

# Suffering

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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These six study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Suffering* issue. They are especially appropriate for group study during the season of Lent.

### POWER MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

How do we express courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? While our culture idolizes strength in adversity and tough self-reliance, courage has another side that is revealed when our vulnerability is greatest and our own strength is exhausted.

### SUFFERING SERVANTS

In the prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus, the suffering of those called into God's service becomes clothed with ever deepening significance. Their suffering is not glorified, but it is endowed with power to advance God's kingdom.

### WE HAVE NEVER SEEN HIS FACE

How we depict the face of Christ reveals both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. Shusaku Endo's celebrated novel, *Silence*, challenges us to see "one who 'suffers with us' and who allows for our weakness."

### MY FATHER'S HANDS

Whether facing the twisting agony of arthritis or numb despair of leprosy, her father's response was the same: to take the hands of a person gently in his own, to become intimate both with their disease and with them. Renowned hand surgeon Paul Brand knew that we can use our hands to tell people in pain something about themselves: that they are not alone.

### HEALING PRESENCE

Congregations—through fear, ignorance, or prejudice—may forsake members with severe suffering. How can our friendship increase abundance of life for people with physical and mental health problems?

### SUFFERING TOGETHER AT VALLE NUEVO

In a little Salvadoran hamlet, the memory of villagers' suffering during a long and terrible war becomes a celebration of the Christ who suffers with them at each Station of the Cross. They remind us there are many "crucified peoples," and we need to ask "Who put them on the cross?"

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**Suffering has a mysterious role in the Christian life and should mold our response to human agony in the world. Indeed, the suffering of those called into God's service can become clothed with ever deepening significance—not glorified in itself, but endowed with power to advance God's kingdom.**

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**I**n *The Meaning of Jesus* N. T. Wright has observed, "The church is called to be for the world what Jesus was for Israel: not just a moral lecturer, nor even a moral example, but the people who, in obedience to God's strange vocation, learn to suffer and pray at the place where the world is in pain, so that the world may be healed." Our contributors explore this mysterious role of suffering in the Christian life, and how it should mold our response to human agony in the world.

We must be very careful how we assent to suffering, for it's as difficult and dangerous as walking on a knife-edge. We must avoid, on the one side, the wrong sort of passivity that glorifies suffering as something good in itself and, on the other, the wrong sorts of activity that would eliminate suffering at all costs. "In between is the apprenticeship," as theologian David Ford has noted in *The Shape of Living*, "which can only be served with those who know the trade of suffering and have learnt when, and how, to accept it and assent to it."

In *Power Made Perfect in Weakness* (p. 11), Rebecca DeYoung explores the type of courage we need to face our suffering, pain, and even death. "It is hard to face our own vulnerability and weakness, and tempting to trust our own strength or to impatiently return evil for evil." Yet in Christ's example, she urges, we find courage "to resist these temptations, to own up to the limits of our control, to 'love God...with all [our] might.'"

As disciples, our apprenticeship in suffering—in knowing when to accept it and how to endure it with courage—comes at the feet of the biblical prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus. “Their suffering is not glorified, for it proceeds from the sinfulness of those resisting God’s leading,” Waldemar Janzen observes in *Suffering Servants* (p. 20), “but this sin-generated suffering is endowed with power to advance God’s kingdom.”

The Crucifixion remains the powerful focal point for Christian reflection on suffering. Indeed, how we picture the Christ who suffers on the cross says much about both the one whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. Shusaku Endo’s celebrated novel, *Silence*, challenges us to see “one who ‘suffers with us’ and who allows for our weakness,” Brett Dewey writes in *We Have Never Seen His Face* (p. 29). “If we really believe that Jesus ‘was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities,’ then Endo is asking us to turn our imagination away from a pristine Jesus and to see in the Savior’s face his exhausted, sunken features.”

Heidi Hornik’s *Transcending Cultures* (p. 36) helps us look more closely at Christ’s suffering as she compares He Qi’s *The Crucifixion*, which depicts Jesus’ suffering among the poor who live in southwestern China, to Giovanni Stradano’s *Crucifixion*, which discovers in Jesus a model for Catholic forgiveness of Protestant. In *My Redeemer Lives* (p. 38), she explores the theme in Carpaccio’s *Meditation on the Passion* that our interpretation of Christ’s death is deeply layered. In this striking image, the dead Christ is contemplated by Job and St. Jerome, the early church’s greatest biblical scholar “who has so strongly influenced our interpreting Job as a paradigm of patience, a believer whose suffering compares with Christ’s, and a prophet who foretold Christ’s resurrection.”

These multiple layers of Job’s exemplary suffering and Christ’s redemptive passion reappear in Terry York and David Bolin’s new hymn, *Why Have You Forsaken Me?* (p. 41). York’s text, which employs Christ’s cry from the cross in order to voice our “private pain, a Job-like friend,” is matched with Bolin’s haunting tune in a minor key. The story of Job’s suffering then becomes the frame for a service of worship created by David Bridges (p. 44). Job’s lamentation, the misguided advice of his “friends,” Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and the concluding speech of the Lord elicit our responding prayers and hymns, and lead us to worship the God who suffers with us.

“Some grief is too deep to bear,” Stephen Schmidt observes in *Not in the Medical Records* (p. 61). Rather, “it is endured, it is challenged, it becomes the stuff of reconciliation or transformation.” In a personal reflection on enduring Crohn’s disease for twenty-five years, Schmidt charges the medical records are seriously incomplete, for “they don’t mention the sacramental memories that shape my faith or the grace-filled church that sustains me to face the dark questions” of pain, anger, and despair. Then,

in *Suffering Together in Valle Nuevo* (p. 56), Yvonne Dilling recounts the transformation of a Salvadoran hamlet as villagers share their grief. The annual remembrance of their suffering during a terrible war becomes a celebration of the Christ who suffers with them at each Station of the Cross. Their plight reminds us “there are many ‘crucified peoples,’ and we need to ask ‘Who put them on the cross?’” Dilling writes. “This will lead us to the question, ‘As a follower of Jesus, what am I doing to help them get down from the cross?’”

How the church as a community should respond to those with profound mental health problems such as schizophrenia is John Swinton’s topic in *Healing Presence* (p. 68). In our culture schizophrenia is a totalizing disease, for “to have schizophrenia is to find oneself alienated, stigmatized, often friendless, and, interestingly, often prevented from expressing one’s spirituality.” Our response, he suggests, should mirror Jesus’ encounter with the alienation of leprosy in the ancient world.

The renowned hand surgeon, Dr. Paul Brand, helped unlock the mysteries of leprosy and pioneer reconstructive surgery for its victims. In *My Father’s Hands* (p. 76), Pauline Brand Nelson reflects on her father’s work and the lesson he taught us: “We can use our hands to tell people in pain something about themselves: that they are not alone.”

“Though the loss of a loved one is always deeply personal, the spiritual insight that can emerge from reflection upon it can be of great benefit to the wide community of faith,” Phyllis Kersten demonstrates in her review essay, *How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (p. 84). With two autobiographical accounts in hand, Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* and Gerald L. Sittser’s *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, she traces how we may be changed as we endure honestly and fully the pain and grief of losing a family member.

Reviewing two books that focus on understanding God—*Can God Be Trusted?: Faith and the Challenge of Evil* by John G. Stackhouse, Jr. and *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* by Douglas John Hall—and two that deal with anguished doubts—Gary Watts’ *Painful Questions: Facing Struggles with Faith* and Phillip Yancey’s *Where is God When It Hurts?*, Roger Ward finds a single theme gives these books their power: God’s identification with the creature and creation. “Because God suffered his Son to live, experience pain as we do, and die,” Ward concludes in *Facing Painful Questions* (p. 90), “in what other way can we be more intimately connected to the reality of God’s love than in our own suffering and death?” ❖

# Power Made Perfect in Weakness

BY REBECCA KONYNDYK DEYOUNG

**What does it mean to have courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? While our culture may idolize strength in adversity and tough self-reliance, courage has another side that many of us have not thought about much. It is revealed when our vulnerability is greatest and our own strength is exhausted.**

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**W**hen the Apostle Paul was struggling with personal pain or difficulty—the mysterious “thorn in the flesh” that he endured—he received from the Lord this answer to his recurring prayers for relief: “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Several years ago, a young couple was featured in the newspaper, holding a picture of their 21-month-old daughter Macy, whom they had buried the day before. She died of a rare genetic disorder called spinal muscular atrophy. These parents went through a lot caring for Macy in her short life, but they knew exactly what they were up against. The same disorder had also claimed the lives of Macy’s older twin brother and sister just two and a half years earlier. The twins were diagnosed when they were six months old. They too died before their second birthday.

You might expect parents in a situation like this to be bitter, angry, and hardened by their experience. Macy’s mother and father freely admit how difficult life has been for them, how many questions they have for which they can’t find answers. As her father put it, “When they first told us this was a fatal disease, we didn’t know the half of what we were getting into.” Even the blurry newsprint on the front page of the paper conveys

faces marked by wounds that are fresh and deep. It is plain from the article, however, that their love for their children is greater than their pain. “‘We see Macy as a dancing angel,’ said her mother. ‘She is in heaven, able to breathe freely, playing with her sister and brother.’ The couple is not sure whether they will try to have another baby or adopt. But they do know they want to be parents again.”

What does it mean to have courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? When I first started writing about the virtue of courage, the newspapers were full of stories about the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Our vulnerability to suffering had suddenly become real. Whether pain and fear come on a large or small scale, we all need to face them somewhere, sometime.

Courage is probably one of the most familiar virtues. From cowboys to superheroes to decorated veterans, models of courage abound in our films and stories. In our culture, courage is perhaps better known as an American value than a Christian virtue, since it epitomizes qualities that Americans idolize: strength in adversity, tough self-reliance. Despite its apparent familiarity, however, courage has a side that many of us have not thought about much—the side of courage that is revealed in the endurance of great suffering and sometimes even death. This courage shows its real character when our vulnerability is greatest and our own strength is exhausted. Then, as the Apostle Paul puts it, God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.

In America we value independence, being able to take care of ourselves. As a result, we treat weakness, vulnerability, and suffering as evils to be avoided, prevented, and overcome. We live in “a cultural climate which fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs.”<sup>1</sup> For many, eliminating the evil of terrorism was the obvious response to the events of September 11. The suffering caused by those attacks was a horrific evil; there isn’t one of us who doesn’t want the world rid of it. Several years and multiple strategies later, however, it is easier to ask, Is the battle to eliminate all threats to our security one we can really hope to win? And at what cost?

A Christian view of courage knows that suffering, for all its horror, is not the greatest evil. It is worse to *do* evil than to *suffer* it. Christian courage also knows that it need not fear weakness; for it knows that suffering can be a crucible of self-transformation, an opportunity for new vision. Like Job, it is precisely when we are bent low from desperate weariness and pain that we are most likely to learn to say, “My ears had heard of you, but *now my eyes have seen you*” (Job 42:5, NIV, emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> This way of thinking about suffering has its source in a radically different understanding of strength and power.

### WHO IS OUR MODEL?

What is the source of this understanding? As Christians we have a different ideal of goodness because we have a different role model in mind: becoming virtuous amounts to becoming more and more like Christ. Being created anew by the Spirit means emulating Christ's character—his wisdom, gentleness, and truthfulness. To understand each of the virtues, then, we should look first to what the person and life of Christ reveal to us. To understand the virtue of courage, we need to ask, What does Christ teach us about true strength?

He teaches this: that love can lead us to endure suffering and pain and even death on a cross. Do you want a model of courage? Look at Christ's life of suffering love. This model of courage is worth thinking about precisely because it is such a startling contrast with the typical American picture of courage. Perhaps it is a model of courage and strength of which only a Christian can make sense.

St. Augustine defines courage as "love readily bearing all things for the sake of the object beloved."<sup>3</sup> For courage to point beyond itself, for love to bear all things, we must have something we love more than the suffering and pain we fear. Love is the *sine qua non* of courage. Without it, all the bravery in the world is mere gritted teeth. "The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him," G. K. Chesterton once said of courage, "but because he loves what is behind him."<sup>4</sup>

One mistake we make about suffering is the idea that we must avoid pain at all times and places as the greatest evil. Even Socrates argued that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it, because there is nothing worse than the moral corruption that comes with perpetrating evil. In opposing the view that suffering is the worst thing imaginable, however, we must not glorify suffering for its own sake. Suffering isn't intrinsically good; it is not an end in itself. For this reason,

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**Because we value independence and being able to take care of ourselves, we live in "a cultural climate which fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs."**

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Aquinas called courage an *enabling* virtue—it doesn't realize the good itself, but rather serves as an indispensable aid when the good is threatened. If there were no obstacles to truth and goodness in this world, there would be no need for courage. The courageous suffering we endorse, then, is not merely enduring pointless pain in a meaningless world. The suffering the Christian is called to bear is most often the result of trying to love others in

a world full of sin and wretchedness. Great love almost always involves suffering, whether it is in small doses of self-denial or great dramatic losses. Just as speaking in tongues and moving mountains is of no value without love, so courage is of no value without something good worth suffering *for*. If someone is suffering injury or pain because he doesn't love or respect himself, because he has been beaten into submission and self-

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**Christ's example teaches us that courage is a spiritual strength. It does not require physical power or military might or the ability to overcome another person with force. The disciples were still trying and failing to grasp this the night Christ died for them; perhaps we still are, too.**

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hated, then suffering can deaden the soul, not enliven it. The martyrs died out of great love, not out of despair.

Aquinas and Aristotle agree that the courageous person doesn't have to enjoy being in threatening situations, but that person does have to think it's the best place to be because of the good it will win her in the end. The suffering endured is redeemed by the

good for the sake of which it endures, something that is only obtainable by walking through the fire, not around it.

It's easy to think of suffering as a passive response to evil. Evil comes upon us unbidden, and since we are powerless to resist it, we suffer. What is the virtue in that? Suffering doesn't seem to fit our picture of courage: courage is an action-adventure virtue, not a walk-all-over-me virtue. Aquinas tells us that the natural human reaction to a present evil is sorrow, and sorrow, when we can't escape it, easily degenerates into despair. The endurance of suffering can, therefore, involve active resistance to being overcome by despair, an energetic and courageous clinging to something good, a decision to hope. Thus, in contrast to his wife's resentment and resignation, Job's courage enables him to say, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). A suffering life is not the end for which we are created, even if it is an unavoidable part of our wayfaring to that end. When he set his face toward Jerusalem, Christ's mission was to suffer *for our sakes*, for the sake of love and its redeeming power to overcome suffering and death. When we endure suffering, we say by our endurance that we are waiting for something better, and we believe it is still coming. In *Lament for a Son*, Nick Wolterstorff speaks out of this faith-infused courage: "In my living, my son's death will not be the last word."<sup>5</sup>

Looking to Christ's example also teaches us that courage is first of all an inner quality, a spiritual strength. It does not, therefore, require physi-

cal power or military might or the ability to overcome another person with force. The disciples were still trying and failing to grasp this the night Christ died for them; perhaps we still are, too. This conception of courage puts strength of heart ahead of strength of fist and sword. It contrasts with the classic American hero, who through his own strength and cunning manages to escape desperate situations, overcome the bad guys, and win the day. It is also characteristically American that the hero wins the day totally on his own, without any help from anyone else. Whether the leading man is John Wayne or Sylvester Stallone, the ideal of self-sufficient power is one that has a powerful grip on our moral imaginations.

But back up from heroic fiction to real life for a minute. The Lone Ranger model of courage doesn't tell us what to do when our own strength isn't enough to win the day. What if we fight to protect ourselves with all the strength we've got, and still find ourselves vulnerable? Since September 11, we as a nation have had this question ringing in our ears. What if we exercise, eat well, and see the doctor regularly and still find our bodies riddled with cancer? What if we drive defensively and have a clean record, but still end up hospitalized after being hit by a drunk driver? What if we're not superheroes after all, but only their bumbling, ineffectual sidekicks who constantly need to be rescued ourselves?

Courage is necessary precisely because we are weak and vulnerable to harm, because pain and suffering are a very real part of human life. This is the way it is for us. We know that all too well after New York, after watching little children die of incurable diseases, after living long enough to see our bodies get sick, hurt, and weary. Courage cannot eliminate every threat; it cannot gain for us guarantees of safety and comfort. Courage can, however, ensure that fear and suffering don't stop us from doing good. And it can keep fear and suffering from driving us to do evil.

Especially in his moment of greatest vulnerability, Christ showed us the source of true strength—the love of God. The power of God's love far exceeds the limits of any human power, yet it can become our own. What Christ ensures for us in his dying and rising is that there will be sufficient grace for the journey, and that in the end all our tears will be wiped away (Revelation 21:4). God's power and promises give us reason to take heart.

#### **WHY IS ENDURANCE SO DIFFICULT?**

Thinking of courage as the endurance of suffering is a very old idea, even if it is a new thought for some of us today. It is also a scary idea. When faced with suffering, our instincts lead us to want to do something about it. A recent survey reported that terminally ill patients who wanted the option of physician-assisted suicide were more afraid of suffering and pain than they were of death itself.

Why is the endurance of suffering so difficult for us? Why does it occasion such intense fear? When Thomas Aquinas considers this question, he

mentions three reasons—perhaps there are more.<sup>6</sup> First, we suffer and endure when we are threatened by someone or something stronger than us. Counterattack is an option when *we* are in a position of superior strength and are willing to use it, when we still have some measure of control.

We experience two emotional reactions to pains, difficulties, and threats of injury: either in fear we shrink back from them or with daring we strike out against them. Courage's job is to moderate both emotions so that the threat of evil doesn't deter us from holding fast to what is good. Both fear and daring are about something that might harm us; they differ according to the possibility of warding it off. We shrink back from evil we can't overcome; we strike out against evil we believe we can prevent or shake off. Everything depends on how our strength measures up against the threat of harm. If it is possible to keep it at bay, then we mobilize for attack. If it is not, then the task of courage is to dig in and withstand the storm.

What Aquinas's analysis reveals is that when we suffer, we suffer precisely because we are in a position of weakness. The pain is bad enough, to be sure; what makes it unbearable is the feeling of powerlessness that goes with it. We must endure pain because we cannot prevent or alleviate it.

Sometimes courage does require defending ourselves against a threat. Moreover, courage never stands idle when others are in danger or in pain. Yet courage can also uphold us when we are in a position of weakness, when we have lost control over our circumstances, or when we cannot or should not use power and force to fight back. Courage can stand firm and stand fast as well as striking out against. As Macy's parents show us, sometimes standing firm is all we are able to do. As the cross shows us, sometimes it is all we ought to be willing to do.

The second reason suffering is hard to face is that when we are able to strike back against things that hurt us, we can use anger to our advantage. Anger is a powerful emotional force that can psyche us up to overcome threats against us. What we love about the action-hero type is that he is angry enough to take on injustice and overcome it. Courage is justice's greatest ally; anger, in turn, serves as courage's toughest weapon. Anger is powerless to help us, however, when we can't fight the pain and make it go away.

When we suffer, we carry the extra burden of sorrow, the emotion we feel when evil is already here with us. Our sorrow is an additional weight to bear, and it is a burden that often threatens to undo us. The courage to suffer must therefore stand firm against sorrow inside, as well as threats from outside. This internal firmness can be as much a testimony of courage as any outward act. The martyr's resistance, despite pain and suffering, speaks boldly for justice when it says, "The truth will stand even when I fall." Even though it is marked by weeping, Macy's parents' graveside vigil

bears witness that “Love is strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6).

