

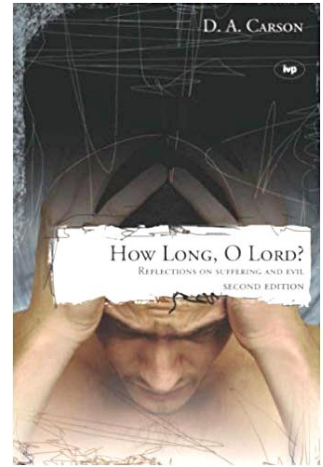
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# How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil

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*Italics – my notes; standard print – quotations.*



The unavoidable reality is that if we live long enough, we will suffer. My hope and prayer is that this short volume will help a new generation of Christians, and others who may wish to listen in, think through questions all of us must face in this broken, beautiful, and twisted world. 9

This is a book of preventative medicine. One of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that our expectations are false. We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. 11

*CS Lewis described his conversion by the memorable title Surprised by Joy; most of us Christians ruefully admit that there are times when our faith is surprised by grief. Pain and suffering often generate a profound sense of loneliness.*

## PART 1 : THINKING ABOUT SUFFERING AND EVIL

### 1. First steps

*Some tough stories.*

The truth of the matter is that all we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer. Our loved ones will die; we ourselves will be afflicted with some disease or other. Midlife often brings its own pressures – disappointments, sense of failure, decreasing physical strength, infidelity... Live long enough and the infirmities of old age eventually catch up with you, compounded by the fact that all your friends have gone and left you alone.

*And then there's.. war, racism, genocide, poverty, starvation; holocausts, 'natural' disasters and their exacerbation by evil structures such as despotic governments, tribal warfare, unfair trading practices, unqualified avarice...*

In any and all of these tragedies, in all of this pain, where is God?

*We need more than a belief system; naked beliefs offer little consolation under the worst experiences of suffering and evil.. In addition to holding that Christian beliefs are true and consistent, the Christian, to find comfort in them, must learn how to use them. Christian beliefs are not to be stacked in the warehouse of the mind; they are to be handled and applied to the challenges of life and discipleship. Otherwise they are incapable of bringing comfort and stability, godliness and courage, humility and joy, holiness and faith.*

### 2. False steps

*Responses to school shootings deriving from ignorance and arrogance: it shouldn't happen HERE, in nice neighbourhoods like ours. This was the response of a secular community. But even many Christians feel we ought to be immune from evil and suffering. Why so?*

- a) We may get the balance of Scripture wrong – *we remember the triumphs and the healings, not the sufferings and the illnesses and the destruction of the innocent.* We may be infected by a pious version of the raw triumphalism that prevails in much of the surrounding culture because we have not taken care to follow the balance of Scripture.
- b) We may succumb to the crush of the urgent. We think that if God is going to relieve our sufferings he ought to do so immediately.
- c) Some of us misunderstand a number of important texts *eg Romans 8.28, which promises that God is at work not to prevent misery but in the midst of it.*
- d) Some of us have absorbed a form of theology with all the answers. We offer standard answers to every problem.. especially if the problem is afflicting some other person.
- e) Many of us have not adequately reflected on the cross. We are used to thinking of the cross as the means of our salvation; we have not thought much about what it means to take up our cross and die daily, or to fill up the sufferings of Christ.

*Other false steps derive from a non-Christian worldview. Atheism denies evil rather than solving it. We suggest God is less than omnipotent (eg Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People; he lost his son, and eventually concluded God could not have prevented the death). Or we go for dualism.*

*Other false steps derive from sub-biblical Christianity. We say that God is not omnipotent, thus exonerating him but also his ability to help. We say he has made humans totally free, and we have to be able to get things wrong – some merit in this, but not completely satisfactory because if God can arrange things otherwise in the new creation, why not in this one? And none of these positions takes account of Jesus.*

## **PART II: PARTS OF THE PUZZLE – BIBLICAL THEMES FOR SUFFERING PEOPLE**

### **3. The Price of Sin**

*We need to look at the whole storyline, not just parts of it – like standing back to look at a whole tree, not so close you can see only leaves.*

*The starting point is to realise how evil evil really is. Just look at the C20th...*

*Evil is on the one hand rebellion against God, and on the other all the suffering, pain and adversity that is the consequence of this rebellion.*

*God, by contrast, is good, and just.*

*Kushner's title assumes we are mostly Good People. But we aren't. We are all caught up in rebellion. We live in an age when everyone is concerned about their rights. But we have none; we have sacrificed our rights by our sin. If we believe that our sin properly deserves the wrath of God, then when we experience the sufferings of this world, all of them the consequences of human rebellion, we will be less quick to blame God and a lot quicker to recognize that we have no fundamental right to expect a life of unbroken ease and comfort. From the biblical perspective, it is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. 44.*

