

Fantasies

The Riddle of Suffering

Lies that keep us from walking in the light.

In the West, the hard-won insight that “God is love” is too often construed to mean that God is a sugar-coated benevolent person who endorses all the insights and longings of western culture and baptizes them into the lofty status of God’s will. God is too often thought of as a cosmic “public servant” who exists to help us succeed. We reason that “if God loves us he should obey our commandments” which are shaped by a value system that is more attuned to the American dream of “life, liberty, and happiness (defined in material terms)” than the cross. How often have people uncritically viewed a promotion to a higher salary as a blessing from God? A financial raise could mean that a person has become a full-fledged workaholic or is about to be seduced into such a condition. Should not a disciple of Jesus find herself living a life that more often stands against the cultural grain, rather than flowing with it. What I have just said often brings an automatic, “Yes but...” from so many of us - why? Sacred cows like materialism, nationalism, and creature comforts have become so important to our culture that they simply pass into our Christian lives unchallenged and even unquestioned.

In this section, we will challenge those who are members of “The Church of the Inaccurate Perception.” We will look at some popular false perceptions or fantasies that people embrace as they try to deny suffering its role in shaping their spiritual lives. To appreciate the importance of this section we must realize that walking in reality starts with seeing and accepting reality as reality. Jesus said, “The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad your whole body will be full of darkness.” (Matt.6:22-23). Was not the temptation of Eve in the garden (Gen.3) and Jesus in the wilderness (Matt.4) a challenge to the way they saw reality? Eve was tempted to define reality solely in terms of her physical senses. Jesus was tempted in the same way. Should we not expect our spiritual warfare to follow the same script?

When Jesus invited Peter to walk on water, he was more than happy to follow but when Jesus told Peter that He and His followers were going to carry a cross, Peter would have no part in it. We can identify with Peter. We want to power to rise above our circumstances but not the pain of enduring the injustice of a fallen world.

Most of us will struggle to live our lives in touch with reality. That is to say that we will not always behave in a way that reflects confidence in who we are as image bearers, who God is as a loving Creator, and what the world is like as an environment flawed by sin. This failure to live “in the light,” however, is not what really makes us dangerous to ourselves and to others around us. The real tragedy is the failure to see and accept “the light” of what is real. An emotionally ill person is not so only because he or she is not living in reality but more so because of an inability to identify reality. When we fail to see ourselves, God, and

the world realistically, we have no sense of where we need to change in order to grow to maturity. Furthermore, we will tend to project upon others a set of expectations that lead them not to the light but to darkness. When I expect the world to be fun, fair, and free, when I expect God to spare me from confusion, suffering, and disappointment, when I expect to be able to manage my life perfectly, I will probably be neurotic and encourage others to join me. The key to a healthy, growing life starts with seeing and accepting myself, God, and others in a realistic way. This is a major objective in any psychological or spiritual therapy. What follows is a series of tired fantasies that need to be retired.

Fantasy #1 – Only if I understand suffering, can I learn from it.

A challenge for those who suffer is to avoid cheap answers and at the same time long for a deeper knowledge of God through their pain. We may never understand why we suffer but let us be committed to profit from our pain even when we can't understand fully why it is there. We need not understand suffering to profit from it.

Talk about suffering in the right way.

The outcry in many circles after the tragedy of 911 was one of confusion. Why would anyone do this to us? Why would God allow it? It was as though we could accept the fact that tragedies like this could happen somewhere else in the world but not here. We are a Christian nation. God blesses America. It is because of who we are that we escape such suffering. Our expectations made a horrible tragedy even more terrible. Some people were beginning to connect the dots of Watergate, Vietnam, presidential sex scandals, and 911 so that it no longer was clear that God was on our side or granting us an exemption

This request came through our congregation's prayer chain not long ago: "Hi, Jean. Please share this prayer request with the prayer chain: A friend of my sister was assaulted at gunpoint yesterday, raped, and robbed of her car and purse. She is a believer. She's had a painful life with abuse from parents and a first husband. Her 2nd happy marriage ended with her husband's early death to cancer, and daughter died of brain tumor at 21 a couple of years ago. Please uphold her in your prayers."

How are we to understand and explain this woman's terrible circumstances? We might ask, "Where is a loving God in this picture? I thought that God loved us and had a wonderful plan for our lives if we trusted Him." When we read Jesus' exhortation to not be anxious about our lives because he cares for us knowing what we need and valuing us above the birds and flowers, are our expectations in line with his plan? As I mentioned earlier, he reminds us that we can trust our heavenly father to care for us just as an earthly father will not give a snake to a beloved child asking for bread. What does that mean in light of our life experiences that so often leave us feeling abused by God? Can we really count on God to treat us as a loving father would treat a beloved child? Can we count on God to protect us? In

the face of the harsh realities of a fallen world where things seem so unfair, we can understand why following Jesus takes courageous faith.

