

SECTION 2: TOO LITTLE, TOO CLOSE

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A fascinating Pew Research Center survey conducted among nearly 6,500 American adults across all religious backgrounds revealed a range of responses regarding suffering. As you read the following, keep in mind these sentiments come from believers.

- Only 40% felt compelled to help those who suffered
- Nearly a third (32%) either felt they needed to make changes in their lives to not end up in similar straits, or worried similar suffering might happen to them also
- Seeing or hearing news about others' suffering sparked sadness in individuals (62%), but even more so gratitude for the good in their own lives (71%)
- Fewer U.S. adults (19%)—including just 5% of atheists and agnostics—strongly identify with the idea that suffering exists “to provide an opportunity for people to come out stronger”
- Amazingly, 10% were happy if the person suffering seemed to have deserved itⁱ

These data mirror our common American beliefs that suffering is:

- **Contagious:** If your tween is acting up and a fellow church member's kid just landed in juvie, or if your marriage is wobbly and long-time friends just announced their decision to divorce, it's tempting to keep your distance. → *You've got something I don't want.*
- **Comparative:** Watching someone recover from a massive heart attack or long-term unemployment might make us take pause...or we could imagine such tragedy won't come for us. → *Your crises won't happen to me because I'm healthier/better/smarter.*
- **Overwhelming:** We all know which friends are good in a crisis...and the ones who spout a scripture or two and then change the subject breezily. → *Your reality is too much to take.*
- **Gratuitous:** That church friend who moves from crisis to crisis, despite wise actions and prayerful decisions, and still thinks God is good? → *Your suffering doesn't make sense.*
- **Warranted:** Single parent home with a newly pregnant teen? Overweight woman whose husband left? Wealthy family who lost everything in a Ponzi scheme? Deserved it. → *Your suffering is your fault.*

...Most of us, individually and corporately, believe we deserve good. (*We* do... because we work hard, are clever and tenacious, and make no missteps. But not *everyone* does. Just to be clear.) Those dreams of ours that come true—good times, good luck, and good lives—we take as a sign of God's favor, and we try to protect against suffering by insulating our lives with overcommitment and productivity, not thinking too deeply, and doing all the right things.

But what does this say about us, and our faith—that our biggest dreams entail working hard and fast so we can have ease?

ⁱ Pew Research Center, “Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies,” November 23, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-human-suffering-and-gods-role-in-it/>, 10, 18.