

Suffering as Justice and Judgment

The first chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1–3, say that suffering in the world is the result of sin, particularly the original sin of humankind turning away from God. After Adam and Eve disobey their Creator, God describes what the fallen world will look like. It is virtually a catalogue of all forms of suffering—including spiritual alienation, inner psychological pain, social and interpersonal conflict and cruelty, natural disasters, disease, and death (Gen 3:17ff). All this natural and moral evil is understood as stemming from the foundational rupture of our relationship with God. And suffering begins when Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:23–24). Their exile is the original infliction of suffering as judgment.

Paul looks back to this when he writes:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. . . . For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God (Rom 8:18, 20–21).

The word *frustration* can also be translated as “futility.” To be futile is to fall short of your purpose, to stretch and exert but see it all come to nothing. The world is now in a cursed condition that falls short of its design. Human beings were not created to experience death, pain, grief, disappointment, ruptured relationships, disease, and natural disasters.²¹⁵ The world we were made to live in was not supposed to be like that. A frustrated world is a broken world, in which things do not function as they should, and that is why there is evil and suffering.

But Paul adds that this judgment does not represent God’s abandonment of us. Rather, his judgment of the world was purposeful. Even as he judged the world with suffering, he had in view a plan for the re-

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The Sovereignty of God

Everything difficult indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces.

—George MacDonald²¹⁴

We have looked at suffering and evil from cultural, historical, and philosophical perspectives. Along the way, we have contrasted various views with Christianity and as a result we have already laid the groundwork for a biblical theology of suffering. Now we will take what we have already learned and lay out an outline of what the Bible as a whole tells us about pain and suffering.

Compared to the other worldviews we have considered, the Bible’s picture of suffering is, I would argue, the most nuanced and multidimensional. When weighing the biblical material, we see two foundational balances.

Suffering is both just and unjust.

God is both a sovereign and a suffering God.

These two sets of paired truths, held together without jettisoning one in favor of another, leads to a remarkably rich and many-sided understanding of the causes and forms of suffering. It also affords sufferers a great range of resources and approaches for facing it, without a one-size-fits-all prescription.

In this chapter and the next, we will look at these two pairs of complementary truths about suffering, and will then revisit God’s final answer to evil in the cross and new creation.

demption of all things. God judged the world “in hope” of a final redemption from evil that would be glorious. This little verse has an enormous depth behind it. It suggests that once human beings turned from God, there were only two alternatives, either immediate destruction or a path that led to redemption through great loss, grief, and pain, not only for human beings but for God himself. There is even a hint here that the future glory will be somehow even greater for all the suffering. Nevertheless, for the present, we live in the shadows.

The Bible is emphatic, then, that the existence of suffering in the world is really a form of justice. But suffering-as-judgment does not end with original sin and the initial expulsion from the Garden. God often gives out rewards and punishment in history to peoples and individuals on the basis of their deeds, or simply to allow people to reap the natural consequences of what they have sown. The book of Proverbs is filled with examples of what has been called retributive justice.²¹⁶ Stinginess often leads to want because the miser has no friends (Prov 11:24-26); a lazy and undisciplined person can suffer hunger (Prov 19:15); a person who chooses the wrong friends often comes to grief (Prov 13:20). Much of the wisdom literature is very clear that suffering comes in all these instances because certain behavior goes against the grain of the universe, violating God’s moral order as much as trying to fly off a cliff violates the law of gravity.

Suffering as Injustice and Mystery

However, while the Bible tells us that suffering in the world is the result of human sin in general, it is just as emphatic that individual instances of suffering may not be the result of a particular sin. As one scholar summarizes it, “The fact of suffering was held to be the result of sin, especially original sin, but this did not mean that each instance of suffering could be causally linked to a specific sin and its divine punishment.”²¹⁷

The most prominent example of this is the case of Job. Job’s suffering is greater than his friends’. This leads his friends to conclude smugly that

Job’s moral life must be inferior to theirs. As the book shows so vividly, this was a proud, cruel, and mistaken belief, and one that God himself condemns with great forcefulness at the end of the book. Job’s friends forgot one half of the crucial dual principle. While the human race as a whole indeed deserves the broken world it inhabits, nevertheless evil is not distributed in a proportionate, fair way. Bad people do not have worse lives than good people. And, of course, the best people often have terrible lives. Job is one example, and Jesus—the ultimate “Job,” the only truly, fully innocent sufferer—is another.

The book of Ecclesiastes also points to cases of unfair, unmerited, and seemingly inexplicable suffering. The writer sees that “the wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in darkness,” but then he comes to realize “that the same fate overtakes them both” (Eccles 2:14). The hard worker and the wise man often lose everything while the wicked prosper. He says, “In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there” (Eccles 3:16). At the beginning of his fourth chapter, the author says he took another look at “all the oppression that was taking place under the sun” and

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.
And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.
But better than both
is the one who has never been born,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun. (Eccles 4:1-3)

And so, he writes: “I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccles 2:17). The Hebrew term for “meaningless” or “vanity”

used here is akin to the “futility” visited on the world in the wake of human sin.

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job sit literally alongside one another in the “wisdom literature” section of the Bible, and it is important to recognize their differing yet complementary perspectives on suffering. While Proverbs tends to emphasize the justice of suffering and how much suffering is directly related to wrongdoing, Job and Ecclesiastes vividly show how much of it is *not*.

The biblical story of creation was unique among ancient accounts of the world’s origin. Other accounts describe the world as coming into existence through a battle or struggle between divine beings or other supernatural forces. In these views, there are multiple power centers in constant conflict and tension. That meant that the world was basically a chaotic place, a place where anything could happen, depending on which power gained the upper hand. This view has resurfaced today in the writings of scientific materialists who see the universe as the production of violent, unguided forces. In this kind of world, the most important trait is strength and power.

But Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad points out the uniqueness of the Hebrew Scriptures.²¹⁸ There we read that creation was the result of one all-powerful God without a rival, who made the world not in the way a warrior wins a battle but more as an artist crafts something of wonder and beauty. As an artist, he creates for the sheer joy of it (Prov 8:27–31). And therefore the world has a pattern to it, a *fabric*. A fabric is a complex underlying designed order or structure.

Biblical wisdom, according to von Rad, is to “become competent with regard to the realities of life.”²¹⁹ Since the world was made by a good and righteous God, the fabric of the world has a moral order to it. That order is not based on power but on righteousness. Power and self-interest may appear successful in the short run, but they do not ultimately “work” in a world created by a good and just God. Therefore cruel, selfish power is not only sinful, but stupid. It brings about loneliness, emptiness, and destruction. Faithfulness, integrity, unselfish service, and love are not only right but wise, because they fit the fabric of reality.

Except. While Proverbs points to the fact that, in general, leads to prosperity, and laziness leads to want—it doesn’t always

that way. Job and Ecclesiastes supplement Proverbs’ understanding of the world. Our world has been created by God and therefore has a foundational moral order to it. And yet something is wrong with that order now. It is partly, though not fully, broken. Biblical scholar Graeme Goldsworthy tells us that, while Proverbs shows us the reality of God’s order, Job points to its “hiddenness” and Ecclesiastes to its “confusion.”²²⁰ At the end of the book of Job, God appears and insists that the moral order of the universe is still intact, but it is in large part hidden from human eyes. So while there is still a certain amount of “poetic justice” in which evildoers fall into the very traps they set for others, much suffering is disproportionate and unfairly distributed. The good can and do die young.

The New Testament testifies to the same view of things. In John 9, Jesus heals a blind man and takes pains to show his disciples that he was not in that condition because of his sin or that of his parents, but in order to fulfill God’s inscrutable purposes. Thus, suffering people should not automatically be blamed for their condition.

This biblical idea not only contrasts with the teachings of karma, it goes against common sense. Psychologist Mel Lerner has demonstrated that most people have a deep desire to believe “people get what they deserve and deserve what they get.” They tend to assign blame to victims of tragedy especially if it is not possible to punish a perpetrator.²²¹ This comes from a normal human impulse to make sense of things, but it also likely stems from the deep human need to believe we are in control of our own lives. People want to believe “that couldn’t happen to me—because I’m wiser, I’m better, I know what I’m doing.” The Bible’s assessment is less flattering to non-sufferers and kinder to those who are hurting. Much suffering is mysterious and unjust.

Suffering as the Enemy of God

Evil is an intrusion into God's good creation. And often evil and suffering occur without regard to an individual's relative moral decency or deserts. But even though, as we will see, the Bible is insistent that suffering is not outside of God's control, it is crucial to understand evil as an enemy of God. David Bentley Hart, in an essay written after the 2004 tsunamis that killed so many, writes

... of a child dying an agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines. . . . Our faith is in a God who has come to rescue His creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death, and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred. . . . As for comfort, when we seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child, I do not see the face of God, but the face of His enemy. It is . . . a faith that . . . has set us free from optimism, and taught us hope instead.²²²

Something of this truth can be seen when Jesus comes to visit the family of his recently deceased friend Lazarus, in John 11. When he approaches the tomb, most translations say he was "once more deeply moved" or "he groaned in himself" (v. 38). But these translations are too weak. The Greek word used by the gospel writer John means "to bellow with anger." It is a startling term. Theologian B. B. Warfield writes: "What John tells us, in point of fact, is that Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state, not of uncontrollable grief, but of irrepressible anger."²²³ Why did the sight of Lazarus's tomb and his family's grief enrage Jesus? In some ways, his anger and tears seem inappropriate. He knows full well that he is about to turn all the grieving and mourning into shouts of wonder and joy—he is about to raise Lazarus from the

dead (vv. 42–44). So why is he quite literally furious? And what is he furious at? Warfield, relying on John Calvin's commentary on the same passage, gives a remarkable answer.

The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death, its unnaturalness, its "violent tyranny" as Calvin (in verse 38) phrases it. In Mary's grief, he "contemplates"—still to adopt Calvin's words (in verse 33)—"the general misery of the whole human race" and burns with rage against the oppressor of men. Inextinguishable fury seizes upon him; his whole being is discomposed and perturbed. . . .

