

More Than Suffering

More Than Suffering

Chuck Russell

More Than Suffering

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Preface | 4 |
| A Personal Note..... | 4 |
| This Child of Ours..... | 6 |
| Woodcutter’s Wisdom – an old fable..... | 7 |
| In the Presence of Mystery | 8 |
| The mystery of brokenness | 8 |
| The mystery of “good” | 9 |
| The mystery of God’s self-restraint..... | 11 |
| The mystery of humanness | 12 |
| The Pathos of Yahweh | 13 |
| The Plan of Yahweh | 13 |
| The Choice of Yahweh, Self-limiting and Self-giving | 13 |
| The Suffering of Yahweh..... | 14 |
| The Reflection of Yahweh | 16 |
| The Son of Yahweh | 16 |
| The Suffering of the Son of Yahweh | 16 |
| Completeness in Suffering..... | 18 |
| Suffering and the goodness of Christ | 18 |
| The Marks of Jesus..... | 19 |
| Suffering and Holiness | 20 |
| Suffering in Faith and Maturity..... | 20 |
| Suffering in Community..... | 21 |
| Suffering to Serve the Public | 22 |
| Suffering to Comfort others | 22 |
| Suffering to Help Us See More Holistically | 23 |
| Suffering to Grab our Attention | 23 |
| Suffering as a Gift | 24 |
| Suffering as a Strength | 24 |
| Suffering Persecution for Righteousness..... | 25 |
| Suffering to Increase Faith..... | 25 |
| The Strange Work of Yahweh | 27 |
| Yahweh’s self-description..... | 27 |
| Love’s counterpart..... | 28 |

More Than Suffering

| | |
|---|----|
| Love that leads to anger leads to violence | 28 |
| Reframing Yahweh's violence: A case study, the conquest of Canaan | 30 |
| The literary framework of our Biblical narrative | 30 |
| Recapitulation of Creation | 30 |
| The Promise connecting Creation to Recapitulation..... | 31 |
| Yahweh's abandonment of Israel | 32 |
| Use of "totally destroyed" (Heb. Herem) | 33 |
| The excess of Yahweh's human agents | 33 |
| Violence as mercy and the deaths of innocents..... | 34 |
| Context of God's violence | 34 |
| God's violence is always in response to human violence. | 34 |
| Using violence to prevent more violence..... | 35 |
| Intergenerational violence | 35 |
| Other instances of mass killings..... | 36 |
| A few cultural notes..... | 36 |
| Lament: Holding grief and hope during suffering..... | 36 |
| Bible is filled with Lament | 36 |
| Redeemed, not abandoned..... | 38 |
| Lament is not despair, but a cry directed to God..... | 38 |
| Suffering from sin requires lament..... | 40 |
| End Note | 41 |

More Than Suffering

Preface

Love is an act of the will. The desire was to create image-bearing beings who could mutually share the joy and peace. The relationship would have spiritual and emotional components. To create beings with whom he could give love to and receive love from, required God to create those beings with the freedom to accept or reject love. The rebellion against God meant that there would be negative and well as positive emotions - there would now be suffering. But God did not walk away from those beings or the suffering and pain. Instead, He entered into that suffering.

As God enters into suffering with us, He is able to redeem our suffering but using it to create good. And also, because God loves us and suffers with us, He is angered by the sin and injustice that brings us suffering. God sometimes addresses that suffering with violence. Anger and violence are not part of God's character but are a response to sin. If there were no sin, there would be no violence.

We often misinterpret the instances of violence in the Old Testament to the point where we sometimes think that the Yahweh of the Old Testament cannot be the same as the Jesus in the New Testament. But as we closely examine the Old Testament, we discover that the God of mercy and justice shines more brightly in the midst of the violence.

But even as we understand this perspective, as we consider the violence in the Bible and in the world around us, we still have questions. We still suffer and observe the suffering of others, including loved ones. With God, then we can lament and grieve about the suffering, the sin and the violence. There is still mystery, so much we don't understand, but God suffers and laments with us. And in that, we can have comfort.

A Personal Note

Fertility treatments are often accompanied by painful waiting. And that painful waiting is sometimes intensified by moments of hope interrupted by the pain of miscarriage.

In remembrance of **Dale Ambrose**, **Cara Nicole**, and **Dierdre Joanne**; lost to the world before we knew you, before we had a chance for the first hug, the first kiss, the first giggle, the first steps, the first "I love you," the first shared joy. The sadness only parents can feel at the loss of a child is ours. We have no pictures to remember you be – except for some fuzzy ultrasounds. Therefore, to remember you, we dedicate to you verses from the beloved Scripture. Your names are chosen from these verses so that they may serve as a memoriam. Whenever we read or hear these verses they shall remind us of you, and not only so, but also the hope we all have in our beloved Lord. God. And we, on earth, await the final day when we shall see Jesus and you. Every day that passes is a day closer to His return – and a day closer to our reunion.

Dale Ambrose – Your name means *Valley Divine*

We lost you, Dale around my birthday, just before our Christmas celebration. Around this time of year, we always hear the words used in Handel's music, "The Messiah." That message brings us hope, and we shall remember that hope more dearly now.

Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for; that she has received from the Lord's hand, double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the desert

More Than Suffering

*prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. **Every valley shall be raised up**, every mountain and hill made low the rough ground shall become level and the rugged places a plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind together shall see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

Isaiah 40:1-5

*His **divine power has given us everything** we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may **participate in the divine nature** and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 2*

Peter 1:3-4

Cara Nicole – Your name is derived from the Hebrew words *Yaqaar Nachal*, Precious Heritage.

*Since you are **precious and honored** in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you and people in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. **Isaiah 43:4-7***

*See it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flames and makes a weapon fit for its work. And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc; no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the **heritage** of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from me," declares the Lord. **Isaiah 54:16,17***

Diedre Joanne – Sadness of Joanne. We lost you, too. Could we even try to have another child? The pain was numbing us at this point, but we did not know if we could go through this anguish yet another time.

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God. When can I go out and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is you God?" These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go out with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul? **Why so distressed within me?** Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him my Saviour and my God. My soul is downcast within me: therefore I will remember you from the land of Jordan, the heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep in the roar of you waterfalls; all you waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? **Why must I go about mourning**, oppressed by the enemy?" My bones taunt me saying to me all day long, "Where is you God?" Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so distressed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God. **Psalms 42:1-11***

More Than Suffering

Even after the pain of three miscarriages, there is still hope.

This Child of Ours

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>This child of ours we give to you This little one we surrender This tiny child we offer you This helpless one so tender This helpless one so tender</p> <p>For ours is not to give and take But merely hold awhile It's from your hand that we bring forth Then return into your hands Then return into your hands</p> <p>What we conceive we dearly love With bitter tears we grieve and lose But we remember you also grieved When from your Son you turned away When from your Son you turned away</p> | <p>And it was yours to give and take But you let go awhile And from your Son you turned away Then returned him to your hands Then returned him to your hands</p> <p>And we await the final day When we shall finally see The ones we lost beside you And we shall cease our sorrowing And we shall cease our sorrowing</p> <p>It's only for a little while That we must bear our pain The hands that brought us all forth Shall restore us then in peace Shall restore us then in peace</p> |
|--|---|

More Than Suffering

Woodcutter's Wisdom – an old fable

In a tiny village there was an old man who was poor but envied by all, even the king, because the old man had a beautiful and majestic white horse. Many people offered to buy the horse, but he always refused, claiming that the horse was friend, and he could not sell a friend.

One day the horse disappeared from the stable and everyone called him a fool. They said, that if he had sold the horse, he could be rich. Additionally, because many people knew about the horse, someone was likely to steal it. But now without the horse, he was now poor, They said he was cursed with misfortune. The old man responded, “Don’t judge too quickly. We can only say that the horse is not in the stable. We cannot know if this a curse or a blessing. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?”

As it turned out, the horse had not been stolen. Fifteen days later, the horse returned, along with a dozen wild horses with him. With a little bit of work, the animals could be broken and trained and sold for much money. The village people recanted and apologized saying that the woodcutter was right, what they thought was a curse was actually a blessing. The man responded, “Don’t judge too quickly. We can only say that the horse is back and a dozen horses returned with him. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?”

The old man had only one child, a son, who broke his legs while he was breaking in those wild horses. The villagers then said that the dozen horses were not a blessing, but a curse, because now that the old man had no one to help him and he was poorer than ever. The old man spoke again, “Don’t judge too quickly. We can only say that my son broke his legs. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?”

A few weeks later the country engaged in war against a powerful enemy and all the young men were sent to battles in which few were likely to return. Only the woodcutter’s son was not sent because he was injured. Once again the villagers claimed that the woodcutter was blessed because he still had his son. But the old man spoke again, “Don’t judge too quickly. We can only say that your sons have gone off to war. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?”

More Than Suffering

In the Presence of Mystery

Often, as we strive to understand suffering, we seek knowledge - to know the why of suffering. But in seeking the “why,” we face a mystery. We look at each situation of suffering and ask why now, why this person, and why in this circumstance. And if sometimes we think we have an answer, we have to deal with the fact that there is always much we don’t know.

We need wisdom to understand not just the mystery of suffering but the mystery that is God. In the end, we discover that what we need most is not an answer but a person. As we contemplate the mystery of suffering, we should not rest in opinions or dogma but humbly accept that just as there are answers we may only know in part, that we can know the One who knows the answers. Even then we can only partly know the One who Himself will always partly be a Mystery.

The mystery deepens even more when we realize that the essence of the One who is Mystery resides in all the creatures who bear His image. And even more, His imprint can be reflected in not only all the other creatures but also in all the things He has created.¹

There will always be a limit to how much knowledge that we can gain about God. Whatever knowledge we have, we need to seek wisdom in an attitude of awe, to see the transcendence of God in His creation. We need to see imprint of God on creation and in his creatures. We need to learn to know God Himself more than we need to seek knowledge about God.²

. “Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who practices kindness, justice, and righteousness on the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord”³.