*This does not mean that every bit of suffering is the immediate consequence of a particular sin, or that those who suffer most are those who have sinned the most. Eg illness may result from sin (1 Cor 11.27-34); John 5.1-15) but there is no necessary connection (John 9, man born blind). Indeed, one of the functions of biblical teaching about rewards in heaven and degrees of punishment in hell... is that it explains in part why there is not equitable distribution of punishments here. Some answers we are not going to receive here; we shall have to wait for the Lord's return before justice is completely done, and seen to be done. [cf doctrine of Purgatory].*

Most biblical writers are surprised neither by the prevalence of wickedness (except among the covenant people) nor by the suffering it occasions... On the whole, the biblical writers are surprised, not by punishment, but by the Lord's patience and forbearance. God does not punish the Amorites until their sin has reached full measure (Gen 15:16). Again and again we are told that the Lord is long-suffering, slow to anger, and very merciful. *See Jonah 4.2, who did not like this characteristic of God. The blessings we enjoy are signs of God's patience and forbearance – Romans 2.4, do you not realise that God's kindness is intended to lead you toward repentance? The saints cry out How long O Lord, until you avenge our blood (Rev 6.10); the Lord himself quietly waits.*

I suspect that the reason why it is so hard for many of us to live out these implications of our theology is that we do not deeply feel the truths we formally espouse. My creed may tell me I am a miserable sinner, that I deserve hell, that all that I enjoy in life is a gracious gift from God, that I am in no position to expect to escape suffering. But when it comes right down to it, I simply feel my own suffering is unfair. That surely means that I have not really taken aboard the Bible's picture of my own guilt... If we grasp a little better where we fit into the Bible's story line, how God looks at our sin, what our own rebellion rightly deserves, then although not all our questions about evil and suffering are answered we are likely to face the wounding times with less resentment and indignation, and with more gratitude and trust, than would otherwise be the case. 46

### **4. Social Evils, Poverty, War, Natural Disasters**

#### Evils prevented – and perpetrated – by the State

*Scripture recognises that civil authority is there to restrain evil. That's why Paul tells the Romans to submit to the authorities. At the same time, the state is operated by people, and people are fallen. If you put fallen people into positions of power, corruption is never far away. God provided kings after a period of lawlessness (Judges) but he remained ambivalent about them. He provided a Covenant to hold both rulers and people to account. But time after time, rulers came to power who were not held accountable for their actions – from Jeroboam onwards. Even a great monarch like David could be evil and petty – Bathsheba. Ahab and Naboth.*

*God uses the Assyrians to bring Israel to heel, Isaiah 10.5ff; they are a tool in his hands. But as that's not how they see it they too will be brought to account; after God has used them to destroy his people, he will destroy them.*

So while the Bible insists the state restrains wickedness, it also recognises that the state may perpetrate it. There is no reason for us to think we should be exempt from the pain that arises from these sources.

### Kinds of poverty

Agur son of Jakeh writes, 'Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' (Prov 30.8.9).

There are different kinds of poverty, and they aren't all about money. Scripture describes six:

1. The unfortunate poor – poverty as the result of circumstance, misfortune, tragedy. We are supposed to provide compassion and material support. Eg Deut 15.11, 24.19-22, leavings from harvest, see Ruth & Naomi.
2. The oppressed poor – poverty caused by the exploitation of others, eg Naboth, Uriah, Eccles 4.1-3 & 8-10. This kind is the direct result of someone else's sin. We are supposed to provide justice.
3. The lazy poor - Proverbs. Includes asking for more and more money for less and less work.
4. The poor who are dependent on the punished – children of Saul & Jonathan. Sin affects others even when they are not the intended victims. The Bible does not tell us that life in this world will be fair.
5. The voluntarily poor – Acts 2, Jesus himself.
6. The poor in spirit. OT writers point out there are worse things than poverty; it is Western materialism that doubts it. The poor may develop a vein of insight that the rich lack; the rich may not realise their need of grace, may become self-reliant.

### Wars and natural disasters

We think war is a problem. Does the OT? The Israelites did when they lost. But in the OT there is no reflection on the question of war itself; it is simply assumed that wars will settle certain forms of disputes. It is our generation that has a problem, after a century of brutal conflict in which hi-tech military prowess has mown down millions of young soldiers, decimated entire nations, and now threatens the entire planet with a nuclear holocaust. The NT is not shocked by the presence of wars either. Jesus says wars will persist till he returns (Matt 24.6).

How should we respond? Luke 13.1-5 is helpful: unless you repent, you too will perish. Jesus does not assume that the victims of Pilate or of the tower did not deserve their fate; we all deserve it. He did not insist that they were more wicked than others. He treated wars and disasters as incentives to repentance, as God's megaphone to call attention to our guilt and destination if we do not repent.

