

## Christian Doubts No. 12

“Suffering No. 2”

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Last week we began our consideration of the challenge to the Christian faith posed by the suffering that we find in this world, both its universality and its intensity. Would a good God, such as Christians confess, allow so much misery in a world he controls? Would he permit so many to suffer such pain and loss? The number of Christians who have found their faith shaken by their encounter with suffering, either their own or that of others, is very great. We first said that, however difficult it may be for us to explain God’s management of this world, we should be very careful to consider the alternative first. Terrible as human suffering is – and the Bible not only does not deny this, it rings the changes on it – it would be worse, far worse, if, in fact, such misery, such heartbreak *meant nothing at all*, if it had no purpose and if there were no one to care or to help. And we argued, with the help of philosopher Alvin Plantinga, without God it is impossible to assign *any* meaning to *anything*, including suffering. We would be left having to say that life can be terrible. Full stop.

In a fortuitous happenstance, after preaching that sermon last Lord’s Day evening I came across an article in the most recent issue of *Touchstone* entitled “The True Atheist Myth.” [“The True Atheist Myth: Jordan Bissell on Past and Present Atheism and the Invention of Happiness,” *Touchstone* (Sept/Oct 2016) 14-15] The article begins this way:

“In a review of Alister McGrath’s recent book, *The Big Question*, Barbara King, a professor of anthropology at the College of William and Mary, takes issue with McGrath’s characterization of atheism as lacking the meaning which, McGrath contends, can be found in a religious, and specifically Christian, worldview. That the philosophical implications of atheism should doom the atheist to an arid and desolate existence, King contends, is an unkillable myth: a shibboleth of the faithful as buoyant but as false as the contention that Darwin had a deathbed conversion.”

King believes that atheists are entirely capable of finding meaning in life. But the author of the article has an easy time debunking King’s argument. All he does is to demonstrate with citations how prominent atheists – men whose philosophical sophistication exceeds that of professor King by several orders of magnitude – have admitted that this loss of meaning is precisely the price that must be paid for atheism. For all its attractions – no strict moral code limiting one’s freedom, no final judgment, and no hell – there is this rather painful consequence that must be faced. He quotes Nietzsche arguing that we must come to terms with “the belief in the absolute immorality of nature and in the utter purposelessness and meaninglessness of our psychologically necessary human impulses and affections.” (He means such things as a sense of right and wrong or love!) He cites Jean Paul Sartre to the effect that “man is a useless passion.” Sartre rejected the idea that without God or religion society could reasonably require people to be honest or not to lie. Without God anything is permissible and, as Sartre put it, “if God does not exist...man is in consequence forlorn.” Similarly Bertrand Russell, one of the most influential of modern atheists admitted that without God our hopes, our loves, our beliefs are nothing but “the outcome of an accidental collocation of atoms.” The world that science presents

to our belief, Russell admitted, must be organized “on the firm foundation of unyielding despair.” Similarly Sigmund Freud remarked that the moment one begins to question the meaning or value of life, “he is sick, since objectively, neither has any existence.” And Richard Dawkins, the Russell and Sartre of the millennial generation, says similar things, denying any reality or meaning to our moral intuitions or our existential longings. Man is reduced to biology. He is an animal, here for a moment and then gone forever. Jerry Coyne the University of Chicago biologist and outspoken atheist, celebrated King’s review of McGrath’s book, but then went on to admit that he would be “hard pressed” to say what the purpose of his life is and that “in some sense” he agrees with the idea that if science cannot establish God, it cannot establish meaning either.” The author of the *Touchstone* article then wryly observes,

“Here as elsewhere, Coyne’s remarks give the impression that atheism liberates one not only from God but also from the [law] of non-contradiction.”