The mystery of brokenness

There is a Japanese art form known as Kintsugi which fixes broken pottery with a lacquer of gold, silver or platinum, making the original pottery more precious than before. But we should ask the question, when was the pottery completed, before or after it was broken? Was the pottery completed then broken, or broken then completed? As it turns out, it is after we are broken that we find ways that we can find fulfillment in serving God that we could not before we were broken. In the same way, instead of thinking that we were complete before suffering entered our lives, we should realize that it was after we were broken by suffering us that we were now completed.

“You therefore must be perfect (Heb. Teleios), as your heavenly Father is perfect”⁴

The admonishment to be perfect is not our modern-day conception of flawless, but to be completed. The Japanese practice of kintsugi, which repairs broken pottery with a lacquer of gold, silver or platinum, making the original pottery more precious than before, shows how that completion may be a “broken

¹ Proverbs 3

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *In the Presence of Mystery*

³ Jeremiah. 9:22–23

⁴ Matthew 5:48

More Than Suffering

completion.” In the same way, suffering may break us, but our brokenness can become part of our completeness.⁵

It is in a similar fashion, we encounter stresses that don’t break us, per se, but they stretch or compress us. That stretching and compressing can serve to strengthen us. When we exercise, the physical stresses we place on our body strengthen our muscles and strengthen our bones. When we are stressed in the process of child rearing, we strengthen our parenting. Emotional and spiritual stresses enable us to become more mature.

We do not know what the next day brings. We do not know what bending and breaking pressure of suffering we will experience on the next day. We cannot choose the conditions for our suffering. But we can know that in the midst of suffering, we are not alone, there is the “present, abiding reality of God.” And in that presence we can release our need to be control and rest in God’s control, allowing Him to shape us through the suffering. We can submit to suffering with the hope that, in the end, there will be great gain to the glory of God and the comfort of knowing that He wants what is best for us.⁶

The mystery of “good”

None of us escape suffering. We feel it in many ways: personal, physical, emotional and spiritual. Sometimes it’s less intense and we can manage it, but sometimes it’s unmanageable. Sometimes it affects us, and we find a way to bear it, but sometimes it hurts more because it strikes our loved ones. Sometimes it just seems a part of this world, but sometimes it seems to come from a source of evil beyond our world.

Most of what we read in the Bible is not answers to questions, but rather stories that describe what happens but without much in the way of explanations. When Job asked for an explanation for his suffering, God just answered with a litany of things to show how limited Job’s knowledge and understanding were. Sometimes that’s the message we need to accept when regarding our own suffering: there are many things we do not know or understand.

But our inability to understand all suffering does not mean that there is nothing for us to understand. When we see or experience suffering or evil, we can wonder:

- Where does God fit into all of this?
- If God is all good and all powerful, why is there suffering or evil?
- What does it mean that God is good?

Much of the time in the Bible, the word for good (Hebrew “tov”) refers to people in the Bible who are good because they are “morally righteous.” But what does “tov” mean when, for instance during the days of creation, “tov” is used to describe things like light, dry land, plants, birds, fish, land creatures, stars and moon. Like many words, there is a second meaning for “tov.” In this second case, “tov” refers to things that fulfill their purpose.

From this definition we can understand what the Bible means when it says that it was “not tov” that Adam was alone. Adam could not fulfill his purpose of filling the earth without a woman. That meaning could

⁵ Makoto Fujimara, *Kintsugi Grace - Prismatic Art beyond the Rainbow*, makotofujimura.com/writings/kintsugi-grace-prismatic-art-beyond-the-rainbow

⁶ Tessa Thompson, *A Peculiar Perspective on Suffering*, December 18, 2019. www.reformation21.org/blog/a-peculiar-perspective-on-suffering

More Than Suffering

then in mind when the Bible says that it was “tov” when the birds, fish and land animals could multiply and fill the earth.

Using this definition, then what does it mean that the land is good, that is, what needs to be true about the land in order for it to have the right conditions for life to flourish? When scientists look at the special characteristics of our planet that make it suitable for life to flourish, they point out all the different ways that the earth has to have various dynamic properties.⁷

- To be shielded from harmful space radiation, the earth needs a magnetic field, but to have a magnetic field the earth's core has to be dynamically churning, and when the earth's core is churning it will create tectonic plates which slide over and under each other, which produces not only the mountains, lakes, rivers and oceans which we need for flourishing life, but also earthquakes and volcanoes.
- For life to flourish the earth must rotate as it turns around the sun creating atmospheric currents like the Coriolis effect that create dynamic weather conditions which produce a water cycle that evaporates water on the surface and then releases that water as rain and snow, and sunny days and rainy days. But those same systems will also produce more extreme conditions like floods and famines.
- For plants to survive, the soil must be fertilized. For the soil to produce nutrients, one generation of plants must die with their remains becoming reduced to its basic elements in order to fertilize the earth for the next generation of plants. This process also requires bacteria and viruses, some of are beneficial but some which can be harmful.
- For animals to flourish, there needs to be ecosystems where animals exist in a food chain that creates a self-maintaining balance of animals in those ecosystems.
- All the conditions above depend on appropriate physical laws. One example is gravity which, among many of its features, enables the earth to hold the types of gases we need in the atmosphere. But those same laws create situations where we can fall and get hurt. Particularly if we try to test the limits of our abilities.

This means that a “good” earth is not a risk-free earth. For life to flourish on earth, there needs to be dynamic processes and physical laws which although are necessary, also create hazardous and dangerous situations.

“He's not safe, but he's good.” (referring to Aslan, the Lion, in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe)⁸

Many will find that this view of creation is not comfortable, because it means that God has, from the beginning, intended for us to be exposed to all the natural hazards of the world, exposing us as well as God's other creatures to death and suffering. How is it that the suffering of innocent animals is good? It is hard for us to accept that death and suffering are good, that they a purpose from the very beginning of creation.

⁷ M. Özgür Nevres, *What Makes Life on Earth Possible? [10 Crucial Factors]* ourplnt.com/life-on-earth-possible/#google_vignette

⁸ C.S. Lewis

More Than Suffering

In the Garden of Eden, humans had access to the Tree of Life and thus potential immortality; but immortality was then not available to other creatures. So, over the “lifespan” of the earth, generations of plants and animals have come and gone. Evolutionary processes have produced species that have lived and died out to get to the point where we are right now. Many more species have existed than are living right now; on the one hand this displays God’s lavishness and fruitfulness, but on the other hand we might question why God saw it necessary to accomplish his purposes this way. But Job reminds us that our viewpoints are much more limited than God’s.⁹

This view of “good” challenges our tendency to consider goodness from a self-centered viewpoint. We may think that if something is good, then it is pleasing, welcoming, useful, advantageous, beneficial and pleasant to me. Rather, we need to consider goodness from God’s viewpoint. But we still struggle how an all-powerful and good God has created a world in which people and animals must be exposed to suffering in the form of illness, sickness and death.

One common explanation is that suffering was not introduced into the world until the rebellion in the Garden of Eden. But that explanation does not consider how the world must have been created in order for life to flourish. Healthy plants need fertile soil. Fertile soil is full of organic matter which results from, at least, other plants that have died and whose remains were processed by bacteria. And to create all those and other necessary conditions, we need a dynamic earth as described above.

The mystery of God’s self-restraint

Outside of self-contradictory statements like 1) God cannot make a square circle, or 2) He can’t make a rock so big that he cannot lift it, God is all-powerful. But having all power doesn’t limit God’s freedom, including the freedom to limit how He uses His power. For example, as an expression of God’s love, He has chosen to restrain His power regarding His creatures.

God desired to make creatures who bore His image and who could return His love, but to do that, these creatures had to have independence. They had to have the freedom to freely chose if they shall love or who shall they love. Choosing to be in a self-giving loving relationship requires accepting the risk of rejection. Being in a loving relationship requires respecting and listening to others’ ideas and opinions. It is in this regard that the Perfect Listener obliged Himself to listening and responding to His image-bearers – as imperfect as our prayers might be. While He reserves the right to rule and over-rule, He listens and responds.

God also took another risk. God gave His image-bearing creatures the responsibility to be His vice-regents, who would rule the world on God’s behalf. And again, although God can rule and overrule, God has chosen to restrain His power, at times limiting His power to the will of His vice-regents and at times accepting those options that are carried out by His vice-regents.

God did not eliminate those options despite the rebellion of His image-bearers which corrupted their ability to make choices. He did not release His image-bearers from the charge of stewardship nor turn His back on His project, but rather moved forward, still listening and responding to His image-bearers. He

⁹ Biologos, *Is animal suffering part of God’s good creation?* Biologos, biologos.org/common-questions/is-animal-suffering-part-of-gods-good-creation

More Than Suffering

entrusted His creation to the oversight of His image-bearers. Although His image-bearers were sinful, corrupted, and sometimes violent, He used them to accomplish His will.

When God is everywhere and in control and yet relies on his image-bearers to accomplish His will, He opens Himself up to the risk of being charged for being responsible for all the evil carried out by people acting in His name. And yet, that is choice He made.¹⁰

The mystery of humanness

Before the modern era, our identity was rooted in our community. The led to scenarios such as: if the king changed his religion, then the community and all the individuals in the community changed their religion. But with the advent of the modern era, personal identity has become more and more fractured. This has led to individuals not only not identifying strongly with their community, but also not identifying with their bodies with an increasingly fractured sense of self to the point where even the concept of truth is personalized where everyone is allowed their own truth.

However, if our humanness is rooted in our identity as image-bearers of God, then our humanness reflects the Trinity of God. In the Trinity, each person of the Trinity is unique but at the same time each person is interwoven with the other persons of the Trinity. While our identity as an individual reflects the personhood of each member of the Trinity, at the same time we also reflect the community of the Trinity. We are not our own. As humans, we are linked to all the other humans and at the same time linked to the God who created us all.

This means we do not live to ourselves but to the One who created us and to the community He placed us in. Our human identity includes both the uniqueness of who we are as individuals and who we are as community members. Our human identity includes both our physical nature and our spiritual nature. Regarding suffering, it means that we do not suffer alone and that we also suffer with the suffering of others.

