

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

LIVING IN THE MIDST OF THE PITS OF LIFE

[PAIN, INJUSTICE, TRAGEDY AND SUFFERING]

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Why is there so much pain, injustice, tragedy, and suffering [“P.I.T.S.”] on planet earth? Indeed, is God even *there*? If so, is He *aware* of our pitiable human condition? If so, does He even *care*? Is He really *fair* in dealing with humankind? On a personal level, will He *repair* my broken life? Will He *prepare* a place for me in heaven if there is such a place?

A biblically adherent Christian would likely answer yes to all of these questions. Yet for many, the pits of the human condition, and especially when experienced individually, will often cause even a sincere and devoted Christ follower to experience deep perplexity and agony of soul and perhaps even doubt God’s awareness, goodness, or fairness especially in times of great suffering or tragedy, experienced personally, or observed in others.

The mystery of suffering has stymied sages and saints for millennia. The oldest book in the Bible, Job, is an emotionally explosive conflict involving God’s sovereignty and goodness contrasted with the outrageous pits inflicted on Job by Satan though he was apparently on a leash, so to speak, afflicting Job only to the degree permitted by God. Job’s outrage at the overwhelming severity of his unjust suffering should stir us deeply in recognizing the profundity and soul jarring struggle we face in attempting to even partly understand some components of this mystery. No thinking person remotely aware of the human condition can consider these questions and issues frivolous or worthy of only canned and simple answers.

Atheists, in one way, do offer a simple “answer” to the mystery of suffering. They would say there is no mystery. Only the natural world exists, and there are only blind forces of nature at work, sometimes creating chaos and death (e.g. tornadoes, flood, fire, earthquake, disease, plague, etc.). If man is in the “wrong place at the wrong time” he may lose his possessions and even life. That is simply the natural outcome of the physically unstable and dangerous world we inhabit, and should be no surprise to us. There is no “sovereign goodness” existing beyond the physical universe. Bad things happen to “good” and “bad” people alike because that’s how the physical world operates, a place where moral “absolutes” are an illusion, alongside the religious illusion of a caring, all-powerful and good God overseeing the universe, a very small part of which is our insignificant planet we call earth.

This “simple answer” offered by atheists does offer one “explanation” as to why pits occur but does not deal at all with the greater question of the mystery of the origin of the material universe, or the origin of a multitude of values humans nearly universally embrace, such as justice, love, sharing, compassion, loyalty, theistic belief etc. Why does man even feel that life *should* be fair, that goodness *should* prevail over evil, that there even is a thing that can rightly be called “evil” even if we have trouble defining it?

Are all of these “values” just custom, culturally fabricated ideals to try and hold social groups and tribes together? Is not there a higher ‘law giver’ behind these seemingly supra-cultural values?

Even theists, however, though believing that there is or must surely be, a creator of the material universe, may struggle with whether or not that creator is actually involved in powerfully, wisely, and kindly overseeing the affairs of humankind. They may even harbor thoughts of wishing the world would “come under new management”.

In his book, “The Goodness of God”, British writer John W. Wenham, sets forth the challenge of belief in the power and goodness of God in the following way:

“Look at the goodness of God, says the Christian teacher. But when we look at the world of solid reality, as seen in history and in the contemporary world, things seem far from good. There is the long continuing tale of man’s inhumanity to man. Every age has known oppression and torture and the sighing of prisoners: Spain had its inquisition, Britain its Atlantic slave trade, Germany its gas chambers, Russia its Siberian labor camps. A world torn by war now lives under the protecting threat of the hydrogen bomb. But it is a world still swept by fear and lust and greed and racial tension. It is a world where the ordinary man feels himself the pawn of irresistible, impersonal forces which govern his life. Is it conceivable that a kindly Providence of unlimited power presides over it? How can God look on in silence as the bombs rain down on defenseless cities, as widows and orphans cry to heaven for protection? How can God endure the age-long grinding poverty of the Eastern multitudes? Further than this, human wickedness does not by any means appear to be the sole cause of human misery. Babies are *born* deformed, both physically and mentally. They *inherit* diseases; they *inherit* tendencies to insanity. Why does he allow apparently purposeless torture to the sick, producing at times not purification, but agonized bitterness? Why does he allow one of his faithful servants to endure torment on the border-line between sanity and insanity? Is this world of preying animals, of parasites, viruses, of bacteria, the work of a good creator? Is it God’s design which allows a quantum of energy from outer space to cause some hideous mutation in an unborn child? Men find themselves in a world of earthquake and typhoon; in a world accident-prone, where bereavement and inconsolable grief may strike without warning. It is a world united only in expectation of death; a world, to many, without purpose or hope, against which there is a deep, despairing hatred. A good God? That is the question”