He means that Coyne seems unaware that he has celebrated what he takes to be King’s dismantling of McGrath’s argument and then agrees that McGrath is right. The author then concludes:

“What conclusions can we then draw, apart from the fact that atheist quotations don’t make for great motivational posters? For one, the idea that atheism and nihilism are intimately intertwined is not a calumny [– that is a false charge –] of believers against non-believers; on the contrary, it’s a view that some of the most eminent atheists in the history of philosophy have consistently professed over the centuries.

Even Prof. King admits in her review that there is no *objective* meaning to life, but she claims that one can find *subjective* meaning. “That is, one can live a purpose-driven life even in a purposeless world.” [Jordan Russell, 15] The problem with that, of course, is that one is simply making up one’s meaning. He or she is *acting as if* there is meaning when, in fact, there is none. Such pretend meaning is impossible to defend or justify in a world where 1) pretend meaning does not stand up to the shocks of life and 2) a great many people are making up a great many very different meanings. The jihadist can make up his meaning too. So could Hitler, so could Mao, so could Jeffrey Dahmer. So can the evangelical Christian. Prof. King certainly doesn’t want evangelicals’ meaning to be as authoritative as her own! As the author of the article, Jordan Bissell, observes, “Without a dartboard, the aim of the lover is no closer to the bull’s-eye than the aim of the hater.” If purpose is one’s invention and rests upon nothing and cannot be objectively justified, then Prof. King cannot justify her criticism of Prof. McGrath. Each is pretending and each free to pretend whatever he or she pleases.

All of this to remind us how important this point actually is and how confidently we ought to bring it up in conversation with unbelievers. The sole alternative to belief in God, who remains the only conceivable origin of the moral intuitions and existential longings that every human being is born with and cannot escape – *if those intuitions and longings are not an illusion* – I say, the only alternative to God is moral and existential despair. An honest person ought to admit this. So the next time someone says that morality and meaning can be found without God, your reply should be a simple, “Says who?”

In our first sermon we then pointed out that fundamental to a biblical theology of suffering is the fact that God himself suffers in and with our suffering – it is not something he enjoys or treats with indifference – and, further, that he sent his Son to suffer with us and for us. Only Christianity has such a message about suffering. Therefore, there is both a necessity to our suffering – why else would God allow it if it causes even *him* pain? – and a purpose for it – as it is the instrument by which the world was redeemed and by which human beings – even the only sinless human being who ever lived – are perfected. As deliverance from disease sometimes requires the scalpel, so deliverance from sin requires pain, Christ’s pain first, and then ours.

But the Bible has much more to say about the purpose of suffering than that. Years ago I began to note in my Bible, on the title page of the book of Job, the various reasons for suffering that are identified here and there throughout Holy Scripture. I have more than a dozen reasons listed there and, next to each one, some of the biblical texts that identify that reason. Most of them, of course, as we would expect, have to do with suffering *in the life of believers, the people of God*. The Bible, after all, is addressed to them by and large. And nothing in that list would surprise you. Andreas Rivetus, one of the Reformed theologians of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, reduced my dozen or more to six. They were these: suffering in God’s world is an instrument

1. To lead us to conversion, to faith in Christ. Think of those who came to Christ in the Gospels because of their afflictions, their sense of terrible need or the Philippian jailer crying out in fear and trembling, afraid that his life had come to ruin, “What must I do to be saved?”
2. To purify us from our sins. As Rivetus puts it, if sin is venom, affliction is the antidote. So Peter says in (1 Pet. 4:1), he who has suffered in the body is done with sin.
3. To test our faith, to reveal the true state of our souls. Think of the trials the church in Corinth was suffering which, Paul said, were intended to reveal who the real believers were. President James Garfield, whose life was cut short by an assassin’s bullet, was a wise man and might have made one of our very best presidents. He was also a Christian minister. He once said, “I have sometimes thought that we cannot know any man thoroughly well while he is in perfect health. As the ebb-tide discloses the real lines of the shore and the bed of the sea, so feebleness, sickness, and pain bring out the real character of the man.” [Cited in Millard, *Destiny of the Republic*, 215] How many of us have found this to be true, watched our faith and our character wither to some degree under the pressure of suffering? I certainly have! My trials have taught me what I am and, alas, what I am not.
4. To help us place our hope in the next world and to take our eyes off present things. Think of the promise repeated throughout Rev. 2 and 3, in the letters to the seven churches, that “to him who overcomes – that is endures in faith the trials of this life – I will give him the right to eat from the tree of life.”
5. To humble us and kill our pride. Think of Paul and his thorn in the flesh that was given him to control his pride on account of the great advantages and privileges he had been given.
6. To drive us to God. Think of Paul in 2 Cor. 1 saying that living under such great pressure as he had, he had learned not to rely on himself but on God. [H.J. Honders, *Andreas Rivetus: Als Invloedrijk Gereformeerd Theoloog in Holland’s Bloeitijd*, 64]