The last reason why the endurance of suffering is so difficult is that endurance implies suffering for a long stretch of time. As we’ve seen, when we suffer something, it is usually something beyond our control. If we *could* have warded off the threat or fixed the problem, we *would* have, and the sooner, the better. If we are powerless to do so, however, then something beside our own will is setting the terms. We don’t decide when to get Parkinson’s disease or how fast it will progress. We don’t decide to face religious persecution and for how long, nor do we know when we might have to choose between losing our job and losing our integrity, and how long our subsequent unemployment will last. We simply have to endure hardship for as long as disease and injustice hold sway.

Added to our natural disinclination for suffering over the long haul is that fact that American culture tells us to expect things to be fixed, and to be fixed without delay. Waiting is hard enough; waiting in pain is unthinkable. As a recent advertisement proclaimed, “We took ‘immediately’—and made it *faster*.” Why should we have to put up with pain? Call *now*! See your doctor *today*! In a culture dedicated to comfort and convenience, we have precious little tolerance for pain and difficulty. We feel as though we have the right to avoid it, and if not, then the right to get rid of it as quickly as possible. Especially when we have these impatient (and unrealistic) expectations, suffering can wear us down over the long haul.

#### **WHO ARE THE COURAGEOUS?**

If suffering can be a genuine expression of courage, the example of Christ also teaches us something important about *who* is capable of having this virtue. Centuries ago, Aristotle described courage in terms of battle-field action. This definition, in the world of the Greek *polis*, unapologetically disqualified women and children, the sick and disabled, the foreigner and the socially disenfranchised, from having the virtue of courage. Later, when Aquinas brought a Christian perspective to bear on this Greek formula, he deliberately shifted his model of courage from Achilles to Christ, thus opening the virtue to everyone capable of sacrificing themselves for another out of love, as Christ did. Today we, like Aristotle, prefer action heroes—those who embody the American moral ideal—who are macho men. Some of us are not men, and even among those who are, many will never be particularly macho. If courage can be expressed in the endurance of suffering, however, then it is no longer open only to those who excel in human strength and physical power. It is a virtue for all of us, even those who may never count as powerful; in fact, it may be especially available to the weak and the wounded.<sup>7</sup>

It is tempting to avoid suffering at all costs. It is hard to live with pain and difficulty and not be able to ‘do something about it.’ It is hard to face our own vulnerability and weakness. It is tempting to trust our own

strength or to impatiently return evil for evil. Courage is the strength to resist these temptations, to own up to the limits of our own power and control, to “love God...with all [our] might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Courage, says one author, is “nothing else than to love [the] good, in the face of injury or death,...undeterred by any spirit of compromise.”<sup>8</sup>

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**It is hard to face our own vulnerability and weakness, and tempting to trust our own strength or to impatiently return evil for evil. Courage is the strength to resist these temptations, to own up to the limits of our control, to “love God...with all [our] might.”**

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less that we see most clearly that courage is not finally about trusting our *own* strength. Only God has the ultimate power to overcome evil. Only God has faced death down and defeated it. When our own strength is exhausted by suffering, we see most clearly that true strength is rooted in God’s power, and true courage inspired

by his love. That love has the power to hold us steadfast as we endure the pain of broken relationships, or walk through the rubble in New York City, or stand beside little Macy’s grave.

God promises us, as he promised Joshua long ago, “I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.... I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). N. T. Wright points out that, surprisingly enough, the most frequent command God gives us in Scripture is “Do not be afraid.... Fear not.”<sup>9</sup> The promise to which we hold fast is God’s promise to help us stand firm against fear, and to stand with us when we are powerless to avoid suffering, so that love—not fear—has the last word in our lives.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, I.15.

2 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

3 *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manicheorum* (On the Morals of the Catholic Church), XV.25.

4 *Illustrated London News*, January 14, 1911.

5 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 93.

6 *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, qq. 123-124. See my “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11:2 (Fall 2002), 23-25, for a more extended discussion of this point.

7 Aquinas goes so far as to argue that the act most fully embodying courage is martyrdom. Does that mean courage is only for super Christian saints, instead of action-adventure superheroes? I think the opposite is true. First, even the martyrs' suffering is unlike Christ's in this respect: no human being can repeat his redemptive work on the cross. That was already done for us. Secondly, for all Christians, Aquinas argues that the fundamental moral task is to intentionally become more and more like Christ. Each day of *imitatio Christi* requires, therefore, that we reaffirm our baptism, dying to our old selves and welcoming the birth of the new, dying with Christ and like Christ in order also to rise with him (Philippians 3:7-11). As Henri Nouwen notes (*A Letter of Consolation*), suffering this daily mortification of the old self is part of the rhythm of discipleship. Laying down our lives and taking up our crosses, in this analogical but no less important sense, is a courageous task for all of those who claim Christ as their own.

8 Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 131.

9 N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (London: SPCK, 1994), 56.

10 This article is a revised and expanded version of my "Courage, Weakness, and September 11," *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 17:6 (June/July 2002), 3-5. I am grateful to the editor for giving me permission to incorporate that material. The opening story is from *The Grand Rapids Press*, February 2, 2001.

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# Suffering Servants

BY WALDEMAR JANZEN

In the prophets, the suffering servant, and Jesus, the suffering of those called into God's service is clothed with ever deepening significance. Their suffering is not glorified, for it proceeds from the sinfulness of those resisting God's leading. But this sin-generated suffering is endowed with power to advance God's kingdom.

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A line of sufferers in the Bible, long recognized as somehow belonging together, include the Old Testament prophets, the (suffering) servant of Isaiah 40-55, and Jesus. Understanding their suffering is important for making sense of large portions of the Bible, but it becomes even more so when we realize that we as Christians are invited to join their group. What links them to one another and to us?

## THE PROPHETS

The suffering prophet *par excellence* is Jeremiah. He is called by God against his own protestations, mocked and persecuted by his fellow villagers of Anathoth and others, and forbidden by God to marry or have children. Beaten and put in the stocks by the priest Pashhur, he barely escapes the death sentence demanded by a mob and must go into hiding for his preaching during the reign of King Jehoiakim. He is accused of being a traitor for announcing God's judgment on Jerusalem through the Babylonians. After being thrown into a dry well to perish, he eventually is rescued and kept in a prison, only to be carried off to Egypt against his will.

Jeremiah is not the only suffering prophet. While some, like Nathan, are respected at the royal court and their message is sometimes heeded (2 Samuel 7; 12:1-15), others, like Elijah, have a message that challenges the powerful in society and thus encounters resistance (1 Kings 18 ff.). Resistance to the prophets flared up in the eighth century B.C., when Israelite

society was increasingly stratified socially, evoking announcements of God's judgment by Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah on behalf of the down-trodden. Persecution reached an apex a century later, when Jeremiah said the Babylonian invasions, destruction of Jerusalem, and deportation of many Judeans to Babylon, were God's judgments on his unfaithful people.

Obedying God's call, no matter how heavy the burden or how harsh the persecution, is central to the prophetic ethos. A quaint story of an unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 13 underscores this point, as does the book of Jonah.

Suffering under this burden of obedience to proclaim a message painful to the prophet himself and hateful to his hearers is portrayed most articulately in the so-called Laments of Jeremiah (11:18-20; 12:1-6; 15:10-12,15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). They resemble the individual lament psalms, but their content is tied to the specifics of Jeremiah's life. He cries out:

O LORD, you have enticed me,...  
 you have overpowered me,....  
 If I say, "I will not mention him [the LORD],  
     or speak any more in his name,"  
 then within me there is something like a burning fire  
     shut up in my bones;  
 I am weary with holding it in,  
     and I cannot....  
 Why did I come forth from the womb  
     to see toil and sorrow,  
     and spend my days in shame?

*Jeremiah 20:7a, 9, 18*

Though some statements seem to construe Jeremiah's sufferings as sacrificial or vicarious—like "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (11:19)—von Rad rightly denies this, but perhaps too categorically, when he says: "Never for a moment did it occur to him that this mediatorial suffering might have a meaning in the sight of God."<sup>1</sup> Did Jeremiah simply cry out in anguish? Why then did he commit these intimate prayers to writing, for others to read? Sheldon Blank argues convincingly that Jeremiah realized his suffering, though not propitiatory for others in the sight of God, was a paradigm that transcended his personal experience; it was representative for the coming suffering of his people, and thus was in some sense significant for them. This is evident most clearly in Jeremiah 16:1-9 (though a Divine word, rather than a prophetic lament), where Jeremiah is told by God not to marry and raise a family, in this way projecting—we might even call it "pre-living"—for his people a future devoid of hope.<sup>2</sup> Thus Jeremiah's prophetic suffering proceeds from two sources: the external resistance and persecution, and the internal burden of paradigmatically embodying or "pre-living" his people's approaching Divine judgment.

### THE (SUFFERING) SERVANT

Our consideration of prophetic suffering leads inevitably to Isaiah 52:13-53:12 ("Isaiah 53" from here on), one of four "Servant Songs" in the section of the book widely called "Second Isaiah" or "Deutero-Isaiah."<sup>3</sup> Many interpreters identify the unnamed servant in it with Jeremiah or with the prophetic author of the text, but other theories abound. It is also a key text in the New Testament's interpretation of the suffering role of Jesus.

Who is the servant in the Songs? Some identify the servant in *all* servant texts in Second Isaiah with the people of Israel, who now are called to a prophetic role for which Jeremiah provides the model.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, in the servant-texts *outside* the Songs in Second Isaiah, the servant is the people of Israel. In a general sense, this also may be true of the servant in the Songs, but to establish this, we need to reflect more on the context of each Song.

In keeping with newer perspectives in Isaiah-scholarship that recognize the editorial unity of the *whole* book of Isaiah, I no longer interpret the Songs in isolation, but see them as part of the unfolding "inner movement of the prophetic narrative extending from chapter 40 to chapter 55."<sup>5</sup> This approach leads to a more nuanced and satisfactory picture of the servant than the simple identification of him with the people of Israel.

In Isaiah 40:1-11 God calls (in a heavenly council?) for the comforting of Israel in exile: her punishment is completed and her salvation is now to be proclaimed. The Divine voice takes precedence over identifiable prophetic speakers. Then in the first Servant Song (42:1-4, explained in 42:5-9), God commissions his servant, the people of Israel. Elected by God and endowed with the spirit, the servant (Israel) will, in a gentle but persistent way, bring justice to the nations, who are awaiting God's teaching (cf. Isaiah 2:2-4). Yet Israel apparently fails to see or disregards God's commission.

As a result, a human voice, so far unidentified but possibly the human speaker of chapters 40-48, appears: "And now the Lord has sent *me* and his spirit" (48:16b). In the second Servant Song (49:1-6, expanded in 49:7-13), this human speaker tells of his earlier prophetic commissioning (1b-3), reminiscent of Jeremiah's call, and his lack of success in carrying it out (4a).

Who is the prophetic figure addressed as "servant" in 49:3? This verse, often taken to identify the servant as the people Israel ("You are my servant, Israel"), is better read in context, "You [second person singular] are my servant, [you are now] Israel...." As Childs puts it: "The task that the nation Israel had been given and failed to accomplish (42:1-9) had been transferred, not away from Israel, but rather to one who would incarnate Israel."<sup>6</sup> Despite his lack of success (49:4a), the servant further reports, God has not only reaffirmed his call, but extended it beyond being "a light to the nations" (42:6) to include restoring "the survivors of Israel" (49:5-6).

In the third Servant Song (50:4-9), this servant emphasizes his obedient acceptance of suffering and indignity, but also his persistence and his unwavering confidence in God's help and triumph.

In the final Servant Song (52:13-53:12), other voices speak about this servant. God pronounces that “my servant,” who has experienced unprecedented suffering and degradation (has been “marred beyond human semblance”), will be “exalted and lifted up,” a fact that will be recognized far and wide, by many nations and kings (52:13-15). Then a group of persons, “we,” report with astonishment that they have seen incredible things: an individual whom they had considered “struck down by God, and afflicted” because of his ungainly appearance, rejection in society, weakness, sickness, pain, quiet submission, and eventual death, is seen by them now in an entirely different light (53:1-11a). They recognize that he was innocent, that he bore all these sufferings, laid on him by God, as an “offering” for their own transgressions, but that God would not give him up.<sup>7</sup> In a final speech, God affirms the correctness of this insight (53:11b-12). God will indeed exalt the servant (cf. 52:13) because “he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). The “we” confessing this new understanding can be seen as those in exiled Israel who, albeit after some time of doubt, have accepted the message of salvation preached by the servant (embodying Israel; 49:3) and recognized his own role in bringing it about. They seem like a vanguard of those far and wide, who will recognize the servant’s true significance, according to God’s introductory speech (52:12-15).<sup>8</sup>

In sum, the servant in Second Isaiah is “Israel,” cast in a prophetic role by Israel’s commission to bring a message of salvation to the nations. The role of this “Israel,” if the people fail to accept it, can be embodied by an individual—not by one who replaces Israel, but one who shoulders the calling of Israel and extends this calling to address both the nations and his own renegade people. The historical identity of this individual is deliberately left veiled, so that the emphasis falls fully on the servant-role, a role marked not only by proclamation in words, but by suffering unto death. Others in Israel, also veiled as to historical identity, recognize that this servant has taken upon himself for them the suffering prophetic role that Israel as a whole has rejected.

This servant’s suffering has two chief dimensions. One is continuous with earlier prophetic suffering, but adapted to a new situation. While Jeremiah suffered by “pre-living” his people’s coming judgment, the servant/Israel has already endured that judgment and now can be comforted (Isaiah 40:1-2). Further, with Israel’s new commissioning as prophet-servant comes the suffering that typically results from (internal Israelite?) opposition to a prophetic calling. Beyond such prophetic suffering that—as in Jeremiah’s case—results from opposition, the suffering of the servant of Isaiah 53 is broader: it embraces in a spirit of gentleness, meekness, and submission the wide range of suffering that marks the human condition.

The second dimension of the servant’s suffering is his “vicarious” bearing of the sins of others. The biblical roots for such vicarious suffering

include: (1) the prophetic office, which involves intercession (e.g. Amos 7:1-6; Jeremiah 18:20); (2) substitution of animal sacrifices for human guilt in the cult;<sup>9</sup> (3) royal suffering, for the king was seen to embody the people and bear their fate;<sup>10</sup> and (4) Moses, a royal and prophetic figure, who intercedes for the people, suffers on account of their disobedience, and bears some of their punishment (e.g. Exodus 5:22-23; 17:1-4; Deuteronomy 4:21).<sup>11</sup>

We need to consider the prophetic roots of the servant's suffering as primary, but recognize in addition a distinctive development proceeding from God. The servant, in prophetic manner, obediently shoulders the burden of his commission to embody Israel (49:3)—unlike Elijah, who becomes despondent on the (incorrect) perception that "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life" (1 Kings 19:10)—and to accept the consequent suffering unto death (50:4-9; 53:1-11a). God's new move consists of not rejecting Israel for failing as a people to follow the call to be God's servant (42:1-4), but "reducing God's expectation" of Israel to the obedience of *one* person and accepting it as vicarious for the people. Remember God's "concession" to Abraham to spare Sodom on the basis of the righteousness of *ten* of its inhabitants (Genesis 18:32 f.). Here, God accepts the obedience of only *one*.

The servant as Israel is fully human, and his exaltation (Isaiah 52:13; 53:10-12) is described in earthy terms ("he shall see his offspring," "divide the spoil with the strong"). Nevertheless, the servant-theme in Second Isaiah depicts a dimension of God's accommodation to human sinfulness that is not exhausted by a restoration of Israel—or even a faithful remnant of followers (53:1-11a)—to their land in the sixth century; it has an openness to further embodiment in the future that may be called eschatological.

### **THE SERVANT AND JESUS**

From its earliest beginnings, the Church has interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus by means of the servant-paradigm of Second Isaiah, and especially Isaiah 53. Numerous quotations and echoes in the New Testament go back to the servant-passages, though many are brief and uncertain, or do not refer to Jesus' suffering or its vicarious nature.<sup>12</sup>

Here is one example of the complexity of establishing intertextual relationships. In Acts 8:26-39, Philip meets the Ethiopian Eunuch, who is reading Isaiah 53:7b-8a. On the Eunuch's request, "starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (8:35). The Isaiah passage quoted tells of the servant's suffering, but stops just short of referring to its meaning, interpreted in Isaiah 53:8b as being "stricken for the transgression of my people." This poses a question basic for other references as well: How much of Isaiah 53 did Philip (or the author, Luke) include when he proclaimed to him "the good news about Jesus"? Some would like to limit the intertextual connection strictly to the words quoted (here and elsewhere). Others argue that a brief reference to an Old Testament text evoked for hearers the wider context as well, in this case all of Isaiah 53.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of such uncertainties in the case of cross-references, however, there are clear associations of Jesus' mission with that of the servant. Simon, for example, greets the infant Jesus as the one who will fulfill the servant's call to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32; cf. Isaiah 49:6). 1 Peter 2:22-25 draws on several verses of Isaiah 53 to develop an argument that indisputably includes the atoning nature of Christ's suffering in line with the church's customary perspective. Morna Hooker also finds a clear echo of Isaiah 53 in Romans 4:25: "[Christ] who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification."<sup>14</sup> There can be little doubt that the church's use of the servant-theme of Second Isaiah, including the vicarious atonement in Isaiah 53, to interpret the ministry of Jesus begins in the New Testament itself rather than later.

Furthermore, Jesus takes up the Isaianic servant's total calling (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6) to be "a light to the nations" and to "restore the survivors of Israel" (49:6). Jesus not only atones for the sins of both through his suffering and death, but also extends God's salvation by reaching out to those suffering in many and various ways. Thus Matthew 12:18-21 (citing Isaiah 42:1-4), one of the clearest New Testament quotations linking Jesus to the Isaianic servant, does so on the basis of his healing ministry (12:15-17).

Scholars debate whether Jesus himself interpreted his ministry in light of the Isaianic servant.<sup>15</sup> We must not forget, however, that Jesus and/or the New Testament writers turn not only to the servant-theme in Second Isaiah for an interpretation of Jesus' suffering, but also to other accounts of suffering. For example,

Jesus places himself into the widespread Jewish view that the role of the prophets generally (not only of the "suffering servant") includes suffering (cf. Nehemiah 9:26; Luke 13:33-34).<sup>16</sup> In view of his approaching passion, he extends prophetic suffering to embrace other righteous sufferers, including "sages," "scribes,"

and "righteous Abel" (Matthew 23:34-35). Jesus also links his suffering to that of the sufferers in the lament psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (cf. Matthew 27:46 with Psalm 22:2). Passages like "this is the blood of my covenant" (Matthew 26:28) suggest a cultic-sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death (cf. Exodus 24:8; or perhaps Romans 3:24-26). When the soldiers mock Jesus with a purple robe, a crown of thorns, a

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**Jesus takes up the servant's calling to be "a light to the nations" and "restore the survivors of Israel." He not only atones for the sins of both through his suffering and death, but also extends God's salvation by reaching out to those suffering in many and various ways.**

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staff, and sneering obeisance, and when Pilate's superscription on the cross identifies him as king, the evangelists present this as an unwittingly correct witness to Jesus' suffering royal role (Matthew 27:27-31, 37; Mark 15:16-20, 26). Here, as in many texts, he is the suffering royal Messiah. And finally, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus turns to the two disciples and, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about

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**If opposition and suffering result from obedience to our call, this too—as in the case of Jeremiah and other prophets—may make our lives a witness to the world around us.**

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himself *in all the scriptures*" (Luke 24:25-27; my emphasis).<sup>17</sup> Jesus' scriptural basis for his sufferings was thus comprehensive, and not limited to the servant-theme of Deutero-Isaiah. That his suffering also brought a radically new dimension through the

incarnation—*God* is suffering with and for humanity—cannot and need not be developed here.