¹⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, *To Say Something – About God, Evil, and Suffering*, Word & World, Volume XIX, Number 4, Fall 1999, p. 347

More Than Suffering

The Pathos of Yahweh

The Plan of Yahweh

Yahweh's plan was to create a universe to be his temple where he would create creatures in his image, with whom he could have a relationship and who would rule the world on his behalf. The plan was to start with two humans who would start their mission in a garden supplied by God and who would then multiply and spread over the earth, extending Yahweh's kingdom where they went.

Instead of complying with Yahweh's plan, these creatures rebelled against the authority of Yahweh. This rebellion resulted in the immediate spiritual separation of the humans from Yahweh and their banishment from the Garden and the Tree of Life. Without access to the Tree of Life, the mortal Adam and Eve would die. But just as death entered into the world by the sin of one person, Adam, God's plan was to send one person, a second Adam, from whom grace would enter into the world and free the world of death. To that end, Yahweh still allowed his image-bearers to fill the earth, to spread across the earth and form nations. It would be from out of those nations, God would select one person through which he would form a new nation through which he would send the second Adam. Through the second Adam, grace would enter into the world and overcome the consequence of death.

Israel was the nation Yahweh chose through whom he would send the second Adam. Israel would be special on account of being chosen for that purpose, but it was not chosen for who it was in and of itself. In fact, Israel would prove to be as stubborn and rebellious as any nation and would require disciplining as much as any nation.

The Choice of Yahweh, Self-limiting and Self-giving

Yahweh is all-powerful, fully self-sufficient, complete in Himself and full of love. Out of love, He chose to create a universe in which he could create humans, image-bearing creatures who could freely receive and freely reflect that love back. These humans were given the capacity to reflect Yahweh's own full and abundant capacity to love as a full person as is manifest in His emotions and in His sharing love with joy and delight.

But to fully reflect the image of Yahweh, for these humans to truly and freely love, these creatures would have to be given the ability to freely choose to not love, or to love others above Yahweh. They would have the ability to treat each other with love or not. So for the humans and for Yahweh, the capacity for emotions also include the less pleasant emotions such as jealousy, emotional pain, and anger.

*As a father has **compassion** on his children, so the Lord has **compassion** on those who fear him¹¹*

Yahweh's choice to create us, to love us and to emotionally respond to us, to be in relationship with us, was a choice to limit himself for our sake. But unlike us, He is not driven by his emotions even though He allows himself to feel emotions. His emotions never cause Him to respond out of character or cause undue harm. Similarly, humans are not just brains on a stick or thinking machines, but, like Yahweh, are rational,

¹¹ Psalm 103:13

More Than Suffering

emotional, relational beings with body, soul and spirit. Our emotions give rise to our passions that motivate our actions and relationships – and allow us to have empathy for others.¹²

Yahweh's self-limiting extended to another area. Yahweh has also freely chosen to constrain how he uses His power, by giving humans the authority to be his vice-regents on earth. As Yahweh vice-regents, the humans could choose how they administer their authority on earth. Unfortunately, humans can choose to misuse or abuse their authority.

Unlike Greek philosophy,¹³ Biblical religion begins with Yahweh addressing man and entering into a covenant with man. For us to understand Yahweh we must obey his will. We do not contend with impersonal forces, but rather we are free-willed persons interacting with a free-willed divine person.

The Suffering of Yahweh

In the initial creation narrative in Genesis 1, God is introduced by the more generic 'Elohim,' as He divides light from dark, waters from waters and land from waters. But in Genesis 2, where God interacts with the first humans, God is introduced with his name, Yahweh. We are introduced to the personal God interacting with the humans. Starting at this point, we see the unfolding relationship of Yahweh with humans. When the relationship was disrupted by the human rebellion, the relationship did not stop. The character of the relationship was expressed many times with verses such as:

Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust¹⁴.

When dealing with the tragedy that is fallen human behavior, Yahweh is still present as expressed in verses like:

She gave this name to Yahweh who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."¹⁵

Sometimes, there were instances where Yahweh did not seem to be responding to human suffering. But, of course, the expectation was that Yahweh should be responding to our human suffering. In those cases, we see expressions such as:

"All this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But

¹² Abraham Herschel, *The Prophets* pp. 362-364

¹³ In Greek philosophy, the Good is self-sufficient, not dependent. God has no needs: of friends, social life, etc. Divinity pays no heed to us, does not trouble itself with us – no anger or any other emotional reaction. Transcendence implies detachment from the world. Creation is perfect, it needs no adjustment, physically or morally. Reward and punishment follow automatically as per cause and effect. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Deity is the unmoved mover, self-sufficient, wholly separated from all else, acts on the world only as a final cause.

¹⁴ Psalm 103:8-14

¹⁵ Genesis 16:13

More Than Suffering

*you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals; you covered us over with deep darkness.... Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?*¹⁶

It is not that Yahweh has forgotten us or is no longer compassionate or gracious or is no longer around, but Yahweh is limiting his response to allow for human freedom to be fully expressed by all of us. He has not revoked either the responsibility or the freedom from any of us to be stewards of the resources that he has provided.

In the meantime, our rebellion has created suffering for us. Our pride and selfishness have caused us to inflict pain on each other. And Yahweh, who cares for us also suffers when we suffer, even when our suffering is caused directly because of our rebellion or when he directs us to suffer as a means of bringing us to turn back to Him. More than that, when we cry out in our suffering, He can be moved to act on our behalf.¹⁷

*"Yahweh regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled." Before the flood, the Bible states that God was "grieved" in His heart because of humanity's wickedness.*¹⁸

*When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, God told Moses, "Yahweh said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."*¹⁹

*"In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy, he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old."*²⁰

*God expresses deep emotional turmoil over the judgment of Israel, saying, "'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused"*²¹

*"For no one is cast off by Yahweh forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone"*²²

You who are my Comforter^l in sorrow, my heart is faint within me. Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there? Why have they aroused my anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?" "The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved. Since my people are

¹⁶ Psalm 44:17-19, 23-24

¹⁷ Abraham Herschel, *The Prophets*

¹⁸ Genesis 6:6

¹⁹ Exodus 3:7

²⁰ Isaiah 63:9

²¹ Hosea 11:8

²² Lamentations 3:31-33

More Than Suffering

crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? ²³

The Reflection of Yahweh

It has been claimed that the Old Testament depictions of Yahweh are anthropomorphizing Yahweh – that is the Old Testament is describing Yahweh in terms of human attributes. It would be more proper to say that the Old Testament is theomorphizing humans. Humans are made in the image of Yahweh, so His attributes are reflected in our attributes. We have emotions because Yahweh has emotions. We get angry because Yahweh can get angry. We desire justice and mercy because Yahweh desires justice and mercy. What is also true though, is that our emotions are also subject to our sinful tendencies – in which case we do not properly reflect the image of Yahweh. ²⁴

The Son of Yahweh

In Christian phraseology, we say that Jesus is the Son of Yahweh. Although it sounds a little strange to our ears, it is the same thing as saying that Jesus is the Son of Yahweh. In the Trinitarian formula, we could say, “The persons of the Trinity are Yahweh the Father, Yahweh the Son and Yahweh the Holy Spirit.” The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the same essence²⁵ and they are the same essence of Yahweh.

This means that we cannot separate the activity of Yahweh and Jesus; the activity of Yahweh. Anything that Yahweh did, was Jesus’ doing as well.²⁶

Both Yahweh and Jesus

- Desire peace ²⁷
- Desire to show mercy.²⁸
- Desire to restore us when we cause grief²⁹
- Desire holiness and justice ³⁰
- Desire to reconcile the world to themselves ³¹

The Suffering of the Son of Yahweh

No mystery is greater than how the One who exists outside of creation and from before time, encumbered himself in a human body, even starting as an embryo and then growing into an adult and dying as a human. And even more than that humility, while in that human body, He suffered being rejected, despised, persecuted, spit upon, and tortured to death; enduring all this treatment by the very people He came to offer forgiveness to and restore to Himself.

²³ Jeremiah 8:18-22

²⁴ Abraham Herschel, *The Prophets* p. 380-381

²⁵ Nicene Creed

²⁶ John 8:58; 10:30; 20:28; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1

²⁷ Luke 7:50; 8:48; 10:5-6; John 14:27; 16:33; Judges 6:24; Is:4; 54:10; Ps 29:11

²⁸ Genesis 3:21; 12:16-33; 4:13; 6:5-8; 12:1-3; Exodus 32:1-14; 33:19; Deut 32:4; Job 42:10; Hosea 11:8-9; Jeremiah 4:27; 21:20; Matthew 5:7; 9:13; 12:7; 23:23; Luke 1:50; 10:37

²⁹ Genesis 6:5-6; Psalm 78:40; Isaiah 54:7-8; Jeremiah 42:10; Luke 13:22-35

³⁰ Psalm 29:2; 89:35; Isaiah 35:8; Ezek 36:23; Matthew 10:14-15; 10:34; Mark 9:42-48

³¹ Genesis 3:14-15; 2 Cor 5:18-19

More Than Suffering

This selfless act was born out of the love shared within the Trinity. Within himself, Yahweh desired to expand that love by creating creatures who bore His image who would then be creatures also capable of voluntarily giving themselves in sacrifice to one another. The risk was that by creating creatures who can voluntarily give themselves in love, those creatures can also choose to not love or to love someone or something else.

When those image-bearing creatures chose to reject Yahweh and rebel against His rule they suffered the consequence of death: severing the relationship they had with Yahweh (spiritual death) and then being expelled from the Tree of Life so that their bodies would eventually die (physical death).

But Yahweh intended to finish what He completed and arranged that through the physical death of His Son, that the humans would be restored to Himself. So by His death and resurrection, He suffered so that we don't have to and He was resurrected so that we can be resurrected with Him.

In a remarkable statement, we are told that "he learned obedience from what he suffered." The Son of Yahweh, the all-wise, all-knowing Yahweh and creator of the universe "learned obedience." And even more, that verse continues "and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him." Through His suffering and death, Jesus became perfect or completed. He was now able to do what He could not do before, to be able to bring salvation to His image-bearers, enabling them to come to Him in faith so that they could then receive His forgiveness and follow Him.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you³².

