

Suffering in God’s Beloved Creation

By Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Clapsis*

General Remarks

Human beings are always involved in suffering situations either personally or insofar as they have a share in the lives of the others. It is one of the most profound, disturbing, and inescapable human experiences. It refers not only to maladies, pains, and life difficulties, but it also involves crises and threats that constitute a degradation of human life¹. It has the potential either to lead people to despair, misery, and self-enclosure or transcendence and new levels of creativity through faith and hope. Suffering can be an opportunity for maturation, an occasion to focus on the essentials of life. In the words of Aeschylus, “it is only through suffering that we achieve wisdom”². Philosophical, religious and secular belief systems have provided multiple explanations of human suffering³. They assume that if people know why they are suffering, they can manage their pain. However, the causes of unjust suffering for many people remain beyond their knowledge or control, and this leads them to paralysis and misplaced guilt. Unjust suffering makes suffering intolerable

* Ο π. Emmanuel Clapsis είναι π. Καθηγητής στὴ Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Brookline, Massachusetts.

1. E. J. Cassel, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, Oxford University Press, New York: 1991, pp. 30-47.

2. Aesch. *Agamemnon*, II, v. 177-78.

3. For a broad discussion of suffering, see John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970; J.A. Amato & D. Monge, *Victims and Values: a history and theory of suffering*, Greenwood Press, New York 1990; S. Hauerwas, *Naming the Silence: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1990; B. Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering, and Religion*, Hawthorn Books, New York 1997.

in a world which is not ruled by irrational fate but by the just and mighty God.

In Scripture, we find multiple explanations of what suffering means and how it relates to hope⁴. They attempt to explain suffering in particular contextual circumstances from the perspective of humanity's relation with God. The multiple interpretations of suffering that we find in Scripture must be juxtaposed and intertwined as valid options of understanding that illuminate the subject but do not provide a comprehensive explanation of human suffering.

Suffering as Punishment for Sin

In the Old Testament, God blesses the pious and righteous people with a life filled with happiness, health, prosperity, and peace. He punishes the wicked and unjust people with afflictions and death⁵. In the book of *Proverbs*, it is affirmed that wise and righteous behavior brings happiness, while foolish and evil conduct brings suffering and death. It is stated that: "He who is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die"⁶. God is the retributive judge who punishes evil and rewards good⁷. The law of retribution provided then a rational and coherent explanation of how suffering pervades the world that God has created to be inherently good.

The notion of the retributive justice of God runs throughout the Bible, but it does not prove true in all cases. Many righteous, pious and good people are suffering, and their suffering radically questions the predominant understanding of divine justice. How could innocent people suffer in a world created and sustained by the benevolent, compassionate, just, and Almighty God? The idea that those who suffer are sinners and

4. J. Chr. Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision of Human Predicament*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grant Rapids, Michigan 1987; E.S. Gerstenberger & W. Schrage, *Suffering*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1977.

5. *Amos* 5, 10-24; cf. *Deut.* 28, 3-6, 16-19.

6. *Prov.* 11, 19.

7. cf. *Ps.* 1, 1-6.

those who prosper are righteous and wise is demonstrated to be in dire need of correction.

The recognition that pious and righteous people do suffer leads to the recognition that suffering can be an instrument in the hands of Yahweh for the purpose of disciplining, purifying, and educating His people.

My Son, do not despise Yahweh's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because Yahweh disciplines those that he loves, as a father the son he delights in"⁸.

The book of *Deuteronomy* records that Yahweh led the Israelites "through the vast and dreadful desert"⁹ for forty years to "discipline" them and to "test" them, "so that in the end it might go well with them"¹⁰. It is expected, according to *Dan. 11, 35*, that "some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made spotless until the time of the end."

The purpose of this paper is to argue that, in Scripture, the law of retribution is one (however prominent) among several approaches to the problem of suffering. Depending on contextual realities, people who believed in the righteousness of God gave different interpretations of unjust suffering that aimed to instill hope in them that God will grant either in this life or life after death new possibilities of life. In some instances, the suffering is so immense and unjust that no rational or theological interpretation is provided.

The Absurdity of Suffering

In the book of *Job*, the absurdity of the unjust suffering of righteous people is addressed. Job is the model of biblical piety and righteousness who is subject to significant physical and personal sufferings. Perhaps his most severe affliction is his inability to understand why he is suffering. He has done nothing wrong, and nobody around him (wife and friends)

8. *Prov. 3, 11-12*; cf. *Sir. 2, 1-5*; *Job 5, 17*.

