

*Why Does It
Have to Hurt?*

Why Does It Have to Hurt?

The Meaning of
Christian Suffering



DAN G. McCARTNEY

R&R

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION



A Problem for All Seasons

MY GOD, MY GOD, why have you abandoned me? Why have you abandoned ME!

Jesus cried those words. Have you? I would guess, since you are reading this book, that you have at least once or twice come face to face with the mind-numbing sense that God has not only abandoned you but is actively sending turmoil into your life. If you haven't yet, you will. And if you are relating to God personally and honestly, you too will cry out in confusion from time to time. You will sometimes have questions that seem almost blasphemous to raise.

Why did my father, one of the kindest, most humble, and most gentle men I have ever known, have to endure the horrible prolonged agony of cancer in his bones? Why does my friend, a godly man struggling with cancer, have to endure the added burden of his son's addiction to cocaine? Why was a four-year-old child who was adopted at birth and growing up in a stable home taken from the only parents he has ever known and given to his biological father by some judge, in contradiction of the state's adoption laws? And why did that biological father who pursued this legal travesty then aban-

don the child? Why does God allow extremists who call themselves Christians to blow up buildings with little kids inside? Why are little kids in the city randomly shot in shoot-outs between drug dealers? Why does God inflict not just momentary suffering but *generations* of suffering by taking a mother away from her young children? Why does God permit things like the genocide in Rwanda, the torture and execution of millions of Jews in Germany, the Armenian massacre in Turkey, the famine and fighting in Somalia, or the destruction of millions of not-yet-born infants by the injection of salt into their brains, or a host of other horrors?

These questions are hard enough. But it gets even harder when you, or someone you deeply love, suffers personally. Then the questions become excruciating. Suffering raises the deepest questions of life, of meaning, of reality, of truth, of personhood. It is natural to ask such questions. In fact, it is unnatural not to ask them. We instinctively recognize that suffering ought not to be. We know that something is *wrong*. Suffering is one of the deep, disturbing mysteries of life. Some mysteries, like why some stars appear older than the universe, bother astrophysicists but do not touch us. The mystery of suffering, however, confronts everyone. It is a problem for all seasons.

Both Christians and non-Christians face this mystery, but it is a particularly crucial question for Christians, who believe that God is both good and all-powerful. Remember the command in 1 Peter that you should “be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (3:15)? That command occurs in a passage dealing with suffering! Being always ready to explain our hope means being able to deal with this problem.

The meaning of suffering is not only important for our defending Christianity before the world. It is perhaps the hardest question of all for Christians to answer *for themselves*.

We are psychologically incapable of leaving this question alone. Suffering gets personal. We may ignore it for a while, but as soon as *we* experience suffering, the question comes back as insistently as ever. And when we or someone we love suffers greatly and the world appears senseless and God is as remote as he can be, the question becomes all-consuming. The question “Why?” becomes “Why *me*?” How can *we* make sense out of something that appears so senseless?

Christians must think about these questions. Suffering generates feelings that are often jumbled and incoherent, and to make sense of things and bring order to our feelings, we need truth. And to find truth, we must turn to the Scriptures.

I must say up front that I do not think the Bible gives anything like a definitive answer to every question on suffering. But the Bible does speak of it often; it shows us how to view suffering, and it points to specific ways in which God *uses* suffering.

In fact, we could say that the Bible is *the* book about suffering. From suffering’s origins in the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3 to its final defeat in Revelation 21, over and over the biblical writers raise the questions of why God’s chosen people are suffering and what their response should be. Israel’s bondage in Egypt, Israel’s suffering in the wilderness, their experience of oppression from their neighbors, their constant warfare, their droughts, and their exile are all problems for the biblical writers. Indeed, it was the question of suffering that gave rise to most of the Bible. And it is not just the travails of the collective people that are in view. Job’s individual, personal afflictions, the psalmists’ troubles, and the persecutions of the prophets give cause for questioning God again and again. And the New Testament deals not only with the suffering of God’s people but also with the agonizing question of why God’s own unique Son suffered.

After almost two thousand years of theological meditation, Christ's suffering does not appear very problematic to us. But to Christians of the first century, the suffering of the Messiah was a huge stumbling block. Remember how Peter reacted when Jesus first said he had to suffer and die? "No way, Jesus—you can't do that; God would never allow it." How could God allow his anointed conqueror to be put to death by Rome—and so ignominiously? The Bible's answers to suffering are never simple, but they do help us to put our own sufferings in perspective and to learn to trust God.

This book will focus on certain key passages of Scripture to answer the "whys" of suffering. First, in answer to the question "Why is there suffering at all?" chapter 1 will look closely at Genesis 3. After we see how God and suffering are related (chapter 2), I will focus on how God's sovereignty relates to this question, first in general (chapter 3) and then with special attention to Job and the problem of *unjust* suffering (chapter 4). Chapters 5 through 8 ask more specifically why *Christians* suffer, looking particularly at 1 Peter. Finally, I will address how we can endure suffering (chapter 9) and examine some psalms that are most helpful to sufferers (chapter 10).

