

I believe God is a loving Heavenly Father. I believe He is both transcendent and personal. So when I first developed Multiple Sclerosis (MS) I felt like a child who cannot understand why they needed to get a painful injection at a doctor's office. "Why this Father", as I look up at Him with tears in my eyes, and "why now?" I have felt hurt, angry, and even betrayed by God. After having MS now for almost 2 decades I see that the mystery of suffering according to the Bible is not exclusively "why did God allow this to happen to me" but more like "how can God use me for His glory now?" and "how can I continue to be useful in the worldwide outreach God has initiated to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ?"¹ This is not emotionally easy to write and believe but it is true. So what I hope to cover in this brief essay is how can a Christian, one who is already committed to Jesus as their Savior and Lord, and one who accepts the authority of scripture as their highest and final authority in their lives, firmly decide to seek God and His comfort in the occurrence of suffering in their lives and remain an intentional part of God's work on earth.

For all believers a theology of suffering is an essential aspect of growing deeper in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.² In light of your losses you can be confused as to the nature and purposes of God, angered over why He allowed this to happen, and fear as to what this means for your future. I felt all of these emotions when I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 2001.

This part of my story begins two decades earlier. In 1981, while in college, I visited China with 200 other college students. It was there that I first sensed God's leading me to serve the Chinese people. I graduated college in 1982 and went to work for a bank on Wall Street. In 1985 I met Ming and became very interested in her as she was a mission intern at the church, and fun to be with. We married in 1987 and two years later left for seminary in which we thought be the first step in a life time of serving God together and by His grace storing up treasures in heaven. In light of living eternally, what else could matter? We felt led to overseas missions after a mission conference at our home church, the First Baptist Church of Flushing. Where we would go we thought was obvious: reaching Chinese

¹ For a more in depth coverage see the works cited page.

² see Philippians 3:10

as one of us was already fluent in Mandarin! While at seminary we were visited by our pastor Russel Rosser who said he had the perfect place for us. It was both European and Chinese! (much like us). We were enthralled with what was happening in the Chinese church and when a Macau missionary visited us in Seminary and later that year we spoke to our future teammate in Asia, we were convinced that was the place for us! Just hearing the scooters zoom by the Great Hope Church in Macau when I was on the phone with a teammate made me excited to dream about what life and ministry would be like there.

After graduating from seminary we embarked on two years of partner development. We moved to Taiwan in 1994 to begin language school. Taichung Taiwan was full of new sights, sounds, and smells! I spoke no Mandarin so Micah's 5-year-old friends knew more Mandarin than I! In 1996 we moved again this time to Macau! I was so excited to finally be there! After a first term of four years, of joys and frustrations we returned home to the US for a ministry to the churches and individuals that had supported us (this is known as "home assignment" and it lasts for 1 year usually).

While at the YMCA one day in New Jersey I started to dream what it would be like to plant a church. In 2001, we rented an apartment to conduct a Bible study in Taipa Macau. We hoped that Bible Study would become a church. I developed my first signs of Multiple Sclerosis as I was looking at apartments to rent, I was dragging my left leg. I was frustrated, embarrassed, in denial, and angry. After seeing a Neurologist, it was confirmed that I had Multiple Sclerosis (MS). In 2002 we had to return to the US because of my MS. My last sermon in Macau I felt as free to speak in Mandarin as in English.

Ming and I went to seminary, raised support, struggled with language learning, made plenty of dumb mistakes as a field leader for 1 year, started planting our first which we hoped would be many churches, and now it was all going, going, gone. I wrestled and fought with God over this illness. Dealing with a chronic illness is not a one-time process with loss but a series of grieving loss, a series we are still in.

There are many uncertainties when facing a loss or grieving the loss of someone you love. You may ask yourself, "What is my life to be like

without” The question that is in everybody's has in mind who suffers is “Is God there and is He good” That is what is often referred to as the “mystery of suffering” I have seen too many of God’s children be tangled up with these questions preventing them from knowing God’s love, goodness, and comfort. My concern now is for the body of Christ to approach the occurrence of suffering in our lives in a way that honors God and deepens our own faith and the faith of our community. It is with that hope I share a framework of suffering.

