

Welcome to the preview of *The suffering guy*.

I hope you enjoy what you read here!

-jim

(scroll to read)

The suffering guy.
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**The
suffering
guy.**

the title i never wanted.

jim barnard

**For Alisha—
All the reasons why are detailed on the next
several hundred pages . . . and more
specifically on page 249.**

I love you.

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introduction.

Story is our greatest tool. I might have stolen this line from someone, but I've said it so much over the last few years that if I haven't been sued yet, I think I might be safe. Still, I wish I could attribute this quote to someone because it has changed my life, and I am certain I'm not smart enough to produce that level of wisdom on my own.

The context for this story is that my wife, Alisha, became severely sick three months after we got married in 2006. When I met her, we knew she had some health issues, but there was no indication things would fall apart so fast and so hard. We were young, naive, and not ready for this new reality. As newlyweds, we were still developing expectations and enjoying how easy it was at that point to meet those expectations. When Alisha got sick, the honeymoon ended abruptly and the expectation gap we found ourselves in quickly became our identity.

I would have never wanted to experience what would become our story, let alone write it for public consumption, but it's the story God has been writing in our lives. To that, I am sincerely thankful to the Lord for what He has done, and what He continues to do. You will read in the pages ahead about our 16 years together (and counting), our journey with Alisha's

chronic illness, and the absurdity with which God has worked in the midst of it.

I hope there is something in our story that is inspiring or challenging for you. If not, I hope you at least find my quirky writing entertaining!

-jim

1. the tent.

A few years ago, Alisha fell asleep on her makeshift bed, otherwise known as the couch, watching the *Gilmore Girls*. Normally I would fall asleep on the floor next to her, but I wisely opted to go upstairs to watch *SportsCenter* on ESPN instead and fell asleep there in the process. Early the next morning, while it was still very dark outside, she yelled up to me in the bedroom and woke me from a deep sleep.

“I’m sorry it’s so early,” she called, “but you *have* to come downstairs. There’s something you *need* to see.”

“If something is important at 5 in the morning, it’ll most likely be important at 7 as well,” I grumbled under my breath as I begrudgingly went downstairs and asked her what was so important.

“*The 700 Club.*”

The Christian news/editorial show has been on the air for as long as I can remember, and I had successfully never watched a whole episode. I emphatically explained to Alisha about recent technological breakthroughs of modern equipment that the Lord had already provided us in the form of a DVR.

“No, you *have* to watch this *now!*”

At this point, my only hope was whatever this was, it had

better be short.

I expected to see Pat Robertson at the news desk talking about something that had happened in Palestine, but this particular piece was a feature story about a couple enduring the reality of the wife’s recovery from a brain stem stroke, an event that should have killed her. She survived but was left permanently disabled.

I quickly understood why Alisha wanted me to watch this. This couple had endured, and were still enduring, a major expectation gap. But more than simply enduring . . . they were finding, and sharing, hope. Jay and Katherine Wolf started a ministry called “Hope Heals” in an effort to share their story and encourage other people to find hope in the midst of suffering.

Watching that piece spoke to me, but I didn’t cry or anything. *I wouldn’t do that, not that there is anything wrong with crying. I was tired, I had a lot of junk in my eyes, and the pollen index was exceptionally high that particular morning.* I grabbed a box of Kleenex to handle my “allergies” and headed back towards the stairs to return to bed.

“We’re going to work with them someday.”

Alisha stopped me momentarily with this statement. I wasn’t sure what it meant, and I was too tired to try to figure it out. I replied with something generic like, “that sounds cool,” and promptly forgot all about it.

Several months later, the Wolfs suddenly came to mind for some reason, so I jumped onto their Hope Heals website. While checking out their page, I realized they were living in Southern California, and I was actually headed there for the Catalyst Conference¹ within a couple of months. I am not sure why, but I felt compelled to send them an email to thank them for sharing their

¹ A conference for pastors and other church leaders.

story so well. I ended up extending an invitation to have coffee with Alisha and me, as she was going to fly out and join me for a few days following the conference.

