

THE FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

Why should humans suffer?

Is suffering always punishment?

Why should the innocent suffer?

What—if any—is the value of suffering?

The questions are as old as the human race, and are not solved by clichés or trite answers. Many ancient religions have struggled with the concept of suffering, and have tried to find a way around it, or even to use it. It is often those who suffer little who most dread the thought of suffering. Many who have suffered much spend little time to consider the subject as something in itself.

The author is interested in the biblical treatment of the theme. He explores suffering that comes in forms of judgement, punishment, retribution and chastisement. He then takes us beyond these first confrontations of suffering and brings us into the realms of Divine Suffering. Christ, as God's Suffering Servant, shows that God is the God who suffers, though not in the sense that He is the victim of suffering. It is suffering which primarily reveals the nature of love. For us to witness to God's love means we too must learn to suffer.

This little book should not only prove interesting, but practically helpful to those who face suffering.

Geoffrey Bingham (1919-2009), an Anglican clergyman, a teacher of interstate and international experience, was a missionary with the Church Missionary Society, Principal of the Pakistan Bible Institute and of the Bible College of South Australia, an Executive Director of New Creation Ministries.



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NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia, 5051

2012

First published 1980
First edition in book form 1987
Reprinted 1993
Second edition 2012

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National Library of Australia card number and

ISBN 978 0 86408 313 5

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Published by
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
Coromandel East, South Australia

www.newcreation.org.au

General Foreword

The series *Living Faith Studies* was commenced in 1975, under the title of *Masters' Classes* which were intended as materials to be used by pastors and teachers. The idea was that I would gather together materials from available bibliography and add that dash of co-ordination and understanding that I possessed. The studies were put into note form, each one being bound.

Because the title *Masters' Classes* scared some who might otherwise have read them, it was decided to call them *Living Faith Studies*. Over a period of five years, fifty studies were formed. They were put out in A4 paper format, and hence difficult to display in bookshops. It was then decided to turn them into the present series.

Thematic writing has its drawbacks simply because themes are abstracted from the Scriptures where, in fact, they are not presented thematically. No one theme can be properly treated since its context is a holistic one. Even so, much that is useful can be achieved by thematic research and presentation.

It is with the hope—and trust—that these books may be valuable to readers that we publish them. They require serious reading, the looking up of the biblical references nominated and, where possible, the use of books nominated in the Bibliographies.

Geoffrey Bingham

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Foreword

How does one write a foreword to a treatment of the subject of suffering? The whole human race shies away from pain, disturbance and trouble. It recognises—with some natural sanity—that most of our suffering comes from error, sin and failure which we have done. At this point God is out of the picture. Much of our suffering can be explained along natural lines. We can observe—for the most part—that which causes us trouble and suffering.

However, that is not the whole story. We face so much suffering that does not apparently come from wrong we have done, and we are at loss to explain it. If we have some kind of belief in God as Creator, then we feel He has missed out handling His creation. So many human beings are angry with God, and their anger is along these lines.

What we do not take into consideration is the strange way in which conscience and guilt work to make us uneasy in life. Because we are insecure we often panic, even hitting out at God and others, or building up fires of anger within ourselves, which one day explode fearfully, bringing disastrous results.

This little book—all too small—is an attempt to give some kind of rationale for suffering. No one has ever succeeded in doing so, and it is scarcely likely this book will achieve it. What it does, however, is to show us that being made in the image of God, that

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since God can be said to suffer, then suffering is not alien to true personal being. Suffering must have a great point in the order of things.

Not until we get into the heart of that suffering will we understand. That is why this little book is called *The Fellowship of Suffering*. Fellowship (sharing the matter) will alone give an entrance to understanding the point and value of suffering. It can then be that our comprehension of the mystery of God will spread far beyond the matter of suffering which, itself, is a kind of foyer into the great House of God.

Knowing as I do the areas of suffering which must be ‘felt’ rather than ‘tel’t’, and realising the limitations of any book on the subject, I trust that the material in this volume will be of great help, and alleviate that element of pain which need not be felt, even in the deepest of suffering. The pain is often compounded of fear, self-pity and anger, whereas suffering can really be rich in joy, since true suffering is not for oneself, but for others, and—in a sense—for God.

1

Introduction: Peace Is the Goal

What is it that causes man to believe that total joy and total serenity are the ideal for man? We mean, why should man see the states of joy and serenity as to be desired above other things? The answer is that it appears natural for man to be free from fear, pain, suffering and sorrow. Indeed this too appears to be the case in Scripture. The passages of Revelation 7:16–17 and 21:1–5—amongst other passages—represent eternity as a place devoid of suffering, sorrow and death. The ideal ultimate shown in the Old Testament in such passages as Isaiah 11:6–9, 65:17–25 and 66:22–23 is also of serenity and bliss. In any case most human beings desire cessation of strife, tension, fear, cruelty, greed, pain and suffering.

The present facts of man's existence are that pain, suffering, tension, sorrow, cruelty, selfishness, terror and horrific happenings are all part of his normal existence. The dream of a wholesome change, whilst persistent, seems by nature of the case impossible. In order to have some relief from the confrontation of suffering, the mind seeks a rationale which will, at the least, give some purpose and meaning to what appears otherwise to be arbitrary and pointless, a useless imposition upon the human race.

There are many such rationalisations, some religious, some philosophical and they make their appeal according to the

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mind-set of the one who accepts this or that explanation. Whether or not they can prove, in the ultimate, to be satisfying is simply a matter of opinion. It is certain that suffering is to most an enigma, and to many it is the cause of anger and indignation. So much so that many are angry with the Deity which caused the universe to come into existence, or as others see it the blind and alien forces which work the fate of the human race and the universe in which it lives.

There is a Christian rationale of suffering. The most painful element of suffering for those who have no faith, is not understanding its meaning, purpose and value. If there were even a sliver of purpose which could be detected in suffering, then the sufferer could know an element of relief. The biblical view of suffering certainly explains much of man's pain, and tells the man of faith that it is not, in the ultimate, pointless. We emphasise that it is only to the man of faith that the biblical view is intelligible.

2

The Time of No-Suffering

The accounts of the creation in Genesis, chapters one and two, give us a picture of initial serenity, purpose, and lack of pain and suffering. Creation, when completed, is said to be, 'very good'. Whilst it is *not good* for man to be alone, creation in one sense is not complete until man and woman constitute two discrete entities yet are one flesh. This having happened, all is good, i.e. functionally good. A wider view of the Scriptures informs us that man correlates with God in his essential being. God's essential Being as Creator, Father and King demands man's essential being as correlating in the elements of creature, son and subject. Man therefore is contingent upon God, and as such he exists and lives in fulness. This is the time of no-suffering.

The positive elements of the no-suffering are that man is in harmony with God and His creation. There is harmony between human beings. A mandate has been given to man so that his existence is purposeful, and there are indications of a goal or goals. Such can be seen by reading Genesis 1:26–31, 2:15–17. Man, then, was purposeful, at one with God in His creational purposes. Because of this, the elements of guilt, fear, tension, anger, suffering and so on were absent. Man was serene, guiltless, and doubtless was joyful, purposeful, and enjoyed the creation in which he lived.

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This is inferred by the placing of him in a garden in which it is said each tree was good for food and pleasant to the eyes. The positive relationship of man with God, and man with his fellow-creatures and fellow-human beings all made for no suffering, and for total peace and joy, with purpose.

This situation no longer obtains. Why that is so we must discover. What we discover must form the basis of our biblical rationale of suffering.

3

The Beginning of Suffering

One of the most powerful books on theodicy is P. T. Forsyth's, *The Justification Of God* (New Creation Publications Inc., Coromandel East, 1988). Forsyth would be the last to seek to vindicate God and so no explanation ought to be tendered in order to do this. Nevertheless the Scriptures do vindicate God in the matter of suffering within the creation. In other words, we are saying that in the ultimate, God is shown to be the God of holy love, and has made no mistake within His universe, though all appearances may appear to be contrary to this claim. Primarily we see that sin is basic to the suffering man's experiences, although all suffering by no means relates to sin.

ABDICATION FROM HARMONY

If we see the biblical view of creation is that God is good and all He creates is good, then there can be no evil innately within that creation. The problem of Satan and his forces of evil, and man and his rebellion, must be considered. Some theologians see in Genesis 1:2, 'The earth was without form and void', the idea of a former creation become a chaos by some former fall, rather than simply

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inchoate at this point. This could be so. Others see the creation of celestial creatures, including Satan and other angels, as prior to creation, and this seems to be borne out by Job 38:4–7 where the ‘sons of God’—understood as the angels—‘shouted for joy’ when the terrestrial creation was effected. It is assumed that evil began with the rebellion of Satan against God (cf. Revelation 12:1ff.). The use of Ezekiel 28 to trace the origins of Satan could lead us to believe either that Satan was created prior to Adam, and sinned prior to Adam, or that his sin was to tempt Adam he, at that point, having become inordinately proud of his own beauty, and perhaps jealous of Adam’s unique glory.