Wenham’s brief summary of the travail of human existence is a sobering reminder that whatever Christian response is offered, that response must be both faithful to the biblical views on these issues as well as faithful to the issue of the reality of the perplexities of the various pits of life that each of us sometimes faces.

Though the journey toward a greater understanding of the issues of suffering involves a sometimes darkened pathway, there are numerous principles in scripture which shed light on the way. If we are teachable, we can begin to understand that suffering is both *consequential* AND *divinely purposeful* even if the purpose is not always readily or even ever discernable in this life.

The “reason” for suffering appears to be divisible into these two main lines of thought. First, at the most basic and common sense level, suffering is “*consequential*” to the actions or inactions that we engage in

as humans. A chronic alcoholic might develop cirrhosis of the liver and ultimately die from it. Clearly, his liver disease and the suffering associated with it, be it physical, relational, and possibly financial, is likely a direct and “natural consequence” of actions taken by that person over the course of his or her life. Virtually all of us would agree with seeing that “consequence” as being connected in some way to the lifestyle choices made by that individual. Even if that alcoholic was a pregnant mother, and delivered a new born afflicted with fetal alcohol syndrome, we would agree that the suffering of that infant is the direct cause of choices made by that mother i.e. the “consequence” of bad choices made by her while pregnant. But we may be troubled or even angry that God, if He is really there and indeed cares, should somehow have protected that infant from acquiring that disease and thus avoiding the perhaps life-long disability associated with it. Some states will even criminally prosecute mothers for negligently consuming alcohol or drugs while pregnant and injuring their unborn child. The “trouble” we may feel is our sense of unfairness or injustice at the thought of the “innocent” suffering due to the misbehavior or neglect of others. “People should suffer only for their *own* sins, and not suffer as a result of the sins of others. And God, if he exists, should somehow manage the world accordingly.” So the thought goes.

For the follower of Christ, consequential suffering is also primarily associated with Adam’s and Eve’s misdeeds in the garden. The whole human race came under a curse including the earth upon which we all dwell. It may be that even natural disasters may be attributed to the earth’s ‘groaning’. Our “ancestral sins” has impacted our very human nature, marking us with a propensity to sin, corporately and individually and enabling us to suffer physically and in many other ways as a consequence.

Because of the redemptive *purpose* of God in the sacrificial death of his Son, Jesus, we can see the second line or reason for suffering: it is ***divinely purposeful***. We are not left solely to our imagination as to what these purposes might be since the biblical scriptures reveal several. A major difficulty for us, however, is even if we are informed as to what some of those revealed purposes are, we simply don’t like one or more or even all of them, and prefer instead our life of ease, pleasure and comfort. Thus, God’s purposes in our suffering are often in direct opposition to our own desires for our lives, and the lives of others. Until and unless we consent to and accept His purposes and lay down our arms in opposition to His divine purposes for suffering, we will never come to peace with it or Him. Several scripturally revealed “divinely purposeful” reasons for suffering are discussed below.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RETRIBUTION

The principle of retribution [as a consequence of sin] is certainly presented in scripture in various places, the book of Judges being a simple and cyclical example of *blessing following obedience to God* and *judgment and disaster following disobedience*. Many tribal groups historically and perhaps presently believe that judgment awaited the evil doer, and even the non-Christian island dwellers of Malta who assisted Paul and his traveling mates after their shipwreck, assumed Paul was an evil person since a poisonous snake attached himself to Paul when Paul was building a fire. Their words were: “Undoubtedly, this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, *justice* has not allowed him to live”. They adhered to the common and perhaps universal belief that divine judgment would *always eventually befall the evil doer*.