9. *Deut. 8, 15*.

10. *Deut. 8, 2, 16*.

understands his plight. The doctrine of reward and punishment has lost its experiential relevance for Job. After Job affirms his integrity and righteous behavior, he complains that God has forgotten him and has turned cruel to him. Job feels that “God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you, and you do not answer me... You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand, you persecute me”¹¹. He asks God to take his eyes away from him: “Would you like to take your eyes away from me, so that I may swallow my spittle!”¹². For Job, evil and its attendant suffering are intolerable in a world created, sustained, and ruled by God who is omnipotent and just. His undeserved suffering drives Job to despair: he is convinced that his suffering is not only undeserved but also radically disproportionate to whatever hidden sin he may have committed. Unjust suffering makes it intolerable in a world which is not ruled by irrational fate.

The conversation between Job and his friends reveals the problems associated with the law of retribution. Job’s friends assume that because he is suffering, he must have sinned – and so they advise him from many different perspectives to confess his sin and rely on God’s mercy. Job, however, maintains his innocence and contends that the real problem lies not with him but with God. Job’s friends do not provide him with any convincing and intelligible explanation of his suffering and even God with whom he wrestles does not adequately respond to his protest.

Job’s despair becomes an emotional indictment of God. He accuses God of indifference –if not hostility– to the unjust suffering of innocent human beings.

The book of *Job* does not solve the problem of innocent suffering. It does, however, establish the inadequacy of those approaches to suffering that place all the responsibility on the person who suffers, the law of retribution, the assumption that all humans are sinful and so deserve to suffer, and the idea that suffering is a discipline from God. Thus, the book of *Job* argues that unjust suffering constitutes an insoluble dilemma in a monotheistic universe which posits God as its creator. The inexplicable nature of unjust suffering is not diminished but rather heightened by the

11. *Job* 30, 16, 19-21.

12. *Job* 7, 19.

so-called solution of chapter 42, which describes God's theophany and his answer to Job. It highlights the hidden character of God's wisdom in the world that human beings must live.

Skepticism about the law of retribution is also discussed in the book known as *Ecclesiastes*. Its author refuses to accept the assumption that people get what they deserve. It observes, "There are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing¹³. God seems so utterly transcendent, and the world such a spectacle of contradictions in the matter of justice, that the best advice for human inquiry and conduct in the world is to cease exploring the ultimate meaning and to enjoy the good moments in life for what they offer.

Everything before them [the righteous] is vanity since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifice and to him who does not sacrifice¹⁴.

Unjust or meaningless suffering is inexplicable to both Job and the *Ecclesiastes*. It leads in Job to rebellion and an indictment to God, whereas it leads in the *Ecclesiastes* to skeptical resignation and fateful submission.

The Delay of Divine Retribution

The response to the crisis of faith that the unjust suffering generates has a very different cast in the book of *Daniel*. The author of this book refuses to surrender the world as God's creation and to render the suffering of the righteous as meaningless. He adheres to the notion of divine retribution – but its execution is not at present. It is reserved for the future. When God's kingdom comes, then the righteous will be vindicated, and the wicked will be punished or annihilated. What about those righteous people who have suffered persecution and martyrdom from the evil forces of the

13. *Eccles.* 7, 15.

14. *Eccles.* 9, 2.

world and “now sleep in the dust”? Will they taste the blessings of God? It is believed that even though they now sleep in the dust, they will awake to live eternally¹⁵. An implicit assumption here is that suffering and even life would be absurd were death to have the last word¹⁶.

This approach affirms the justice of God by deferring rewards and punishments to the final judgment or some other divine intervention. It also preserves the sovereignty of God by attributing the present happiness of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous to the mysterious plan of God or to an evil force now active in history under the ultimate control of God. Although the apocalyptic writers are aware of the absence of God’s power and justice in the present order of things, they have been granted insights into the mysteries of God’s wisdom.

They know their God to be a God of justice and faithfulness who “for his own sake” will soon break into history, abolish the suffering of the righteous, establish his kingdom of justice, and right the present wrongs of undeserved suffering¹⁷. Thus, they are not overwhelmed by their affliction and look towards the possibility of a better future. When the present era of suffering is viewed as a provisional reality soon to be redressed by God’s saving intervention, hope assumes a central role in people’s lives.