## **5. The Suffering People of God**

Despite the best efforts of the proponents of the health and wealth gospel, the fact is that Christians get old and wrinkled. They contract cancer and heart disease, become deaf and blind, and eventually die. In many parts of the world Christians have to face the blight of famine, the scourge of war, the subtle coercion of corruption. This is not to say that God does not sometimes intervene on behalf of his people in remarkable ways. It is to say, rather, that we, too, live in a fallen world and cannot escape participation in its evil and suffering. If you doubt this, you are (1) ignorant of what many Christians around the world have to face daily; (2) not old enough yet, for certainly if you live long enough you too will suffer; (3) kidding yourself; or (4) some combination of the above.

But there are some sufferings that are peculiar to the people of God. Those who track such things tell us that there have been more Christian martyrs in the past century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined. Of course, this owes a great deal to the incredible growth in world population during the last century and a half. Even so, Christians in the West, largely untroubled by official persecution, must become aware that we are something of an anomaly. And in the West, subtle anti-Christian pressures are increasing. Sometimes we are aware of them and sometimes we are not. 63

### 1. Discipline

The most dominant form of suffering peculiar to God's people, according to the Bible, is the discipline that God himself metes out. Hebrews 12.51-12 (quoting Prov 3.11-12). The discipline the author has in mind is designed to help God's people combat sin. *You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood – what are you complaining about?*

- Discipline helps us combat sin.
- To resist discipline is to betray our immaturity or question our desire to grow in conformity to our heavenly Father. This is why Paul delights in his weakness; it curtails his pride (2 Cor 12.7-9).
- Discipline is for our good – Hebrews makes clear it's possible to start well, make a fine show of Christian faith and life, but only faith that perseveres to the end is genuine (3.6, 14). Discipline trains us to persevere.
- Living without God's discipline means your status as a child of God is called into question.

Discipline may include war, plague, illness, rebuke, personal 'thorns', bereavement, loss of status, personal opposition... Many of these are themselves evils, but are used by God. Paul knows his thorn is from Satan, and that God allows it to prevent pride. We must come to terms with these ambiguities. If we divide our experiences into good and evil, we are dualists, and if the evil does not disappear our faith is damaged. In reality, we never escape God's sovereignty. Eg illness is not a good thing, but rightly accepted can breed patience, prayer, compassion, self-knowledge.

- *Discipline seems painful at the time. Correct theology will not make a spanking sting less, or make a brutal round of toughening up exercises fun. But it does help to know there is light at the end of the tunnel. Psalm 6.1-3 – and lots of similar ones – recognises that the suffering is discipline, and that it will not endure forever. David breaks through to a new level of confidence, 6.8-10; the Lord has heard.*

*Habakkuk is another illustration of discipline. Hab 1.2-4, how long O Lord? The Babylonians have been appointed by God to execute punishment, but their sins too are remembered by God, and they will be held to account. Habbakuk makes 3 commitments:*

- *To take the long view; God's justice will prevail over the oppressors – see also 1 Peter 4.17.*
- *However great the pain, he will delight in God*
- *He commits himself to praise, not complaint.*

In the Bible, the dominant form of suffering peculiar to God's people is discipline. *And yet through it we know we have been reconciled to God (Romans 5.1), and one day shall see him.*

So sweeping a vision changes all our priorities. Maximal comfort in this fallen world is now low on the agenda. The real question is how our current circumstances are tied to our faith in Jesus Christ, our peace with God, and our prospect of seeing him. So Paul insists that we rejoice not only in the hope of the glory of God, but that we also glory *in our sufferings*, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom 5.3-4). Like the discipline of physical training, suffering produces perseverance. The staying power of our faith is neither demonstrated nor developed until it is tested by suffering. *Maturity is attained by being proved/tested, like a metal refined by fire.* There is a certain kind of maturity that can be attained only through the discipline of suffering. *Hebrews 5-9 Jesus learned obedience from what he had suffered. What on earth persuades us to assume we should be exempt?*

## 2. Opposition and persecution

*The kind that the people of God experience just through being the people of God. Paul warns that everyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted (2 Tim 3.12). We are warned we have to carry our cross, to count the cost. If in fact we never have to make a decision which costs us anything, we may fail when challenges come. 1 Peter 4.12-19 – if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, just keep going. Don't overprotect your children!*

## 3. Suffering peculiar to leaders

The leaders are called to suffer the most. Suffering tempers believers and is part of God's discipline. *Moses was banished. Timothy was told to endure hardness. If God disciplines his children, the leaders should not expect any less. Secondly, witness is likely to bring pressure, particularly under dictatorships. 1 Cor 4.8-13 is about how the apostles come last into the arena, as those who will suffer the most. When we are cursed we bless, when we are persecuted we endure it, when we are slandered we answer kindly. Thirdly, Christians suffer for the sake of those they lead - Col 1.24, 2 Cor 4.8-12. The more the leaders are afflicted with weakness, suffering, perplexity, and persecution, the more it is evident that their vitality is nothing other than the life of Jesus. 81*

## **6. Curses and Holy Wars – and Hell**

*Ps 137, Deut 20, Matt 13 – there are lots of passages with curses, threats of war; we find them complicated. Surely we should be turning the other cheek? Ps 144, 'the Lord trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle'; 1 Sam 15 Saul is ordered to destroy the Amalekites. And most of the threats of eternal destruction (hell) come from Jesus himself.*

We must dare to ask ourselves if our own moral sensibilities have somehow been misdirected, misfocused. Is it possible that our severest problems about these forms of suffering owe more to the pluralism of our age than to any ostensible superiority in moral judgment on our part? Is it possible that, part, at least, of our horror at hell owes something to our inability (or refusal?) to look at sin from God's perspective? 86.