I believe the issue of suffering as it relates to God and of Christian theology is not complex. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10 ***that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death*** And the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53:3 would describe the messiah, God in the flesh as:

He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with] grief

Christian theology has a God who has suffered and even anticipates us suffering and dying in a manner that glorifies Him. As a believer in the one true God and Savior the Lord Jesus Christ I am assuming that the final authority in our lives in terms of faith and conduct is the Bible.³ I am using the metaphor of a picture frame.

How does God's providence relate to our understanding of suffering? "What is providence exactly? In the metaphor of a picture frame, the back of the frame is providence.

Providence - It's hidden like the back of a frame but like the back of the frame it holds the “picture” together of our life together, especially when we are suffering.

We are all affected by God’s providence, God’s sovereignty. I firmly believe the God of the Bible rules over everything from our emotions, thoughts, actions, health, relationships, and mundane everyday things.

³ (Grudem, 2005)

While I am completely responsible for my actions and attitudes (I must own my “bad moods” and harsh words), God is either permitting (in the case of sinful, harmful attitudes and actions) or actively accomplishing His will in the world⁴.

Providence is defined as to see beforehand and provide. The term providence reminds us that God not only sees, knows, and cares for our future, but is actively preparing us for it.

The God who sees and knows me reminds me of the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. Hagar came face to face with the God who sees her. When she ran away from Sarai, pregnant, alone, powerless, and ready to die, God saw her and spoke to her. Trusting in His Words she returned to Sarai only to be thrown out again with her son Ishmael after Issac was born. God again saw her and provided for her and Ishmael.

We believe in Providence because as believers in Jesus we hold to a God who is completely and totally sovereign. There is no other God in the universe, in scripture, in reality that we must acknowledge exists in all of the events of our lives. That is both great news (God is truly watching and cares for me) and difficult news. Why this now we may ask? How long O lord must I suffer? Mostly, it's great news as I am assured that things are not spiraling out of control (although they may feel like it) and there are limits to what I will go through⁵ (1 Corinthians 10:13). But on dark days when you don't sleep and your outlook becomes grim, we cry out for God's mercy and grace and we remember Joseph. Joseph is a great example of a believer in God who trusted in God's providence.

19 But Joseph said to them, “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them

Genesis 50:19-21

⁴ Ephesians 1:11

⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:13

There were two wills in effect, two intentions 1 - God's good will to provide for millions of people during a time of extreme drought who would otherwise starve to death. Ultimately the saved people of Jacob would bring about the birth of Jesus and 2- The brothers evil and jealous intent to destroy Joseph

But remember this was not a case of dualism where good and evil forces are in battle a.k.a. **Star Wars**. No, God is in complete control and will use circumstance, seemingly random events, even as in the case of Joseph, the evil intent of his brothers, to bring about His will

- Joseph could not know when he was thrown in a ditch by his brothers and sold as a slave that God was preparing to use him to save nations and the line of the Messiah and Savior Jesus
- Joseph could not know when he was thrown in jail, unfairly accused of attempted rape, that God would use this last degrading step to raise him up as a leader to save lives and save a remnant in which the messiah would come.

Starting over three decades ago God prepared us for my approaching disability. About 5 months before we were married, Ming imagined and announced to me that she could go through with the marriage because she thought through what it would be like if I was paralyzed and was ok with it. We could proceed to get married! I was perplexed giving that we were engaged but did not give it any thought! About 6 months before I developed MS, Ming and I were led to read *How Long Oh Lord - A Biblical response to suffering* by D.A. Carson⁶. While I was going for medical testing in Hong Kong, while my condition was still unknown, God spoke - not audibly but communicated to me in my heart while I was reviewing scripture memory cards - God asked me to trust Him

God sees me! Yes, out of billions of people on planet earth He sees me, knows my name, sent Jesus to reconcile me to Him, and lovingly cares for me. I know He loves me daily because I read in His Word how He sent Jesus to die for the sins of the World. He not only sees me but also arranges my circumstances and desires to both prepare me for my future

⁶ (Carson, 1990)

and provide for me. This is providence. How else can I make sense of Ming's "vision" or my reading of a trusted and loved professor's book, or the email I received from Macau on a bad day after my diagnosis of MS?

