

WHY PAIN?

I. Introduction.

A. The rock of atheism.

Nobel Peace Prize winner (1986) Elie Wiesel was a teenage Jewish boy when he was taken from his home in Transylvania to Auschwitz concentration camp and then to Buchenwald. He writes of how his experiences in the camps led him to lose all faith in God.

One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all round us, machine guns trained; the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chairs – and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel. The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him...

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. "Long live liberty!" cried the two adults. But the child was silent! "Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. "Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping. "Cover your heads!"

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows..." (Night. Elie Wiesel. P. 61-62).

Not long after the horror of this scene, Wiesel watched as thousands of fellow Jewish prisoners celebrated Rosh Hashanah. While others were affirming their faith in God, he found the moment propitious for abandoning his!

Thousands of voices repeated the benediction; thousands of men prostrated themselves like trees before a tempest. "Blessed be the Name of the Eternal!"

Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe...?" I was alone – terribly alone in a world without God and without man.... In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void. (pp. 64-66).

B. Christianity's most difficult question.

The theological term that describes the dilemma posed by suffering is **theodicy**. Derived from *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice), theodicy is the effort to speak justly about God amid the fact of suffering. Theodicy aims to **"justify God"** in the face of suffering and pain.

The biblical view of God affirms the four following propositions:

- 1) God exists.
- 2) God is **all-good**.
- 3) God is **all-powerful**.
- 4) Evil exists.

It is very difficult, however, to affirm all four at the same time when confronted by the fact of suffering. We can easily affirm any three of them. But affirming all four tests our highest powers of logic. For example, imagine a baby born with severe birth defects.

- If God exists and is good and powerful, then things like this wouldn't happen.
- If God exists and is good and yet evil exists, then he must not be all-powerful.
- If God exists and is powerful and yet evil exists, then he must not be good.
- If evil exists, then there could not possibly be a "God" who is good and powerful.

Conclusion: the problem of suffering is the **greatest challenge** to the Christian faith.

C. Possible solutions.

Throughout history, various attempts have been made to resolve the problem posed by suffering and pain. Most attempts center on denying at least one of the four propositions.

- Deny that God exists: atheism.
- Deny that God is all-good: pantheism.
- Deny that God is all-powerful: polytheism.
- Deny that evil exists: Eastern Philosophy (Hinduism, Christian Science, New Age, etc.).

Only those religions that worship the God of Abraham (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) labor to affirm all four propositions and deny that they are logically contradictory.

II. Suffering in the Bible.

A. Defining terms.

A major part of our difficulty in understanding the meaning of suffering is that we are careless in how we define terms such as "good", "evil", "power." The Bible is our best **dictionary** in this important endeavor of defining terms.

1) Evil.

When Adam and Eve ate from "the tree of **the knowledge of good and evil**" (Gen. 2:17) they lost the ability to define good and evil! Since that time, man has been confused about the real nature of good and evil (Isa. 5:20; Heb. 5:14).

The Bible helps us to understand two very important truths about evil:

a. Evil is not something God **created**.

Everything God made was **good** (Gen. 1:31). However, because God gave free will to parts of his creation (angels, human beings), he created the **possibility** for evil to exist. God is not the author of evil! Even the devil (Lucifer) was created good. But free will means that good things **can go bad**.

For example: a knife is not evil. But in the hands of a wicked person, a knife can be a source of great evil. Evil then is not in the knife, but in the will and intentions of the one who holds it.

b. There are two kinds of evil: **physical** evil and **moral** evil.

Physical evil relates to afflictions we may experience due to "natural" calamities: earthquakes, disease, birth defects, accidents, etc. Moral evil relates to sin: hurtful and harmful choices we make that negatively affect both ourselves and others.

Distinguishing these two kinds of evil is important because it helps us to better understand their cause and their cure. Interestingly, Genesis 3 explains how both forms of evil find their origin in "the fall."

	Physical Evil	Moral Evil
Nature	<u>Suffering (passive)</u>	<u>Sin (active)</u>
Cause	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Free will (human, demonic)</u>
Cure	<u>New heaven and earth</u>	<u>New heart</u>

2) Good.

Suffering will forever be a major stumbling-stone to faith as long as goodness is confused with **happiness**. The biblical concept of goodness is much deeper and richer than happiness. God wills good things for his people. However, this may not mean that the path he chooses (or permits) for them is filled with pleasant experiences.

3) Power.

If God is all-powerful, then why didn't he create a world without sin and suffering? The answer, of course, is that he did! Evil illustrates human (and demonic) freedom not some flaw in the power of God.

So if God is all-powerful, then why didn't God create a world without free will? The answer is that such a world would have been a world without humans. To be created in the image of God means to be given the ability **to choose**: to obey or disobey, to love or to hate, to believe or disbelieve.

The Bible makes it clear that there are several things that God "can't do."

- *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. (Numbers 23:19)*
- *For I the Lord do not change. (Malachi 3:6)*
- *It is impossible for God to lie. (Hebrews 6:18)*
- *For God cannot be tempted with evil. (James 1:13)*

Thus, God cannot:

1. Violate **his own nature**.
2. Violate **human freedom**.

B. Illustrations.

1) Joseph.

Victimized in turn by his brothers and then Potiphar's wife, Joseph illustrates how those who wait upon the Lord mount up with wings like eagles. (Isaiah 40:31)

- *So it was not you (brothers) who sent me here (Egypt), but God. (Genesis 45:8)*
- *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50:20)*

In Joseph we learn that suffering cannot **thwart God's sovereign purposes for good**.

2) Job.

Although Job himself never understands the reason for his suffering, the reader does! In a heavenly encounter between Satan and God (Chapter 1), God **permits** Satan to torment Job to prove to Satan (and the world!) the strength of Job's righteous character.

- *The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)*
- *Though he slay me, I will hope in him... (Job 13:15)*

In Job we see the **mystery** of suffering. Although Job never received the "explanation" for his suffering he so desired, he trusted in God and his goodness anyway!

B. Solomon.

If Job represents the suffering caused by affliction, Solomon represents the suffering that often comes to those who **prosper**. In this case, the suffering is emotional and psychological rather than physical, but it is no less real.

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless!" What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)

In Solomon we see **existential** suffering; the agonizing pain involved in trying to understand the meaning of life.

C. Paul.

Paul recognized that the cross of Christ was not only a place where the Savior died. He, too, was crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20). The cross came to define his own life and ministry. "I die every day!" (I Cor. 15:31)

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you. (II Corinthians 4:7-12)

In Paul we see the **ministry potential** of suffering. Far from being a limitation, Paul's sufferings magnified his Kingdom impact on the world.

D. Jesus.

Jesus' death was voluntary. His life was not taken from him, he freely offered his life (John 10:18). Those who trust in the cross find their burden is transferred to the One dying there.

- *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone' but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)*
- *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)*
- *He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-5)*

In Jesus we see the **redemptive power** in suffering. In the cross he takes upon himself the burdens (guilt, pain, sorrow, suffering) of others so that they find freedom.

TABLE TALK

1. Describe a time in your life when you struggled with the problem of suffering? Did it make your faith stronger or weaker?
2. How do you define God's "goodness"? Has this lesson caused you to change your definition?
3. Have you ever wished that God had created a world where men were not free to choose, a world where everyone and everything were programmed (like robots) to perform so that everyone was always "happy"? Describe what such a world would be like.
4. Which is worse: the physical sufferings of Job or the existential sufferings of Solomon? Why?
5. Talk about the "redemptive power" of suffering. How does suffering enhance ministry to others?

IV. The Pastoral Consolations.

Pastoral theology through the centuries has developed a series of classical "consolations" to offer those who are struggling to understand the meaning of suffering in their particular life situations. No one of these responses is sufficient in itself, but taken together, the consolations provide real comfort and help to those who hurt.

- A. Distinguish between God's **ultimate** will and his **permissive** will.

It can be most helpful to recognize the difference between something God causes directly to happen and something he indirectly permits. God is not the author of evil though as sovereign Lord he certainly allows it to occur.

- B. Distinguish between **tests** and **trials**.

Satan is the source of temptations (Matt. 4:10; I Cor. 7:5; etc.) and their purpose is to **cause someone to fall**. God never tempts anyone!

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. (James 1:13)

However, God does indeed test us (Gen. 22:1; Ex. 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut. 8:2; etc.) for the purpose of **strengthening** us, **equipping** us, and **confirming** our faith.

C. God's power can draw good out of evil.

The Bible is full of illustrations of how great evil was the occasion for God to bring about a great good (slavery in Egypt, the Babylonian captivity, the cross, Paul's thorn in the flesh, the blood of the martyrs, the fall of Rome, etc.). It is this reality that makes it possible for believers to affirm that all things do indeed "work together for good" for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. (Roman 8:28)

D. Heaven.

Many of our questions about suffering will remain unanswered in this world. And many of our pains will never find relief here in this life. However, this world is not our final home! Heaven is God's final answer to suffering. In heaven, there will be no more crying or pain or mourning and God himself will "wipe away every tear" from our eyes. (Rev. 21:4)

E. Good grief.

Suffering and pain have tremendous educative value. No other moments in life are more propitious for learning about God and godliness than when we hurt. Just as a muscle grows in strength only as it is tested by pressure and tension, so it is with our faith. No pain, no gain. Even Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered". (Heb. 5:8)

The Scriptures are able to say "blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4) because God knows how many lessons can only be learned in the school of suffering. God allows pain in our lives not because he wants us to suffer but because he wants us to be holy!

Look at just some of the blessings that can come to those who suffer rightly.

1) Getting our attention.

In good times, most of us tend to forget God. However, when suffering and pain come, our attention instinctively turns to God. As C. S. Lewis said: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 74)

2) Patience/Endurance.

² *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience (endurance, perseverance). (James 1:2-3 NKJV)*

3) Humility.

⁷ *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (II Corinthians 12:7-10)*

4) Purified faith.

⁶ *In this (salvation) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be **proved genuine** and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (I Pet. 1:6-7 NIV)*

5) Holiness.

*...the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. ⁷ Endure hardship as discipline: God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his **holiness**. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of **righteousness** to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:10-11)*

6) **Compassion** for others and increased effectiveness in ministry..

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (II Corinthians 1:3-4)*

7) Intimacy with God... and with one another.

⁸ *More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and **the fellowship of His sufferings**, being conformed to His death; ¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)*

V. What to do when it hurts.

Perhaps no part of the Gospel message is more radical than what it says about suffering. After all, at the center of our faith stands **a cross**. And that symbol of pain and unanswered questions ("My God, my God, why...?") has become a beacon of hope for millions. It is this revolutionary Gospel of the cross that enables a child of God to not just survive hardship, but to **thrive!** Here are some concluding encouragements for the one today who hurts.

A. Don't be **surprised!**

¹² *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though **something strange** were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12)*

B. Leave **unanswered questions** in the hands of God, where they belong.

²⁹ *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deut. 29:29)*

C. Ask better questions.

When things go badly, don't just ask God *Why?* Learn to ask, ***For what purpose?***

D. Rejoice!

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces **endurance**. ⁴ and endurance produces **character**, and character produces **hope**. ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because **God's love** has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)*

E. Give thanks.

¹⁸ *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and **for everything** to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... (Eph. 5:18-20)*

² *Count it **all joy**, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)*

F. Memorize Romans 8:28 **and** 29.

²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:28-29)*

TABLE TALK

1. Describe the difference between God's permissive will and his ultimate will. Describe a time when you experienced this personally.
2. What is the difference between a test and a temptation? Why is this distinction important? Explain.
3. Look again at the seven blessings that can come from suffering (pages 7-8). Discuss how God is seeking to bring some of these blessings into your own life through difficulties you are currently experiencing.
4. Think of a difficult situation you are in now. After this study do you think it would be possible for you to actually thank God for allowing this to happen? Why or why not?

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for help that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity, that might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I had hoped for.
I am among men, most richly blessed.¹*

¹ Prayer of an anonymous Confederate soldier.

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