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin³³

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered³⁴

³² 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

³³ Hebrews 4:15

³⁴ Hebrews 5:7-8

More Than Suffering

Completeness in Suffering

As we explore different aspects of our own suffering, we can know that whatever the circumstances, Yahweh suffers with us.

Suffering and the goodness of Christ

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*³⁵

*“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*³⁶

*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him,*³⁷

*So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*³⁸

Besides the suffering that everyone experiences just by being in the world, the Christian has an added expectation that suffering may occur because they follow Jesus. Added to that, Scripture tells us that not only are Christians not exempt from suffering, but they should expect it. Nevertheless, Christians are instructed to keep on doing good.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[a] have been called according to his purpose.*³⁹

The hope that the Christian has is that no matter the circumstance, Yahweh is able to use whatever bad or difficult circumstance we experience, transforming it into something that can work for the good of the believer. That transformation may not come right away, and maybe not until the next life, but it will come. It is that hope that empowers us to keep on doing the right things and to continue to bless others.

*What is our hope in pain? It is the promise of God that he can bring good out of anything, even pain, if we trust him. Romans 8:28 is one of the most beloved verses in the Bible, but it’s also one of the most misquoted. It does not say, “All things that happen to us are good.” That is obviously untrue: rape, cancer, war, disease, racism, and starvation are not good. It also does not say, “All things will have a happy ending.” That too is not reality: not every injustice is corrected; not every disease is healed; not every pain is removed.*⁴⁰

If our goal is to become more like Jesus, we should be full of the fruits of the Spirit.

³⁵ 1 Peter 4:12

³⁶ John 16:33

³⁷ Philippians 1:29

³⁸ 1 Peter 4:19

³⁹ Romans 8:28

⁴⁰ Rick Warren, *God’s Purpose in Your Pain*, www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/gods-purpose-in-your-pain

More Than Suffering

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.⁴¹

For us to express those fruits, we might need to live the kind of life He lived: How He learned from what He suffered, and how He obeyed through painful circumstances.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

42

The Marks of Jesus

Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"⁴³

For Jesus followers, our sufferings and wounds are not meaningless. Just as for Jesus who suffered before He received His glory, so our suffering will precede our glory. Like the apostle Paul, we can identify our suffering as a means of identifying with Christ. Paul encouraged the little, struggling church in Galatia with these words full of gospel hope.

"I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" ⁴⁴

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."⁴⁵

Paul encourages all believers to identify with Christ just as he did. Our suffering, like Christ's suffering, will result in our glory; our cross will be followed by our crown. Like Paul, we can bear in our body, the marks of Jesus' death, in order that we may likewise bear in our body the glory of his resurrection.

"If we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall also partake in the likeness of his resurrection."⁴⁶

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.⁴⁷

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Galatians 5:22-25

⁴² Hebrews 5:7-9

⁴³ Luke 24:26

⁴⁴ Galatians 6:17

⁴⁵ Galatians 2:21

⁴⁶ Romans 6:5

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 4:13

⁴⁸ Romans 8:18

More Than Suffering

Suffering and Holiness

In the same way that Jesus became complete through His suffering, we also can become complete through our suffering. The source of suffering can come from various places: from the good but not safe world, from the sin of others, from our own sins, from intentional or nonintentional acts. But whatever the source, Yahweh can use the circumstances so that wherever the suffering originated from, it can be redeemed so that the suffering can be used for our benefit or even for the benefit of those around us. (Rom 8:28).

*In the midst of suffering, we cry out for God to **deliver us**, when what He may want to do is **transform us**. He doesn't merely want to move us out of our suffering; He wants to **change us** through it. This is a hard truth. God, in His infinite wisdom, works all things—painful things, difficult things, heart-breaking things, terminal things, and excruciating things—together for good, so that we will be more Christlike. If the goal is your immediate comfort and your temporary happiness, then God has failed. But that's not the goal. God is **more concerned about your holiness than your happiness**. His goal is **your eternal character, not your immediate comfort**. God wants us to fully rely on Him.⁴⁹*

Suffering in Faith and Maturity

While we normally wish to avoid suffering, it is through suffering that we can **grow in faith and maturity**, become **transformed more into the likeness of the One we desire to follow**. Like athletes who endure the stress of training so that they can achieve the physical form that gives them success in their sport, we endure the suffering of life so that we can enjoy being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

[God] comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer.⁵⁰

Notice the phrase “when we are weighed down with troubles, it is *for your comfort*.” Just as Yahweh in Christ suffered for our benefit, sometimes Yahweh allows us to experience pain in order that we might use it to minister to others who are in pain. Of course, **Yahweh uses our strengths and talents** to help others, but often in even more powerful and transforming ways, **Yahweh uses our weaknesses and failures**. Paul explains this in 2 Corinthians:

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ... [The Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ ... That is

⁴⁹ Stand to Reason, *God Has a Purpose in Suffering*, www.str.org/w/god-has-a-purpose-in-suffering-

⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians 1:4–6

More Than Suffering

why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses ... for when I am weak, then I am strong"⁵¹.

We typically think we will attract others by impressing them with our successes, victories, and accomplishments. But talking about those things can create jealousy, competition, and distance between people. In contrast, sharing our weaknesses, failures, and grief creates a common bond.⁵²

Suffering in Community

When we are called into the community of Christ, we are **called to be in communion and fellowship with all the followers of Christ**. In this community, the sufferings we endure that can be redeemed to work for our good, also can be redeemed to work for the good of those in our community.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.⁵³

We may become distracted in the midst of our own suffering and forget that we are not alone in our suffering. Our first thought should be of the suffering of Jesus, who endured being insulted, tortured and put to death for our sake, to make it possible for us to be reconciled with and united with Him, not just in the future when He comes again, but now. We do not suffer but that He suffers with us. If we feel we are being deserted in our suffering, but Jesus himself was deserted in His suffering on the cross.

As we endure our suffering, we enter into the **fellowship of suffering**, not just with Jesus, but with all who suffer. We can, along with Jesus, willingly put any glory and power aside to weep with those who weep. It is within that fellowship that we can become transformed, to become more like Christ in this life, that in this life we weep with those who weep so that in the next life we can rejoice with those who rejoice.

The refusal to accept the challenge of suffering reflects our culture's allergy to transcendence.... the reality of the human person that points toward transcendence is negated by reducing the person to the level of an object (an object that can be manipulated). In this way, all suffering becomes merely a technical problem that requires fixing. ... Ironically, the existence of suffering has been used to discredit the existence of God. I propose that it is because there is a God that there is suffering. Suffering is a sign of God, a cry to the author of life. Our response to suffering must be to walk along with the sufferer toward God, to risk our own identity by relating with the one who suffers in his or her questioning. ... To co-suffer – to be a companion with the sufferer – is to walk alongside them toward transcendence. The one who does not co-suffer and is not prepared to do this cannot speak about it. Such a person does not know the truth and does not speak the truth. He or she is a liar – a deceiver, to use the words of Walker Percy. The task of someone confronted with the suffering of the other, especially people in

⁵¹ 2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:9–10

⁵² Rick Warren, *God's Purpose in Your Pain*, www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/gods-purpose-in-your-pain

⁵³ Romans 12:15

More Than Suffering

the healthcare ministry, is to be willing to co-suffer. Co-suffering affirms the personhood of the sufferer and is an act of love. Co-suffering is the way we love the one who suffers.⁵⁴

Suffering to Serve the Public

Placing their own health in danger, the church rescued people from the streets and established hospitals. In AD 252, the Christians of Corinth saved the city from the plague by responding to the needs of those who were simply dragged into the street.⁵⁵ Monasteries served as hospitals (treating even diseases like leprosy), places of refuge. Monasteries also developed agricultural skills and knowledge.⁵⁶ During the Middle Ages, the Benedictines alone were responsible for more than two thousand hospitals in Western Europe. The first free infirmary was at Monte Cassino. The first public hospital in Western Europe. When the city of Edessa was ravaged by plague, established hospitals were open to all who were afflicted.⁵⁷

“Then the king will say to those on his right hand: come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; naked and you covered me; sick and you visited me.”⁵⁸

Suffering to Comfort others

Suffering and woundedness is a part of this world. It is when Yahweh works within us, comforting us in our own suffering that we can be enabled to **comfort others in their suffering**. As Yahweh mends us, using our brokenness to make us more complete, even more beautiful, His light can shine through us into the world.

*Henri Nouwen said something like that in his book *The Wounded Healer*, where he wrote about how our wounds can be a blessing in our lives and the lives of others, if we're willing to receive them as gifts. Our wounds, whether grief and loss, or chronic illness, or mental health conditions, provide us with the opportunity to know the suffering of others first-hand. They allow us to see things that those who don't suffer similarly can't see. Woundedness fosters empathy and understanding, and binds us together in our shared, broken humanity ... As you examine the wounds in your life, could it be that rather than revealing the absence of God in your life, they are the cracks through which the light of God can shine?⁵⁹*

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And

⁵⁴ Lorenzo Albacete, “Does Suffering Shock you?” www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/devotional-reading/Does-Suffering-Shock-You

⁵⁵ James William, *The Social and Historical Impact of Christianity*

⁵⁶ Simon Newman, *Monasteries in the Middle Ages*

⁵⁷ David Bentley Hart, *The Ethic of Caring for the Sick*

⁵⁸ Matthew 25:34-36

⁵⁹ Michael Frost, *When your wound is the gift*, mikefrost.net/when-your-wound-is-the-gift

More Than Suffering

*our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*⁶⁰

In the past, crucifixion was used in a painful, ugly way to torture someone to death. But because Jesus endured death by crucifixion as a way to redeem us and all of creation, the cross has become ubiquitous in Christian art, no longer simply perceived as an instrument of death, but as an instrument of life. In the same way, there are many ways that Yahweh can take the ugly things of life and transform them into things of beauty, things that Yahweh can use to transform us more into His image.

