



BROADCAST TALKS

How Can I Help People Who Are Suffering?

by Nancy Guthrie

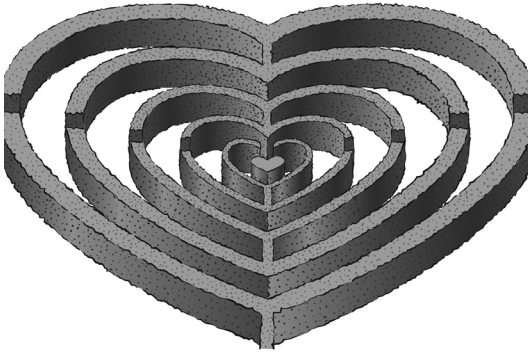


C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

Nancy Guthrie is a Bible teacher and author of several books, including *Holding on to Hope: A Pathway through Suffering to the Heart of God* and *I'm Praying for You: 40 Days of Praying the Bible for Someone Who Is Suffering* . She trains women and helps them identify and understand major themes that run from Genesis to Revelation. Nancy and her husband, David, are hosts of the GriefShare video series for small group ministry to grieving people. They also host Respite Retreat, a retreat ministry for couples who have experienced the death of a child. She is pursuing graduate work in theological studies via Reformed Theological Seminary Global. She speaks regularly at conferences nationally and internationally and is a regular contributor to The Gospel Coalition, including hosting the *Help Me Teach the Bible* podcast.

The following is adapted from *How to Pray for Others Who Are Suffering* , with Nancy Guthrie, a C.S. Lewis Institute (CSLI) livestream event hosted by Joel Woodruff, President of CSLI, on January 21, 2022.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



It's my pleasure to welcome you to this interview with best-selling author and Bible teacher Nancy Guthrie. Over the past twenty years since Nancy published her first book, *Holding on to Hope: A Pathway through Suffering to the Heart of God*, she's become known as a very thoughtful proclaimer of God's word. She has a deep love for Scripture, and many of her books have been known to have centered on biblical theology. She has some wonderful books, one titled *Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament* and another, *Abundant Life in Jesus*, and these books have helped many people go deeper into the themes of Scripture and the deeper truths. But I know that Nancy and her husband, David, are also known for their ability to share deeply as well on how God has worked in and through their lives following great loss and sorrow. Their transparency and their ability to communicate how God has worked in their lives has touched many people. Nancy, as a result, has written a number of books helping people deal with sorrow, trauma, and loss. One of them is her newest book, *I'm Praying for You: 40 Days of Praying the Bible for Someone Who Is Suffering*. This is probably one of the most practical and helpful books you will ever find in learning how to come alongside those in your life who may be hurting or suffering. It's a pleasure to welcome Nancy to our time together. Thank you so much for joining us.

Thank you, Joel. So glad to be with you and all who are joining us online.

Q: You have experienced loss, and yet you've done a great job of integrating heart and mind in your teaching and your writing. I wonder if you could share a little bit of your story with us. First of all, how did you get to be a person who talks about these topics and difficult subjects?

Well, I grew up in a Christian home, I went to a Christian college, and I got a job working at a Christian publishing company right out of college. People would always ask me, “Are you going to write a book someday?” I would always say, “I will never know enough about one thing to write a whole book about it.” So it wasn’t that I aspired to write necessarily. My first book came out in 2002 [*Holding on to Hope: A Pathway through Suffering to the Heart of God*], and the way that came about was, in 1998, we had a son, our son Matt, who was eight at the time, and I gave birth to a daughter named Hope.

And when Hope was born, immediately, it was noticeable, what the doctor called a number of small problems. She was very lethargic. She was a little underweight. Her hands turned slightly out. She had a really large soft spot and extra skin on her neck. So all these little things. And the pediatrician said to us on that first night, “A lot of times when there’s a number of little things wrong, they add up to something more significant, so I’m going to have a geneticist come and take a look at her tomorrow.”

So when he came to our room that next night, he told us that he suspected Hope had a rare metabolic disorder that we had never heard of and probably none of you have, either, called Zellweger syndrome, which meant that she was missing a tiny sub-cellular particle, an enzyme that you and I have in every cell; this enzyme is responsible for ridding the cells of long-chain fatty acids. Because she was missing these peroxisomes, in a sense, there was nobody to take out the trash in her cells. Because of that, these toxins had built up in all of her cells, all of her systems, and had already affected all of her major

organs, including her liver and her kidneys and her brain. He told us that there was no treatment and no cure and that most children with that syndrome live less than six months. Which was devastating. I remember my husband, David, crawled into the hospital bed with me, and we cried. We cried out to God probably the most unceremonious prayer we'd ever prayed, which was just simply, "God, help us! We don't know what to do!"