#### **FINDING OURSELVES IN THE STORY**

The suffering of the prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus help us to see an unfolding Divine economy of endowing the suffering of those especially called into God's service with ever deepening significance. Suffering is not glorified as a desirable human achievement; it continues to proceed from the sinfulness of those resisting God's word and leading. But this sin-generated suffering can be endowed in God's service, and through God's own accommodation to it, with power to advance God's kingdom.

Each group of texts speaks to us as disciples. The prophets' obedience to their call against all resistance addresses our call to proclaim the gospel entrusted to us. If opposition and suffering result from obedience to our call, this too—as in the case of Jeremiah and other prophets—may make our lives a witness to the world around us.

Similarly, the servant role of Israel, whether lived out by the people called to faith or represented only by a faithful remnant or one individual, is a challenge to the church and each member. In a "post-Christian" and increasingly secular society, it assures us that God's commission can be carried out by a small remnant, and this is due to God's grace that accepts such a remnant, even if it were reduced to one, to represent before God, in its suffering and rejection, "the many" who have turned away.

The total impact of these passages reaches us when we appropriate the Isaianic servant's fuller embodiment in Jesus Christ, whether it was prophetically understood before Jesus, applied to himself by Jesus, or appropriated for the interpretation of Jesus by the New Testament writers and the church. In him we see the Divine realization of the servant's commis-

sion to proclaim the good news to the nations, to deal gently and salvifically with the sick and the downtrodden, to endure obediently the humiliation and suffering heaped upon him, and to bear both representationally and substitutionally our own burdens and sins.

The trajectory we discover in these texts must not stop, however, before we ourselves identify with the “we” of Isaiah 53:1-11a and the equally astonished post-resurrection disciples of Jesus. Their shocked astonishment at God’s grace that accepts the servant’s lowly life and despised death as that which has a future in God’s sight, makes possible a new individual and communal beginning in this world, and opens up hope to be “exalted and lifted up” with him to eternal life with God.

## NOTES

1 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, volume II (London: SCM Press, 1965), 206.

2 Sheldon H. Blank, “The Prophet as Paradigm,” in James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis, eds., *Essays in Old Testament Ethics: J Philip Hyatt, In Memoriam* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 111-130, especially 122 f. For a similar situation in Ezekiel, see 123 f. On the paradigmatic role of the prophets as obedient sufferers, see my *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

3 In 1892, Bernhard Duhm initiated the practice of interpreting four Servant Songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) together and independently of their context in Second Isaiah. I will retain the traditional term “Second Isaiah” for chapters 40-55, though some scholars apply the term to chapters 40-66. The twenty uses of “servant” in chapters 40-55 are distinctly different from the eight instances in Isaiah 1-39, where specific individuals are named, and the eleven in Isaiah 56-66 that always occur in the plural.

4 See, for example, Sheldon H. Blank, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1958, 1967), 74-104, and Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 32-72. (The servant-texts *outside* the Songs, but in chapters 40-55, are Isaiah 41:8, 9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 5, 6; 50:10; and 54:17.) Sommer states that “Jeremiah serves as a pattern for Israel, especially when the nation is depicted as a servant figure in...the ‘servant songs,’” both through his prophetic ministry (to Israel and the nations) and through his tribulations (63-64).

5 Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah (Old Testament Library)* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 382, speaks especially to chapter 53, but his point is applicable to all Servant Songs. My understanding of the servant is indebted to this work and to Christopher R. Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, volume 6 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 307-352.

6 See Childs, *Isaiah*, 383 f. (the quote is on p. 394); Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” 429.

7 The sufferings listed for the servant, which are typical of the lament psalms, do not allow for a reconstruction of a historical situation. The servant’s suffering was possibly inflicted at least partially by those in Israel who had hardened their hearts against his message, but references to unimpressive appearance and sickness seem to extend the range of suffering beyond human persecution. The word translated “offering for sin” (*ašam*) mostly refers to a cultic sacrifice (e.g. Leviticus 5:15), but it can be used more generally (e.g. Genesis 26:10).

8 Therefore many interpreters (e.g. Blank, *Prophetic Faith*, p. 87) assume the speakers of 53:1-11a to be the kings and nations introduced in 52:12-15. I am more convinced, however, by the understanding of Childs (p. 413) that these speakers are a group within Israel. It is also intriguing to ponder the suggestion of Seitz (p. 460f.) that these Israelite

“servant followers” of the servant are the means by which we hear the anticipated (astounded and confessing) voices of the nations. Not to be identified with these followers, according to Seitz, are the servant followers who shaped the present Song and perhaps are responsible for Isaiah 40-66.

9 Especially the understanding of *ašam* (53:10) as “guilt-offering” (but see note 7) evokes a cultic association. Childs rightly points out, however, that the context of chapter 53 is not cultic (p. 416).

10 The last Judean kings suffered greatly, but the dynasty was not totally extinguished (cf. 2 Kings 25:27-30), and great hopes for the people’s restoration were attached to it. The royal traits of the servant, however, are not nearly as clear as the prophetic ones.

11 See Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” 461 f. and R. E. Clements, “Isaiah 53 and the Restoration of Israel,” in William H. Bellinger and William R. Farmer, Jr., eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 47 ff.

12 See Morna D. Hooker, “Did the Use of Isaiah 53 to Interpret His Mission Begin with Jesus?” in Bellinger and Farmer, *Jesus and the Suffering Servant*, 88-103, as well as other essays in that volume.

13 See Morna Hooker on this passage, in “Did the Use...?”, 91. C. H. Dodd (pp. 28-60) argues that the early church thought in terms of *testimonia*—clusters of Old Testament Scripture that could be called to mind by brief quotations or allusions to any part of them. Otto Betz, “Jesus and Isaiah 53,” in Bellinger and Farmer, *Jesus and the Suffering Servant*, 70-87, works with a similar assumption: “There are words and formulas that point to this prophetic text [Isaiah 53] in an abbreviated way” (p. 73).

14 Morna Hooker, “Did the Use...?”, 101-103.

15 In “Did the Use...?” Morna Hooker reaffirms the negative answer she argued in a classic monograph, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant-Concept in Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1959). While I tend to favor the positive answer (see the new arguments in its support presented by Otto Betz, “Jesus and Isaiah 53”), Hooker is right when she states that her position does not at all invalidate the church’s theological interpretation of Jesus in light of Isaiah 53 (“Did the Use...?”, 89).

16 In *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 154-159, David Aune shows how the designations of Jesus as a prophet are closely associated with his suffering role, and he concludes that this “probably provided a decisive influence on Jesus’ understanding of his own mission and destiny” (p. 159).

17 Sheila Anne Klassen-Wiebe perceptively develops how Jesus, in this story, leads the two disciples from their inadequate understanding of him as a martyred prophet to the fuller one that he is the Messiah, who, according to all the scriptures, had to suffer to be raised to glory. See her *Called to Mission: A Narrative-Critical Study of the Character and Mission of the Disciples in the Gospel of Luke* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, Bell and Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 494-499.



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# We Have Never Seen His Face

BY BRETT R. DEWEY

**Shusaku Endo's "Silence," one of the twentieth century's finest novels, is a meditation on the face of Jesus. How we depict his face reveals both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. Endo challenges us to see "one who 'suffers with us' and who allows for our weakness."**

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**H**ave you ever noticed how often we use "face" in colloquial metaphors to depict a deepening awareness of situations, closeness of relationships, or self-knowledge? When we need a reality check, we *face* the facts. To confess a wrong, we *face* the music. Sometimes a person gets in our *face* during a tense confrontation, and if pushed too far, we *face-off* with the fellow. Yet the face represents not just the increased awareness that comes with disharmony and conflict, but also with intimacy. When more personal communication is required, we speak *face-to-face*. If all goes well, we may end up seeing *eye-to-eye*, or if it goes really well, (in Irving Berlin's famous words) dancing *cheek-to-cheek*.

In everyday language, the face stands for truth, accountability, and a deeper (antagonistic or intimate) relationship. This is understandable; all five of the body's senses reside on the face: eyesight, smell, taste, hearing, and the gentle touch of lips, cheeks, or Eskimo noses. The face is a grand central station to life's passage; on our faces develop tracks and lines like a map of where we have been and a promise of where we are going.

No wonder then that one of the twentieth century's finest novels is, at heart, a reflection on a face. Shusaku Endo (1923-1996), the famed Japanese writer and Catholic Christian, in *Silence* meditates on the face of God-with-us, Jesus Christ. For Endo, our depictions of Christ's face in art and literature reveal both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. How we picture Christ matters. Thus he reproaches western Christianity for failing to depict in Christ's face the terrible suffering and sorrow that are so much a part of God's incarnation into the fullness of human experience.

Many of us remember those Sunday school images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus that attempt to portray the Savior as attractive, heroic, and pristine. Western forms of faith based on these images, charges Endo, promoted a triumphal missionary strategy and underpinned Western cultural hegemony. The church sought to imitate that Sunday school Jesus by being attractive, powerful, and heroic to the point of trying to save native peoples from their “undeveloped” cultures. The problem was that these people were transferred into a new culture not of kingdom freedom, but of western dominance. And the result was anything but a pristine church. To help us picture Jesus in a new way, Endo movingly traces “one who ‘suffers with us’ and who allows for our weakness.”

### **BEHIND THE STORY**

Shusaku Endo left his native Japan in 1950 to study French literature at the University at Lyon, particularly the novels of François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, which portray the radical demands of faithful Christian discipleship amidst the deepening secularization of France. After two years he contracted tuberculosis and had to return to Japan.

As a Christian in Buddhist-dominated Japan (he was baptized in the Catholic Church at the age of ten), Endo was an outsider. He anticipated that immersion in the culture-Catholicism in France would be a sort of spiritual homecoming. This hope was never realized. From the start of his studies, he was keenly aware of being everywhere a stranger. He suffered in Japan on account of his faith and in France due to racial prejudice and the overwhelming humiliation of being Japanese in post-war Europe. While tuberculosis ravaged his body, a sort of cultural-religious schizophrenia tormented Endo even more. His faith betrayed him in Japan while his racial features upset his French Catholic brethren. These pivotal years became the inspiration for *Silence* and his realization of the power of the face.

### **THE MISSION**

*Silence* tells the story of a fictional seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary, Sebastian Rodrigues. The inexperienced Portuguese cleric accepts a mission to Japan at a time when Japanese Christian communities suffer savage persecution. The trip begins with missionary zeal for the unconverted as well as for “hidden Christians,” the underground practitioners of the faith who fear the cruelty of local authorities. But the young missionary also has a secret motive for traveling to Japan: to investigate whether reports of a former missionary’s apostasy, or denial of the faith, are true.

Christovao Ferreira, Rodrigues’s mentor who encouraged his passion to spread the Gospel, is rumored to have apostatized under the cruelty of “the pit.” In this diabolical public torture, the victim hangs upside down in a trench filled with excrement, while a small incision behind each ear and on the forehead allows the blood to drain slowly from the person’s body.

Endo’s story here is based on historical fact. A priest named Christo-

vao Ferreira was tortured and recanted his faith in 1632; before this, no priest had ever apostatized. The history is worth noting.<sup>1</sup>

Francis Xavier first preached the Gospel in Japan in 1549, and within thirty years Christians numbered nearly 200,000. Japanese authorities, fearing the impact of western cultural assumptions embedded in the mission movement, became suspicious toward the Christian missionaries, who until then had enjoyed privileged rank in society and dined with the country's magistrates. By the mid 1600s, all foreign missionaries were ordered to leave Japan, and believers were brutally tortured. The rulers' cultural fortress mentality matched by an offensive to rid the land of Christianity began to take its toll on the Christian population. At first, public tortures only served to fasten the resolve of the Japanese Christians, until an even more wicked form of torture was invented. The native Christian community numbered 300,000 at its peak, but with the advent of "the pit," public martyrdoms turned to public renunciations. When Ferreira apostatized under torture in 1632, as the leader of the mission in Japan, the repercussions for the hidden Christians were devastating.

Here Endo inserts the fictional character, Rodrigues. His journey of imperialistic missions and personal intrigue turns into a face-to-face encounter with the divine.

### THE COWARD

The antithesis of Rodrigues's missionary zeal is the cowardice of Kichijiro, a Japanese man who helps authorities locate pockets of hidden Christians. A dubious, sake-soaked, nervous wreck of a man, Kichijiro repeatedly denies being a Christian; but as the narrative unfolds we discover his secret: he is an apostate. His family was delivered to the magistrates and ordered to practice a ritual of renunciation—to reject Christianity by treading on an image of Christ, called a *fumie*. Kichijiro was the only one in his family to apostatize, as the rest embraced the horrors of being burned alive because they dared not step on the face of Christ.

This unlikely pair—missionary and apostate—travel the countryside ministering to hidden Christians and fleeing from political authorities and their samurai henchmen. Kichijiro confronts Rodrigues with the question at the heart of the novel, "Why has Deus Sama [God] imposed this suffering on us?" (p. 55). Rodrigues begins to understand that though he only meant to bring the gospel of life to Japan, he has brought death too. All the while, he asks, why does God remain silent to the suffering of the faithful?

Kichijiro eventually betrays Rodrigues for three hundred pieces of silver. Like Judas, he profits from his disloyalty, but then anguishes over his treachery. The coward returns to Rodrigues—now in prison—to confess his weakness, whimpering that had he been born during the comfortable period of the mission movement, he would have been a good Christian. Had Kichijiro been a believer during the comfortable heyday of Japanese

Christianity, his weakness would not have been exposed. Endo invites readers to examine their faithfulness. We must consider whether we, like Kichijiro, would turn apostate in difficult times.

After bidding the coward good-bye, the incarcerated priest has visions of the face of Christ, a face on which he has often meditated. He takes so-

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**If Jesus “was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities,” then Endo asks us to turn our imagination away from a pristine Jesus and to see in the Savior’s face his exhausted, sunken features.**

---

lace in Christ’s features, which appear regal and stately. To Rodrigues, Christ has an unblemished face of perfection; he is a paragon of beauty.

#### **THE DILEMMA**

Sharing the jail with Rodrigues are Christian peasants who spend their nights and days in song.

Even as they are led to “the pit,” words of hope spring from their mouths:

We’re on our way, we’re on our way,  
 we’re on our way to the temple of Paradise,  
 to the temple of Paradise...  
 to the great Temple....

Even as their present life is being dashed by the rigor of magisterial inquisition, the peasants model a future of worship and peace amidst their pain. This awes Rodrigues, but does not inspire him. He expects more than passive relenting to persecution; he hopes for God’s intervention. Yet in the divine quiet, a spiritual hollowness grows in him.

As he listens to the sounds of the peasants being tortured outside, the cleric debates with a Japanese official who tries to convince him to apostatize, to step on the *fumie* (picture of Christ). “It’s only a formality,” the official soothes the priest. “What do formalities matter?... Only go through with the exterior form of trampling” (p. 171). For the inquisitor, what really matters is the external. All he hopes for is an outward sign of apostasy, and he tries to convince Rodrigues by suggesting that he simply spiritualize his faith—by acting in conformity to his captors, but retaining the proper “heart” or inner understanding. But Rodrigues discerns this is the very hub of temptation; action and intent must not be separated.

In a final attempt to convince the captured priest to turn traitor, his former mentor Ferreira is brought to him. Any lingering questions Rodrigues has about Ferreira’s fate are answered when the elder priest, too, advocates for apostasy. When confronted with why he apostatized, Ferreira readily admits that as peasant Christians hung in “the pit” he realized he must do something for them because God did nothing. If he recanted his

faith, the Japanese officials would release the peasants. "God did not do a single thing," Ferreira recounts, "I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing" (p. 168). Having lost faith in God, Ferreira did the only thing he could do for the tortured peasants: he disavowed his faith by stepping on the *fumie* so that the peasants might be released from their demise.

The Japanese inquisitor and Ferreira do their best to convince Rodrigues to trample the *fumie*. Like Ferreira before him, Rodrigues hears the groans of Christians dangling precariously in "the pit". At first he thinks the groans are snores carried through the night air. But when he discovers that this "snoring" is the moaning of torture, he wonders again why God remains silent. He lifts his foot and places it down on the face of Christ.

Does Ferreira convince Rodrigues? Does the inquisitor? Why does Rodrigues place his foot on the Galilean's nose?

In the most shocking twist of the story, Jesus appears in the jail cell. The haunting silence of God is broken in a broken Jew. As Rodrigues hears the moans of the peasants, he sees a vision of Christ's face:

Yet the face was different from that on which the priest had gazed so often in Portugal, in Rome, in Goa and in Macao. It was not Christ whose face was filled with majesty and glory; neither was it a face made beautiful by endurance to pain; nor was it a face with strength of a will that has repelled temptation. The face of the man who then lay at his feet [in the *fumie*] was sunken and utterly exhausted.... The sorrow it had gazed up at him [Rodrigues] as the eyes spoke appealingly: 'Trample! Trample! It is to be trampled on by you that I am here' (pp. 175-176).

Obedience to Christ's invitation leads Rodrigues to stomp on the *fumie*.

### THE FACE

Rodrigues' attention to Jesus' face, which begins as rumination on the paragon of beauty and perfection, is transformed when Christ's handsome countenance shifts to a pulped visage. His face appears in the *fumie* not in ideal beauty, but as haggard and troubled. We have burdened him with our travails and bludgeoned his face with our sins, Jesus tells Rodrigues.

If we really believe that Jesus "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5a), then Endo is asking us to turn our imagination away from a pristine Jesus and to see in the Savior's face his exhausted, sunken features.

We should not be misled by the phrase, "Trample! Trample!" The original Japanese is in the permissive rather than the imperative mood, so that a better translation would be "You may trample. I allow you to trample."<sup>2</sup> The free offering of God is preserved in this rendering, so that we can say with Flannery O'Connor "there is nothing in our faith that implies a foregone optimism for man [who is] so free that with his last breath he can say

No.”<sup>3</sup> The invitation to trod offers redemption as a free gift of the Father’s love. This redemption does not betoken the personal achievement of the believer, or even of Christ himself, for the Son abandons his own notions of self-sufficiency in obedience to the will of the Father.

Images of Christ that deny his suffering deny who he is. By depicting him as only robust and regal, they fundamentally disavow his sacrifice. They also tempt us to view redemption as our pious response to divine command, rather than acceptance of God’s free gift, which only requires acknowledging that the sins that bruise Christ’s face are our own, regardless of any merits we may claim. Finally, Endo is suggesting, our true vocation as followers of Christ is to suffer with God and the peasantry rather than to stand over the world in positions of power, authority, and control.

In trampling the *fumie*, Rodrigues frees the peasants. He sacrifices his pride and place as an upstanding member of the clergy in order to participate in Christ’s redemptive suffering that liberates creation. By treading on the image of the Savior, he affirms the vocation of Christ. Yet this action hurts him deeply. “The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain,” the narrator recounts. “This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man.... How his foot aches!” (p. 171).

