

What about Suffering?

“What about suffering? How do you account for suffering? Why do good people have pain? Why am I hurting? It seems a senseless evil to me. How does Jesus address this?”

Most people live with the vague impression that the universe itself is broken. Or else they have concluded the universe is oblivious to human suffering. Some philosophies say we suffer because we are working out some bad “karma” or are being punished by God or the universe. The friends of Job in the Bible came to him with this idea, essentially: “*Job, admit it. You have sinned against God; that’s why this evil has happened to you.*” Others say we suffer because the powerful oppress the weak, and only the fittest survive, but then we all die anyway. This leads some to rage against a cold and unfair universe. Others will calmly, even proudly, accept their fate with a brave exterior covering their inner hopelessness.

In the end, Christians are asked to explain the mystery of suffering while the atheist has to explain everything else. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God does not explain our suffering - He triumphs over it. He does not give a logical, reasoned-out philosophy of pain, but He Himself comes to suffer with us, to cry out on the cross, “My God, My God, why?” (Mark 15:34). The risen Jesus is now able to come to us in our suffering to sustain us. He can even use our suffering in His gracious hand to mold us according to His will (FC SD XI 48-49). Then, because the end of His suffering and death is His resurrection from the dead, He promises to raise us, so we are able to say with Paul, “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time do not deserve to be compared with the glory that is about to be revealed to us,*” (Romans 8:18).

This is God’s basic way of operating. He raises the dead. First Jesus, then us. He calls the lowly. He lifts up the humble. He finds the lost. Throughout the biblical story, God does not often choose the strong and the powerful, but frequently the dominated, the powerless, and the marginal. In Genesis, God often picks not the firstborn, but the second son: Abel rather than Cain, Isaac rather than Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph instead of Reuben. Working with women, it’s often not the young and beautiful: it’s old infertile Sarah, not young Hagar; unloved Leah, not lovely Rachel. As the story progresses, God stands with the slaves in Egypt to deliver Israel. Moses is the outcast who doesn’t speak well. The judges often come from the smaller tribe, those of low status. David the king is the youngest of eight sons. Do you see the pattern? “*He raises the poor person from the dust and lifts the needy person from the ash heap, that He may seat him with princes, with the princes of His people. He settles a childless woman in her home as the joyful mother of her children. Praise the LORD!*” (Psalm 113:7-9). It’s God’s basic way of operating - resurrection.

In the New Testament, Jesus consorts with the rich and poor alike, not as “good” and “moral” people might expect. He attracts tax collectors and sinners, calling them to repent and follow Him (Luke 15:1-2). He is concerned with the little, the last, the least, and the lost. He even raises the dead - it’s always His go-to plan. This is not simply because people love an underdog but has to do with ultimate reality. We are all dying sinners. The rich and the powerful. The poor and the outcast. We all end up in the grave. So Jesus Christ Himself was abandoned by most of those closest to Him, including, for a time, even His Father. He was the victim of a miscarriage of justice who died in disgrace, helpless; and He suffered it all willingly, for us. We are not saved by finding in ourselves the strength to escape death by our great deeds, but we receive by faith the salvation Christ worked for us. Now in His Word, in Baptism and His Supper, He gives His gifts of the forgiveness of sins and resurrection to life. The Word delivers what it promises.

“Pull yourself together! Master yourself! Get control of your situation. Be strong; you can do it!” is one approach the world takes. Another is to control others by playing the victim. But Jesus says, in essence, “You cannot do it. You have to rely on Me!” A salvation earned by moral effort would favour the strong, the competent, the privileged. But salvation as a gift of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus favours the failed, the outsiders, the weak, because it goes only to those who know salvation must be sheer gift. When we know we are as good as dead, then we come to appreciate above all else the One who raises the dead. That’s because the Bible is not principally the story of great heroes of faith; rather, it is the record of God intervening in the lives of people who don’t deserve it, often resist it, and don’t always appreciate it: people like you and me. People like those we know and meet every day. That is what changes us. That is what gives new life, for “*God has chosen the lowly things in the world, the things that are despised, and the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no one may boast before God,*” (1 Corinthians 1:28-29). By His resurrection, Jesus does not explain suffering and death, but triumphs over them. We matter to God, soul and body, because we shall be raised, soul and body, to eternal life.