

The Christian Meaning of Suffering

Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God. ~ 2 Timothy 1:8



Crucifix, by Peter Kelley

“The practice of self-denial is essential to mastering our flesh and growing in holiness.”

FEW THINGS AFFECT US SO DEEPLY as human suffering. This is the perennial and universal problem of all human history. Why, alongside of all the good things in life, are there so much evil, pain, and suffering? Why do we have to lose loved ones to death? Why do we have to die at all? What’s gone wrong with the world?

The answers to these questions are to be found at the very dawn of human history. Adam and Eve were created in complete friendship with God. There was no evil, no suffering, and no death. They were at peace with God, with each other, and within themselves.

So what went wrong? They disobeyed the Lord. They chose to follow the words of the serpent, rather than obey God. They rebelled against the very source of their own life and happiness. It was this rebellion that introduced sin, suffering and death into human history. God is not to blame for all the misery of the world; human beings are.

God’s Answer to Suffering

Ever since the sin of our first parents, the devil has delighted in the misery of humanity. This delight reached its climax with his role in the crucifixion of the Son of God. But what, at the moment, appeared to be the devil’s greatest victory, became his greatest defeat. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. And in doing so, he conquered sin, the devil and death *forever*.

God the Father’s solution to the problem of suffering was to send his own Beloved Son to rescue us. The answer to the problem of suffering is Jesus Christ. Jesus takes up the most heart-wrenching reality of human history and turns it into the path to glory and salvation. In Christ, suffering suddenly has new meaning.

Certainly, God could have done it all differently. But there is a clear logic to it all. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (see Jn 10:11). Why? Well, that’s what love does. God’s love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ: “*God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*” (Rom 5:8). True love is sacrificial: “*By this we know love, that he laid down*

his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16).

God didn't have to save us. God didn't have to give us his own Son. Jesus didn't have to die on the cross for us. All of this God did because he chose to. Out of his boundless love and mercy, God the Son became a man. He lived a truly human life. He revealed God the Father to us. He suffered and died on the cross for us. He rose from the dead for us. He opened the gates of Heaven for us. He will return in glory for us. This kind of love leaves us speechless.

No Glory Without the Cross

Suffering and trials are a necessary part of the Christian life. Some people seem to think that Jesus suffered on the cross so that we don't have to suffer. This is not true. He died on the cross so that the damage done by sin could be repaired, and so that we could live in friendship with God again. Holy Scripture says, we are *“fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him”* (Rom 8:17).

Spiritual Sacrifices

Central to the role of trials, temptations and sufferings in the Christian life is the idea of sacrifice. All the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ. Because of this, we are able to offer every aspect of our lives as *“spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”* (1 Pt 2:5). We do this especially during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, where we can unite our spiritual sacri-

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fices to the sacrifice of Christ being offered by the priest in the name of the whole Church.

In this way, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our whole lives can be offered to God the Father.

Suffering as Self-denial

To grow in Christian holiness, it is necessary that we practice self-denial. Denying ourselves does not come naturally to us. It can be painful. Why? We have a fallen human nature. Holy Scripture tells us to *“walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other”* (Gal 5:16-17).

The term “flesh” simply refers to our fallen human nature. In other words, that lower part of us that tends toward selfishness and is attracted to sin. The practice of self-denial is essential to mastering our flesh and growing in holiness. It is a key way in which we carry the cross. Jesus says, *“If any man*

would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). There are many forms of self-denial. We do not have to do anything complicated. Simple acts of self-denial done consistently can be quite effective. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are traditional forms of self-denial.

We can also do other things. We can give up television for a day, or give up desserts on certain days. We can simply accept and perform our daily responsibilities without complaining and offer



Jesus meets his mother on the way of the Cross; 4th Station of the Cross in St. Teresa of Avila Church in Washington, DC

them to God as a form of self-denial. The particular form of self-denial is really not the point. The point is that we do simple acts of self-denial and penance out of love for God and the desire to grow in Christian holiness.

Through Christ, Suffering is Redemptive

The key to the Christian meaning of suffering is the cross of Christ. Through his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Christ made suffering the path to glory. It brings about our redemption. Those who are in Christ are able, in some mysterious way, to unite their sufferings to his own. St. Paul writes, *"I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I*

complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). This means that our human suffering can be redemptive. In other words, it has tremendous value both for our own spiritual lives and for the salvation of others. This is very important for us to be aware of, especially when our suffering is profoundly painful (physical, mental, emotional) or heartbreaking (such as the death of a child, a spouse, or any loved one).

It is why, in the New Testament, suffering and trials are seen as something to rejoice about — not for their own sake, but for what they can mean when united to the sufferings of Christ. St. Paul rejoiced that his



Mother of Sorrows, by Elizabeth Stefanick

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own afflictions and hardships could be united to Christ's and offered to the Father for the benefit of the Church (see Col 1:24). Holy Scripture tells us to rejoice in our trials and sufferings because they test and strengthen us and our moral character: *"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"* (Jas 1:2-3; see also Rom 5:3-5).

Conclusion

Through the cross of Christ, the problem of human suffering has been answered. In Christ, our suffering has profound, redemptive meaning. Jesus has gone before us and marked out the way to Heaven — the way of

the cross. And beyond the cross, there awaits resurrection to *new, glorious, and everlasting life*. Yet while we journey through this life on earth, let us always remember that God is in control. *"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength"* (1 Cor 10:13). We must resist any temptations to bitterness or to doubt God's love and faithfulness whenever suffering comes our way. Especially regarding our suffering and trials, Holy Scripture tells us to trust the goodness and wisdom of almighty God: *"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him"* (Rom 8:28).

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