

Suffering and the Christian: A Philosophical Problem and a Pastoral Response

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Introduction

The intention of this paper is not to give an answer to the problem of theodicy which arises because of suffering in this world, but to move beyond the polemic and to give attention to how a person can find meaning and hope in suffering. In giving a pastoral response this paper argues that the appropriate use of God-images/attributes in suffering will help persons find meaning in suffering thus enabling them to become more positive in their faith and service to God and humanity.

A Philosophical Problem

From its very inception Christianity has been continually challenged on both the philosophical and pastoral level by the reality of suffering in the world. How do Christians who claim the goodness and comprehensive sovereignty of God explain the fact that the world we live in is pervasively evil and literally filled with instances of suffering, disease, tragedy, and horrific acts of violence? Any ordinary person will observe that this world at times may be characterized as a terrible place to live. Yet, throughout these two millennia, believers in the Christian God have steadfastly maintained that God is both infinitely good and fully in command of the universe.

The problem of suffering touches Christianity at its core. It represents an apparent logical inconsistency with the claim that an omni-benevolent and all-powerful God exists in such a world littered with the debris and carnage of human suffering. The problem of suffering sets forth the philosophical and pastoral challenge to understand how a good and powerful God could possibly allow his creatures to act as they do. Perhaps even more importantly, the problem of suffering reveals the necessity of supplying a sufficient foundation for the discovery of

meaning and purpose in the midst of the massive tribulation and pain that this world inflicts upon men and women without discrimination and suffering that God apparently permits or is powerless to stop.

A Pastoral Response

In reality, the problem of suffering, in both its logical and evidential expressions, is a disturbing perplexity intrinsically related to the existence of the Judeo-Christian God and his alleged attributes more than a dilemma regarding the mere presence of pain and suffering itself. John Hick has insightfully observed this very point by noting that the problem of suffering does not attach itself as a threat to any and every concept of deity.¹ It arises only for a religion which insists that the object of its worship is at once perfectly good and unlimitedly powerful. The challenge is thus too inescapable for Christianity, which has always steadfastly adhered to the pure monotheism of its Judaic source in attributing both omnipotence and infinite goodness to God.

Likewise, Ronald Nash, a Christian theologian and philosopher, lays out the specific challenges confronting theists in the following propositions:

If God is good and loves all human beings, it is reasonable to believe that He wants to deliver the creatures He loves from evil and suffering.

If God is all knowing, it is reasonable to believe that He knows how to deliver His creatures from evil and suffering.

If God is all-powerful, it is reasonable to believe that He is able to deliver His creatures from evil and suffering.²

The harsh realities of life, however, reveal that creatures loved by God do in fact suffer, apparently gratuitously in many cases, and often go to their graves unaware of any sense of purpose for their pain. This fact, for many, provides a philosophical basis for the probability that the God of Christian theism simply does not exist, or is at least much less good and powerful than he is assumed to be by believers.

Typically, traditional Christian theism has confronted the deductive problem of suffering by asserting that the existence of God and the presence of evil in the created order are not logically inconsistent propositions since God has good reasons for allowing evil to exist, and even flourish, in the world. Alvin Plantinga, by means of his critically acclaimed *Free Will Defence*, has convincingly argued that the divine

¹ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 251.

² Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 178.

granting of moral freedom and responsibility to the creature necessarily entails the possibility of evil decisions and actions.³

A world containing creatures that are significantly free (*and* freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil; and he cannot give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.

Most agree that Plantinga's work on the *Problem of Evil* has sufficiently answered the deductive form of the challenge. Other traditional Christian theists, taking a somewhat different approach in responding to both the inductive and deductive forms of suffering, have proposed that God's sovereignty over the created order, including the choices and actions of moral agents, is logically consistent with the freedom to obey or disobey divine commands. D. A. Carson, for example, presents the claims of what is known as theological compatibilism:⁴

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

Traditional Christian theism (TCT), while proposing various responses to the problem of suffering, has tenaciously affirmed God's all-encompassing sovereignty and unique attributes, namely his omnipotence and omniscience, even in the face of apparently gratuitous evils. More specifically, TCT recognizes that God possesses exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge of all future events, even the future choices and actions of moral agents. Though there does exist some measure of disagreement as to the exact relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, proponents of TCT are consistent in their belief that God knows the future with absolute certainty.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *Free Will Defence* (1989), 31.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 201.