Life is not fair. It too often seems empty, pointless, and completely senseless. A fallen world is a chaotic laboratory of pain. The world is crying out for hope. There is a harshness to reality that is hard for many of us to accept. It does not easily fit the restricted context of our narrow perspective of life. This harshness challenges our superficial hopes. We choose too often to live with a “Camelot Christianity,” a fantasy where God is expected to anoint circumstances ahead of us, responds to our prayers with powerful displays of fruitfulness, and protects us from want, pain, and despair. But when we embrace this fantasy and also face the harshness of reality we are forced to ask, in what sense is a living, loving, and powerful God really out there? We want to believe that He is sovereign and that hard times have a loving purpose in our lives even if we cannot see it at the moment. But sometimes we wonder. Is the hope and expectation that so many Christians celebrate and cling to just wishful thinking, a holy hype? Am I a fool to believe that the chaos of suffering that I see and experience is really meaningful? Would any reasonable, objective observer of the life experience of God’s people conclude that God is a loving and powerful God?

It is not difficult to understand why many early American intellectuals became Deists, believing that God existed but was not directly involved in the seemingly random blessings and curses of life. Such a view seems to square with life as it is observed by so many who try to be objective.

I believe that there is a real and powerful hope in Christ that does not deny the enigma of human suffering and also does not see Jesus as a chaplain of false hopes for quick answers. I believe that we can come to know Christ and ourselves through our suffering in a way we could not without it. But for this knowledge to be experienced we must deal with the false idealism that is often used to medicate the pain of life. We must not encourage hope through a “Camelot world” of fantasy, a world that demands a clear understanding of why.

My war on Camelot Christianity started early in my Christian life. I heard many teachers, and preachers talk about the Kingdom of God and the dynamics of life in a fallen world. Often, what I heard seemed to be unrelated to my experience of life. My teachers too often gave answers to complex problems that seemed so simplistic. For example, I was led to believe that when a person came to faith in Jesus, their life would be so changed that they would no longer struggle with doubt or sin, they would no longer be lonely or afraid. They would have a never-ending peace, love, and joy that would mark them as disciples of Jesus. My experience was not so clearly marked by those blessings yet I knew that I had faith. As I read the Bible, I also felt that much of the preaching and teaching was not doing justice to the candid way in which the Biblical writers were speaking of life in this broken world. I often wanted to stand up and say, “Just a minute, my life experience and my reading of Scripture is not at all like the simple template that you are laying out. What you are saying is not true to what I see and experience.” I was led into a teaching ministry by a strong passion to tell the

story of the gospel in a way that was true to the harsh realities of a fallen world. I was not going to settle for easy answers that sounded “good” but did not find correspondence in the Bible or in life. I knew that the gospel story was best told on the far side of the complexities of life, not on the near side. I am convinced that the “simple gospel” need not be simplistic or superficial, or oblivious to the enigmas of human suffering. I am convinced that the Biblical authors were much more at home in a broken world than some teachers and preachers that I know. Suffering was a way of life for the Apostles in ways that some of us do not want to believe.

Let much of suffering remain a mystery.

I somehow felt that the “mystery of suffering” was not so much a mystery as a puzzle to be solved. I now know that much suffering falls into the category of mystery. I have come to realize that I don’t have to understand suffering to learn from it. I promised myself that I would never offer a Camelot Christianity to those who came to me for advice. I was not going to be afraid to say, “I don’t know why this is happening to you.” What I do know is that you and I have choices in how we will respond to what we face. It is in our response not our circumstances that we are identified as disciples of Jesus.

When confronted with the harsh realities of disappointment and suffering, we too often receive and give explanations that seem inadequate and uninformed by reality. It is true that the suffering of this life is nothing compared to the glory that awaits the redeemed child of God. But does not this promise imply that we should expect to drink deeply of the well of suffering in this life? For many of us, we must first appreciate the chaos and mystery of suffering. We must allow ourselves to acknowledge the pastoral and philosophical challenges that suffering and death pose to a Christian’s world, a world that too often wants to pretend that life in a fallen state is not that bad.

Many of the popular responses to the problem of suffering seem unsatisfying. Let me share some of them and why they leave me looking for a more complete understanding. I must confess that in my search for meaning to suffering, I do not always have convincing answers. What I offer is a way of looking at suffering so as to learn from it even if we cannot explain or justify it.

Traditional answers to the mystery of suffering.

