

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN HOLINESS

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A THEOLOGICAL TREATISE

Submitted to Rev. Dr. James M. Arcadi
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the course ST 7070:
Models of Sanctification
at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

December 13, 2018
Deerfield, IL

INTRODUCTION

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*² *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*³ *For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...*
– Isa. 43:1b-3a ESV

No matter the approach, the reality of suffering “...is vexing in a particular way for people who espouse a religious faith.”¹ Its presence is problematic, its solutions everything but simple and to engage with the topic, one must humbly concede that “The reality of evil and suffering is probably the greatest single intellectual obstacle to belief in an all-good and all-powerful God.”² However, humility should not be mistaken with indifference or ignorance, but it does understand that this issue, in its pervasive and inexhaustible presence in this world, cannot be subjected to a simple fix. Occam’s Razor is rightfully dulled in the presence of suffering.

Every worldview is challenged with answering the question of suffering. However, regardless of its inescapable difficulty, the Christian worldview presents profound and comprehensive answers to suffering – an issue unresolved and simplified in the inconsistent and reductionist methods found in other worldviews.³ The solution is centralized in the centerpiece of the Christian confession: *the suffering of Jesus Christ*. The goal of this theological query will be to use the suffering of Christ as a lense by which suffering moves beyond evil and into a refining agent for holiness. In order to accomplish this, some distinctions and assumptions need to be clarified, holiness and suffering must be bridged, and some guidance regarding how to respond

¹ Mark Slatter. *Insights While Suffering: With a View to the Cross and Resurrection*. American University studies. VII, Theology and religion Vol. 345. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), 289

² Harold Netland, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering” (Lecture presented at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, April 9th, 2018, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course Christian Faith and Contemporary Challenges: PR 5600)

³ A helpful resource regarding a comparison of worldviews alongside Christianity, see Anderson, Tawa J. *An Introduction to Christian Worldview: Pursuing God’s Perspective in a Pluralistic World*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017.

to suffering will be considered. In addition, a final segment on suffering – with its subsequent effects in holiness – and ministry will suggest applications for how to engage with suffering in ministry.

MORAL EVIL VS. NATURAL EVIL AND THE GREATER GOOD

Prior to considering fully the role of suffering in holiness, some assumptions and definitions must be clarified. Suffering is a sub-category; a footnote in the greater concept of evil.

Categorically, all evil can be divided under two headings: moral evil and natural evil.

Subsequently, suffering too can be described using these same two categories. *Moral* evil/suffering is that which “...results from the choices and actions of human beings.”⁴ In other words, evil that has a clear, traceable, and therefore culpable subject. This category of evil, addressed quite frequently in scripture, is commonly identified in persecution, injustice, oppression and the like. However, even though this category most certainly plays a role in the *suffering* element regarding the role of suffering in holiness, for the sake of specificity and space, this treatise will not address it. Rather, the goal here is to explore and map the realm of natural evil.

Natural evil is “Any evil or suffering that is not moral evil -- e.g. suffering caused by earthquakes, diseases, storms, etc.”⁵ In other words, and to provide a more concise definition, natural evil is evil that does not function within the immediate parameters of a culpable subject. The role of culpability and/or its absence thereof determines the category of evil. In Ponerology,⁶ this is where the dialogue normally introduces *gratuitous* evil, or “evil or suffering that serves no

⁴ Harold Netland, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Or, the study (ology) of evil (*poneros*; from the Greek πονηρός)

useful purpose at all or that exceeds the limits necessary for achieving some greater good.”⁷ Such evil purportedly has no intended meaning and cannot, in whole of its probability, ever achieve good or be explained as to why it was allowed by God.⁸ Unfortunately, due to space, gratuitous evil will not be explored beyond one, hopefully satisfactory, assumption. Gratuitous evil is most effectively repudiated by *skeptical theism*, which humbly claims that “We ought to be skeptical about our ability to make the relevant judgment about whether or not it is likely that there is a justifying reason for the evil we observe.”⁹ Harold Netland provides a helpful explanation of this principle, observed through a series of questions:

How could any finite human being, from our limited perspective, ever know whether there is gratuitous evil? How could we know that x amount of evil and suffering is justified in serving some greater good but $x + 1$ amounts of evil exceeds this and is unjustified? Can we really think of evil in quantifiable terms?¹⁰

With this assumption regarding gratuitous evil noted, gratuitous evil will be sanctioned by humanity’s inescapable ignorance, which, having no legitimate reason to determine any contradiction exists in the relationship between seemingly pointless evil and God’s goodness, cannot disprove a greater good theodicy.