Whether celestial evil began prior to Adam, or subsequent to his creation, is not the point. Satan and his followers are shown to be evil. Adam, in his abdication from his relationship with God, is also shown to be evil. The origin of evil is not discussed. It may well be that we cannot use the same term ‘origin’ in regard to evil as we can in regard to that created by God. What is not created by God does not have ontological reality, but only seeming reality. Augustine thought of sin as the negation of the good. Evil cannot exist except where there be good.

None of this discussion gets us very far. What we do know as objective biblical fact is that man lived in harmony with God, the creation, and his fellow human beings until he rebelled against God. The passages of Genesis chapter 3, Romans 1:18–32 and Romans 5:12ff. show us the results of man’s sinning. Put together they are as follows:

- (a) Man lost full relationship with God, and in that sense died to God, coming alive to himself.
- (b) Man knew division between himself and his fellow-beings.
- (c) Physical death of a certain kind passed on to the whole human race. Sin now ruled over man, as did also death, and each by virtue of the other.
- (d) Man, in rejecting God, turned to idols with—perhaps, simultaneous—elements of sexual immorality, homosexuality and all forms of rebellion and evil.

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Put another way, man became both depraved and deprived. Evil invaded every part of his personality. His mind-set was fleshly, i.e. egocentric and against God. This caused the breaking of true relationships with God, the creation, his fellow-beings and himself. Much of man's sufferings can be shown to be just this loss of serenity, peace, joy and purposeful vocation, as also a failure to understand the essential nature of the creation in which he lives, and the functional nature of its laws and principles.

Man can be said to be a creature (and a people) without true knowledge of God, creation, himself and others. Hence he is malfunctional because of his will and lack of true knowledge. He is dislocated, disjointed, dysfunctional, awry. He is deprived of true emotional fulfilment in that he has denied himself all authentic relationships, thus bringing upon himself dissatisfaction, emotional deprivation, guilt-experiences and so fear, loneliness, purposelessness and similar elements. Obviously his actions are going to land him in all sorts of misery, reaction, and the like. His chosen egocentricity is going to bring him into conflict with God, the creation, his essential self, and others. Such conflict produces anger, fear, jealousy, rivalry, and results in suffering to himself and others. His best relationships will be impregnated with his own self-seeking, so that genuine love cannot be said to exist in him.

Without this foundation of understanding, it will be difficult for any person to have the key to much of the suffering man endures. Even those who have it tend to veer off into other (and lesser) explanations of suffering in the world.

SUFFERING AND THE NATURE OF GOD

At this beginning of man we must see that God is not a passive factor in man's suffering. Man had been warned against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He had been told he would die were he to eat of it (Genesis 2:15–17,; cf. 3:2–7, 11). It was God who made death to be the outcome of sinning (Romans 5:12ff.). In Romans 5:12 both sin and death are pictured as two entities entering the world through man's disobedience. In one

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sense these are consequences man brought down upon himself. In another sense they are the judgement of God.

A weakness of (sinful) human thinking is that man equates true love with no judgement. This cannot be so. From what we know of human love we know that it is indignant where there is wrong, otherwise there would be no true moral sense. It would not be love if it were not angry with cruelty. Also true love demands recognition of evil and, where it is necessary, some kind of judgement, and even punishment. Love that is not clean, righteous and holy is not essentially love. It is true that our emotions often turn to pity, amelioration of judgement, and the like, but then love which is not tough will ultimately fail to do its job.

Having said all of this we will see that God is basically merciful, gracious and forgiving. Even so, none of this is a contradiction of His love, and none of it may be against His holiness. We conclude then that man, having rebelled against God, has opened himself to the proper anger and judgement of God. What is primarily puzzling to human beings is how it is that God can be both loving and a Judge. That we will seek to understand.

What, however, must be concluded is that the beginning of suffering happened when man rebelled against God, and so against His creation, including man's own fellow-beings. Man, in a sense, also rebelled against his own true (created) personhood.

4

The Suffering Which Comes from Man's Sin

SUFFERING RESULTING FROM HUMAN SIN

We must not be surprised if sinful man cannot comprehend the nature of sin, seeing he is involved in it, and cannot be objective about it. However, in the light of Romans 1:20ff., we know that man has rejected the nature of God, the creation, himself and others. Hence he suffers from lack of true knowledge, i.e. lack of truth. We are told he did not wish to retain God in his knowledge. Hence he cannot ascribe the suffering he sees around him to his own sin. Romans 5:12 tells us that both sin and death entered via (rebellious) man. This means that his refusal to keep the functional law of the functional creation, i.e. the law of love, holiness and righteousness, has landed him in grievous sin and crime. It can only be said that his perverse use of the universe, and egocentric actions have brought much of the suffering man knows. Thus wars, genocides, rapes, cruelty, self-aggrandisement all bring to

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the human race the suffering which springs from mankind itself. Whilst it is a favourite pastime to accuse others of these forms of evil, the same elements are in all the human race. Our point is that *they cannot be laid at God's door*.

Even those who admit man is responsible for the major part of suffering still accuse God concerning it. They say He ought to do something about it. The Bible indicates that He does a lot about it, but never before time, as also never after time. It is our assessment which demands either *immediate action* or ultimately, *no action*. God passes over nothing, but He does not act according to a sinful demand for action.

What is generally demanded is that God act with violent and selfish men to prevent them from doing evil. It may well be that God does more of this than we can even imagine, but at no point does God violate the wills of human beings. He may bring pressures and influences to bear to change attitudes or actions, but He does not violate the freedom, even, of sinful wills. Man being in His (self-determinative) image is permitted to will what he wills, and so often he wills the evil which causes suffering to his world. Much criticism by one person of another is done in the interests of jealousy, or anger at having failed to achieve or acquire what the other has effected.

We can say then that much, if not most, of man's evil comes from his own actions. Yet there are other elements in which the personal sin of a sufferer is not primarily the cause. This is the case when one person suffers as the result of the sin of another, e.g. death through the careless driving of another, blindness caused in a child by the venereal disease contracted by a parent. Much of the world's suffering can be seated home to the selfishness of others. Again there is a protest which arises from many that God does not handle His universe properly. Hence the cry of Omar Khayyam:

Ah, love! could Thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire.
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's desire.

The Suffering Which Comes from Man's Sin

It is of course a shallow cry, for the author presupposes his wisdom is greater than that of God. It is the old pattern of laying the blame of all things upon God. There is no deep attempt to understand the moral predicament which is brought about by man's free will, and God's ordered universe. For this reason we need more deeply to examine the fixed order of things, with the purposeful moving forward of all things to the appointed goal, and the incorrigible wills of fallen human beings. Not until we examine these can we come to some worthwhile understanding of the nature of the suffering of the world. In order to understand even these we must have objectivity which is rare in human beings.

MAN'S INABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE TRUTH OF GOD

We have more than hinted that man does not have the disposition to know God or understand the truth of things as they really are. Many will protest that they do wish to understand things as they are. They point to the reasonably objective enquiries of science. Certainly man does come to understand the natural functional uses and principles of much of creation, but the whole he cannot see apart from faith's enquiry and an acceptance of the revelation of the Scriptures. This is because of the nature of man's thinking. We mean not his *ability* to think but the *bias* of his thinking.

Psalm 14:1 says, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."' It adds, 'They are corrupt. They do abominable deeds.' The meaning is, 'Men say there is no God so that they can feel free to do what they will'. Paul, in quoting this Psalm, adds, 'No one understands, no one seeks after God'. All of this means that man is not concerned to know God. We see then that when Romans 1:21f. says, 'They became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming themselves to be wise, they became fools', it must mean that man's intellectual ability was not dimmed, but rather his sinful bias prevented his ever knowing

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the truth. Hence Paul says (1 Corinthians 2:14), ‘The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness unto him’, and Jesus says, ‘Except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God’, and both mean that man does not have the will to know the truth. This is why Jesus often cries, ‘He that has an ear to hear, let him hear’. Sinful man then has not a right attitude to understand suffering, for *understanding is not primarily a matter of the intellect, but of the will.*

Even given in that man may wish to know the truth, he can only know that degree or area of truth which can be understood by reason of his humanity, for man lacks essential deity. Isaiah 55:8–9 says that man’s thoughts are not God’s thoughts, nor man’s ways God’s ways. It contrasts the Word of God with the word of man. Even so, if man would understand then there would be nothing hid from him which were necessary to his maturity of personhood. Deuteronomy 29:29 says that the things which are hidden belong to God, but the things revealed to us are ours *to do them.*

From another point of view man cannot bear to know the truth. It would outline his own sinfulness, rebellion against God, and his moral failure. His guilt is a preventative against knowing God. Also the knowledge of God would be confronting, demanding moral response. Man prefers to remain in ignorance of God. For the time, the suffering in the world constitutes man’s great argument against the goodness of God, and how could he surrender *that?* Man’s many questions are not so much sane enquiries as they are in the mood of accusation. By nature of the case it is impossible to answer such. Even if the answers could be logical they would not be received. A logical answer can even be infuriating to the questioner, especially if his own question is intended as a smokescreen to cover himself!

This does not mean that man cannot intellectually appreciate answers given if he will! The Spirit of God is ever working (John 16:7–11) and he brings men and women to a point of desperation and necessity where they will thus begin to listen. By the aid of the Word and the Spirit men can come to hear God, and even to know Him.