1. **“We are trying to justify a God who needs no justification.”** No! We are rather trying to justify what we say about God, that He is all-powerful and perfectly good. We are trying to show how this can be true even though there is suffering in the world. If we expect people to believe what we say about God and his Kingdom, it must be coherent and internally consistent. It must make sense. But to find this sense we often sell the suffering short, and especially the powerful positive role it can play in our spiritual life.
2. **“The problem just shows that human reason is totally inadequate for understanding the things of God.”** It is true that human reason is limited and that we must approach

spiritual matters with spiritual insight. But if reason is totally inadequate and spiritual discernment by-passes logic, then how can we hold any justifiable beliefs about God? If this is true, we are left only with a private experience of God that cannot be talked about or shared in any meaningful way. The problem is not “reason” but rather a way to make sense of the data and the doctrine. What we read about God and what we experience of God seem not to match. We do not help the cause of the gospel by failing to address this appearance of a disconnect between what we say about God and what we observe in life.

3. **“God’s will is radically free. He is bound by no external moral principles. He can do whatever He wants to do. ‘Good’ just means ‘whatever God does’ or ‘that which is in accordance with the will of God.’”** But if this is true then the statement “God is good” is completely uninformative. It says only that God does whatever He does. If “goodness” has any meaning in our actions toward each other, it must be more than arbitrary divine fate. It does little good to suggest that God sees a bigger picture and can justify what seems to be senseless evil in the context of the long-term good. This answer seems hard to accept when we see the horror of a holocaust or the slaughter of the innocents in the birth narrative of the Gospel of Matthew 2.

4. **“There is much more good in the world than there is suffering and evil. There is enough good to show that the world was created by a good God.”** But Christians claim not just that God is good and powerful, but that He is perfect in these respects. The problem is why a perfect God would allow ANY unjustified evil in the world. For some of us the evil can seem pretty dominant.

5. **“There could be no good, or appreciation for good, without evil.”** Why not? It may be a psychological truth that contrast enhances experience, but if God were perfectly loving, why did he not create us to appreciate good without the necessity of suffering? Will there be evil in heaven so that we can know the good?

6. **“God is limited in power, so all evil exists against His will.”** This is an attempt to save God’s goodness by giving up His power. Most Christians find this unsatisfactory because the Scripture is so emphatic in declaring and demonstrating God’s absolute sovereignty. I will never forget a seminary lecture in systematic theology by Charles Ryrie where he spent the entire 50 minutes of the class citing Biblical references (without taking time to read them). At the end he said, “I have just cited the direct references to the sovereignty of God so that you will never forget that sovereignty is a Biblical doctrine.” I have not forgotten.

7. **“God chooses to allow evil in a free open environment where people as well as God can respond with virtue and wisdom.”** This is a view made popular in some circles where “the openness of God” or “process” is emphasized. This answer suggests that God chooses to create an environment that fosters genuine relationships in the context of both good and evil with the result that his name is glorified through the drama. In many ways this option (properly nuanced) is most attractive but this open view of God seems to rob God of his power to act or save his suffering people.

Tentative insights into the mystery of suffering.

For several years I tried in vain to find a satisfactory answer to the problem of evil and suffering. After some 30 years of ministry, I have five conclusions that make sense to me.

One, the world that we live in with all of its enigmas, pain, suffering, virtue, blessing, etc., is the best possible environment to display the full range of God's attributes in this life. There are some attributes of God that are most dramatic and meaningful in the context of evil, injustice, and pain. Hope, for example, is most clear in the face of hopeless situations. Love is most powerful in the face of not being loved. Grace has meaning when it governs our response to injustice, courage means little if there is no real threat to our wellbeing. Suffering presents an opportunity for a certain kind of virtue that can best be expressed only in the context of suffering. Where sin abounds, grace does all the more abound. Sin is not good but it provides a context for the display of grace in this life that would not be experienced apart from the sin.

There is the story of the little league baseball team that had a mentally challenged player, Jon. It was part of the coach's philosophy that each player get at least one at bat per game. Jon got to play but one at bat per game. He always made an out but in little league there are some things more important than scoring. It was now a championship game, the score was tied, and the coach wrestled with putting Jon in the game. He made his decision and put Jon in to bat even though everyone knew that he could not hit the ball. Little did any one know that this coaching move would make the game one that no one would ever forget. The other team was struck by the courage of the coach and Jon. Like the coach, the opposing pitcher now also faced a decision. His usual hard fast-ball was replaced by a lob ball so that Jon might hit it. One of Jon's teammates ran and stood behind him and helped him swing the bat. The ball was hit over the infield and Jon started running, but not to first base. He was running to third. The third baseman ran to meet him, turned him around and got him going in the right direction. The outfielder deliberately fumbled the catch and then over threw the ball to the catcher, allowing Jon to score the go ahead run. This was not a joke. No one was laughing at Jon. The parents of both teams stood and cheered as he scored. I don't really know who eventually won the game. I think the human spirit (bearing the image of God) was the real winner. This dramatic display of virtue could never have happened had not there been a mentally challenged boy. Sometimes our tragedy is God's opportunity to showcase attributes in his creatures that simply would never shine so bright had the tragedy not set the context. Calvary comes to our mind. Sometimes great defeats are the great victories in disguise.