The following observations below will operate *just outside* of what is known as a greater-good theodicy. The reason for the qualifier “just outside,” is because a fully greater-good theodicy, according to Bruce Little, affirms that “...God allows into this world *only* that evil from which he can bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil.”¹¹ The understanding that

⁷ Harold Netland, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering”

⁸ Chad V. Meister, and James K. Dew, eds. *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2013), 38

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22

¹⁰ Harold Netland, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering”

¹¹ Meister and Dew eds., *God and Evil*, 38; Italics mine

any present evil *only* exist for a greater good or against a worse evil is too simplistic. Rather, Netland provides a good qualifier, writing

Even if it is granted that God allows for the reality of evil in general because its presence can be used by God to accomplish a greater good according to his purposes, it does not follow from this that every particular instance of evil or suffering in the world contributes to a greater good.¹²

Therefore, this renders the assumed theodicy paradigm as *God allows evil knowing it to be a necessary element in bringing about a greater good or preventing a worse evil, upholding the standard of free will he, himself established with the dichotomy of Eden.*¹³

The expression “greater good” is quite vague, and requires some further distillation before proceeding. A greater good can be expressed in many ways and fall under many definitions. Therefore, in seeking to understand how suffering as a result of natural evil most directly influences the believer, suffering must be addressed in how it relates to the deepest and ever changing element of the Christian ontology: *holiness*. Though enigmatic and nearly esoteric in its definition, no Christian has ever been removed from reckoning holiness and Christ’s call within them thereto. The term is most readily seen inside many common topic areas of the Christian faith, from discipline to doctrines of God. But what of suffering? Can evil contribute to the development of the truest Christian’s greater good – i.e., holiness?

¹² Harold Netland, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering”

¹³ The dichotomy of Eden is an expression that means simply the requirement of the decision between obedience and disobedience, wherein the paradigm of free will is must fundamentally upheld. Any cohesion beyond defining the parameters of the decision would have prevented the requirement that mankind choose freely within the dichotomy

SUFFERING

*The enemy pursues me,
he crushes me to the ground;
he makes me dwell in the darkness
like those long dead.*
– Psalm 143:3 NIV

No matter its difficulty, pervasiveness and complete immanence, Christian's must readily acknowledge that "...suffering is something that must be walked through."¹⁴ When it happens, it cannot be avoided, and avoiding it does not prevent it from happening. Suffering is essential to humanity. There is no part of the world immune to it and life, regardless of where one might be, will always be effected by it, either directly or indirectly. Mark Slatter, a catholic priest and theologian, comments powerfully on this reality, and observes that "The story of the Garden of Eden is an archetype of the necessity of leaving innocence behind and coming into a world where there is good and evil."¹⁵ He continues,

At one time or another we are expelled, barred, and 'driven from' (Gen. 3:24) the Eden of our warm childhood familial hearths, our longing for the perfect worshipping community, our desire for relationship that could never go awry, and the general hope for a trouble-free existence. To grow and to grow up we have to leave behind the idealism of an Edenic existence and be wounded by the knowledge of good and evil through disappointments, betrayals, suffering, weakness, and limitations.¹⁶

So humanity, having left Eden behind, stands in the hot and thorny untilled earth of life, wherein many obstacles will cause much relentless pain. Wherein does this humanity find solace?

In the current, post-enlightenment world, suffering is often viewed as *depreciation*. In other words, when Christ is considered primeval, suffering is simply a degradation; the slow but natural rendering of the self until it is reduced to both corporeal and ethereal nothingness. The

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*. (New York: Dutton, 2013), 226

¹⁵ Slatter, *Insights While Suffering*, 285

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 286

lack of that which is greater subjects humanity to the cruelty of nature, red in tooth and claw. But what happens when the idea of God is made real? What happens when, despite suffering, the goodness and love of this God is upheld, and suffering is imbued with meaning? Suffering, while it still can, no longer has to function as a depreciation. Rather, suffering can become the means for *sanctification*. Suffering is no longer the progression to some inevitable, rotting end. Rather, it becomes the medium of refinement; the grinding stone upon which spiritual maturity, understanding, discipline, faithfulness and dependence upon God are honed.