When we first returned to the United States we went to Colorado where I started physical therapy. After one session while driving home, I started crying in the car. No one was with me (at least physically). I cried out to God "Why God are you letting this happen" Upon returning I read an email from a dear friend in Macau. She quoted Psalm 126

***Those who sow in tears
will reap with cries of joy.***

How did she know I was crying that morning? She couldn't know, but God was there and He saw it. Psalm 56 says:

***Record my misery;
list my tears on your scroll—
are they not in your record?***

God sees me, He not only sees me but keeps an account of my hardship.

When I review my life I see how God was leading and directing me to the seminary we attended so I could have class with the professor and be nurtured and grow in my trust of God. Further thinking about this professor's book, Ming my wife, was reading it because of struggling with her brother's own battle with a tumor that was growing inside him and causing him to be paralyzed. Who has the wisdom and power to orchestrate these series of events in our lives? Only the God who sees me and provides.

As I reflect back on my time in Macau as a missionary I see God's providence in so many instances, some quite mundane. When I was taking Micah who was 5 then, to the doctors I was waiting in the office of a group of international doctors (which in itself in being there is an amazing testimony to God's sovereign control) I met Bob. Bob was also taking his son to see the doctors. I heard him speaking English which was rare in Macau at that time, and we started talking. Ed was from Long Island like

me, Ed's wife is named Ming, like mine! Ed and I became friends. We met for Bible study and lunch pretty often. One time I was reflecting with him on how in my current career as a missionary with Multiple Sclerosis was manageable. How could I know that my life would have been so impacted by MS that I could only be gainfully employed for another ten years in church and missionary relations? God knew back when I was a freshman in college when He began to lead me to be a career missionary.

This morning I read Luke 5 and the story of the miraculous catch of fish. After seeing the haul Peter proclaimed:

“Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Luke further records how they were astonished at the great catch of fish. It was the miracle that opened Peter's eyes to see that the Lord was there with him. Jesus though had been with him perhaps hours or even days before but he only recognized Jesus as master then and there. It made me think of the way I treat Jesus or think of my day to day life. The Lord who does the miraculous is always with me, always sees me but I only see Him when I observe His miraculous actions⁷.

Questions for reflection

1. What are some other examples of God's providence in the Bible?
2. Reflect on the difference between what the Bible declares as God's sovereignty and dualism. How does this impact our view of God and our suffering?
3. How has God prepared you for the sufferings you face today?

We believe that the Bible teaches God is completely sovereign in our suffering but how do we know He is good enough to trust? We will take that up in our next section.

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⁷ For more on God's Sovereignty see the excellent book by D.A. Carson Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

The Cross

Jesus crucifixion changes our whole paradigm on suffering. The cross touches all aspects of suffering: Satan is defeated, the world is overcome, sin's penalty and power has been negated, and becoming increasingly like Jesus through His discipline is possible. The cross is a point in history we can look at clearly see the love of God.

God's Love

The love of God is an objective truth in history. I base my life on it even when I don't necessarily feel the love of God (which is often). I also put my faith in it and find comfort in God's love always.

Paul says in Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Through this verse we know:

- God clearly showed His existence in Jesus
- God clearly showed His love in His Son dying on a cross for us.

So while we can have doubt's, feel afraid, even alone, He gave us an unmistakable, undeniable, rock solid proof of His love, His goodness, His mercy. For me personally this has been a progressive discovery and I am trusting that as I grow in strength in my inner person I will understand it better.⁸ The more I reflect on God's love for me, the more I think on His grace and kindness. It was an act of His grace to woo me to be His son. To choose me before the foundation of the world⁹ To save me and deliver me from the realm and authority of Satan and delivery me to the kingdom and authority of His Only Son Jesus¹⁰. These are not only great theological facts but also living words, true words, words of great promise by Him who

⁸ Ephesians 3:16-20

⁹ Romans 8:31ff, Ephesians 1:4ff

¹⁰ John 1:12, Colossians 1:13

cannot lie¹¹.