Vicarious Suffering

Suffering in some instances becomes meaningful, especially when it is associated with a noble cause that transcends self-interests and desires. It becomes significant for those who have committed themselves to sacrifice their well-being and even their lives promoting a world with less violence, injustice, and oppression that restores people’s relationship with God. In the book of *Isaiah*¹⁸, the Servant of God suffers on behalf of the people and his suffering redeems the people from their sins renewing their life with

15. *Dan* 12, 2; *2 Mac.* 7, 9, 14; *Is.* 26, 19.

16. *Wis.* 2, 1-5.

17. *Dan.* 9, 17-19.

18. *Is.* 40-55.

God”¹⁹. The suffering of God’s Servant wiped away the sins of Israel and gave to them the possibility to join in a new exodus and build the New Jerusalem.

Who is this servant of God? In the central section²⁰ the human speakers (“we”) observe that there was nothing exceptional or attractive about the Servant. He is described as “despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity”²¹. His identity is mysterious. God, however, discloses whom the Servant of God is by referring to him as “the righteous one, my servant”²². He also confirms the vicarious and expiatory character of the His Servant’s suffering: “he shall bear their iniquities ... he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” His shameful and humiliating death benefits “many” who become righteous. Isaiah alludes to the close connection between the suffering servant and Israel. Almost everything said about the Servant is also said about Israel. The early Christians identified Jesus as the suffering Servant of God. They found in the sufferings of the Servant of God²³ the basis for interpreting Jesus’ suffering and death as a sacrifice for the sins of the many.

The notion of the suffering servant of God does not only explain Jesus’ passion, but it illuminates the whole conception of the Christian life. Whenever Christians suffer because of their identification with Jesus Christ and their adherence to the gospel they are participating in Jesus’ redeeming suffering. On a purely human level understanding suffering as a sacrifice for the good of others expresses a noble and heroic ideal.

Letting God know the pain of human suffering

Do we have in Scripture the prayers of suffering innocent people who are voicing, through prayer, protest against their unjust suffering as a result of their abandonment by God? If that is the case, why do they persist in

19. *Is.* 52, 13-53, 12.

20. *Is.* 53, 1-10.

21. *Is.* 53, 3.

22. *Is.* 53, 11-12.

23. *Is.* 52, 13-53, 12.

their faith and continue to pray to God who seems not to respond to their prayers?

In the book of *Psalms*, the prayer book of the early Church, we have the lamentation Psalms of righteous suffering people who have turned in prayer to God²⁴. They narrate to God their pain with a bold language of lament, anger, and argumentation. They urgently request not only relief and liberation but also strongly protest the fact that God has not yet acted to remedy their situation. They accuse Him of their suffering and exhort Him to act swiftly because His reputation and honor are at stake. These lamentation Psalms were written after the situation of suffering had subsided, and almost all of them end with prayers of praise and thanksgiving. They disclose the fact that when God finally responds to their prayers, He grants possibilities of hope for a new life. Being reminiscent of God's fidelity and mighty acts in the past become the ground of hope for the future²⁵.

In the lamentation Psalms, the suffering people directly ask God to remedy their tragic situation because of their faith in Him and also because He is mighty and just. Their hopes for divine intervention reflect their long history of trustful relation with God. In their prayers, they detail their desperate plight expecting God's healing and transformative act. They attribute their suffering to God's inattentiveness or absence and hope that their narrative will motivate God to act on their behalf. They do not only seek God's attentive compassion, but they also insist on their rights. It is a plea for justice as much as mercy.

Most of the lamentation Psalms in their final verses disrupt and change the narrative of suffering to praises and thanksgiving to God. Their sense of urgency and desperation is replaced by praise, joy, gratitude, and well-being. While the psalmist had complained that God is absent, remote, unresponsive, and not listening now, he is convinced that Yahweh has heard the petition. In these moments of joy, the psalmist vowed that he

24. W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms, A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg, Minneapolis 1984, p. 48; Idem., "Suffering Produces Hope", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1998), pp. 95-103.