It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy. Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but this is incidental. His soul is held by rage: and he advances to the tomb, in Calvin's words again, "as a champion who prepares for conflict." . . . What John does for us in this particular statement is to uncover to us the heart of Jesus, as he wins for us our salvation. Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites in our behalf. He has not only saved us from the evils which oppress us; he has felt for and with us in our oppression, and under the impulse of these feelings has wrought out our redemption.²²⁴

So Jesus is furious at evil, death, and suffering and, even though he is God, he is not mad at himself. This means that evil is the enemy of God's good creation, and of God himself. And Jesus' entire mission was to take evil on and end it. But, as we have seen, evil is so deeply rooted in the human heart that if Christ had come in power to destroy it everywhere he found it, he would have had to destroy us too. Instead of coming as a general at the head of an army, he went in weakness to the cross in order to pay for our sins, so that someday he will return to wipe out evil without having to judge us as well. He will be

able to receive us to himself because he bore our judgment himself on Calvary.

In passages like John 9 and 11 Jesus teaches that, though God has imposed suffering and evil as just punishment on us and will put things right on Judgment Day, suffering in the meantime is often unjust and always something that God himself hates. As Ronald Ritgers summarizes: “Christ upholds the . . . justice model [that suffering is due to sin]. When he rebukes people for speculating about the eighteen who were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them (Luke 13:4–5) or when he chastises the disciples for trying to connect a man’s blindness with a specific sin (John 9:1–12) he does not deny the model . . . rather he opposes a simplistic and self-aggrandizing application of it.”²²⁵

Suffering, Justice, and Wisdom

Already we can see how this first set of paired biblical teachings—that suffering is both just and unjust—leads us toward wisdom about how to face suffering. As von Rad observed, wisdom is an awareness of complex reality. Part of reality is that suffering is something that God has justly imposed on the world. We owe God everything, since he created us and sustains our life every moment. It is only reasonable and right that we love him more than anything else and serve him rather than our own interests and impulses. But we do not—we live for ourselves and we sin. Therefore we do not deserve a good world, a world made for our benefit.

But another controlling reality is that the creation order—the fabric of this world—is frayed or broken through. Suffering and pain are distributed disproportionately so that often the innocent suffer more and the wicked suffer less. In light of this second reality, we must be very slow to assume that suffering has come upon us or others because of not living right. We must not look at parents with children gone off the rails, or racial groups with a lot of poverty and crime, or gay people who are dying of AIDS and assume that, if we are not suffering in the same way as they, we are morally superior to them in God’s eyes. And when suf-

fering comes upon us inexplicably, as it did to Job, it means that we can indeed cry out in our confusion. We have a warrant for being in deep distress, and there is truth in our feeling that we are suffering unjustly.

If we ignore either of these truths, we will be out of touch with the universe as it really is. If we forget the first truth—that, in general, suffering is just—we will fall into proud, resentful self-pity that bitterly rejects the goodness or even the existence of God. If we forget the second truth—that, in particular, suffering is often unjust—we may be trapped in inordinate guilt and the belief that God must have abandoned us. These teachings eliminate what could be called both the “I hate thee” response—debilitating anger toward God—and the “I hate me” response—devastating guilt and a sense of personal failure. Counselors know what an enormous number of people fall into one or the other—or both—of these abysses. This balance—that God is just and will bring final justice, but life in the meantime is often deeply unfair—keeps us from many deadly errors. If we end up in one abyss or the other, it will be due to being unwise, “incompetent with regard to the realities of life.”

The Sovereignty of God

The second pair of balancing truths we must begin to consider is the twin teachings that God is a sovereign and yet suffering God. These are the biblical teachings that correspond to the philosophers’ depiction of an “all-powerful” and “all-good” God. The Bible goes beyond such abstractions, presenting God as not merely omnipotent but sovereign over every event in history, and it also shows us God as not merely “good and loving” but as entering our world and becoming subject to greater evil, suffering, and pain than any of us have ever experienced. Ritgers writes that unless we know both of these truths, suffering cannot have any meaningfulness nor any ultimate solution:

The God of the Bible . . . both suffers with humanity—supremely on the cross—and yet is in some sense also sover-

eign over suffering. *Both* beliefs were (and are) essential to the traditional Christian assertion that suffering ultimately has some meaning and that the triune God is able to provide deliverance from it.²²⁶

What do we mean, first, when we say that God is sovereign over history and therefore over suffering? The doctrine of the sovereignty of God in the Bible has sometimes been called compatibilism.²²⁷ The Bible teaches that God is completely in control of what happens in history and yet he exercises that control in such a way that human beings are responsible for their freely chosen actions and the results of those actions. Human freedom and God's direction of historical events are therefore completely compatible. To put it most practically and vividly—if a man robs a bank, that moral evil is fully his responsibility, though it also is part of God's plan.

It is crude but effective to think of this in percentages. We think that either God has planned something or that a human being has freely chose to do it—but both cannot be true at once. Perhaps we grant that the event is due 50 percent to God's activity and 50 percent to human agency. Or maybe it is 80-20, or 20-80. But the Bible depicts history as 100 percent under God's purposeful direction, and yet filled with human beings who are 100 percent responsible for their behavior—at once.

This way of thinking is counterintuitive to both ancient and modern ways of thinking. The Greek notion of “fate” or the Islamic notion of “kismet” are quite different from the Christian doctrine of God's sovereignty. The Greek myth of Oedipus tells of the main character who, the oracle predicts, is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Though Oedipus and all around him do all they can to avoid this fate, all of their schemes to avoid this destiny only end up hastening it. The destined end is reached despite everyone's choices. The Christian concept of God's sovereignty is quite different. God's plan works *through* our choices, not around or despite them. Our choices have consequences, and we are never forced by God to do anything—we always do what we most want to do. God works out his will perfectly through our willing actions.

The Bible everywhere presupposes this “compatibilism” between God's plan and our actions, and at many places explicitly teaches it.²²⁸

In Isaiah 10, God calls Assyria “the rod of my anger” (v. 5). He says he is using Assyria to punish Israel for its sins, and yet he nonetheless holds Assyria responsible for what it is doing. “I send him [Assyria] against a godless nation [Israel],” says God, “but this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind, his purpose is to destroy” (v. 6–7). While God uses Assyria as his rod according to his wise and just plan, that nation's inner motivation is not a passion for justice but merely a cruel and proud desire to dominate others. And so God will judge the instrument of his judgment. Assyria's actions are part of God's plan, and yet the Assyrians are held accountable for their free choices. It is a remarkable balance. On the one hand, evil is taken seriously as a reality. And yet there is an assurance that in the end, it can never triumph.

God is called the one “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11). “*Everything*” that happens fits in accord with, in harmony with, God's plan. This means that God's plan includes “little things.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but the disposal thereof is from the Lord.” Even the flip of the coin is part of his plan. Ultimately, there are no accidents. His plan also includes bad things. Psalm 60:3 reads, “You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.”

Suffering then is not outside God's plan but a part of it. In Acts 4:27–28, the Christian disciples pray to God, “In this city, there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus . . . Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” Jesus' suffering and death was a great act of injustice, but it was also part of the set plan of God.

God's Plans and Our Plans

According to the Bible, God plans our plans. Proverbs 16:9 says, "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." The author assumes that while we make our plans, they only fit into the larger plans of God.

There are many texts that weave free will and divine sovereignty together in ways that startle us. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph explains how his brothers' evil action of selling him into slavery was used by God to do great good. "You intended me harm, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Notice Joseph assuming that what they did was evil—they "intended" harm, it was deliberate. Yet he says God's plan overruled and used Joseph's troubles and sorrows for his own good purposes. The New Testament version of Joseph's saying is Romans 8:28—"All things work together for good to them who love God."

In Acts 2:23, Peter again tells us Jesus was crucified "according to the definite plan" of God, and yet the hands that put him to death were guilty of injustice and "lawlessness." In other words, the death of Jesus was destined to happen by God's will—it was not possible that it would not happen. Yet no one who betrayed and put Jesus to death was forced to do it. They all freely chose what they did and were fully liable and responsible for their decisions. Jesus himself puts these truths together in one sentence: "The Son of Man will go [to his death] as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him" (Luke 22:22).

One of the most fascinating examples of this biblical perspective is found in the account of Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh in Exodus 7-14. Moses continually calls Pharaoh to release the Israelites from bondage and declares that this is the will of God. Over several chapters the text tells us Pharaoh "hardened" his heart and he stubbornly refused to let the people go. This obstinate refusal led to untold misery and death for the Egyptians. But the text is fascinating, because it tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex 7:3; 9:12; 10:1; 11:10; 14:4, 8) almost the same number of times it tells us Pharaoh hardened his own

heart (Ex 8:15, 32; 9:34; 10:3; 13:15). So which is it? Did God do it or did Pharaoh do it? The biblical answer to both is yes.

Look at the sins in the life of the patriarch Jacob, whose life is recounted in the book of Genesis. Jacob deceived his father and robbed his brother; as a result, he had to flee his homeland and experienced great suffering and injustice in a foreign land. Yet there he met the love of his life and had the children through which Jesus was descended. It is clear that his sin did not put him into a "plan B" for his life. It was all part of God's perfect plan for him and even for the salvation of the world. Was he therefore not responsible for his sin? No, he was. Did he not suffer consequences for his foolish behavior? Yes, he did. But God was infallibly in control, even as Jacob was completely responsible.

In the end, the Christian concept of God's sovereignty is a marvelous, practical principle. No one can claim to know exactly *how* both of these truths fit together.²²⁹ And yet even in our own ordinary experience, we know something of how to direct people along a path without violating their free will. Good leaders do this in part—why would the infinite God not be able to do it perfectly? The sovereignty of God is mysterious but not contradictory. It means that we have great incentive to use our wisdom and our will to the best effect, knowing God holds us to it and knowing we will suffer consequences from foolishness and wickedness. On the other hand, there is an absolute promise that we cannot ultimately mess up our lives. Even our failures and troubles will be used for God's glory and our benefit. I don't know a more comforting assurance than that. "God performs all things for me!" cries the psalmist (Ps 57:2).

This teaching has both high-level and practical implications for how we approach suffering. At one level, this means that, as Don Carson writes: "It must be the case that God stands behind good and evil in somewhat different ways; that is, he stands behind good and evil *asymmetrally*."²³⁰ While moral evil cannot be done outside the bounds of God's purposes, "the evil is not morally chargeable to him" since the perpetrators are responsible.²³¹ Yet since all good impulses in the human heart come ultimately from God (James 1:17)²³²—when good things happen, they *are* directly attributable to him.

At the most practical level, we have the crucial assurance that even wickedness and tragedy, which we know was not part of God's original design, is nonetheless being woven into a wise plan. So the promise of Romans 8, "that all things work together for good," is an incomparable comfort to believers.