THE ANSWER TO SUFFERING CAUSED BY MAN'S SIN

There is, of course, no direct answer. Man, causing much of his own suffering, can lessen such suffering only if he lessens his sin. This he is unable to effect. He often recognises the evil he brings about, and the suffering which results. He is often moved by this to seek to limit the evil of man. An example of this is the attempts in recent years to limit wars, or to ameliorate their causes, all of this by direct action. Young men refuse to fight. Others seek to bring about better social conditions. Such attempts may be highly commendable, and even achieve certain success. The vision put forth is that if all men would do the same then wars would cease, and social conditions effect changes in society. It is a vexed question. Simplistic rejection of it would say that it cannot succeed whilst simplistic acceptance of it assumes the humanistic estimate of man, i.e. man can succeed if he would try. A realistic view is that much can be achieved if only some will attempt something. Realistically we have to take into account the selfishness of mankind. It is this realism which angers those who think man can eliminate suffering, and those who think that the elimination of even some suffering is impossible.

We must then conclude that man has no right to lay the responsibility upon God for much of the pain and suffering that is in the world. It comes from man's sinfulness, selfishness, hatred and greed. He must not blame God for not changing the unruly wills of people. He must not criticise Him because He does not alter the actions of men, and the consequences of those actions. Finally man must accept the principle with God that he finds in the world about him, namely that of retribution.

This leaves us free then to examine the nature of suffering, both its good and evil effects, and insofar as we can understand, its ultimate usefulness and purpose.

5

Suffering and Judgement

SIN AND FREE WILL

We have already seen that much of man's suffering comes from the selfish and sinful use of his will. What man decides to do, he then seeks to do. Hence he must take the consequences of his actions. The question of whether man's will is truly free has been debated both biblically and otherwise, i.e. psychologically, philosophically. Much of the biblical view lies in the following:

Man is made in God's image, and God is self-willing. Hence man will be a moral creature, i.e. make his own decisions. These may be good or bad. Normally man should will in conformity with the nature of things-as-they-are, i.e. God as He is, man as he is, and the creation as it is. Man should understand this God–man–creation complex and decide accordingly. His rebellion against God and his re-rationalisation of all things means his decisions will not always (if ever) be in congruity with things-as-they-really-are. Hence his use of will can cause much harm and suffering.

In John 8:31–36 Jesus discusses the freedom of will, indicating that man's will is in bondage because of sin. He is a slave of sin. Other Scriptures make this point such as Proverbs 5:22–23 and 2 Peter 2:19. The forces of Satanic evil also oppress man into

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further evil decisions. (See 2 Timothy 2:25–26; Ephesians 2:2; Hebrews 2:14–16; 1 John 5:19.) Man-in-sin does not see his will as bound. He makes clear choices of will and follows them. In practice he appears to be free. Could he then make other real choices?

THE EFFECTS OF SINFUL CHOICES

Adam is a case in point. Having sinned, he was afraid of God. In his guilt he hid, seeking to cover himself. The effect of fear is to see oneself as alienated from God, and this fear develops into hatred. In Cain's case it manifested itself in hatred of Abel. 1 John 3:10–12 expounds this, and 1 John 4:20 rounds off the argument, i.e. the one who does evil and does not love his brother is of Satan and not of God. To say one loves God and hates one's brother is a lie. Cain hated Abel before the non-acceptance of the sacrifice he offered to God. The result was that, he killed his brother Abel, whom he hated. Romans 5:10, Romans 1:30 and Colossians 1:21 show man to hate God *from the heart*. Man of course suffers from such hatred since it is not creationally natural or functional.

EFFECTS AND JUDGEMENT

When God brought the *principle of judgement* into view, Cain objected to the sentence as harsh. Genesis 4:13–14 shows this: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear'. Obviously God had overestimated it! In regard to the measure of judgement, Abraham commented, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Theodicy (when expounded) shows that God's judgements are always right. If they are not then God is partial, unjust, arbitrary in decision, and so out of conformity with His own law and the holiness which the Scriptures claim for Him. If He punishes some and not others, or if He passes over sins and does not exact judgement, then there is no moral sense or stability in the universe. It may be that man—

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like Cain and others—is angered against His judgements, that they should be unquestionable in character.

Romans 1:18 shows that God’s wrath is revealed upon men for suppressing the truth in (acts of) unrighteousness. This is called wickedness. It is transgression of the law. It is rebellion against the created order (and functioning) of things, and warrants judgement. Romans 2:1–11 shows that man earns the judgement of God by the evil he does and that the judgement is ‘righteous judgement’. Revelation 20:11–15 shows that the ultimate judgement is in accordance with what persons have done, not for anything else. A close study of Scripture shows that God never judges before the time, e.g. God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 15:12–16 in which due judgement on both Egypt and the Amorites is prophesied. *God will do nothing before the time*, nor after it, for that matter. The same principle is shown in the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8), and in Revelation 6:9–11 (cf. 2 Peter 3:1–7), that God will judge *speedily*, i.e. will not be tardy though it appears that way to men, and even to the saints. Romans 3:25 and Acts 17:30 make it seem that God had been tardy but in fact this was not the case.

The effect, then, of sinful choices, is to bring the judgement of God upon evil. It is a basic tenet and maxim of Scripture that no sin will go unpunished in the ultimate. It is also basic that judgement will never be premature or belated.

JUDGMENTS IN TIME AND ETERNITY

Whilst we cannot here deal with the entire matter of judgement, yet we can be sure that some suffering results from judgements in time and beyond time. P. T. Forsyth once said that conscience is that which makes man man, makes him one, and makes him eternal. He meant that moral values have not only temporal but eternal connotation. Man’s conscience tells him wrong matters not only for the time it convicts. The Scriptures point to certain immediate, temporal judgements such as the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, destruction of certain nations (e.g. the Canaanites), the deaths of Ananias, Sapphira and Herod Agrippa. There are

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many more. They all lead us to the conclusion that God judges and executes punishment. This is what many will not have as the truth concerning God and His creation.

‘THE LORD IS A GOD OF JUDGEMENT’

This is a statement of Isaiah 30:18. Seen in its context, judgement is grace. In the Scriptures the terms *judgement* and *justice* are virtually the one. We have mentioned that God is neither over-hasty nor tardy in His judgements. We will need to see this in large measure, but if God lingers in His judgements then He leaves men in their guilts which, in fact, is the most painful form of judgement. Romans 1:18–32 shows God giving man up to his own sin, and this is His wrath, His way of punishing man. In this sense it can be said that God’s judgement such as in the case of the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the destruction of the Canaanites was merciful, both to those who received punishment, and to posterity. Those who received judgement were cut off from their own evil-doing, and the continuing effects of their evil were stopped. Such drastic forms of judgement may not suit our generation which has seen, and inflicted as much (if not more) cruelty and suffering as any generation in history. The infliction has come directly from man, however much it may prove, in the ultimate, to be a judgement of God. Man is responsible for his own evil and must expect just retribution. Retribution alone can give man dignity; otherwise he is treated as a stupid and irrational being, wholly under contempt, from whom God can expect nothing in the way of true moral sense and behaviour.

We see in the first judgement—that in Eden—that man must suffer, woman must suffer, and Satan must (eventually) suffer. So, in some sense, must the earth, but not for its own sake, but for man’s sake. In this the justice and judgement of God is expressed. The creational *terms* for living are not altered, but some of the *modes* are. Woman will suffer in child-birth, man will now earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. These were not the original Eden conditions.

As man lives on the earth we see the death-fruits of the Fall.

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Man is not excepted from judgement. Probably no human being could be objective enough to see or understand the *justice* of God's *judgements*. No human being can compute the nature of the Fall, the depths into which man has fallen, or the innate evil of his heart. True, the Scriptures describe these elements, but who then, can receive them? Man's complaint is often that the justice of God is too severe, and His judgements harsh and repressive. Abraham's cry, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' was not so much a strong affirmation, as a lever to get God to do what Abraham wanted!

Much of man's complaint about suffering is along the lines that God is too severe in His judgements (i.e. punishments) and that He has not handled His universe as He ought to govern it. Man's deepest problem in suffering is in what appears to him to be the irrational or inexplicable nature of it. His rebellion against God prevents him from seeing its rationality and its true rationale. On the human level adults can remember their rage, resentment, chagrin, and bitterness as they reacted to adult justice, judgements and punishments. Hence the various judgements described in Scripture will be met by subjective assessments of sinful human beings, and will themselves (i.e. the judgement) be judged and condemned, and God along with them. The only other escape is to say that the judgements were seen by the writers of Scripture to emanate from God when in fact they could not. Such comments would come from moderns who will not allow a God who judges and punishes.

THE JUDGEMENTS OF ISRAEL

In the Old Testament the law was not so much a body of legislation as it was *instruction*. That is man was taught how to live by the law. Psalm 119 is a powerful exposition of this fact. The words law, work, precept, commandment, are interchangeable. Justice was a judgement in respect to how the law was to be obeyed, and as to how it would help. The word law (*torah*) became identified, gradually with justice (*mishpat*) and Israel was expected to live in *mishpat* for God was the God of *mishpat*. This then was the right way and the best way of living, i.e. by *torah* and *mishpat*.

