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The Mystery of God and Suffering

Kenneth R. Overberg S.J.
overberg@xavier.edu

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A sound and refreshing look into the ancient question of suffering that satisfies contemporary hearts and minds that long for the compassionate God revealed by Jesus.

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The Mystery of God and Suffering

Suffering surrounds us, from broken families to earthquakes, from poverty to torture, from cancer to starvation. Such personal and global anguish often leads people to ask about God: “Who is God?” “How can a good and gracious God allow this to happen?” “Where is God in all this suffering?” “Is there a God?” Those directly involved in suffering often ask: “Why did this happen to me?” and sometimes even “What did I do wrong to be punished in this way?”

Humans have long searched for satisfying insights into these and similar questions. The whole Book of Job in the Bible is dedicated to this topic. Christians have focused, in particular, on the suffering and death of Jesus in the hope of discovering meaning for suffering. Some of these biblical perspectives, however, fail to satisfy contemporary hearts and minds that long for the God of compassion revealed by Jesus.

In order to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of God and suffering and to develop an understanding closer to the vision of Jesus, we first consider the life and death of Jesus, including some of the prominent interpretations of his suffering and death. We will then return to Scripture and the tradition for another perspective on Jesus’ life and death. We will discover what this view means for our image of God and how it grounds a threefold response to suffering of lament, action, and trust.

Jesus’ Life and Teachings

From the Gospels, we learn three important points about Jesus and suffering:

1) Jesus resisted suffering and its personal and social causes and is frequently

described healing the sick; 2) Jesus rejected the conviction that suffering is the punishment for sin; 3) Jesus expressed a profound trust in a loving, compassionate, and present God.

First, Mark's Gospel (1:40-42) describes an encounter between Jesus and a leper. With a simple but profound touch, Jesus heals the leper, breaks down barriers, challenges purity laws that alienate, and embodies his convictions about the inclusive meaning of the reign of God.¹ This event reveals not only Jesus' care for an individual in need but also his concern about structures of society that oppress people.

Second, deeply embedded in some streams of Hebrew thought is the conviction (called the Law of Retribution) that good deeds lead to blessing and evil deeds to suffering. If a person were experiencing sickness or other trials, then that person must have sinned in the past.² The Hebrew people in exile in Babylon, for example, interpreted this political-social event as God's punishment for their failure to follow the covenant faithfully. This conviction appears in many religions and cultures. Jesus, however, rejected it. Matthew's Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount describes God as showering rain on evil persons as well as good ones (Matthew

¹PHEME PERKINS, "The Gospel of Mark," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Volume VIII, 544-545.

²For more details, see Daniel Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer?* (Franklin, Wis: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 15-29.

5:45). Similarly, John's Jesus heals the blind man and explicitly rejects the idea that suffering is punishment for sin (John 9:1-41, especially 2-5).

Third, implicitly and explicitly the gospels reveal Jesus' intimate, loving relationship with God. Jesus' surprising use of *Abba* to describe God conveys a sense of simplicity, familiarity, fidelity and trust.³ The parables also give us a glimpse of Jesus' sense of God. The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) tells us a lot about the father who forgives the son without any bitterness, celebrates his return, and consoles the angry older brother. *Abba* is a loving, forgiving, gentle parent. Even as he faced suffering and death, Jesus remained faithful to his call, always trusting God. In the resurrection, God confirms Jesus' faithfulness.

Interpreting a Terrible Death

The life and teaching of Jesus highlighted the healing presence of a God of love and life. In the end, however, Jesus suffered a horrible execution. Death, first Jesus' and later others', led the early Christian communities to search for meaning. In light of their experience of the risen Jesus, they looked to their culture and their Hebrew Scriptures for possible interpretations. They included these insights in their preaching and eventually in the Christian Scriptures.

³John H. Elliott, "Patronage and Clientism in Early Christian Society," *Forum*, vol 3, no 4 (December 1987), 39-48. Arthur J. Dewey, "The Truth That Is in Jesus," *The Fourth R*, vol 16, no 4 (July-August 2003), 7-11. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 256-271.