Applied Pastoral Care

In most South African congregations, people are confronted with the reality of suffering, which could be attributed to a number of factors including that of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. If we all could avoid the sufferings of the day or the moment, we will do it at all costs. No one likes pain or suffering encroaching on his or her life, but as a Christian it is something that one must go through. In fact, suffering in the life of a Christian is inevitable.

It is for this very reason that a proper understanding of the meaning in suffering needs to be undertaken. Many Christians, because they fail to understand the meaning in their suffering, rob themselves of the joy and maturity it can bring. We grumble and moan and curse to the point of doubt. Yet like gold in the hands of the goldsmith, we are in the hands of God.

The refining process of gold needs the fire to bring out its value and impurities. What fire is to gold, suffering is to a Christian. Thomas Cahill states:

In all the tragic dramas of antiquity, whether lived or staged, we detect a pattern: the hero, be it Alexander or Oedipus, reaches his pinnacle only to be cut down. Only in the drama of Jesus does the opposite pattern hold: the hero is cut down only to be raised up.⁵

The idea of suffering is inseparable from the New Testament concept of fellowship. If we are to walk alongside Christ and arm ourselves with the mind of Christ we will have to suffer in the flesh (1 Peter 4:1). To suffer as a Christian (1 Peter 4:16) means to share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 4:13).

Although such trials may be attributed to Satan or to our own personal choices that bring about the suffering, it is often said that coping with suffering is an art.⁶ This does not imply that a certain technique or attitude towards suffering can be taught through pastoral care, but rather coping with suffering becomes an art when a person sees an opportunity for growth in their suffering. Practicing the art of coping with suffering comes down to the following: putting meaning into suffering, trusting while everything seems futile, and living in the face of death. Friedman states:

⁵ Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 130.

⁶ R. C. Cabot and R. L. Dicks, *The Art of Ministering to the Sick* (New York: Continuum, 1959).

Ultimately, survival depends upon existential categories: on vision, for example hope, on the imaginative capacity, on the ability to transcend the anxiety of those around us, and on a response to challenge that suffering as opportunity for growth.⁷

Thus the crisis of suffering can be an opportunity for growth in life and faith, depending on the person's frame of reference, perception of life and understanding of God. So the pastoral response to the problem of suffering is to assist the person to understand the meaning in suffering.

Pastoral Care and the Quest for Meaning: A Hermeneutical Approach

The pastor's responsibility is to try to find out how suffering persons understand God and the interaction that exists between them and their expectations of God.

The therapeutic dimension of faith is closely connected with the person's concept of God.⁸ According to Louw, the process of imparting meaning in pastoral care works with two presuppositions:

1. When people are in suffering or pain, their perception of God is distorted, thus this prevents constructive application of their faith potential. Once a person's emotional filters are blocked their vision of God becomes distorted. Thus the quest for meaning then becomes primarily a problem of a dysfunctional belief system; it becomes a problem of perception. Ammon. E. Kasambala states that when one has a distorted image of God in times of suffering, this will lead to what he terms *pathological faith*.

2. The task of the pastor is to help the sufferer understand and interpret God in the light of suffering and conversely to understand and interpret the person's experience of suffering in terms of God's involvement with suffering. The person's story must be put with God's story and vice-versa. Where the two stories converge, the person discovers God's fulfilled promise, and hope emerges. The discovery of God's faithfulness and a vision of Christ's resurrection results in that dynamic hope. When suffering disturbs this vision, hopelessness ensues. Hope is strengthened when a person's concepts of God once again become constructive and positive.

⁷ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1985), 5.

⁸ D. J. Louw, *Illness as Crisis and Challenge* (Doornfontein: Orion Publishers, 1994), 77.