Suffering and Judgement

This idea extended to God's action relating to *torah* to His active *mishpat*, and this action was judgement, i.e. *mishpat*, involving both justice and judgement, that is, justice by judgement. This accords with Isaiah 30:18 (and context), 'for the Lord is a God of judgement'.

When, then, Israel is judged, it is judged not that it may be destroyed but that it may be redeemed. This rationale of judgement is found in the prophets. It also extends to the nations. It is eschatological, not only for Israel but for the nations. Primarily Israel will be saved by the judging of the evil, hostile nations. This judgement is known as the Day of the Lord. The principle is also given in Psalm 96:13 where all creation is to rejoice because:

the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

It can be seen then that Israel under judgement is not dismayed so much by the judgements of God as it is encouraged, even under those judgements, to believe that God will ultimately vindicate His people. All the great promises of the Covenant, the Kingdom, Messianic deliverance and the like are given under the very stress of God's *mishpat* as Israel experiences it in judgement.

This takes us back to the Pentateuch where God tells Israel He has chosen the nation from all the nations of the earth, but not for any intrinsic merit of the people (Deuteronomy 7:6). That is what binds Israel to obedience, i.e. God's grace of choice. The chapter then goes on to warn Israel against disloyalty under threat of judgement. The latter chapters of Deuteronomy intensify this teaching. Chapter 32 is a powerful song of Moses in which he speaks largely of God's judgements where Israel refuses to act commensurate with its privileges.

Doubtless a more detailed study is required to grasp the principle perfectly, but the same principle must obtain for all men created of God. Whilst Israel undoubtedly has special privilege, yet God does not act with partiality. This background helps us to understand the New Testament view of judgement and justice.

THE GOSPEL AND JUDGEMENT

God had judged Israel, driven the nation into exile and repatriated it. Idolatry had been driven from its midst, yet the nation was in need of repentance if the Kingdom were to come, as also for its coming. John the Baptist gave out that message. He aligned himself with Isaiah 40:1ff. This passage announces forgiveness to Israel, and a cessation of judgement. Christ is aligned with this same word. He shares in the baptism of repentance with a view to the Kingdom, and the forgiveness of sins of the nation.

In the Gospel of the Kingdom he announces judgement upon those who will not align with the Messianic Kingdom. At the same time he gives the good news of release and healing. His message polarises the nations, so much so that one section hate him and his disciples and plan to destroy him, and consequently crucify him. The Sanhedrin (i.e. the Jewish parliament) not only reject his message, but that of the apostles, following the resurrection and the events of Pentecost. Israel does not align with the teaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The message is first delivered to Jews, and then to Gentiles. Because of the Cross, God now commands men everywhere to repent, and also to obey the Gospel. There is judgement for those who do not. There are not only judgements for those of Israel, but for all men, especially for those who hear the Gospel and disobey.

JUDGEMENTS OF THE END TIME

The New Testament speaks (Matthew 25:31ff.) of the judgement which will come to the nations at the end of time. Other passages speak in similar terms. The Gospel must be preached to all the nations so that some may be saved, and others come under the judgement for rejection of the Gospel, as also for their sins. The Book of the Revelation speaks of two kinds of judgement: (a) those judgements of plagues and wrath which are poured upon the earth; and (b) the judgements at the end time before the great white throne. The evil forces of Satan, including the beast and the false prophet are all judged and committed to punishment.

ETERNAL PUNISHMENT AND SUFFERING

Suffering and Judgement

It is difficult to prove that such will not be the case. Many commentators have expressed dissatisfaction with what the Scriptures appear to say when they speak of eternal punishment. Without linguistic wrangling it seems impossible to disprove eternal punishment. That is there is posed for us a suffering which is eternal. Doubtless the thought is repugnant, and that is why there have been attempts to ameliorate the blunt language of Scripture. It would be more honest to admit the Scripture says there will be such punishment and disagree with the principle than to seek to show that it does not say what is apparent. Some commentators have solved the problem by saying that the fires of punishment are eternal, but none suffers in them eternally. This poses the natural question, 'Why do fires of punishment go on burning when they are not needed?'

CONCLUSION AS TO SUFFERING AND JUDGEMENT

This section on judgement is vital to understanding why man suffers. He suffers by reason of his disjunction with the created order of his universe. He is out of harmony with its essential functional and ordered nature. He does not align with its purposes and (so) progression. He does not move towards its goal. He seeks to be autonomous in the world he has rationalised according to his own wisdom.

That would be suffering enough, but then God insists on being present to every, molecule and atom of His creation. It is His. Hence He judges all that is out of line with the essential nature and function of His universe. That which opposes His creation He will judge and punish. Even so that judgement is no end in itself. Because He is the God of love and grace He turns even the wrath of man to His praise. His own wrath highlights the need of man to be redeemed, and He provides that redemption. The outcome of His actions of wrath and judgement should be, ideally, to drive men to grace and so to their redemption. Rejection of such grace can only result in further hardening of the sinful heart, and the judgement which comes from rejected grace.

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All of this is said to show that man suffers by reason of many things, and the elements which we have named cannot be seated home to God as though they were His fault. Man, for the most part, suffers by reason of sin—i.e. his and the sin of others. In none of this can God be charged with partiality, harshness, or lack of love. Man must accept the bulk of suffering as originating from, or being caused by, his own rebellion and sinfulness.

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Some Elements of Punishment and Suffering

THE SUFFERING THAT COMES FROM SIN

The *kinds* of suffering man experiences relate to the kinds of judgement which come upon him. As we have noted, man's suffering intensifies when he does not know *why* he is suffering. The element of the unknown or the seemingly irrational is what worries him. For example in Job's case he did not know *why* he suffered. His counsellors claimed to know *why*, but they only intensified his grief by their wrong reasoning. They confused the issues and increased the suffering. Job had to fight their *whys* in order to clarify his *why*. The greatest suffering in history lay within the cry of Jesus on the Cross, 'Why did you forsake me?' Though Jesus had known, previously, that he must go to the Cross, yet the ultimate in his suffering was not to have a clear and logical *why* at that climax of rejection. *That is WHY he had to suffer such!*

The suffering the sinner experiences comes partly from the elements which come upon him such as deprivation of the norm

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of living, subjective anguish and so on, but primarily he suffers because he lives in the deceit of his own sin. That is he will not acknowledge he is guilty, even when he is feeling the very pangs of guilt! His rebellion against God, and the anger he has for Him increases the suffering. He reasons more and more that he deserves no suffering. We saw that Cain, when convicted of his sin, still struggled against the punishment meted out to him. He claimed he could not bear it, which really meant that God had passed out an unreasonable punishment. He was saying, 'The Judge of all the earth does not do right!' When, then, we come to the measure of punishment meted out we must see that man is responsible for meeting his punishment on the grounds of acceptance or rejection. If the latter, then he intensifies his own suffering. The irony of this is that he then declares God to be unjust!

The other matter of suffering which comes from sin is that sin (or guilt) compounds itself. This is its nature. Whilst covering itself with its own deceit, one act of sin with its consequent guilt, triggers the person off into the next act. We have seen that guilt puts a man relationally against God, and so fear, insecurity and guilt further anger (irrationally) and widen the breach. This is suffering that is born of sin itself, especially when we remember that man is not truly man, *of himself*, and as Jeremiah 10:23 shows, the way of man is not *in himself*—thus, in his rebellion he is depriving himself of himself, so increasing his suffering. To deprive himself of himself must mean he is depriving his self of God. It also means he is depriving himself of authentic relationships with others.

Further even to this is the *principle of suffering, i.e. the wrath of God* which is opened to us in Romans 1:18–32. The principle is set out thus:

- (a) Man seeks to suppress the true order of the universe by anti-acts. God is wrathful.
- (b) Man is inexcusable. It is not that he cannot know the true order of creation, and the God who rules it. He can know.
- (c) He has deliberately rejected God, and so has changed the direction of his own thinking. This results in a darkened mind, and foolish rationalisations of God, himself, and His Universe.

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- (d) Such bias in thinking leads to idolatry. This leads to (i) sexual immorality; and (ii) sexual perversity.
- (e) God's wrath now gives man up to his own evil. Verses 24, 26 and 28 show the giving up of man to his own evil by God.

Wrath, then, whilst it is not sin, is felt in the actions and elements of sin and guilt. Man suffers from his own sin and guilt, and God personally and deliberately gives man up to this anguish and awryness of evil. *This is God's wrath*. It cannot be understood unless we recognise the vitalistic and dynamic nature of sin and guilt. This fastens upon man, and destroys serenity and joy. It immerses him in its terrible nature. Indeed it immolates him. He is in anguish. This is intensified by the fact that God does not merely allow him to slip deeper and deeper into it, but *actually commits him to it*. Another way of saying this is that God personally presses up against man in his evil, thus intensifying it to the agony of man.