Life Story: Dependence on God

by *Russ and Sue*

RUSS: The first decade of our marriage was marked by cycles of privilege and crisis. The perpetual jostling of high-flying careers and sudden unemployment and trying to jump-start new careers made it very difficult to feel any sense of security. It was, however, preparation for the unrelenting challenges that lay ahead.

In 2000, our world was in upheaval from the unexpected news of cancer.

SUE: The night before I was to hear the results of my biopsy, I was in anguish and despair. Suddenly an undeniable presence entered the room. An overpowering sense of calm overwhelmed me and I heard, "It will be all right, I am with you." That chilling moment was a gift that not only lulled me to sleep that night but gave me the strength to hear that I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. It would sustain me throughout my ordeals.

No sooner had we celebrated the end of chemotherapy when the cancer returned with a vengeance. This necessitated a stem cell transplant and high-dose chemotherapy with a 50-50 chance of survival, followed by radiation. It was clearly evident how little control we had.

RUSS: We spent three weeks together through the stem cell procedure as Sue's immunity was reduced to zero. We faced the issue of morality, had deep talks and quiet contemplation. I felt such closeness to God and my wife, as if in a peaceful, parallel universe. The most difficult thing was how to handle the "what if?"

God were to allow her to die. I needed to truly be able to say "Your will, not mine." She went on to recover and God spared me the torment.

SUE: The treatment eliminated the cancer but a year later caused pulmonary fibrosis, an incurable, progressive scarring of the lungs. Over time, the only option for survival was a double lung transplant.

I prayed desperately to be spared the procedure, but the disease outpaced a cure. The support we received through the church, friends, neighbors, and family was a testimony to God's faithful hand. After three failed attempts, the replacement lungs were a match. As doctors operated, I could see angels entering their bodies. I awoke two days later euphoric. My first thought was "Lord, you did it!" I was blessed with more time. My thoughts were then with my donor who in death became my lifesaver.

RUSS: The first night at home, we felt a mutual sense of awe, tremendous joy, and deep reverence toward God. A glimpse of heaven was revealed when for a brief night we felt love and intimacy with Him deepen to a completely different level. It was an unforgettable experience of shared relief and contentment, utter bliss so intense that neither of us wanted it to end. It was quite literally a mountaintop experience that encourages us to this day.

Our joy in the days that followed was immense, but in the fourth month, signs of rejection and chronic lung disease ensued, along with talk of re-transplantation.

These volatile and unresolved medical issues are a source of deep frustration and sadness and place difficult burdens on our family. Yet somehow, God eases the pain, exhaustion, and anger when we cannot bear any more, and encourages us forward. His face appears in the gracious actions of others, and our gratitude runs alongside our sorrow. We know that God is holding us up, working on our behalf. We feel it, see it, and are uplifted by it.

We've come to accept that we will not have the life of stability and comfort we had hoped. We've come to realize that we should not have been striving for stability and comfort but for *total de-*

pendence on God, from whom we draw strength. This requires a daily effort to give up all to Him. Our real comfort is the promise that “in heaven our joy will be made greater as a result of the depth of our distress.” We may be crippled still, but empowered by our renewed faith. God has helped us to persevere and that gives us the hope and strength to carry on.

SEVEN

The Suffering of God

It seems to me quite disastrous that the idea should have got about that Christianity is an other-worldly, unreal, idealistic kind of religion that suggests that if we are good we shall be happy. . . . On the contrary, it is fiercely and even harshly realistic, insisting that . . . there are certain eternal achievements that make even happiness look like trash.

—Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?*

God is sovereign over suffering and yet, in teaching unique to the Christian faith among the major religions, God also made himself vulnerable and subject to suffering. The other side of the sovereignty of God is the suffering of God himself. As Ronald Ritgers said, holding both of these together—as paradoxical as they seem at first—is crucial to grasping the unique Christian understanding of suffering. In earlier chapters, we have already learned that “the *main reason* that Christians insist that God can be trusted in the midst of suffering is that . . . God himself has firsthand experience of suffering.”²³³

We can’t overemphasize the importance of this. Ritgers and Peter Berger both identify this truth as the counterweight and the complement to the teaching that God is sovereign and uses suffering as part of his often inscrutable purposes. Yes, he is Lord of history, but he is also the vulnerable one who entered that history and became subject to its darkest forces. Yes, God often seems to be absent, but Jesus himself experienced the searing pain of that absence when he cried, “My God,

my God, why have you forsaken me?” Yes, God is king, but is a king who came to earth and went not to a throne but to a cross. Yes, God is glorious, but there is no greater glory than this—that he laid his glory and power aside and became weak and mortal.

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6–8 ESV).

How did the sovereign God become the suffering God? The suffering of God is indicated already in the Hebrew Scriptures, long before the coming of Jesus into the world.

The Old Testament shows us a God who so deliberately sets his heart upon us that our condition affects him. In the book of Jeremiah, God speaks of Israel as “Ephraim” and says, “Is not Ephraim, my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him” (Jer 31:20). In a famous outburst in Hosea 11, God cries, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? . . . My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim again” (Hosea 11:8–9). Another striking example of this same theme is Genesis 6:5–6: “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become. . . . The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain” (NIV-1984). Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner says that these are “the boldest terms, counterpoised elsewhere [in the Bible] if need be, but not weakened.”²³⁴

Kidner means that these passages of the Bible must be put alongside those that talk of God’s omnipotence, sovereignty, holiness, absolute self-sufficiency, infinity, and eternal nature. As biblical theologian Alec Motyer puts it: “The living God [is] a self-maintaining, self-sufficient reality that does not need to draw vitality from outside.”²³⁵ Put another

way, God depends on no one and nothing, but everything depends on him. God does not need our love and worship. He needs nothing to complete himself, as we do. We must not look at these passages that talk of God’s emotions and grief without seeing what the rest of the Bible says; otherwise we might come up with a God as “halting . . . ever-changing, in process of growth” or needing our love.²³⁶

But we must not go to the other extreme either. Theologians sometimes have spoken of the “impassibility of God,” namely that God could not be capable of emotions, of either joy and pleasure or pain and grief.²³⁷ But this goes beyond the language and teaching of the Scripture. We must not play down the poignancy of what is said in passages like Hosea 11 and Genesis 6. “The word *grieved*,” Kidner writes about Genesis 6:6, “is akin to the ‘sorrow’ and ‘pain’ [inflicted on human beings for their sin] in Genesis 3:16, 17: *already God suffers on man’s account*.”²³⁸

We all know how heart involvement leads to suffering. The more you love someone, the more that person’s grief and pain becomes yours. And so even in the first chapters of Genesis, we see God is suffering because of our suffering, because of the misery of the world. Here we have no abstract deity, no “divine principle,” no “rational structure behind the universe.” This is not merely the “spark of divine life in every living thing.” This is a transcendent but personal God who loves us so much that his heart is filled with pain over us. That would be remarkable enough. But then there is Jesus himself.

The Suffering of God the Son

The gospels show us Jesus experiencing the ordinary pressures, difficulties, and pains of normal human life. He experienced weariness and thirst (John 4:6), distress, grief, and being “troubled in heart” (Mark 3:5; John 11:35; 12:27). His suffering was such that throughout his life he offered up prayers “with loud cries and tears” (Heb 5:7; cf. Luke 22:44). He knew what it was like to be completely misunderstood by his best friends and rejected by his family and hometown (John 7:3–5; Mat

13:57; Mark 3:21). He was also tempted and assaulted by the devil (Matt 4:2ff). And amazingly, we are told that Jesus “learned” from what he suffered (Heb 5:8). Don Carson concludes, “The God on whom we rely knows what suffering is all about, not merely in the way that God knows everything, but by *experience*.”²³⁹

But at the end of his life we come to the *Passion*, literally the sufferings of Jesus. He was abandoned, denied, and betrayed by all the people he had poured his life into, and on the cross he was forsaken even by his father (Matt 27:46). This final experience, ultimately unfathomable to us, means infinite, cosmic agony beyond the knowledge of any of us on earth. For the ultimate suffering is the loss of love, and this was the loss of an eternal, perfect love. There is nothing more difficult than the disruption and loss of family relationships, but here we see that “God knows what it is like to suffer, not just because he sees it in far greater clarity than we, but because he has personally suffered in the most severe way possible . . . the agony of loss by death, the separation from a beloved . . . [and] the disruption of his own family (the Trinity) by the immensity of his own wrath against sin.”²⁴⁰ That is, in order to satisfy justice, in order to punish sin so that in love he could forgive and receive us, God had to bear the penalty for sin within himself. God the Son took the punishment we deserved, including being cut off from the Father. And so God took into his own self, his own heart, an infinite agony—out of love for us.

The early-nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Robert Murray M’Cheyne stretches to give us a sense of what he called “the infinity of Christ’s sufferings” on the cross. As he reflects on Jesus’ cry that God had forsaken him, M’Cheyne writes:

He was without any comforts of God—no feeling that God loved him—no feeling that God pitied him—no feeling that God supported him. God was his sun before—now that sun became all darkness. . . . He was without God—he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from him now. He was Godless—deprived of his God. He had the feeling of the condemned, when the Judge says,

“Depart from me, ye cursed . . . who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.” He felt that God said the same to him. I feel like a little child casting a stone into some deep ravine in the mountain side, and listening to hear its fall—but listening all in vain. . . .

Ah! This is the hell that Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ’s sufferings is unfathomable. . . . He was forsaken in the [place] of sinners. If you close with him, as your surety, you will never be forsaken. . . . “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” [The answer?] For *me*—for *me*. The ocean of Christ’s sufferings is unfathomable.²⁴¹

And yet we are not finished with what the Bible tells us about God’s suffering. In Acts 9 we have the account of the conversion of St. Paul. As a zealous Pharisee, Saul (later Paul) had been persecuting Christians. When Jesus appears to him on the road to Damascus, he asks him, “Saul, why do you persecute *me*?” (Acts 9:4). Here we see that Jesus so identifies with his people that he shares in their suffering. When they are hurt or in grief, so is he.

Sometimes the New Testament puts it the other way around and speaks about Christians sharing in Christ’s sufferings. Peter encourages his readers that when they go through the fiery trials—the furnace—Jesus is not merely spiritually present with them, “you share in Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet 4:13; cf. Col 1:24). Peter is saying that we and he suffer together. Now, it is quite clear in the Bible that Jesus’ sufferings achieved our redemption completely, and we can contribute nothing to his saving work. That is why, when Jesus died, he said that his work was “finished”—the debt was fully paid (John 19:30). As we saw Luther argue so forcefully—our suffering does not earn or merit any salvation. Nevertheless, we can have the remarkable comfort of knowing that because we are connected by Christ through the Spirit, because we are in union with him, part of his Body, that we have “fellowship” with Jesus in his sufferings (Phil 3:10).