The story of the old testament character of Job seems to be, in part, a battle between *Job's innocence* and his friends' firm belief in the *consequential nature of suffering*, i.e. his friends collective thinking and bold assertion was that *Job MUST have sinned because suffering is always the consequence of wrongdoing*. Even Solomon in all his wisdom was perplexed by the suffering of the righteous and blessedness of the wicked and calls it "futility" i.e. nonsense: "There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked.[i.e. they suffer in spite of their 'right-doing'] "On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.[i.e. they are blessed in spite of their 'wrong-doing'] I say that this too is futility" [Ecclesiastes 8:14]

SUFFERING SETS THE STAGE FOR GOD TO DISPLAY HIS POWER

Therefore, one might readily conclude that suffering befalls nations and individuals due to such persons collectively and individually wickedly [and in some cases naively] violating the commands of God. This commonly held belief during Jesus' day was turned on its head by the words of the Master in dealing with the man born blind as recorded in John chapter nine. His disciples asked: "Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents that he would be *born blind*".[John 9:2] They were troubled by how to apply to the man *born blind* the traditional [consequential] view of suffering that the sufferer was due his pain as a direct consequence of his personal sin/disobedience. But how could someone commit a sin in the womb? If an infant was born afflicted, surely it must have been some kind of divine retribution due to the sin of his parents. So went their thinking. But Jesus refuted this view by saying, in essence, that God had a purpose in allowing [causing?] this affliction and the affliction was in no way connected to any person's *specific sin or disobedience*. So, one safe conclusion we can draw from this biblical account is that suffering may, sometimes at least, be ***very purposeful in the mind of God*** and ***not associated with any one person's sin*** and brought about for the well-being of the sufferer as well as the glory of God. We may not always know or be able to discover or observe in this life what that purpose[s] is or are. Nevertheless, the more we look to see how God might use or be using the particular affliction in our life, or how our affliction might bless someone else by their observing our response to the affliction we might be bearing, the greater the sense of peace, and acceptance, [not just resignation] we might experience as we drink that strange concoction of tears and joy we may experience in the midst of the pits of life. In this case of the man born blind, the divine purpose is clearly stated by Jesus: "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." [John 9:3] Although the man was healed of his blindness, being *born blind*, he "innocently" suffered the consequences of that blindness *for years* until the Great Physician appeared and healed him. The man's miraculous healing *allowed God to display His power in Jesus*, further validating His Messiah-ship.

The Apostle Paul discovered that God was not always going to relieve Paul of his affliction though Paul had prayed multiple times for God to do so [see II Cor 12:8-9]. Instead God would provide Paul with the grace [enabling power] to endure the affliction. As a result of Paul's understanding the divine purpose of his affliction-*that God's power is perfected/displayed more fully in our weaknesses and sufferings*, he, in essence, said to God "bring it on!" "Most gladly therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that *the power of Christ may dwell in me*". Apparently, sometimes God's divine power is not only

displayed in His miraculous works, but perhaps even more so, when He demonstrates His grace/enabling power in our lives via enabling us to endure suffering and afflictions.

TURNING STONES INTO DISPENSING SPONGES

The scriptures reveal that another valuable purpose of our experiencing the pits of life is so that we might be *comforted by God who in turn will equip us to comfort others*. Paul says to the Corinthians: “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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” [II Cor 1:3-4]

We know well that a non-porous stone cannot absorb water as can a sponge. Likewise, a stone cannot provide or share much water to someone in need [I am ignoring the miraculous provision of water from the rock that Moses struck!] But a sponge can soak up or absorb water and *when squeezed*, can share that water with another. It seems clear from scripture that God sometimes allows suffering in our life to give us an opportunity to receive comfort from Him [and He often uses other humans to provide it] so that our own heart will change from a hard, stony heart to a soft and gentle “sponge” inclined to share the “water of life” to another person who is suffering from the pits of life.