In the above are included all the statements of Scripture as to the outcome of sin, and sinning, namely, Psalms 31, 32, 37, 38, 51, Genesis 4:6–7, Numbers 32:23, Proverbs 5:22–23, Ezekiel 18:4, John 8:34, Hosea 8:7, Amos chapters 1 and 2, amongst many others. These speak about the soul that sins shall die, of the agony of sin unconfessed, the power of sin gripping a person and demeaning him, of judgement, of wrath, of moral pollution and its horror, and of ultimate judgement. These are elements of wrath and judgement which a man experiences in this life. God is never neutral in regard to sin. Man cannot know the awfulness of his sin, and thus cannot know God's attitude to it. The wicked man casts up mire and dirt. The wicked man says, 'God will not require it!' He says, 'God will not speedily act against sin', and so he sets his heart to do wickedness. Yet 'God is angry with the sinner every day', and He says, 'I the Lord will smite!'. Whatever men may say to the contrary as they express themselves as morally outraged by the doctrine of wrath, it is nevertheless true. This is the source of suffering for man and he dare not lay it at the feet of God.

BENEFITS OF SUFFERING FROM SUCH SIN

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The question is, ‘Benefits to whom?’ The answer must be, ‘Benefits in some cases to the sinner who suffers, in other cases to the ones who would suffer even more were the sinner not contained within his sin’. Benefits then may come to both, according to particular cases and circumstances.

SUFFERING OF SIN CAN ACT AS A DETERRENT

God’s word to Adam was that he would die if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The mention of death was intended to be a deterrent. Doubtless the Flood was a judgement also aimed at deterring evil. Deterrence and its meaning is spoken of in Deuteronomy 19:20 (cf. 17:13; 21:21), ‘And the rest shall hear, and fear, and shall never commit any such evil among you’. Doubtless not all are deterred, but that is not the point. Many are deterred. This is good for the community.

SUFFERING FROM SIN ACTS AS RETRIBUTION FOR SIN

1 Kings 8:31–32 gives the principle of retribution for sin and righteousness, ‘hear thou in heaven and act, and judge thy servants, *condemning the guilty by bringing his own conduct upon his head*’. Hence, ‘when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness’ (Proverbs 11:10). Even so retribution has a purpose. It is to rid the land of evil, i.e. ‘to purge the evil from Israel’ (Deuteronomy 13:12ff.; 17:7; 19:12; Judges 20:13; 2 Samuel 4:11).

When it comes to homicide, Israel is instructed (Deuteronomy 19:13), ‘Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you’. The same principle goes for sexual crimes (Leviticus 18:24–28), for like murder such sexual evil defiles the whole land.

It is interesting to note that if the people of the land allow evil to continue then the land itself will vomit them out (Leviticus 18:25). What should also be noted is that retribution is never revenge. It may avenge the person who is harmed, but revenge is an inordinate reaction. Hence the *lex talionis*—‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’—is retributive, and kinder than the cruelty of exacting more (Exodus 21:23–25; cf. Leviticus 24:19–20).

All of this means that punishment is conducive to deterrence, to

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retribution and to the stamping out of certain forms of evil. Since evil is the disposition of fallen man it is realistic to seek to deter acts of evil by the fact of suffering and retributive punishment. Without doubt the Flood and the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah acted as deterrents to future evil, as also the eradication—even if only in part—of the current evil.

OTHER ELEMENTS RELATING TO SUFFERING

J. W. Wenham in his *The Goodness of God* (see Bibliography) points out that God exercises a *beneficent* retribution. Retribution is in fact the recognition of responsibility, and the equivalent dignifying of the offender by punishing him. The punishment does not exclude deterrence, and may well (and rightly) include reformation. However, retribution will be helpful to the offender as also society. Justice cannot be either evoked or maintained apart from retributive punishment. What is more, since society is a solidary body—rightly understood—then it must often bear part of that punishment. This principle is evident in the fact that Romans 5:12ff. shows us all men sinned corporately in Adam, and that a family sinned when their head Achan sinned at Jericho. Society is thus made aware of the moral issues, and kept sensitive to the same. Of course the reverse is also true, namely that as in Adam all die (i.e. all in Adam), so in Christ all shall be made alive. Society benefits in its solidary being from the goodness of man where this is executed.

All we have examined to this point has been suffering occasioned by sin and evil. In this area to some degree comes the chastening elements of suffering, described in Hebrews 12:3–11. The heart of this is from Proverbs 3:11–12, but then the book of Proverbs expands the theme greatly. In the passage of Hebrews discipline is meted out to those who are sons of God. Such are close to Him, but then in one sense all men are God's children, by origin even if they have chosen to abdicate that status (cf. Acts 17: 28; Luke 3:38; John 1:12–13). God administers chastisement to all men, and doubtless they suffer as a result. It is the penitent believer, the true child, who benefits.

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The chief complaint of man, especially man-in-rebellion, is that God stands off from His world. He is a cold Deity, detached from the anguish of the human race, and for that matter the anguish of the whole creation. This is far from the case. In fact the difficulty in understanding God's love for His creation comes from sin. It was the task of the Son to reveal God as love, and this through the act of the Cross, without which the incarnation could have had little meaning.

What happens in time—from a Biblical point of view—is unauthentic without prophecy. Were no Suffering One prophesied then his appearance would be an anomaly. Genesis 3:15 promised that the seed of woman would crush the serpent under his heel, but that the same seed would be bruised. Most prophecies of the Messiah, Son of Man, Davidic King and the like have elements of greatness and power. Zechariah 9:9 alone speaks of the One-to-come being meek and lowly, a claim Jesus makes for himself in Matthew 11:27–30. It is true that in Zechariah's prophecy there is One who is going to take fearful judgement (13:7; cf. Matthew 26:31) so that suffering is entailed. Also in Lamentations 1:12 the

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same principle is expressed, 'Look and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, wherewith God has afflicted me in the day of his anger. It may be said this was uniquely the experience of Jeremiah, but then Psalms, which are indicated as Messianic also, reveal suffering of the same ilk, such as Psalm 22 and Psalm 69. The Lamentations verse can easily be linked with the Cross.

It is, however, the latter part of the prophecies of Isaiah that point to the One who is called 'The Suffering Servant'. Most notable is the 53rd chapter, but the character of this predicted One is by no means confined to that passage. Such a person must have been baffling to those who lived in Christ's time, but for the Jewish sufferers in the time of the Exile, these passages would have been quite intelligible. Only one who has suffered exile, humiliation, hunger for homeland, longing for true serenity, can begin to understand the principle of vicarious suffering. Suffering is a world largely foreign to man who knows the strong drive of hedonism, and who prefers pleasure to pain. Hence the death of Christ on the Cross was an offence to the Jewish, Roman and Greek worlds, though for varying reasons. The disciples who viewed the Cross must have seen the end of their Messianic endeavour. To the Sanhedrin the event was a triumph over the troublesome Nazarene. To the contrary: it was the triumph of the Nazarene. It was the triumph of God, the God of love. Without suffering there is no answer to the seeming enigma of the convulsive pains creation has come to know.

'A MAN OF SORROWS AND FAMILIAR WITH SUFFERING'

All the Servant Songs should be read. Indeed they should be studied deeply, for they are keys to the problem of human suffering. These passages—Isaiah 42:1–9, 49:1–6, 50:4–9 and 52:12—53:12 build a powerful picture of a humble but despised Sufferer. He is at the same time a Servant, serving others by his suffering. Even those who refuse to confess Jesus as Saviour, and as the Suffering

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Servant, are bound to agree that the passages fit his case.

When we examine the sufferings of Christ, we indeed agree that he was ‘familiar with suffering’, i.e. ‘acquainted with grief’. He had grief in various ways. ‘He came to his own [people] and his own received him not.’ His announcement of himself as Messiah at Nazareth caused his hearers to seek to kill him. The elders of the people rejected him without examining his claims. He was entitled to such an examination by reason of his acts of healing, love and mercy. He revealed the Father, but increased the hatred. He wept at Lazarus’s grave from no mere human sympathy but at the sight of created mankind bowing and grovelling before death. He had anger at the impudence of evil spirits. He grieved at the bondage of man whom he had created. He wept over Jerusalem for its perpetual rejection of the prophets, and now — at the last — of him.

His suffering in Gethsemane was such that he said, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death’. These words have no rhetoric in them, no exaggeration. *He was dying in that garden!* This is made clear by Hebrews:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

Here, in the garden, he was pressed to death. Had not an angel come and strengthened him then doubtless he would have died, cheated of the Cross. What then caused this Gethsemane suffering often called ‘the beginning of sufferings’? Some have ventured the thought that Satan was pressing him down (cf. John 14:30–31), and others that he was repelled emotionally by the Cross. Probably both these ideas are not correct. John 12:27 shows a deeply troubled spirit, and what he felt in part at that time he may well have felt in full in the garden.

One thing is certain: he had always anticipated the Cross. Time and again he had said he *must* go to the Cross. This *must* was not merely the *inevitable* happening of prophecy, although it was certainly that, but the *indispensable* element required to redeem man. Peter later spoke of the prophets who, ‘enquired what person

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or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when *predicting the sufferings of Christ* and the subsequent glory'. Jesus said to two of his disciples after the resurrection, 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe *all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary* that Christ should *suffer these things* and enter into his glory?' Three times in Mark's Gospel he tells them of this necessity (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32). and yet they do not hear him. In Luke 24:46, Christ says, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead', and later the apostles insist that this suffering was in accordance with the Scriptures (cf. Acts 17:1–3; 1 Corinthians 15:3–4; Acts 26:22–23).