The reality of Hope's life was—those first days were her best. She was continually manifesting more of the problems related to this. So what was great was that we were able to take her home and enjoy her. Of course, taking her home wasn't even what we expected. I had really looked forward to having a daughter to grow old with me, to be my friend in my old age, and had looked forward to taking her home to grow up with us. Instead, when we took her home, we knew we were taking her home to die. That reality just began to be more and more real to me. I remember it hitting me one day just a few weeks in, and just realizing, okay, we know everyone's going to die, even though we like to deny that.

But I remember it just hit me that Hope ... it was going to be soon, relatively soon, that either Hope was going to die in my arms or I would find her dead, and that really scared me. I wasn't sure how I would deal with that. And I wondered if that would be the only memories I would have of her. So her life ... It's hard to explain, Joel, but it was such a mixture of joy and sorrow, of loss and incredible richness. Because it was really all of those things. There's something about life when you know it's short. David and I felt like we learned for the first time what people mean when they talk about taking one day at a time. Just every day, we didn't know if that would be her last, and that was, in some ways, a great way to live. In some ways, we missed living that way after she was gone. I tried not to borrow too much on the sadness because I just thought to myself, "Okay, if I allow myself to get too sad now, I'll miss her life, and then I'll regret that the rest of my life." So her days with us were really rich. We were

able to share her with lots of people, and she went with us everywhere. We went and we enjoyed her, and we loved her, and God gave us 199 days with her, and she slipped away from us in the middle of the night.

I'm a planner. I plan ahead on things, you know? And I thought that spending those six months of her life knowing that she was going to die, that somehow I was getting a jump on the grief, that maybe then grief wouldn't be so hard for me. And it just didn't work that way. At all.

Hope was gone, and there was just this huge empty place in our lives. It's amazing how heavy empty can feel. The best way I can describe it is that, to me, it just felt like this huge boulder on my chest of heaviness and sadness and disappointment. Like I could hardly ever take a breath. I was just sad. I was just sad for a really long time. A really deep, pervasive sadness.

To have a child with this syndrome means that both my husband, David, and I must be carriers of a recessive gene trait. Do you remember high school genetics class, and you learned what it took to have blue eyes? Both parents have to be carriers of the recessive gene trait, and then, when they have a child, that child has a 25 percent chance of having blue eyes. Well, that's similar to us. So once we had Hope, we knew then that we were both carriers and that, whenever we have a child, that child would have a 25 percent chance of having this fatal syndrome. So that meant we had some difficult decisions to make about whether or not we would have more children. In so many ways our family didn't feel complete. Also, because we had loved and enjoyed Hope, we did not immediately think, "Oh, we could never risk going through that again." But also our lives weren't just us. There was our son, Matt, who had experienced six months living in a household waiting for his sibling to die. And then a lot longer than that with a really sad mom, which I promise you couldn't have been much fun. And then there were our parents. As hard as it is to lose a child, I think it's doubly difficult to watch your child lose a child. And you've got nothing in your toolkit that you can pull out to fix that. So



it had been devastating for our parents.

So we determined that we would take surgical steps to prevent another pregnancy, and evidently it didn't work. About a year and a half after Hope died, I discovered I was pregnant. I was shocked, to put it mildly, as was David. If, in our experience with Hope, we had asked the question why?—and I don't think anybody suffers without asking that question—this time, it was like, “Why again?” Like, “Was there something we were supposed to learn that first time around that we didn't learn?” It was so interesting, Joel. People around us. People of faith—Oftentimes faith, in our modern Christian world, is defined as, “I've got enough faith to believe and to call upon, pound the doors of heaven to get a miracle, to win God to our side, to the outcome that we think is best.” I could challenge that in terms of a version of faith. I've come to think that faith really is saying to God, “I belong to You, and I believe You are in charge and that You are at work in this world and in my life for my good and for Your glory and that I can trust You with whatever You allow into my life and that I will still love You even if You don't order my life according to my plans.” I think that's the definition of faith.

Anyway, I knew I was pregnant, and so we went through prenatal testing. I discovered when I was about 15 weeks pregnant that we were going to have a son and that he would also have the fatal disorder. So our son Gabriel was born in July 2001. Initially, we thought maybe he was a little stronger than Hope, that he might be with us a little longer. He was actually with us a few days less, 186 days. And then we said goodbye to him.