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to put it in the following

way. Dan McCartney writes: "Christ learned humanness from his suffering (Heb 5:8). [And therefore] we learn Christhood from our suffering."²⁴² Just as Jesus assumed human likeness through suffering (Heb 2:18; 4:14–15), so we can grow into Christ's likeness through it, if we face it in faith and patience. "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:16–17).

When believers in Jesus suffer, he is quite literally with us in our furnace of trouble, in some way actually feeling the flames too.

The Suffering Sovereign

These two truths must be held together as they are in the Bible—both true, not contradicting but rather complementing the other. As Don Carson and Dan McCartney point out, one error is to fall into the belief that God is not capable of emotions or suffering. This gives us a God more like a Platonic ideal than the God of the Bible. It also may undermine the historic Christian belief that Jesus was fully God while emptied of his glory and living a human life. God learned suffering by experience. On the other hand, there are an increasing number of theologians who are so glad to emphasize the suffering of God that they lose the idea of divine sovereignty, depicting God as one who is not all-powerful and not able to stop suffering in the world.²⁴³ Ronald Ritgers writes: "The idea that God has a causal relationship to adversity and misfortune is rejected by many contemporary theologians. The notion of God as co-sufferer is welcomed, but the idea of God as agent of suffering is shunned."²⁴⁴

But, Ritgers adds, "the God who has no causal relationship to suffering is no God at all, certainly not the God of the Bible . . . who is both suffering and sovereign. Both beliefs were (and are) essential to the traditional Christian assertion that suffering ultimately has some meaning."²⁴⁵ That is absolutely right. If God is out of control of history, then suffering is not part of any plan; it is random and senseless. This would

be the secular view of things that Richard Shweder sketches. On the other hand, if God has not suffered, then how can we trust him?

In other words, it is because God is all-powerful and sovereign that his suffering is so astonishing. If God were somehow limited or out of control, his suffering would not be so radically *voluntary*—and therefore not so fully motivated by love. That is why the sight of God's agony on the cross is so profoundly moving and consoling. Albert Camus writes: "In that Christ has suffered, and had suffered voluntarily, suffering was no longer unjust. . . . If everything, without exception, in heaven and earth is doomed to pain and suffering, then a strange form of happiness is possible."²⁴⁶ Elsewhere Camus observes: "[Christ] the god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. . . . The divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death."²⁴⁷

Peter Berger says that Camus, an "insightful critic" of Christianity, nevertheless understands the "immense religious potency" of this answer to the problem of suffering.²⁴⁸ If God is no exception—if even he has suffered—then we cannot say he doesn't understand, or that his sovereignty over suffering is being exercised in a cruel and unfeeling way, or that he is a cold king who lets things happen without caring about what we are going through. As Camus argues, the cross makes it impossible to say such facile things. Since even he has not kept himself immune from our pain, we can trust him.

That leads to many rich and powerful practical implications. Because suffering is both just and unjust, we can cry out and pour out our grief, yet without the toxic additive of bitterness. Because God is both sovereign and suffering, we know our suffering always has meaning even though we cannot see it. We can trust him without understanding it all. When one of my sons was around eight years old, he began to exert his will and resist his parents' directions. One time I told him to do something and he said, "Dad, I'll obey you and do this—but only if first you explain to me why I should do it." I responded something like this: "If you obey me only because it makes sense to you, then that's not obedience, it's just agreement. The problem is that you are too young to

We can't always know the reasons for suffering

understand most of the reasons why I want you do to this. Do it because you are eight and I'm thirty-eight—because you are a child and I'm an adult and your father.”

We can easily see why children need to trust their parents even when they do not understand them. How much more, then, should we trust God even though we do not understand him. It is not just that the differential in wisdom between him and us is infinitely greater than the difference between a child and a parent. It is not just that he is sovereign and all-powerful. We should also trust him because he earned our trust on the cross. So we can trust him even when he hasn't shown us yet the reason why. He is good for it.

The Final Defeat of Evil

The book of Revelation is a dizzying text, and touches on many subjects. But I have always profited from meditating on how it addresses suffering and evil.

In chapter 6, the author John has a vision of “the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained” (Rev 6:9). These are people who had been unjustly put to death for their faith. They cry out for justice, asking God, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth . . . ?” (Rev 6:10). This is an agonized cry that has echoed down the years throughout the books of the Bible. “How long, Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their ravages” (Ps 35:17). “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal 2:17). “Why do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up the righteous?” (Hab 1:13).

But theologian Louis Berkhof writes: “The Bible teaches us to look forward to a final judgment as the decisive answer of God to all such questions, as the solution of all such problems, and as the removal of all the apparent discrepancies of the present.” Berkhof then lists passages such as Matthew 25:31–46, John 5:27–29, Romans 2:5–11, and Revelation 20:11–15, which speak of the “great white throne” and all people

who ever lived, “great and small,” standing before the throne with the “books opened” and every person judged with justice. “These passages,” says Berkhof, “do not refer to a process, but to a very definite event at the end of time.”²⁴⁹

However, the Bible does not merely tell us that evil is punished, as important as that is. In our world, sometimes evildoers are caught and brought to justice, but while we can *punish* evil, we cannot *undo* evil. Imprisoning or executing murderers, for example, cannot bring back the dead they killed or repair the lives they have ruined. But the book of Revelation promises much more than a Judgment Day. Berkhof tells us that Judgment Day is “accompanied by . . . the coming of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the renewal of heaven and earth.”²⁵⁰

In Revelation 5, John has a vision of God sitting on a throne with a sealed scroll in his hand. Many scholars have agreed that this scroll is “the meaning and purpose of history, the great plan of God for all time.” It is sealed with seven seals, and John begins to weep because it appears to him that no one has the ability to open the scroll, that is, “to interpret and carry out the plan of God.”²⁵¹ But then he hears others tell him not to weep, for “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain” (Rev 5:6), stands forth and opens the scroll seal after seal. And why is he able to share the throne and open the scroll? It is because of his redemptive suffering. The song goes:

*You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You
have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth* (Rev 5:9–10).

Over the next few chapters, the seals are opened and great judgments are carried out, exercises in immense power. Inexorably, we move toward Judgment Day and the renewal of all things. And now we see what

Is this life evil usually cannot be undone. Is that what happens at the end of 5:6?

at first looks simply like an irony. The New Testament shows us that virtually every kind of evil was thrown at Jesus at the end of his life. He was abandoned, betrayed, and denied by friends. He was handed over by a fickle mob. He was given a sham trial and was tortured and killed, a victim of injustice. On display was the whole range of sin and malevolence—cowardice, lies, vested interests, nationalism and racism, corrupt religious and political institutions, and behind it all the power of Satan himself (John 13:27). Christopher Wright sums it up: “The cross was the worst that human [and non-human] evil and rebellion against God could do.”²⁵²

But look how it backfired. Who is opening the seals on the scroll and carrying out judgments against the forces of darkness? A wounded lamb! That is hardly a figure we would associate with strength and power, and that is the whole point. The Bible says that at the very moment Jesus was dying on the cross, he was “disarming the powers . . . triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). Through his death, he absorbed the curse for human disobedience (Gal 3:10–14) and so defeated sin and death and the evil forces behind them. For those who are “in Christ Jesus . . . there is no condemnation” (Rom 8:1)—death has no more ultimate claim on us. And so it is a wounded lamb who now is able not simply to judge wrongdoing but actually to undo the damage that evil has wreaked on the creation.

This is not just an irony—this is the ultimate strategy for the defeat of evil. Without the suffering of Jesus, evil wins. It results in the destruction of the entire human race. It is only Jesus’ suffering that makes it possible to end suffering—to judge and renew the world—without having to destroy us. Theologian Henri Blocher says that here we come to “the threshold of the secret and hidden wisdom,” the deepest look we have into the mystery of how the cross of Jesus answers the problem of evil.²⁵³

Blocher, in his book *Evil and the Cross*, argues that if evil were purely “local”—“an imperfection in every finite being”—Christ could have simply come to teach people a different way. If evil were, on the other hand, only some entity—some external force in the universe—then “it

would have been sufficient to deploy a superior force against it.”²⁵⁴ But evil is neither simply the result of flawed individuals nor merely of a single powerful being like the devil. It stems from both as well as from the effects of a corrupted created order. And ultimately we can’t see all the roots and sources of evil—it is a mystery.

But we can see this—at the cross, evil is “turned back on itself.” Or, as John Calvin expressed it, on the cross, destruction was destroyed, “torment tormented, damnation damned . . . death dead, mortality made immortal.”²⁵⁵ Blocher writes:

At the cross evil is conquered as evil. . . . Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin. The manoeuvre is utterly unprecedented. No more complete victory could be imagined. . . . God entraps the deceiver in his own wiles. Evil, like a judoist, [tries to] take advantage of the power of the good, which it perverts; the Lord, like a supreme champion, replies by using the very grip of the opponent.²⁵⁶

This is certainly the ultimate defeat of evil, for this strategy used evil’s own weight and force against it as, Blocher says, in judo. He goes on: “This . . . sin of sins, the murder of the Son . . . provides the opportunity for love to be carried to its very peak, for there is no greater love than to give one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13).” Evil is defeated because God uses it to bring about its very opposite—courage, faithfulness, selfless sacrifice, forgiveness. But there’s more. The cross doesn’t simply provide an inspiring example of love. “The requirement of [justice] . . . that evil be punished by death . . . permits our Brother and Head to intervene in love and take over the debt in place of the guilty party. . . . At the cross, evil is conquered by the ultimate degree of love in the fulfillment of justice.”²⁵⁷ Blocher concludes by rightly claiming that this Christian answer to evil is both more optimistic *and* more pessimistic than the alternatives—at once:

We have no other position than at the foot of the cross. After we have been there we are given the answer of the wisdom of God, which incenses the advocates of optimistic theodicies or of tragic philosophies. God's answer is evil turned back upon itself, conquered by the ultimate degree of love in the fulfillment of justice. This answer consoles us and summons us. It allows us to wait for the coming of the crucified conqueror. He will wipe away the tears from every face, soon.²⁵⁸

So, while Christianity never claims to be able to offer a full *explanation* of all God's reasons behind every instance of evil and suffering—it does have a final *answer* to it. That answer will be given at the end of history and all who hear it and see its fulfillment will find it completely satisfying; infinitely sufficient. Dostoevsky expressed this as well as anyone ever has when he wrote:

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.²⁵⁹

No More Tears

Henri Blocher is right to look to both the past and the future here. The cross secured the defeat of evil in the past, on Calvary, but now it also guarantees a final experience of that defeat in the future, in the renewal of all things, when every tear will be wiped away. In the vision of St. John, even before the opening of the seals, it is said:

Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev 7:16–17).