Perhaps the bluntest statement of all is Acts 2:23, 'This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men'. This prophetic rationalisation meant that suffering was essential to fulfil the purpose of God.

THE SUFFERING OF THE CROSS

Christ is described by Paul as 'the wisdom of God'. Doubtless he means—amongst other things—that the Cross was God's only solution to the dilemma of His own holiness and man's sinfulness. Whatever the suffering of Christ as the man who ministered in Galilee, it was minor in relation to the suffering of the Cross. Nor must his physical sufferings be counted greatly since other men have suffered as much and more in the course of accidents, torment and cruelty from their fellow-men. Not even the terrible indignity of hanging naked, and being unlawfully subjected to contumely and the like must be taken as the deepest of his sufferings. This one 'familiar with suffering' was the only person in all history who could come with incorruptible holy love to take the suffering of man upon himself—*all the sufferings of mankind*.

A remarkable trilogy of volumes, namely that of the Dutchman, Klass Schilder¹ are perhaps the most thorough treatment of Christ's

¹ *Christ in His Suffering*, Klock and Klock, Minnesota, 1978; *Christ on Trial*, Klock and Klock, Minnesota, 1978; and *Christ Crucified*, Klock and Klock,

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sufferings. Schilder covers the entire Palestinian ministry of Christ, and then the trial and the Cross. He discovers depths which cannot be known apart from a related study of the Old Testament. The serious student will want to encompass as much as possible of the sufferings of Christ so that he can understand the measure of God's love and His purpose for such suffering. Even so, it is not possible for man to plumb these sufferings.

John the Baptist announces that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus himself promises he will liberate man from the power of sin. It is the event of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor which virtually terminates his ministry of announcement of the Kingdom, turning him to the Cross, for which he has been predestined. Moses and Elijah appear with him in glory, speaking of his *exodus* which he was (shortly) to *accomplish* at Jerusalem, i.e. 'he was transfigured that he might be disfigured, that we who are disfigured (by sin) might be transfigured'. This is in accordance with the Fourth Servant Song where he was so disfigured that his face could not be seen to be that of a human. The three attendant disciples (Peter, James and John) do not understand. Later, when he tells all the disciples he must go to the Cross they do not understand. Indeed they fear to understand.

The words uttered from the Cross give some revelation of what he suffered. However, they must be understood in depth, not by human reasoning alone, but by revelation of the Spirit (John 16:12–15; 1 Corinthians 2:10–13).² There are many objective statements made about that suffering from the New Testament, but it is significant that they are made in the light of the Old Testament prophecies. When Jesus says, 'The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many', then he was referring to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. When he said, 'This is my blood of the New Covenant shed for you and for many for the remission of sins', he was quoting from Jeremiah 31:31–34. Peter's famous statement, 'He himself bore our sins in his own

Minnesota, 1978.

² See Schilder, op. cit. See also author's book *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, NCPI, Adelaide, 1980.

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body on the tree', is a reference to Isaiah 53:4–5. Other statements are:

Christ suffered, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God;
God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us;
Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour for the suffering of death ...
that he might taste death for every man;
It became him ... in bringing many sons into glory to make the pioneer of their salvation complete through suffering;
God hath set him forth as a propitiation through faith in his blood;
sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins;
he has appeared at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself;
Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice.

These tell us objectively that he suffered and something of what he suffered, but they cannot really tell us how he suffered what he suffered.

In order to see *what* he suffered and *how* he suffered, we need to know the whole gamut of the nature of God and of the fallen nature of man, and to know the nature of sin as man has to bear it in its elements of depravity and deprivation of his former peace and joy with God. We must see its vile pollution, its guilt-burden, and the elements of pain, shame, fear, loneliness and impurity, all impregnated with the fears of death, dissolution of the body, judgement before a holy God, and the like. These are elements man knows every day whether he will admit to them or not. Thus passages which tell of Christ's identification with mankind in his death (and resurrection) tell us what he suffered. In 2 Corinthians 5:14, Paul says, 'We are convinced that if one died *for* all, then did *all* die'. In Galatians 2:20, Paul speaks of himself being crucified with Christ. In Romans 6:6, he says the whole of the Adamic humanity knew a death with Christ. John 3:14 seems to suggest that evil was present in the Cross, and Galatians 6:14 (cf. 5:24) shows that the world and its evil were borne to defeat on the Cross. Romans 8:3 shows that Christ died in regard to sin, the outcome of which was a judgement of sin executed within his flesh.

The whole of the action on the Cross, then, was a conflict with the powers of evil, as well as a suffering of the sins of mankind. It

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is true to say that there has been no suffering which sin and evil cause, which was not borne by him on the Cross. In one sense, sin's punishment is its own innate self. In another sense, it is God who brings that punishment. Passages such as we have mentioned—Zechariah 13:7, Psalms 22 and 69, Isaiah 53 and Lamentations 1:12—all contribute to help us to see the vast suffering endured in that titanic action of redeeming man and defeating evil. Doubtless, the terrible cry of dereliction is the cry of all cries in history which communicates the horror he suffered as he bore evil to its ultimate destruction. In Psalm 22, we see the powers of darkness sweeping up against him, intent on destroying him, only to meet its defeat. Similarly, the enmity of evil is depicted in Psalm 69. However, it is the Fourth Servant Song which is most poignant, most powerful of all. Here we face suffering in its deepest depths, and no one who studies this passage seriously can come away without awe, and a great sense of the humility of the Servant, and his patient bearing of the suffering of all men for all time. 'He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows', tells us of the identification of God with us in all our sufferings, be they deserved or undeserved.

Note, again, that the deepest element of his suffering lies in the 'Why?' of his cry. Ultimate judgement will surely be rational, but the deepest present suffering man knows lies in his inability to understand its purpose, its rationality. We have seen that man's sin blinds him to the nature of both sin and holiness, and therefore to the requirements of a holy God who cannot regard sin and iniquity without judging and punishing it. Likewise man will find it difficult to comprehend Christ's battle with evil which is personal, i.e. Satan and his fallen angelic powers and other forms of spiritual evil.

If man could comprehend the above, then he would come to know, in a startling way, the wonder of God's nature as Love. He would comprehend that God is holy, and so His wrath is rational and desirable. He would understand very simply the causes of human suffering, and the need for such suffering as comes from sin. He would also understand the marvellous intimacy of God in His relationship with His universe, both in His transcendence, as also His immanence. Indeed, man would have no more real problem in regard to the fact of suffering. He could then move on

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to understand that Christ's suffering has done that which removes penitent man from destructive suffering, and puts him on to the sphere of genuine suffering for Christ's sake, and the sake of the Father.

8

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THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS

The Cross, because of the suffering of Christ, gives intelligibility to all suffering, even though man may not be able to comprehend the rationale of suffering. The Cross accomplishes the deliverance of man from:

- (a) The penalty of his sin and evil, and so the suffering that entails.
- (b) The powers of evil which have commandeered him and lead him more deeply into evil. Because of this deliverance man is saved from further suffering from sin.
- (c) All evil has been judged, and must meet its inevitable, ultimate punishment. Meanwhile it is hampered from dominating man, especially repentant, believing man.

The ultimate defeat of evil is ensured by the following factors:
(i) 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 (cf. Philippians 2:9–11) shows, in miniature, that every evil power is being put down by the risen, exalted Christ; (ii) The Book of the Revelation with Christ's

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prophecies and the apostolic corpus of prophetic teaching shows that the paradigm given in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 is being worked out in the vast terms of world judgement, as such as seen in Revelation 5:1–21:8. This includes the putting down of all enemies including death and Hades, but primarily the bringing to judgement of Satan, the beast, the false prophet, the Babylonish world system, and man who is finally unrepentant. This ensures ultimate cessation of suffering, a fact underlined by Revelation 7:9–17, 11:15–19, 12:7–11, 21:1–22:21. What is to be noted is that it is the Lamb-as-it-had-been-slain, i.e. Christ crucified (and risen) who is in authority, and whose power ultimately wipes suffering from the universe by the redemption of his people, and the destruction of the forces of evil. This, in theology, is called theodicy, the vindication of God.

THE SUFFERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE INTERIM

It is sometimes stated simply that in the time between Pentecost and the Parousia the church will know persecution. Whilst this is true it is not a fact without a clear rationale. It is the same as we saw obtains in the case of Cain and Abel. Cain hated his brother because his deeds were righteous and his own evil. Doubtless this also relates to the fact that Abel was a prophet—perhaps the first, i.e. ‘since the world began’. 1 John 3:10ff. enunciates the principle given by Jesus in John 15:18–25, i.e. the world will always hate the people of God. Jesus calls this ‘hating without a cause’. Doubtless Psalm 69:4 was in his mind, for he was about to undergo the sufferings set out in that psalm.