CAUSE AND EFFECT: SUFFERING AND ITS ROLE IN HOLINESS

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.
– Job 23:10

The unanswered question still lingers: How does Christ provide the means by which Christians can understand suffering? When introducing the Son of God into the survey of one's suffering, suffering is purposed and made consonant in Christ. But to understand why this is, five theological claims need to be asserted and defended, and when combined, form a premise:

- a) We exist to bring God glory
- b) Our existence features suffering
- c) God thought it necessary not to prevent suffering
- d) Because of Christ, there is ontological significance to the existence of suffering
- e) Suffering exists to bring God glory

Premise A – We exist to bring God glory. Keller writes “According to all branches of Christian theology, the ultimate purpose of life is to glorify God.”¹⁷ The purpose of mankind goes back to this simple point, instilled by the image in which humanity was created.¹⁸ By bearing God's

¹⁷ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 167

¹⁸ Gen. 1:26-27

image, humanity was ingrained with the purpose of reflecting that image, understanding its weight and living with the joy that accompanies it. It is natural to conclude, therefore, that if one is created by, sustained, and continually loved by God, then one's natural response is to glorify God in all things as the one who creates, sustains and loves humanity. Further, here is where a paradoxically simple but profound content of holiness can be situated: to achieve the purest form of Giving God glory, one must achieve holiness.

Premise B – Our existence features suffering. Having created humanity, God instituted free will, and in so doing, required the dichotomous decision of Eden wherein humanity was to decide between obedience and disobedience. Upon choosing the latter, evil – and therefore, suffering – was introduced into the knowledge and experience of humanity. This opposed God's volition, and subjected humanity to the consequence of their decision. Today, a simple glance at the local news source is as far as one needs to go to witness the reality of suffering.

Premise C – God thought it necessary to not prevent suffering. The question then arises: If God is all powerful, and could therefore have no hindrance within the means by which he accomplishes his work, did he need to make a world with suffering? Here is where the sequence of the premise begins to bear weight. The reality of the Christian's existence is that "...the world as it is, which includes the laws of the physical universe, must be a place where there is freedom, fallibility, suffering, sin and the statistical inevitabilities and probability of accidents..." because "...God thought this world the best of all possible worlds..."¹⁹ John Piper helps connect Premise C with Premise A when writing "I believe the entire universe exists to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God.... Therefore, this is the ultimate aim and the final explanation of

¹⁹ Slatter, *Insights While Suffering*, 292

all things – including suffering.”²⁰ Timothy Keller, drawing a similar conclusion, believes “...that the first – but perhaps hardest to grasp – purpose for our suffering is the glory of God.”²¹ But, like an incessant toddler on the brink of existential angst, the question remains: *Why?* Why is a world with suffering the best of all worlds and that which brings God glory?

Premise D: Because of Christ, there is ontological significance to the existence of suffering. Christ and his work on the cross becomes the crux within which suffering and holiness meet, for “Meaning in suffering is best understood in light of the suffering of Jesus.”²² The suffering of God’s beloved son epitomizes the reality that God’s glorious grace was most revealed in an act of suffering.²³ This assumes that even the painful and thorny reality of suffering can be redeemed by God through new meaning, for, “...Christ has given it meaning, not only for salvation but also for sanctification, and that is the best part.”²⁴

Christ ascribed meaning to suffering when he underwent the purest and most gruesome rendering of it on the cross. For the sake of humanity, we was mutilated and killed. And yet, it is “To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”²⁵ This verse, found in 1 Peter, features two notable statements: 1) *Christ suffered for you*, and 2) *leaving you an example*. First, *Christ suffered for you*. When Christ suffered for humanity, he stepped into the judgment that was owed to mankind. His work in suffering for humanity ensured the salvation and subsequent union with God that they were now capable of experiencing. But this act of suffering did not just establish

²⁰ John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds. *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2006), 81

²¹ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 167

²² Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, eds. *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2011), 180

²³ See Piper and Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, pp. 82-83

²⁴ Waters and Zuck, *Why, O God?*, 17

²⁵ 1 Peter 2:21

the means of salvation. It, indicated in the quote by Joni Erickson Tada above, was given meaning “...not only for salvation, *but also for sanctification, and that is the best part.*”²⁶ Second, *leaving you an example*. By this, Peter means, an example “...that you might follow....” But how is Christ’s salvific work on the cross able to be followed? He was the only one who could achieve the salvific plan set in motion by God at the fall of humanity, for he was without sin. It mustn’t be understood that Peter means we are to die for the salvation of others. His meaning is both that Christ is an example of how the Christian engages with suffering, and that how one engages with suffering determines how man become more like Christ. In other words, *Christ, in his suffering, made a way for the Christian’s suffering to achieve holiness*. Ajith Fernando writes “The good that comes out of all our experiences²⁷ is that we will become what God intended when he predestined us: being conformed to the image of Christ.”²⁸