*Perhaps some of the cries for vengeance are just expressions of anger/outrage. But God sent the flood, and will judge the world; it is natural for besieged rulers who had a covenant with God to turn to him for justice – and for that justice sometimes to come through military means.*

*Does God work the same way today? We don't have the same covenant, though judgement is still a reality. Most C20th wars have been started by powerful, greedy, technologically proficient nations whose ambition had already generated mass defection from the faith of their fathers – so perhaps judgement is still with us as they fall. We have not taken full account of the biblical portrait of a God of justice who holds all to account, individuals and nations. So we should perhaps respond not with shock but with contrition and intercession – for unless we repent, we too will all perish (Lk 13.5).*

*We don't like thinking about Hell. But Jesus gave us the most graphic details. Even if the language is metaphorical, it still stands for something. We need to bear in mind that Jesus is shocked not by the existence of hell but by the hardness of people's hearts. We need to take on board that there is no suggestion of repentance in hell. We need to remember that God does not arbitrarily pounce on people and assign them randomly to heaven or hell; that heaven would surely be hell to those who do not enjoy his presence; and that God is not unmoved by our suffering – he takes guilty men and women,*

*all of whom deserve his wrath, and saves vast numbers of them. We should not warn others of his wrath from superiority, but from the brokenness of experience and the relief of redemption.*

*In the NT, under the new covenant, discipline still has to be applied.*

*Matt 18.15-18 – how to discipline a brother*

*1 Cor 5.1ff – how to expel an incestuous Christian*

Christian discipline in the church can take many forms – gentle rebuke, encouragement, mutual confession, private confrontation.

As for cries of vengeance – *read the Apocalypse.*

## **7. Illness, Death, Bereavement**

All we have to do is live long enough, and we will be bereaved. All we have to do is live long enough, and we will die... Yet grief and pain always catch us unawares. All suffering, not least sickness and death, is tied to sin. Death must be seen as God's well-considered sentence against our sin; the wages of sin is death. We are not gods; and by death we learn that we are only human. We cry out against this limitation, not only because in our rebellion we still want to become gods, but because we have been made in the image of God. I am a responsible participant in my own death. It happens to me because I am a sinner. Our rage is better directed against the ugliness of death, the wretchedness of sin, our sense of betrayal and self-betrayal.

*Illness and death can be the immediate judicial consequence of a specific sin. Eg John 5.14, the 38 year paralysis of the man in John 5; 2 Kings 5, the leprosy of Gehazi; Acts 5, the deaths of Ananias & Sapphira; Acts 12, the painful end of Herod; 1 Cor 11 the illness and death of some members in the Corinthian congregation. The conclusion is not that these were the worst sinners of their times – they were not – but that sin merits such punishment. It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not all instantly punished whenever we sin – if we were, the world would become a vast cemetery, and none would be left to generate new life.*

*Illness and death are not however necessarily the consequence of a specific sin. Hezekiah's illness was the Lord's way of ending his earthly pilgrimage (2 Kings 20); the man born blind had committed no particular sin (John 9); Paul was directed by an illness to Galatia (Gal 4.13) – perhaps malaria, often treated by retreating into the highlands. Timothy had frequent illnesses (1 Tim 5); Trophimus had to stay behind in Miletus (2 Tim 4). So it is wrong to charge the sick with secret sin or inadequate faith.*

*Some illnesses and death follow sinful acts or behaviour but in natural terms of cause and effect – suppressed anger, jealousy, guilt; gluttony; pollution; dysfunctional families; sexual behaviours. Certainly sinners, not least forgiven sinners, need to be very cautious how they point the finger at other sinners. 102.*

*Death has become the last taboo in W. society. Psalm 90, Moses sees death as an expression of God's anger, God's response to our sin; and asks for the wisdom to number our days.*

There are at least three ways in which pain and suffering, rightly received in faith, will contribute to our growth as Christians.

