



What is God's Answer to Human Suffering?

The answer must be someone, not just something. For the problem (suffering) is about someone (God—why does he... why doesn't he ...?) rather than just something. To question God's goodness is not just an intellectual experiment. It is rebellion or tears. It is a little child with tears in its eyes looking up at Daddy and weeping, "Why?" This is not merely the philosophers' "why?" Not only does it add the emotion of tears but also it is asked in the context of relationship. It is a question put to the Father, not a question asked in a vacuum.

The hurt child needs not so much explanations as reassurances. And that is what we get: the reassurance of the Father in the person of Jesus, "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9).

The answer is not just a word but the Word; not an idea but a person. Clues are abstract, persons are concrete. Clues are signs; they signify something beyond themselves, something real. Our solution cannot be a mere idea, however true, profound, or useful, because that would be only another sign, another finger, another clue—like fingers pointing to other fingers, like having faith in faith, or hope in hope, or being in love with love. A hall of mirrors.

Besides being here, he is now. Besides being concretely real in our world, he, our answer, is also in our story, our history. Our story is also his-story. The answer is not a timeless truth but a once-for-all catastrophic event, as real as the stories in today's newspapers.

It is, of course, the most familiar, the most often-told story in the world. Yet it is also the strangest, and it has never lost its strangeness, its awe, and will not even in eternity, where angels tremble to gaze at things we yawn at. And however strange, it is the only key that fits the lock of our tortured lives and needs. We needed a surgeon, and he came and reached into our wounds with bloody hands. He didn't give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself.

He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness. Not happiness. "Better unhappy with her than happy without her"—that is the word of a lover. He came. That is the salient fact, the towering truth, that alone keeps us from putting a bullet through our heads. He came. Job is satisfied even though the God who came gave him absolutely no answers at all to his thousand tortured questions. He did the most important thing and he gave the most important gift: himself. It is a lover's gift. Out of our tears, our waiting, our darkness, our agonized aloneness, out of our weeping and wondering, out of our cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" he came, all the way, right into that cry.

In coming into our world he came also into our suffering. He sits beside us in the stalled car in the snowbank. Sometimes he starts the car for us, but even when he doesn't, he is there. That is the only thing that matters. Who cares about cars and success and miracles and long life when you have God sitting beside you? He sits beside us in the lowest places of our lives, like water. Are we broken? He is broken with us. Are we rejected? Do people despise us not for our evil but for our good, or attempted good? He was "despised and rejected of men." Do we weep? Is grief our familiar spirit, our horrifyingly familiar ghost? Do we ever say, "Oh, no, not again! I can't take any more!"? He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Do people misunderstand us, turn away from us? They hid their faces from him as from an outcast, a leper. Is our love betrayed? Are our tenderest relationships broken? He too loved and was betrayed by the ones he loved. "He came unto his own and his own received him not." Does it seem sometimes as if life

has passed us by or cast us out, as if we are sinking into uselessness and oblivion? He sinks with us. He too is passed over by the world. His way of suffering love is rejected, his own followers often the most guilty of all; they have made his name a scandal, especially among his own chosen people. What Jew finds the road to him free from the broken weapons of bloody prejudice? We have made it nearly impossible for his own people to love him, to see him as he is, free from the smoke of battle and holocaust.

How does he look upon us now? With continual sorrow, but never with scorn. We add to his wounds. There are nineteen hundred nails in his cross. We, his beloved and longed for and passionately desired, are constantly cold and correct and distant to him. And still he keeps brooding over the world like a hen over an egg, like a mother who has had all of her beloved children turn against her. "Could a mother desert her young? Even so I could not desert you." He sits beside us not only in our sufferings but even in our sins. He does not turn his face from us, however much we turn our face from him. He endures our spiritual scabs and scars, our sneers and screams, our hatreds and haughtiness, just to be with us. Witness—that is the word of love.

Does he descend into all our hells? Yes. In the unforgettable line of Corrie ten Boom from the depths of a Nazi death camp, "No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still." Does he descend into violence? Yes, by suffering it and leaving us the solution that to this day only a few brave souls have dared to try, the most notable in this century not even a Christian but a Hindu. Does he descend into insanity? Yes, into that darkness too. Even into the insanity of suicide? Can he be there too? Yes he can. "Even the darkness is not dark to him." He finds or makes light even there, in the darkness of the mind—perhaps not until the next world, until death's release.