SUFFERING –THE GREENHOUSE FOR GROWING HUMILITY, HOLINESS, AND OBEDIENCE IN OUR HEART

Are you as humble as you could be? Are you as humble as you should be? Who in their right mind would say yes to these questions? Is humility a character quality that is simply a “nice” adornment but not essential to “wear” much less possess?- Just a left-over sentiment from religion having little value or use in modern societies, and actually hindering pursuit of success via a bold, strong, and conquering spirit on and off the playing field? Isn’t humility associated with weakness, an “aw shucks”, non-assertive mindset? Is the pursuit and deeper development of this character quality foundational to the heart of a serious follower of Jesus? If so, then surely there is no wonder that sometimes suffering is brought into our lives to enrich the soil of our heart in which this trait can grow. Paul, having experienced incredible visions was struck by a minister of Satan to afflict him so that he would not become puffed up: “[...]”a messenger of Satan to torment me-to keep me from exalting myself”-II Cor 12:7]] Imagine, the great apostle longed to be delivered from this affliction but the Lord said “no”. The affliction was *purposeful*, to hinder Paul from becoming puffed up, inflated, i.e. prideful, and thus not walking in humility. Multiple scriptures challenge us to embrace humility e.g. Proverbs 15:33, Phil 2:3, I Peter 5:5. Doing so will protect us from foolish and prideful reactions to the offenses of others, will help us be more inclined to receive correction, rebuke and instruction from the Lord via his Word and *sometimes via His human servants*. Of course suffering may make us bitter rather than better but that is because we reject God’s purpose for our lives and His *kind* use of affliction to shape us. Frankly, though most of us may not be fully satisfied with our present level of good character qualities, and we may weakly desire a character similar to that of Jesus, we are nowhere near aware of, much less willing, to embrace the rough, hard, sometimes dirty, and perhaps bloody, emotionally jarring pathway to possess a greater degree of His character. We are far more concerned with safety and comfort and a positive view of ourselves by others than we are acquiring a deep and enduring Christ-like character. The writer of Hebrews seeks to

encourage his readers by explaining that parents “disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us *for our good*, so that we may *share His holiness*”. [Heb 12:10]

In Romans chapter five, Paul states that “we exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance and perseverance proven character, and proven character hope, and hope does not disappoint”. Notice the connection between *tribulations* and *proven [or tested] character*. [Romans 5:3-4] Sometimes, to “test our metal” we have to be *tested via suffering*.

In Hebrews 5:8 we read this amazing statement: “He [Jesus] *learned obedience* from the things which He *suffered*”. For us, learning something usually involves trial and error, corrections, and mistakes, often many. For Jesus, since He was perfect and therefore never sinned and disobeyed the Father, how could He *learn* obedience? I suggest it refers to Jesus’ obedience being fully *tested* via the temptation in the Garden, abandonment of His disciples, as well as the incredible suffering of the Cross. *Obedience to the Father is more fully developed and our true heart revealed to us through suffering*.

SUFFERING IS A GIFT REVEALING OUR IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST

Paul writes to his friends in Philippi; ...”in no way alarmed by your opponents, which is a sign of destruction for them but of salvation for you and that too from God; *for to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake*”. [Philippians 1: 29] Because Christ was persecuted, those who join themselves to him will likewise experience suffering *on His behalf*. When Paul was confronted by the exalted Jesus on the road to Damascus, the Lord asked him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*? [Acts 9:4] Paul was actually seeking out Christians living in the Damascus area but from the Lord’s perspective, he was simply persecuting the invisible Christ by persecuting His followers.