From culture they knew about ransom. From their Jewish rituals they also understood sacrifice and atonement. From their Wisdom literature they were familiar with the theme of the vindication of the Innocent Sufferer (see Wisdom 2:17-20 and 5:5, 15-16; also 2 Maccabees 7, and Daniel 6). From the prophet Isaiah (chapters 42, 49, 50, 52-53) Jesus' followers creatively used the songs of the Suffering Servant to interpret Jesus' suffering and death. The Messiah, of course, was not expected to be a suffering messiah. The facts of crucifixion and death jarred Jesus' followers into searching the Hebrew Scriptures for insight for proclaiming and interpreting his death (see the letter to the Hebrews, for example).⁴

Scholars tell us that what the Bible means by terms such as sacrifice and atonement may be quite different from the understandings that many of us have. For example, for Hebrew people, the blood of the sacrificed animal symbolized the life of the person or community. Pouring the blood on the altar was a symbolic gesture reuniting life with God. The sacrifices were an expression of the people's desire for reconciliation and union with God.⁵

It must be noted, however, that even while emphasizing these more positive meanings of sacrifice, most of the scholars pass over in silence the fact that the ritual

⁴Arthur J. Dewey, "Can We Let Jesus Die?" in *The Once & Future Faith*, Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, (Santa Rosa, Polebridge, 2001), 135-159.

⁵Anthony J. Tambasco, *A Theology of Atonement and Paul's Vision of Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 65-71.

still includes violence and the death of the victim, dimensions that are foreign to Jesus' vision of the reign of God.

Throughout the centuries Christians have reflected on and developed these different interpretations, leading to a variety of theologies and popular pieties, some of them quite distant from the Scriptures and even farther from the vision of Jesus.

In the fourth century, St. Augustine spoke of satisfaction for sin in legal terms of debts and justice. A key development took place in the eleventh century when the theologian St. Anselm used St. Augustine's ideas to describe atonement for sin.

Anselm, reflecting the medieval culture of his day, understood sin to be something like a peasant insulting a king. Reconciliation would require satisfaction for this insult to the king's honor. Sin, however, is an infinite offense against God that demands adequate atonement. While humanity was obliged to atone, no human could pay this infinite debt. Only God could do so adequately.⁶

According to this eleventh-century view, that is exactly what Jesus, the God-Man, accomplished by his suffering and death. It was actually later theologians and preachers who added to Anselm's position by emphasizing blood and pain as the satisfaction that placated God's anger. Most Christians still grow up with such an understanding, although some are uneasy with this view, even if they do not know why.

⁶Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995), 61-79. See also: Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Atonement Paradigm," *Theological Studies*, 68 (2007), 418-432.

This image of God—angry, demanding, even bloodthirsty—often appears in sermons, songs, and popular pieties today, although the focus is usually placed on Jesus’ willingness to bear the suffering. Initially, this willingness to suffer for us may seem profoundly moving and consoling. But we must ask several questions of this interpretation. What does this say about God the Father? What kind of God could demand such torture of the beloved Son? Is this the God revealed by Jesus in his words and deeds?

Jesus Is Not Plan B

There is an alternative interpretation of the life and death of Jesus, also expressed in the Scriptures and throughout the tradition. This view, perhaps only on the margins of many people’s religious understanding and devotion, is completely orthodox. Indeed, it offers perspectives much closer to Jesus’ own experience and vision.

This alternative interpretation holds that the whole purpose of creation is for the incarnation, God’s sharing of life and love in a unique and definitive way. God becoming human is not an afterthought, an event to make up for original sin and human sinfulness. Incarnation is God’s first thought, the original design for all creation. The purpose of Jesus’ life is the fulfillment of the whole creative process, of God’s eternal longing to become human. Theologians call this the primacy of the incarnation.

For many of us who have lived a lifetime with the atonement view, it may be hard at first to hear this alternative, incarnational view. Yet it may offer some wonderful surprises for our relationship with God. God is not an angry or vindictive

God, demanding the suffering and death of Jesus as payment for past sin. God is, instead, a gracious God, sharing divine life and love in creation and in the incarnation. Such a view can dramatically change our image of God, our approach to suffering, our day-to-day prayer. This approach is rooted solidly in John's Gospel (see 1:1-18 and 13:1-17:26) and in the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians.