1. *It gets our attention. Suffering is God's megaphone.*
2. *It shapes us, moulds us. We may not enjoy it, but we will be transformed. It cleanses us from self-centredness.*
3. *It engenders compassion and empathy in us and makes us better able to help others.*

*Note on Wimber's theology. His framework is not large enough. He estimates his 'success rate' as 2%. Good; but he has tried to establish a theology of healing and power encounter without a theology of suffering; he has a theology of victory without an adequate theology of the cross; he has a theology of life without proper reflection on the place of death. He sees the triumph of the kingdom when sickness is overthrown, and cannot see the triumph of the kingdom when people are transformed in the midst of sickness. Etc.*

*We need to cultivate a personal knowledge of God, which is what will sustain us when every other pillar crumbles. Finally, we remember the hope that is in Jesus. The Bible does not encourage us to suppress grief, but it does remind us not to 'grieve like those who have no hope.'*

## **8. From the Vantage of the End**

1 Cor 15.19, if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others.

*May parables have to do with the kingdom of God, and some stress the delay before it is consummated. The tension between the now and the not yet is a commonplace of biblical thought.*

*Parable of the weeds, Matt 12 – the people of the kingdom and the people of the evil one will grow together until the harvest.*

*The spread of Christianity has been astonishing – stats. But in Europe evangelicals constitute less than 3% of the population. In France 2.5-3x as many Muslims worship each Sunday compared with Catholics. There seems to be much more crime, exploitation, greed than there does punishment. It only makes sense if you consider the prospect of a new heaven and a new earth. Ultimately, justice will be done.*

Psalm 73. *Asaph envies the arrogant and feels sorry for himself. Then he reflects on retribution after death and learns that it is better to be with God now, and this present relationship must be assessed on the long term.*

Amos 4. One of the most frightening passages in the OT. *A list of judgments, and a warning 'prepare to meet your God. The truth of the matter is that meeting God is either transcendently wonderful, or utterly horrific.*

Matthew 11.20-24 – *warnings to Bethsaida, Chorazin, where they did not repent, and threats of punishment worse than Sodom's. Implications: there are degrees of punishment; there are degrees of responsibility; God knows not only what has happened and is happening, but what would have happened under different circumstances.*

### Practical reflections

1. Christians ought to be developing some kind of homesickness for heaven. *Heaven is our hope and our goal – or should be. 1 Peter 1.3-9.*
2. *Christians must not rely on other hopes, Ps 146.3 do not put your trust in princes etc.*
3. For the believer, the time of death becomes far less daunting a factor when seen in the light of eternity.
4. Christians who have no answers to why this or that has happened can afford to take the long view. The God they know is a just God; he will ensure that justice is done, and seen to be done.

## **9. Job – Mystery and Faith**

*Sometimes suffering strikes us as staggeringly irrational, unfair – there is a mismatch between the suffering involved and the relative inoffensiveness of the afflicted party. Step forward, Job.*

### Job's sufferings and initial reactions (1-3)

1. The book of Job frankly insists that suffering falls within the sweep of God's sovereignty. *Satan has to have permission. Job rejects all forms of dualism; 'shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?' 2.10*
2. The emphasis on Job's goodness is meant to highlight the fact that there is such a thing as innocent suffering. Some suffering in this world is not related to any sin.
3. The degree to which we struggle with this question is likely to be related to the extent of our own sufferings. *Job had taken nothing for granted; he'd already thought about it – 3.25.*
4. God does not blame us if in our suffering we frankly vent our despair and confess our loss of hope, our sense of futility, our lamentations about life itself. *Ch 3 God excoriates the comforters, and insists Job said right things, 42.7.*
5. The theme of mystery has intruded. *God does not tell Job of Satan's challenge. Job faces mystery.*
6. Job's initial lament, and his later questions, must be placed within the right framework. *He does not abandon faith in God. He wrestles with God, challenges God – but his struggles are those of a believer.*

### Job's outrage and his miserable comforters (4-31)

Job's friends offer glib answers and a condemning spirit – those who sow trouble reap it. Job responds with self-justification and hard questions – he is guilty of nothing that can justify such suffering.

Job's friends have a tight theology with no loose ends; there is no category for innocent suffering in their understanding. There is little compassion. Job's speeches are the anguish of a man who knows God, remains convinced of the justice of God – but who cannot make sense of these beliefs in the light of his own experience. His final speech (26) reaches a new intensity of bitterness; he openly charges God with injustice. Job is not looking for a merely intellectual answer; he wants personal vindication by God himself, an account of what He is doing. Job defends his own integrity so virulently that he steps over the line now and then and actually charges God with injustice, yet God insists that his servant Job has spoken what is right.

### Job and Elihu (32-37)

*Elihu does better; his speech is neither praised nor condemned. He avoids the opposing pitfalls into which Job and his comforters have fallen. He begins with an apology for speaking to his seniors. He rebukes Job for impugning God's justice. He says God speaks more often and in more ways than Job acknowledges – God speaks in revelation, in dreams and visions; but he may also speak in the language of pain (33.1ff). Job must not rebel against God in his words. He makes the point that when God does not answer cries for help it's because they are wanting relief, but not turning to God in prayer, wanting freedom, but not attempting to listen to him. Finally he says that the justice of God is a given.*

### Job and God (38-42)

Finally God himself speaks. There follows question after question, each designed to remind Job of the kinds of things he cannot do, and that only God can. God does not charge Job with sins that have brought on his suffering, nor does he challenge Job's defense of his own integrity. The reason he calls Job on the carpet is not because of Job's justification of himself, but because of Job's willingness to condemn God in order to justify himself. God does not "answer" Job's questions about the problem of evil and suffering, but he makes it unambiguously clear what answers are not acceptable in God's universe.

