

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

In the Light of Holy Scripture

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I

THE problem of suffering is an age-old one. Men ask, Why, if God is a righteous and all-powerful God, does he permit hunger and disease and cruelty, the agonies of childbirth or the horrors of war? This is a question which has been put from all time. It was ancient when, centuries before Christ, Habakkuk asked—

“Thou that art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and that canst not look on perverseness, wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy peace when the wicked swalloweth up the man that is more righteous than he?”

The problem still remains, and is still without a complete solution. Indeed, we can hardly hope that in this sphere of life we shall ever see other than in a glass darkly. Our world is a pinpoint in God’s universe, and our three score years and ten are a mere fragment of eternity.

Christianity is content with certain fundamental mysteries. Such is the problem of suffering. We have good reason to believe that God is love, and that we are His children made in His image. And we must be prepared to accept that great fact, even though we may not be able to explain away what appear glaring exceptions.

For all that we must not give way to agnosticism or despair. We must retain our faith in God’s good purpose.

A striking parable of this is given in chapter xviii. of the Koran.

The tale goes that as Moses was travelling along a lonely road he was met by a stranger. Together they walked until they reached the sea-shore, and there they found a boat. The stranger did something at which Moses wondered—he knocked a hole in the bottom of the boat. Then they went a little further on their journey, and the stranger met a youth—and drew his sword and killed him. Moses was horrified and said—

“Thou hast slain an innocent person without his having killed another? Now hast thou committed an unjust action.”

But the stranger explained: although his actions seemed so blameworthy, he was really a messenger of God, acting for the best. He had damaged the boat to preserve it for its owner, because a pirate was coming who stole away all sound boats. He had killed the young man, because he foresaw that otherwise the youth would have killed his parents and lost his own soul.

Crude as it is, the parable contains a sound warning. It is never safe for us to criticize God's ways and say that they are wrong. We humans cannot see very far into God's providence, and it is foolish for us to presume to say that the world rests upon an unsound foundation.

Nevertheless, if we bear this warning in mind, we may see some way into the problem of suffering and perceive indications of its place in God's plan for the world. No complete solution is possible, but we may hope to find some light thrown into dark places.

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No Christian examination of any human problem can be complete without a study of Biblical teaching upon that problem. Accordingly we must begin with what the Bible tells us about human suffering.

As may be expected, we find a development of belief. We begin with a primitive idea of God as a non-moral being whose demands are purely ritual. Concurrently with this type of ritual belief we find the strong solidarity of the family and nation, so that individuals suffered divine or human punishment for the misdeeds of some or all of the group—as the episode of Achan in the Book of Joshua illustrates so vividly.

With the advent of the great writing prophets both these doctrines were smashed. And, as always happens, new truths brought new problems in their train.

In the first place, God was seen to be a moral being. To put their teachings in a nutshell, Amos taught that He was just, Hosea that He was loving, and Isaiah that He was holy.

Secondly, the doctrine of individualism grew up—as we shall see later, a less absolute truth in ways, for our human solidarity never allows us to be free from ties of different sorts. We find the first great teaching of individualism in Jeremiah; Ezekiel followed by countering the popular proverb—

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge” (xviii. 2)—with the principle—

“The soul that sinneth, it shall die, the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father” (xviii. 20).

From these two doctrines it appeared to follow that individual suffering was a penalty for sin, that sin was always punished with material disaster, and that goodness would be rewarded with earthly prosperity. This became the orthodox Jewish doctrine, stated thus in Psalm xxxvii :

“Mark the perfect man and behold the upright : For the latter end of that man is peace. As for transgressors, they shall be destroyed together ; the latter end of the wicked shall be cut off.”

Of course there were many apparent exceptions. In this case it was assumed that the sufferer was guilty of some great secret sin—and the result must have been much cruel suspicion which made the burden of the sufferer even harder to bear than it might have been.

As against this line of thought there were two Old Testament suggestions. The first is the hint given by the great prophet of the Exile that suffering may be vicarious and have a redemptive purpose.