And there we were, once again, back to a family of three. In one sense just feeling like, “What has happened?” I've got to be honest with you, Joel, sometimes I still—I mean this is twenty years ago now, which is wild to me, but sometimes I just shake my head. “Did that really happen?” It was profound. It was such a mixture of joy and sorrow. It has so shaped me in who I am and how I think and what I believe. I think experiences like this—they really cause us to figure out, not just

what we think we ought to believe, but what we really believe; it's the place where I figured out not only what I really believed but that what I believe matters. And that, in fact, it makes all the difference in the world—facing living in a world that is so very broken because of the curse of sin.

Q. Thank you so much just for sharing the story. We certainly feel with you as you share that. I think anyone who heard that could feel the depth of your pain and suffering and asking why. I think many of us, when we hear a story like that, struggle with the question, how can I 'come around' someone who is hurting? Have there been people in your life, perhaps, who have modeled care for those who are suffering? And if so, what did those people do? What did they look like?

That's a great way to ask that question. I'm not sure many people have phrased it that way because they usually assume, what are the bad things people have done? How have they failed? And honestly, I haven't known a grieving person who hasn't had a list that they could give you, pretty long, in that regard. But when I think back to that time you will get me crying with this, because that is where I am so moved, when I think about people who showed up for me.

Just last weekend, I got on a plane, and there was an old friend of mine who was on the same flight. I never see her anymore, but she's one of those people who was there for me. I mean, she's one of the people ... As I remember, she might have even been the first person I told that Hope was going to die, when she came to see me at the hospital. I just remember her eyes welling up with tears and her just weeping with me. And that's maybe the number one thing. I think most of us feel so awkward around other people's suffering. Some of it's just a social awkwardness. We like it when we have a conversation with someone that it ends upbeat. When everything ends up kind of tidy, right? And when you're interacting with a suffering person, that's often not the case. I think especially when you're interacting with someone who's in a situation where it is not going to get better, a terminal situation quite often, or other situations where you realize it's



not on a trajectory toward a, “Hey, we’ll just be happy about that.” No. It’s hard. It’s probably only going to get harder.

So some of the awkwardness comes out of our desire to have things turn out well, but when I think back, there was both ... There are two sections of time, or maybe even more than that, in regard to my experience, because there was the way people came around us during Hope’s life. I remember one of the best things a friend did was—A lot of times, you’re going through something hard, and you’ve got all these people who come from all these directions who want to help, and just managing people wanting to help can be overwhelming, especially when you’re dealing with something hard. I remember I had one friend who stepped up—anybody who wanted to come to my house or do practical things to help, she was the contact. And another person was a contact for meals. So anybody who said they wanted to help, I could say, talk to them, and they organized it. That was a great gift to me.

I think about my friend Julie, whom I wasn’t really close friends with—I think this is another important thing. A lot of times, we don’t approach someone who’s suffering because we think to ourselves, “They’ve got friends who are closer friends than I am. I’m sure those people are who they want and who are around them.” You know what? Close friends sometimes don’t know how to handle it. I mean, the two couples that we called to the hospital and told this news to—both of those couples disappeared in our lives. But the Lord brought us other people who stepped in, like my friend Julie. I remember she contacted me, and she said, “I have Monday off. I’d like to come every Monday and do whatever ...” Here’s what got me, “Because I want to know Hope.”

You know, I didn’t have any choice but to love Hope, who was going to die. She did. And she wanted to know her, and she did. And then I remember, the first Monday after Hope’s death, getting an email from Julie. It’s Monday, and I miss Hope. And that was profound.

There’s that stepping in in those difficult days. I think it’s a little bit

different dealing with someone who's in the midst of grief. The being with them can look a little bit different, although doing practical things to help is important. Probably the most important thing is being a good listener rather than a good talker. I mean, a lot of us are intimidated by being around grieving people because we think, "I don't know what to say." You know what? If you had something to say that would fix it, then maybe you should be worried about what to say, but it actually shows great honor to someone who's grieving for you to come around.

Maybe the only thing you can say is, "I don't know what to say." Because it's humble. It says, "This is bigger and harder than mere words could fix." And so to sometimes just come around, have a listening ear, and learn how to ask good questions ... I think the most natural question that comes ... We see someone in the narthex of the church who's going through something. What's the first thing? We say, "How are you?" And that's not a terrible question except that, if we try to put ourselves in the shoes of someone hearing that question, they feel like they've got to give a report, and deep down, they know that what you really want is a good report.