### THE CALL

Rodrigues discovers that God is not silent to suffering. God does not “do nothing” as Ferreira feared. Christ incarnate takes on the pain of the world in his mission to fulfill the will of the Father. Thus, in his face-to-face encounter with God, Rodrigues encounters the mystery of divine affliction. It is truly an unspeakable glory.

To participate in God’s saving work requires radical submission to Christ; the young missionary must sacrifice his pride of place. Endo does not depict his suffering as a social strategy, as an efficient way to accomplish his witness or share the Gospel. It is not good in itself, and is not the way life is supposed to be. Yet suffering with God is a matter of fidelity, even when, in a dramatic irony, Rodrigues’ accepting the stigma of apostasy becomes his route to faithfulness.

In an appendix to *Silence* we learn that Rodrigues, who later takes on a Japanese name, Okada San’emon, and marries a native woman, is known in the community as “Apostate Paul” – while Ferreira is named “Apostate Peter.” In a living, subterranean Christian community, Rodrigues is the head servant. Even Judas-like Kichijiro is brought back into the fold and serves as personal secretary to the apostate priest. Their church is a place for weakness and forgiveness; its leaders are redeemed Sauls, and Peters, and Judases. Theirs is a broken community, whose triumph consists in participating in God’s mission of sacrificial love to the world.

The great good news of the Gospel, theologian Herbert McCabe says, is this: "If you do not love you will not be alive; if you do love effectively you will be killed."<sup>4</sup> Jesus is evidence that loving effectively leads to death. He "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried," the earliest confessions declare in the briefest of summary. Jesus refused to set up an earthly regime or to abuse the power that was his as Son.

We, like the young missionary Rodrigues, are called to imitate Jesus' life of sacrifice. Such suffering faithfulness must stand against misguided mission strategies that embrace Western cultural hegemony and confuse its notions of power with the good news of God's kingdom of sacrificial love. Our enduring challenge, therefore, is to join the redeemed in a community that transforms the work by offering forgiveness and accepting sacrifice.

If we envision our Savior's face only as regal and stately, then we have never seen his face. We must gaze into the face of Christ to discern the reality of his passion and the reality of what our sins have done to him. What we see surely will change how we experience God, allowing us to know his presence amidst suffering rather than to fear his absence. It will lead us to embrace radical forgiveness and solidarity with all people who find themselves stuck in the mire of their sin, loneliness, and suffering.

Shusaku Endo's *Silence* confronts believers, especially in the West, with challenging questions: What does it mean to follow Jesus? How might the Christian community forgive so that even Judas could return to fellowship? Have we seen the face of Christ?

## NOTES

1 Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, translated by William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1980). For the historical context of the story in *Silence*, see the translator's Preface, vii-xviii (further page citations will be in the text).

2 Junko Endo, "Reflections on Shusaku Endo and *Silence*," *Christianity and Literature* 48:2 (Winter 1999), 146. Junko Endo, Shusaku Endo's widow, was shocked to learn that the English and French translations employ the imperative mood rather than the permissive mood of the original Japanese, and she is working with the publishers of *Silence* to alter future printings. Not only is "Trample!" not an imperative, according to Junko Endo, but also it likely represents a feminine voice as juxtaposed to a triumphant, patriarchal voice of Jesus.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 182.

4 Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1991), 218.



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The Crucifixion—depicted by contemporary Chinese artist He Qi (above) and by the Catholic Reformation artist Giovanni Stradano (cover art)—remains the powerful focal point of Christian artistic reflection on suffering.

*He Qi, THE CRUCIFIXION, 1999. Colored ink on paper. Used by permission of the artist.*

# Transcending Cultures

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Working in Mainland China, He Qi (pronounced ho-chee) combines Chinese painting techniques with western modernism. His composition in *The Crucifixion*, which is influenced by classic modernist pieces like Picasso's *Three Musicians*, is flat and relies on color to convey perspective. As Jesus suffers on the cross, he is surrounded by a nude woman, a wounded man, a mother and child, a prisoner, and a man supported by a friend. The Holy Spirit, in the iconography of a dove, hovers over this assemblage of suffering people, who call to mind the parable of judgment in Matthew 25:34-36. Two crosses refer to the thieves who were crucified beside Jesus. "I did the painting based on my three visits to southwest China, the mountain area, which is very poor," He Qi has said in an interview. "I found sometimes people did something wrong—even committed a crime—due to their poverty. Some of them became thieves, became robbers, and became prostitutes. I think Jesus had a special concern about the poor and their living right during his life on Earth."<sup>†</sup>

Giovanni Stradano (1523-1605), a Flemish artist who moved to Florence to study Italian art and culture, followed the style of Mannerism taught by Giorgio Vasari. The renovation of SS. Annunziata, which included his painting *Crucifixion*, was part of a city-wide project to modernize chapels and reemphasize the teaching of Biblical stories through art. Stradano captures the moment when Jesus says to the repentant thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Symbolic elements pervade the image, including Christ as the New Adam, Mary as the New Eve, the Cross as the tree of life, and the dog in chains as the defeated Satan. Among its Mannerist features are elongated proportions, contorted body positions, and use of bright yellow and orange colors in the fabrics.

Both artists interpret a narrative of Jesus' suffering to their respective contemporary audiences. He Qi develops a non-European artistic idiom for sharing Christian faith in Mainland China. Stradano teaches forgiveness to a Catholic Church that has watched as its vision of a Christian European culture was torn apart by Protestants.

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Interview with Douglas LeBlanc in *Christianity Today* (January 7, 2002), 67-68. For more information on the artist He Qi, please see [www.heqiarts.com](http://www.heqiarts.com).

This photo is available in  
the print version of Suffering.

**Job is very prominent in fifteenth-century Venetian painting as an intercessor, suffering servant, and redeemer-prophet during the horrific plagues and famines of the day. So it is not at all surprising to meet him in Carpaccio's "Meditation on the Passion."**

*Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1455-1525), THE MEDITATION ON THE PASSION, ca. 1510. Oil and tempera on wood, 27 3/4" x 34 1/8". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1911.(11.118).*

# My Redeemer Lives

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

In the center of Carpaccio's striking image, the dead Christ sits on a deteriorated throne of red and cream marble. With his eyes closed, he appears to be sleeping. This iconographic reference to the resurrection, or the reawakening, of the Man of Sorrows derives from *pieta*, the images that depict the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Christ.

The throne divides the background. On the left side, which is rocky and void of vegetation, is a cave, a doe, a wolf, and a female leopard leaping upon a male leopard. The right side, by contrast, depicts the verdant, gently rolling hills near the village of Veneto, and a stag escaping from a leopard. The colors throughout the painting are warm earth tones.

The stigmata of Christ are noticeable in his hands and side; his crown of thorns, fallen to the ground, leans on its side against the throne. As Christ slumps towards the figure on the right, the Hebrew characters for "Israel" are revealed on the throne. Some scholars interpret him as sitting on the shattered throne of Israel while his faithful servants contemplate his sacrificial death and resurrection. Two birds are placed strategically in the composition: one perches between Christ and Job, the figure on the right; the other flies from the top of the throne. They may be symbols not only of new life, but also of Christ's resurrected life as prefigured in Job 19:25.

The hermit on the left is Jerome (c. 347-420), the great biblical scholar of the ancient Church. He is identified by the iconography of the books, rosary, and lion figurine behind him. Jerome was one of the first, through his several commentaries and an interlinear exposition of the entire book of Job, to give a Christian symbolic interpretation of Job's suffering. In an often-quoted passage in a letter to Paulinus, he sums up his interpretation:

Then, as for Job, that pattern of patience, what mysteries are there not contained in his discourses? ... To say nothing of other topics, it prophesies the resurrection of men's bodies at once with more clearness and with more caution than any one has yet shown. "I know," Job says, "that my redeemer liveth, and that at the last day I shall rise again from the earth; and I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh shall I see God. Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another. This my hope is stored up in my own bosom" [Job 19:25-26].<sup>1</sup>

Job, who is seated on the right, supports his weary head with his left hand. He stares not at the Christ figure, but to his left and towards the viewer. His indirect glance expresses the subject of this painting—it is a meditation that leaves the eyes of the contemplator glazed. Some interpreters suggest that the odd positioning of the left side of Job’s body—recalling the iconographic tradition of the Middle Ages that the left is sinister (from the Latin, *sinister*, for “on the left side”)—signals his association with disease. Job’s right hand points to his sandaled feet. The nearby skull and human bones link him, more convincingly than the left orientation, with death and disease. Job’s feet, unlike those of Christ and Jerome, remain covered to reflect the stigmata of ritual impurity—compare the biblical images that Job’s “feet are unstable” (Job 12:5), a sign that his stricken life is slipping totally out of balance and control, and that his feet are bound “in the stocks” and marked by God (13:27; 33:11).

On the marble slab on which Job sits, the Hebrew inscription is “My redeemer lives 19,” which refers to Job 19:25, the hopeful passage that Jerome interprets above. Even the location of the inscription is meaningful, for Fredrick Hartt reminds us that the preceding verse is: “Who will grant me that my words may be written? Who will grant me that they be marked down in a book? With an iron pen and in a plate of lead, or else be graven with an instrument on a flint stone?” (Job 19: 23-24).<sup>2</sup>

Notice that the inscription is on the side of the block that faces toward Jerome, who has so strongly influenced our interpreting Job as a paradigm of patience, a believer whose suffering compares with Christ’s, and a prophet who foretold Christ’s resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1 Jerome, Letter LIII (to Paulinus) in *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, translated by Philip Schaff (online at [www.ccel.org/s/schaff/npnf206](http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/npnf206)).

2 For a discussion of this inscription, see Frederick Hartt, “Carpaccio’s Meditation on the Passion,” *Art Bulletin*, XXII.1 (1940), 25-35. The Douay translation used here is noticeably different from the King James Version.

3 See my “Job as Intercessor or Prophet? The Venetian Images by Bellini and Carpaccio,” *Review and Expositor*, Theme Issue: “Have you Considered My Servant Job?” 99:4 (Fall 2002): 541-68. I thank Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Managing Editor, for allowing me to express ideas that I originally developed in the *Review and Expositor* article.



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# Why Have You Forsaken Me?

BY TERRY W. YORK

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"Why have you forsaken me?"  
Jesus cried from Calvary;  
psalm of faith and suffering,  
moaned for lack of songs to sing.

When I face my Calvary,  
do not hide your face from me.  
Share the pain within my bones.  
Hear, as prayer, my silent moans.

Private pain, a Job-like friend,  
never leaves me, knows no end.  
God of love, is this your plan?  
Would you not this demon ban?

Yet, though dimly, still I see  
One who shares the pain with me.  
Then, though dark, this hope I claim:  
Jesus calls me by my name.

# Why Have You Forsaken Me?

TERRY W. YORK

G. DAVID BOLIN

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and a more active treble line with chords and moving lines. The lyrics are printed below the vocal line.

"Why have you for - sa - ken me?"  
 When I face my Cal - va - ry,  
 Pri - vate pain, a Job - like friend,  
 Yet, though dim - ly, still I see

Je - sus cried from Cal - va - ry,  
 do not hide your face from me.  
 ne - ver leaves me, knows no end.  
 One who shares the pain with me.

psalm of faith and suf - fer - ing,  
 Share the pain with - in my bones.  
 God of love, is this your plan?  
 Then, though dark, this hope I claim:

moaned for lack of songs to sing.  
Hear, as prayer, my si - lent moans.  
Would you not this de - mon ban?  
Je - sus calls me

4. by my name.

4.

The musical score consists of four systems. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the piano accompaniment. The third system shows a vocal line with the lyrics '4. by my name.' and a piano accompaniment. The fourth system continues the piano accompaniment. The score is written in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 7/7 time signature.

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at Baylor University, Waco, TX

Tune: PSALM OF FAITH  
7.7.7.7.

# Worship Service

BY DAVID M. BRIDGES

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In this service, based on the book of Job, the congregation inhabits Job's position. A narrator describes his condition and three readers recount the speeches of his "friends," Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. These readers may dress in appropriate costume to deliver their speeches. The songs and hymns, which respond to these speeches and address the universal phenomenon of human suffering, may be performed by the congregation, choir, or soloists.

## *Prelude*

### *Scripture: Ecclesiastes 9:11-16*

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded."

## *Call to Worship:*

"Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,  
nobody knows but Jesus.*

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,  
Glory Hallelujah!*

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down (Oh, yes, Lord),  
sometimes I'm almost to the ground (Oh, yes, Lord). *Refrain*

Although you see me going along so (Oh, yes, Lord).  
I have my trials here below (Oh, yes, Lord). *Refrain*

*African-American spiritual*

*Hymn:*

"God Has Spoken by the Prophets"

God has spoken by the prophets,  
spoken the unchanging Word,  
each from age to age proclaiming  
God, the one, the righteous Lord!  
'Mid the world's despair and turmoil  
one firm anchor holding fast:  
God eternal reigns forever,  
God the first and God the last.

God has spoken by Christ Jesus,  
Christ, the everlasting Son,  
brightness of the Father's glory,  
with the Father ever one;  
spoken by the Word incarnate,  
God of God, ere time was born;  
Light of light, to earth descending,  
Christ, as God in human form.

God is speaking by the Spirit,  
speaking to our hearts again;  
in the age-long Word declaring  
God's own message, now as then.  
Through the rise and fall of nations  
one sure faith yet standing fast:  
God abides, the Word unchanging,  
God the first and God the last.

*George W. Briggs (1875-1959)*

*Tune: HYMN TO JOY*

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[www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com).

*Narrator* (Job 1:1-5, 13-21; 2:7-8):

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

*Song:*

"Goodness Is Stronger Than Evil"<sup>1</sup>

Goodness is stronger than evil,  
love is stronger than hate,  
light is stronger than darkness,  
truth is stronger than lies.  
Victory is ours through Him who loves us.

*Desmond Tutu*

*The Speech of Eliphaz (Job 4:2, 7, 12, 17-21; 5:1):*

“If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?  
But who can keep from speaking?

“Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?  
Or where were the upright cut off?

“Now a word came stealing to me,  
my ear received the whisper of it.  
‘Can mortals be righteous before God?  
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?  
Even in his servants he puts no trust,  
and his angels he charges with error;  
how much more those who live in houses of clay,  
whose foundation is in the dust,  
who are crushed like a moth.  
Between morning and evening they are destroyed;  
they perish forever without any regarding it.  
Their tent-cord is plucked up within them,  
and they die devoid of wisdom.’

“Call now; is there anyone who will answer you?  
To which of the holy ones will you turn?”

*Hymn:*

“Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

*Terry W. York*

*Tune: PSALM OF FAITH (pp. 42-43 of this volume)*

*The Speech of Bildad (Job 8:3-10):*

“Does God pervert justice?  
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?  
If your children sinned against him,  
he delivered them into the power of their transgression.  
If you will seek God  
and make supplication to the Almighty,  
if you are pure and upright,  
surely then he will rouse himself for you  
and restore to you your rightful place.  
Though your beginning was small,  
your latter days will be very great.

“For inquire now of bygone generations,  
and consider what their ancestors have found;

for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing,  
for our days on earth are but a shadow.  
Will they not teach you and tell you  
and utter words out of their understanding?"

*Prayer (based on Lamentations 5):*

Leader: Remember, Great God, what has happened to us.

**People: See our disgrace.**

Our inheritance is given to strangers,

**Our homes are given to aliens.**

We have become orphans with no father,

**Our mothers are like widows.**

We must pay for water to drink,

**We must buy our firewood.**

We are driven hard with a yoke on our neck,

**We are weary but are given no rest.**

We get our bread at the peril of our lives,

**Our skin is scorched from the heat of famine.**

The joy of our heart has ceased,

**Our dancing has turned to mourning.**

Because of these things our hearts are sick,

**Our eyes have grown dim because Mt. Zion lies desolate.**

**All: Restore to us yourself, Great God, that we may be restored.**

*The Speech of Zophar (Job 11:4-6, 13-16, 19-20):*

"For you say, 'My conduct is pure,  
and I am clean in God's sight.'

But O that God would speak

and open his lips to you,

and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!

For wisdom is many-sided.

Know then that God exacts of you

less than your guilt deserves.

"If you direct your heart rightly,

you will stretch out your hands toward him.

If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,

and do not let wickedness reside in your tents.

Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;

you will be secure, and will not fear.

You will forget your misery;

you will remember it as waters that have passed away.

“You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid;  
many will entreat your favor.  
But the eyes of the wicked will fail;  
all way of escape will be lost to them,  
and their hope is to breathe their last.”

*Hymn:*

“From Depths of Woe I Raise to You” (stanzas 1, 3, and 5)<sup>2</sup>

From depths of woe I raise to You  
the voice of lamentation;  
Lord, turn a gracious ear to me  
and hear my supplication.  
If You iniquities will mark,  
our secret sins and misdeeds dark,  
O who shall stand before You?

Therefore my trust is in the Lord,  
and not in my own merit;  
on Him my soul shall rest, His Word  
upholds my fainting spirit.  
His promised mercy is my fort,  
my comfort, and my sweet support;  
I wait for it with patience.

Though great our sins and sore our woes,  
His grace much more abounding;  
His helping love no limit knows,  
our utmost need it sounding.  
Our Shepherd good and true is He,  
who will at last His Israel free  
from all their sin and sorrow.

*Martin Luther (1523)*

*Tune: AUS TIEFER NOT or ALLEIN GOTT IN DER HÖH' SEI EHR'*

*The Second Speech of Eliphaz (Job 15:2-9):*

“Should the wise answer with windy knowledge,  
and fill themselves with the east wind?  
Should they argue in unprofitable talk,  
or in words with which they can do no good?  
But you are doing away with the fear of God,  
and hindering meditation before God.

For your iniquity teaches your mouth,  
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.  
Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;  
your own lips testify against you.

“Are you the firstborn of the human race?  
Were you brought forth before the hills?  
Have you listened in the council of God?  
And do you limit wisdom to yourself?  
What do you know that we do not know?  
What do you understand that is not clear to us?”

*Hymn:*

“I Want Jesus to Walk With Me”

I want Jesus to walk with me;  
I want Jesus to walk with me;  
all along my pilgrim journey,  
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

In my trials, Lord, walk with me;  
in my trials, Lord, walk with me;  
when the shades of life are falling,  
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

*African-American spiritual*

*The Second Speech of Bildad (Job 18: 2-12):*

“How long will you hunt for words?  
Consider, and then we shall speak.  
Why are we counted as cattle?  
Why are we stupid in your sight?  
You who tear yourself in your anger—  
shall the earth be forsaken because of you,  
or the rock be removed out of its place?

“Surely the light of the wicked is put out,  
and the flame of their fire does not shine.  
The light is dark in their tent,  
and the lamp above them is put out.  
Their strong steps are shortened,  
and their own schemes throw them down.  
For they are thrust into a net by their own feet,  
and they walk into a pitfall.  
A trap seizes them by the heel;

a snare lays hold of them.  
A rope is hid for them in the ground,  
a trap for them in the path.  
Terrors frighten them on every side,  
and chase them at their heels.  
Their strength is consumed by hunger,  
and calamity is ready for their stumbling.”

*Song:*

“Nada de Turbe”<sup>3</sup>

Nothing can trouble.  
Nothing can frighten.  
Those who seek God shall never go wanting.  
God alone fills us.