I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis on March 11, 2001. While back in the US seeking treatment, I was angry, depressed and moping around. Ming recommend me seeing a counselor. I began seeing a counselor and after one session when I was walking to my car, I was overwhelmed with a sense of God's love for me. It was almost as if God' was speaking to me and assuring me of His love. It was at that moment all despair disappeared and it was replaced by hope in the love of God. God's word says in Ephesians 3:19 ***and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.***

Tim Keller wrote:

“See what this means? Yes, we do not know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, or why it is so random, but now at least we know what the reason is not. It cannot be that he does not love us. It cannot be that he does not care. He is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he was willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself. He understands us, he has been there, and he assures us that he has a plan to eventually wipe away every tear”¹²

Reflection questions

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the no impact whatsoever, how does Jesus suffering and death on a cross impact your feelings/thoughts on your personal suffering?
2. Do you often feel God's love?
3. Have you made a personal decision to depend on Jesus through your suffering?

So I know that God is not angry with me or punishing me (Romans 8:1) than why am I suffering? Why does my good friend suffer with cancer? my dog is dying of cancer, there exists natural calamities, ruthless world leaders, human trafficking, corruption, and the list can go on and on. Let's go on to the next part of our frame, sin.

¹¹ Numbers 23:19, Hebrews 6:18

¹² (Keller)

Sin

While the cross can be thought of as the glass cover on the frame (which covers all that we see in the picture), we now describe the frame proper. Three of the four sides represent the causes of our suffering. One side represents the actions that God will use in the light of our sin to make us more like Jesus. It's important to remember that while God is not behind the causes of suffering, none of them are beyond His rule and sovereignty. God does not tempt us to sin¹³, we are responsible for our actions and attitudes. Yet our individual suffering is probably not a direct result of something we have done.

Jesus and the cross impacts all of our suffering and it is this that we need to look at, stare upon when we are suffering. We need to understand the awful effects of Adam's decision to disobey God, turn His back on Him and His instruction on what is "good"¹⁴.

Sin is the #1 reason we suffer in this world, the fall from the perfection we had with had with God in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's sin resulted in a people that live apart from God, in rebellion against Him, and seeking to be their own Master. We can look at the results of sin in at least 2 ways that it can lead to suffering. Physically, sin leads to weakened bodies & minds we become sick and die (Romans 5:15 -20). My good friend Frank said upon seeing me "Don't you just hate the fall" He was right. Tough news to hear but he reoriented me to the reality of what the fall means for me personally.

In Genesis 3:19 Moses records "***By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return***" Death, while ushering believers into God's kingdom, is still an enemy, Sickness and weakness from chronic or terminal illness are the results of our fallen state .God can choose to heal for His glory but He is also glorified by our relying on His grace 2 Corinthians 12:9 "***My grace is enough for you: for where there is weakness, my power is shown the more completely.***"

¹³ James 1:13

¹⁴ Genesis 3:1ff

Relationally we see the tremendous impact of sin. From Cain killing Abel to us today. Conversely the people redeemed by God and empowered by His Holy Spirit can engender wonderfully, rich community. Read Colossians 3:12-13 for a description of our lives as believers empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit:

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

On the other hand, because of our fallen nature we tend toward the opposite:

- Instead of compassionate hearts we tend towards having cold and uncaring hearts.
- Instead of bearing and being kind with one another we tend towards being mean spirited.
- Instead of a posture of humility towards one another we tend towards being boastful.
- Instead of bearing with one another, forgiving one another, being patient with one another, we tend towards being self-protective, we hold grudges or ledgers of wrongs done to us, we tend to be impatient with others.

So sin causes much suffering both physically and relationally. If we are suffering could it be a result of a specific sin? Maybe. We must recognize that we are as fallen as Adam and if we abuse alcohol and have liver disease, we were part of that. If we have an affair and our marriage is in shambles, we were responsible for that decision.