The climax of the book of Revelation depicts the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1). There will “no longer be any curse” (Rev 22:3)—the curse that fell on creation at the Fall is lifted. And as a result, “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4). This is poetic language of course, but the message is clear. There will be no more evil, suffering, sin, or pain. The suffering of Jesus has ended suffering.

As we observed before, the Bible teaches that the future is not an immaterial “paradise” but a new heaven and a new earth. Matthew 19:28 and Acts 3:21 speak of the “regeneration” or “restoration of all things.” Peter says that we look for the day in which we will have a new heaven and new earth (2 Pet 3:13), and Paul teaches that the creation will gloriously be liberated from its bondage to decay and death (Rom 8:19–22).

It is this new world that John saw in his vision in Revelation 21 and 22. Here ultimately, Christianity holds out a hope unlike any other. The secular view sees no future good of any kind, and other religions believe in an eternity or heaven that is a consolation for the losses and pain of this life and all the joys that might have been. But as we have said, Christianity offers not merely a consolation but a restoration—not just of the life we had but of the life we always wanted but never achieved. And because the joy will be even greater for all that evil, this means the final defeat of all those forces that would have destroyed the purpose of God in creation, namely, to live with his people in glory and delight forever.

Life Story: The Ring*by Andi*

I dropped to my knees when I got to the side of my bed. It was time to end the day, but I couldn't yet. The ring had to come off. It was time.

That afternoon, a judge had declared my divorce final. Though the demise of our marriage had appeared inevitable for a while, I hadn't stopped wearing my wedding ring, a symbol of my confidence that no matter how hopeless things looked, God could turn them around in an instant. But now here I was, thirty years later, kneeling alone by the side of my bed. I sobbed, but it wasn't the sorrow I dissolved as these images were eclipsed by an overwhelming awareness of God's faithfulness to me through it all. Never had I felt abandoned by him. Confused by his allowing life to be excruciatingly hard for so long when I knew he could restore? Yes. On the verge of complete mental, emotional, and physical collapse at times? Yes. Like I had lost my bearings spiritually? Yes.

In fact, one night it all came to a head and I experienced a true spiritual crisis. Where was this God I had been counting on? Was he real? If he was, did he care? I was in no shape to compose an articulate prayer. There was a lot of sobbing and groaning. When I could form words, I cried out, "I could never watch someone I love suffer like this and not stop it! You say you love me, but I can't square that with what I see happening. This feels cruel. I've got to know you are who you say you are or I cannot go on." I didn't need to know his reasons . . . I needed Him.

The next morning, wise words from a trusted friend came to me: "Andi, you need to force-feed yourself the Scriptures. Through them the Holy Spirit can speak to places in your heart where human words just can't reach."

I needed to be touched that deeply, so the next morning I opened my Bible. My eyes fell on these words in Psalms: "You, O

God, are strong, and you, O Lord, are loving." They came like smelling salts to my fainting heart, silencing torturous fear and doubt. My heart was infused with a deep assurance that He loved me and was very near. I was immediately steadied. It didn't matter anymore that I couldn't square this with what I saw unfolding in my life.

Kneeling by my bed that night, my heart broke, unable to contain my gratitude for God's persistent love through a mess that should have driven him away. . . . Instead he came closer than ever.

As I slipped the ring off, a prayer poured from my heart. "Now I want to give you the devotion I thought I would be giving to an earthly husband. You alone are worthy of my whole heart's trust, and it's yours for the rest of my life."

How could a vow of such loving trust pour from a heart that had just lost so much . . . and be made to the One who had been my only hope? The only explanation is that while so much was dying, something was coming to life.

I had been changed by the experience of this unstoppable love constantly moving toward me when I was coming to him with nothing to offer but weakness, confusion, and need. I cannot adequately explain what happened. I just know that, in the end, this prayer was the only possible response.

As I got up off my knees and climbed into bed, I thought, *I should get myself a new ring to remind me of this vow I've made to the Lord tonight.*

The next morning, I met with a group of women with whom I had been meeting weekly for prayer. We never talked a lot about what we were going to pray for, we just prayed.

During the time of silence with which we always began, I noticed one of them coming over and kneeling in front of my chair. She took a ring off her finger, held it out to me, and said, "I feel like the Lord wants you to have this ring. He wants you to know that you are his beloved, and he is betrothing himself to you for the rest of your life. He will be your protector and provider. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you forever."

The ring she handed me was much more beautiful and valuable than any ring I would have gotten myself. I had mentioned nothing about getting a new ring.

I can't tell you how many times, in the years since, a glance at that ring calmed my fear, filled my loneliness, and comforted me in grief.

I wanted a ring to remind me of my commitment to the Lord. Instead, I ended up with one that will forever remind me of his commitment to me.

EIGHT

The Reason for Suffering

*Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round! . . .
Pulpits and Sundays, sorrow-dogging sin,
Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in.*

George Herbert, "Sin"

Peter Berger says that all people and cultures long to "bestow meaning on the experience of suffering and evil." I have been arguing that no culture or worldview has ever done this with the thoroughness of Christianity. According to Christian theology, suffering is not meaningless—neither in general nor in particular instances. For God has purposed to defeat evil so exhaustively on the cross that all the ravages of evil will someday be undone and we, despite participating in it so deeply, will be saved. God is accomplishing this not in spite of suffering, agony, and loss but *through* it—it is through the suffering of God that the suffering of humankind will eventually be overcome and undone. While it is impossible not to wonder whether God could have done all this some other way—without allowing all the misery and grief—the cross assures us that, whatever the unfathomable counsels and purposes behind the course of history, they are motivated by love for us and absolute commitment to our joy and glory.

So suffering is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is not only the way Christ became like and redeemed us, but it is one of the main ways we become like him and experience his redemption. And that

means that our suffering, despite its painfulness, is also filled with purpose and usefulness.

On Not Wasting Your Suffering

We live in a time in which this ancient idea of suffering's "usefulness" is resisted. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains that people who face imminent death but survive often develop post-traumatic stress disorder that may permanently debilitate them. The condition can leave them "anxious and over reactive," liable to "panic or crumble more easily when faced with later adversity." Research on stress shows that it is generally bad for people's health. Stressors include death of a spouse (or, for a non-adult, a parent or sibling), separation and divorce, personal injury or illness, job loss, and financial reversals. Studies show that these can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, and physical illness, particularly heart disease.²⁶⁰

Nevertheless, Haidt maintains that there is empirical support for the ancient view that "people need adversity, setbacks, and perhaps even trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfillment, and personal development."²⁶¹ He relates a true story of a friend of his whom he names "Greg." Greg was a young assistant college professor whose wife left him for another man, taking their two young children with them. Greg faced years of legal expense and fights over the custody of the children. Eventually he won custody but then found himself a single parent with a full-time, poor-paying job. He had almost no hope of finishing the book on which his academic career depended, and he worried about the mental health of his children.²⁶²

But several months later, Haidt visited Greg and discovered that many people had rallied around him. He learned how his church helped him with meals and child care and strong emotional and spiritual support. His parents had sold their home in the west and moved nearby to help him raise the children. And then, after relating all of this, Haidt wrote that Greg "said something so powerful I choked up." He observed how in the middle of many operas there was a crucial aria, a "sad

The Reason for Suffering

and moving solo" in which the main character turned sorrow into something beautiful. And Greg said:

This is my moment to sing the aria. I don't want to, I don't want to have this chance, but it's here now, and what am I going to do about it? Am I going to rise to the occasion?²⁶³

The psychologist listened and knew that "to have framed things in such a way showed that [Greg] was already rising." Haidt recounts what he calls the "post-traumatic growth" of his friend after that. "With the help of family, friends, and deep religious faith . . . [he] rebuilt his life, finished his book, and two years later found a better job. . . . He now experiences more joy from each day with his children than he did before the crisis." Greg said that the experience had "radically changed his perspective about what mattered in life." Career was now not nearly as important to him as it had been, and this freed him to be a much better father. He now found himself "reacting to others with much greater sympathy, love, and forgiveness. He just couldn't get mad at people for little things anymore."²⁶⁴

Haidt points out that the three benefits of suffering seen in Greg's life often appear in others' lives as well. First, people who endure and get through suffering become more resilient. Once they have learned to cope, they know they can do it again and live life with less anxiety. Romans 5:3-4 sums it up: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." Second, it strengthens relationships, usually bonding the sufferer permanently into a set of deeper friendships or family ties that serve to nurture and strengthen for years.

But the third benefit is perhaps the most significant—suffering "changes priorities and philosophies."²⁶⁵ Psychologist Robert Emmons has sorted people's life goals into four basic categories—personal achievement and happiness, relationships and intimacy, religion and spirituality, and "generativity" (contributing something lasting to society). People who invest much or most of their energy into the goals of personal achievement and happiness are the most vulnerable to the adverse

circumstances of life.²⁶⁶ Efforts to seek God, deeper relationships, and the good of society sometimes can be directly enhanced by suffering, but our freedom and comfort never are. And so trouble and trials tend to force us out of certain life agendas and into others.

Haidt puts this in another way. Everyone operates out of a life story that integrates the events of life into a “coherent and vitalizing” narrative. People who have never suffered are likely to have naive stories about life’s meaning. He gives the example of a woman who thought of herself as a brilliant but unfulfilled artist who had been forced by her parents into a mundane job. Her life story led to unrealistic views of her own abilities and to a great deal of self-pity and resentment toward life in general. It also contributed to her failure to find any qualified spouse candidate, who (she felt) had to be extremely creative and perfectly compatible with her. Haidt concluded that adversity offered her a prospect. “She is a mess of mismatched motives and stories, and it may be that only through adversity will she be able to make the radical changes she would need to achieve coherence.”²⁶⁷ He went on to write: “Trauma . . . shatters belief systems and robs people of their sense of meaning. In doing so, it forces people to put the pieces back together, and often they do so by [turning to] God or some other higher principle as a unifying principle.”²⁶⁸

Haidt makes a crucial disclaimer when he says, “I don’t want to celebrate suffering, prescribe it for everyone, or minimize the moral imperative to reduce it where we can. I don’t want to ignore the pain that ripples out from each diagnosis of cancer.”²⁶⁹ He is indeed right, and as we have seen, the Bible agrees with his view. God is grieved at our grief. The Bible is filled with cries of lament and shouts of “Why?” that God does not denounce. And yet—God is so committed to defeating evil that he is ready to help us use it for good even in our individual lives right now. Haidt, James Davies, and other psychologists are arguing that there is a common sense as well as empirical basis for the idea that suffering produces endurance, character, and hope.