*St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)*

*The Second Speech of Zophar (Job 20: 4-7, 20-23, 29):*

“Do you not know this from of old,  
ever since mortals were placed on earth,  
that the exulting of the wicked is short,  
and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?  
Even though they mount up high as the heavens,  
and their head reaches to the clouds,  
they will perish forever like their own dung;  
those who have seen them will say, ‘Where are they?’

“They knew no quiet in their bellies;  
in their greed they let nothing escape.  
There was nothing left after they had eaten;  
therefore their prosperity will not endure.  
In full sufficiency they will be in distress;  
all the force of misery will come upon them.  
To fill their belly to the full  
God will send his fierce anger into them,  
and rain it upon them as their food.

“This is the portion of the wicked from God,  
the heritage decreed for them by God.”

*Sermon Text (John 9:1-7):*

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born

blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

*Narrator (Job 38:1-7) with Sung Response:*<sup>4</sup>

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:  
"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
and rides upon the storm.*

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
of never failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs  
and works His sovereign will.*

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

*Blind unbelief is sure to err  
and scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
and He will make it plain.*

*Benediction Reading (Romans 8:18-25):*

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the

one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

*Benediction Hymn:*

“How Firm a Foundation” (stanzas 1, 3, and 6)

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!  
What more can He say than to you He hath said,  
to you, who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,  
for I am your God and will still give you aid;  
I'll strengthen and help you, and cause you to stand  
upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;  
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

*John Rippon's A SELECTION OF HYMNS (1787)*

*Tune: FOUNDATION*

**NOTES**

1 A musical setting of this text is in John L. Bell, *Two Songs of Social Justice* (#G-5671, GIA Publications, Inc., Chicago, IL 60638).

2 Some recent hymnals include “Out of the Depths,” a contemporary translation of this text by Gracia Grindal.

3 A musical setting of this text by Jacques Berthier of the Taize Community is online at [www.taize.fr/en\\_article483.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article483.html).

4 “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” stanzas 1, 2, and 6; text: William Cowper (1774), tune: DUNDEE

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## ➤ Other Voices ➤

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[T]he cry of 'Abba' in Gethsemane is surely part of a wider sense of the way in which Jesus' own sonship is inseparable from conflict, decision and suffering, from the cross. The paradox is that it is precisely Jesus' intimacy with the will of his Father that presses him towards the dereliction, the 'Godlessness', of the cross. To be 'Son of God' in the world of violence is to be the crucified victim; the sonship of Jesus is in no sense a 'cushion' between him and the felt absence of God in the world.

**ROWAN WILLIAMS**, *On Christian Theology*

Thus the church is called to be for the world what Jesus was for Israel: not just a moral lecturer, nor even a moral example, but the people who, in obedience to God's strange vocation, learn to suffer and pray at the place where the world is in pain, *so that the world may be healed*.

**N. T. WRIGHT**, in *The Meaning of Jesus* (with Marcus Borg)

Assent to suffering is a knife-edge. On one side are the wrong sorts of passivity which give in to evil, fail to value life and health, and glorify suffering as something good in itself. On the other side are the wrong sorts of activity which make elimination of suffering an absolute, strive above all for comfort and control, and fail to see the superficiality and boredom of a world without risk of things going wrong. In between is the apprenticeship which can only be served with those who know the trade of suffering and have learnt when, and how, to accept it and assent to it.

**DAVID FORD**, *The Shape of Living*

[A] belief in the unique presence of God in the crucified Christ means that God has chosen to identify himself as God in a dead man; he has chosen to define his deity in weakness. This strikes a blow against all human self-aggrandizement and self-deification, where power is defined as the ability to inflict suffering upon others or to avoid suffering for oneself, and where the weak and suffering are despised as of no real account and as failures of the system. Whatever we think in our better moments, we often act on the basis that refugees have no votes and starving children have no armies. But the belief that God is uniquely at one with the crucified Jesus turns all human values upside down; God is revealed not as the one who causes suffering, or has escaped great suffering, but who suffers.

**PAUL FIDDES**, *The Creative Suffering of God*

The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it.

**SIMONE WEIL**, *Gravity and Grace*

Most of us have been insulated for so long that we are numb to the suffering of others—and even to our own. Our media-driven culture is partly responsible, as our power to sympathize switches off in self-defense against a barrage of murders, massive earthquakes, famines, and atrocities. What’s more, our numbness anesthetizes us to our own pain as well: we push away reflections on our problems with self-esteem, relationships, and disappointment. Many of us flee from an unblinking view of human reality into entertainment or consumption....

But materialism is not the only false escape from suffering; selfish and sentimental religion is a culprit that’s just as guilty. When religion becomes a fantasy buffering us from life’s harshness by telling us to ignore the present and worry only about the afterlife, it has become an opiate.

**JOHANN CHRISTOPH ARNOLD**, *Escape Routes*

Unfortunately, brothers and sisters, we are the product of a spiritualized, individualistic education. We were taught: Try to save your soul and don’t worry about the rest. We told the suffering: Be patient, heaven will follow, hang on.

No, that’s not right, that’s not salvation! The salvation that Christ brings is salvation from every bondage that oppresses human beings.

**ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO (1917-1980)**, *The Violence of Love*

[D]ramatic demographic changes and immense economic pressures are creating a situation in which...churches will soon be called on to offer various forms of health care to their members and to the community at large....

Although it would be wonderful if every church could hire a parish nurse,...many will not be able to do so. But this doesn’t mean that every church can’t have a health ministry.... Every church has members who are known for their caring hearts, and many have the organizational skills to take the lead in establishing and sustaining a ministry. They are willing and eager to help, but they must be identified and informed.

**W. DANIEL HALE and HAROLD G. KOENIG**, *Healing Bodies and Souls: A Practical Guide for Congregations*

If the soul is set in the direction of love, the more we contemplate necessity, the more closely we press its metallic cold and hardness directly to our very flesh, the nearer we approach to the beauty of the world. That is what Job experienced. It was because he was so honest in his suffering, because he would not entertain any thought that might impair its truth, that God came down to reveal the beauty of the world to him.

**SIMONE WEIL**, “Love of the Order of the World,” in *Waiting for God*

# Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo

BY YVONNE DILLING

In a little Salvadoran hamlet, the memory of villagers' suffering during a long and terrible war becomes a celebration of the Christ who suffers with them at each Station of the Cross. They remind us there are many "crucified peoples," and we need to ask "Who put them on the cross?"

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I encourage first-time visitors to El Salvador to go to the rural village of Santa Marta where folks are willing to talk about their past. In this village where mother and grandmother still cook delicious thick white corn tortillas from scratch on a clay griddle over a wood fire, all you need to do is give people a leading sentence—such as "They say the people suffered a lot before they fled through the hills to Honduras"—and some personal or family experience rolls right out, as though the mother awoke that morning thinking about it. And maybe she did.

When I think back over all I have heard during more than twenty years of accompanying the Salvadoran people, the words "terrible suffering" do not come anywhere near to the reality. If I began to recite the worst of what I have heard, no reader would continue to the end of this article. Perhaps the gory details are not necessary; any parent, whose child has died prematurely, especially through some injustice, would agree that the word "suffering" is not sufficient to describe what they live with.

## HEARING ROSARIO'S STORY

Recently this lesson came to me unexpectedly and poignantly when I made the mistake of referring to the historic military operation at the

Lempa River as simply “the Lempa River crossing.” Rosario, a native of Santa Marta with whom I had never talked about the event, even though we are neighbors in a village some six hours from Santa Marta, looked at me quickly, her normally amicable and joking features suddenly frozen, her jaw almost locked. Out came the words as though she were holding back the force of an avalanche.

“*Massacre*; it was a *massacre*, not a *crossing*.” We were referring to a U.S.-financed military operation in March, 1981. It was part of a newly launched “scorched earth policy” modeled on the one used in Vietnam more than a decade earlier—terrorizing, dispersing, and even destroying civilian populations without mercy if it was suspected that rebel fighters might be hiding in their midst, or even that the civilians might sympathize with the then-small group that had abandoned civilian protest.

Rosario, like most rural women here, began childbearing so young that I should not have been surprised that at eighteen she had been a mother. Though my own cultural context led me to think she was too young to have children in 1981, I had the presence of mind quickly to say, “You lost loved ones there,” and to ask, “Were you there yourself?”

We were traveling at the time in a four-wheel-drive pick-up truck over a rough dirt road through the mountains. Though the bumpy ride was bruising to our tail bones, it was worth it for the views of the lush green hills meeting lovely blue sky.

Rosario looked out over the hills, but I knew she was not seeing the cultivated corn as she said, “They shot my baby in my arms and wanted me to fall into the river and be swept away in the current just like those five-hundred who were swept away at the Sumpul River massacre. I carried my baby all the long hike to Los Hernandez. All the while I was thinking, ‘I can’t bear this.’ The women there had to forcibly take her out of my arms that night and I watched them bury her just as she was, wrapped in a cloth.” Other details emerged as she recalled how that night changed her life. A few months later soldiers killed her husband. After several more months, Rosario gave her remaining child to her mother and joined the emerging guerilla group. They fought for seven years until the armed forces, unable to defeat the rebels, finally accepted a U.N.-sponsored opportunity to negotiate peace.

When Rosario finished her remembering, I cautiously ventured: “Visitors from other countries often wonder how you could still believe in God after all the unjust suffering you have endured. Why aren’t there more atheists here?”

“The suffering did not produce atheists; what did was the church’s failure to defend the people in the face of the injustice, and the outright collusion of the bishops when they blessed the army,” she responded. “Not even that, really,” she continued on a new train of thought, “it produced folks who will not participate in that church but who still believe in God.”

"I felt that God was always with me," Rosario said, repeating a view I've heard frequently from Salvadorans. "If I hadn't felt that, I could not have born the suffering." And she named women from Scripture and tradition who are saints for her: "*Santa Maria* was always with me, Veronica was with me just as she was with Jesus, and we suffered together and gave each other strength to go on."

Then a litany of thanksgiving overflowed from her: "God didn't abandon me. God gave me another *compañero* to console me, and babies who are grown now and give me joy. Thanks be to God! In the seven years of fighting after the Lempa river massacre, I was never captured, never raped or tortured. I did not die. Thanks be to God!"

"We know that God didn't cause the suffering; God didn't wish it on us," she urged, making a final important point. "Political and economic policies caused it; the structural sins of society caused it. It is some consolation to know that I didn't perpetuate those sins by sitting back and doing nothing, or just running to save my life. I confronted them. I am consoled in my own faithfulness." Many of the poor and oppressed in El Salvador reached the same conclusion during their decade of suffering: "To recognize a structural sin but not resist it is also a sin."

Having expressed her sorrow, Rosario quickly changed the subject and found something to joke about. I have come to see this indomitable sense of humor and accompanying optimism among Salvadorans as a blessing of God, a sign of special grace. They have not abandoned their culture and their communities, even when millions of others have opted for the precarious flight to the U.S. in search of a job that will put food on the table. They have been known to say "when we can no longer laugh, then God has lost the battle."

### **LEARNING TO HOPE**

El Salvador has been described as a place that exports more hope and optimism than coffee. In spite of all the stress and outright suffering caused by the less visible war that is being waged today—an economic war on the poor fueled by neo-liberal economic policies—there are still little pockets where hope can be found. I am reminded of an interview with Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest and university professor, shortly before he was slaughtered in 1989 along with five of his brother priests and their cook and her daughter. Giving an overview of the economics of a war fueled by rigid U.S. ideologies, the priest painted a very pessimistic view of the future. After a poignant silence, someone in our group asked him, "Is there any hope?" With a small, but triumphal smile, he raised a hand with one finger pointing upwards to emphasize his soft reply: "I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful."

Martín-Baró understood that Christ did not come to suffer and die, but to announce a project of life—the building of a kingdom of love, a project

in which we are invited to participate. This glorious project has many enemies and its construction workers inevitably experience suffering just as Jesus did. Indeed, they can bear their pain better if they understand the structural aspects of their suffering and its relation to the work of building the kingdom of God. Because they know that God does not will their suffering, in a spirit of gratitude they remain open to the comfort God provides in times of suffering, to the hope of a radically different future, and to God's continuing invitation to be involved in the kingdom.

It has taken me many years to understand that this combination of gratitude, hope, and humor is not accidental. I have learned a simple truth: grateful people are most often happy people.

### HEALING MEMORIES

Next to Santa Marta is a little hamlet called Valle Nuevo that I visit every year for the commemoration of the Lempa River crossing. (I call it a "crossing" because, even though fifty people were slaughtered by the army, five thousand others survived. In contrast, the year before, five hundred people were killed when they tried to cross the Sumpul River. There, the few survivors say that babies were thrown into the air and speared on U.S.-provided bayonets.)

Originally the commemoration consisted of a circuitous trek to the river, following the same path the folks had used as they fled the pursuing soldiers. At the river we observed a Mass, enjoyed a picnic, and swam in the river. By our swimming we were taking back the river that produced death and pronouncing it a river of life. Over the years, however, the long hike became too difficult for the older folks, and unsupervised youth played in the river instead of participating in the Mass. To the adults it was sacrilegious that the kids would play in the water while a Mass was being held to honor those who had died there. So, in a community assembly the decision was made to no longer go to the river, but to commemorate in the village with a re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross and a Mass in the church.

With this new arrangement, something amazing happened. Women and men who had *never* gone to

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**Salvadorans have been known to say "when we can no longer laugh, then God has lost the battle."**

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the river because their memories were too painful began to participate in the long procession of the Stations of the Cross. At each station, they reflected on how Christ suffered there again with the Salvadoran people during the war. These villagers who could not bear the memories of the crossing were blessed with some mental healing as they recalled that God was with them in Christ through those long and terrible years.

**SEEING CLEARLY**

By keeping alive *la memoria histórica* (the historical memory) with the people at Valle Nuevo, I've realized that my North American addiction to ease—to obtaining material things for my physical comfort—can be a spiritual block. For instance, among these suffering friends I have learned to fast, which is an understanding blocked for years by my penchant for comfortableness. Simply offering up slight physical discomfort to God in El Salvador has led me to new spiritual insights about risk-taking, sensitivity to the poor, and examining political and bureaucratic policies from the perspective of their affect on the disadvantaged.

Now I see that these are biblical teachings. Many laws in the Old Testament are based on sensitivity to the poor, and the parable of the Good Samaritan calls us to “cross the road,” to risk suffering in order to help persons in need, even when we know that a robber could return at any moment to confront us. Indeed, our biblical mandate is two-fold: to respond immediately to alleviate the suffering of others, and to work to change policies that cause suffering. Our works of mercy are important, but so is political advocacy. To *not* take action to transform political structures that cause suffering is to side with the oppressor.

In El Salvador I have learned the difference between victims and martyrs. Victims are people who are caught in the world's cross fire, who are unfortunate to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, like the pedestrian who crosses the road in front of a drunken driver. Martyrs are those who act out of faithfulness, even though they know their actions could bring them suffering and death.

There are many “crucified peoples,” and we need to ask “Who put them on the cross?” That is, we have to do political analysis. This will lead us to the question, “As a follower of Jesus, what am I going to do to help get them down from the cross?”

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**YVONNE DILLING**

*lives in rural El Salvador where she assists with community organizing, rural women's development, and non-formal education.*

# Not in the Medical Records

BY STEPHEN A. SCHMIDT

**My suffering fills me with anger, frustration, sadness, and sometimes despair. Yet the medical records, seriously incomplete, just say “Crohn’s disease for twenty-five years.” They don’t mention the sacramental memories that shape my faith or the grace-filled church that sustains me to face the dark questions.**

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**M**y reflections on faith and healing must begin with medical records. I have files of them. White male, seventy-one years of age, three surgeries, Crohn’s disease for twenty-five years, three bowel resections, and multiple hospitalizations for partial blockages and active Crohn’s flare ups. More recently the hospitalizations occur because of adhesions, the body’s response to multiple surgeries. Early in the experience of Crohn’s, the charts read: “Chronic intestinal inflammation, no medical cause determined.” End of entry.

There is more. I live with chronic diarrhea, chronic anemia, chronic arthritis, and fused disks at the base of the spine and in my neck. My daily diet is mush, bland and boring. When I am honest I admit to chronic anxiety. Where is the next bathroom? Dare I have breakfast with any one? Where is the nearest hospital? Emotions are not part of my hospital record. They are in my memory. I live with an unrecorded diet of despair. I experience anger, pain, frustration, sadness, depression, rage, envy, hope, and faith—not recorded. Perhaps I am blessed because my medical records are not much for meaning-making. There is no reason for my disease; I was not somehow chosen for this particular disease. Perhaps there is some hereditary connection. My grandfather died of “stomach distress.” But he died before I knew him, before Crohn’s disease had been named.

My life’s narrative is not widely known and certainly not part of my

medical record—nothing about my grandfather, or about the experiences that come with seventy years of living. There is nothing in the medical canon regarding doubt and faith, or religion and reality. Memories are not part of the medical record.

### **SACRAMENTAL MEMORIES**

The first memory is as vivid today as it was many years ago. My infant sister Henrietta was to be baptized. I surely do not remember my baptism, but the memory of hers is vivid. It was not a “high church” event. Rather, we were surrounded by our immediate family, grandparents, and the young woman who took care of us when we were very young.

Pastor Schmalz came to our home. The baptism was in our living room—our own sacred space where Christmas unfolded and family wakes were held. My mother brought a glass bowl of water and some napkins. Pastor Schmalz stood in the middle of the family. I stood on the outside, filled with wonder, certainly, but also with other unhappy thoughts. I was not important this day; everything was all about Henrietta, this new family member who took most of my mother’s time. I was not sure that I liked her at all. My parents had told me before the ceremony, “Stephen this baptism is important. You must behave. Be quiet and listen and watch.” I had my orders. Then everything changed.

Pastor Schmalz looked directly at me. “Stephen,” he said, “I think you are big enough to take a very important part of this celebration.” He asked if I was strong enough to hold the bowl of water when he baptized my sister. I must have nodded yes. Suddenly I found myself in the middle of the circle with the pastor. The bowl was not large or heavy. For just a moment, I thought about dropping it, but the thought passed quickly. The baptism began. There were Bible readings and words about the meaning of baptism. Then Pastor Schmalz told me to hold the bowl carefully while he sprinkled water three times on Henrietta’s forehead. My sister cried. I think I laughed. Every one was happy. I was suddenly important, encircled by a family as I held something I thought surely must be holy water. I was chosen by this group, I was in the middle of “church.” My first spiritual memory was mysterious and healing, a damp watery wisp of the spirit. I was changed for life.

A second memory, equally important, is of Christmas Eve when I was in the first grade. Christmas Eve was the most important day for my family. Nothing happened at home until after the church service, a vesper filled with readings, songs, and children everywhere. I was chosen to sing a wonderful German song in front of all the church. Stephen, chosen at six, to stand in the middle of the chancel and sing *auf deutsch*:

*Gott is die Liebe,  
lasst mich Er losen;  
Gott is die Liebe,*

God loves me dearly,  
grants me salvation;  
God loves me dearly,

<i>Er liebt auch mich.</i>	loves even me.
<i>Drum sag ich noch ein mal</i>	Therefore I say again
<i>Gott is die Liebe,</i>	God loves me dearly,
<i>Gott is die Liebe,</i>	God loves me dearly,
<i>Er liebt auch mich.</i>	loves even me.