But if we come down with a terminal or chronic disease It’s hard to say it was caused by a specific or habitual sin. People smoke, abuse alcohol, eat

unhealthy and live long lives and people smoke, abuse alcohol, eat unhealthy and die early. What about our relationship problems? Most likely they can be the result of either of your sin or another's against you. Regardless of our suffering, physical or relational, Jesus' death on a cross is the only, complete, remedy: The atonement.

The atonement was necessary because of our sin. For God to be both completely holy, and completely just sin demanded a sacrifice of blood¹⁵. God also showed He is completely loving in sending His Only Son Jesus to die a horrible death. In His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus suffered as our sin bearer, He received the penalty that you and I deserved. All of our sin and the results of that pain, death, illness, loneliness, chronic pain, cancer, war, destruction, lust, inordinate passion, abuse, idolatry, worship of Satan, cheating, etc. Was placed on Him. While I don't fully understand the imputation of our sin on the perfectly sinless, Son of God, I fully believe this is the world and God we live with.

With the arrival of Jesus, the Kingdom was ushered in on earth, it was in effect inaugurated. Though it was inaugurated it has not been consummated, a time when all of the effects of sin relationally and physically are banished, undone, and reversed. While we wait for Jesus' return and the consummation of the Kingdom, we continue to suffer. Physically we become sick and eventually die. Relationally, some friendships even among believers will be strained or broken.

Questions for Reflection

1. In your relationships do we have more of what Paul describes in Colossians or are do we find our attitudes are more of the opposite?
 - a. Who can help you develop more of what the Holy Spirit wants to do in your life?
2. How does the reality of having a sinful and fallen nature impact our understanding of suffering in our bodies?
3. How does the responsibility we have to live Godly lives impact our approach to our appetites: food, sex, material goods?

God does not leave us in our sinful attitudes or actions rather he is

¹⁵ Hebrews 9:1-22

molding us into the image of His Son Jesus. He often does this through suffering. CS Lewis wrote:

“Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

So how Does God use circumstances to mold us?

Discipline/Training

At the moment we are born into God’s family He is forming us into a likeness of His son. (Philippians 2:12-213) He is renewing our mind from patterns we have learned from any Godless culture we assimilated. (Romans 12:1-2). He is breaking ways of behaving we may have learned from our families (2 Corinthians 10:3-5) When we experience suffering it seems to be an intense faith workout. At times I felt like I would lose my faith and at times it seemed like God is very close, surrounding me with His love (Psalm 125:2) This process of training is much like how we prepare for a physical competition or simply to take action to remain healthy: It feels like going to the gym. Tim Keller wrote:

“But when troubles and difficulties hit, we are suddenly in “God’s gymnasium”—we are exposed. Our inner anxieties, our hair-trigger temper, our unrealistic regard of our own talents, our tendency to lie or shade the truth, our lack of self-discipline—all of these things come out. Perhaps the trouble was brought on by the presence of these negative qualities. Or maybe the new situation demands a certain response, and it reveals the absence of the positive qualities we need. Either way, the gymnasium shows you who you really are, inescapably.”¹⁶

An early lesson I began learning was on having a very noticeable handicap. I began walking with a cane and my posture started declining noticeably. I was (am) very concerned about how I look to others. It was than a Christian counselor reminded me that everyone is handicapped in some way, mine was just more visible! If I am reflective enough and willing to change, I could be available to love others well and not be consumed by

¹⁶ (Keller)

my outward appearance. God is teaching me that my weakness and need for others results in an opportunity for the “helper” to share their struggles and pains. It also reminds me of my need to depend on God’s help, His intervention. The lessons thankfully keep on coming. What is God up to? Broadly, He is showing me He loves me and I am His child.

Hebrews 12: 7 says

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

If we belong to God, He is working on us to heal our addiction to sin, to a life of self-effort and of self-centeredness. He is working to reconcile our relationship, with Him and with others. Our training in Godliness usually starts with those closest to us, our parents, and our wife and children.