Throughout the centuries great Christian theologians have contributed to this positive perspective on God and Jesus. From the Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century (St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazianzus) to Franciscan John Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century to Jesuits Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner in the twentieth century, God's gracious love and the primacy of the incarnation have been proclaimed.⁷ So, for example, Rahner states that "we can understand creation and incarnation as two moments and two phases of the *one* process of God's self-giving and self-expression, although it is an intrinsically differentiated process. Such an understanding can appeal to a very old 'Christocentric' tradition in the history of Christian theology in which the creative Word of God which establishes the world establishes this world to begin with as the

⁷For more on the Cappadocians, see Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 53-79 and 270-278; on John Duns Scotus, see B.M. Bonaseo OFM, *Man and His Approach to God in John Duns Scotus* (Lanham, Md: UP of America, 1983), 44-50; on Teilhard de Chardin, see Christopher Mooney SJ, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 133-145; on Karl Rahner, see William Dych, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 65-81.

materiality which is to become his own, or to become the environment of his own materiality.”⁸

In the late twentieth century, theologian Catherine LaCugna pulled together many of these themes in her book *God for Us*. She uses and expands the Cappadocians’ wonderful image of the Trinity as divine dance to include all persons. Borrowing themes of intimacy and communion from John’s Gospel and Ephesians, she affirms that humanity has been made a partner in the divine dance, not through humanity’s own merit but through God’s election from all eternity. She writes: “The God who does not need nor care for the creature, or who is immune to our suffering, does not exist. ... The God who keeps a ledger of our sins and failings, the divine policeman, does not exist. These are all false gods. ... What we believe about God must match what is revealed of God in Scripture: God watches over the widow and the poor, God makes the rains fall on just and unjust alike, God welcomes the stranger and embraces the enemy.”⁹

Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx OP has also questioned the traditional interpretation of Jesus’ death. In Part Four of his book *Christ*, Schillebeeckx strongly affirms and holds together God’s goodness with suffering, both in Jesus’ life and in all humans’ experience. Schillebeeckx does not try to explain away the reality of suffering and evil in human history, but sees them as rooted in finitude and freedom. Still he stresses that God’s mercy is greater, as seen in Jesus’ ministry and teaching.

⁸Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 197.

⁹LaCugna, *God for Us*, 397.

God does not want people to suffer but wills to overcome suffering wherever it occurs.

Such a God could not require the death of Jesus. Schillebeeckx states:

“*Negativity* cannot have a cause or a motive in God. But in that case we cannot look for a divine *reason* for the death of Jesus either. Therefore, first of all, we have to say that we are not redeemed *thanks* to the death of Jesus but *despite* it.”¹⁰ Schillebeeckx adds, “Nor will the Christian blasphemously claim that God himself required the death of Jesus as compensation for what *we* make of our history.”¹¹

Contemporary insights from Scripture scholars and from liberation theologians also affirm aspects of the alternative interpretation of Jesus’ life and death. In his commentary on the crucifixion in Luke’s gospel, Arthur Dewey emphasizes trust as the key to understanding this passage. Neither atonement nor sacrifice is even mentioned by Dewey. Rather, he notes that the early Jesus followers borrowed from Judaism the tradition of the suffering righteous one to make sense of Jesus’ horrible death. “The innocent one was tried, mocked, and executed by evil men who wanted to find out whether the righteous one was truly a child of God. The vindication of the righteous one takes place, however, in God’s space and time. Only

¹⁰Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 729.

¹¹Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 728.

from the point of view of faith can one perceive the true outcome.”¹² Jesus’ own trust in God is confirmed in the resurrection, the foundation of the followers’ trust (faith). Dewey states that throughout the passage Luke points to the reign of God, “where trust alone has the final word.”¹³

Writing in the general context of poverty and oppression in El Salvador and in the specific context of the 2001 earthquake, Jesuit John Sobrino addresses the ancient question of God and suffering (theodicy). He notes that some people (he calls them extremists) claimed that the earthquake was God’s punishment for sin. He adds that an archbishop in Guatemala made a similar judgment after the earthquake there in 1976. Sobrino responds, however, calling this type of message “an insult to God” that is also “unjustly harmful to human beings” because it intensifies their spiritual anguish.¹⁴

Another reaction to the earthquake was simply submission, “God’s will be done.” Sobrino sees this response as understandable in El Salvador’s traditional

¹²Arthur Dewey, *The Word in Time* (revised edition) (New Berlin, Wis: Liturgical Publications, 1990), 216.

¹³Dewey, *Word*, 217.

¹⁴Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 138.

religious culture, but finally not satisfying, especially in the even more difficult times of civil war. Then the question was a profound “What’s wrong with God?”¹⁵

Sobrino offers his own response, one that recognizes the mystery of God and suffering. “Our only choice, I believe, is to live with a theodicy unresolved in theory, and with a practice that goes on opening a pathway—with God walking it besides us—through the history of suffering.”¹⁶ Later he describes the theological foundation for this view while pondering the crucified God and the meaning of redemption: “It is the love of Jesus (and of God) that saves, not bloodshed. The love of Jesus saves human beings, especially victims; love that stays through to the end, even if it leads to a cross. That is what we call redemption. I think everyone can understand that, with no need for a sacrificial interpretation.”¹⁷

What, then, can be said about Jesus’ terrible death? Surely Jesus had to die, because he was human. However, he died by crucifixion because of human decree (the domination empire of his day) not by divine decree.