Suffering to Help Us See More Holistically

Even an extremely painful bone disease can have transforming power, **helping us to see more completely and holistically**, that what in the world's eyes seems broken, is part of tapestry of great beauty; that Yahweh can take our brokenness and mend us, transforming us more into His image.

*"I know also the way in which the imperfect growths in the creation of God take on a strange beauty all their own. The twisted tree is often the one to stand and marvel at: it has been given something out of its twistedness. There is a new kind of beauty which is intrinsically painful, yet free from the grotesque. As for the twisted child, I had learnt how every 'normal' response, so hard fought for, was felt as a miracle, culmination beyond reasonable hope ... The fundamentally awry can perhaps never be made whole in this life; yet like the twisted tree, or the child's courage and wisdom, it can take on a beauty of its own."*⁶¹

Suffering to Grab our Attention

In our self-centered view of the world, sickness and accidents seem to be on the list of those things that distract us from the business we had planned. Whether major or minor, as we participate in suffering, it is easy for us to think of that suffering as a distraction. Pain and discomfort get in the way of our agenda. But it is precisely through those means that **Yahweh can use to grab our attention**, so that if we do pay attention instead of complaining, Yahweh can work in our lives more completely, enabling us to know Him and to know our fellow sufferers more intimately.

"For many Christians in Western cultures, the idea that beauty can come from suffering is counterintuitive. There's little room for pain and discomfort in a society that idolizes a life of safety and luxury ... But what if, instead of viewing suffering as a punishment, we chose to embrace it as a privilege that both sanctifies us and allows us to know and experience God at a deeper, more intimate level?"

"In this life, we all want to get on board with the new life, blessings, and abundance of knowing Christ, but we're certainly not willing to go through crucifixion and sacrifice to find communion with Jesus," speaker and author Jay Wolf told The Christian Post.

"When we are so averse to discomfort, we miss out on something so vital to understanding who Jesus is. We're missing out on communion with Him and with

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

⁶¹ Margaret Spufford, *Celebration, A Story of Suffering and Joy* 1996

More Than Suffering

humanity. We're missing out on a deep level of compassion if we've never experienced hardship. ...

"It's this idea that recognizing your limitations helps you see the Kingdom of God in a whole new way," he said. "What if your invisible wheelchair, your limitation was not just a thing you are bound to and constrained by? What if it is the very means through which you can find a new kind of flourishing in your life?"

Referencing 2 Corinthians 12:9, Jay stressed, "God's power is perfected not in our own competency but in our weakness. This is a time of clarity; when there are fewer distractions, we can see Him at work in ways we never would have otherwise. That's the opportunity we all have right now." ⁶²

Suffering as a Gift

When difficult things happen in life, there are some who think that Yahweh, who is pictured as a Divine Disciplinarian, is punishing us for something wrong we did. Instead, we should remember that Yahweh loves us and wants to draw us, all of us, to Himself (John 12:32). So, what we suffer may be for us or for the sake of others. In either case, the **main intention is not punishment, but love, a gift.**

"It's a gift to exist and existence comes with suffering." ⁶³

"A divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift', if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make 'punishments' (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained" ⁶⁴

"Suffering is a gift. In it is hidden mercy." ⁶⁵

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3)

Suffering as a Strength

In the world's culture, weakness is not seen as good thing, rather it is best to be strong and independent. But in the upside-down economy of Jesus, we find our spiritual strength when we are otherwise weak. We are not above the fray, but subject to suffering. When we find ourselves without our normal resources then we are dependent on Yahweh, who is then free to show His power without our mistaking His power for ours.

suffering is the means by which it becomes and remains unambiguously clear that his success as an apostle is due exclusively to another power. Suffering is a manifestation of

⁶² Leah MarieAnn Klett, Stroke survivor Katherine Wolf on finding God in suffering: 'There's hidden treasure in darkness' www.christianpost.com/books/stroke-survivor-katherine-wolf-on-finding-god-in-suffering-theres-hidden-treasure-in-darkness.html

⁶³ Stephen Colbert

⁶⁴ The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 286

⁶⁵ Persian Poet, Rumi

More Than Suffering

human frailty and limitation ... suffering ensues from powerlessness, and such powerlessness is incommensurate with the results achieved by the apostle. ... When the righteous find themselves in a position of helplessness, cry out to God and then experience God's deliverance, the pedagogical effect is that they come to know with experiential certainty that God alone has power enough to save and that human efforts are utterly ineffectual. It is a short step from here to Paul's conclusion that God actually wills this pedagogical benefit for an apostle as the condition for the appropriating that other power... Yet, while not relieving the apostles of this excessive suffering, nevertheless, God preserves them..⁶⁶

"In every way we are afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed but not despairing; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed"⁶⁷

Suffering Persecution for Righteousness

Not only are those who are righteous are not exempt from suffering, but they may also be subject to persecution. Such mistreatment is not a sign of Yahweh's displeasure, but a sign of their identity in Christ, that as they become more like Christ then they suffer like Him.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"⁶⁸

Suffering to Increase Faith

When we are in comfortable circumstances, we can question how strong our faith truly is. Our faith can be tested and strengthened when we find ourselves in circumstances where we run out of our own resources and need to depend on Yahweh.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.⁶⁹

*God permits suffering in the world to warn the world of the impending judgment. He uses it to call people to repentance. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:4–5) In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis says, "We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our*

⁶⁶ Material is excerpted from Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous (New York: Peter Lang, 2002)

⁶⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:8–9

⁶⁸ Matthew 5:10-12

⁶⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:8–9

More Than Suffering

conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Suffering is God's megaphone to get this world to wake up, listen, and repent.⁷⁰

In a Central American prison women responded to the story of Hagar (Genesis 16), a woman who found that Yahweh had seen her in the midst of her suffering.

They heard the angel of the Lord pay honor and respect to Hagar by becoming the only character in the narrative to address her by name. The angel then asks her a beautiful question-"Where have you come from, and where are you going?" ... The women in the prison could relate to being unnamed and used as property by people in positions of authority and power who never bothered to ask about their stories. They knew what it felt like to live in deserts of loneliness caused by rejection and marginalization. In Hagar's story, the women found their story ... it is no small matter that she (Hagar) is the first person in Scripture who has the privilege of giving a name to God. She marvels, "Could it be that I have seen the back side of the one who sees everything and am still alive?" She gives to God the name El Roi, "the God who sees me." ... We see three gateways to transformation: prayer, praise, and pain. The widest of all is pain. Ironically, pain is the most guarded gateway among those in power, and it is the most accessible gateway for the people we serve. Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor says, "The first condition of healing is to give voice to pain."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Biologos, *Is animal suffering part of God's good creation?*, biologos.org/common-questions/is-animal-suffering-part-of-gods-good-creation

⁷¹ Joel Van Dyke and Kris Rocke, *Asking the Beautiful Question*, www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/april2010/index.html

More Than Suffering

The Strange Work of Yahweh

*The Lord will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon—to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task.*⁷²

Yahweh's self-description

*And Yahweh descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful (**rahûm**) and gracious (**hannûn**), longsuffering (**'erek appayim**), and abundant in goodness (**chesed**) and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands (**elef**), forgiving (**nasa**) iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.*⁷³

As we closely study the words used by Yahweh's in his description of himself, we can see more deeply and clearly about His love for us.

- **racham** means “love deeply, have mercy, be compassionate.” Racham has its roots in the word for “womb” suggesting a motherly love, a selfless participation which protects and nourishes but does not possess and control.
- **channun** means “to be gracious, to have pity, to show (undeserved) favor – and always refers to Yahweh. These words are often used together and, except for one instance, refer to Yahweh.
- **'erek appayim**, “long of nose” means “slow to anger,” that divine patience exceeds divine anger.
- **chesed** means “steadfast love” refers to the faithful commitment that binds two parties in a relationship, so it can be translated as faithfulness or unfailing love or loyalty.
- **elef** means thousands (cp Ps 30:5) Yahweh keeps his love for a thousand generations (cp. but visits those who hate him only to the 4th generation)
- **'emet** means faithfulness, fidelity. Is often used with chesed. Yahweh is a God who keeps steadfast love for the thousandth generation
- **Nasa** means forgive, to lift up, to bear, to carry

This verse is sometimes misunderstood. People who focus on the perception that the God of the Old Testament as a violent God compared to the New Testament sometimes focus on the last part of the verse and point to a translation that says, “God *punishes* the children to the third and fourth generation...” Viewed that way, it seems that God is focusing on punishing generations of children for the sins of their ancestors.

But notice that the verse is mostly focused on things like love and mercy. And then last part of the verse is actually talking about the repercussions of sins that carry through from one generation to the next. In the meantime, the verse balances that with the mercy shown to thousands. And then elsewhere, God expresses the desire that all people will turn from their sinful ways and turn back to him because He desires to have a relationship with all people in which love is given and received.

⁷² Isaiah 28:21

⁷³ Exodus 34:5-7

More Than Suffering

Love's counterpart

We have seen how Yahweh's character is love, compassion and mercy. We have seen how Yahweh is a God of relationship and how he created us so that he could share his love with us. We have seen how he still desires to keep that relationship despite our rebellion. We have seen that the suffering we endure because of our rebellion has brought us suffering and that Yahweh suffers with us.

Part of Yahweh's suffering is in experiencing the injustice we receive. Yahweh's proper response then is anger as he seeks justice for us. His anger is not a part of his character⁷⁴ but is a response to the injustice we suffer.⁷⁵ Even when Yahweh brings us suffering for the discipline we need to endure, it is painful for him as well as us. But our suffering is meant to draw us back to him, to seek His forgiveness. And when we tarry in returning to him continuing to pursue our broken paths, he patiently waits, sharing in our suffering.⁷⁶

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.⁷⁷

... I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.⁷⁸

The suffering of Yahweh provides the context for the anger of Yahweh. The love that leads him to suffer for us, the love that desires justice for us, is the love that causes anger, an anger that is controlled by Yahweh's faithfulness, righteousness, patience and forbearance.