The reality of Christ’s work on the cross “...does not relieve us of the struggle against suffering.”²⁹ But the new meaning it bears sustains the sufferer in such a way that brings them ever closer to Christ-likeness. It is “...like a sheep dog snapping at my heels, driving me down the road to Calvary, where otherwise I might not naturally inclined to go.”³⁰ Slatter, writing on the paradoxical nature of suffering, powerfully writes:

I try to solve the paradoxes of evil and suffering but never quite manage to live in it and to be taken and ultimately transformed through it. But when the problem is put against the horizon of a crucified God the *eros* of the question and the hope of a response are contained and settled, and as an ‘answer’ but as a place where my questions can be met, heard, received, and responded to. I now have a place of permission to live in the paradoxes.³¹

²⁶ Waters and Zuck, *Why, O God?*, 17

²⁷ Here understood as sufferings

²⁸ Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2007), 65

²⁹ Kristiaan Depoortere. *A Different God: A Christian View of Suffering*. Louvain theological & pastoral monographs 17. Louvain : ([Grand Rapids, Mich.]: Peeters Press ; W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 119

³⁰ Waters and Zuck, *Why, O God?*, 18

³¹ Slatter, *Insights While Suffering*, 297

Slatter's "...permission to live in the paradoxes," is a powerful condensation of the role of suffering in holiness, for the result of suffering being holiness is paradoxical indeed. Inside of this ever pulling tension, the paradox of suffering is the hottest crucible, wherein wisdom is made from the destruction of the impurities of humanities infinite capacity to be finite. Suffering is humbling. It breaks any and all dependence on anything but God. Piper concludes that "...God ordains suffering to help us release our hold on worldly hopes and put our 'hope in God.'"³² Therefore, the ultimate role of the cross is knowing that nothing supersedes the power of Christ and his presence in the life of the Christian, for "If you remember with grateful amazement that Jesus was thrown into the ultimate furnace *for* you, you can begin to sense him in your smaller furnaces *with* you."

Premise E: Suffering exists to bring God glory. In tying up the argument, suffering and the created purpose of bringing God glory are bridged. Therefore, suffering and holiness are bridged, because (again) holiness is the purest manifestation of bringing God glory. Because God's truest manifestation of his glorious grace was in the suffering of His son, then the truest manifestation of his glorious grace in the life of the Christian is in the experiences of suffering. In Christ, "...suffering [relates] to your character like fire relates to gold."³³

PASTORAL APPLICATION: RESPONSE, WITNESS AND ENDURANCE

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

– 2 Cor. 4:17-18

³² Piper and Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 109

³³ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 234

After this above noted, *brief* attempt at seeing the role of suffering in holiness, part of the exploration of this relationship is its application within the ministerial context. Suffering not only brings about holiness in the sufferer, but it evokes holiness in those who witness a faithful response to it. Because “we are the living examples of our responses,” the way in which the Christian responds to suffering is telling of the Christ whom they serve. Suffering reveals most potently to the world that Christ knows fully what it is humanity endures in suffering. Kristiaan Depoortere writes “...only those persons who have come to terms with their own limits and have experienced moral, physical, and metaphysical evil without yielding, will be able to help other humans when they are confronted with their limits.”³⁴ Why does this matter? Because “...where reason sometimes finds its limitation, where our strengths wane – in these places we meet God...”³⁵ By knowing and displaying her limits, the Christian reveals where she ends and God begins.

Ajith Fernando tells the story of George Harley, a medical doctor who was a missionary to Liberia. He served in a remote village, 17 days walk from any form of civilization. After serving in this village for nearly 5 years, not one person had converted to the cause of Christ. Weekly worship meetings were held, but not a single African villager would attend. Then suddenly, Harley’s son of 5 years died. Fernando writes,

He himself had to make the coffin and carry it to the place of burial. He was all alone there except for one African who had come to help him. As Harley was shoveling the soil into the casket, he was overcome with grief, and he buried his face in the fresh dirt and sobbed. The African who was watching all this raised the doctor’s head by the hair and looked into his face for a long time. Then he ran into the village crying, “White man, white man, he cry like one of us.” At the following Sunday service the place was packed with Africans.³⁶