But there are more than just these six. Suffering is sometimes punishment for a believer's sins. Think of the disintegration of David's family that followed upon his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah and his failure as a father, including the death of four of his sons. Such punishment, of course, also serves as a warning to others and keeps many from doing the same evil things. Sometimes, as we are also reminded in David's case, we suffer because of the sins of others. Think of those who died because of David's numbering the people. Think of so many who suffer greatly because of their parents' sins. Sometimes the suffering of believers is to demonstrate the reality of faith and salvation to others, even to spiritual beings. Think of Job enduring terrible suffering at the hand of Satan to demonstrate to the evil spirits the reality of his faith. And we could say much more about the purpose of suffering according to the Bible.

Christians not only understand *how* suffering can produce such results, the wiser among them and those with the longer experience of life, especially those most thoughtful about their own sins and about what true holiness of life consists of, accept that in many cases *nothing but* suffering can accomplish these things or, at least, accomplish them in the measure necessary. You have heard this point being made in many different ways, but let me jog your memory.

1. Samuel Rutherford: "Faith's necessity in a fair day is never known aright."
2. Andrew Fuller: "We have no more religion than what we have in times of trial."
3. A.W. Tozer: "It is doubtful that God can bless a man greatly unless he has hurt him deeply."
4. Augustine: "The world was not overcome by fighting, but by suffering."
5. Archbishop Trench: "The receiving of this world's good with no admixture of its evil, the course of an unbroken prosperity, is ever a sign and augury of ultimate reprobation. ... There is in every man dross in abundance, needing to be purged away in the purifying fires of pain. He therefore whom these purifying fires come not near, is left with all his dross in him, with his evil unpurged; and therefore can be no partaker of that holiness without which no man shall see God."
6. John Bunyan: "...by the sadness of my countenance I find my heart bettered and mortified to the world, and I draw nearer to God, and [am kept awake], and have experience of the Lord's goodness, so that I may say, 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted.' In a word, the Lord hath so blessed his rod to me, as I find all these ends and fruits of righteousness wrought on me, so as I may say, I had perished unless I had perished (*perissem nisi perissem*)."
7. Samuel Rutherford once more: "The Lord sometimes sends us to the cellar but only because he keeps his best wine there."

Take all of this together, all the holy and wise purposes that our suffering fulfills, and we are left with the conviction not merely that the world is full of suffering, but that it must be so. As I have told some of you before, I found stated by Rutherford, a man who suffered a great deal, what I have found not nearly so clearly in anyone else, viz. the straightforward assertion that our particular afflictions and suffering have been appointed for us by our heavenly Father precisely to get us to heaven and without them we would not make it there. It seems to me that, taking the Bible's teaching together, that must be true. But then that is how necessary pain and suffering is and that is why God will not, cannot spare us from it. Here is the passage from one of his immortal letters to Lady Kenmure:

“Madam, when ye are come to the other side of the water, and have set down your foot on the shore of glorious eternity, and look back again to the waters and to your wearisome journey, and shall see, in that clear glass of endless glory, nearer to the bottom of God’s wisdom, ye shall then be forced to say, ‘If God had done otherwise with me than he hath done, I had never come to the enjoying of this crown of glory.’” [Letter XI, p. 52]

And, of course, I could go on and on. But if these masters of the Christian life all take it for granted that suffering is a necessary part of growth in true faith and genuine holiness, who are we to imagine that we can gain those things in comfort and without pain. How could we imagine such a thing, all the more, when the Bible speaks so frequently and emphatically about the necessity of suffering for those various reasons, each of which has something to do with our salvation and our growth in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ? Some of you will remember John Newton’s poem on this subject. Newton, of course, was another master of the Christian life.

“I asked the Lord, that I might grow  
in faith, and love, and every grace;  
might more of his salvation know,  
and seek more earnestly his face.

“I hoped that in some favored hour  
at once he’d answer my request,  
and by his love’s constraining power  
subdue my sins, and give me rest.

“Instead of this, he made me feel  
the hidden evils of my heart;  
and let the angry powers of hell  
assault my soul in every part.

“Yea more, with his own hand he seemed  
intent to aggravate my woe;  
crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

“‘Lord, why is this?’ I trembling cried,  
‘Wilt thou pursue they worm to death?’  
‘Tis in this way,’ the Lord replied,  
‘I answer prayer for grace and faith.

“‘These inward trials I employ  
From self and pride to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may’st seek thy all in me.’”

Such is the power of the world, our flesh, and the devil that only a powerful force is capable of breaking their grip upon our hearts, only the sharpest scalpel can cut away the diseased parts of our heart and life. Hence the suffering of the saints. So much is this the Bible's viewpoint and teaching that it is safe to say that the Christian who complains that God is unjust in allowing him or her to suffer or to suffer so severely is, by his or her complaining, simply demonstrating how little he or she really understands how deeply sinful we are, what it means to have faith in God, what it means to be holy, and how difficult a thing salvation really is.

I don't mean by any of this to make light of the struggle. The Bible never does that. And no observer of human life will do that either. The suffering must be intense for its effects to be realized. The suffering God's people must endure can be devastating, heart-breaking, sometimes almost unbearable. That the Lord Jesus himself should be called "the man of sorrows," that we are taught that he was acquainted with grief, and shed great tears and was himself terrified, reminds us that God never views the suffering of his people as a mere pageant, as some play rather than a real thing. Our Father in heaven knows what it feels like to lose a beloved son, to be rejected by those he loves, to be disappointed of his hopes. Mysterious as this is in the case of someone omniscient and omnipotent, the Bible says repeatedly that God's heart was filled with pain (Gen. 6:6), that he was grieved, or that he longs for what he does not obtain. But this only further confirms how essential suffering must be to the perfection of character and the obtaining of salvation. If the perfect God suffers and we are to be like him and are being made like him, then suffering will be, must be our lot.

I suspect that, readers of the Bible that they are, most Christians accept this, at least intellectually. They understand the purifying power of pain. They realize that suffering deepens and softens the heart as nothing else can. There are lessons that cannot be learned in any other fashion. And, above all, they know all too well that they don't deserve a trouble free life and that God has more than enough reason to subject them to his rod for what they have done and failed to do. And that remains true no matter that our sins are forgiven. David's sins were forgiven, but he still had to suffer the consequences of them. As the Psalmist reminds us:

"O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings" [Psalm 99:9]

Every thoughtful Christian knows this and, therefore, wonders – can't help but wonder – how much of his suffering is his heavenly Father's punishment. I have had through the years many people ask me that very question: did this happen to me because of my sins? Did I bring this upon myself? Am I being punished? Are my children suffering because of my sins? Indeed, as often as suffering is punishment in the Bible – even in the lives of real Christians – when a Christian *doesn't worry about this* it can only be because he or she is far too self-satisfied, far too proud, and far too cavalier about his or her sins.