Love that leads to anger leads to violence

Many people have trouble reconciling the portrait they see of God in the Old Testament versus the portrait they see in Jesus in the New Testament.

- The Old Testament portrait seems so violent not just man against man, but violence that God seems to promote and even participate in.
- The New Testament portrait seems to show Jesus who seemed to focus more on serving and forgiving and being non-violent, even to the point of submitting to being executed.

There have been various awkward responses to these seemingly disparate portraits that even include suggesting that the God of the Old Testament is a different God than the one shown in the New Testament. The questions we are left with are: Are there really two different versions of God in the Old and New Testaments? How do we reconcile that the God of love and peace can also be a God of wrath and violence? How is it that the all-powerful God seems not only to tolerate violence, but sometimes even seems to direct it?

⁷⁴ Abraham Herschel, *The Prophets*, p. 105, 363-364; 380-381

⁷⁵ Jeremiah 31:3, 11; Hosea 2:19; Psalms 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1-4; 136:1-26; Ezra 3:11

⁷⁶ Abraham Herschel, *The Prophets*, p. 365-366, 377; Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Jer. 15:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3; Psalm. 86: 15; 103:8; 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17

⁷⁷ Psalm 30:5

⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 5:9-10

More Than Suffering

*If human violence were the only story about violence in the Bible, this could be a briefer, if bloody, discussion. But that is not the case. The most basic theological problem with the Bible's violence is that it is often associated with the activity of God; with remarkable frequency, God is the subject of violent verbs: From the flood, to Sodom and Gomorrah, to the command to sacrifice Isaac, to the plagues, to all the children killed on Passover night—and we are not yet through the book of Exodus! What will we make of this divine violence?*⁷⁹

But it is the same God portrayed in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. The same God whose character never changes. The same God who seems to direct violence in the Old Testament then seems to turn away from it in the New Testament. But as we consider how we perceive Jesus, we find that even Jesus did not totally avoid violence. For example:

- Jesus did not admonish Roman soldiers about their jobs when he encountered them, he even complemented them on their faith.⁸⁰
- Jesus attacked property in the temple.⁸¹
- Jesus never promised to not use violence. In fact, he promised to bring division.⁸²
- In the final judgment wrath will be unleashed⁸³

It is for love that we were created. It was Yahweh's desire to create us in his image that we were given both the capacity and the freedom to love. It is out of love that causes Yahweh to suffer with us in our suffering. It is out love that causes Yahweh's anger when our suffering is due to injustice. It is out of a desire to correct injustice that Yahweh will invoke violence.

⁷⁹ T. E. Fretheim *God and Violence in the Old Testament*,

⁸⁰ Matthew 8:5-13

⁸¹ John 2:13-17

⁸² Luke 12:49-53

⁸³ Revelation 5-8-11-19

More Than Suffering

Reframing Yahweh's violence: A case study, the conquest of Canaan

The land that Yahweh showed to Abraham as the place where his descendants to settle in, was filled the descendants of Canaan and others when Yahweh led Abraham's descendants from Egypt to that land. The people of Israel could not just settle there without problems. One of the problems was that the people of Israel would adopt the corrupt practices of current inhabitants. Another problem would be resistance of the current inhabitants to Israel's settling in. The result would be the necessity of Israel to "conquer" the land. This conquest brings up a variety of issues associated with Yahweh's approval of and initiation of violence. Studying this conquest provides an opportunity to study the various issues dealing with the violence we attribute to Yahweh.

The literary framework of our Biblical narrative

The Bible is not a universal moral rule book, nor a book of genocide. The conquest of Canaan was conducted according to the accepted rules of ancient warfare. The Bible is not written to tell us how to produce goodness, but rather to tell us how to participate in the goodness that Yahweh is producing.

The sparse language of the Old Testament hides the fact that it is sophisticated literature. The narrative of the Old Testament uses many literary techniques. The narrative contains history of real people and events but it is not presented in the fashion of modern history books. It is first and foremost a theological text intended to draw us to the person and the work of Yahweh.

Recapitulation of Creation

One aspect is that the Conquest narrative is a recapitulation of creation.

Genesis 1 is doing something similar. It is articulating a purpose through a mission statement (people living out their designated role as the image of God) and a vision statement (seeing the world around us as sacred space where God is living among his people and being in relationship with them).⁸⁴

"the story of creation is seen more as a story about the dedication of a temple, where the universe and the world were dedicated as a sacred space, a space where God would dwell with his people."⁸⁵

Just as the creation account is a story about how Yahweh created the universe as a place where He would meet with his image-bearing humans, the Conquest of Canaan account is a story about Yahweh creating the Promised Land as place where he would meet with his people. The difference being, in the creation account the chaos that God created order from was the chaos of an unordered universe whereas in the conquest account chaos is represented by the disorder of the Canaanite population.

⁸⁴ John Walton, *Material or Function in Genesis 1? John Walton Responds*

⁸⁵ Charles Russell, *Dancing in the kingdom*, p. 64

More Than Suffering

| | |
|--|---|
| Exodus/Conquest narrative | Creation narrative |
| Crossing the Red Sea | Separating the waters so that dry land could appear |
| Army of Pharaoh being destroyed. The Canaanites are chaos creatures. | Order is imposed on the waters of chaos. (In the ANE narrative, the great sea serpent is vanquished.) |
| Sabbath Rest | Provide a place where God can dwell with humanity |
| Canaan as a place where God dwells with his people | Eden as a place where God dwells with his people |
| Angel guarding the way into Canaan | Angel guarding the way into the garden |

The Promise connecting Creation to Recapitulation

In Genesis 15, Abraham is put into a deep sleep (Heb. *tardemah*) in which he has a dark vision about his descendants experiencing slavery in a foreign country after which they would come out with “great possessions.” This mirrors the *tardemah* that Adam experienced when he had a vision of the woman being created from his side.

In the Creation account, Yahweh created order out of the chaos and then created a garden in which he placed Adam. After Adam’s *tardemah*, Adam and the woman were to serve as his vice-regents in extending Yahweh’s kingdom beginning in of the garden and extending out into the world. But because of the rebellion, Yahweh’s plan was to “restart” the Creation. After Abraham’s *tardemah*, there would not be a woman, but a nation which would form in the chaos of Egypt. This nation would serve as Yahweh’s vice-regents extending Yahweh’s kingdom out into the world, starting in the chaos of Canaan.

Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”⁸⁶

One of the other curiosities of this passage is that in Genesis 14, the Amorites (at least some of them) were one of Abraham’s allies in helping to rescue his nephew Lot. They were certainly not framed here as a nation needing to be destroyed.

One central word in this passage needs a closer examination. When we see how the word “sin” (Heb. *Awon*) is used in other passages (Ex: Gen 4:13; 44:16), we should think of *awon* as referring to a iniquity/punishment/disaster coming UPON a person instead of an iniquity done BY a person.⁸⁷

A second term that needs attention is “fourth generation.” Keeping in mind that the Amorites are Abraham’s allies at the time of this passage, it hardly makes sense that the passage could refer to their sins which have not yet reached full measure. What the fourth generation could refer to is the generation after

⁸⁶ Genesis 15:13-16

⁸⁷ Anderson, Joel Edmund. *Israel’s Conquest of Canaan” Questions and Controversies – A Look at John Walton’s New Book*

More Than Suffering

Abraham that he will not see grow into adulthood – which is to say it's referring to descendants that will come sometime after Abraham has died.

Given all that information, Gen 15:13-16 should be translated as, “Your descendants will be enslaved for 400 years in Egypt, but I will eventually punish Egypt and bring your descendants back to this land. You yourself will live a long life and will die at a ripe old age, and although I have decreed the destruction of the Amorites, that destruction won't come upon the Amorites who are your friends and allies.”⁸⁸

At this point we can already see that we need to be careful as to how we interpret this narrative about Joshua's conquest of Canaan.

Yahweh's abandonment of Israel

As discussed before, Yahweh brought Israel into the land of Canaan to start a new creation. Unfortunately, Israel rebelled against Yahweh just as Adam did. So if we go forward in the history of Israel to the time of King Solomon and on we would see that Israel's failure to follow Yahweh would eventually lead to their exile.

Yahweh would use Assyria to capture the Northern Kingdom of Israel and would remove many people from the northern kingdom and then scatter them throughout the Assyrian empire, and those tribes would never emerge again in history. But even though Yahweh used Assyria to discipline Israel, Assyria used excessive force and so Yahweh raised up Babylon to overtake Assyria and its territories. Babylon would also use excessive force and they would be disciplined by being overtaken by the Persians.

Much of the suffering Israel and Judah experienced (starvation even to the point of cannibalism) was due to their failure to surrender during the siege of the cities. Of course, if Israel and Judah had been obedient from the beginning, Yahweh would not have brought in the Assyrians and the Babylonians.⁸⁹

God's violence towards Israel was in contrast to the continued mercy shown by God to Israel in the past. For that reason, this abandoning Israel to the violence of Assyria and Babylon would be referred to as his “strange” work.⁹⁰

After Israel was exiled, they were allowed to return but they still were not obedient to Yahweh. So the Old Testament ends with the expectation that there would yet be another new creation. The new Israel would be in the form of Jesus, the second Adam, who would finally carry out the mission of Yahweh and become the head of the new Israel, the church.

From the time of the Exodus, Yahweh received the title, “the Warrior God” in a song of triumph over Pharaoh⁹¹. Yahweh was described as a warrior fighting for Israel⁹². But, after going into exile because Yahweh turned the tables and fought against Israel, that sentiment disappeared.⁹³

⁸⁸ *ibid*

⁸⁹ Jeremiah 42:11-12

⁹⁰ Isaiah 28:21

⁹¹ Exodus 15:1-21

⁹² 1 Samuel 17:45-47; 25:28; Exodus 17:16

⁹³ Ezekiel 8:17; 23:19; Habakkuk 1:6-7; Jeremiah 6:23

More Than Suffering

Use of “totally destroyed” (Heb. Herem)

There are many passages in Joshua that call on Joshua to “totally destroy” (Heb. Herem) various towns. It makes it seem that Israel is called upon to commit genocide with the people in Canaan. Although “herem” is typically translated as “completely destroyed. what herem literally means is “the removal of something from human use or community identity.”⁹⁴ The idea was that foreign identity needs to be removed so that Israel cannot make use of it. God’s instructions to Joshua for conquering the land of Canaan along with the language that summarized some of results can make it seem genocidal, like all the Canaanites were wiped out.⁹⁵ However, descriptions of totally destroying men, women and children,⁹⁶ is likely hyperbole. The Canaanite structures and identities that imposed violence and immorality needed to be destroyed.