³⁴ Depoortere, *A Different God*, 121

³⁵ Slatter, *Insights While Suffering*, 281

³⁶ Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain*, 96

Through the suffering of George Harley, the village came to understand that to belong to Jesus does not mean one is void of suffering. Fernando eloquently concludes "...in our own nations, before people are enamored by Jesus, they will need to see us become one with them in their experiences."³⁷

However, what about endurance within the church of Christ? What is a pastor to say to the hard questions about suffering? Initially, the pastor should convey that Christ never promised his followers an easy, suffer free life. In fact, "The reality of complex suffering should keep us from the common misconception that a lifestyle of wisdom and preparation is a formula for ease and success."³⁸ With simplicity, Billy Graham comments on the matter, writing "The Christian... must expect conflict, not an easy cozy life. He is a soldier, and as it has been said, his captain never promised him immunity from the hazards of battle."³⁹ Second, it is vitally important that the pastor dispel any doubts that the congregant might have about whether or not God loves them. It might be helpful to have the congregant meditate over a mantra that is similar to this one, recited by Keller:

"This is my furnace. I am not being punished for my sins, because Jesus was thrown into that ultimate fire for me. And so if he went through that greatest fire steadfastly for me, I can go through this smaller furnace steadfastly for him. And I know it means that if I trust in him, this furnace will only make me better."

Third, and in the same line as the above noted recitation, resources that the congregant can engage with regularly could be helpful. These resources could be books, songs, or even poems. The following poem is a part of a conglomeration of poetry gathered by the 1950's pastor and theologian, William Goulooze, whose text *Blessings of Suffering* is both approachable and effectual. The poem therein reads:

³⁷ Ibid., 97

³⁸ Gerald W. Peterman, *Between Pain & Grace: A Biblical Theology of Suffering*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 284

³⁹ Billy Graham, *Till Armageddon: A Perspective on Suffering*. (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1981), 134

Not now, but in the coming years,
It may be in the better land,
We'll read the meaning of our tears,
And there, sometime, we'll understand

We'll catch the broken thread again,
And finish what we here began;
Heav'n will the mysteries explain,
And then, ah, then, we'll understand

God knows the way, He holds the key,
He guides us with unerring hand;
Sometime with tearless eyes we'll see;
Yes, there, up there, we'll understand

Then trust in God thru all the days;
Fear not, for He doth hold thy hand;
Though dark thy ways, still sing and praise,
Sometime, sometime, we'll understand⁴⁰

Fourth, the pastor should connect those who have endured suffering with those who are starting to or have yet to. The intermingling and testimony of experience can be most edifying in the task of understanding the role of suffering.

CONCLUSION

Lastly, and as both a conclusion and a continuation of the former section, perhaps the following interpretation of Lewis' *Prince Caspian* in his Narnia Chronicles can provide an effectual means of understanding the raw, thorny, yet crucible-like nature of suffering in light of God. In the story of *Prince Caspian*, Peter, Susan, Edmond and Lucy have all returned to Narnia. Aslan has vanished and Lucy particularly desires to see him once again. During the night in the midst of the tale, Lucy awakes to a stirring in the forest. She goes out to investigate.

⁴⁰ "Some Time We'll Understand," quoted in William Goulooze, *Blessings of Suffering*, (Grand Rapids: Mich., Baker Book House, 1951), 126

A circle of grass, smooth as a lawn, meet her eyes, with dark trees dancing all around it. And then – oh joy! For he was there: the huge Lion, shining white in the moonlight, with his huge black shadow underneath him.

But for the movement of his tail he might have been a stone lion, but Lucy never thought of that. She never stopped to think whether he was a friendly lion or not. She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far around his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane.

“Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan,” sobbed Lucy. “At last.” The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all around her. She gazed up into the large wise face. “Welcome, Child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. *But every year you grow, you will find me bigger*”⁴¹

Like Aslan’s size as Lucy has aged, God grows in size the eyes of the sufferer. Through every experience in which the Christian suffers, suffering acts as the crucible in which the Christian “...shall come out as gold.”⁴² In the end, “...perhaps the greatest good that suffering can work for a believer is to increase his or her capacity for God.”⁴³

⁴¹ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*, The Chronicles of Narnia (1951, Harper Collins, 1994), 141.

⁴² Job 23:10

⁴³ Waters and Zuck, *Why, O God?*, 19

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