The emphasis on Jesus as God’s first thought can free us from violent images of God and allows us to focus on God’s overflowing love. This love is the very life of the Trinity and spills over into creation, incarnation, and the promise of fulfillment of all creation. What a difference this makes for our relationship with God! Life and love, not suffering and death, become the core of our spirituality and morality.

¹⁵Sobrino, *God?* 139-140.

¹⁶Sobrino, *God?* 142.

¹⁷Sobrino, *God?* 148.

Into the Abyss

But what about the “dark abyss” (Psalm 88) of suffering? The incarnational approach with its emphasis on God’s overflowing love leads us beyond our usual question of “Why?” and suggests three elements of a response to suffering: 1) acknowledge the suffering and then lament, 2) act, 3) trust in God.

We respond to suffering simply by being truthful, avoiding denial, and admitting the pain and horror of the suffering, whatever the cause. We must never glorify suffering. Yes, it can lead us to deeper maturity and wisdom, but suffering can also crush the human spirit. The first step to grief and healing, then, is to move from overwhelmed silence to speech, the bold speech of lament. The Psalms show us how to speak out against suffering and oppression, even against God. But such crying out allows us both to grieve and to grow into a mature covenant partner with God. A paraphrase of Psalm 56 expresses well this relationship: “Be gracious to us, O God. Enter our lament in your book. Store every tear in your flask.”

Awareness of suffering and relationship with God allow and inspire our action. We acknowledge that at times our choices have caused personal and social suffering, so one form of action is moving toward repentance and a change of heart. We also suffer from sickness and many other personal challenges. In this suffering we need to reach out to others, to ask for help, to receive what they offer, to allow them to accompany us in the dark abyss.

Following the life and ministry of Jesus, we also work as individuals and as communities to overcome and end suffering. We know that some suffering results from persons’ evil choices (war, injustice, oppression). We know that other suffering

simply happens in a world that is not yet fulfilled (earthquakes, debilitating diseases). Our deeds include remaining with others in their suffering, along with action concerning political and economic issues. We cannot do everything, but we can and must do at least one thing, whatever God asks of us.¹⁸

The third element in our response to suffering, trust in God, is of course especially challenging in the dark times of suffering. Jesus, as we have seen, is a marvelous example of trust in God. His deep, trusting relationship with *Abba* grounded his life and teaching and sustained him in his suffering. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31). We follow Jesus’ words and life by entrusting our lives to our God who has been called a Loving Abyss.¹⁹

Our God suffers with us, to use human terms. In the depths of suffering we too may cry out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) In the darkness, we may need to express our lament, even defiance, but

¹⁸For a profound reflection on this insight, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 304-308.

¹⁹Karl Rahner SJ speaks of God as Holy Mystery, the Incomprehensible One, a Loving Abyss. See, for example, “Why Am I a Christian Today?” in *The Practice of Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 8; also “Thoughts on the Possibility of Belief Today” in *Theological Investigations*, vol V (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 8-9.

finally our trust that the gracious, gentle God holds our suffering bodies and spirits. How could it be otherwise for the God of life, the covenanted partner, the tender and gracious parent, the infinite abyss of love?

God does not desire suffering but works to overcome it. God did not demand Jesus' suffering and does not want ours. In the context of trusting this gentle God, we lament and act to overcome suffering, even as we acknowledge its incomprehensibility and marvel at God's remarkable respect of human freedom. Suffering remains a mystery, not a problem to be solved. We move past "Why?" to ask instead: "How can I respond? What can we do now?" A profound trust in a compassionate God allows us to ask these questions and then to act, with surprising peace and hope.

We can trust because there is even more: our God is a God of resurrection, of new life. Jesus' story did not end with suffering and death, but with new and transformed life. Trust in God is not some pie-in-the-sky piety, but a profound conviction rooted in the experience of the risen Jesus. Christians are an Easter people, trusting that good overcomes evil, that life overcomes death. Christians trust that God leads us as individuals and as community in resisting evil and brings us all to the fullness of life..

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