So it's sometimes better to ask a different kind of question. Like, for someone who's grieving, to maybe ask, "What's your grief like these days?" I mean, in many ways, it's the same question, right? But there's something about that that says, "I'm not shocked that you're grieving. It makes sense to me that you would be grieving, and I'm just inviting you to talk with me about what it's like. Good, bad, or otherwise," so the skill of asking good questions, the skill of listening, and specifically in terms of grief of a loss of someone, to say that person's name. That's the thing grieving people want most, to hear not just, "your daughter, your son, your mother, your brother." But "Hope. Gabe." Say that person's name. Because they've stopped hearing that person's name. So to say that person's name, to express that you miss that person, too—if that's fitting for you.

I'll just give one general principle, though, as we leave that discussion.

As you think about, “Should I say this?” Think in terms of—Does it esteem that person’s loss or does it diminish it? Run it through that grid. To esteem their loss is to demonstrate that the ‘lost’ person was important. Therefore, the grief that they feel over the loss is significant. To diminish it is to make it about us. Or to make it about, “I know a story about somebody else who this happened to,” or that kind of “look on the bright side kind of thing,” like, “Well, at least you can have more children” or “at least you can get married again.” Those are things that diminish loss. So as we interact with grieving people, especially, we want to think, “What would esteem that loss?” And that can help us judge whether or not that thing that is on the tip of our tongue is something that we should swallow or go ahead and say.

Q. That’s really helpful, to think about it that way. As far as this whole process of coming alongside. How long does the grief process go on? Two months later, is it all gone?

Oh, what a good question! Yeah. I do think that is a common misunderstanding—and I find myself falling into that trap again—that we think, “Okay, it’s been a while; they should be better by now or they are better by now.” We think it’s been too long to bring it up. You know what? Most people in the midst of a loss start marking time by that loss. If you really want to be a good friend to a grieving person, when that loss happens, write it on your calendar, and put a note on your phone. Mark the three-month date and the six-month date and the nine-month date and the one-year date and the two-year date, and then, on those days, it doesn’t have to be some big grand show. I still have a handful of friends who, on Hope’s death day and Gabe’s death day, I get a little text or an email. “Thinking about you today.” We remember. I mean, there’s nothing that gets me more than “we haven’t forgotten.” Hope would be 23 next week, and Gabe would be 21—just let people know you haven’t forgotten.

But it’s interesting you bring that up, because I’m thinking about that right now. A lady, one of our deacons at my church, [her husband] died, and I’m thinking August; I keep kicking myself because...

I've spoken to her, but I haven't sent her something in writing, and every time I think about it, my first thing is, "Wow, it's been a while," but then I remember, "No. She got a big rush of cards there at the beginning, but will anybody note that three-month mark? Or heading into Thanksgiving and Christmas, to send her a note?" So that's become my goal, to send her one before Thanksgiving that says, "As you head into this holiday season, I know that somebody important is missing at the table. It will be so hard to hear all of those 'Happy Thanksgiving' and 'Merry Christmas' and 'Happy New Year' greetings because there's a huge hole in your heart and in your home and in your family and in your future. I just want you to know that we haven't forgotten him, that David is very much still on our hearts and minds, and the fact that you and your kids are facing these holidays without him—we're hurting with you."

Q. That's very helpful. Just the idea of writing notes and communicating with people in that way. I'm sure it's very, very helpful.

It's a skill that I didn't learn and I still struggle with, but boy do notes have power. To get something in the mail from somebody. "They took the time to write me and find my address and put on a stamp." It means a lot.

Q. Yeah. There's coming alongside others outside of our family, but, being in a family, how do you help ... How did you help your son? How do you help your spouse? Those who are suffering with you in the midst?

That's a big question, Joel. Yeah. I don't pretend to be an expert on helping children through grief. I just parented one unique kid through it. So I don't set myself as an expert. The only thing I do think I have figured out about that is that we're often so uptight about what we're going to say to our kids, how we're going to explain things to them, and the truth is our kids are watching us. And that's the most profound communication for them in regard to grief and loss and how they should think and feel about it. So I just tell parents, "If you're angry and hopeless, your kids are probably going to follow your lead. If you're sad but confident in God's goodness, they probably will follow

your lead in that, too.” And the other thing: It’s not only what they see in you, it’s what they overhear you say to other adults. Because you know how that is. That’s who we speak the truth to, what we really think, and so what they overhear you say to other adults about how you’re thinking, processing, all of these things, that’s probably how they’re going to respond to it.

In terms of a spouse, the challenge is figuring out how to feel lonely together. The essence of grief is loneliness, a deep, pervasive loneliness, and it can be really hard to share that with a spouse. That’s one reason David and I, in 2009, we started hosting weekend retreats for couples who’ve lost children. We’ll have our 41st retreat in January for grieving parents. The reason we started it—we saw how much pressure grief puts on a marriage, especially the death of a child, and how a husband and wife can grieve very differently and what it takes to give each other grace to grieve in our own way through that.