I saw my parents smile, then cry. They were proud and filled with love and joy. Later when my father was one hundred years old, the last words he could form were these: “*Gott is die Liebe, Er liebt auch mich.*” My early memory of faith was also my father’s last memory—this song about being loved by God in childhood and in dying, with one hundred years separating those events. Even after my dad could not say the words, he would chant the melody. The words were a blur, but the music carried the hope.

My memories are filled not only with images of God as love, but also with images of the devil as evil. Leonard Fisher, my Lutheran school-teacher, told us the following story every year. Each morning as a child, a rooster on a fence post awakened him and he crept to the fence to frighten the rooster. He believed that if the rooster flew to the left, he would be damned, but if the rooster flew to the right, he would be saved. Each morning, damned or saved. With wide eyes, we knew the terror and the hope.

My family was religious, deeply Lutheran. We regularly attended church and Sunday school, and we children attended Christian day school. Never could we skip a service unless it was harvest time. My grandfather and father were truck gardeners, and I lived among the tomatoes, cabbages, beans, strawberries, lettuce, squash, and radishes. Each day we enjoyed a banquet of freshness. My father was a wise gardener with thirty acres of land under irrigation and a greenhouse, covering several acres, carefully managed. Yet even with all the water we could spray, we knew we were always at risk. We prayed for rain in the summer. August was the most difficult month—some years were bountiful, but in other years with no rain, the crops were only modestly productive. So our livelihood depended on God.

The highest office in God’s world belongs to the gardener, not *Herr pastor*, my dad would remind Pastor Schmalz. “Alfred you know why we were not in church the last two weeks. Tomatoes had to be picked. Remember Alfred,” father would say with a twinkle in his eye, “the first profession was farming. Clergy came much later.” Alfred Schmalz would smile, give my father a loving pat, and accept a gift of tomatoes.

During my childhood there were many funerals. Because the church was next to the school building, students heard the bells toll and knew a member had died. We counted the number of tolls and usually someone in the class knew who had died. We were filled not only with dread, but also excitement, for in the upper grades we knew the meaning of a funeral. The

day after the bells tolled there would be no school. The children sang for all funerals, so we met in the morning for choir rehearsal, and then sat in the balcony, looking down on open caskets. We saw grief and pain and love and community. We learned that suffering and death were not the end of life. We sang our hearts out, singing our young faith into the hearts of those who mourned. Funerals were difficult, but wonderful. And in the doing of the grieving we were healed. In our music we affirmed our faith and encouraged others to comfort:

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;  
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee,  
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

The most life-changing event of my childhood occurred while I was in the fourth grade. We lived next to our grandmother who was dying of pneumonia. She was in a coma. She experienced some suffering but little pain, and medically there was nothing left to do. Josie, who cared for my grandmother, kept her comfortable, and she would die gently.

My father announced one evening that he was going to sit with grandma. Believing she was near death, he wanted to be by her side. We children could not go with him; we were too young. Evening passed slowly, and even more slowly my father walked back to us, head bent in his own grief. He was crying. We prayed in the breakfast room with our battered *Stork's Prayer Book*. After reading three prayers, he spoke gently and softly, "I want to tell you how grandma died. She was in a deep sleep. Suddenly she awakened and saw me. She held my hand and said, 'Henry it is so good for you to be here.' She sank back into a coma. Then without warning she sat up, eyes open wide. She smiled, turned to me, and looked up toward the ceiling, toward heaven. 'Henry, I see the angels, they are coming to take me to heaven.' She laid back and was dead." My dad said he put pennies on her eyelids to hold them shut. The undertaker would not come until morning. Grandma was now in heaven; the angels were the proof. I will never forget this memory.

I live between the pennies and the angels. Pennies for holding eyes shut, pennies for home and food. Pennies for medicine and surgery. Pennies for culture and music, travel and fun, movies and books. Pennies for the future, insurance, and retirement. I know the value of pennies.

And all the while angels flutter in my memory. Martin Luther was not big on angels—he believed we should be careful about emotionalism, for some folks "swallow the dove, feathers and all." Yet we know that Luther in his adolescence had a mystical experience in the midst of a terrible storm: "St Ann," he cried, "I will become a monk." And he did.

In my life there is still the brush of angels' wings. I feel the wind and the wings, the shadow of their being. Yes, we live between the mundane

and the holy, between pennies and angels. We live with the mystery of God.

### **DARK QUESTIONS**

Can faith make sense of illness and pain? I think not, if you are asking whether religious faith can make *logical* sense of suffering. It could not make sense of the suffering and death of a six-year-old, my brother Henry Conrad—we called him “HC”—buried on my first birthday. Faith could not ease the pain my parents felt after the death of their first-born. HC had talked about being with Jesus, and my parents believed in heaven and that HC would be with Christ. But the hurt, the guilt, and a swelter of other feelings lived on in my parents after his death. Some grief is too deep to bear; it is endured, it is challenged, it becomes the stuff of reconciliation or transformation. But such grief is never erased; it enters the fabric of life and faith.

Can faith cure a chronic illness like Crohn’s? Not if you seek some quality of being. While other sinners—people just like me—parade robustly, I seek the comfort of the bathroom. I rarely go to breakfast with friends any more, for I know the aftermath. I excuse myself. I plan my social life, symphonies, operas, and plays around the solace of the bathroom. My faith helps me little as I measure the twenty-seven pills I take daily.

My youngest daughter also has Crohn’s disease. Why my daughter? Why this disease? She walks with her own faith struggle and I join her in dismay and hope.

Suffering fills me with anger, frustration, sadness, and sometimes despair. Why this body? Why me? There is no justice about health and no reason for ongoing suffer-

ing. There is no purpose, no joy, no gift, and no grace, none that I know. Yes, I smile, I try, I ignore my disease, I appear healthy, and I do not seek sympathy. Yes, I have learned dozens of lessons. But there is still, even after twenty-five years of my disease, rage and terror

and anxiety. Where is God? On some days there is stillness with a brief rumor of angels and a nudge of luminosity. But I am not sure if I fear that reality or receive comfort from it.

Through suffering, pain, the fear of death, and the slow details of dying, I am haunted with mystery, with the enigma of God’s being with us. They call into question my personal wisdom, my years of faithful habit.

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**Some grief is too deep to bear; it is endured, it is challenged, it becomes the stuff of reconciliation or transformation. But such grief is never erased; it enters the fabric of life and faith.**

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Goodness counts for naught; obedience is unrewarded. The crisis of suffering is the death of conventionality. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people.

Suffering raises dark questions: Can I love this body? Can my wife love this body? Is God my passionate companion? Here we come close to what Lutherans call a “theology of the cross,” for on the cross we meet another who is beaten, forsaken, ridiculed, naked, and despondent. And his suffering is “for us.” So, perhaps we are the most theologically accurate, have the most intimate relationship to the tradition, when we endure pain, despair, and hopelessness?

The possibilities are endless if we discover compassion in ourselves, in others, in a community, and in God. Then suffering can be re-creation. It may become the way to rebuild a world, to re-envision our place with others, and seek real intimacy. It may be a way to the center of being—our own being and the being of God.

Can I love this body—Crohn’s-filled, diarrhea-drained, aged, arthritic, and deformed—which rebels at food once loved and rejects commands of my mind? Can I celebrate this wrinkled, butchered, unattractive body? Yes, on a good day, and even on some bad days. Yes, in the middle of the night. Yes, in a regular hospital visit. Yes, when alone. Yes, sometimes.

#### **GOD’S LOVE EMBODIED**

Even in the midst of messy, stinky suffering, there is the possibility that another will love me. I have a gift—a wife who stays with me after twenty-five years of pain, messiness, and fear. She says “No” to my self-pity, self-scrutiny, and excesses of sadness. She holds, caresses, and loves me—this fragile, failing façade. She loves me passionately, and for a moment I am healed. She is my lifeline, my hope, my meaning, and my being.

And there is a compassionate community filled with the rustle of angels—the chronic illness group in Grace Lutheran Church. Here the angel wings still touch the water, stirring healing and hope. For over fifteen years, group members—a dozen or more church members and others who are equally ill—have continued to listen, pray, tease, tell, hold, and confront one another. In our monthly gatherings after we open with prayer led by a member of the group, each person reports in, telling what has happened in their life and with their illness. Each one is open to questions from the others. We challenge, encourage, tease, and hug each other into hope. We relate stories, we tell of times when each of us was hopeless. We share our frustration, doubts, anxiety, and depression. We listen carefully and respond to each person. In this kind of “sick” confession group, we disclose our faults and we absolve.

And we help each other die. Over the years as members have approached death, they have been visited in the hospital by group members and prayed for by the group. Grief is no new sentiment for the group. We

cry often, but laugh almost as much. Over time we form close friendships. We keep confidences and trust each other.

Grace Church is a parish that really prays, like the contemplative nuns of old. They pray for all of us, for me. Here is a faith tradition that claims story as central to hope, and knows that the ear is the most important organ of faith. Here is preached the theology of the cross, which is at once a story of suffering, a tradition of mystery and despair, and a promise of hope and healing. Here is a God who felt as lost and disconsolate as I have felt: "Why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46). Here is a God who has been there before, and who stays with me. Here is a God that is faithful—"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers...nor powers...can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38). Here is a suffering God with compassion and here a community that embodies that reality.

Can faith help make meaning in suffering? Yes, if there is a living, faithful communal embodiment of that faith. The "grace-full" church is one that is always on edge, always living in the paradox of tradition and experience, always living out God's compassion. Faithful communities embody that hope and possibility.

#### **EDITOR'S SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

Stauros USA is an ecumenical organization promoting reflection on human suffering from a religious point of view, particularly a Christian viewpoint. The website [www.stauros.org](http://www.stauros.org) provides many resources, including *Stauros Notebook*, edited by Dr. Schmidt, which contains articles and poetry on themes related to suffering.

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# Healing Presence

BY JOHN SWINTON

**How do people with profound mental health problems suffer? In our highly medicalized culture, we define and respond to disease from a biomedical model. We want to fix the 'bad spot.' But suffering is a richer concept, and true healing requires friendship and community.**

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**W**e think we know what suffering is, but is this always the case? Within our highly medicalized culture, a biomedical model of health and ill-health shapes our understanding of suffering and how we should respond to it. Health, we assume, is the absence of disease and symptoms of illness. Disease is identified as a discrete 'bad spot' within a person's body or mind, and this bad spot becomes the locus of our efforts to relieve suffering. If we can excise or 'cure' that bad spot, then we think we have succeeded in our healing task.

But deeper reflection on human experience reveals that suffering is a much richer concept than this medicalized perspective allows us to see. Physician Eric Cassell offers this richer definition:

Suffering occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived; it continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or until the integrity of the person can be restored in some other manner. It follows, then, that although suffering often occurs in the presence of acute pain, shortness of breath, or other bodily symptoms, suffering extends beyond the physical. Most generally, suffering can be defined as a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person.<sup>1</sup>

Cassell points out that suffering (1) is not confined to physical or psychological symptoms alone, (2) is not measurable only in terms of pain, and (3) cannot be assessed on a scale that is universal—that is, applicable to all

people irrespective of context, personality, and situation. Rather, he suggests, suffering occurs when we experience a loss of meaning, purpose, hope, and value that leads to a disintegration of our sense of self and our identity as a valued person. Suffering, therefore, is unique to each individual and filled with personal meaning.

“Suffering is personal,” agrees David B. McCurdy, “it has to do with the meanings that illness (and treatment) holds—for *this* person. Ultimately, a key ingredient of suffering is the person’s experience of a threat to integrity or ‘intactness’—in any or all dimensions of life, the bodily among them.” Because no two people experience an illness in exactly the same way, he suggests “the meaning that illness or injury holds for a person depends on factors in that person’s history and relationships that others simply do not know.”<sup>2</sup>

How we experience suffering is shaped by our distinctive personality and unique life experiences, by our personal expectations, values, and hopes, and by the particular ways in which we see and understand the world. It is also shaped by our culture and the ways we are taught to deal with pain. As Cassell and McCurdy indicate, the degree and form of suffering we experience is linked tightly with the meaning we place on the events that cause our suffering, the consequent situation of our misery, and ourselves.

## **TWO NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING**

Let me put two powerful narratives of suffering before us. In the first one, which is recounted by psychiatrist John Strauss, we encounter a young man who has been through the ravages of schizophrenia:

This 28-year-old man had had the first onset of his schizophrenia ten years previously. He had spent three years in hospital, and then from the period between seven and five years before my interview had been able to manage outside the hospital. However, five years before my interview, he had been readmitted to hospital and had remained there since. As part of our interviews, we try to delineate the various general levels of illness, at several times in the past. We then determine levels of social relations and work functioning, symptoms and hospitalization during those times and plot a time line of course of disorder. This line is generated by rating scales of established reliability. In this particular study, we also enquire about the worst year the person has had since becoming ill. I expected that when I asked that question of this young man he would say that it was one of the times when his functioning scores were lowest, his symptoms highest, and when he was in hospital. He said the worst year was about six years ago, a time when by our scores he was doing fairly well and was not in hospital. He said

that he had been living with his mother and then finally had been kicked out of her house and was living in an apartment. About two weeks after leaving her house he called home. She answered the telephone. He started talking, but when she heard his voice, she said ““You have the wrong number” and hung up. He said that was the worst year of his life. My heart sank as he told his story. It was not difficult to understand what he meant, but the worst year according to him and the worst year according to our rating scales were very different. Who was right?<sup>3</sup>

As we reflect on the life experiences of people with schizophrenia, it is clear that they undergo rejection, stigmatization, isolation, and relational disconnection with self and others. Some of this relates to the illness itself. But much (and arguably most) of the negative experiences of schizophrenia relate to the way our society interprets this form of mental health problem and constructs deeply negative identities around individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Notice that in the psychiatrist’s clinical gaze, the young man’s suffering derives primarily from his experience of the clinical symptoms of schizophrenia. With his medical tools and methodological assumptions, the doctor can only measure schizophrenia by its symptoms, so he assumes they are the primary cause of the young man’s suffering and that control of them would be a movement toward mental health. However, from the perspective of the young man, suffering and mental health look quite different. Unpleasant as the symptoms of schizophrenia clearly are for him, the most devastating form of suffering comes from his broken and apparently irreconcilable relationship with his mother. This fragmented relationship and its meaning for his self-perception and life expectations form the core of his suffering, and not the symptomatic manifestations of the illness.

Of course, in some ways the two perspectives are connected. But only one perspective—the clinical—is taken into consideration when the psychiatrist reflects on this young man’s treatment. Whose perspective on suffering should take priority in understanding the meaning of mental health and suffering, and in prescribing forms of treatment and rehabilitation? Are vital dimensions of human suffering being overlooked by the ways that we conceptualize particular mental health problems?

The second narrative of suffering comes to us from Scripture:

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “See that

you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

*Mark 1:40-45 (NIV)*<sup>5</sup>

We might approach this story in two very different ways. On the one hand, we might assume that its cultural context is not particularly important. Then we can impose our understanding of medicine to produce a picture of Jesus as "the great physician" who breaks into natural history and miraculously removes the bad spot—in this case leprosy—in order to return the person to health, which we construe as life without disease. Jesus functions just as a surgeon would today, but instead of using antibiotics and scalpels, he draws upon Divine power to heal the sick person.

If we read the story that way, however, we will miss its crucial *theological* meaning. Of course, the healing was an act of compassion that freed the man from his disease—and at this level we rightly may compare contemporary medicine to Jesus' action. The miracle speaks of the compassion of Jesus and the desire of God to care for the sick and wounded. However, if we stop here we miss the real significance of the miracle.

Living in a culture that understands illness from a biomedical model, we focus automatically on the pathology, the leprosy. However, to more accurately understand this story, we must focus on the *meaning* of leprosy—not on the clinical diagnosis, but on the social and theological meaning of the condition. In first-century Mediterranean culture, to have leprosy

meant a person was "unclean" and thus unworthy of participation in the Temple rituals. Denied access in this way to the Temple, the person's exclusion was not simply from the community, but seemingly also from God. The primary suffering that accompanied leprosy was not its biological symptoms, as important as these certainly were, but the *pollution* and *exclusion from holiness*. Within a culture that was totally God-centered, such

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**In the psychiatrist's gaze, the young man's suffering derives from his clinical symptoms of schizophrenia. But from the man's perspective, unpleasant as these symptoms are for him, the most devastating suffering comes from his broken and apparently irreconcilable relationships.**

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exclusion was equally painful as, if not more painful than, the clinical manifestations of the illness.

When he touches the man, Jesus himself becomes polluted and enters into the social and spiritual death of leprosy. By entering into the man's stigma and social isolation, God in Christ shifts the boundaries. This is an

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**Christ is our model for how the practice of friendship can ease the suffering of people with profound mental health problems who live in our communities and desire to find a spiritual home.**

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important point. We often talk about Jesus sitting at the edges of acceptable society, but such a suggestion is misleading. By sharing in the social exclusion of those whom society had marginalized, Jesus *shifts the margins*: those previously marginalized people now form the heart of God's coming Kingdom.

And those religious people who sought to marginalize the "unclean" find themselves on the margins, cut off from true relationship with God, and mired in a form of spiritual alienation which was manifested so horribly in the crucifixion of Jesus. When Jesus enters into relationship with the marginalized and shares in their 'social death,' he initiates a process of resurrection for people like this man with leprosy. They become full persons and are reintegrated into the community, which itself is necessarily transformed by his healing actions.

These two narratives of suffering, of the young man today with schizophrenia and the man long ago with leprosy, provide rich insights into the nature of suffering. The parallels between these stories are not coincidental. They are prophetic reminders of the social position of the church community and its potential healing responses to disease. Our choice of whom we choose to stand with is a deep indication of our faithfulness.

#### **PRACTICING CHRIST-LIKE FRIENDSHIP**

How should the church as a community respond to the suffering of people with profound mental health problems such as schizophrenia? To have schizophrenia in our culture is to be alienated, stigmatized, often friendless, and, interestingly, often prevented from expressing one's spirituality. Schizophrenia is a totalizing illness. Unlike someone with influenza or measles, a person diagnosed with schizophrenia loses their personal identity and actually becomes the illness: a "schizophrenic." Once this happens, all of their experiences are interpreted through the lens of cultural assumptions about the illness. Because these assumptions about schizophrenia tend to be negative, so the social identity that a person with this condition develops is negative.

Even the person's spiritual experiences are interpreted through the lens of pathology. There is strong evidence to suggest that mental health services tend to exclude spiritual expression as pathological and they actively seek to disengage spirituality from the therapeutic process.<sup>6</sup> Here we can see a pattern of exclusion from their community, personal relationships, and God that is strikingly similar to the experience of people with leprosy in Jesus' day.

"Six hundred years ago lepers were exiled, cut off from the normal social intercourse in case they infected everyone else," notes a prominent psychiatrist, Bob Johnson, in his reflection on the plight today of people with severe personality disorders. "A few dedicated people worked with them, improved their standard of living and long before anti-leprosy drugs were available, enabled them to live longer. The optimum treatment for this dread disease, then as now, was human comfort. How can we do less to our own mentally ill, merely because the current dominant section of the psychiatric profession has determined that personality disorders are as 'untreatable' as leprosy once was? Isn't it time to apply other criteria?"<sup>7</sup> Though Johnson is speaking specifically of people with personality disorders, his statement is equally applicable to the type of suffering we have been discussing.