The Bible of course assumes this and tells us much more about the various meanings and benefits of suffering, and the various purposes it can accomplish in our lives. What are those purposes?

To Glorify God

According to all branches of Christian theology, the ultimate purpose of life is to glorify God. That means that the first—but perhaps hardest to grasp—purpose for our suffering is the glory of God. The words *suffering* and *glory* are linked in a surprising number of biblical passages.

Paul says repeatedly that our sufferings prepare for us an eternal glory (Rom 8:17–18; 2 Cor 4:17). Peter adds that our sufferings enhance our eventual joy at our future glory (1 Pet 4:13). Then, in Ephesians 3:13, Paul tells his readers that his imprisonment and sufferings are for *their* glory. Finally, in 1 Peter 1:6–7, the apostle explains why his readers are “suffering grief in all kinds of trials.” “These have come,” he writes, “so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Our sufferings, if handled properly, bring the Lord glory.

Many of the most popular churches today teach that God will make you happy, healthy, and prosperous, that he is there for your personal benefit. If we tacitly accept that view of things, we may find it offensive to hear someone say that tragedies and evil can honor and glorify God. And indeed, to simply say such a thing to someone who is watching their mother or child die from cancer would be confusing and cruel.

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Reflections of the Psalms*, confesses that for many years after becoming a Christian he was confused and embarrassed by God’s calls to us to glorify and praise him, to tell him about his greatness and rejoice in his excellencies. Lewis pointed out that, among humans, such a desire for praise was seen as completely despicable. “We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence, or delightfulness.”²⁷⁰

However, Lewis began to think about how praise and glorifying worked in other ways. He noticed that when we say that a work of art is admirable, we don’t mean that it “deserves” praise in the way that a good student deserves a high mark. Rather, we mean the artwork demands admiration because it is the only “adequate or appropriate re-

sponse to it” and that if we do not give it that praise, “we shall be stupid, insensible, and great *losers*, we shall have missed something.” And of course, he concluded then that “God would be, by his very nature, the ‘supremely beautiful and all-satisfying Object.’”²⁷¹

From there, Lewis reasons that God commands us to glorify him because it is only by doing this that we will ever find the rest, satisfaction, and joy in him that we were made for. He directs us to do this not only because it is simply right but also because we need it. The psalmist tells us that it is “fitting . . . to praise him” (Ps 33:1; 147:1). It *fits* to glorify God—it not only fits reality, because God is infinitely and supremely praiseworthy, but it fits *us* as nothing else does. All the beauty we have looked for in art or faces or places—and all the love we have looked for in the arms of other people—is only fully present in God himself. And so in every action by which we treat him as glorious as he is, whether through prayer, singing, trusting, obeying, or hoping, we are at once giving God his due and fulfilling our own design.

The God of Glory

So much of Christian faith and practice hinges on the concept of the glory of God. But what is that?

The theology books struggle when they try to define it. I believe it is because the glory of God is actually the combined magnitude of all God’s attributes and qualities put together. The glory of God means what can be called *his infinite beyondness*. He is not a “tame” God, a God at hand. He is not someone you can always figure out, or expect to figure out. This is a God beyond our comprehension, and it is one of the aspects of the biblical God that modern people dislike the most. We are always saying, “I can’t believe in a God who would do this” or “I can’t believe in a God who would judge people.” One of the things that may mean is that we don’t want a glorious God, one beyond our comprehension.

The glory of God also means his *supreme importance*. The Hebrew word for “glory” is *kabod*, which means “weight”—literally God’s

weightiness. Fortunately, we have an English word that has the same lexical range and that functions in the same way—it is the word *matter*. Matter means “as opposed to the immaterial, something solid, something substantial,” but it can also mean “importance.” And therefore, when the Bible says that God is glorious, it means he should matter, and does matter, more than anything else or anyone else. And if anything matters to you more than God, you are not acknowledging his glory. You are giving glory to something else.

When J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was published in the 1950s, a woman named Rhona Beare wrote Tolkien and asked him about the chapter in which the Ring of Power is destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. When the ring is melted, the Dark Lord’s entire power collapses and melts away with it. She found it inexplicable that this unassailable, overwhelming power would be wiped out by the erasure of such a little object. Tolkien replied that at the heart of the plot was the Dark Lord’s effort to magnify and maximize his power by placing so much of it in the ring. He wrote: “The Ring of Sauron is only one of the various mythical treatments of the placing of one’s life, or power, in some external object, which is thus exposed to capture or destruction with disastrous results to oneself.”²⁷²

Tolkien means something like this: It is one thing to love somebody and get a lot of joy out of the relationship. But if that person breaks up with you and you want to kill yourself, it means you have given that person too much glory, too much weight in your life. You may have said in your heart, “If that person loves me, then I know I am somebody.” But if that person then takes the relationship away, you collapse and melt down because you have ascribed more glory and honor to him or her than to God. If anything matters more to you than God you are placing yourself and your heart into something external. Only if you make God matter the most—which means only if you glorify him and give him the glory—will you have a safe life.

There is one more thing to say about God’s glory—it is his *absolute splendor and beauty*. The word for “glory” in the Old Testament means importance, the word for “glory” in the New Testament (the Greek word *doxa*) means “praise and wonder, luminosity, brilliance, or beauty.”

Jonathan Edwards once said: "God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in."²⁷³ It is not enough to say, "I guess he is God, so I have got to knuckle under." You have to see his beauty. Glorifying God does not mean obeying him only because you have to. It means to obey him because you *want* to—because you are attracted to him, because you delight in him. This is what C. S. Lewis grasped and explained so well in his chapter on praising. We need beauty. We go to lengths to put ourselves in front of beautiful places, or surround ourselves with beautiful music, or hang out with beautiful people. But these will leave us empty if we don't learn to see all of these things as mere tributaries and God himself as the fountain, the headwaters of it all.

So to see God as glorious is not only to admit his incomprehensibility and beyondness, and make him the thing that matters the most, but it is also to work your heart so it finds him the most pleasurable and beautiful thing you know.

No Graven Image

How, then, can we glorify God in our suffering—and how can suffering help us glorify God?

In 1966, Elisabeth Elliot, who had been a missionary to the Aucas (Waorani) of the South American Amazon rain forest, wrote a novel entitled *No Graven Image*.²⁷⁴ It is the story of a young unmarried woman named Margaret Spathawk who had dedicated her life to translating the Bible for remote tribes whose languages had not yet been written down. She took up Bible translation work among the Quechua people of the mountains of Ecuador. Key to her work was the discovery of a man, Pedro, who knew the unwritten dialect that Margaret needed to learn in order to translate the Bible into that particular language. He began to teach her the language, and her painstaking work of systematically recording and documenting it moved forward.

One day, Margaret is feeling grateful as she travels to see Pedro. She remembers the Bible verse "Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your

heart take courage." And she prays to God, "I've been waiting, Lord. Waiting and waiting. . . . You know I waited a long time to be a missionary to mountain Indians. . . . You seemed to say translation and medical work. So you gave me Pedro. . . . Just being here today is an answer to prayer."²⁷⁵ She thinks of all it has taken to bring her to where she is that day—the support of friends, financial help from many people in the United States, years of training, years of building relationships, and of course the provision of the one man who knew both Spanish and the dialect she needed. God now seemed to be bringing things together. Margaret imagines the possibility of bringing the Bible to a million people in remote regions of the mountains.

Finally, she arrives at Pedro's home and discovers that he has an infected, painful wound in his leg. As part of her duties Margaret provided ordinary medical care and therefore she had with her a syringe and some penicillin. Pedro asks her for an injection and she decides to give it. But within seconds, Pedro begins to experience anaphylaxis, a severe, whole-body allergic reaction to the penicillin. The entire family gathers around in tears as he lies convulsing.

"Can't you see he's dying?" his wife, Rosa, cries to her. "You killed him."

Margaret is astonished at what is happening and prays, "Lord God, Father of us all, if You've never heard me pray before, hear me now. . . . Save him, Lord, save him."²⁷⁶ But Pedro worsens and begins to retch, bent over in tormented spasms. Rosa puts both of her hands on the top of her head and begins the death wail of women in her community. But Margaret continues to pray in her mind, "O Lord, what will become of Rosa? . . . What will become of *Your work*? You started all this, Lord. It wasn't I. You led me here. You answered prayers and gave me Pedro—he is the only one. . . . O Lord, remember that. There is no one else."²⁷⁷

But Pedro dies, and indeed it means her work is over. All the years of labor are wiped away. "As for the translation of the Bible, of course, I cannot go ahead without an informant. God knew about that when Pedro died. I do not write prayer letters [to my supporters] anymore, for I have nothing to say about my work. It seemed, on the night of Pedro's death, as though *Finis* were written below all I had done."²⁷⁸

The book ends with a profoundly confused young missionary. There is no last-minute reversal, and no "silver lining." She stands at Pedro's grave and thinks, "And God? What of Him? 'I am with thee,' He had said. With me in *this*? He had allowed Pedro to die, or—and I could not then nor can I today deny the possibility—He had perhaps caused me to destroy him. And does He now, I asked myself there at the graveside, ask me to worship Him?"²⁷⁹

The answer was yes—as my wife, Kathy, and I learned a few years later when we listened to Elisabeth Elliott's lectures in the theological seminary where we were graduate students. She pointed to the last page, where, she said, was the key line.

"God, if He was merely my accomplice, had betrayed me. If, on the other hand, He was God, He had freed me."²⁸⁰

She went on to explain to us that the graven image, the idol of the title, was a God who always acted the way we thought he should. Or more to the point—he was a God who supported our plans, how *we* thought the world and history should go. That is a God of our own creation, a counterfeit god. Such a god is really just a projection of our own wisdom, of our own self. In that way of operating, God is our "accomplice," someone to whom we relate as long as he is doing what we want. If he does something else, we want to "fire" him, or "unfriend him," as we would any personal assistant or acquaintance who was subordinate or incompetent.