Reading carefully, we can see that the language is being used hyperbolically.

- There were some survivors⁹⁶
- there was land still waiting to be possessed⁹⁷ and
- by the time the era of Judges arrives, there are still many Canaanites around that God intended to remain in order to bother the Israelites⁹⁸
- The Hebrew construction used for driving out the Canaanites is used for a divorced woman, indicating that Yahweh had a prior relationship with the Canaanites just like He had in primeval times with Adam’s son, Seth and Seth’s descendants.⁹⁹ We aren’t given much detail about this, but the language indicates that Yahweh had worked with the Canaanites, but they rejected Him.

The excess of Yahweh’s human agents

Related to this issue is Yahweh’s use of humans to do his work. From the beginning, Yahweh has intended humans to be his vice-regents on earth and our rebellion did not change that. Although sometimes Yahweh does act directly in the world, most often Yahweh will use human agents to do his work. In this case, this work includes using Israel to bring order to the region of Canaan.

*and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they went too far with the punishment.*¹⁰⁰

When God’s assigned His image-bearers the responsibility of stewardship of His creation, that assignment did not end with our rebellion. To that end, Yahweh’s preferred method of working in the world is through His image-bearers. This means that when Yahweh wishes to use violence to restore justice, He often uses human agents. Those agents however often exceed the charge given them, creating much of the abusive violence we see in the Old Testament. However, when that happens, God disciplines those same agents.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Lilley, P.P.U. “Understanding the Herem” <https://tyndalebulletin.org/> <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30692>

⁹⁵ Joshua 6:15-19; 8:1-2; 10:40-43; 11:16-23; 21:43-45

⁹⁶ Joshua 10:20

⁹⁷ Joshua 13:1; 15:63; 16:10; 17:16

⁹⁸ Judges 3:1-7

⁹⁹ Genesis 4:26; Deuteronomy 33:27

¹⁰⁰ Zechariah 1:15

¹⁰¹ Zechariah 1:14-15; Is 10:5-12; Jer 25:12-14

More Than Suffering

(1) God works in and through human beings, with their foibles and flaws, in the achievement of God's purposes, and God does not perfect them before deciding to work with them. God works with what is available, including such institutions in that ancient context involved in the waging of war and other governmental trappings. Violence will be associated with God's work in the world because, to a greater or lesser degree, violence is characteristic of the persons and institutions through whom that work is done. Thus, such work will always have mixed results and will be less than what would have happened had God chosen to act alone. Moreover, God does not necessarily confer a positive value on those means in and through which God works (e.g., Isa 47).

(2) Human beings will never have a perfect perception of how they are to serve as God's instruments in the world. Israel's perceptions were often expressed in terms of the direct speech of God. Inasmuch as this is a phenomenon rare in the New Testament, should we understand that Israel may have put into direct divine speech understandings they had gained through study and reflection rather than through an actual hearing of God's words? And they may not have fully or properly understood.

(3) That God would stoop to become involved in such human cruelties as violence is, finally, not a matter for despair, but of hope. God does not simply give people up to experience violence. God chooses to become involved in violence so that evil will not have the last word. In everything, including violence, God seeks to accomplish loving purposes. Thereby God may prevent an even greater evil. By so participating in our messy stories, God takes the road of suffering and death (e.g., Exod 3:7). Through such involvement, God absorbs the effects of sinful human efforts and thus suffers violence (not least because a divine promise of land for Israel lies behind the whole affair).¹⁰²

Violence as mercy and the deaths of innocents

Context of God's violence

Yahweh does not act capriciously and without warning. There is a pattern of the application of judgment.

1. Yahweh declares judgement for extreme sin.
2. Warnings are usually given and the opportunity to repent and avoid judgment is provided.
3. Yahweh usually makes it clear that He is responding to sin in the world and He is seeking justice for His children, passion for holiness,
4. someone is saved from the judgment before Yahweh's judgement is carried through.

God's violence is always in response to human violence.

God's acts of violence are not part of his nature but are a reaction to acts of human violence.

On Israel's first approach to Canaan, ten of the twelve spies sent into the land discouraged Israel from entering into the land, resulting in a 40-year wait in the wilderness, waiting for the adults to die in the wilderness before Israel would enter Canaan. As they first approached the territory, they asked to pass

¹⁰² T. E. Fretheim, *God and Violence in the Old Testament*

More Than Suffering

through the land of Amorites, but they were unsuccessfully attacked and Israel took control of the land. After that, the Bashanites unsuccessfully attacked Israel and Israel captured that land. The people of Jericho heard of the Israelites success, but did not surrender and so Israel captured that city.

The purpose of God's violence to restore justice in his creation.¹⁰³

The righteous think they have a just case to bring before God and they seek to motivate God to act on their behalf by claiming that they have "avoided the ways of the violent" (Ps 17:4). And then, when they have been delivered from violent people, they sing songs of thanksgiving (2 Sam 22:3, 49; Ps 18:48). The righteous are confident that God will see to a future when "violence shall no more be heard in your land" (Isa 60:18). Such a resolute divine opposition to human violence is important to remember in reflecting upon divine violence. In sum: if there were no human violence, there would be no divine violence. (God and Violence in the Old Testament, T. E. Fretheim)

One of the prominent points to note is that, other than Jericho and Ai, all the other battles were initiated by either attacking Israel directly or attacking an ally.

Using violence to prevent more violence

A common concern with the violence, is what about the children and other innocent people that will be hurt. Whether they recognize the responsibility or not, parents are acting as vice-regents in regards to their children, determining the welfare of their children – for good or for bad. In situations, as with the conquest of Canaan, the advent of war is usually given ahead of time which typically provides a warning period with opportunity for women, children and the elderly to flee.

When the battles did ensue, the children killed in these episodes were living in a depraved environment with a miserable outlook for the future (a future that they may not have even experienced as a result of the culture of child sacrifice pursued by their parents). Being killed by the sword was a more merciful way to die, especially when compared with abandonment and starvation that would have resulted if only the adults were killed.

Finally, death is not the end, and we can trust God to do what is right, not least of all with children who are not old enough to know any better.

Intergenerational violence

Many people are disturbed by the statement made in a few locations in the Old Testament, about punishing the children for sins of the fathers to the 3rd and 4th generation. Some clarifications need to be addressed in this statement.

- Some translations use the term "punish" but other versions use the better translation "visit," That is to say that God will witness the effects of the sins of one generation on the following generations. Since family structures in Old Testament times included up to 4 generations living in one location, it would be natural to see the effect of the oldest generation affecting the others.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Isaiah 40:1-2; 48:8-11

¹⁰⁴ Exodus 20:5:34:6-7; 14::18-19; Deuteronomy 5:9-10

More Than Suffering

- Setting the effect of sin to just 3rd and 4th generations also needs to be seen in contrast to the mercy shown to thousands of generations. Yahweh's mercy is greater than sin.
- This statement also needs to be set in contrast to Ezekiel's statement that the penalty for sin would only be applied directly to the sinner.¹⁰⁵

Other instances of mass killings

1. The Flood (Genesis 6-8)
2. The cities of the plain, including Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19)
3. The Egyptian firstborn sons during the Passover (Exodus 11-12)
4. The Amalekites annihilated by Saul (1 Samuel 15)

In the first three instances above, Yahweh is directly implementing the violence. And as per the discussion in "the context of violence," that violence was not done without plenty of warning. The Amalekites were constantly attacking Israel ever since the Exodus.

A few cultural notes

In many ways, our modern-day sanitized culture puts a distance between us and some of the everyday realities of violence. Some examples: Buying packaged meat from the butcher, without seeing the slaughter of the animals, People dying in the hospital and are sent to the morgue Instead of allowing us the honor hosting the dead at home.

For those of us who have more privileged lives where we don't directly experience violence done to us or loved ones, may have problems with a judgmental God. But those who are oppressed and do directly experience violence done to them or their loved ones desire God's judgment and His righteousness.

There is one expression that doesn't seem to align with the concept of forgiving our enemies and "turning the other cheek." The concept of "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" is an expression of *lex talionis*, a counter-cultural idea that the MAXIMUM penalty for a transgression should be not greater than the transgression itself.¹⁰⁶

Even with all these explanations we should expect that, in the end, God's violence is a mystery we cannot fathom. We cannot grasp why God allows violence to persist on earth.¹⁰⁷

Lament: Holding grief and hope during suffering

Bible is filled with Lament

The Bible is filled with lament. We see time and time again that when the God's people are faced with evil, injustice, oppression and turmoil, the Biblical response is often lament. Sometimes the lament is focused on ourselves, sometimes it is focused on others.

¹⁰⁵ Ezekiel 18:4

¹⁰⁶ Westminster Theological Center, *Old Testament Vengeance*, wtctheology.org.uk/theomisc/jesus-and-old-testament-vengeance/

¹⁰⁷ Jeremiah 30:24; Is 55:8

More Than Suffering

Then Jeremiah chanted a lament for Josiah. And all the male and female singers speak about Josiah in their lamentations to this day. And they made them an ordinance in Israel; behold, they are also written in the Lamentations¹⁰⁸.

Then David chanted with this lament over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the sons of Judah the song of the bow; behold, it is written in the book of Jashar.

"Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How have the mighty fallen!"¹⁰⁹

Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord. In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God."¹¹⁰

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken¹¹¹.