It is hard to fathom that somehow suffering is a “gift” from God. Such a statement at first seems ludicrous. But I suggest that the reason we respond this way is that our view of how the Christian life should be is often far removed from the life God intended for us. Disappointment is normally the **gap** between our **expectations** and **reality**. Our expectation of a life of relatively peaceful blessedness, freedom from conflict, stress free except that which is voluntarily assumed, comfort, and adequate provisions of our needs sometimes is rudely interrupted by the purposes of God which sometimes runs contrary to a life of ease. We are simply not yet what He intends for us to be. [see Phil 3:10-14] Though we won’t be fully perfected until we enter our heavenly home, along our earthly journey God is shaping, even carving us in ways that can be profoundly painful-emotionally and sometimes physically.

“In a universe created and maintained by [a] God powerful enough to abolish all suffering at once, loving enough to want only our blessedness, and wise enough to know always what makes for our blessedness, *the only reason serious enough to justify God’s continued tolerance of suffering is our need for it*. “Love may cause pain to its object but only [if] that object needs alteration to become fully lovable” [C.S. Lewis]. ...Thus, our suffering is compatible with God’s love if it is medicinal, remedial, and necessary; i.e., if we are very sick.” [Peter Kreeft-Making Sense of Suffering-page 117].

EXPERIENCING SUFFERING OURSELVES AND OBSERVING SUFFERING AND EVEN DEATH IN OTHERS CAN STEER AND MOVE US TOWARD REPENTANCE TOWARD GOD

Jesus dialogued with some of His followers about the death of some Galileans at the hands of Pilate. [Luke 13:1-3] In the same narrative he mentions the death of eighteen people when a tower fell on them in the city of Siloam.[vs 4-5] He apparently was responding to a possible implied question of “why did those people die”. He does not give a direct answer to the reason for those deaths other than saying that those that died were *not* greater sinners than all other Galileans or all others living in Jerusalem. Instead he focuses on the need for *the living to repent*: “unless you repent you will all likewise perish”. This principle is critical to understanding suffering. *If in fact heaven is a real and blessed place and the alternative is very bad indeed, then does it not make sense that one divine purpose of suffering is to re-direct our attention to get on and stay on the pathway to that most blessed of all places?* When our very nature makes us “hell-bent” does it not seem profoundly appropriate for a loving and good God to so rattle our cage by our own afflictions as well as observing suffering and even death in others that we begin to think more about *our* ultimate destiny? Can the sufferings of this life even remotely compare favorably with what awaits the child of God in the hereafter? The Apostle Paul said regarding his own sufferings : ...” in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger...three times I was beating with rods, once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked, ..often without food, in cold and exposure..” [II Cor 6:4-5, 11:24,25,27]. But it was the same apostle who also wrote: “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us*” [Romans 8:18].

A HUMBLE CONCLUSION

The above is an attempt to briefly [and inadequately] touch on some of the divinely revealed purposes for human suffering. It is nonsense for anyone to assert that all the depths of the mystery of suffering can be plumbed by the human mind. Theists and non-theists alike are faced with hard questions that cannot be easily answered, if at all. For the vast majority of humankind, the enigma of suffering is not some academic or mere philosophical “problem” to be discussed or “solved”. The stakes are way too high. The “PITS” of life are so very real and potentially destructive to our soul that only a trusting faith in the goodness and wisdom of God will sustain the serious follower of our Lord. “*Therefore, do not throw away your confidence which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But my righteous one shall live by faith and if he shrinks back my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul*” [Hebrews 10:36-39].

Sometimes then, for the follower of Jesus, our final response to the mystery of suffering is found in the *exclamatory praise* from the pen of the often agonizingly afflicted apostle Paul: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him, and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen” [Romans 11: 32-36]

Indeed, to Him be the glory.

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Suggested Readings:

Making Sense Out of Suffering-Peter Kreeft-Servant Books-1986

The Goodness of God-John W. Wenham-InterVarsity Press-1974

The Problem of Pain-C.S. Lewis-The Macmillan Company-1962

God, Freedom, and Evil-Alvin C. Plantinga-William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.-1974

Affliction-Edith Schaffer-Fleming H. Revell Company-1978

Out of the Storm-Grappling with God in the book of Job-Christopher Ash-IVP Press-2004

[Scripture references are from the NASB-©The Lockman Foundation-1995]