When I became ill I finally slowed down enough to see how much I missed just being with Ming. At the time MS began we were taking weekly trips to receive treatment and this gave us plenty of time together. It was and is a wonderful blessing! On the other hand, it also showed me painfully that my dependence and love for God needs to be first. I was fearing what my inability to provide for the family would mean for our relationship. She would need to work leaving me alone and her social circle would go beyond what our first 15 years of marriage resulted in. What would happen to our marriage? I was afraid. The real issue though was who was I depending on for my love, security, and provision?

God may not specifically answer the reason why we are suffering but He has told us what He plans to do through it. Eugene Petersen in the Message excellently paraphrases Hebrews 12:4-11

In this all-out match against sin, others have suffered far worse than you, to say nothing of what Jesus went through—all that bloodshed! So don’t feel sorry for yourselves. Or have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as his children?

My dear child, don’t shrug off God’s discipline, but don’t be crushed by it either. It’s the child he loves that he disciplines;

the child he embraces, he also corrects. God is educating you; that's why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God's training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God's holy best. At the time, discipline isn't much fun. It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.

Questions for reflection

1. What area of your life has been the most difficult for you lately? Have you asked God if in some way He is using the circumstances to mold or form you in Christ? Who can help you in walking through these difficult times?

As we are viewing the reasons for suffering we spoke first of sin. Our fallen state is perhaps the primary reason we suffer in this life. As people grow into nations we see the effects of an aggregate population of fallen creatures making imperfect rules and laws and at times even maleficent governments. The next component of our frame is the "world or persecution".

The World/Persecution

How a Christian relates to their home culture is covered wonderfully in other works¹⁷. I will limit myself in these few paragraphs to direct opposition by a country's government and how this relates to suffering. Before leaving for Macau, a co-worker from China stated it would be good for me to develop a theology of suffering. The church in China suffered persecution greatly (and in some cases still does) in the four decades after

¹⁷ (Carson D. , The Intolerance of Tolerance Carson, D. A. (2012). (Carson D. , Christ and Culture, 2008)

the Peoples Republic of China was formed. I met several people upon arriving there who experienced what history has recorded.

As we discuss the world in regards to suffering there is a wide ranging ways that people are oppressed or enslaved. We can talk about human trafficking, the causes of endemic poverty, the plight of the 10 million or so orphans caused by aids, the reasons for starvation in countries in Africa or a plethora of others world ills. The reasons for these sufferings created by the world are complex and voluminous. I believe the heart of it all is the fallen heart of man. I'm defining the "world" as the way the organized, Godless, and sometimes outright oppositional governments that exist worldwide either make policies or turn a blind eye to evils inflicted, and especially on the church of Jesus Christ. I would like to look at persecution as having lived and worked with the persecuted church, I'm more keenly aware of it. Worshipping, living, and working in a world where only government regulated Christian behavior is legal is oppressive and often dangerous. Asia is not the only area of the world where the church is persecuted.

For example

Iraq & Iran

- In the land of Eden, Jonah and Daniel, Christians have shrunk from 1.5 million to 300,000.
- "We are being massacred and I don't know how much further we can go," a tearful Assyrian Christian activist told a packed audience at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. ISIS has systematically targeted religious minorities for murder and abduction and has auctioned off girls and women kidnapped from religious minority groups. It prices the youngest (ages one to nine) at 200,000 dinars/ USD \$170.

Iran

- The church in Iran is growing in the face of intense persecution.
- In addition to Iranian-American Christian pastor Saeed Abedini, who is serving an eight-year term in prison for his faith, the Government has imprisoned at least 40 Christians for apostasy.
- The official charge is usually espionage or undermining national

security. Ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim making almost all Christian activity illegal—from evangelism to publishing Scripture—especially in Persian.

Columbia

- In May 2017, a Catholic priest received death threats for denouncing criminal activity in his region. Two months later, another priest was found murdered.
- In June and July 2017, many Christians in indigenous communities were denied access to basic services in an attempt to get them to renounce their faith.¹⁸

There is a direct correlation between the persecution of Christians and Satan's hatred for God and His people. When God judged Satan and condemned him to the earth, earth became a battle field for those that belong to Him¹⁹. This is not a battle in doubt of the victor. Jesus by dying on the cross and being willing to do God's will unto a horrible death on a cross, totally defeated His and our enemy.

This helps to answer the question of why persecution. People who are in the realm of darkness, under the rule and power of Satan either knowingly or unknowingly, would naturally oppose Jesus who being God's son, the second person of the trinity, is their enemy²⁰

How does God react to the persecution of His children? Jesus so identifies with the church.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”²¹

Why does God allow persecution? I am not sure, but I do know eternity is

¹⁸ (Open Doors Website)

¹⁹ Isaiah 14:12-17, John 14:30, 1 John 5:9, Rev. 12:9

²⁰ John 3:19 14:30, Colossians 1:14

²¹ Acts 9: 1-6

so much longer and more wonderful than any life we can have on earth and that He will greatly reward those who have suffered for His name²² .

Questions for reflection

1. How has the country you currently live in either encouraged or discourage your faith in God?
2. How do you care for the brothers and sisters who are living under a government that is actively opposing their faith in Jesus? Who can help you better care for them?
3. Have you mentally and theologically prepared for the time when it will become very difficult to openly confess your faith in Jesus?

Jesus describes Satan as the father of lies. Elsewhere he is described as a deceiver, and a schemer. How does work in the world impact our suffering?

Satan

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

Let's look carefully at 2 Corinthians 12:7

vs 7 a messenger of Satan - Paul makes it personal - the same Greek word used for the angels who serve God, but these demons serve Satan. They are messengers or do the bidding of Satan

vs 7 To torment me - Slap me, spit in my face - torment - It's the same word used to describe what Jesus went through.

Our team in Macau of ten experienced some tragedies together; One couple experienced their baby developing a rare childhood illness, another had their child assaulted while in boarding school. Another couple had marital issues. We developed an unusual case of multiple sclerosis. And one member had a sibling shot and killed by state troopers leaving himself as the only caretaker for his aging parent. Very unusual for a group this

²² Matthew 5:22, 1 Corinthians 2:9

small to have all of these events occur.

Was it a work of Satan? Probably yes. He is God's enemy and ours Jesus said

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10)

These are real very physical, destructive actions: Loss, death, pain - this is what the thief brings, but notice back in our 2 Corinthians 10:7 He was "given" He cannot act independently without God's permission He acts as God's agent. Again drawing us back to Paul's pleading for relief and protection. What did God say to Paul?

My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.

Another story in Luke 13 gives us a picture of the havoc Satan can have on individual lives. We pick it up in verse 15 and 16

And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?

Jesus is rebuking the synagogue leader and his followers declaring them duplicitous by their actions in caring for their animals on the day of rest and not caring for this woman. He is rebuking them for not caring for this Jewish woman who by an evil spirit was crippled for almost 2 decades Earlier in the text we are told the woman was suffering because of a demon. Jesus very simply and powerfully releases the woman. The focus of the story is on the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders. It's obvious from Jesus' words that Satan was allowed to inflict suffering on an individual. It's equally obvious from the story that the kingdom of God was breaking through, that in Jesus authority resided that evil spirits had no defense for. They immediately left the women and she was free. From these two examples we learn that Jesus has all authority and sovereignty in this world. While Satan can and does inflict suffering it's only temporal and under God's watchful eye. We also learn in the case of Paul, that He may allow the suffering to continue and it will be bearable by His grace.

Christians in general and those who take the initiative in sharing the Gospel, planting churches, and laying claim to God's rule, are co-working with Jesus to destroy the works of Satan (1John 3:8) As this is the case opposition by the enemy is to be expected. It's important to remember though what Tim Keller points out in his book:

“Of course, it was the work of Satan. But in God’s universe, even Satan’s work cannot step outside the outermost boundaries of God’s sovereignty. While that is what raises the problem, it is also what promises hope”²³

As believers in Jesus we know that suffering will have a limit. Our focus ultimately is on our permanent home with Jesus. We will live forever with Jesus

Questions for reflection

- 1) Someone once said the biggest mistake is to overemphasize Satan’s actions or to underemphasize. Do you agree with this statement? What part?
- 2) Think back on your complete life. Have you ever dabbled in the occult or done anything to allow an evil spirit have an inroad in your life? Who can help you break free from its influence?
- 3) 1 John 5:19 says: ***We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*** How does this impact our thoughts on the cause of our suffering? How do we keep this in balance with Jesus’ teaching on our need to daily pray for deliverance from evil?

As believers in Jesus we know that suffering will have a limit²⁹. Our focus ultimately is on our permanent home with Jesus. We will live forever with Jesus

Eternity

16 They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the

²³ (Keller)

throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7:16-17

Think on the description of heaven in this verse: No more hunger or starvation, no more dying of unclean drinking water, no more dying because of skin cancer or of dehydration due to exposure to the elements, no more feelings of directionless or loneliness, no more death, no more crying. One word sums it up nicely: paradise!

Jesus said to the dying thief on the cross next to Him:

“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” Luke 23:43

And so we will. How suffering figures into God’s plan for us at times becomes a mystery for me. When I visited with a friend in palliative care, dying from cancer it produced in me many emotions and thoughts. I was appalled at the suffering my friend was enduring, their skin color, the skin and bones they had become. The verse that kept coming to mind was 2 Corinthians 4:17

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

My comfort than is they are now enjoying the glory awarded to them for remaining faithful to God till the end ²⁴

D.A. Carson says again:

“But perhaps it is better to put the matter the other way round: the God who put Job through this wringer is also the God of whom it is said that, with respect to his own people, “he will not let [them] be tempted beyond what [they] can bear. But when [they] are tempted, he will also provide a way out

²⁴ For an excellent description of heaven see the excellent book by Joni Ereckson Tada ***Heaven***

so that [they] can endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). God could not trust me with as much suffering as Job endured; I could not take it. But we must not think that there was any doubt in God's mind as to whether he would win his wager with Satan over Job! When we suffer, there will sometimes be mystery. Will there also be faith?"²⁵

Question for reflection

1) Does the knowledge of the fact that your life does not end in suffering comfort you? How certain are you of heaven? Think on 1 (Geisler, 2011)John 5:

11-13:

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

But D.A. Carson reminds us:

"But thinking through the theology of suffering, and resolving in advance how you will respond, however praiseworthy the exercise, cannot completely prepare you for the shock of suffering itself. It is like jumping into a bitterly cold lake: you can brace yourself for the experience all day, but when you actually jump in the shock to your system will still snatch your breath away " - How Long Oh Lord DA Carson²⁶

In Conclusion

I believe the essential problem as Christians we face when we encounter suffering is how will God be glorified through this situation I am now facing. This is the main mystery we must grapple with. Secondly, how can my loving heavenly Father permit this to happen to me now and how will I better be shaped into the characteristics of His Son. A person suffering,

²⁵ (Carson D. , 1990)

²⁶ (Carson D. , 1990)

weather it's missing out on a parking spot or facing terminal cancer, has a unique opportunity in that moment to testify to the world, that God is there and He rewards those who seek Him, He is good (Hebrews 11:6).

Obviously the degree of suffering will determine the impact of the testimony. The determination of the individual to remain faithful to God in light of great suffering will have a greater testimony to declare to the world that God is good and deserves our ultimate trust. So my friend who in the face of a certain death could declare God is good and impact hundreds of lives around them. Similarly, Jim Elliot was martyred at the hands of the Auca Indians and he impacted millions of lives.

The "problem" of suffering I believe is best summarized as our looking at a picture frame. The back of the frame in this metaphor is that which holds the whole picture together, **Providence**. Covering the picture in our frame like the glass of the frame is the **Cross** of Jesus Christ. **Sin, Training, The World,** and **Satan** make up the four sides of the frame. I do believe the theological, philosophical "problem" of suffering can be that simple. I do not believe the emotional problem of suffering is simple. It is painful to just think about how my loved one's have had to endure suffering. I trust in a good, sovereign, and loving heavenly Father when he promises me:

***"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man,
All that God has prepared for those who love Him."***

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