“ He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities : the chastisement of our peace was upon him ; and with his stripes we are healed ” (Isa. liii. 5).

The second is incomparably the most valuable Old Testament treatment of the problem of suffering—the Book of Job.

We have the picture of a man who maintains that he is righteous though he is afflicted. His friends argue that as he suffers, he must necessarily be guilty of personal sin.

“ Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished being innocent ? Or where were the upright cut off ? ” (iv. 7).

“ If thou return to the Almighty, thou shalt be built up ; If thou put away unrighteousness far from thy tents ” (xxii. 23).

But all the time Job is certain of his innocence, and at last he throws out his challenge, that he may appeal to God and stand before Him and state his case.

“ Oh that I had one to hear me ! (Lo, here is my signature, let the Almighty answer me.) And that I had the indictment which my adversary hath written. . . . If my land cry out against me, and the furrows thereof weep together ; If I have eaten the fruits thereof without money or have caused the owners thereof to lose their life ; Let thistles grow instead of wheat, and cockle instead of barley ” (xxxi. 35ff).

God answers. But He does not argue with Job. Rather, He gives an exposition of the greatness and wonder of His universe, wrought with loving care upon a great scale past human comprehension.

“ Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth ? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who determined the measures thereof, if thou knowest ? Or who stretched the line upon it ? Whereupon were the foundations thereof fastened ? Or who laid the corner stone thereof ; When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy ? ” (xxxviii. 4ff).

And when Job knows God, his doubts and questions vanish away. He no longer needs a specific answer, for he has attained his soul's certainty—the peace of God which passeth all understanding. Perhaps, indeed, this mystical knowledge of God is the only true answer to which man can attain—the knowledge which enables him to cry like Job—

“ I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, But now mine eye seeth thee, Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes ” (xlii. 5, 6).

Turning to the New Testament we find ourselves in a world where the orthodox solution is that stated by the islanders of Malta when St. Paul escaped from the wreck, only to be bitten by a poisonous serpent.

“ No doubt this man is a murderer, whom though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live ” (Acts xxviii. 4).

But in that world we find a flood of new light thrown upon the problem by the whole life and works and words of Jesus Christ.

The first great truth that strikes us at once is that Jesus does not look on suffering as necessarily being a punishment for sin. Even

to-day we still hear of good people who search their souls in agony, wondering what sin they have been guilty of that they should be punished so cruelly. Wives who say, "I can't think why this accident happened to my husband, he was always a good-living man." Mothers who go through tortures of remorse for some imagined sin when their baby dies.

Jesus makes it clear that this is false thinking—pain is not necessarily the scourge of God on the individual, though certainly sin often brings its recompense of suffering. He Himself treated the sick with much the same attitude of mind that a modern doctor would adopt. He looked on sickness as something evil which must be cured. When those afflicted with disease were brought out to Him at sunset He laid His hands on them and healed them. And we cannot conceive of an antagonism of purpose between the Father and the Son—the Father, as the Old Testament taught, punishing with pain, and the Son taking it away again.

Rather, His attitude towards pain was that expressed on the occasion when He healed the woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years.

"Ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan had bound, lo, these eighteen years, to have been loosed from this bond on the day of the sabbath?" (St. Luke xiii. 16).

"Whom Satan had bound." Not the work of God, but the work of the power of evil, contrary to God's desire.

The same thought about suffering and punishment is expressed at two other occasions upon which Jesus is reported to have spoken about the subject.

The first is the reference in St. Luke to the massacre of the Galileans and the disaster of the Tower of Siloam.

"Think ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they have suffered these things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, think ye that they were offenders above all the men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (St. Luke xiii. 2-5).

Here Jesus runs contrary to the traditional Jewish idea of mechanical rewards and punishments, and then goes on to warn His audience that, nevertheless, sin does produce disaster, and that they, too, are in danger as long as they fail to repent. The same question was raised by the disciples in the case reported by St. John.

"And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (St. John ix. 1, 2).

Jesus's answer to the rather bewildered question of the disciples makes it clear that there is suffering in the world which cannot be accounted for by the sin of the individual.

"Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be manifest in him" (St. John ix. 3).

God is manifested in destroying the works of evil. And man's duty is action, conflict against evil—to do like Jesus, going about, doing good.

“I must work the works of him that sent me” (St. John ix. 4).

The duty of man is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Then “all these things”—which include the conquest of human suffering—will be added to us.

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II.

We have seen how our Lord has made clear that suffering is not necessarily God's method of inflicting punishment upon the sinning individual. We have also seen how our Lord indicates the practical road towards the cure of human suffering.

“I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day” (John ix. 4).

From this point we must strike out for ourselves, for our Lord gives us no other information. He Himself was perhaps more concerned with the practical work of ending suffering than with explaining the intellectual why and wherefore. But we must at any rate be profoundly grateful that He gives us the essential assurance of the falsity of the point of view which is satirized so pungently by Studdert-Kennedy.

“He bids us love our enemies
And live in Christian Peace,
’Tis only He can order Wars
And woes that never cease.”

In other words—*God is Love.*

Now the loving omnipotent God has limited Himself in certain ways. The first limitation that He has put upon Himself is that He has given to man freedom of will. He has decided to work out His purpose through man, a self-creating being—“Man is his own star.”

No doubt God might have made man an automaton, a non-moral being. As such, man would have been incapable of evil. But it would also have followed that man must then have been incapable of good, incapable of advance, a soulless being without love.

There is a well-known brand of milk labelled “Carnation Milk from Contented Cows.” God might have created a world of contented cows. But who would not prefer humanity—with all its possibilities for good, albeit with the almost inevitable chances of mistakes, sin, and sorrow?

God has decided to work out His purposes through man. As it were, He has voluntarily surrendered to us His work, to act as His agents. In the words of St. Theresa—

“Christ has no Body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which He is to look out compassion to the world; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.”

As God's members upon earth, we must strive, beings of free-will. Without that striving, indeed, there could be no advance. That is a fundamental law of life. Mr. H. G. Wells, in his book *The Time Machine* gives a powerful illustration of that truth. He describes a race at the end of time, when conflict had ceased and life had become effortless. A race of charming cultured little people, but spineless, thoughtless, utterly hopeless and ineffective, a parody upon humanity. And the logic of experience shows us that Mr. Wells' parable is a true one.

It is through conflict and suffering that we arrive at humanity's greatness. The spirit which carries the world to victory is the spirit of sacrifice—the spirit which shines through the deathless story of Captain Oates' giving of himself in the Antarctic and which comes to its climax at Calvary itself.

“Measure thy life by loss instead of gain ;
Not by the wine drunk, but the wine poured forth ;
For love's strength standeth in love's sacrifice ;
And whoso suffers most hath most to give.”

And there can be no true sacrifice, no true love, no victory, except among beings of free choice.

But necessarily this weapon of free choice is double-edged. It is possible for man to make the wrong choice. Man can become a saint—but he may also be a sinner. Besides man's willed good, there may also be man's willed evil. Man has been put in a sphere where he can live dangerously. And he has often misused his freedom. That is the cause of most of our suffering, if we can trace cause and effect far enough. We see a family in our slums, pinched with want, the children going to bed crying with hunger. We can trace it all back to man's inhumanity to man ; the greed of speculators, the indifference of the rich. We ask why God allowed the War. But its cause was not God's will, but rather man's reckless misuse of his God-given freedom. Kipling summed up the truth when he wrote,

“Money spent on an Army or Fleet
Is homicidal lunacy . . .
My son has been killed in the Mons retreat,
Why is the Lord afflicting me ?
Why are murder, pillage and arson
And rape allowed by the Deity ?
I will write to *The Times* deriding our parson
Because my God has afflicted me.”

• • • • •

“As was the sowing, so is the reaping,
Is now and evermore shall be.
Thou art delivered to thine own keeping.
Only Thyself hath afflicted thee.”

It is useless to cry out against God because of suffering which is the result of man's own vice or carelessness or neglect of opportunities. Rather, we must strive to follow the God of Love and work towards that which is a human possibility—the conquest of sin and suffering.