But at the very end, Margaret realizes that the demise of her plans had shattered her false god, and now she was free for the first time to worship the True One. When serving the god-of-my-plans, she had been extraordinarily anxious. She had never been sure that God was going to come through for her and "get it right." She was always trying to figure out how to bring God to do what she had planned. But she had not really been treating him *as* God—as the all-wise, all-good, all-powerful one. Now she had been liberated to put her hope not in her agendas and plans but in God himself. If she could make *this* change, it would bring a rest and security she had never had. In short, suffering had pointed her

to a glorious God, and it had taught her to treat him as such. And she did so, it freed her from the desperate, doomed, exhausting effort to seek to control all the circumstances of her life and of those she loved.

Elliott's novel was extraordinarily bold, and it offended traditional religious as well as secular sensibilities. In spite of the fact that we expect young children to trust adults that they cannot understand, most modern people are horrified to be asked to trust a God they cannot understand. But the novel was just as outrageous to many in the evangelical Christian world. Many readers wrote Elliott and protested vehemently that God would *never* allow such a thing to happen to a woman who had so prayerfully dedicated her life to his cause. A leading evangelical pastor told her with much satisfaction that he had personally kept the book off the Christian "book of the year" list.

However, Elisabeth told us, her own actual life experience had run almost exactly parallel to this novel—and actually had been even worse. In *These Strange Askes*, an account of her first years as a Bible-translating missionary in South America, she tells of a man named Macario, who was "God's answer to prayer . . . the key to the whole of the language work; he was (God knew) the only man on earth who spoke both Spanish and Colorado with equal ease." But he was senselessly murdered, shot to death. Their translation work "now came to a sudden full stop."²⁸¹

Later a flood and then a theft robbed the translators of their card files—in which they had invested years of work.²⁸² And after all this, Elisabeth married Jim Elliot, one of five young missionaries who were trying to reach out to the then isolated and hostile Waorani people of the Amazonian rain forest. One evening they sang a hymn, "We rest on thee, our Shield and our Defender," and the next day they traveled into the forest, met a party of Waoranis, and were all speared to death, leaving behind many widows and orphans.²⁸³ All the Christians who were indignantly telling the author that God would never allow such things to happen to faithful believers simply didn't know what they were talking about.

In her 1996 epilogue to *Through Gates of Splendor*, the account of the missionaries' deaths, she challenged both the secular and traditional

religious views of God and suffering as simplistic and naïve. She warned against trying to “find a silver lining” that would justify what happened. She wrote:

We know that time and again in the history of the Christian church, the blood of martyrs has been its seed. We are tempted to assume a simple equation here. Five men died. This will mean x-number of Waorani Christians. Perhaps so. Perhaps not. . . . God is God. I dethrone Him in my heart if I demand that He act in ways that satisfy my idea of justice. It is the same spirit that taunted, “If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross.” There is unbelief, there is even rebellion, in the attitude that says, “God has no right to do this to five men unless . . .”²⁸⁴

The theme that runs through all of Elliot’s work is that to trust God when we do not understand him is to treat him as God and not as another human being. It is to treat him as glorious—infinately beyond us in his goodness and wisdom. But, as Jesus says, the hour at which God’s glory was most brilliantly revealed was on the cross (John 12:23, 32). There we see that God is so infinitely, uncompromisingly just that Jesus had to die for sin, but also that God is so absolutely loving that Jesus was willing and glad to die. This is consummate wisdom—that God’s love and justice, seemingly at odds, could both be fulfilled at once. And so to trust God’s wisdom in our suffering, even when we don’t understand it, is to remember the glory and meaning of the cross. Elliot reasons like this: “Those hands that keep a million worlds from spinning into oblivion were nailed motionless to a cross—for us. . . . Can you trust him?”²⁸⁵

So one of the purposes of suffering is to glorify God by simply treating him as the infinite, sovereign, all-wise, and yet incarnate and suffering God that he is. This glorifies God to God—the most fitting thing that can be done. And if we do what fits God and our souls, we will find, as Elisabeth Elliot argues, a rest not based on circumstances.

Glorifying God to Others

Trusting God in suffering also glorifies him to others. When believers handle suffering rightly, they are not merely glorifying God to God. They are showing the world something of the greatness of God—and perhaps nothing else can reveal him to people in quite the same way. “It is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering out of a conscious commitment to God,” writes Peter (1 Pet 2:19). Patient endurance of suffering, when onlookers know that the sufferers are Christians, can reveal the power of God. Paul puts it even more vividly: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus [suffering], so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Cor 4:10).

In the early church, the first martyr was Stephen, who was stoned to death for his public preaching of the gospel. The account of his death is told in Acts 6:8–8:1. When he was on trial for his life, we are told he was not fearful but radiant—“his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). And as he was dying under the hail of stones, he prayed aloud, “Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). The young scholar Saul of Tarsus was present and saw the entire scene (Acts 7:58, 8:1). Later Saul is on his way to imprison Christians and destroy the church in Damascus when he meets the risen Christ. Jesus says, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). Goads were sharp sticks used to move animals in a right direction, and Jesus is indicating that although Saul was angrily opposed to Christianity, there was something deep inside that was pushing him unwillingly toward acknowledging its truth. Many believe that one of those “goads” was the seemingly inexplicable joy, peace, and lack of bitterness that Stephen showed as he was dying. How could Stephen have been that calm? How could he have been that sure that he was right with God? That able to forgive people even as they were killing him? It didn’t make sense. The way Stephen bore up under suffering was more than just “commendable”—it struck in Saul’s soul.

This was perhaps the first example of what later Christian writers such as Ambrose, Cyprian, Ignatius, and Polycarp said over and over. Chris-

tians died so well, leaving onlookers wondering where they got their power. “Christians used suffering to argue for the superiority of their creed . . . [because] they suffered better than pagans.”²⁸⁶ Paul never forgot the principle after his conversion. That is why later he could write to believers not to be discouraged by his imprisonment (Eph 3:13) because his suffering was a way to show people his Savior’s character. He said to the Philippians, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ” (Phil 1:12–13).

In October of 2006, a gunman took hostages in a one-room schoolhouse of an Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. After shooting ten victims, five of whom died, ages seven to thirteen, he killed himself. Within hours after the suicide-murders, members of the Amish community visited the killer’s parents and expressed sympathy for their loss and support for the hard days ahead. When the gunman was buried a few days later, his young widow and her three children were amazed to discover that half those attending the funeral were Amish, who showed nothing but support and concern for the murderer’s family. An entire Christian community faced their suffering with the same peace that Stephen did in Acts 7. The forgiveness and love shown by the Amish community toward the shooter and his family was the talk of the entire country. The way they handled their suffering had been a powerful testimony to the truth of their faith and to the grace and glory of their God.

It is worth noting that the testimony of the Amish to Christ was so powerful that many observers felt the need to mute it. A made-for-TV film about the incident created a fictional character, Ida Graber, an Amish mother of one of the murdered children. In the movie, she is so filled with doubts and anger at God, and so unable to forgive the gunman, that she almost leaves her faith. Those who were actually involved with the Amish after the shootings countered that, despite the deep grief and pain, there was simply no one in the community who had their faith shaken or who could not forgive.²⁸⁷ The film showed—without aiming to—that the secular filmmakers who lived within the “immanent frame”

couldn’t really comprehend an attitude toward God that enabled people to accept mysterious providence and dispense forgiveness without bitterness toward either God or the shooter.

Four years after the incident, a group of sociologists published a book about it.²⁸⁸ One of their main conclusions was that our secular culture is not likely to produce people who can handle suffering the way the Amish did. Many pundits and commentators across the country tried to claim the Amish’s startling love as “the best in ‘us,’” ignoring the profoundly and distinctively Christian roots of what they did. The *Amish Grace* scholars called that out as naive. They argued that the Amish ability to forgive was based on two things. First, it was grounded in deep reflection and meditation on Christ forgiving his tormentors and killers.²⁸⁹ At the heart of their faith was a man dying for his enemies, and if you are a member of a community that speaks and sings about it—rehearses and celebrates it—constantly, then the practice of forgiving even the murderers of one’s children will not seem impossible.

But second, the authors pointed out that at its heart, forgiveness is a form of “self-renunciation”—it means giving up your right to pay back. As sociologists, they knew that the Christian view is that the meaning of life is to give up one’s individual interests for the sake of God and others, it is to give up one’s freedom in order to live according to God’s will and to the benefit of one’s neighbor. But this is directly opposed to how Americans are taught to live.

We live in an individualistic, consumeristic society, a society in which we are taught not self-renunciation but self-assertion—that your freedom, interests, and needs must always come first.²⁹⁰ A culture promoting self-assertion, however, will usually produce revenge as a response to suffering, while a counterculture like the Amish, promoting self-renunciation, will much more likely produce forgiveness as a response. “Most of us have [therefore] been formed by a culture that nourishes revenge and mocks grace,” the authors conclude, and they are right.²⁹¹

And that is why peace and love in the face of evil and suffering—whether shown by the Amish in Lancaster, or Stephen in Jerusalem, or Jesus himself on the cross—is one of the greatest testimonies possible to the world of the reality of God, to his glory and his grace.

Glorifying God When No One Sees

The martyrdom of Jim Elliot had a visible impact on a generation of young Christian leaders. But what about suffering that virtually no one sees? Can that glorify God? Yes.

Joni Eareckson Tada is a woman who has been in a wheelchair most of her life. When she was seventeen, she had a diving accident and suffered an injury that left her a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the shoulders down. During the first two years after the injury, Joni experienced depression, bitterness, thoughts of suicide, and doubts about her Christian faith. When she was in a rehabilitation hospital in the Baltimore area, she shared a room with three or four other young women who also had some kind of debilitating condition. One of the people in her room was a girl named Denise Walters.²⁹²

Denise had been a happy, popular seventeen-year-old high school senior in Baltimore, Maryland. One day when she was bounding up the steps at the high school, she stumbled because her knees felt rather weak. By the end of the day, she could hardly walk. She went home and went to bed. When she woke up to go to dinner, she found she was paralyzed from the waist down. Not long afterward, she was paralyzed from the neck down, and then went blind. Just like that. It was a rare form of rapid-progression multiple sclerosis.

She lay motionless in her bed at Greenoaks Rehabilitation Hospital, unable to move or see, or barely able to talk. It was difficult to have any kind of conversation with her. Her roommates could have brief, fragmentary talks with her, but that was it. It wasn't long before she had no visitors but her mother. But Denise and her mother were Christians, and every night her mom came in and read the Bible to her and prayed with her dying daughter. Denise knew she was dying, but death was not coming quickly enough to be considered merciful in any way. She lay there in a lonely hospital bed for eight long years.