CHAPTER 1



Why Is There Suffering at All? A Look at Genesis 3

IF YOU BELIEVE IN GOD, you have a problem. If God is both good and all-powerful, how can there be suffering in the world? Why did God permit it in the first place? Could he not have created a perfect world without suffering and death? These are not just abstract questions for theologians—they are questions that deeply trouble us, especially when we ourselves encounter suffering. But before we can answer any of these questions, we must think about what suffering is.

What Is Suffering?

If you are going through suffering, you may think this is a stupid question. But experiencing something, and knowing what it is, are not the same. Suffering is not just pain. Pain is ordinarily a good thing. It keeps the body sound, it trains reflexes and coordination, and it teaches the body what to avoid. Philip Yancey's classic book *Where Is God When It Hurts?*¹ has an extensive chapter on the pain system that shows how excellent it is for the

functioning of the body. In fact, when the pain system stops working, as in the case of leprosy (Hansen's disease), it is devastating for the body. If we say, "Well, yes, pain is good, but why does it have to *hurt*?" the answer is that it must hurt or we don't pay enough attention to it. God knew what he was doing when he created a nervous system that feels pain.

In fact, only recently has pain itself been regarded as something we think we should not have to experience. In modern America we think we deserve to be insulated from all pain, even accidental pain or pain caused by our own foolishness, and we press lawsuits for "pain and suffering" even when we ourselves are largely responsible. But for most of the world's history, pain has been regarded simply as a part of life.

Oddly, my own experience with extreme physical pain has not produced the same kinds of questions as those raised by experiencing evil. When I was writhing on a floor five thousand miles from home and screaming my head off, I was not asking "Why?" or any other complicated question. My thought processes could hold onto little more than "God, please make it stop!" I had no ability to reflect on whether God was really there, or whether I was being punished, or how God's sovereignty fit into the picture, or any other theological question. But when I experience suffering because of evil, then all kinds of questions flood in.

Our real problem is not pain but senseless, seemingly arbitrary pain, or pain deliberately caused by others, and above all, *mortal* pain, pain which goes all the way to death. *Oppression*, or wanton infliction of pain both physical and mental by other people or demonic powers, is what is evil. If you look at the word for "suffer" in the New Testament, you will notice it is never used for just pain; suffering always refers to oppression, or something caused by wickedness.² In fact, it most often refers to Christ's suffering or the suffering that Christians experience because they belong to Christ. It can

be physical, but it can equally well involve being slandered or having family relationships damaged. The Hebrew Old Testament does not have a word that quite matches the Greek word for “suffer.” But its more descriptive terms, translated “affliction,” “trouble,” “oppression,” or “grief,” which indicate poverty or any humiliating condition, are all very common. These too indicate conditions caused by evil. It is when you experience affliction and oppression, when pain runs amok, when pain is seemingly futile, and when evil is so clearly present, that questions are raised. Then is when you begin to question all you know of God—his wisdom, his justice, his goodness, his sovereignty, even his being.

Another difference between pain and suffering is that pain is experienced by the body and could be good or bad, but suffering is experienced by the *self*, the person, the “soul,” the “I.” As C. S. Lewis noticed, “You don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer.”³ Suffering is the soul’s response to experiencing evil. If you are suffering, it might be because of the evil of disruption or alienation from your body (physical suffering). But it is more likely that you are feeling a form of alienation from others as the victim of oppression, racism, hatred, or a shattered marriage, or you’ve experienced betrayal, abandonment, or dehumanization. Or perhaps you are alienated within yourself, experiencing depression, trauma, jealousy, self-hatred, psychosis, hopelessness, or humiliation. And to top it off, perhaps you are feeling abandoned by and separated from God. All of these are your *soul’s* experience of evil. Where did all this evil kind of suffering come from?

The Origin of Human Suffering

For Christians, this *appears* to be an easy question. The Bible answers it clearly and early. In fact, it is the first issue ad-

dressed after the account of creation. Most readers of this book probably already know the story in Genesis 3, which tells how Adam and Eve tried to declare their independence from God and how human life was cursed as a result. What many people do not realize, however, is that this story of the origin of human suffering contains within it the seeds of God's *remedy* for suffering. The first and most significant curse fell not on people but on the Serpent.