True enough, like so much else in the Christian life, the purpose of our suffering is shrouded in mystery. Why this, why now? Job was never told that his suffering had nothing to do with the character of his life, had to do entirely with something with which he was not directly connected at all. Paul was told why the Lord would not remove his thorn in the flesh, but we are not. David was told that he would suffer for the sins he had committed, but we are given only general

principles and explanations in the Bible and usually cannot say precisely why we suffer when we suffer. Sometimes we know, but many times we do not. We must trust the Lord to be doing right by us, to know what is best, what is necessary in our case, and surely no one else would know that but he. And then we must seek to improve our afflictions.

The finest statement of this calling, the calling of every Christian, I have ever come across was in P.T. Forsyth's superb book on prayer, *The Soul of Prayer*. Forsyth was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century English Congregationalist.

“It is a greater thing to pray for pain's conversion than for its removal. It is more of grace to pray that God would make a sacrament of it. The sacrament of pain! *That* we partake not simply, nor perhaps chiefly, when we say, or try to say, with resignation, ‘Thy will be done.’ It is not always easy for the sufferer, if he remains clear-eyed, to see that it is God's will.... But, now it is there, a certain treatment of it *is* God's will; and that is to capture and exploit it for him. It is to make it serve the soul and glorify God. It is to consecrate its elements and make it sacramental. It is to convert it into prayer. God has blessed pain even in causing us to pray for relief from it, or profit. Whatever drives us to him, and even nearer him, has a blessing in it. And, if we are to go higher still, it is to turn pain into praise, to thank him in the fires, to review life and use some of the energy we spend in worrying upon recalling and tracing his goodness, patience, and mercy... Or we may see how our pain becomes a blessing to others.” [*The Soul of Prayer*, 42, emphasis added]

All of this to say simply this. In this world of sin and death, in this world of people heading either to hell or heaven, in this world dominated by the Evil One, when our own hearts are still so full of everything that is contrary to God and to our own best interests and the interests of others, there must be trial and trouble. The Devil will do his part for his evil purposes and God will do his for his purposes of love and goodness. But killing sin in a human life takes extraordinary measures. What person who knows the power of sin in his or her heart can doubt that? And who but God is wise enough to know what we must suffer and how if we are to be sanctified and ultimately if we are to be saved?

Now, having said all of that, I do not imagine that all our doubts are removed or our questions answered. There is great mystery here and I want to address that fact next time. The fact of the matter is, we do not understand what God is doing almost all of the time. We cannot. But is that a reason for us to doubt – given how often the Bible explains the purpose and necessity of suffering in our lives – that he is at work or that his purposes are good and wise? I want to answer those questions next time.

But as I conclude, this word to those who are at this moment suffering some trial, are enduring some pain, or living with some great fear. This from Alexander Whyte.

“Give your mind and your will and your conscience and your imagination and your heart to these few first principles and make constant application of them to your own case. 1) It is God's love that so cuts you to the quick. 2) There is to be no myrrh allowed nor chloroform nor any kind of mental or moral insensibility. 3) No pain no cure; little pain

little cure; great pain great cure; lifelong pain here everlasting life without any more pain in that land where God himself shall wipe away all tears from his patients' eyes. 4) All his divine operations are performed in secret. 5) All his divine operations are performed free and for nothing: for his hospital is fully endowed for the service of the poor. And 6) A perfect and an everlasting cure is absolutely guaranteed; absolutely guaranteed against all possible relapse." [Thomas Shepard, 172-173]

And, finally, once again from Samuel Rutherford, who lost his children to death, then his wife, was mistreated by his government, expelled from his ministry and sent into domestic exile, and finally made an enemy of the state; a man, that is, who suffered in so many ways.

"Nay, whether God come to his children with a rod or a crown, if he come himself with it, it is well. Welcome, welcome Jesus, what way soever thou come, if we can get a sight of thee! And sure I am, it is better to be sick, providing Christ come to the bedside and draw by the curtains, and say, 'Courage, I am thy salvation,' than to enjoy health, being lusty and strong, and never to be visited of God." [Letters, XI, 52]