25. Kathellen D. Billman and D. L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry, Prayer of Lament an Rebirth of Hope*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 1999.

would keep his promises of expressing thanksgiving and praises to God. The God who has been accused is now acknowledged as generous, faithful, and saving. The doxology makes clear that things have been changed for a whole new world of trust and gratitude have commenced.

A Dialogue with the Silent God (Psalm 88)

Not all the lamentation Psalms end with thanksgivings and praises to God for His compassionate and righteous acts of responding to the cries of the suffering righteous people. In Psalm 88, a believer whose life has gone awry desperately seeks Yahweh's help, but God does not seem to respond. It begins with an acknowledgement of the intimate relationship that the suffering person has with God and proceeds to tell Him what is needed and expected from Him. The psalmist calls out to God who appears to have abandoned him and to be hiding from him.

No interpretation is given for the silence of God. The silent God is still somehow present – present enough to be addressed in prayer, to be criticized, and to be angry at. The failure of God to respond does not lead to atheism or doubt in God or even his rejection. The psalmist speaks boldly with anger to God, without trying to appease God or expecting an answer from Him. This is the voice of a wounded person, one crying out to the only source of life. The speaker is utterly helpless. The fault is firmly attributed to God. In Job-like fashion, the speaker may hope that such an assault will evoke a response. But it does not-only more silence. The strong language and the urgency of the speech presupposes the belief that even at this moment Yahweh can still do his life-giving work, but not for long. If Yahweh does not act soon, the chance will be lost preempted by the power of death. The speaker will be utterly lost because the power of Yahweh has failed. However, there is still no answer and so only waiting. The prayer then culminates in its harshest statement: “Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me...You have caused friends and neighbors to shun me”. The psalmist finally lives in darkness. Nothing works. Nothing is changed. Nothing is resolved. So what is one to do about that? The only option that one has is to persist in love and wait for God's response/visit:

Then one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job. But if the soul stops loving it falls, even in this life, into something almost equivalent to hell²⁶.

Psalm 88 helps us to confront the reality of affliction and the terrifying experience of God's silence when God is most needed. The dialogue with a silent God shows how to pray when prayer seems most difficult. "O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?"²⁷. Here are words not to be frequently used, but for the limited experiences when words must be honest and not claim too much.

Suffering in the New Testament

The New Testament does not provide additional explanations about the unjust suffering of the righteous people. It accepts the multiple interpretations of suffering that we find in the Old Testaments and provides insights about the suffering of the Christians. It offers the story of the crucified and risen Christ as the disclosure of how the suffering of the innocent in history should be understood in relation to God's affirmation of life. Jesus on the cross experienced in his human nature the absence of God, his abandonment by His Father: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God's response to Jesus' anguish is His resurrection. Resurrection is the event that signifies the "first fruit" of the final defeat of the power of death and suffering in the coming kingdom of God²⁸. The resurrection discloses the fullness of life as God intends it. The cross of Christ expresses the boundless love of God for His people, His voluntary identification with the consequences of our fallen condition (suffering and death) for the purpose to liberate us from it and grant us the gift of His Kingdom. Thus, the suffering of the cross discloses the nobility of

26. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, Perennial Classics, Harper Collins Publishers, New York 2001, p. 70.

27. *Ps.* 84, 14.

28. *I Cor.* 15, 54-55.

God's love²⁹. It points to the defeat of the power of evil and death³⁰ in the resurrection of Christ.

Those who suffer because of their faith and their Spirit-filled life participate in Christ's suffering and death. God is actively present in them as He was in the suffering of His Son. St. Paul understood his apostolic suffering as an essential aspect of his life with Christ, a strong sign of his participation in Christ's suffering and the witness of Christ's presence in his ministry. The awareness that he suffers because of his identification with God allows him to not succumb to his pain: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed³¹. God acts in the lives of the suffering Christians by not keeping them *from* suffering and death but *in* suffering and death.

If God in His love liberates humanity and the world from evil and suffering, then it is the vocation of all human beings to participate in actions that intent to eradicate or lessen the evil and the suffering of the world by becoming good Samaritans. In fact, in the last judgment those who serve the poor, the homeless, the sick and the suffering will be favored and blessed by God³². Human beings become authentic icons of God as they respond to and participate in the suffering of others through active compassion and love that has its origins in God. The redemptive and ultimately truly liberating significance of suffering lies in the suffering which one takes upon himself in his responsible concern to overcome suffering. In this way the negativity and meaningless of suffering, rather than being wiped out in theoretical theodicies³³, provide the basis of real contact with the other. It creates the interpersonal space in which persons in suffering situations become authentic human beings. Responding to suffering through compassion is not simply an achievement of human

29. 1 *Thees.* 3, 4.