I didn't expect an answer, so it didn't shock me not to get one. I assumed they had a lot of people filling out that form online, and it must be hard to respond to every single person. I didn't even tell Alisha I had sent them a message because I didn't want her to feel any disappointment.

At the end of day one of the conference, I joined a bunch of people from my seminary for dinner at a nice Mexican restaurant. I got halfway through my chimichanga when my phone rang. It was one of those calls that you usually send to voicemail because you don't have the number saved. Whenever numbers show up on my phone instead of names, I assume they have the wrong number or it's a robocall. Perhaps I was feeling particularly Christian that day and decided to pick up the phone.

It was Jay Wolf, apologizing for not getting back to me. *Are you kidding me?* I wanted to apologize to *him* for wasting his time reading my email. He's obviously trying to juggle a lot in his life, and the last thing he needs is strangers trying to steal whatever free time he has. He told me he was glad he got ahold of me because he and Katherine had decided to come down to the second day of the conference and wanted to know if we could hang out in the early afternoon. As luck would have it, Alisha was flying in around noon, so I could pick her up and bring her straight over to meet who she regarded as our future co-workers.

I wanted to surprise her with this news and just "run into them" on accident. Although, I kinda struggle with surprises, because they feel like little lies. They are the *best kind* of lies, but I just can't be about that action, especially this time. The

next day, as soon as I saw her being pushed past security in her wheelchair by an airport employee, I ran over to them with a tip in hand, ready to take over as her driver. I told her immediately what we were about to go do and because she didn't believe me, I had to repeat at least three times how I coordinated this. She was pretty impressed.

After we met up, Jay and I pushed our wives in their wheelchairs around the beautiful Mariners Church campus. It was so refreshing to spend time with people who could relate with our expectation gap. Alisha and Katherine talked like lifelong friends eager to catch up on everything since last month. I can't tell you how great it felt watching Alisha that afternoon. I couldn't believe I was able to organize this. *I know it wasn't me . . . it was God, but I wanted Alisha to be sure to give me some credit.*

She probably gave me too much credit. Every couple of months after that, Alisha would ask me if I had talked with Jay yet about helping with their ministry. I was never sure what she was expecting, I failed to ask her, and I never reached out to him. I think I was afraid of him accepting my offer, then feeling obligated to follow through. It just seemed like too much for me.

Three years later, I had interacted with the Wolfs exactly zero times (outside of liking each other's Instagram posts and reading their fantastic book, aptly named *Hope Heals*). I was not feeling overly guilty about this because I was incredibly busy at my church gig and didn't have any capacity for much else. I decided it would be a good time for me to attend the Catalyst Conference again, where I hoped to get a much-needed bolt of enthusiasm from God. I went online to order tickets, and staring

at me in the lineup of speakers' headshots were Jay and Katherine's smiling faces.

The next few months got turbulent for Alisha and me, and I decided I needed to write our story in quick fashion (you'll see why). In those months before the conference, a lot happened, and it spun me around pretty hard. I had ignored Alisha's requests to "work with" the Wolfs because I wasn't sure I felt confident about opening ourselves up to anything that resembled a *suffering* ministry. I wanted to ignore the suffering *we* were experiencing. The last thing I wanted to do was focus on it more. Yet, here I was, writing it all down in book form and sharing it online for the world to see.

I badly needed the time away when the conference came around. It did excite me to know Jay and Katherine were speaking at the conference, and I thought their words could potentially inspire me to lean into this whole suffering thing. I decided to finally text Jay and tell him I was coming to the conference. If the opportunity availed itself, I'd love to see them and say hi. He replied they'd like to see me, but because they were part of the conference, they weren't sure when they'd have free time from their obligations. He told me to "just come find" them.

After their session, the host of the conference announced the Wolfs were going to be hanging out at the autograph tent to meet people and sign copies of their book. I waited a few minutes to let the crowd thin out a bit, then headed over to the autograph tent, only to find a long line of conference attendees queued up to speak with Jay and Katherine. I knew people were inspired by their talk, so I could rationalize why this line was so long. But this line barely moved at all. At some point, a Catalyst worker came through and kicked out the back two-thirds of the line because the Wolfs had another conference commitment in 45 minutes, and there was no chance of this line moving fast

enough for any of us to make it.