The friendships that Jesus formed with persons during his ministry both revealed and initiated their friendship with God. Christ becomes our model as we consider how the practice of friendship can ease the suffering of people with profound mental health problems who live in our communities and desire to find a spiritual home.

Friendships, of course, are critical for developing and maintaining spiritual and psychological health. From our friends we gain a positive sense of identity and an awareness of value, meaning, and purpose; in our friendship with God, we discover our ultimate significance. Above all, friendships express love. Indeed, when a human friendship is practiced out of a relationship with the Triune God, it becomes a concrete expression and manifestation of God's love for the world.

Jesus' friendships were qualitatively different from two types of friendship that are so common today—those based on the principle of social exchange or the principle of likeness. In the first type, based on social exchange, we gauge our friends by what we can get from them. If we find the relationship to be personally satisfying, we will stay with it. But we are under no moral obligation to be faithful. Consequently, when we do not get what we want from a relationship, we seek another one that is more fulfilling. In the second type, the principle of likeness assumes that friendships emerge between individuals who share interests and activities—in other words, like attracts like. The friendships of Jesus, however, were based on a very different principle: the principle of love and grace. Jesus

fellowshipped with people who were radically unlike him—tax collectors, sinners, people considered religiously unclean, and women—and through their friendship, he resurrected their personhood. His friendships were unbounded by cultural assumptions and available to those whom society marginalized, stigmatized, and refused access to God.

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**In this ministry of befriending people with mental health problems, there will be moments of sadness, joy, frustration, and uncertainty. But if the church does not offer such friendships, who will?**

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#### **CREATING “SPACE” IN COMMUNITY**

Can we really become friends with people who have severe mental health problems? We may be tempted to throw up our hands and cry, “We don’t have the expertise! We would not be able to cope with ‘such people’ in our

community.” Yet to cut off the possibility of effective community care with a stream of negatives in this way is simply to hide behind prejudices and stigmatizing labels that prevent us from knowing real persons who are suffering. Sometimes we forget that mental health problems are first and foremost human experiences before they become diagnoses. Did we see such negativizing attitudes in the ministry of Jesus? Do we hear Jesus calling for the expert each time he encounters someone who is marginalized, disturbed, or socially alienated?

Forming friendships with people who are marginalized and different is not an easy task. Yet, if we can create forms of community with “safe space” for people to develop such friendships, even if these friendships are transient, then we will have moved some way towards faithfulness and Christ-likeness.

Creating this “space” for friendship requires making room for individuals, despite their differences and difficulties, to participate meaningfully in church life. To do this, churches may need the guidance of mental health experts and collaboration with professional agencies. Mental health chaplains and parish nurses, for instance, can be facilitators of friendships for people with profound mental health problems.<sup>8</sup> However, to suggest that professionals be liaisons for relationships is not to suggest that they do the befriending on behalf of the church community. Collaboration between a community and mental health professionals has the mutual goal of accompanying individuals as they find their way into the community and to provide support that will enable the church community to rejoice in the newfound diversity. The church’s task is to provide a physical and spiritual space where people perceived by society as “different” can find a home, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, mentally ill nor

mentally healthy, but only travelers struggling together to sustain faith in God and trust in one another.

In this ministry of befriending people with mental health problems, there will be moments of sadness, joy, frustration, and uncertainty. But if the church does not offer such friendships, who will? To do so is to remain faithful to the One who touched the man with leprosy and said, "I am willing." To do so is to offer them true healing—relief from suffering and a chance to maintain their connection with God and others despite the turbulent storms they must endure.

## NOTES

1 Eric Cassell, *Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 640.

2 David B. McCurdy, "The Doctor's Relationship with Suffering" (online at [www.faithandculture.us/resources/papers/mccurdy.pdf](http://www.faithandculture.us/resources/papers/mccurdy.pdf)).

3 John S. Strauss, "The Person-key to Understanding Mental Illness: Towards a New Dynamic Psychiatry," *British Journal of Psychiatry Supplement*, III (October, 1992), 19-26. The story is on p. 18.

4 See my *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

5 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

6 See my *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a 'Forgotten' Dimension*. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001).

7 Bob Johnson, "Modern Day Lepers," in *Personality Disorder and Human Worth: Papers from a Conference Organised by the Board of Social Responsibility* (London: The Church of England, 2001), 20.

8 For other concrete suggestions, see *Resurrecting the Person*.

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### JOHN SWINTON

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# My Father's Hands

BY PAULINE BRAND NELSON

Our hands, her father often said, tell people something about us: the calluses and wounds they bear, the gentleness or skill with which they move. What she learned from her father, the renowned surgeon, Dr. Paul Brand, is that we can use our hands to tell people in pain something about themselves: that they are not alone.

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Last summer I flew halfway around the world to hold hands with my father for the last time. Because the coma in which he lay was the result of an accident rather than a long illness, our anguish felt raw and new. We were novices to suffering of this kind, yet the behavior it called up in us was surely familiar to the nurses: we clung to each other, and we prayed that Dad would feel no pain—we who reeled under the weight of our own. Coming and going from the hospital through the long days, I noticed that each of us did the same things in the same order upon returning to the room, as if performing a ritual we had rehearsed. Anxious to reassure ourselves of his continued physical presence, we stroked and kissed Dad's head—something I had never seen anyone do before—spoke his name, and held his hand. Dazed and disoriented after sixteen hours travel from Europe, I too held his hand and felt glad to have had the chance to feel its familiar warmth and shape again.

I knew that the extent of his brain injury meant he could not know me or clasp my hand in return, but something remarkable did happen. His fingers began to move around my hands in a movement that seemed at first a caress, but became an examination. He explored the muscles of my palm, traced the shape of each joint. From the depths of his unconscious state, it seemed that some old familiar instruction was getting through, and Dad was doing what he did best. As a surgeon who judged the human hand

to be one of God's finest creations, Paul Brand had connected with many thousands of people by taking his hands in theirs and examining them. It was how he knew them, served them, and loved them. To have him so do now, even unknowing, was a gift: a last glimpse of the very essence of him.

Hands tell the story of their owners, Dad used to say: the calluses and wounds they bear, the gentleness or skill with which they move. He once preached a sermon in which he "examined" the hands of Christ, and the testament they bore to His profession and sacrifice. There in that hospital room, feeling my father's strong, supple fingers continue their ceaseless exploration of mine, I couldn't help but think of the ways we had all been shaped and affected by those dear hands and the work they had done.

### **THANK GOD FOR PAIN**

While there was a certain irony in our praying for Dad to be free of pain at the very moment we were consumed by it, the deeper irony was that we should pray that way for the man who had taught us everything we knew about pain. And not just pain, but prejudice, rejection, and isolation—all of which I was familiar with as a child. I did not, I should add, experience those things myself, but I grew up among people who had, because the disease to which my parents had devoted their medical careers—my father as an orthopedic surgeon, my mother as an ophthalmologist—was leprosy.

Leprosy, one of the world's ancient and most feared diseases, offers an interesting challenge to our thinking about the relationship between pain and suffering. The leprosy bacillus itself damages the body's network of nerves in such a way that physical sensations, including pain, are irretrievably lost in all affected areas of the body. On learning this, people sometimes see it as a sort of silver lining for victims of leprosy—while the disease may cause them problems, at least pain is not one of them. Indeed, one of my earliest memories from my Indian childhood was of learning that a young victim of leprosy had impressed his friends by putting a thorn all the way through his palm without flinching.

This image makes us recoil, for good reason. We know instinctively that such a child is not lucky, but defenseless in a perilous world. Left untreated, leprosy can result in terrible deformity, and even when modern medication halts its progress and contagion, the lack of pain sensation particularly in hands, feet, and eyes means that only diligent attention will save a patient from further injury.

As if that were not enough of a burden for one disease to lay on its victim, the leprosy patient endures a more terrible side effect: the fear, revulsion, and rejection it inspires in the rest of the human race. Partly because of its visible and distinctive deformities, and partly because of its largely undeserved reputation as a highly contagious disease, the victim of leprosy down through the ages has endured a pitiable existence. In medieval Eu-

rope, city gates would not be opened to him, and his diagnosis would be followed by a funeral-like rite, symbolizing the extent to which the victim was now cut off from the land of the living. The very term “leper” is defined in the dictionary as “a spurned person, an outcast.”

No pain then; only incalculable suffering.

I was accustomed to seeing the physical results of insensitivity to pain—the ulcerated feet, the damaged eyes—either in the patients I met, or in scientific photographs that in our chaotic household might turn up in any pile of papers. Not infrequently, a show of family slides would be interrupted by a single grisly picture of an ulcerated foot, a mislaid illustration from one of Dad’s lectures. It was always a jolt to see these terrible images, but it helped to reinforce my father’s view, constantly drummed into us: that the ability to feel pain was a gift to be grateful for.

As a child, I did not trouble myself with subtleties of language or paradox; I simply trusted Dad when he explained that the pain of a twisted ankle was a good thing. “Thank God for pain!” he would cry with enthusiasm as he applied the bandage, going on to explain exactly how the pain in my ankle enforced the adoption of the right conditions for its healing. He maintained that enthusiasm throughout his life, writing in his last years: “Give me grace to be thankful for the hurt that keeps me whole.”

Friends of mine sometimes wondered if Dad’s views were evidence of callousness—did his profound admiration for the role of pain in our bodies make him dismiss the suffering of people with diseases other than leprosy? In fact, he was a most tender and compassionate physician. Whether the cause of suffering was an excess or an absence of pain, the twisting agony of arthritis or the numb despair of leprosy, Dad’s response was the same: to take the hands of a person gently in his own, to become in some way intimate both with their disease and with them. When that person had leprosy—it was especially so on his first encounter with the disease—this was no small step.

### **A CHANGE OF HEART**

Appropriately, the story of my Dad’s fascination with pain began while he was studying a pair of hands. It was 1949, and my parents had just left war-damaged London, accepting an invitation to help in the creation of a surgical training unit within a newly-established Christian medical school in Vellore, south India. Some time after their arrival, he visited a friend who worked at a local facility that existed solely for the care of those with leprosy. Such institutions, necessary because general hospitals would not admit people with the disease, were not infrequently set up and staffed by Christians.

The treatment of leprosy by drugs was in its hopeful infancy, and progressing. In contrast, surgical interventions to correct deformity in the interests of the patient’s ultimate rehabilitation were virtually unheard of.

It was not even clear whether tissue affected by the bacillus would heal following surgery, and by the time a patient's hand had acquired the most recognizable symptom of the disease—paralysis in a permanently clawed position—it was generally believed that the muscles of the hand were useless. And yet, as he and his friend walked in the grounds of the clinic, Dad's professional curiosity was piqued. Hopeful of finding evidence of potentially usable muscle and healthy tissue, he stopped to examine one young man's hands.

That my father should have held the hands of a leprosy patient in his own at that time and in that place is, on the face of it, inexplicable. He had encountered the disease once before, as a young boy living with his missionary parents in the south Indian hills, and the memory of that encounter had long haunted him. He could recall the terror he had seen on his mother's normally serene face, and the panic he himself felt as he pulled his little sister away from possible contact with the disease that had so disfigured the three men crouching pitifully outside the house, men who had come many miles in search of the kindness and help of the Christians they had heard about.

There would come a time when Dad would be a leading voice in the call for breaking down the barriers around leprosy, and ending the isolation of its victims. I myself grew up knowing that it was extremely unlikely I would catch the disease, even though as a child I was slightly more at risk. However, even today there exists the remote possibility that a health professional in this field might ultimately share the fate of those they serve; in those days it was feared as a likely outcome. Certainly, on that day when Dad took the young man's hands in his own, he did so with a sense of becoming vulnerable to danger.

I wondered, recently, whether I ought to feel indignant that he decided to take a risk that indirectly exposed the rest of the family to the possibility of infection. I found that I could not even begin to

consider the question—partly because I was doing so from the position of the health I enjoy today, but more so because the man I knew simply could not have done anything else. There would have been no “decision”. The act of examining that man's hands, like that of exploring my hands in the hospital so many years later, was instinctive, a reflex made inevitable by the forces that shaped his character between his first encounter with

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leprosy as a child, and his second as a young surgeon—the forces of passionate curiosity, tenderness towards his fellow man, and a longing to serve God.

Gently manipulating fingers that were pulled back in the familiar clawed position, Dad observed the lack of any useful movement, such as a finger-to-thumb pinch. Nevertheless curious to see if there might yet be some muscle strength available to the man, my father asked him to squeeze his hand as hard as he possibly could, and waited hopefully for some flutter of movement. Instead, he found his hand gripped so powerfully that he cried out in shock.

It was the moment that changed my father's life. In that split second of acute discomfort, he was given the gift we all desire—a glimpse of the direction and purpose of his life. He went on to develop surgical techniques for the reconstruction of the hand in leprosy, harnessing the great strength that had so surprised him, and restoring movement to thousands of pairs of hands. It makes me smile to think that the voice God used to guide my father into that life was a jolt of pain.

#### **BEYOND HELPLESS VOYEURISM**

My family moved to America in the 1960s, when my parents accepted positions at a leprosy hospital in Carville, Louisiana. At eight, having absorbed the lessons of my parents' research, I was carelessly confident of the fact that leprosy was not as destructive or contagious as people had once believed it to be. While it was sad that the long-term patients at Carville had endured the terrible rejection and abandonment that was common in years gone by, I was glad that newly-diagnosed patients would never have to encounter that outdated prejudice.

Month after month, however, and year after year, my mother continued to come home from work with stories of patients—new patients—whose diagnoses had led to divorce or abandonment by loved ones. Despite all the advances in drugs and surgical techniques, the fear of leprosy remained. The long line of patients outside my mother's eye clinic were waiting less for medication than for the listening ear and hug she always offered—a healing desperately required in a world that recoiled from them. I was dumbfounded that this could still be so.

I should not have been, because a clear illustration of the degree of society's understanding about leprosy was staring me in the face all the years we lived at Carville. Around the grounds of the hospital, encircling the houses of staff and patients alike, ran a ten-foot-high chain-link fence.

At first, I liked that fence. As a nervous child with an over-active imagination, I saw it as a vital protection against all the burglars and murderers who would otherwise undoubtedly break into my home. But as I learned about the attitude of the local community to the hospital, it dawned on me that the fence had been erected not to keep danger out, but to keep it in.

It was my first taste of knowing myself to be on the same side of the fence as the perceived threat.

I got used to it. Schoolmates sometimes feigned fear, laughingly fleeing whatever contagion I might carry. Once, a passport official saw my address while taking a set of my fingerprints and dropped my hand in shock. What interests me as I recall those moments is that my response at the time was not embarrassment for myself, but fury on behalf of patients whom I knew as friends. That fury prompted an event that occurred when I was about ten, and this story too involved a pair of hands—my own.

Outside the fence was a section of the River Road that almost nobody ever drove down, although now and then people drove slowly along its length, peering in curiously at the grounds of the hospital. On one such occasion I saw a couple looking at me with the intensity of birdwatchers glimpsing a rare species. They were trying to tell whether or not I was a patient. I felt the familiar anger boil up in me, and I walked to the fence holding my hands up in a gross caricature of the clawed position I had seen so often. Was this what they had come to see? Then I would give it to them! Their faces registering obvious horror, they sped away.

At the time, I felt proud of myself, seeing my actions as evidence of courage in the face of the enemy. Now I recall the episode with shame, knowing that the evil lay not in the couple but in the fence itself, because it kept them at just the right distance to maintain their fear and ignorance. Like their forbears in medieval cities, they were able to observe the trials of their fellow man from a safe distance, but unable to respond in any meaningful way to that suffering.

It may seem that in the twenty-first century we will not have to consider the sad consequences of such barriers, because our modern, open society is free of such outdated prejudice. It is true that we no longer put people with leprosy behind fences.

However, just as medicine has developed more sophisticated and effective barrier techniques to prevent the spread of infection, so we have developed subtle and efficient ways to isolate ourselves from each other.

Much of the pain we witness these days, for example, happens on the far side of a television screen: a million children starve before our eyes in the Sudan, a family spills the ugliness of its hatred on Jerry Springer. Like

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the couple in the car, we may be at a safe distance, but we are also, like them, no more than helpless voyeurs to other people's suffering. Even when the need is close to home, the temptation is often to distance and protect ourselves. We create barriers of busyness or self-consciousness; we remind ourselves that there are people "more qualified" to deal with our widowed neighbor's grief, as if what was required of us was anything

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**All pain—physical, mental, and spiritual—is lessened when someone is there with you, physically present with you to bear it. The psalmist did not ask to escape the valley of the shadow of death, only to have God walk through it with him.**

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more complicated than our company.

If I learned anything from holding hands with my father, it is this: all pain—physical, mental, spiritual—is lessened when someone is there with you, physically present with you to bear it. A mother's kiss really does make it feel a little better. The psalmist did not ask to escape the

valley of the shadow of death, only to have God walk through it with him. It is the way we are made, and it is why, when the sickness of sin separated us from Him, the only cure was for Christ to come to be on our side of the fence, fully exposed to the contagion of the human race. There was no pretence there, like there was in my clawed hands; He came not just to taste our fate but to go to the grave with it.

Jesus healed a man with leprosy by *touching* him, and although the disciples tried to shield Him from the needs of a pressing crowd, Jesus' healing power went out to a woman who touched His garment—indeed, Jesus *felt the power go out of Him*. It is a startling idea, as mysterious as magic: that God Himself drew on the power of physical closeness as a healing tool.

The implication, for those of us who call ourselves His servants, is that we too need to put ourselves within arm's length of the suffering around us. The same side of the fence, close enough to risk being affected. What else can it mean when we are instructed in the laying on of hands for healing? Just as the cells of the human body respond to the alarm bell of pain in ways that help to heal the injury, so we must be people who respond to, rather than merely observe, the suffering of our neighbor. There is no other way for the body of human society, and especially the body of the church, to stay well. For some of us, skilled at shielding ourselves from the draining demands of the crowd, the prospect of intimacy with others' pain is frightening, exhausting. The good news, however, is that no special skill is called for; our presence alone does battle with the isolation and fear that so magnifies all human suffering.

Our hands, my father said, tell people something about us. What I have learned, though, and what Dad reminded me of in that hospital room, is that we can use our hands to tell people in pain something about *themselves*: that they are not alone.

#### **EDITOR'S SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

To read more about the experiences of this acclaimed hand surgeon and his reflections on suffering, see *In the Likeness of God: The Dr. Paul Brand Tribute Edition of FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE and IN HIS IMAGE* (Zondervan, 2004), which includes reprinted editions of two of Dr. Brand's three Gold Medallion Award-winning books co-written with Philip Yancey. Their third, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants – Memoirs of the World's Leading Leprosy Surgeon* (HarperCollins and Zondervan, 1993), is now available in the paperback title *The Gift of Pain* (Zondervan, 1997).

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# How the Soul Grows Through Loss

BY PHYLLIS KERSTEN

Though the tragic losses of their loved ones were deeply personal, the spiritual insights that emerge as Nicholas Wolterstorff and Gerald Sittser reflect upon them are of great benefit to the community of faith. Reading their books, we can glimpse the world they now know, which “dry-eyed” they could not see, and the terrible splendor of the suffering God they encounter there.