30. *Rom.* 5, 3-5.

31. 2 *Cor.* 4, 7-12.

32. *Matt.* 25, 31-46.

33. K. Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Blackwell, Oxford 1986), discusses the failure of philosophical and theological "theodicies with a theoretical emphasis" and the surge of "practical theodicies" that focus on praxis that aim to lessen the evil and suffering in the world through compassions and active liberating acts.

virtue. It rather reflects the presence of God to those humans who become conscious of their humanity through acts of empathy and mercy³⁴.

The Suffering of early Christians

Suffering Christians in the *First Letter of Peter* are encouraged to remember the passion of Jesus, persevere in their faith, and willingly accept the costly price of their belief in anticipation of their participation in God's glory: "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, establish and strengthen you"³⁵. It is expected that all the disciples of Christ throughout the world will experience suffering as a result of their faith: "the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world"³⁶. Their deep faith in Christ and their willingness to participate in His suffering is a source of joy³⁷. Joy in the midst of suffering is possible because it is the prelude to the joy at the coming of God's glory³⁸. In light of this hope, suffering can both be endured and realistically assessed as penultimate³⁹. Furthermore, joy amidst suffering is possible because the life of these Christians is anchored in a tightly knit support group, the house-church, that gives cohesion to their lives, yields comfort in the midst of oppression, and enables them to devise strategies of hope.

34. In the words of St. Maximus (*Myst.* 24, PG 91, 713B) it is the incarnate God who cultivates empathy and mercy in Christians: "If the poor person is 'God', it is because of God's condescension in becoming poor for our sake (cf. *2 Cor.* 8, 9) and in taking upon himself by his own suffering the sufferings of each one "until the end of time" (cf. *Matt.* 28, 20), always suffering mystically out of goodness in proportion to each one's suffering. So all the more will that person be "god" who, in imitation of God's philanthropy, personally heals by his or her own initiative, but in a deiform way, the afflictions of those who suffer, and who exhibits in his or her merciful disposition the very same power of God's sustaining providence that operates in proportion to need".

35. *1 Pet.*, 5, 8-10. S. R. Bechtler, *Following in His steps: Suffering, Community and Christology in 1 Peter*, Scholars Press, Atlanta Ga. 1998.

36. *1. Pet.* 5, 9.

37. *1 Pet.* 1, 8.

38. *1 Pet.* 8, 10.

39. *1 Pet.* 4, 13.

The future orientation of their hope is not divorced from “hopeful” possibilities in the present time. First Peter offers the ray of hope that the world will still listen to the gospel or will at least permit Christians to practice their faith in the world. On this account, Christians are urged to accommodate themselves to the political realities of their times⁴⁰, adopt the best ethical norms of their society, and demonstrate by acts of gentleness, sobriety, and “good deeds” their faith⁴¹. The coming of God’s ultimate victory and glory motivates Christians to devise strategies of hope in the midst of their daily experience of suffering.

Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence. And keep your consciousness clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame⁴².

Those who suffer because of their faith and their Christian life are empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit⁴³. This, however, is not true for those who suffer because of their iniquities:

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God⁴⁴.

In the book of *Revelation*, the realities of the world are oppressive and totally incompatible with God’s spirit (ch. 17). Suffering is so absolute that it leads inevitably to death and martyrdom. The sufferers become passive victims of their harsh environment. In such an environment, hope is a spiritual liberating force that empowers the sufferers to resist their oppressive world. Their hope is so antithetical to the realm of suffering that it becomes purely otherworldly. It rejects the world as is and offers the vision of the new world that God will make possible. It defends God’s power and justice by deferring their full manifestation

40. *1 Pet.* 2, 12-17.

41. *1 Pet.* 3, 8-17.

42. *1 Pet.* 3, 15-16.

43. *1 Pet.* 4, 14.

44. *1 Pet.* 4, 12-16.

to some future time known to God. In the book of *Revelation*, Christian hope is directed solely toward the imminent coming of a “new heaven and new earth”⁴⁵, the time of the last judgment. At the last judgment, God will destroy the evil powers of this world and reward the oppressed followers of the Lamb⁴⁶.