Then she died.

Joni shares how troubling Denise's life was to her. As her book explains, she first had to come to grips with her own loss and suffering. She

recounts all the questions that pressed down on her every day. "Why did this happen to me? I am a Christian committed to Jesus: Why am I in a wheelchair for the rest of my life? How can God bring any good out of this? Why should I trust a God who allowed this to happen to me?" Nevertheless, slowly but surely, she began to make progress. She had begun to discover some of the reasons why suffering can be meaningful. Many of them had to do with a deeper understanding of God's glory. She came to see that suffering is a way to testify to others about the glory of God. If others see you being patient under the suffering, it can show them that God is real.

But when Denise died, Joni struggled because here, it seemed, was a person who had loved Christ, and who never complained, but whose suffering seemed to be completely pointless. Nobody saw her. "Nobody ever told her 'I want the kind of life you have. How do I get it?' Her suffering seemed to be for nothing."²⁹³

When Joni heard that Denise had finally died, she shared her struggle with some of her friends. One of them opened a Bible and turned first to Luke 15:10, which talks about the angels rejoicing in heaven over a repentant sinner. Then she turned to Ephesians 3:10, where it says that the angels are looking at what happens inside the church. If they had thought of it, they also could have gone to the book of Job. There the suffering of Job is watched by a great council of angels and by the devil as well. And suddenly Joni got it.

The secular worldview says there is only *this* world. The here-and-now material universe is the only reality. The natural is real, there is no supernatural. The immanent is real, there is no transcendent—no angels and demons, no spirits and souls, no God or devil. If you live within the secular "immanent frame," as Charles Taylor says, you would be completely cut off from the hope that then came to Joni. "I get it! I lit up. . . . So her life wasn't a waste, I reasoned. . . . Someone *was* watching her in that lonely hospital room—a great many someones."²⁹⁴

To understand Joni's insight, do this thought experiment. What if I told you that tomorrow, for one day, there would be a special camera that was going to put everything you said, everything you did, and everything you *thought*, on television? It would beam it around the world

and probably a billion people would see it. Would that make any difference in how you lived tomorrow? I think it would. It would bestow enormous meaning and significance on even the most fleeting thoughts and minor actions. It would be somewhat frightening, of course, because you would need to be on your best behavior. But it would also be thrilling. You might say, "There are a couple of things I have always wanted to tell the world. Now I really can." It would make an enormous difference. It would make the day incredibly meaningful.

But if Christianity is true—this is already happening. Don't you see that you are already on camera? There is an unimaginable but real spiritual world out there. You are already on the air. Everything you do is done in front of billions of beings. And God sees it, too. As Joni wrote about her friend Denise, "Angels and demons stood amazed as they watched her uncomplaining and patient spirit rising as a sweet smelling savor to God."²⁹⁵

No suffering is for nothing.

Suffering and Glory

Paul said to his Ephesian readers, discouraged because of his imprisonment, "My suffering is for your glory." Why? Because that is how it works. Suffering and glory are closely linked. Suffering glorifies God to the universe and eventually even achieves a glory for us. And do you know why suffering and glory are so tied to each other? It is because of Jesus. Philippians 2 tells us Jesus laid aside his glory. Why? Charles Wesley's famous Christmas carol tells you.

*Mild he lays his glory by; born that men no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth.*

Jesus lost all his glory so that we could be clothed in it. He was shut out so we could get access. He was bound, nailed, so that we could be free. He was cast out so we could approach.

And Jesus took away the only kind of suffering that can really destroy

you: that is being cast away from God. He took that so that now all suffering that comes into your life will only make you great. A lump of coal under pressure becomes a diamond. And the suffering of a person in Christ only turns you into somebody gorgeous.

Jesus Christ suffered, not so that we would never suffer but so that when we suffer we would be like him. His suffering led to glory. And you can see it in Paul. Paul is happy to be in prison because "my sufferings are for your glory," he says. He is like Jesus now. Because that is how Jesus did it. And if you know that that glory is coming, you can handle suffering, too.

Life Story: The Canvas of Suffering

by Gigi

Growing up in the inner city of Oakland, California, in a predominantly black community, I identified as brown, even though I was Brazilian and Amish. With time, I became very passionate about how the gospel engages social issues such as poverty, race, and socioeconomic issues, and I devoted my life to serving in low-income areas for these very purposes. All the while viewing such issues through the lens of a person of color.

Then, in 2009, I moved to South Africa. Overnight, I became white.

I was well aware that South Africa continues to be one of the most racially polarized countries in the world. In 2010, I married an amazing black South African man, becoming one of very few interracial couples in this country. We instantly became a threat to the very fabric of a society built on racial hierarchy and separation, even post-Apartheid. Wherever we went, we felt the piercing stares of the masses.

Just before we met, my husband had planted a church in the largest township in South Africa: Soweto. Townships in South Af-

rica, by definition, are exclusively black communities begun during the oppressive system of Apartheid. Today, they are vibrant communities full of life, culture, and beautiful people, as well as poverty, crime, and much suffering.

In short, overnight I became a “white” woman living in the largest all-black residential area in a country still hemorrhaging from its long legacy of racial distrust, hatred, and anger. I never could have expected what awaited me in this beautiful country among these beautiful and broken people. I longed to be an agent of healing among such devastation, and I continually prayed that God would make me more like Him to serve here. Little did I know how He intended to answer that prayer. It seems that some fruit comes only from suffering.

One month before our wedding, my husband’s closest friend and his most trusted leader in the church was exposed in having multiple moral failures with vulnerable young women in our church. As it turned out, he’d been living a double life for quite some time and hid it from all of us. Having been an elder, he was removed from leadership to go through a restoration process. Though he appeared repentant with his words, it soon became apparent that he was out for vengeance.

On our wedding night, while we slept, there was a fire in our room, which quickly filled with smoke. I woke up feeling like I was choking. We were taken to the hospital and told by the doctors that we never should have survived. They said we both should have died that night.

As a result of the smoke inhalation, chest X-rays showed, I had gotten pneumonia very badly. I was barely conscious for those two weeks of our honeymoon and I don’t even remember most of it. We came home after two weeks to a divided church and vicious rumors circulating. The elder who had been living a double life had made appointments with each of our leaders alleging that we had grossly mistreated him after his sin was exposed. He told many of our trusted leaders and members that I, in particular, had refused to forgive him and wouldn’t even speak to him. Given the

great mistrust of white people in this community—and seeing as how I was now considered white—people readily accepted his story as truth. Within six months, we lost seventy-five percent of our church as a result of these lies. We lost most of our closest friends in this web of deceit, and many of them walked out of our lives with unashamed hatred toward us.

My health continued to decline. I found out that I had contracted a medically incurable tropical disease, which caused severe exhaustion and weakness most of the time.

By 2011, our thriving, vibrant ever-growing church had dwindled down to thirty people, many of whom still questioned if we could be trusted. As a result of the rumors, some people lost confidence in us, and our salary was cut almost in half. We struggled to pay rent, buy food and gas, and live day to day.

I felt utterly lost and alone, hated and alienated among the very people I left everything to love and serve. I also felt abandoned by God.

By October of 2011, I was so sick that I struggled to live day to day. Living in a poor community in South Africa also meant that pollution was really bad where we lived. My doctor told us that if I continued to live in Soweto, I would likely die within two years.

This shook us to the core. After much prayer, however, we felt the Lord was saying otherwise; that we were to stay and I would be restored.

As we neared the end of 2011, a momentum was finally building in the church again. We had been gutted by the countless trials and were still trying to recover, but the process of rebuilding had begun. We thought the worst was over . . . only to find it was yet to come.

During these two years full of rejection and hatred and violent slander, there was only one person who stood with me through it all. One person who refused to listen to rumors, who was not afraid to speak the truth to those who lied, the only one who openly stood as a friend in a time when it was very unpopular to be associated with me, the one person I could say was like a sister to me.

On December 30, 2011—my thirty-fifth birthday—that one person, my closest friend in South Africa, drowned. And another close friend of ours also drowned trying to save her. Words cannot describe the force of this grief and loss. Losing her was like losing ten people. At that time, she was the sum total of true community for me. We spent about three full days driving around the city delivering the horrible news to her family and her closest friends.

One week after that, my husband and I were assaulted at gunpoint by seven cops for no identifiable reason. It was a terrifying twenty-minute ordeal. I was left wondering, What kind of a wilderness have I come to where those threatening my life are the very ones I'm supposed to trust?

This is merely a "list" of events that we've suffered, but the internal turmoil and suffering is incalculable; immeasurable; indescribable. In one of the darkest moments, the Lord drew near. After months of crying out to Him and wondering why He felt so far in the darkest moments, He drew near in a way that I could sense and feel. I was reading Isaiah 53: "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised. . . . He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors."

In some sense, my God "left" the comfort and glory of heaven to put Himself on earth in the weakness of human flesh. That, in and of itself, is unbelievable. But that wasn't all. He put Himself on earth, laying aside His privileges of being God (Phil 2) for the sake of saving fallen mankind, the single most selfless act in human history . . . only to be "despised and forsaken of men"; to become "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"; to be numbered with the transgressors. My holy, righteous, omnipresent, omnipotent God who spoke all of creation into being at the sound of His voice was regarded as a transgressor. Though He was perfect and innocent, regarded as a transgressor. For the first time in three years, I felt deeply His nearness. I, too, left everything, coming to South Africa as a brown girl longing to love and serve. I, too, was

to be numbered with hatred as something that I am not, as a white oppressor with the scores of injustices perpetrated. Though I am far too fallible to be compared with our glorious Savior, I saw His story in mine. I somehow felt for the first time in so long a sense of redemptive purpose in the midst of unspeakable suffering.

I saw it was the gospel message. Although there are seasons of the Lord's discipline, I saw that suffering is the inextricable base-color thread woven through the fabric of the gospel. It is the canvas upon which salvation has been painted. Somehow in modern-day Christian circles, we tend to see God's faithfulness as saving us from suffering. And yes, sometimes, in His great mercy, He does save us from suffering. But that is not the mark of His faithfulness. We see in Scripture that many of those He loved deeply are also those who suffered greatly.

This great moment of nearness with my Father didn't remove the pain or the unspeakable grief, but it filled it with purpose and redemption. By the end of 2012, my health was steadily improving and my relationship with the Lord is steadily being restored. It has taken months of drawing near to Him, but I am now standing on my feet again. Still healing, but definitely standing. I see the fruit of suffering. And I see His story in mine.