

From Suffering to Worship: A Pastoral Challenge.

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1. Introduction

The intention of this article is not to give an answer to the problem of theodicy which arises because of suffering in this world, but to move beyond the polemic and to give attention to how a person can worship God by finding meaning and hope in suffering. In giving a pastoral response this paper argues that the appropriate use of God images in suffering will help a person find meaning in suffering thus enabling him/her to become more positive in his/her faith and worship of God. Usually, when we reflect on worship, we do not put suffering and worship together. Yet suffering and worship are connected. Because the process of suffering enables us to become purer and humbler people, if we cooperate with God. It is the pure and humble who have truly learned to love God for who he is and to worship him most deeply.

2. A Philosophical Problem

From its very inception Christianity has been continually challenged on both the philosophical and pastoral level by the reality of suffering in the world. How do Christians who claim the goodness and comprehensive sovereignty of God explain the fact that the world we live in is pervasively evil and literally filled with instances of suffering, disease, tragedy, and horrific acts of violence? Any ordinary person will observe that this world at times may be characterized as a terrible place to live in. Yet, throughout these two millennia, believers in the Christian God have steadfastly maintained that God is both infinitely good and fully in command of the universe.

The “problem of suffering” touches Christianity at its core. It represents an apparent logical inconsistency with the claim that an omni-benevolent and all-powerful God exists in a world littered with the debris and carnage of human suffering. The problem of suffering sets forth the philosophical and pastoral challenge to understand how a good and powerful God, if He exists at all, could possibly allow His creatures to act as they do. Perhaps even more importantly, the problem of suffering reveals the necessity of supplying a sufficient foundation for the discovery of meaning and purpose in the midst of the massive tribulation and pain that this world inflicts upon men and women without discrimination, and the suffering that God apparently permits or is powerless to stop.

3. A Pastoral Response

In reality, the problem of suffering, in both its logical and evidential expressions, is a disturbing perplexity intrinsically related to the existence of the Judeo-Christian God and His alleged attributes more than a dilemma regarding the mere presence of pain and suffering itself. John Hick (1966:251) has insightfully observed this very point by noting that the problem of suffering does not attach itself as a threat to any and every concept of deity. It arises only for a religion, which insists

that the object of its worship is at once perfectly good and unlimitedly powerful. The challenge is thus too inescapable for Christianity, which has always steadfastly adhered to the pure monotheism of its Judaic source in attributing both omnipotence and infinite goodness to God.

Likewise, Ronald Nash (1988:178), a Christian theologian and philosopher, lays out the specific challenges confronting theists in the following propositions:

If God is good and loves all human beings, it is reasonable to believe that He wants to deliver the creatures He loves from evil and suffering.

If God is all knowing, it is reasonable to believe that He knows how to deliver His creatures from evil and suffering.

If God is all-powerful, it is reasonable to believe that He is able to deliver His creatures from evil and suffering.

The harsh realities of life, however, reveal that creatures loved by God do in fact suffer, apparently gratuitously in many cases, and often go to their graves unaware of any sense of purpose for their pain. This fact, for many, provides a philosophical basis for the probability that the God of Christian theism simply does not exist, or is, at least, much less good and powerful than He is assumed to be by believers.

Typically, traditional Christian theism has confronted the deductive problem of suffering by asserting that the existence of God and the presence of evil in the created order are not logically inconsistent propositions since God has good reasons for allowing evil to exist, and even flourish, in the world. Alvin Plantinga (1979:31), by means of his critically acclaimed *Free Will Defence*, has convincingly argued that the divine granting of moral freedom and responsibility to the creature necessarily entails the possibility of evil decisions and actions. A world containing creatures that are significantly free (*and* freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.

Most would agree that Plantinga's work on the *Problem of Evil* (1989) has sufficiently answered the deductive form of the challenge. Other traditional Christian theists, taking a somewhat different approach in responding to both the inductive and deductive forms of suffering, have proposed that God's sovereignty over the created order, including the choices and actions of moral agents, is logically consistent with the freedom to obey or disobey divine commands. D. A. Carson (1990:201), for example, presents the claims of what is known as theological compatibilism:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they

are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

Traditional Christian theism (TCT), while proposing various responses to the problem of suffering, has tenaciously affirmed God's all-encompassing sovereignty and unique attributes, namely His omnipotence and omniscience, even in the face of apparently gratuitous evils. More specifically, TCT recognizes that God possesses exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge of all future events, even the future choices and actions of moral agents. Though there does exist some measure of disagreement as to the exact relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, proponents of TCT are consistent in their belief that God knows the future with absolute certainty.

4. Applied Pastoral Care

In most South African congregations, people are confronted with the reality of suffering, which could be attributed to a number of factors including that of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the socio-economic situation. If we all could avoid the sufferings of the day or the moment, we will do it at all cost. No one likes pain or suffering encroaching on his or her life, but as a Christian it is something that one must go through. In fact suffering in the life of a Christian is inevitable.

It is for this very reason that a proper understanding of the meaning in suffering needs to be investigated. Many Christians because they fail to understand the meaning in their suffering rob themselves of the joy and maturity it can bring. We grumble and moan and curse to the point of doubt. Yet like gold in the hand of the gold smith, we are in the hands of God. The refining process of gold needs the fire to bring out its value, and impurities. What fire is to gold, suffering to a Christian? Thomas Cahill (1999: 130) states:

“In all the tragic dramas of antiquity, whether lived or staged, we detect a pattern: the hero, be it Alexander or Oedipus, reaches his pinnacle only to be cut down. Only in the drama of Jesus does the opposite pattern hold: the hero is cut down only to be raised up”.