I wandered closer toward the tent to get a peek at what was taking so long. I stood silently and watched. Every single person, during their turn, poured out all of the pain they had ever experienced in their entire life to Jay and Katherine. This amazing couple just stood there, kept eye contact, held people's hands, cried with many of them, prayed, and hugged each one before handing back the signed book. I felt like I was watching a car accident. I didn't want to keep watching, but I did. Their ability to patiently listen and empathize with perfect strangers was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

I wanted to run away before they saw me, but they spotted me and waved. I suddenly felt trapped by the tent. I waited until they were done with all the wreckage and said a brief hi to them before they were rushed off. I didn't dare tell them about the book.

I stopped writing our story of suffering immediately. All I could picture was an endless line of people who could relate to our story, and every single one of them wanting to vomit every detail of their own story of pain. The thought felt overwhelming. I was afraid of it. If I am being honest, I was legitimately depressed during that season and didn't have what it took to move forward.

The good news is, God has done so much in my life since then, especially regarding depression. Someday I will write a book about that because I think it's a story people need to hear. But for now, I will just say God did a good job taking away my fears by bringing me to a place of health, and He seems insistent on me helping fellow sufferers in real ways. Even if

that includes sharing my vulnerable story and listening to long lines of other people sharing their pain.

So on January 19, 2020, Alisha and I sat on stage at LIFEGATE Church and said goodbye to our church family. It is significant that Alisha, at the height of her illness, could join me on stage and look so put together. She had so much pain that particular morning, but she pushed through it so I didn't have to communicate everything alone. On that last day serving as campus pastor, a role I'd held for the previous three years, we told the church how thankful we were for them and the opportunity they gave me/us. We got to tell them about how I was venturing off to start a brand-new coaching ministry, called *tiller*.

Through this new ministry, I am able to provide one-on-one and group coaching for guys and couples who are experiencing the struggle of the *expectation gap*. This is the gap between our expectations/hopes and reality—where disappointment, dissatisfaction, and distress live—something we are all familiar with, *yet some of us are more aware of than others*. The expectation gap is basically fancy lingo for suffering. This ministry is the tent in which I sit with others who are hurting and keep eye contact, hold hands, cry with, pray, and hug other people in the gap (*some of that I can't quite do through Zoom in the midst of the current global pandemic of 2020, but I do as much as I possibly can*). The best part of *tiller* is that I get to build a relationship with these other “gappers” and coach them through an honest attempt to overcome the expectation gap by learning to trust Jesus more.

Through Alisha's extreme illness and my own decisions/re-sponses, I have been aware of the expectation gap for way too long. I can't say I've got it all figured out. I have certainly tried unsuccessfully to navigate it alone at times and have learned

through the support of wise people in my life that victory never comes in isolation. It is a privilege to serve people by guiding them through their own gap.

(See www.tillercoaching.org for more about *tiller*.)

Alisha did not see her prophecy of “working with” Jay and Katherine play out the way she expected. In a way, though, we are absolutely working together to build the Kingdom by using our stories and pain to show others how the hope of Jesus can overcome any gap. Like I said at the beginning of the introduction, story is our greatest tool—and if this is the story that God is writing in our life, as hard and as painful as it might be, I must use it.

Like every good story, there is the potential for multiple different endings. Our story *will* have a good ending, even if it’s not the ideal one. As a Christ-follower, I truly believe that. Despite all the junk that has happened in our marriage, God has been present, and He’s been uniquely good to us. He has done the impossible, the unthinkable, and the absurd. I am still scared to enter this “tent,” but this story of suffering isn’t about me . . . it isn’t about Alisha . . . it’s about God and what He wants to do through our story.

Thanks for reading this preview! I hope you check out the rest of our story when *The suffering guy* comes out on May 1, 2021.

Check out thesufferingguy.com to see all the preorder options... especially the launch team option that gives a steeper discount and helps get the word out about the story that God has been writing in our lives. *Like they say back in my hood, launchteam4life*. I am fairly certain no one has ever said that, but I'm probably gonna start because it helps out a ton to have a large group of people helping to get the word out.

-jim

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