Hear my prayer, O LORD! And let my cry for help come to You. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my distress; Incline Your ear to me; In the day when I call answer me quickly.¹¹²

"For this, put on sackcloth, Lament and wail; For the fierce anger of the LORD Has not turned back from us¹¹³

'Cut off your hair and cast it away, And take up a lamentation on the bare heights; For the LORD has rejected and forsaken The generation of His wrath.'¹¹⁴

The Lord has become like an enemy He has swallowed up Israel; He has swallowed up all its palaces, He has destroyed its strongholds And multiplied in the daughter of Judah Mourning and moaning.¹¹⁵

"On that day they will take up against you a taunt And utter a bitter lamentation and say, 'We are completely destroyed! He exchanges the portion of my people; How He removes it from me! To the apostate He apports our fields.'¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁸ 2 Chronicles 35:25

¹⁰⁹ 2 Samuel 1:17-27

¹¹⁰ Psalm 10:1-4

¹¹¹ Psalm 13:1-4

¹¹² Psalm 102:1-2

¹¹³ Jeremiah 4:8

¹¹⁴ Jeremiah 7:29

¹¹⁵ Lamentations 2:5

¹¹⁶ Micah 2:4

More Than Suffering

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly.¹¹⁷

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."¹¹⁸

Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,¹¹⁹

Some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him.¹²⁰

Redeemed, not abandoned

Sometimes, in the midst of suffering we feel like God has abandoned us. We wonder where God is in the midst of our suffering. That's when we need to look to the cross. Jesus does understand our suffering, and there are things we don't suffer because He suffered for us. He completely took on the limitations of a human body, even to the point of experiencing being born as a human; growing as a human; being raised by a human man and woman; eating, sleeping and defecating as a human; being rejected, misunderstood, abandoned, spit upon, being tortured and dying as a human.

What He did in all that, was to redeem adverse circumstances, making them serve His purposes - taking situations meant for evil and turning them into something good. He can do the same work in our suffering, by redeeming our suffering, using our suffering to accomplish something good, whether that goodness is brought into our own lives or the lives of others.

Lament is not despair, but a cry directed to God

Lament recognizes that beyond the suffering and woundedness of current circumstances is a God who hears our prayers and who offers peace. Lament leans into the hope that the current suffering and pain is only temporary, and yet at the same time is unafraid to lay the pain of past and present before God asking for relief and unafraid to question why God has allowed these circumstances.

"Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and

¹¹⁷ Esther 4:1

¹¹⁸ Matthew 2:16-18

¹¹⁹ John 11:31-33

¹²⁰ Acts 8:2

More Than Suffering

the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are... The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament."¹²¹

Lament sees both the celebration at the end of days, and also the suffering of the present moment and holds both of those in tension, both are reality, the cause of both mourning and rejoicing. The past, the present, and the future are bound together, allowing us to fully recognize the suffering but knowing that it is not the end.

*"Soong-Chan Rah says that "lament recognizes the struggles of life and cries out for justice against existing injustices." My own lament connected me with God's call for justice and gave me a chance to understand my pain. Rah continues: "To only have a theology of celebration at the cost of the theology of suffering is incomplete. The intersection of the threads provides the opportunity to engage in the fullness of the gospel message. Lament and praise must go hand in hand."*¹²²

If we decide to cope with the present suffering by living in a hurry, by focusing only on the future, we can ignore the reality of the pain that we and others are feeling. God feels the suffering, too, and endures that pain along with us. We have a God who endured much suffering on our behalf, and He enters that pain with us and offers us the comfort of His presence. If we don't rest in the present moment, we can miss the presence of our Comforter.

To live in the present pain is also to live in the accumulation of all the past pain that has fed into the present moment; and we feel not only our personal pain, but the pain of others because we all are part of one body and the pain of one part of the body affects the other parts.

Underneath all the past and present suffering, is the sin that amplifies our pain. And we all have a part in that sin, sometimes it comes because of the sin of others, but sometimes it is our own sin, sometimes it comes from the sins of commission but sometimes from the sins of omission. Our own part may be smaller or larger, but it is a part – but lament calls for repentance and with repentance come healing.

My tears showed me a God who was still worthy of my praise in troubled times ... Crying out to the Lord showed me God's goodness because I could see that he cared about his people's pain. As my tears began to show me a fuller picture of God, my heart began to praise him with renewed joy and hope. My pain wasn't erased but was met with God's own tears, and I saw a God who was big enough to carry my pain and good enough to fight injustice. ...

The path to healing can more fully be sought if we take deliberate steps

Rest. We must learn to slow down and become more aware of our emotion and pain.

Remember. Remember the pain and injustices that have affected us individually and as a culture. When we refuse to remember our past, we refuse to acknowledge the hurt that

¹²¹ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice. *Reconciling All Things*, (pg. 78)

¹²² Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: Call for Justice in Troubled Times*

More Than Suffering

others are feeling. ... Remembering allows us to fully experience our emotions as well as those of our neighbors.

Repentance. As rest and remembrance lead us to mourn, we become aware of the part we have played in the world's injustice. Repentance is a godly response to our sin ... Lament without repentance stalls with tears. Repentance turns those tears into a healing force, for both ourselves and for others.

Recompense and Restitution. ... lament also requires that we make whole what injustice has broken. ... to make whole what we have broken out of obedience to the Lord."¹²³

In our lament we can pray most fully "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Our pain makes us most aware of our needs, that the world is not as it should be, that we await for the Lord's return for everything to be made whole. Our lament can draw us closer to draw near to the one in whose image we are made, who also experiences emotions.

Our most passionate prayers are when we are in the most pain. No one prays perfunctory prayers when they're in pain. Superficial prayers are replaced by genuine cries of the heart ... Complaining to God when you're in pain is a biblical act of worship – it's called lamenting. One third of the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms are psalms of lament ... All your emotions are God-given. You have emotions because you're made in God's image and God is an emotional God. In the Bible, God feels and expresses anger, grief, jealousy, frustration, and other negative emotions that we often try to suppress. ¹²⁴

Suffering from sin requires lament

The line between good and evil runs through each of our hearts. Until we and the earth are transformed, the cause of lament runs through each of us. We all participate in the suffering of the broken world and our lament should be shaped by that – a lament that begins with the recognition of the suffering of others and our contribution to that suffering, but a lament that leads to hope and the ultimate joy we find in forgiveness, our joy in the glory of God that we will fully experience in His presence when we are no longer encumbered by sin.

*... sin breeds suffering ... its effects ripple outward to impact untold others as well.... then, the way to healing from sin often leads through suffering, not around it. ... holy grief is also a creative act that leads us toward goodness. The good it produces is multifold. ... lament invites forgiveness ... lamenting sin does not mean despairing of restoration. Despair is the work of the Devil. By contrast, godly grief gives rise to hope. ... godly lament doesn't lead to morose isolation but rather binds us to both God and others ... Grief and lament move us closer to the joy of our ultimate desire: the radiant glory of God himself.*¹²⁵

¹²³ Paula Frances Price, "Lament as a Spiritual Practice" < thewell.intervarsity.org/spiritual-formation/lament-spiritual-practice >

¹²⁴ Rick Warren, God's Purpose in Your Pain, < www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/gods-purpose-in-your-pain >; e

¹²⁵ Han-luen Kantzer Konline. *Eat Phlegm. Chew Grass. Sit on a Pillar*, www.christianitytoday.com/2020/03/lent-desert-fathers-eat-phlegm-chew-grass-sit-pillar

More Than Suffering

End Note

The section of the Bible called the Old Testament has been often misunderstood. On a surface level, the portrayal of God in the Old Testament seems so different that the portrayal in the New Testament that some people ignore the Old Testament version altogether, even sometimes claiming that the Old and New Testaments are talking about two different gods.

But it is only by integrating the two Testaments that we can gain a fuller understanding of who God is and how we can better understand our part in Creation. It is not that our understanding will be complete, there is much we cannot understand. We will still need to lean into mystery of God and how he has shaped and will continue to shape us more into his image. Even though we are created as image-bearers, it is through our experiences that He will continue to refine our shape.

The shaping process is sometimes difficult, but we are never alone – although sometimes it will seem that way. Yahweh has created us to be in relationship with Himself – and that is a relationship of love and emotion. In Deuteronomy 6:5 we are told to *ahav* Yahweh with all our heart and soul and strength. *Ahav* has many dimensions from the responsibility of husband to “provide for and protect” his family and neighbors to the spontaneous, pleasurable feeling of sexual love. It encompasses our body, emotions and mind, all of who we are. But the all-encompassing love we have is only a response to the all-surpassing love that Yahweh has for us – He loves us with all of his being. And so it is with the suffering that we endure; we endure our suffering together with the One who loves us and suffers along with us.

Much of our suffering is due to the sin and injustice we endure – and that invokes anger from the One who cares for us. Yahweh allows sin and injustice, because He does not want to take away the freedom He gave us so that we could truly love Him as He loves us. For that sake, He limits His responses. He cannot totally ban injustice without revoking the freedom that allows us to love.

This anger is not a primary attribute of Yahweh but is a response to the sin that causes injustice. If there was no sin, there would be no anger. It is only because of our rebellion that our freedom has led to the sin that causes injustice and violence – and leads to Yahweh’s anger. And it is from that anger, that Yahweh sometimes uses violence as a means to address the sin and violence in the world as a means to bring justice.

Because Yahweh did not revoke our responsibility for the stewardship of His creation, that He uses humans to tools of His justice. But because of our rebellious nature, the humans used to bring about justice often go beyond what they should do and yet bring about more unnecessary violence and injustice. And the cycle goes on – and will go on until Jesus returns to fully establish His kingdom on earth.

In the meantime, our tragic situation leads us to lament. It is a lament we share with Yahweh. Our lament recognizes that sin runs through each of our hearts making us a part of the pain and suffering in the world. But our lament is not despair, because we still hold onto the hope that eventually all will be made right. And so our lament is directed to the One who will ultimately bring about justice and eliminate the sin, including the sin in our own hearts.

And that is the hope we cling to. And the One who loves us clings to us. We suffer together, lament together, love together, hope together – and someday we will rejoice together when the glory of Yahweh will be revealed. And part of that glory will be in how Yahweh has shaped us more closely in His image.