The idea of suffering is inseparable from the New Testament concept of fellowship. If we are to walk along-side Christ and arm ourselves with the mind of Christ we will have to suffer in the flesh (1 Pt 4:1). To suffer as a Christian (1 Pt 4:16) means to share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pt 4:13).

Although such trails maybe attributed to Satan or our own personal choices that bring about the suffering, it is often said that coping with suffering is an art (Cabot and Dicks: 1959). This does not imply that a certain technique or attitude towards suffering can be taught through pastoral care, but rather, coping with suffering becomes an act of worship when a person sees an opportunity for growth in their suffering. Worshiping God while at the same time coping with suffering comes down to the following: putting meaning into suffering, trusting while everything seems futile and living in the face of death. Friedman 1985:5 states:

“Ultimately, survival depends upon existential categories: on vision, for example hope, on the imaginative capacity, on the ability to transcend the anxiety of those around us, and on a response to the challenge that suffering is an opportu-

nity for growth.”

Thus the crisis of suffering can be an opportunity for growth in life and faith, depending on the person's frame of reference, perception of life and understanding of God. So the pastoral response to the problem of suffering is to assist the person to understand the meaning in suffering and thus while, suffering worship God because of His faithfulness

5. Pastoral Care and the Quest for Meaning and Worship A Hermeneutical Approach

The pastor's responsibility is to try to find out: How the person understands God? And what interaction exists between the person suffering and their expectation of God? The therapeutic dimension of faith is closely connected with the person's concept of God (Louw: 1994:77). According to Louw the process of imparting meaning in pastoral care work with two presuppositions:

1. When people are in suffering or pain, their perception of God is distorted; this prevents constructive application of their faith potential and worship to God. Once a person's emotional filters are blocked their vision of God becomes distorted. Thus the quest for meaning becomes primarily a problem of a dysfunctional belief system; it becomes a problem of perception and worship. Ammon.E. Kasambala states that when one has a distorted image of God in times of suffering, this will lead to what he terms '*pathological faith*', thus finding it difficult to worship God.
2. The task of the pastor is the help the sufferer understand and interpret God in the light of suffering and, conversely to understand and interpret the person's experience of suffering in terms of God's involvement with suffering. The person's story must be put with God's story and vice a versa. Where the two stories converge the person discovers God's fulfilled promise and hope emerges. The discovery of God's faithfulness and a vision of Christ's resurrection result in that dynamic hope being realized. When suffering disturbs this vision, hopelessness ensues. Hope is strengthened when a person's concept of God once again becomes constructive and positive and frees the sufferer to worship God because of the hope he/she finds in Christ.

6. A Pastoral Hermeneutic: Images of God

This section of the article undertakes to work with the basic assumption which states that meaningful pastoral care ministry is given within the South African congregation when God-images are understood as people's understanding and experience of God in terms of human ideas, needs and expectations. And because of this reality the pastoral ministry in South Africa is challenged with the search for appropriate God-images to bring hope and meaning in suffering. For people in pain and suffering helpful God-images convey a sign of God's care and love, hence bringing hope to their situation of distress and despair. The reality of God's care and love within the Christian congregation is made eminent by these appropriate God-images. John Mbiti (1975:53) rightfully observes:

“since God is considered to do all things (creator of all things, sustaining, providing for what he has created, and ruling over the universe), since many of these activities are similar to those carried out by people, it is helpful to the imagination for people to picture God as if he has human characteristics. Such mental pictures are aids to our understanding of God; they illustrate meaning about God. It does not mean that God be looked on as a human being. These images have their limitation, but they nevertheless assist the mind to have a working knowledge of God. They also help people in communicating their idea about God. Other human images make people feel close to God even though he is their creator.”

Plude (1995), notes that the spoken word is the normal vehicle of faith. In our times the “word” also becomes images, colours and sounds. The notion of God-images is of great importance in giving pastoral care to people who are in suffering. It is important because people who are in suffering tend to hold different images of God, some of which could be classified as appropriate or helpful while others can be distorted or unhelpful. According to Depoortere (1995:2) “People in suffering either have helpful or unhelpful God-images.” Louw (1994: 80, 1998) and Tidball (1997: 283-285) remarks that helpful God-images are those images which enable people to come to terms with their situation and turn their faith into action by doing something about the condition of suffering that brings them to a place of devotion, obedience, gratitude, joy and hope which are elements of worship.

Some of the helpful images associated with God in times of suffering are:

God as a Companion: This image depicts God as one who walks with the sufferer, a God that is not transcendental but near (Heb 13:5).

God as Father: A God image that metaphorically represents God as provider, protector and a caring God (Ps 23).

God as Comforter: A concept of God that is used in times of death, disaster and calamity (Is 51:12).

God as Judge: A notion of God mostly in crisis, stressing the fact that good will always triumph over evil. At the end of suffering justice will prevail (Ps 19:9).

God as Friend: This expresses the notion that God is not distant. His presences implies that He is a Partner and Companion (Pr 18:24, Jn 15:13-15).

7. Conclusion

The question could be asked: What is the meaning in suffering? From a Christian perspective it is an opportunity to:

1. Discover more of God's love, grace and mercy and the knowledge that God is indeed involved.
2. Be better equipped to take account of the mystery and inexplicability of suffering in the knowledge that, in his covenantal faithfulness, God is still in control.
3. By long suffering a believer learns to merely depend upon God in the knowledge that God sustains supports and hold him/her:

The South African Baptist Journal of Theology

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