For the darkest door of all has been shoved open and light from beyond it has streamed into our world to light our way, since he has changed the meaning of death. It is not merely that he rose from the dead, but that he changed the meaning of death, and therefore also of all the little deaths, all the sufferings that anticipate death and make up parts of it. Death, like a cancer, seeps back into life. We lose little bits of life daily—our health, our strength, our youth, our hopes, our dreams, our friends, our children, our lives—all these dribble away like water through our desperate, shaking fingers. Nothing we can do, not our best efforts, holds our lives together. The only lives that don't spring leaks are the ones that are already all watery. The only hearts that do not break are the ones that are busily constructing little hells of loveless control, cocoons of safe, respectable selfishness to insulate themselves from the tidal wave of tears that comes sooner or later.

But he came into life and death, and he still comes. He is still here. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). He is here. He is in us and we are in him; we are his body. He is gassed in the ovens of Auschwitz. He is sneered at in Soweto. He is cut limb from limb in a thousand safe and legal death camps for the unborn strewn throughout our world, where he is too tiny for us to see or care about. He is the most forgotten soul in the world. He is the one we love to hate. He practices what he preaches: he turns his other cheek to our slaps. That is what love is, what love does, and what love receives.

Love is why he came. It's all love. The buzzing flies around the cross, the stroke of the Roman hammer as the nails tear into his screamingly soft flesh, the infinitely harder stroke of his own people's hammering hatred, hammering at his heart—why? For love. God is love, as the sun is fire and light, and he can no more stop loving than the sun can stop shining.

Henceforth, when we feel the hammers of life beating on our heads or on our hearts, we can know—we must know—that he is here with us, taking our blows. Every tear we shed becomes his tear. He may not yet wipe them away, but he makes them his. Would we rather have our own dry eyes, or his tear-filled ones? He came. He is here. That is the salient fact. If he does not heal all our broken bones and loves and lives now, he comes into them and is broken, like bread, and we are nourished. And he shows us that we can henceforth use our very brokenness as nourishment for those we love. Since we are his body, we too are the bread that is broken for others. Our very failures help heal other lives; our very tears help wipe away tears; our being hated helps those we love. When those we love hang up on us, he keeps the lines open. His witness with us enables us to be with those who refuse to be with us.

Perhaps he is even in the sufferings of animals, if, as Scripture seems to say, we are somehow responsible for them and they suffer with us. He not only sees but suffers the fall of each sparrow.

All our sufferings are transformable into his work, our passion into his action. That is why he instituted prayer, says Pascal: to bestow on creatures the dignity of causality. We are really his body; the Church is Christ as my body is me. That is why Paul says his sufferings are making up in his own body what Christ has yet to endure in his body (Col 1:24).

Thus God's answer to the problem of suffering not only really happened 2,000 years ago, but it is still happening in our own lives. The solution to our suffering is our suffering! All our suffering can become part of his work, the greatest work ever done, the work of salvation, of helping to win for those we love eternal joy.

How? This can be done on one condition: that we believe. For faith is not just a mental choice within us; it is a transaction with him. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone... opens the door, I will come in and eat with him" (Rev 3:20). To believe, according to John's Gospel, is to receive (Jn 1:12), to receive what God has already done. His part is finished ("It is finished," he said on the cross). Our part is to receive that work and let it work itself out in and through our lives, including our tears. We offer it up to him, and he really takes it and uses it in ways so powerful that we would be flattened with wonder if we knew them now.

You see, the Christian views suffering, as he views everything, in a totally different way, a totally different context, than the unbeliever. He sees it and everything else as a between, as existing between God and himself, as a gift from God, an invitation from God, a challenge from God, something between God and himself. Everything is relativized. I do not relate to an object and keep God in the background somewhere; God is the object that I relate to. Everything is between us and God. Nature is no longer just nature, but creation, God's creation. Having children is procreation. My very I is his image, not my own but on loan.