What shall we make of this exchange between God and Job?

Many doubtful interpretations have been put forward by various writers. Because God refers to so many natural phenomena, one writer [Robert Gordis] argues that a major purpose of God's speech is to tell Job that the beauty of the world must become for him an anodyne to human suffering, a kind of aesthetic aspirin. When one basks in the world's beauty, one's problems become petty, "because they dissolve within the larger plan" of the harmony of the universe. But to someone suffering intense the beauty of the world can just as easily become a brutal contrast that actually intensifies the suffering. Worse, it does not dissolve pain; rather it is in danger of "dissolving" the sufferer in some kind of pantheistic sense of the fitness of things. This is surely a massive misunderstanding of God's response. Not once does God minimize the reality of Job's suffering.

*We should not assume that everything that takes place ought to be explained to us. They assume that God owes us an explanation, that this is more important than that we should worship and trust him. But Job does not say 'ah, at last I understand, but rather 'I repent' – not of sins that have allegedly brought on the suffering, but of the attitude which demands an answer. To those who do not know God, to those who insist on being God, this outcome will never suffice. Those who do know God come in time to recognize that it is better to know God and to trust God than to claim the rights of God. Job teaches us that, at least in this world, there will always remain some mysteries to suffering. He also teaches us to exercise faith – not blind, thoughtless submission to an impersonal status quo, but faith in the God who has graciously revealed himself to us. 153.*

#### Job's happy ending (42)

*Job must pray for his friends and they must make sacrifice. The Lord makes him prosperous again. Note that this does not remove the suffering itself; the losses Job faced would always be with him; a happy outcome does not transform the suffering into something less than suffering.*

*The book disowns simplistic applications of the doctrine of retribution; it rejects any formula that the righteous always prosper and the wicked are always destroyed. Knowledge of God is its own reward.*

*The epilogue to Job is thus the OT equivalent to the NT anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth.*

## **10. The Suffering God**

### **The Cross Is the Triumph of Justice and Love**

When we are convinced that we are suffering unjustly, we may cry out for justice. We want God to be just and exonerate us immediately; we want God to be fair and mete out suffering immediately to those who deserve it.

The trouble with such justice and fairness, however, is that, if it were truly just and truly fair and as prompt as we demand, we would soon be begging for mercy, for love, for forgiveness—for anything but justice. For very often what I really mean when I ask for justice is implicitly circumscribed by three assumptions, assumptions not always recognized:

1. I want this justice to be dispensed immediately;
2. I want justice in this instance, but not necessarily in every instance; and
3. I presuppose that in this instance I have grasped the situation correctly.

We need to examine these three assumptions. First, the Bible assures us that God is a just God, and that justice will be done in the end, and will be seen to be done. But when we urgently plead for justice, we usually mean something more than that. We mean we want vindication now! Second, to ask for such instantaneous justice in every instance is inconceivable: it would too often find me on the wrong side, too often find me implicitly inviting my own condemnation. But justice instantaneously applied only when it favors me is not justice at all. Selective justice that favors one individual above another is simply another name for corruption. And no one wants a corrupt God. And third, when I plead so passionately for justice, it is usually because I think I understand the situation pretty well. I wouldn't be quite so crass as actually to say I need to explain it to God, but that is pretty close to the way I act.

Someone might object that since the psalmist frequently appeals for justice, for vindication, it cannot be wrong to do so. And I agree, so long as those three hidden assumptions are not surreptitiously operating together. For instance, if the psalmist, or any believer since then for that matter, appeals to God for justice, not simply in this instance, but because God is a just God, the appeal is somewhat transformed. If such a believer also recognizes that the Lord's timing is perfect, that unless the Lord extends his mercy we will all be consumed (after all, the psalmist asks for mercy more often than he asks for vindication), and that sometimes our cries for justice cannot be more than vague but intense appeals for help,

precisely because we do not understand what is going on very well, then the nasty hidden assumptions that frequently mar our cries for justice have largely been done away with.

Suppose, for argument's sake, that God gave instant gratification for every good deed, every kind thought, every true word; and an instant jolt of pain for every malicious deed, every dirty thought, and every false word. Suppose the pleasure and pain were in strict proportion to the measure of goodness or badness God saw in us. What kind of world would result?

Many writers have asked this sort of question. They conclude that such a system would turn us into automata. We would not join in worship because of the intrinsic worth of God, but because it gave us selfish pleasure. We would not refrain from lying because it is wrong and abominated by the God we love, but because we wanted to avoid the next nasty jolt. We would not love our neighbor because our hearts had been transformed by the love of God, but because we preferred personal pleasure to personal pain.