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (vv. 14–15)

This story is not about how the snake developed its means of locomotion; it is about the humiliation and curse of Satan, the great enemy of God and humanity. God was not about to allow humanity to be Satan's tame pet. So God first dealt with the perpetrator of this evil by setting up a war. God is a God of peace, but he does not make peace with Satan. In fact it is *because* God is a God of peace that he is at war, and sets us at war, with Satan. Paul tells the Roman Christians that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under *your* feet" (Rom. 16:20). God is winning the war, and has even won the war already, because the Man Jesus Christ crushed the head of Satan by his crucifixion and resurrection; yet Christians are getting their feet bloody. Warfare is not at all comfortable—it is the source of vast suffering, even for the victors. Satan is not holding back anything in this war. He hates humanity because it reminds him of God, and

so humanity, the “image of God,” has become Satan’s target for “getting back at” God. But we should also remember that humankind is also a bane to Satan.

Suffering in Relationships

It was not only Satan who was cursed. God also cursed the rebellious man and woman. First, he said to the woman: “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (v. 16).

Here is the origin of suffering by disruption of human relationships. Rather than harmony in marriage, there will be oppression and tyranny. A shadow will pall the joy of procreation by the tremendous pain and danger added to it. Note, by the way, that when the woman is cursed in Genesis 3, God says that he will *greatly increase* the pain in childbearing, which suggests that even before the Fall there was pain. But after our rebellion it became suffering. And perhaps the increased “pain in childbearing” includes not only the physical pain, which is usually over in a few hours, but the agonies of raising children.

Although this curse is directed to the woman, it is actually of broader application than the female half of humanity. The curse on human relationships not only means that marriage will be disharmonious and women will be oppressed; all the relationships of family and people are disrupted. Husbands abuse their wives, and wives manipulate their husbands. The “generation gap” is not unique to our century; parents and children have complained about each other for millennia. And we see right in the next chapter in Genesis how soon sibling rivalry blossomed into fratricide. Perhaps more suffering is generated within families than in any other social arena.

Suffering unto Death

Finally, God curses Adam, who here represents all humans, for his rebellion.

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (vv. 17–19)

Some people have observed that God says the ground, not the man, was cursed. Nevertheless, this is certainly a curse on the man, because the point is that all humanity will have a tough life, with death at the end of it. Work, rather than being a delight, became frustrating and unrewarding. Instead of cooperating with humanity, the earth resists yielding its benefits and will throw all kinds of obstacles in the way of enjoyment of work. Even the best of jobs now has its agonies, its setbacks, and its frustrations. Conversely, humankind has become destructive toward the very means of sustenance (the earth), wantonly killing and polluting for short-term economic gain. And of course the ultimate curse is death, the climax of suffering. Until the end of this world, people will die gruesomely. There is no escape.

Suffering and Redemption

The main point of Genesis 3 is this: God has ordained suffering! It is a result of his curse. Suffering is not something out-

side of his dominion or beyond his control. But also note here that suffering is not merely punitive. It is also *redemptive*. Suffering is not God's vindictive bashing of humanity for its disobedience; it is God's means of restoring rightness to his creation and rescuing us from the evil situation we produced for ourselves.

We can see this from the curses themselves. The curse of the Serpent (which also involves suffering for the offspring of the woman) is sometimes called the "proto-gospel," the first announcement of the Redeemer. The descendant of the woman will crush Satan's head. Warfare with Satan is the first correlate of peace with God. Deliverance from sin and its consequences is going to come by way of those consequences.

Further, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden and denied access to the tree of life. The curse condemned them to death. But it turned out that the most redemptive act of all was death, the death of the ultimate Human Being, Jesus Christ. *By taking the curse himself, God transformed the curse into redemption, including the curse that we experience in our own suffering.* We will return to this idea later, but here we should note that if our first parents had been able to eat of that tree and live forever, then there could have been no redeeming death, and they and we would have continued forever in separation from God.

Even the curse of the woman is, according to 1 Timothy 2:15, a conduit of salvation. The enigmatic saying, "She will be saved through the childbearing" does not mean that a woman is spiritually saved by her own physical bearing of children, but that, as she is linked to Eve, womankind is instrumental in salvation by *the* childbearing, the bringing forth of Jesus, the "seed of the woman" who would crush the head of the Serpent, according to the promise of Genesis 3:15.⁴ I think it is also a reminder that women experience a unique kind of pain. It is extremely intense pain (I have heard), but there is joy at the end of it. It reminds us also of another

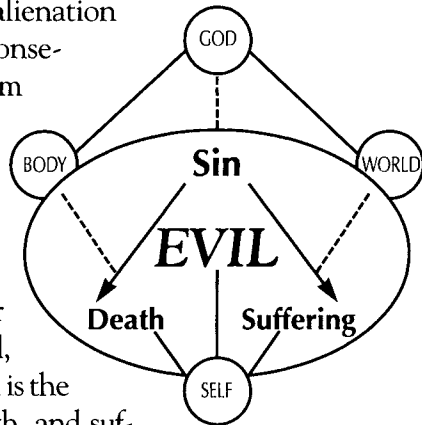
statement of Paul's that "we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22 NKJV).