Before we conclude these thoughts on the problem of suffering another great principle must be examined. That is the principle of family life—of human solidarity.

The way of the world is the way of co-operation. That is obvious in our everyday life. To take a simple illustration, think of the first meal of the day. The oatmeal for our porridge comes from the plains of Canada. Our kipper is provided by trawlers working on the high seas. Our eggs come from Denmark, our tea from Ceylon, our sugar from the West Indies, our marmalade from the orange groves of Seville. Hundreds of unknown men have worked together to give us the necessities of life. Indeed, the individual life is impossible. The world is not a collection of isolated individuals, but a family working for the mutual good. That is the heart of our Lord's teaching of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

And so, too, we are bound together by our common human nature, and by ties of heredity, to those who have gone before us. We have developed a physique suitable for its purpose from the modes of life of our ancestors. Humanity is designed as a co-operative whole.

Without that co-operation advance would be impossible. And so the human race was designed by God to be a family—a universe, not a multiverse.

God was faced with the alternative of making man either a collection of units or a family. He chose the latter alternative, because individualism would have inflicted greater suffering upon man.

But God cannot give the benefits of family life without its necessary risks. If we are to benefit from our bond to our fellow-men, we must also accept the disadvantages of that bond. That is inevitable, and it does not constitute a valid argument against the omnipotence or love of God.

For the co-operative principle, like the principle of free-will, is double-edged. Co-operation multiplies our blessings, but it also multiplies our troubles. For instance, it makes clear the essential truth that the sins of the fathers fall upon the children. A drunken, immoral father brings misery upon his innocent family. A rogue brings ruin and unemployment upon his honest business associates. Mankind is so closely bound together that the greed of a speculator may mean that God's bounty of harvest is kept back from starving little children a thousand miles away.

These are accidents necessarily arising from the misuse of the principle of human co-operation. The principle in itself is devised for the betterment of humanity, but human sin has intruded and the results of sin have magnified themselves through a long chain of cause and effect.

Again, not only is mankind bound together by certain connections into a family, but we see the whole universe of life going through a co-operative evolution towards a final end. This evolution is not haphazard, but it has a definite upward aim obviously directed towards a purpose by an intelligent Being. In that universe the inferior and

the imperfect are being conquered. And that conquest, from the very nature of existence, must imply suffering. We suffer as from growing pains in order to achieve perfection.

If our mistakes and sin cause suffering and disease ; if our ignorance and carelessness allow us to suffer from earthquake and flood ; if our solidarity allows the perpetuation of the sins of the fathers upon the children ; if our growth necessitates suffering in the submersion of the inferior and the imperfect, yet we can see that very suffering does act as a spur and an incentive towards advance.

So we can see that suffering is also at the basis of God's purpose. Perhaps that is the explanation of much of the suffering which we can not attribute to our own abuse of God's scheme of life.

Admittedly, to us who are yet imperfect, to whom it doth not yet appear what we shall be, that suffering does remain something of a puzzle.

Yet it ought not to be a complete stumbling block to us. It ought not to justify us in losing our faith in God. We do know that the universe is a great harmony. "And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good." We may liken the universe to a great symphony with occasional apparent discords, yet with a definite purpose and theme running through it. And we may reasonably conjecture that were our faculties more adequately attuned and educated, we should find that the apparent discords fitted in with the whole symphony. We have at least sufficient evidence that the universe is the ordered work of a master hand to make us willing to take another step in the realm of faith, and to face and fight sin and sorrow in the right way.

And we have the assurance that our fight will not be in vain. When God came to earth He led the way, going about doing good, "healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness among the people" (Matt. iv 23). One way the fight will be won is the way of faith. Another way is the way of sacrifice, the *via dolorosa* which led to Calvary, the way towards God's final purpose. We have the guarantee that that way is the way to victory. That guarantee was given once for all on the third day when our Lord burst from the rocky tomb, making certain the final and inevitable conquest of evil.

"In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer : ye have overcome the world."

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