Q. Yeah. I’m sure that’s pretty powerful to be able to share that with other grieving people, just to have that camaraderie.

Oh, man! I could talk with you for an hour about what happens at these retreats. There’s a lot of power in getting around other people who are going through something similar and finding out you’re not crazy, that maybe you’re experiencing some of the same challenges.

Q. Yeah. Oh, that’s wonderful. It’s a great response to that. Now one response you’ve had to all this is writing a number of books, including your latest, which we’ve been talking about—

Yeah, I’m Praying for You ...

[In the second half of the interview, Joel Woodruff and Nancy Guthrie discuss Guthrie’s latest book, I’m Praying for You: 40 Days of Praying the Bible for Someone Who Is Suffering, as well as related questions: How do you take Scripture and turn it into a prayer? Why does God allow suffering, and how can we communicate the whys of suffering in an apologetics way that’s down to earth and real? and What is biblical discipleship? Although not included as part of this Broadcast Talks, the

full interview is available on video at the link provided at the end. The interview concluded with the following remarks.]

Q: I really appreciate your taking the time to share from your heart and also your mind what God has given you to share with others. There's a passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, that I think reflects a bit of what we've talked about. Paul writes here, beginning in verse 3. He says,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

And you and your husband, David, have certainly been a wonderful example to us in sharing out of your own sorrow the comfort that God has given you and that has overflowed into the lives of others. That's our prayer, that that will continue for you and David—

Thank you.

... and your family. And our prayer for all of us is that we'll be able to take what God has given us and share it with others. So thank you so much, Nancy, for this time. I appreciate it.

Thank you, Joel. Loved being with you.

[The section that follows provides information about Guthrie's book, I'm Praying for You.]

I'm Praying for You: 40 Days of Praying the Bible for Someone Who Is Suffering (10Publishing, 2021)

Description from 10ofthose.com

When we hear that a friend is struggling, it can be easy to say, 'I'm praying for you', but harder to know what to actually pray.

Through forty carefully chosen Scripture passages, Nancy Guthrie opens up the wealth of scripture to teach us how to pray for those who are hurting. She shows us how the Bible provides us with a vocabulary for prayer that enables us to ask God to achieve what he intends in and through suffering. Nancy shows us how God's purposes are revealed even in our darkest days and encourages us to pray for his will to be done in difficult situations.

Each chapter includes a passage, a short explanation, and a prayer for your friend. Using the QR code at the end of each prayer, you'll be able to load and send a personal text message to the person you're praying for so that he or she will know not only that you are praying, but exactly what you are praying.

Additional Information:

Nancy Guthrie includes the Table of Contents of *I'm Praying for You* on her website, showing the titles of the 40 chapters and Scripture references. The following is a sample of ten of these:

1. I'm praying that the work of God will be displayed in your life (John 9:3)
2. I'm praying that the Lord will take away your pain (2 Corinthians 12:7-9)
3. I'm praying that this trial will develop your endurance (Romans 5:2-5)
8. I'm praying that God will make you fruitful (John 15:1-2)

9. I'm praying that God will cause everything to work together for your good (Romans 8:28–29)

16. I'm praying for you to live in a way that pleases the Lord (Colossians 1:9–12)

18. I'm praying that God will give you the faith to trust him (Psalm 20:7)

19. I'm praying that you will remain faithful (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

31. I'm praying for you to grasp how deeply you are loved by God (Ephesians 3:14–19)

34. I'm praying for God to work out his plans for your life (Psalm 138:7–8)

On Praying God's Word

During the second half of the interview, Nancy Guthrie observed, “Somebody asked me. She said, ‘I got through all forty. Now what do I do? Start over?’, and I was like, ‘You’ve got the whole Bible.’ So wherever you are, pick it up and begin to train yourself to do this.”

[Video of the complete version of this interview is available at "How to Pray For Others Who Are Suffering". For additional information about Nancy Guthrie, her books and ministries, go to: [NancyGuthrie.com](https://www.NancyGuthrie.com)]



The C.S. Lewis Institute was founded in 1976 and endeavors, in the legacy of C.S. Lewis, to develop disciples who will articulate, defend, share, and live their faith in Christ in personal and public life. From its inception, the Institute has been inter-denominational, has worked closely with a variety of churches and sees itself as a servant ministry, assisting churches and pastors in making disciples of Jesus Christ. This takes the form of discipleship programs, area-wide conferences/seminars, pastor fellowships and resources in print and on the web.



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