A second observation can be made. *The story of Job tells us that even though we (like Job) may never understand the meaning of suffering and evil, this does not mean that suffering and evil have no meaning or rationale.* The book of Job makes the point that there is a rationale for his suffering but Job was not allowed to know it. In the same way, it seemed absolutely impossible for God to make something good from the death of Jesus. After all,

what do you do with a dead Messiah? There is no category for redeeming the circumstances of the cross, or so it seemed.

Three, as mentioned earlier, *the challenge is not to explain life's mysteries but to respond to them correctly*. In Deut.29:29, we read that there are "secret things that belong to God but the things that are revealed belong to us and our sons forever that we might observe all the words of this law." In Rom.9:18-20, Paul raises the difficult question of God's hardening human hearts and then judging sin as though it was a person's choice. Paul recognizes that the question is a logical result of a correct understanding of his teaching on God's sovereignty. He responds, however, by suggesting there is no answer made available to us. We, like the pot, have no right to ask of the potter, "Why have you made me this way?" Paul is clear that we have a responsibility to respond to our circumstances with courage, grace, hope, and faith but not always with an understanding of why things are the way they are.

Four, *we seldom can appreciate the meaning of circumstances until the entire story is revealed*. There is a Chinese proverb that tells of a man who had a horse that ran away. His friends came to comfort him saying, "We are so sorry for this tragedy." The man replied, "How do you know that this is a tragedy?" The men responded, "You no longer have your horse." But two days later the horse came back with five wild horses following. Now the man had six horses. His friends gathered around him and said, "We are so happy for this rich blessing that has come to you." The man again asked, "How do you know this is a blessing?" They responded, "You now have six horses." But two days later the son of the man was trying to break one of the horses and was thrown and suffered a broken leg. The friends were there again with, "We are so sorry for your tragic accident." And again the man asks, "How can you be so certain that this is tragic?" Two days later, the emperor sends his army through the village conscripting young men for war. The son with the broken leg is exempted because of his leg. And so the story goes on and on. It is not easy to assess the value of a circumstance until the final chapter is written. The book of Revelation assures us that when the final chapter is revealed, it will satisfy the harshest critic of God's love and justice.

Five, the purpose of suffering is not so much to make us strong as it is to give us opportunity for connecting with one who is strong, Jesus. Toughness often comes with suffering and pain but strength and endurance under fire are not the only or even primary benefits of suffering. *Our pain is a great opportunity for empathetic connecting with Jesus*. When such connecting takes place there will be a peace, toughness, and stability that will enable us like the Apostle Paul to be content with little or much, good times or bad. We will find gold in both the mountains and the valleys of life. How often are we heroically committed to managing our pain rather than seeing it as a path to empathize with our Lord's life? The theme of this book is that the intimate bonding that the Spirit of God wants to create between Jesus and his people is a bond that involves the sharing of a common story, a story that is full of injustice, suffering, and pain. It might be noted that this story is also rich in the themes of love, hope, and power. Let us not be too quick to run from our pain. Let us be sure that we drink deeply of its power to unite us with our Lord. The powerful but often unpopular

nature of the hope offered in the Biblical story is that the justice and meaning of suffering will only be resolved in the life promised at the resurrection of the redeemed in Christ at the end of the story.

In the next chapter we will expose some of the ways in which we try to “cook the books” of God’s kingdom so as to marginalize or eliminate brokenness and suffering from our spiritual experience.

But before we go on, let us be sure we leave this chapter with a commitment to be honest and face the real problem presented by unjustified suffering. Let us not propagate shallow answers to the problem of human suffering but allow it to leave us desperate for a deeper understanding. Confusion is a great motivation to listen and learn. The challenge of suffering is to avoid cheap answers and long for a deeper knowledge of Jesus through our pain. We can profit from our pain if we spend more time looking to see Jesus in the midst of our suffering than in trying to find a satisfying explanation for our suffering. But there is a great temptation to avoid our pain by creating a fantasy picture of life. The next chapter will deal with this problem.