I think that if God were to institute such a world order, things would be far worse yet. God does not look only on our external acts. He looks on our heart. Such a system of enforced and ruthlessly "just" discipline would not change our hearts. We would be smouldering with resentment. Our obedience would be external and apathetic; our hearts and devotion would not be won over. The jolts might initially gain protestations of repentance, but they would not command our allegiance. And since God examines the heart, he would be constantly administering the jolts. The world would become a searing pain; the world would become hell. Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell.

There is another factor we must frankly face. When we ask for justice, we presuppose some sort of standard of justice. If the standards are God's standards, he has made them clear enough: the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). We have returned to hell by another route.

We must be grateful that God is a God of justice. If God were not just, if there were no assurance that justice would be served in the end, then the entire moral order would collapse (as it has in atheistic humanism). But we must be equally grateful that God is not only a God of justice. He is a God of love, of mercy, of compassion, of forgiveness.

Nowhere is this more effectively demonstrated than in the cross. At one level, this was the most unjust act, the least fair act, in all of history. He who was sinless became our sin offering; he who had never rebelled against his heavenly Father was brutally executed by rebels he who had never known what it was *not* to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength was abandoned by God, prompting him to cry out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?". And it was this act, this most "unfair" act, that satisfied divine justice, and brought sinful rebels like me to experience God's forgiveness, to taste the promise of an eternity of undeserved bliss. 160-62

### **The cross sets forth Jesus as the example**

Probably no passage makes this connection between the unique features of Jesus' death and the exemplary nature of Jesus' death clearer than 1 Peter 2:20-24. Peter has been telling his readers that there is no credit to them if they suffer punishment for doing wrong.

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth" [Isa. 53:9]. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."

Here, there is no diminution of the uniquely redemptive features of Jesus' death: he "himself bore our sins in his body on the cross." Even so, he died leaving us an example, that we should walk in his steps.

There is a structural parallel to be found in the pages of the New Testament. Repeatedly we are told that Christ first suffered, and then entered into his glory (eg Luke 24:26; 1 Pet. 1:1-3). This sequence accomplished our salvation, but it also established a pattern for us (Rom. 6:2-7; 1 Pet. 2:24).

But if the cross thus sets forth Jesus as the example, the conclusion is inevitable: we, too, in our small ways, should expect to suffer unfairly, as he did. Peter insists that such unjust suffering is among the tasks to which we as Christians have been called.



The applications are countless. For instance, among the things that Jesus unfairly suffered were treason by one of his closest followers and abandonment by the rest. Similarly, from what we can read in his correspondence, Paul agonizes far more over the difficult things he has had to suffer at the hands of his own converts in Corinth than over the beatings and privations he has endured at the hands of outsiders. Thus, pastors and other Christian leaders must not be surprised by the extraordinary emotional pressures that may befall them, imposed by thoughtless or even renegade church members. These will rarely be fair; they can be soul-destroying. But from a biblical perspective, they are scarcely surprising. To expect them is to rob them of part of their power; to endure them with grace and fortitude is nothing other than following the example of Jesus.

To focus on the cross of Christ not only grounds our faith on the God who is loving and faithful, but also gives us an example in his sacrificial and redemptive love that we can never outstrip. When we suffer, there will sometimes be mystery. Will there also be faith: yes, if our attention is focused more on the cross, and on the God of the cross, than on the suffering itself. 173

## **PART 3: GLIMPSES OF THE WHOLE PUZZLE - EVIL & SUFFERING IN THE WORLD OF A GOOD AND SOVEREIGN GOD**

### **11. The Mystery of Providence**

*Approach to suffering in this chapter is something Christians ought to absorb before the evil day strikes. Both the following are true: God is absolutely sovereign, but not in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed; Human beings are morally responsible creatures who make choices and are held accountable for their actions, but this does not mean God is contingent. Carson calls this compatibilism.*

*God is sovereign, but in scripture that does not reduce human accountability even when God is somehow behind a particular act – lots of OT examples p180. At the same time the 10 Commandments can be obeyed or disobeyed. Human beings are tested by God; he utters pleas for their repentance, and finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked – OT examples – p181.*

*Genesis 50 and the story of Joseph. His brothers made the decision to harm him, but God was working through what happened to Joseph. Note – God continues to hold them responsible.*

*Leviticus 20 – be holy; I am the Lord who makes you holy.*

*1 Kings 8 – Solomon asks that God will respond when his people repent and turn to him; and also that he will turn their hearts to him.*

*Isaiah 10 – God uses the Assyrians as the club of his wrath; and then pronounces a woe on them. Although God is using the Assyrians as his own weapon, “this is not what he [the Assyrian] intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations”. Isaiah comments “When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, ‘I will punish the king of Assyria for the wilful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes’”.*

*John 6.37-40 – all whom the Father gives to me will come to me.*

*Phil 2.12-13 – God works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose*