Coping with Tragic Suffering

In St. Paul, the link of suffering with sinfulness provides a meaningful interpretation for the suffering that humans bring to themselves through greed, culpable errors, and egotism. He identifies the origins of suffering in the evil of idolatry, the exchange of the truth about God for a lie⁴⁷. Idolatry is humanity’s voluntary alienation from God that leads to the exaltation of finite beings instead of the Infinite One. It is a rebellion against God’s sovereignty that perverts the hearts of the people and disorients them⁴⁸. Once people’s relationships to God are disrupted or weakened, the whole creation suffers the consequences since the created order becomes chaotic, full of violent conflicts, injustices, and fragmentation.

The suffering of the innocent, however, is not always understood by St. Paul as a consequence of sin. In some instances, suffering may have a cleansing and pedagogic effect upon the sufferer. He argues that several forms of suffering can overlap and intertwine. He speaks about redemptive suffering but also about deserved suffering and even about pedagogic suffering⁴⁹.

In situations of affliction and terrible suffering, the relation of sin with suffering is exceedingly problematic and insufficient explanations of the suffering are useless in relieving the suffering of the victims, whether the suffering is caused by culpable ignorance, excusable ignorance, or greed. There exists a crucial and mysterious “dark residue” of evil and death in

45. *Rev.* 21, 1.

46. *Rev.* 14, 4.

47. v. 25.

48. *Rom.* 1, 18-32.

49. *Rom.* 8, 17-30; 1, 18-32; 5, 3-4.

God's created order which cannot just be attributed to human sin. There are tragic events of meaninglessness and hopelessness that reduce life to an unbearable burden, isolating the sufferers from the rest of the world. When it takes the form of personal tragedy, it strikes us to the very depth of our existence. Moreover, when it takes the form of a universal evil like a "natural" disaster, it has a scope and intensity which seems at times coextensive with life on this planet such that the world often appears to be nothing but a valley of tears. Suffering in the face of the power of death is so unbearable because it compels us to confront the specter of meaningless and hopeless suffering⁵⁰.

Senseless and unjust suffering raises the troublesome question of theodicy. How can Christians affirm the power and goodness of God in a world where evil and affliction seem to triumph? The issue of meaningless or tragic suffering compels the Christian to make some difficult but necessary distinctions. We must differentiate between meaningful and meaningless suffering, at least on the primary level of our experience. For if we confuse these two levels of suffering, we are forced to make indefensible and unintelligible statements. Too often we rationalize meaningless suffering as if it were meaningful, or we simply fuse and confuse dimensions of meaningful and meaningless suffering, as if the explanatory canons for the one dimension are equally valid for the other. For instance, we comfort a person living with cancer by recalling the much more severe suffering of Christ's death, or we argue that the unique atonement of Christ's suffering on the cross makes all suffering bearable. Moreover, we forget that the suffering of Christ for the sake of God's kingdom of justice was a freely chosen suffering with a redemptive purpose. We forget that suffering inflicted by a dreadful disease belongs to a different level of suffering than that of Christ. Indeed, we cannot just equate the capricious manifestations of the power of death and its terrible suffering with the death of Christ as if his death was somehow a capricious tragedy as well.

The view that God causes indiscriminate meaningless suffering to make people aware of their finitude, to ennoble their souls, or perhaps to punish them for their arrogance generates an abominable image of a sadistic Father. It is important to proclaim in the midst of meaningless and

50. *Ps.* 88, 13-18.

senseless suffering that God hates suffering in His good creation, and that suffering is fundamentally alien to His coming kingdom. Christians must celebrate God's coming kingdom as that domain where:

God will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away⁵¹.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Υποφέροντας μέσα στην αγαπημένη Θεία Δημιουργία

π. Ἐμμανουήλ Κλάψη, Καθηγητῆ
Ἑλληνορθόδοξη Θεολογική Σχολή τοῦ Τιμίου Σταυροῦ
Brookline, Massachusetts

Στή Βιβλική παράδοση ὁ ἀνθρώπινος πόνος, τὰ αἰτία του καὶ οἱ ἐπιπτώσεις του μέσα στὸ πλαίσιο μιᾶς θεοκεντρικῆς κοινωνίας ἔχουν πολλαπλές ἐρμηνεