

Where is God in Suffering, Especially Mine?

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Introduction: Our Complex Interaction with Suffering

Some time ago, my wife and I spent time with a friend who was feeling suicidal. She had cut her arms with a knife to see how much it would hurt. She was feeling what psychologists call suicidal ideation, wondering could she actually take her own life. Of course, we felt alarmed. And her story is significant to our topic: God and suffering. Let me give you a bit more of her story. Our friend was wrestling with a deep sense of personal failure. For one thing, she had had an emotional affair with a coworker, and she knew she was in the wrong. Her husband was deeply hurt and deeply furious, all the more so because he had tried to support her in her career while she had spent more and more time at work. She recognized that she had kept things from him, even when he had asked about the emotional distance that she had let build. She had quit her job and was doing something else in order to put some space between her and the other man. But that wasn't all. Because she was at this other job now, which was okay but not her passion, she realized how performance-oriented she was. She had thrived off the praise of other people in a fast-moving job in a fast-moving company. But in a not-so-fast-moving job in a not-so-fast-moving company, she recognized that something was wrong with her. She was anxious and was on three different forms of medication. Was something going wrong with her mind? In her sessions with her counselor, she was exploring the horrific verbal criticism her dad had spat out. As a little girl, she was never "good enough." She knew now that her way of dealing with her dad was to become good at everything she did. She could never be weak. But now, in her mid thirties and with a husband and two kids, she was weak. She had been a victim of suffering, yes. But there was no question that she had also caused suffering, too. And so she wanted to talk about where is God in all this suffering?

Relevance: What a Full Response to Suffering Requires

I'm intentionally reflecting on that story because I think it displays the complexity behind the question of suffering. When we ask where is God in suffering, we have to ask it with the acknowledgement that there is suffering caused *by nature*, even our physical bodies, and suffering caused *by people*. Also, we are both *victims* of suffering, and *perpetrators* of suffering.

In fact, I think we become a viral carrier of suffering, a conduit for it, as it hits someone else. Let me give you some examples. First, a child: When my son was 6 years old, he had his first unhappy day at school. Then he came home and we tried to make him feel better, but he started treating his younger sister badly. He was snappy a few times, he ignored her at other times. And she was hurt. The way he was treating her was not appropriate, so I sent him to his room. I felt very empathetic for him, but I was also empathetic with my daughter. Because he felt pain from somewhere else didn't make it okay for him to pass it on. How much more true is that from God's perspective? His love for each one of us is infinite. And He wants us to pass along His blessing, not our own pain. At the end of my time here, I'm going to ask you which you want to pass along. At the other end of the spectrum, there are entire groups of people. Paulo Freire is a Brazilian educator who wrote a book called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: the behavioral model for an oppressed people is the model of their oppressors. That's why it's very common to see a people who were oppressed taking out their anger on someone else. Arguably, ISIS is doing that right now. Israel was oppressed and they have oppressed the Palestinians for decades. In Boston, lower income Irish were oppressed and they oppressed minorities. Within oppressed communities, often men oppress women.

For that reason, a fully Christian response has to be not only philosophical, in that it needs to make sense, but it needs to be more than that. It needs to be existential and personal, in that it has to offer healing to us and others. So the ultimate response to suffering is healing, not just an explanation and hopefully not a justification.

During that time and ever since then, I think I can distill my questions about God into three: Is God behind my pain, meaning is He causing this? Is God in my pain with me, meaning does He understand me? And can God pull me through it? Let me say up front that, from my years of studying and reflecting on this, I've concluded that God is not behind your pain. Repeat: He is not behind your pain. But He *is* in it with you. And He is ahead of it to pull you through it. *God is not behind your pain, but He is in it with you, and He is ahead of it to pull you through it.* I'll unpack each of those statements.

God Is Not Behind Your Pain

God is not behind your pain. One thing you can do is to try to figure out where pain comes from. In Greek philosophy, namely Aristotle, it's about cause and effect. Just go back far enough and you get the Primal Cause, or the GOD OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY. Such a framework looks like this:

Aristotle said: Prime Mover → Effect A → Effect B → →→→→ Effect Z

So if there's pain, then it must be the will of the Prime Mover. That's the GOD OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY. Not too cool, because if the will to pain was located in the Prime Mover, then He could make it happen all over again at any time. If you can trace pain all the way back to the source of all things, then that means you'll probably be stuck with pain forever, because it's at the source, and the source can make pain happen again. If you're an atheist, then you just plug in 'Big Bang' for 'Prime Mover' and you have a really good *explanation* for why there is pain and suffering in our lives. Pain is the result of random chaos and survival of the fittest. That's a *great* explanation for the past. It gives *very little* hope for the future because you can't eliminate chaos and self-interest! So suffering will continue; in fact from some standpoints it's getting worse.

But if there's a God, is He behind your suffering? Because we in the West inherit Aristotle's philosophy of cause and effect, we tend to think that we can simply retrace all steps so that we can attribute everything to a distant God who just wound up the world and let it run.

Projection onto Christian thought: God → Effect A → Effect B →→→→→ suffering

But that's not accurate. The God described in the Bible, though He created and upholds all things in love (Col.1:16 – 17), actually gave free will to us and to angels. We are not wound up robots. And He upholds the natural world with its own intelligibility, like a written book, as many early theologians called it. So we have multiple causes, like this:

God	→	
Angels	→	
Humans	→	Effects, Effects, Effects
Natural world	→	

That's why you can't really figure out *all* the possible causes of the pain in your life. It's too complicated. This view of history is not unique to the Bible. Leo Tolstoy said over and over in his book *War and Peace* that history is the outcome of millions of individual choices made for millions of motivations. He totally rejects the 'great man' theory of history, because every single person's free will matters.¹ And conservative military historian Victor Davis Hanson said, "It is impossible to determine exactly whether man, nature or chance is the initial catalyst for the origins of Western civilization."² He was critiquing Jared Diamond, who said in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that the geography of Europe *caused* its culture, and therefore *caused* Europe to become the greatest world power. Hanson retorted, 'It's impossible to know the past in the sense of *causation*.' If China hadn't burned its fleet in 1421, it would have taken over the world. The Bible has a similar view of history.

Really? you ask. Does the Bible really say this? Don't some Christians believe that God causes everything, including suffering? A few do, but they're incorrect. God did not cause everything, or do everything, or claim responsibility for everything. How does the Bible tell the difference? Through God's spoken word. The pattern of God speaking and then acting is one of the dominant unbroken patterns of the entire Old Testament. This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to separate them. This God acts by speaking. He said, 'Let there be light,' and there was. Ten times God spoke in Genesis 1 to bring about life and bless life. To Abraham,

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Part 11, I. 'For the investigation of the laws of history, we must completely change the subject of observations, must let kings and ministers and generals alone, and study the homogenous, infinitesimal elements by which masses are led. No one can say how far it has been given to man to advance in that direction in understanding of the laws of history. But it is obvious that only in that direction lies any possibility of discovering historical laws; and that the human intellect has hitherto not devoted to that method of research one millionth part of the energy that historians have put into the description of the doings of various kings, ministers, and generals...'

² Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2007)

God said, 'I will redeem my people Israel from bondage' (Genesis 15:13 – 14), and then He did it. Every time God acted, He spoke about it first beforehand. As God engaged with human beings, He always spoke to some human beings first, who then proclaimed that word, and eventually God would fulfill His word. This gave rise to what Israel called 'prophecy.'

Amos summarized this pattern in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' Many people ignore that verse and this pattern, partly because (once again) they are too influenced by Augustine's monergism (God causes all), or Aristotle's idea of a primal cause that causes all other effects (God set up all dominos and then pushed the first one), as they defend a view of God's sovereignty that makes God the direct cause of everything that happens, both good and evil. Yet Amos did not say, 'Surely the LORD God is causing everything to happen that does happen, so that everything is a reflection of God's will and God's character.' This is absolutely important, because human beings have a tendency to attribute things to God that He has not spoken about.

This is the doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. God's *word* is sovereign. God is sovereign *through His word*. There is nothing that can stop God from fulfilling His word. So, it is a mistake to say that God caused any and all circumstances – especially moral evil – at any point in time, because God does not claim such a responsibility in the Scriptures. That kind of naïve doctrine of the *sovereignty of God*, which makes God the effectual cause of everything, is very different from a doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. The doctrine of the *sovereignty of God*, which sees God as causing the totality of history and human choices, is quite foreign to the biblical characterization of God. Suffice to say here that if we assign evil to God's causality, then we have assigned evil to God's character. And if we do that, then we have made God arbitrary and evil. And if that is the case, then the basis for trust in God, expecting sympathy from God, prayer to God, and hope for God's decisive victory over evil, is all gone.

[OPTIONAL SECTION – BEGINNING]

The 'sovereignty of God' is sometimes defined as 'God causes everything.' There are many passages and situations in the Old Testament which support the view that God is not omni-causal:³

1. God's regret, showing that God was not pleased with the outcome of some human decisions. Regret would not be an appropriate expression if God controlled a human being in such a way that they had no real choice in the matter:
 - a. Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He *was grieved* in His heart. (Gen.6:5 – 6)
 - b. Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, '*I regret* that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands.' (1 Sam.15:10)
2. Various 'moral outrage' passages, showing that God was not pleased with the moral decisions of some people
 - a. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for *while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster*. (Zech.1:15)
3. Various 'I did not intend that' passages, showing God did not cause a certain event:
 - a. And he said to him, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Because *you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction*, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.'" (1 Ki.20:42)
 - b. If anyone fiercely assails you *it will not be from Me*. Whoever assails you will fall because of you. (Isa.54:15)
4. Various 'what more could I have done?' and 'in vain' passages, showing that God wanted more human response than how people actually responded:

³ See also Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)

- a. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. *'What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? (Isa.5.3 – 4)*
 - b. *In vain* I punished your people; they did not respond to correction. (Jer.2:30)
 - c. During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, 'Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. *I thought* that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.' (Jer.3:6)
5. Various 'testing' passages, showing that in these cases, God does not know what a person will actually decide, though He might know the range of possible choices:
 - a. God *tested* Abraham (Gen.22:1)
 - b. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, *testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.* (Dt.8:2)
 - c. And even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, *God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.* (2 Chr.32:21)
 - d. Yet, O Lord of hosts, *who tests* the righteous, who sees the mind and the heart. (Jer.20:12)
 6. Various 'if' or 'may' or 'maybe' passages, showing that God was giving people a real choice:
 - a. And it shall come about that *if* they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they *may* believe the witness of the last sign (Ex.4:8)
 - b. And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And *if* anyone says something to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them.' (Mt.21:1 – 3)
 - c. This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. *Perhaps* they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. (Jer.26:2 – 3)
 - d. *Perhaps* when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.' (Jer.36:3)
 - e. Therefore, son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. *Perhaps* they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. (Ezk.12:3f)
 7. Various 'conditional' present or 'conditional' futures, showing that Jesus was not certain exactly when something would happen:
 - a. Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! *But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.'* (Mt.25:14 – 20)

In all of these cases, God gives human beings genuine free choice. He will be victorious over evil, and we know that because He has said it. But within the story, God has given human beings genuine freedom. So do I have an *explanation* for suffering? Yes. Suffering caused by nature is the result of our vulnerability to nature. Things like the earth's crust moving and storms brewing are actually necessary aspects of the earth supporting life and being a living system. From the standpoint of nature, they are good. It's how we're affected by earthquakes and storms that we are haunted by the question of nature as a cause of our suffering. The explanation there is that in the biblical story, we pushed God out of the creation and tried to make ourselves gods. So we have made ourselves vulnerable to the creation in a way God never intended. Birth defects and chemical imbalances reflect our vulnerability to the

natural world which we were never meant to bear. God wanted us to walk with Him in the safety and beauty of the garden, under His protection. He did not intend for us to walk alone. So Paul says in Romans 8:18 – 25 that the creation groans waiting to be fulfilled by Jesus as the new Adam, God’s new humanity, who would make the creation a garden again.

Human-caused suffering is the result of human beings directly. So God has had to prioritize healing the wound beneath the wound, the problem behind the problem. Suffering is only one symptom of the root problem of the corruption of human nature. We might cry out, ‘How long, O Lord???’ But that does mean good news: God is not behind your pain. He is not the source. That means that you can trust Him, trust His character, trust His goodness.

Let’s apply this to theology. Augustine of Hippo, the great Latin theologian in Roman North Africa in the early 400’s, was the first Christian theologian to use language that might be considered ‘monergic.’ That is, mono means one, and ergo means will. Monergism means ‘one will’ – in this case, God’s will is the only true will in the universe. This would logically mean that God is omnicausal. If you believe in monergism, then you must attribute all human sinfulness back to God, including the fall, subsequent sins, unbelief, evil, injustice, and perdition. All earlier theologians believed in human free will⁴ as the only way God can be 100% good. Augustine himself, in his early years, believed in free will, like when he repudiated the idea of fate on the basis of human beings having free will and not being determined. John Cassian, another leading theologian (the ‘Eastern Orthodox spokesman’), wrote a sensitive, critical response to Augustine.⁵ It’s worth noting that the Council of Orange, in 529 AD, denied that Augustine taught what is called ‘double predestination,’ the idea that God wills from before time some people to be saved and others to be damned.

[OPTIONAL SECTION – END]

Let’s apply this truth to how we talk. Let’s stop saying things that aren’t true:

1. ‘All things happen for a reason’
2. ‘God is trying to tell you something’
3. ‘God has a purpose behind this’

Instead, let’s say things that are true:

1. ‘Not all things happen for a good reason, because of us’
2. ‘God speaks to us through His Word’ (Jesus, Scripture)
3. ‘God’s purpose is to redeem all things’

God Is With You In Your Pain

But more importantly, God is with you in your pain. He is with you. How is that? Let me go back to my story. Like I said, when I was 16, my parents started arguing explicitly about divorce. For reasons I didn’t understand back then, I began to get interested in Jesus. I started reading the Bible. I had investigated Buddhism when I was younger. There was a statue of the Buddha in my grandmother’s house, and I thought as I looked at it, ‘Buddha has his arms folded and eyes closed symbolized his not really being engaged in the pain of this world. Now I understand that it reflects contentment, but it’s a contentment based on not being affected by this world. In fact, many statues depict him as being fat, so he seems even further disengaged from suffering.’ But I found that Jesus is different. There’s one story of Jesus standing by the tomb of his friend Lazarus, in John 11, and weeping. Since I had some Buddhist background, that story really stood out to me. Jesus was affected emotionally. God was always affected emotionally by us, even before He came as a human, but Jesus embodies God’s emotions in a human being, so *we* would know that God feels our suffering with us.

In that sense, Jesus’ human experiences were *for us*. Why be conceived in a womb? So *we would know* that he knows our weakness. Why be born into a family was poor enough that they couldn’t pay the standard baby dedication price at the Jewish Temple. So *we would know* that he knows our poverty. Why become refugees fleeing from genocide? So *we would know* that he knows about being a refugee, having parents with trauma, and being homeless. Why share in our pimples, puberty, and public teasing? So that *we would know* he knows our awkwardness. Why share in our human mind? So that *we would know* he knows the limitations of the human mind.

⁴ See my collection of quotations, *Human Free Will and God’s Grace in the Early Church Fathers*, found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-creation.

⁵ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), ch.4.

Jesus lost his stepfather Joseph when he was still young. So that *we would know* that he knows about having your childhood cut short. When Jesus was baptized, he publicly announced that his human nature needed cleansing. Why? So that *we would know* he knows what it's like to struggle against the corruption of sin within us. Later he endured conflict, mocking, death threats, betrayal, public shaming, and crucifixion. Why? So that *we would know* that he knows what suffering we are capable of inflicting. That matters because God would have known your experience anyway. But now, we can know that He knows, because He showed us through the humanity of Jesus.

Illus: There's a story from author Brennan Manning about how Jesus suffers with us: Just a few years ago, an Episcopal priest from Columbus, OH walked into his office, his church office, on a Monday morning, and wrote a hasty letter of resignation to the vestry. Then he went back to his house, sat down at the kitchen table, and wrote a letter to his wife and three children, all under the age of 10, that he was abandoning them. He went to a logging camp here in New England. He took a job in Vermont as a logger. One Saturday afternoon in Jan., fairly typical, it was about 10 degrees below zero, heavy snow, and the priest was sitting in his portable aluminum trailer that he had rented. The only source of heat was a tiny portable aluminum heater. The heater suddenly quit and died. Within minutes, the temperature in the trailer plunged down to zero. Shivering and in a fit of rage, the priest picked up the heater, flung it through the window, broke the window, and shouted, 'Christ, I hate you. Damn You God. Get out of my life. I'm finished with this Christian crap. It's all over.' He sank to his knees, defeated, and weeping. And in the bright darkness of faith, he heard a voice from within say, 'It's okay Kevin. I understand. I'm here. I am with you and I am for you.' Then, he heard Jesus weeping within him. Christ felt what he was feeling. It was an overwhelming feeling of intimacy. That same afternoon, Kevin Martin packed his bag, returned to Columbus, Ohio to be reconciled to his family and his church, and has gone on to pastor the most alive, dynamic and Spirit-filled Episcopal church in America, St. Luke's in Seattle WA. Jesus is fine tuned to our anger, disappointment, etc. He really knows what hurts the human heart. Who else does this? What other hero? What other god? What other friend?

God Is Ahead of Your Pain, Calling You

That leads me to my third point: God is not just helpless and trapped within our suffering, just as helpless as we are. God is ahead of your pain, pulling you through it. He came in Jesus not to *stay* in human suffering, but to come out the other side of it. And the reason he can do that is because he has conquered the brokenness behind our brokenness. He heals the wound behind the wound. He is healing the suffering behind the suffering. In Christian thought, human suffering is a symptom. Human evil and the corruption of human nature is the root cause and the root issue that needs to be healed. So when God came in Jesus, He came to heal the deepest wound.

Illus: Let me give an analogy. One of the many tragedies of 2014 was Ebola. In December, Time magazine rightly called Ebola fighters the people of the year.⁶ "For decades, Ebola haunted rural African villages like some mythic monster that every few years rose to demand a human sacrifice and then returned to its cave. It reached the West only in nightmare form, a Hollywood horror that makes eyes bleed and organs dissolve and doctors despair because they have no cure. Those who contracted the disease encountered pain like they had never known." One person who got Ebola and survived said, 'It hurts like they are busting your head with an ax.' But in 2014, Ebola followed roads and planes and infected 'crowded slums in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone; it traveled to Nigeria and Mali, to Spain, Germany and the U.S.' Ebola seemed especially diabolical because it struck doctors and nurses and health care workers; they were the most vulnerable. 'Anyone willing to treat Ebola victims ran the risk of becoming one... Governments weren't equipped to respond; the World Health Organization was in denial and snarled in red tape. First responders were accused of crying wolf, even as the danger grew.' But heroic people rushed in. One of them quoted in Time magazine is named Foday Gallah. He was an ambulance driver who survived infection. Bear in mind that catching Ebola and fighting it is painful. But now, after he fought the disease, his blood carries an immunity. 'He calls his immunity a holy gift. "I want to give my blood so a lot of people can be saved," he says. "I am going to fight Ebola with all of my might."'

Jesus is like that in relation to sin. Jesus' blood now carries an immunity. And he wants to give his blood so people can be saved – saved from the disease of sin. To show how the earliest Christians recognized this, let me quote from Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 394 AD) who was a bishop in Cappadocia in Turkey, a brilliant theologian, and a social activist vigorously determined to abolish slavery. He said, "Although Christ took our filth upon himself,

⁶ Nancy Gibbs, "The Choice: Person of the Year," *Time*, December 10, 2014; <https://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-ebola-fighters-choice/>.

nevertheless he is not defiled by the pollution, but in his own self, he cleanses the filth, for it says, the light shone in the darkness, but the darkness did not overpower it.”⁷ Jesus’ divine nature cleansing his human nature, to prepare it to be shared with us by his Spirit. And: “Our diseased nature needed a healer. Man in his fall needed one to set him upright.”⁸

Once again, who else does that? Jesus jumped into our plight. He shared in our disease, and defeated it within himself. Then he rose from the dead with a new human nature, cleansed of the disease, and with the immunity *for us*. He is on the other side of our sin, pulling us through it. So if human suffering is ever going to end, something deeper needs to be fixed: the corruption of sin within us.

How do we experience God pulling us through suffering to the other side? By the voice in us that cries out that suffering should not exist. Something in us also cries out for us to not do evil or cause suffering. We want it to end and we want it to be healed.

And here’s the radical thing: Maybe you’ve wrestled with the problem of suffering, but I suspect that we haven’t wrestled enough. All of us have wounds. And, all of us have caused wounds in others. Jesus can heal the wound behind the wound. He heals the disease behind the disease. He took human wounds from each of us, and the deepest wound, a corrupted human nature. Jesus gives us what we could not give ourselves: his new humanity. Matthew says in Mt.1:21 that Jesus has come to save us from our *sins*, not just to save us from the *consequences* of our sins, or to save us from what God feels about our sins. Jesus saves us from our sins per se, meaning the root source of evil and suffering in the world – our corrupted human nature.

Conclusion

So let me leave you with a few thoughts. First, let me first say something special for a Jewish reader, or anyone concerned with the Old Testament. You might read the Old Testament and see that God occasionally caused suffering for biblical Israel, or to protect biblical Israel. That is unique, and that is over. We no longer live in that part of the story. And God does not do that with any other nation or person. God needed an Israel because He was going to send Jesus. He needed human partners to live in a new kind of garden land so they could diagnose the disease of human nature, document that disease (which is what the Old Testament fundamentally is – a diagnosis), and be absolutely sold out for the cure, the cure being Jesus himself. But being part of biblical Israel was voluntary. God spoke words of hope. People stayed in or joined in voluntarily. There were real blessings for Israel. But there was also real discipline and real consequences for sin within what we call the Sinai or Mosaic covenant, because God was shaping the character and corporate life of this ‘new humanity in a new garden land.’ Once Jesus came, the covenant was fulfilled and reached its climax, because Jesus embodied once and for all what it means to be truly human. He defeated the disease, and defeated what Israel could not. He suffered within himself what Israel could not suffer. But Jesus’ Jewish disciples were witnesses to Jesus doing that, and heralds to the world that he did. And so Israel’s suffering is not a reason to say God is arbitrary or doesn’t exist.⁹

Second, human suffering in general is not a reason to say God doesn’t exist. Actually, if you believe human suffering is a moral objection, then your argument must be founded on the deeper principle of human dignity. If humans did not have special dignity, then our suffering would be simply natural and not a problem at all. Only if human beings have special dignity does our suffering matter and need both an explanation and healing. And the only way human beings can have special dignity is if there is a God of love and goodness who dignifies every person.¹⁰ So if human suffering is a true intellectual problem demanding an answer, it can only be demanded within a framework that includes a good and loving God. If you’re a Christian, don’t be intimidated by suffering. I recognized Jesus reaching out to me in my suffering through his suffering. Now of course not everyone will acknowledge that. But I think we can trust him to be at work in people despite their suffering.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Adversus Apollinarem* 26.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 15.

⁹ For a much fuller explanation of why God needed Israel as a human partner, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *Why Choose a Chosen People? Why Not Just Jump Right to Jesus?* found online here: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-israel-why.

¹⁰ I’ve argued further that only the Triune God of classical Christian theology can serve as the ground and foundation for universal human dignity; see Mako A. Nagasawa, *Human Dignity: Does Every Human Being Matter?* found online here: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-creation.

Third, we now have to be honest with...*ourselves*. What is your pain? And what do you do with it? What about you? What do you do with your pain? Maybe someone loved you but in a very conditional way. Maybe you've been through something hard, but have had to just suck it up and be tough. But now, when other people go through pain, you can't empathize, because you're like, 'Well, I survived; why can't you, too?' Maybe someone abandoned you or betrayed you or something like that. So you're wary, and you almost expect other people to do it again. So you either push people away, which hurts them. Or you might be kind of possessive and manipulative, which also hurts others. Or a combination of both. As much as you're hurting, you hurt others, too, by accusing them or not actually being able to be friends with them on healthy, normal terms. And when a friend eventually does disappoint you, you may respond with a disproportionate amount of pain because you're carrying pain in from somewhere else. But you're not just a victim. You played a role, just like I played a role. You are also a victimizer. I know that's hard to hear, especially if you are in pain, and yet sometimes our own pain blinds us to what we are actually doing.

It would be totally unkind of me to tell you about the pain you cause others when you came to hear about how to understand your pain...if there no hope. But there is hope. So, here is the critical decision I'm asking you to make. You need to decide what you're going to do with your pain. You can let Jesus transform us in the midst of our pain. Or you can transmit your pain to others. My encouragement to you is that Jesus is here, and he understands. So give your pain to him, give your life to him. Let it end with you. Don't pass it on. This world is painful enough as it is. Let it end with you. Be the person God made you to be.

Note to Readers:

Suffering is a deep and wide topic. One message is not enough to give you a comprehensive sense for the nuances of what I would like you to know about God and our suffering. Please do check out my other reflections here: www.anastasiscenter.org/suffering.