So the general answer to why there is suffering is, oddly, because God *cares* about the relationship he has with his image bearers. He does not shrug off our rebellion. Suffering is part of the curse that results from sin, but suffering is also part of the solution.

Evil and Suffering

But is not suffering evil? Yes, in the sense that evil is at the root of all suffering. Either human wickedness or demonic wickedness lies behind all suffering. Even disease is classifiable as oppression by Satan—it is a bondage (Luke 13:16).

As Peter Kreeft points out,⁵ there are three kinds of evil: Sin is our rebellion against and alienation from God. Death is the consequence of sin, alienation from our bodies. Suffering is the consequence of sin that involves alienation and disharmony between ourselves as embodied beings and the rest of creation. Since our bodies are part of the world, suffering is deadly, and death is the ultimate suffering. Sin, death, and suffering separate us from God, our bodies, and the world.



Suffering is evil, because evil is any "breaking of what is good." But if suffering is evil, how can God allow it? There is no complete answer to this question, but we must say at the outset that the Bible tells us God can *use* evil, including suffering, for his own good purposes (Gen. 50:20) even when we cannot know what those purposes may be.

Here is where we must start. God's sovereignty is the most important groundwork for any biblical dealing with suffering. If God does not have control over evil, then evil is only senseless and meaningless, and it is silly to ask, "Why is there suffering?" I will say more on this later. But in answer to the general question, "Why is there suffering?", the answer is that *suffering is always a consequence of the curse*. It is therefore *indirectly* the consequence of our sinfulness.

Now, suffering is *sometimes* the direct consequence of our own sin (Jer. 13:22). This only makes sense. If we attempt to "violate" God's physical laws (such as gravity), we suffer the consequences. So it should not be surprising to discover that violating God's moral laws also results in evil consequences, to ourselves and others. Our society encourages us to slough off responsibility, and there is a danger that we may blind ourselves to our own sin as the cause of our suffering.

On the other hand, in this life the *direct* cause of suffering may be, in fact probably more often is, the sin of someone else, or even of no one in particular. Clearly, the people who suffered in the Oklahoma City bombing were not suffering for their own sins; they were and are suffering because of someone else's sin. There is often very little correlation between a particular instance of suffering and an identifiable sin on the part of the sufferer.

But our *susceptibility* to suffering, and the ultimate causes for the imposition of suffering in general, lie in humanity's Great Rebellion. Jesus pointed out (Luke 13: 1–5) that the Galileans whom Pilate had wantonly murdered did not suffer because they were especially wicked; they suffered because suffering is the lot of fallen humankind.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too

will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. (vv. 2–5)

Suffering tells us that something is wrong. If there were no suffering, how many of us would be concerned either with God or with the welfare of others? The overwhelming immensity of suffering, the fact that there is *so much* of it, ought to give us some indication of the magnitude of the wrongness in the world and the enormity of humanity's sinfulness.

If we return now to our earlier question, "Why did God allow sin in the first place?", although we cannot give a definitive and total answer, we can say a few things. Paul tells us that God allowed sin because the process of redeeming people from sin would bring greater honor, a kind of astonishment at the extent of God's grace (see for example Rom. 5:20). Also, as the theologians of the Middle Ages used to point out, the unity of Christians with their God in the God-Man Jesus Christ was in a way the result of humankind's sin. But even with these "answers" we cannot fully know why God should allow sin in his universe. We can only thank him that he has overcome it.

Suffering by itself, however, is not the severest question we face. More crucial is the question, Why is there *unjust* suffering? We will turn to this question in the next chapter.

For Further Reflection

1. Have you experienced deep suffering? What for you has raised the most serious questions in your life? How did you handle it?

2. Do you agree that “if you believe in God, you have a problem”? Explain.
3. What is the difference between pain and suffering? Is mental illness or psychological depression a form of suffering?
4. Comment on the idea that suffering is a result of our sinfulness, but not necessarily a result of our own sin?
5. How can you tell if your suffering is directly the result of your own sin?
6. Is all suffering evil? Explain.
7. “Suffering tells us that something is wrong.” How? Can we benefit from knowing that?

NOTES

1. New York: Harper, 1977.
2. The only possible exception may be the woman suffering with a long-term hemorrhage in Mark 5:25–26, but even here it could be that the suffering was from the *physicians* who took advantage of her distress and bled her of all her money. Further, as Jesus indicates in Luke 13:16, physical ailments are a form of oppression by Satan. Jesus’ healings, as well as his exorcisms, were a sign of his victory over Satan.
3. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury, 1961), 12.
4. Cf. G. W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 146f.
5. P. Kreeft, *Making Sense of Suffering* (Ann Arbor: Servant Press, 1986), 24.