Meggie as positive examples. Both have equal opportunities for redemption, but their decision to follow either their want or need determines the outcome. Dustfinger is torn between risking his heart and remaining alone. Conor is torn between suppressing and confessing his feelings. Dustfinger takes the easier path, but Conor doesn't. He embraces the truth and frees himself, whereas Dustfinger rejects it and keeps himself imprisoned.

At first glance, a negative arc like Dustfinger's seems to attack hope. But underneath the gloom it issues a challenge to readers. Dustfinger's mistakes inspire them to make nobler choices. When he closes himself off, the importance of openness and bravery becomes clear. This is why Christian writers shouldn't be ashamed to craft stories with devastating endings—because they encourage readers to live differently.

Each of us tends to conceal parts of ourselves that don't align with God's standards. But, as David Foster Wallace so succinctly states, "Good fiction's job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable."¹³ When characters spurn the truth, it's as if we're looking into a mirror. Before we can change, we need to acknowledge that sometimes we behave more like Dustfinger than Conor. But, for the warning to be powerful, we must offer the character an alternate path during the third plot point. Even if he bypasses it, readers will see how close he came to salvation and can learn the lesson he didn't.

Dustfinger receives chance after chance to be heroic, but he's unwilling to jeopardize his own life. During the third plot point, he's forced to choose between staying with a woman he loves and saving his skin. He runs, only to get caught in another dilemma: Will he backtrack and attempt to rescue her after all? Or will he shut himself off again? The lady survives, no thanks to him, and his selfishness serves as a wake-up call to readers.

Readers are healed by Conor's sacrifice and warned by Dustfinger's demise. But Dustfinger's deterioration doesn't make his story meaningless. It shows readers the muck they could sink into and points them to higher ground.

Why We Need Dark Endings

¹³ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," last accessed November 19, 2020, https://samizdat.co/shelf/archives/2005/02/an_interview_wi_3.html.



In this book, we've spent an extensive amount of time staring at darkness. We've discussed how to shake a character's beliefs about God's promises and horrify readers with suffering. We've learned that human goodness isn't enough to save us from ourselves. As dismal as all of that sounds, we need stories that explore these topics and more.

However, simply pouring darkness into our fictional worlds won't change how anyone lives in the real one. Every day we wrestle with anxieties we cannot name and emotions we don't analyze. We're a culture of masks and invulnerability, managing our depravity under the guise of perfection.

But watching characters struggle is cathartic. When they fret about losing something or someone they love, the dread that hovers over all of us feels less intense. When they're deceptive and manipulative, our own craving for control is exposed. And once we see our flaws in vivid color, we have a shot at transformation.

This process is marked with the fingerprints of the gospel, for only by discovering our sins and fears can we recognize our need for a Savior whose resurrection offers forgiveness and peace. Even if an ending must be tragic to reveal the brokenness of our characters—and ourselves—it ushers us toward a hope that echoes with the footsteps of Jesus walking out of the tomb.