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Though the loss of a loved one is always deeply personal, the spiritual insight that can emerge from reflection upon it can be of great benefit to the wide community of faith. We see this especially in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987; 111 pp., \$10.00) and Gerald L. Sittser’s *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995; 184 pp., \$9.99). Reading these books we learn that our souls can grow through loss as we enter honestly and fully into its pain and grief.

After his son Eric died in a mountain-climbing accident in Europe, Wolterstorff turned to the lament “as a mode for [his] address to God” in the darkness of grief. He describes the different kind of faith that is “fastened” to lament: a “bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness,” but still a faith that trusts in hope in God (pp. 70-71).

Wolterstorff puzzles over Jesus’ beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn,” but he finally concludes that mourners are “aching visionaries” who have caught sight of God’s promised new day, God’s coming kingdom, when death and mourning and tears will be no more. While Stoics

urged humanity to “disengage” from the suffering of the world, he observes, Jesus tells us to be “open to the wounds of the world,” but to “do so in the good cheer that an end is in sight” (pp. 85-86). Wolterstorff finds that looking “at the world through tears” enables him to “see things that dry-eyed [he] could not see” (p. 26).

In one of the most powerful segments of the book, he draws new insights from the story of Jesus showing his wounds to Thomas after the resurrection. Wolterstorff’s wounds from Eric’s death, like Jesus’ wounds, will still mark him, be part of his identity, for a long time to come. “But,” Wolterstorff adds, “to believe in Christ’s rising and death’s dying, is also to live with the power and challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love.” Wolterstorff goes on to say that if sympathy for the world’s wounds is not enlarged by our

anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if commitment to what is important is not strengthened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if hope is weakened and faith is diminished, if from the experience of death comes nothing good, then death has won (p. 92).

The faith of Wolterstorff demonstrates that death has not won.

In the days and weeks after the accident that took from him his wife of twenty years, his mother, and his four-year-old daughter, Jerry Sittser says he cared for his three surviving children and fulfilled his teaching responsibilities. But there “was a radical split between the self that did my work and the self that watched me from the shadows” (pp. 35-36). Even in the darkness, however, Sittser says he began to experience the wonder and sacredness of ordinary life, the holiness of tucking his children into bed, or talking to a student. Three years after his traumatic loss, Sittser finds that the sorrow hasn’t gone away, “but it has been integrated into my life as a painful part of a healthy whole” (p. 42). “Sorrow enlarges the soul,” until it “is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world’s pain and hoping for the world’s healing at the same time” (p. 63).

Catastrophic loss can cause people to reevaluate their priorities and focus on what’s most important in their lives. Sittser says that in that first year after the accident, he “reflected on the kind of person I wanted to be, not to please others but to be true to God and myself,...[and] found satisfaction in the doing of life, not in the getting done of it.” What he discovered was a great paradox: that “under the surface” of his grief, of “this vast sea of nothingness” he sailed on, was a world “teeming with life,” if only a person is attentive to it. “Even in loss and grief we can choose to embrace the miracle of each moment and receive the gifts of grace that come to us all the time,” he writes. “The past is gone, the future not yet

here. But the present is alive to us." Receiving these gifts of grace "requires a kind of sacrifice" from us, Sittser says, "the sacrifice of believing that, however painful our losses, life can still be good—good in a different way than before, but nevertheless good" (pp. 65-66, 68).

Like Wolterstorff, Sittser describes his loss as like "an amputation," an "amputation of the familiar self." He began almost immediately, however, to forge "a new identity that integrates his loss into it"—establishing new traditions, remodeling the house, encouraging his children to begin some new activities as well as pursue their prior ones, all "to paint a new portrait of our lives" (pp. 74-75).

It is not all bad, Sittser says, when loss "strips us of the props we rely on for our well-being." God is the one who is able "to help us forge a new identity,...to help us become persons whose worth is based on grace and not on performance, accomplishments and power." Greater dependence on God, he believes, has resulted in his giving up "trying to be a perfect parent for his children and [has] instead invited God to be their parent through me. I have found myself praying for them almost constantly, even asking God to protect them from my weaknesses" (pp. 77-79).

#### **WHAT BLOCKS THE SOUL'S GROWTH**

*A Grace Disguised* is particularly helpful in alerting us to some of the attitudes and emotions that can stunt or permanently block the soul's growth after loss. Sittser speaks of a "second death" that is worse than the first death people experience. He calls it the "*the death of the spirit*," that "death we bring upon ourselves" by becoming permanent prisoners to any of those destructive emotions that can naturally follow a loss: guilt, anger, bitterness, self-pity, despair, hatred, cynicism.

In *Lament*, Wolterstorff says he seeks to "own" his grief "redemptively." And he does. He decides, for example, that he will not put his regrets toward Eric out of his mind, but "allow the memories to prod me into doing better with those still living," waiting for that day, he said, "when we can all throw ourselves into each other's arms and say, 'I'm sorry'" (p. 65).

Sittser acknowledges that regret is inevitable because "in loss we lose the tomorrow that we needed to make right our yesterday or today." But our regrets and "if onlys" can keep our wounds from healing and put "us in a perpetual state of guilt" (pp. 84-85). Without forgiveness—God's forgiveness and forgiving oneself—regret can also become "a form of self-punishment." But, he adds, if "God lavishes us with grace then surely we can stop punishing ourselves and live in that grace." (p. 91)

Regret can lead to personal transformation if loss becomes an opportunity for soul-searching and taking inventory of our lives, particularly of our destructive patterns of behavior. Sittser speaks of changes he made in his work habits and relationships with his children. "I had been attentive

to them before, but since the accident I have begun to carry them in my heart. I once *performed* as a parent; now I *am* a parent" (p. 90).

In a chapter called, "Why Not Me," Sittser addresses our demand that life be fair:

On the face of it, living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such a world I might never experience tragedy; but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of the three wonderful people whom I lost (p. 112).

"So, God spare us a life of fairness!" Sittser concludes. "A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering" (p. 115).

Oftentimes victims of wrongdoing want justice to prevail after their loss because the "moral order in the universe" has been violated. Sittser, for example, wanted the driver of the other car in the accident to "suffer and pay for the wrong I believed he had done" (p. 119). And after the man was acquitted, Sittser realized that he was poisoning himself with his preoccupation with this man and the failure of the justice system, and with his desire to get even. Even when justice is served, Sittser observes, victims are still sometimes disappointed, because they "want more than justice." Their "desire for revenge" becomes "a bottomless pit" (p. 120). "The real problem, however, is not revenge itself but the *unforgiving heart* behind revenge." Sittser says he chooses to forgive for his children's sake, as much as his own. "If I lived like a victim for the rest of my life, they would probably do likewise. If I drove all mercy from my heart, they would probably follow my example. They, too, would insist on fairness and, when that failed them, as it surely would, they would want revenge" (p. 126). Forgiveness is essential because it brings freedom to the one who gives it. Though it is a life-long process, our forgiving acknowledges that "God runs the universe."

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**Sittser speaks warmly of the people who became part of his family's community of brokenness. Those who decide to come close to suffering friends must be willing to let another's loss change them.**

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Sittser believes that faith "changes our attitude about the people who wrong us, for it forces us to view their wrongdoing in the light of our own. Once we see ourselves as people who need God's mercy, we will be more likely to show mercy to others" (p. 131).

He speaks warmly of the people who became part of his family's community of brokenness. Those who decide to come close to suffering friends

must be willing to let another's loss change them. Friends, colleagues, a sister and brother-in-law, and his local church were among those who helped Sittser grieve, and in the process found "meaning for their lives in [his] experience of suffering." There was mutuality to the relationships that enabled Sittser "to risk loving again," even though that "means living under the constant threat of further loss" (pp. 164-165). Sittser says "choosing *not to love*...means imperiling the life of the soul," for if "people want their souls to grow through loss, whatever the loss is, they must eventually decide to love even more deeply than they did before" (p. 165). "Brokenness forces us to find a source of love outside ourselves. That source is God, whose essential nature is love,...the God who creates and sustains community for broken people" (p. 167).

### **SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS**

Where is God when we are in the place of pain? In one of the finest sections of *Lament*, Wolterstorff speaks of the endurance of his faith "in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries,...why God did not prevent Eric's death." Sittser, like Wolterstorff, "was tortured by the question of where God was" the night of his family's accident, and "wondered whether [he] would ever again be able to trust" God. Wolterstorff says he lives with an unanswered question, not willing to say that God caused Eric's death, but not able to say either that there was nothing God could have done about it. "The wounds," the suffering "of all humanity," he writes, "are an unanswered question" (pp. 67-68).

Through his tears, Eric's dad discovered the God who doesn't explain our suffering, but shares it. "It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live," writes Wolterstorff. "I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see [God's] sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor" (p. 81). He suggests that it is in our suffering—as well as in our love and creativity—that we "mirror God" (p. 83). Moreover, in "joining the crowd on the bench of mourning," we "hear the sobs and see the tears of God" (p. 88). To love is to suffer, and since "God is love," God suffers. In fact, Wolterstorff says, "God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering" (p. 90).

Sittser, too, saw meaning for his suffering in the incarnation, in the sovereign God giving up his sovereignty to become "a vulnerable human being," to suffer loss with us and for us. "No matter how deep the pit into which I descend," he reports, "I keep finding God there. He is not aloof from my suffering but draws near to me when I suffer. He is vulnerable to pain, quick to shed tears, and acquainted with grief. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world" (p. 143).

Sittser concludes that he will never fully "be able to comprehend God's Sovereignty." But, in "a waking dream" of the accident scene one night,

Sittser found “a partial resolution” to his questions. A “beautiful light” suddenly illumined the scene. Sittser writes that the light enabled him and his children “to see the presence of God in that place. I knew that moment that God was there at the accident,...to welcome our loved ones into heaven...to comfort us...to send those of us who survived in a new direction” (pp. 144-145).

The “supreme challenge” of loss “is met when we learn to take the loss into ourselves and be enlarged by it, so that our capacity to live life well and to know God intimately increases,” writes Sittser. “Above all, I have become aware of the power of God’s grace and my need for it. My soul has grown because it has been awakened to the goodness and love of God.... God is growing my soul, making it bigger, and filling it with himself” (p. 180).

Wolterstorff describes “faith [as] a footbridge that you don’t know will hold you up over the chasm until you’re forced to walk out onto it.” He is standing “over the chasm” now, inspecting that bridge, he says, but he has the sense that he is doing so in the presence of God, “the Creating, Resurrecting One” (pp. 76-77).

Maybe the most important thing Sittser experienced through his loss was the reality of God’s unconditional love:

Night after night I sat in my living room, unable to say anything, pray anything, or do anything. I was empty of energy and desire. All I could do was *let God love me*, even though I hardly believed that he loved anyone, least of all me.... I learned through that experience that nothing can separate us from [God’s] love—not even our inability to love him in return!” (p. 92).

Is there anything more important for us to know?

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# Facing Painful Questions

BY ROGER WARD

**What can we, as Christians, say about evil, suffering, and pain? Can God be trusted? Our honest reckoning with pain, as the four books reviewed here demonstrate, is essential to our sharing the good news of God.**

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**T**hough each of us must suffer and endure pain within our individual circumstances, together we bear the sentence of death and separation. No human speech is complete if it does not connect to this reality. What can we, as Christians, say about evil, suffering, and pain? If the gospel of God is meant for everyman and everywoman, perhaps there is no subject that fits more smoothly into evangelical purposes than an honest reckoning with pain. Indeed, the four books reviewed here demonstrate the significance of responding to pain and suffering as a part of our Christian duty.

The majesty of God's work of redemption in our world turns, according to the biblical writers, on the ultimately personal category of pain. Jesus invites the lame man, "Do you want to recover?" (John 5:6, NEB)<sup>†</sup>, and we long for the day when "He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain" (Revelation 21:4, NEB). Despite such assurances in Scripture, however, we instinctively judge God's character through the veil of our pain or the suffering of a loved one. John Stackhouse, Gary Watts, Douglas John Hall, and Phillip Yancey underscore the Christian's responsibility for understanding God in relation to a larger suffering world *even while* we dwell in the doubt of God's goodness that arises because of our pain. Each writer emphasizes one side or other of this equation: Stackhouse and Hall focus on the task of understanding God and suffering, Yancey and Watts concentrate on the problems of faith that attend pain and suffering. Taken together these writers construct a rich fabric of response to the perplexing question of God's sovereign power and the persistence of human pain.

## UNDERSTANDING GOD AND SUFFERING

John G. Stackhouse, Jr., in *Can God Be Trusted?: Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1998, 208 pp., \$18.95), begins with David Hume's classic challenge to Christian belief: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (p. 11). Stackhouse develops the intellectual problems of evil and pain in three chapters and follows these with four chapters of responses.

With great intellectual breadth, Stackhouse looks at pain from various Western and Eastern perspectives. For example, he recounts the story of Siddhartha's quest to overcome transience and pain, becoming Buddha (pp. 22 ff.) Responding to evil is an ingredient in every religious and intellectual tradition, and in this context the Christian response shines the brighter.

Rather than evade the burden of pain for the Christian, Stackhouse heightens the problem by reflecting on the character of God: "The God of predestination, the God of worldwide providence, the God who created all and sustains all and thus ultimately is responsible for all—this God has revealed to us only glimpses of the divine cosmic plan" (p. 103). On the other hand, the gospel of Christ alters the story in a unique way: "Christians have affirmed that *on the cross, things changed*. Mysterious as it remains even to the wisest minds, the fundamental Christian affirmation is that the cross of Jesus doesn't just *show* us things, it *did* something once and for all" (p. 115). What the cross means, according to Stackhouse, is that we have a reason to have faith despite the terrible evil in the world, and to think and to live Christianly as our response to this evil. Of course, *why* this is the case is a significant question. Stackhouse gives two responses. First, the Christian response in a world of pain makes sense because it "fits" its purpose; it does what a religion is supposed to do in confronting evil and comforting those who suffer. Second, it provides a narrative or framework from which we can better understand the realities of the world (p. 149). Stackhouse is careful to limit the force of these reasons for adopting a Christian hope in the face of evil. He does not suggest that such reasons are universally persuasive; there is no knockdown argument here. But he does set the Christian response in its strongest possible light as an intellectual accounting of God's goodness discovered in a world of pain.

Confronting the suffering in the world with Christian fidelity requires that we confront our own failures, says Douglas John Hall in *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, reprinted 1987, 225 pp., \$18.00). "Our temptation," he warns, "is that we fall into superficial belieffulness—credulity—healing the wounds of the people lightly and degrading the hope that belongs to the gospel of the cross" (p. 27). In five well-developed chapters Hall explores a version of divine reversal. Just as the forces that sought to rebel against

God by killing Jesus only confirmed God's eternal presence in the world, so pain, the most un-godlike aspect of our human condition, gives us access to the deepest meaning and mystery of God's identification with humanity. Hall points out a reluctance to accept this reversal in religion: "It is the propensity of religion to avoid, precisely, suffering; to have light without darkness, vision without trust, and...hope without an ongoing dialog with

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despair—in short, Easter without Good Friday" (p. 126). He concludes that human rejection necessitated the cross. God did not "intend" the cross, but Jesus dying on the cross "meant in the long run that far more spiritual power had been released into the world than if Jesus had lived to a ripe old age and died in quiet retirement" (p. 192).

Hall's theological proposal is that pain calls for strategic action. The human action that rejects God must be reversed, and the pivot point is pain. "The object is to identify oneself with suffering that is already there in one's world, to let oneself be led by the love of Christ into solidarity with those who suffer, and to accept the consequences of this solidarity in the belief—the *joyful* belief—that in this way God is still at work in the world, making a conquest of its sin and suffering from within" (p. 145). In his masterful use of biblical and theological material, Hall sounds the theme that blessedness implies some experience of suffering. It is this mystery of our lives with God that finally gives sense to the incarnation and suffering of God with us.

#### **DEALING WITH DOUBTS**

In *Painful Questions: Facing Struggles with Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999, 240 pp., \$12.99), Gary Watts does not try to persuade unbelievers of God's goodness. Rather he addresses some hard questions that believers must ask when suffering and pain become their foremost concern. He organizes thirteen chapters around what he calls "fact-finding questions," "fact-stating questions," and "fact-changing questions." Fact-finding questions include those like "Why has this happened to me?" Fact-stating questions bring us to considerations of dignity: "Is this fair?" And fact-changing questions—like "Can good come from evil?"—seek to alter the circumstances of our suffering by calling to mind our hope in a world where the power of pain ends.

Watts concludes that the characteristic “change” of attitude accessible to Christians is to respond in love to the presence of pain, and he recommends that we adopt a spirit of adventure in regard to pain. “If life is an adventure, then our expectations must be so aligned,” he writes. “The evil that befalls us is not an anomaly in an otherwise perfect pattern of peace and tranquility. It is an anticipated obstacle on the road to God’s kingdom” (p. 172). If we adopt an attitude of adventure towards life, Watts says, we can choose to create good out of bad circumstances. More than the other authors reviewed here, Watts promotes a voluntarist response to pain and suffering: we can choose to treat adversity as a “great game.” This hopeful and optimistic attitude fits with our American “can-do” spirit, and it also reveals the roots of our dissatisfaction with a painful reality that doesn’t seem to budge. At this point in the argument there is an opening for discussing the importance of community, both in revealing this dissatisfaction and directing responses to it. Unfortunately Watts does not explore this dimension in this book.

Phillip Yancey, in *Where is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990, reissued 1997, 320 pp., \$5.99), begins from a similar place as Watts. Yancey recounts a personal encounter with a woman suffering with cancer, and wonders what a Christian should say at times like these. He tours the depths of human responses to pain as well as the rich resources of biblical and Christian writers. Most notably, he emphasizes that pain is a work of grace, since without it our biological life is jeopardized. His focus on the medical facts of physical pain, in addition to a range of literary and religious reflections on the meaning of pain, offers a dauntingly wide field for Yancey to cultivate. Yet in reviewing resources as diverse as the bedside manner of Dr. Paul Brand dealing with leprosy patients, the psychological depths of John Donne’s musings while dying, the probing questions of the book of Job, and the gospel hope for redemption, Yancey excels any author I have read in his care and consistency in understanding people and writers.

“Where is God when it hurts?” is a question that intertwines Christian experience today with thousands of years of human experience and tradition. Yancey avoids cliché and formulaic answers. He dwells in the concrete realities of different Christians’ responses to extreme suffering, such as the paralysis from spinal chord injuries in two athletic young people. Their experiences contribute to the fabric of our collective answer to the question. “True health is the strength to live, the strength to suffer, and the strength to die,” he proposes. “Health is not a condition of my body; it is the power of my soul to cope with the varying condition of that body” (p. 191).

Because he does not use theology as a shield, Yancey may appear at times to make more literary sense than Christian sense. But his work is explicitly grounded in the unique power of a Christian theological approach.

“No other religion,” he says, “not Judaism, not Hinduism, not Buddhism or Islam—offers this unique combination of an all-powerful God who willingly takes on the limitations and suffering of his creation” (p. 233).

God’s identification with the creature and creation in suffering is the common theme that gives all four of these books their power. Because God suffered his Son to live, experience pain as we do, and die, in what other way can we be more intimately connected to the reality of God’s love than in our own suffering and death? Yet this suffering is not the end, but the portal of our vision into our true world and our true life, where pain meets its end through the overcoming power of God in the resurrection of our bodies to eternal fellowship and life.

#### **NOTE**

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