A Pastoral Hermeneutic: Images of God

The section of this paper undertakes to work with the basic assumption which states that meaningful pastoral care ministry takes place within the South African congregation as it reflects upon God-images/attributes that are seen in Scripture. Some of the most helpful images are those that depict God in terms of human understanding, experience, ideas, needs and expectations (e.g. God as companion, Father, Comforter, Judge, etc.). And because of this reality, the pastoral ministry in South Africa is challenged with the search for appropriate God-images to bring hope and meaning in suffering. For people in pain and suffering helpful God-images convey a sign of God's care and love, hence bringing hope to their situation of distress and despair. The reality of God's care and love within the Christian congregation is made eminent by these appropriate God-images. John Mbiti rightfully observes:

since God is considered to do all things (creator of all things, sustaining, providing for what he has created, and ruling over the universe), since many of these activities are similar to those carried out by people, it is helpful to the imagination for people to picture God as if he has human characteristics. Such mental pictures are aids to our understanding of God; they illustrate meaning about God. It does not mean that God be looked on as human being. These images have their limitation, but they nevertheless assist the mind to have a working knowledge of God. They also help people in communicating their idea about God. Other human images make people feel close to God even though he is their creator.⁹

Plude notes that the spoken word is the normal vehicle of faith . . . In our times the "word" also becomes images, colors and sounds.¹⁰

The notion of God-images is of great importance in giving pastoral care to people who are in suffering. It is important because people who are in suffering tend to hold different images of God—some which could be classified as appropriate or helpful while others can be distorted or unhelpful. According to Depoortere, "People in suffering either have helpful or unhelpful God-images."¹¹

According to Louw¹² and Tidball¹³ helpful God images are those images which enable people to come to terms with their situation and

⁹ J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Praeger: New York, 1975), 53.

¹⁰ F. F. Plude, "How Communication Studies Can Help Us to Bridge the Gap in Our Theology Megaphors" in *New Theology Review* 8.4 (Nov. 1995).

¹¹ K. Depoortere, *A Different God* (Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

¹² Louw, *Illness*, 80.

¹³ D. Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds: Exploration in Pastoral Theology* (Great Britain: Apollos, 1997), 283-85.

appropriate their faith into action by doing something about the condition of suffering.

Some helpful images associated with God in times of suffering are:

- *God as a Companion*: This image depicts God as one who walks with the sufferer—a God that is not transcendental but near (Heb 13:5).
- *God as Father*: A God image that metaphorically represents God as provider, protector and a caring God (Ps 23).
- *God as Comforter*: A concept of God that is used in times of death, disaster and calamity (Isa 51:12).
- *God as Judge*: A notion of God mostly in crisis, stressing the fact that good will always triumph over evil. At the end of suffering justice will prevail (Ps 19:9).

People who are suffering find comfort when they reflect upon the images and attributes of God found in Holy Scripture.

Conclusion

The question could be asked: What is the meaning in suffering? From a Christian perspective it is an opportunity: (1) to discover more of God's love, grace and mercy and to know that God is indeed involved; (2) to be better equipped to take account of the mystery and inexplicability of suffering in the knowledge that, in his covenantal faithfulness, God is still in control; (3) to learn patiently as a believer to depend merely upon God in the knowledge that God sustains supports and holds him or her; (4) to realize that suffering could indeed shorten one's life but also enhance the quality as it teaches us responsibility towards life; (5) to recognize that suffering is a process of purification, a medium of education; (6) to understand that suffering brings spiritual growth; (7) to learn that suffering makes us more willing to serve God and fellow-man; (8) to comprehend that suffering will ultimately bring glorification: first the cross, then the glory.

When pastoral care asks the question of meaning in suffering, then it is busy engaging the changing, hurting and broken world. The task of pastoral care for the suffering is to take man's most difficult experience, which gives rise to a welter of human emotions, and try to place it in a more objective perspective. In so doing, the pastor will seek, to the limits of his finite wisdom and understanding, to explain the ways of God to

men. He will seek to show that God's power, holiness and love are not irreconcilable in the face of suffering. This core question of meaning in suffering is not what happens to us, but what can happen through us.