What then is suffering to the Christian? It is Christ's invitation to us to follow him. Christ goes to the cross, and we are invited to follow to the same cross. Not because it is the cross, but because it is his. Suffering is blessed not because it is suffering but because it is his. Suffering is not the context that explains the cross; the cross is the context that explains suffering. The cross gives this new meaning to suffering; it is now not only between God and me but also between Father and Son. The first between is taken up into the Trinitarian exchanges of the second. Christ allows us to participate in his cross because that is his means of allowing us to participate in the exchanges of the Trinity, to share in the very inner life of God.

Freud says our two absolute needs are love and work. Both are now fulfilled by our greatest fear, suffering. Work, because our suffering now becomes *opus dei*, God's work, construction work on his kingdom. Love, because our suffering now becomes the work of love, the work of redemption, saving those we love.

True love, unlike popular sentimental substitutes, is willing to suffer. Love is not "luv." Love is the cross. Our problem at first, the sheer problem of suffering, was a cross without a Christ. We must never fall into the opposite and equal trap of a Christ without a cross. Look at a crucifix. St. Bernard of Clairvaux says that whenever he does, Christ's five wounds appear to him as lips, speaking the words, "I love you."

In summary, Jesus did three things to solve the problem of suffering. First, he came. He suffered with us. He wept. Second, in becoming man he transformed the meaning of our suffering: it is now part of his work of redemption. Our death pangs become birth pangs for heaven, not only for ourselves but also for those we love. Third, he died and rose. Dying, he paid the price for sin and opened heaven to us; rising, he transformed death from a hole into a door, from an end into a beginning.

That third thing, now—resurrection. It makes more than all the difference in the world. Many condolences begin by saying something like this: "I know nothing can bring back your dear one again, but. . ." No matter what words follow, no matter what comforting psychology follows that "but," Christianity says something to the bereaved that makes all the rest trivial, something the bereaved longs infinitely more to hear: God can and will bring back your dear one again to life. There is resurrection.

What difference does it make? Simply the difference between infinite and eternal joy and infinite and eternal joylessness. Resurrection was so important to Christ's disciples that when Paul preached the good news in Athens, the inhabitants thought he was preaching two new gods, Jesus and resurrection (*anastasis*) (Acts 17). The same Paul said, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:14, 19).

Because of resurrection, when all our tears are over, we will, incredibly, look back at them and laugh, not in derision but in joy. We do a little of that even now, you know. After a great worry is lifted, a great problem solved, a great sickness healed, a great pain relieved, it all looks very different as past, to the eyes of retrospection, than it looked as future, as prospect, or as present, as experience. Remember St. Teresa's bold saying that from heaven the most miserable earthly life will look like one bad night in an inconvenient hotel!

If you find that hard to believe, too good to be true, know that even the atheist Ivan Karamazov understands that hope. He says,

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.

Why then does Ivan remain an atheist? Because though he believes, he does not accept. He is not a doubter; he is a rebel. Like his own character the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan is angry at God for not being kinder. That is the deepest source of unbelief: not the intellect but the will.

The story I have retold in this chapter is the oldest and best known of stories. For it is the primal love story, the story we most love to tell. Tolkien says, "There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true." It is suggested in the fairy tales, and it is why we find the fairy tales so strangely compelling. Kierkegaard retells it beautifully and profoundly in chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments*, in the story of the king who loved and wooed the humble peasant maiden. It is told symbolically in the greatest of love poems, the Song of Songs, favorite book of the mystics. And the very loveliness of it is an argument for its truth. Indeed, how could this crazy idea, this crazy desire, ever have entered into the mind and heart of man? How could a creature without a digestive system learn to desire food? How could a creature without manhood desire a woman? How could a creature without a mind desire knowledge? And how could a creature with no capacity for God desire God?

Let's step back a bit. We began with the mystery, not just of suffering but of suffering in a world supposedly created by a loving God. How to get God off the hook? God's answer is Jesus. Jesus is not God off the hook but God on the hook. That's why the doctrine of the divinity of Christ is crucial: If that is not God there on the cross but only a good man, then God is not on the hook, on the cross, in our suffering. And if God is not on the hook, then God is not off the hook. How could he sit there in heaven and ignore our tears?

There is, as we saw, one good reason for not believing in God: evil. And God himself has answered this objection not in words but in deeds and in tears. Jesus is the tears of God.