*Acts 4.25-6 – speaking of the cross, Peter & John say Herod & Pilate did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. And yet they did what they chose to do, and they are held accountable for it.*

*Everyone who sins is a slave to sin, because of the fall; even when doing our best we hear a little whisper telling us how good we look while we are doing it. We pray, and wonder if people realise how pious we are. We give ourselves to something, then spoil it by being condescending or unforgiving to those who have not. We live with God at the centre, then get side-tracked by personal ambition.*

*2 Peter 3.9, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

*Lam 3.33, God does not willingly afflict his people.*

*Compatibilism allows mystery; it leaves God untamed. Some resist this. The mystery of providence is not illogical, but we do not know enough to be able to unpack and domesticate it. We have no choice but to embrace it.*

### **12. The Comfort of Providence – learning to trust**

*All Christians learn to accept certain mysteries – Trinity, divinity/humanity of Christ, providence (God’s sovereignty vs human responsibility). But we have to learn to handle the tension, and if we don’t then we can get stymied in our Christian life. Everyone knows of Christians who come into some deepened awareness of the sovereignty of God, and who in consequence find the urgency of their prayer life wilting. 205.*

**Prayer.** *What is the point of intercession if on the one hand God's will will be done, and on the other your cousin is fully at liberty to remain unconverted? If we don't get the tension right we will be undermined.*

*John 17 – we pray in line with God's sovereign plan, in accord with Jesus's will.*

*Acts 4 – 'in the context of this persecution, please enable us to speak your word with boldness'*

*Exod 31 – do not destroy your people – God relents (Moses after golden calf)*

*Amos 7, the Lord relents*

*Ezek 22 – God laments he found no one ready to pray on behalf of the land so he would not have to destroy it (stand in the gap) – so God expects to be pleaded with along these lines.*

*So we learn to recognise that God is sovereign, but we are responsible. How does his sovereignty work in the minds of biblical writers when they observe evil or suffering taking place?*

1. God's sovereignty functions to assure us that things are not getting out of control. *Romans 8.28.*
2. We repeatedly learn from Scripture that the scale of time during which God works out his purposes for us is far greater than our incessant focus on the present. *Ruth and Naomi.*
3. If God is the God of the Bible, then for him there are no surprises, no insuperable problems. Far from breeding fatalism, in the Scriptures that truth breeds confidence and faith. It teaches us to trust. It teaches us to read and reread Hebrews 11.
4. The modern, frequently unvoiced view of God is that he is in charge of the big things, the major turning points; it is less clear that he is in charge of anything beyond that. *Sermon on the Mount argues the reverse – God watches every sparrow.* The biblical view of God's sovereignty is that even now, at every second, he sustains that universe ... A miracle is not an instance of God doing something for a change; it is an instance of God doing something out of the ordinary... This view of God's sovereignty means that we should draw comfort and faith even by observing the world around us – as Jesus did.
5. God is a personal God who responds. That is one of the great lessons of the psalms; it is one of the grand assumptions of the prayers of Paul. *David, oppressed by illness, enemies, defeat, tragedy, guilt, turns to the Lord, who responds. Paul says God's power is made perfect in his weakness - 2 Cor 12 and the thorn in the flesh; so he delights in weakness, persecution and difficulty.* The degree of our peace of mind is tied to our prayer life (Phil 4.6-7). .. We learn, with time, that if God in this or that instance does not choose to take away the suffering, or utterly remove the evil, he does send grace and power. 217
6. There is a sense in which the entire Bible is fodder for this chapter. From beginning to end, it is concerned to teach us to trust and obey.

### 13. Some Pastoral Reflections

Anyone who has suffered devastating grief or dehumanizing pain has at some point been confronted by near relatives of Job's miserable comforters. They come with their clichés and tired, pious mouthings. They engender guilt where they should be administering balm. They utter solemn truths where compassion is needed. They exhibit strength and exhort to courage where they would be more comforting if they simply wept. 221

1. We must recognize that grief normally passes through predictable stages (*shock, emotion, depression/loneliness/physical symptoms, panic, guilt, anger/resentment, disinclination to return to usual activities, gradual hope, reaffirmation of reality*)
2. Some grief takes a long time to heal.
3. *Often the most comforting 'answers' are simple presence, help, tears*
4. *Not everyone asks 'why', so don't try to say why.*
5. *Some who do ask why are seeking comfort rather than answers; and even Jesus asked why.*
6. *Stress that we live in the now and not yet; nothing in scripture encourages us to think we should be free from the things that plague a dying world*
7. *Distinguish between real guilt (for which we have good news) and false guilt (the devil's lie)*
8. Some forms of suffering require active intervention (*eg abuse*)
9. It is important to offer hope
10. It is important to help people live one day at a time – *we need grace for today*
11. We must help people know God better
12. We must pray for those who suffer. *2 Cor 7.6, God comforts the downcast; 2 Cor 1.3 he is the God of all comfort.*