A close scanning of Scripture will show that the people of God have always suffered at the hands of those who are not His people. There are reasons for this, reasons which evil calls reasons but which the Word calls ‘no genuine cause’. They are that all evil is set against the order of creation, against the goal and purposes of the Creator, and against the redemption which would save both man and creation, ultimately transforming all things. This then gives the reason for the opposition the prophets met, both prior

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to Israel's formation, and posterior to that. It gives meaning to the practice of idolatry, and the hatred of the lords, gods, idols and images against the true order of God and His creation. The battle has never known truce. Whilst in the Old Testament little is said about Satan, it is clear from the New Testament that the battle has always been joined:

(i) In the Gospel Jesus warns that those who are of the Kingdom will suffer as a consequence. He enjoins joy and delight at this persecution, for it is not unfruitful. It is for the Kingdom of heaven's sake. Likewise Paul tells new converts that they will suffer before the Kingdom comes (Acts 14:22), and writes later to the Thessalonians, commending them for suffering for the Kingdom (2 Thessalonians 1:4–5). Put together then, there are numerous New Testament Scriptures which are on this one theme, suffering because of the Gospel, the Kingdom, and Godliness. The Book of the Revelation enlarges on this suffering, particularly in regard to those who have refused the mark (or, number) of the Beast. This is the same as refusing to belong to the world or world-system.

(ii) Whilst there is much suffering because of the Gospel, there is also suffering in the cause of the Gospel. In practice it may amount to the same thing. Whenever the Gospel is preached pressure comes against the proclaimers. In 2 Corinthians 4:7–15 Paul shows the incessant pressure of anti-forces who would destroy the proclaimers. Whereas in 1 Corinthians 1:17ff., he shows the opposition of the Jews who see the Gospel as a scandal, and the Greeks who see it as (intellectual) foolishness, yet in the 2 Corinthians 4 passage, he shows that evil is relentless in its determination to destroy the proclaimers. 1 Corinthians 15:30–32 shows Paul is in jeopardy of death every day. In Romans 8:31–39 he shows how powers are trying to separate the brethren from the love of God. He says, 'we are being killed all the day long; we are being accounted as sheep for slaughter'.

At the same time the passage of 2 Corinthians 4:7–15 shows that *faith actually grows under the pressures*. In Acts 5:41, the

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persecuted apostles think their suffering a privilege. In Acts 13:52, they are filled with joy under persecution. Philippians 1:29 tells the reader that *suffering is a gift*. It is one of the gifts that is rarely exalted amongst other gifts!

(iii) Whilst suffering may not be classified in different categories there is also a suffering in the preaching of the Gospel which is not only persecution. It is the suffering Christ knew when he wept over Jerusalem, or perhaps had when the rich young ruler walked away. It is a feeling for others in their sin and despair, and their inability to see or accept the Gospel. Moses knew something of this when he was prepared to be blotted out of the Book of Life for Israel. Paul knew it in suffering for his brethren (Romans 9:1–3). He said he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for Israel. He would even be accursed for his brethren's sake. He went through all forms of suffering, but one which was demanding was 'the care of the churches which comes on me, daily'. In Acts 20 he speaks of having warned the people, 'day and night with tears'.

(iv) There is a suffering within the Body of the Church of which Paul speaks. When he talks about the fellowship of Christ's sufferings he doubtless includes the suffering Christ has *on behalf of* the elect, as well as *for* the elect. Passages like Philippians 3:10 and Colossians 1:24 are not easy to exegete. One has to be, so to speak, in suffering before one can understand. There are deep needs within the church, and in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul speaks of all members suffering when one suffers. In Romans 12 he counsels ways of sharing in the common suffering, and so helping. Paul himself can say, 'Who is weak, and I am not weak?' He is concerned for the weaker brother who needs help and love. In other words there is a shared suffering in a supportive ministry to all members of the Body. This is at once Christ's own suffering, the suffering of each member, and the suffering of the whole Body, the church. Linked with this is the suffering Paul reports in 2 Corinthians 1:3–11. He speaks of the Father comforting His people in all their afflictions. He says that he (Paul) and his team had suffered so that they might learn from such suffering, and so

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as they were comforted by God might also comfort others.

(v) Whilst suffering is corporate within the people of God, yet there is also personal suffering. It may come from persecution, opposition to the Gospel, the burden for those who remain outside grace and faith, and the sharing within the Body with those who are suffering, yet Paul does point to a personal suffering which makes for the maturing of the person suffering. In II Corinthians 3:18, he shows that the believer grows as he contemplates Christ, from one stage of glory (maturity) to another. In Galatians 3:1–5, he shows the secret of this is to go on, as one had begun, in the Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 4:7–15, he shows that suffering comes as one preaches the Gospel. Now he encourages persistence in suffering. In verses 16–18 he says, ‘So we do not lose heart. Though our outer man is wasting away, our inner man is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal’. This shows that suffering is indeed valuable. It is by suffering we become mature and, ultimately, glorified. The same idea is in Romans 8:17–25. Here the Spirit assists the believer to hope, even in the midst of suffering, for he stimulates hope. This is the equivalent of what Peter says in 4:12–14 of his first letter. He says, ‘Rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you’.

(vi) In Romans 8:18–25, Paul does not except the whole creation from the suffering which will result in the glorification of creation. He says that all creation suffers at present. This is because it has been subjected to futility, i.e. inanity, emptiness, because it is powerless to function fully, both in mode and scope because of, undoubtedly, the sin of man. Only when man is freed in the eschaton will the universe be freed into ‘the liberty of the

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glory of the children of God'. It suffers because of its frustration, and somehow its suffering is necessary to bring forth the new creation, seemingly its pangs are those of gestation. There will be, at the very end, a most painful event when the heavens and the earth will be subjected to purgation and renewal, but nothing of current suffering is lost for the personal believer or the entire creation.

(vii) We are now in a position to see the truth and value of Godly discipline. Our mention of Hebrews 12:3–11 was to show that God chastises not only saints but sinners. Now we can see how needed it is by the saints. Constant proclamation and witness will bring the humbling suffering which comes from persecution and failure. Many may be led into pride, thinking they stand of themselves. Whatever the causes of failure they will need the healthy chastisement of the Lord. This must not be seen as punishment, but rather as good correction, a way of humbling us, and teaching us our true place in Christ and the Body. Such suffering is fruitful (verse 11).

(viii) The true principle of fruitfulness is found in suffering. Isaiah 53:11 has it, 'He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied'. This principle Jesus had enunciated when he said, 'Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone, but if it die it will bring forth much fruit'. No one can doubt he was telling us we will suffer but then be fruitful, there being no other way. In the case of Christ's suffering we see the vast result of fruitfulness. In Romans 5:15–21, we read of the rich outcome of one man's obedience in that many are made righteous and all in Christ reign in life through this one man's righteousness.

Paul speaks of deep suffering in 2 Corinthians 4:7–15, and says, 'Death works in us, but life in you'. He cannot see such fruitfulness apart from suffering.

(ix) Finally there is a suffering which believers will know when they are disobedient. It is as retributive as that known by

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unbelievers. It is not merely chastisement, but actual punishment. We saw in Deuteronomy that God warned His people they would suffer grievous sickness and other suffering if they did not give covenantal obedience. He even told them they would be visited with the diseases known in Egypt. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–13, Paul warns his readers against the evil that Israel had known in the wilderness. Israelites had been destroyed by the Destroyer. Some of those folk had tempted God, and Christians might come to do the same. They too, can only expect punishment. In the next chapter (11:27–32), Paul speaks of those in the church who have become weak, ill, and who have died. This is for not discerning the Body. Whatever the sin, God was currently visiting His people with judgement, and so, suffering. In the fifth chapter of the same letter Paul speaks of delivering a man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord Jesus. In yet other places the apostolic writers warn that those who practise certain evil things must not delude themselves into thinking they belong to the Kingdom of heaven.

CONCLUSION AS TO GOD'S PEOPLE AND SUFFERING

Someone has calculated that two-thirds of the text of the New Testament is given over to the subject of suffering. This means it is most important. We have no need to recapitulate what has been included under the above paragraphs. We simply say that suffering is sure to come from hatred of the evil world system under its head, Satan. It is sure to come against those who proclaim and hold the witness of Jesus. It is necessary within the world for believers to suffer, and to share the sufferings within the Body. Such suffering is reason for joy rather than horror or fear, and in the ultimate it will be highly fruitful. Suffering, then, can be seen to be indispensable, as fruitful, and as leading to growth in character, richness in maturity and ultimate glorification of believers and the church.

9

A Personal Approach to Suffering

It is commonly said that suffering is a mystery, and that 'we cannot now know'. It may be true that we cannot know all things in regard to suffering, but then there is much we can know, and indeed it may well be all that we need to know! We have the accounts of many men who suffered and seemed to accept the principle that suffering was both inevitable, indispensable and needful. The list of the men of faith in Hebrews 11 illustrates this point. We read marvellous things of them. They all had a goal and suffering accompanied their pilgrimage but did not deter them. This attitude is not found in all believers, and many find great difficulty in coping with the whole matter of suffering. In fact among the people of God negative and positive attitudes to suffering may be found, whilst some persons are a mixture of both. We need to examine attitudes to suffering.

FAIR-WEATHER GOD, OR NOT?

It is natural for man, anyway for fallen man, to seek pleasure, ease and comfort. Few take kindly to suffering, privations and hardships. Some, however, take it very well. Many persons use

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the Scriptures to formulate their ideas of God. They take the ‘fair-weather’ passages and come up with a Deity who is benign, and that under all occasions. When in life they strike sudden hardships, bereavements, and terminal illnesses, they feel themselves betrayed by God. Others simply scrub off the God of the Old Testament as though He differed from the God of the New Testament, and seek to have love without wrath or holiness. It is no wonder that suffering causes disillusionment, reaction, and ultimately bitterness and resentment.

The fact is that God should be accepted as He is revealed in the Scriptures. Then men may see their universe, the true government, the sinfulness of man, and the rebellion of man and the evil powers. This is a realistic way of approaching matters. There is no need for bitterness, resentment and anger. Men should see both ‘the goodness and severity’ of God, and realise that His goodness is severe, and His severity good—in and for the ultimate. It should also be accepted, realistically, that sinful men and women will not accept God as He is nor His creation as He has made it. We repeat, we should never underestimate the Fall and the sinfulness of man.

ALL THINGS FOR GOOD IN THE ULTIMATE: WE MUST LIVE IN SUFFERING

The doctrine of election, i.e. the working out of the plan of God according to the counsel of His own will tells us that God does not leave (let alone trust) the world to work out its own end. If this were lacking from Scripture the fibre of all things would be lacking. So God works according to His own will. Doubtless in doing so He neither violates the will of His creatures, nor is the Author of evil. He does, then, work all things to His own good end. This fact arouses anger in the hearts of incorrigible and recalcitrant humans, let alone fallen celestial powers.

It is, however, the comfort of the Christian. To be told that in everything God is working for the good of His own, for those who love Him, is immensely comforting. It means that whilst the

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children of God may have cause to be morally indignant, they have no cause to be hurt, to be scarred or to harbour any kind of anger or resentment. *Whilst everything that happens in life is not good, yet God is working it for ultimate good.* Whilst a person may be initially hurt by what another does to him, he is not in a position to retain, foster, or cultivate that hurt, since God is using the event for his good. Also he is a person who is bound to live in love and love ‘bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things’. Indeed it never fails! We mean, of course, the love of God in man (Romans 5:5), so that *the suffering of hurt is eliminated.*

What is significant is the fact that ‘he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows’. If this be true, then there is no cause for man to grieve, at least to grieve from the past. He has personally identified with us in our grief and sorrow and has withdrawn the painful and destructive elements from them. *We are free now to suffer for others without the impediment of suffering for ourselves.*

We have seen that the Christian person, as also the whole Body of Christ must suffer by nature of the case. If then we are not fortified against self-pity and self-concern, the great tribulation that believers must face, and do face, will not only be terrifying, but also devastating. Hence the believer must see the great tribulation when God’s good and Satan’s evil comes in to ultimate and decisive conflict is in fact for the ultimate good. Hence such suffering must be faced with determination. The believer must also recognise that tribulations work patience and enduring character (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 4:12–19; Revelation 7:14; etc.). The believer must see that God works His vindicating actions speedily (Luke 18:1–8; cf. Revelation 6:9–11; cf. 15:4–7; 19:1–2). The believer must see that his suffering is fruitful for the salvation of others, and indeed fruitful for all things and even for himself (Isaiah 53:11; John 12:24–25, Revelation 14:13, Hebrews 11:8–10, 29–40).

We can see in the light of these things the wisdom of Christ in asking for a definite understanding of demanded discipleship. When a man has died to all whom he loves, and has died to sin, the flesh, to the world, and to the desire for comfort, pleasure and

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safety, then he does not have to die again when he faces these things in suffering. This person knows that whilst his friends may count his suffering as heavy he sees it as ‘a breath-weight affliction’ which is ‘but for a fleeting moment’ and that it prepares him to take, ultimately, that ‘great weight of glory’, and indeed to be in the full likeness of the Lord who suffered for him, and with whom, and for whom he is now glad to suffer.

THE NEW AGE IS NOT YET

The beautiful passages to which we have referred in regard to ultimate cessation of suffering constitute the core of hope for the believer. Such passages as Isaiah 11:1–9, 65:17–25, 66:22–23, Zechariah 14:6–9, Revelation chapters 21 and 22, when linked with Romans 8:18–25, Philippians 3:21 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–58 all show that the new age will release humanity from its sicknesses, pains, suffering, diseases and death. All God’s promises are fulfilled in the new age. Glimpses of that new age come to us in signs, wonders and miracles such as Christ did, and which the church has known in one measure or another from the time of the apostles. Indeed Hebrews 6:5 speaks of having tasted of the powers of the age-to-come. This is the age which contrasts with the present evil age (Galatians 1:4). In Hebrews 1:2 the Son is said to have created ‘all the ages’, and in Ephesians 1:21 he is said to be head over this age and the age to come. In 1 Corinthians 10:11 Paul speaks of us as those ‘upon whom the ends of the ages’ have come.

The new age is partly known, partly experienced, but the old age is still with us. Whilst we do not belong to it, but to the new age, yet the new age has not yet fully come, just as the old age has not yet fully passed away (1 Corinthians 7:31; 1 John 2:17). This is why sickness, death, disease, sin, suffering from sin and the like are with us until the new age comes. It is therefore ‘crying for the moon’ to demand things to be perfect as they will be only in the new age, in the true eschaton. Paul makes it clear from 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 that we walk now by faith and not by sight. The promises of

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perfect fulfilment are given not for this age, but the age to come. Hence we must walk by faith until that time comes when all shall be sight (1 Corinthians 13:9ff., Revelation 22:4–5). At that time we will understand all things, including the fact and purpose of suffering.

10

General Conclusion on the Subject of Suffering

It is true that suffering has been called a mystery. Is it, however, so much of a mystery? Is it not rather that we have not obeyed Peter in his injunction: (a) not to be surprised at the suffering that comes upon us; but (b) to rejoice at suffering for Christ, seeing the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us; and (c) trust our souls to a faithful Creator? All is for good. He will not permit a trial greater than we can bear without assisting us (1 Peter 4:12–19; 1 Corinthians 10:13).

We have seen also that man's rebellion and sinfulness causes most of his suffering, and also prevents him understanding the so-called mystery. We can sympathise with Job for he did not know the precise reason for his suffering. Had he known then the element of testing which was the most painful, i.e. *not knowing*, would have been removed, and the story would have been entirely different. His claim to be justified was contested by his counsellors, and the book shows the fallacy of their arguments. Job, once God visited him and revealed Himself and His power, no longer had a taste for intellectual and theological research into suffering. *He somehow knew all was well!*

General Conclusion on the Subject of Suffering

Jeremiah was puzzled as to the suffering he had to endure, but his prophecies and his 'Lamentations' all show the man was not hurt and destroyed, but had come to understand the greatness of God, and the place suffering has in a world of sinful people.

Habakkuk was horrified at God's giving over of His people to a 'hasty and bitter nation', but came to see that whatever God did was right, and indeed ultimately fruitful.

Paul had a clear rationale of suffering. Christ's sufferings had redeemed the world. The redeemed could now share in those sufferings, suffering for Christ and The Kingdom. Out of such suffering would come the fulfilment of God's will and plan for man. Meanwhile suffering trained one, increasing faith and hope, and being fruitful for eternity.

Others also suffered. We would do well to read, time and again, the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. We would do well to read many, many times the Book of the Revelation. In the first passage is the personal rationale of suffering, i.e. 'the City to come which has foundations and whose Builder and Maker is God' is worth the (comparatively) trifling suffering. The second portion (the Revelation) gives a thorough theodicy. It is dynamic in its convicting and teaching power. The man of faith, living in faith, knows his suffering is, somehow, intelligible. Hence his suffering is not destructive. Most of all he has the Cross, and the Cross tells him that whilst God is not the object of suffering, He is, somehow, the true subject of it. Hence suffering for the man of faith can never be, in the ultimate, unintelligible. *Suffering is that by which God finally triumphs in His creation.* It is that which gives the lie to accusations of Satan and his hosts.

One more thing remains to be said. The unbeliever, the rebel, the man-in-evil has no true charge to bring against God. He may seek to ridicule the whole system of law, morality, and judgement, but that which throws the lie back in his teeth is the Cross, for the Cross is for all men, whether they will have it or not. There Christ destroyed the power of evil, and set the tempo for eternity.

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The Cross has proven that God is love and so neither vengeful nor vindictive. He is only vindicating. Sinful man cannot know the truth of suffering until he comes to repentance and the admission that he is a rebel.

David did this and in most profound understanding wrote:

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in thy sight,
so that thou art justified in thy sentence
and blameless in thy judgement.

(Psalm 51:4, RSV)

Isaiah 53:11 says of the Suffering Servant:

After all his pains he shall be bathed in light,
after his disgrace he shall be fully vindicated;
so shall he, my servant, vindicate many,
himself bearing the penalty of their guilt.

(NEB)

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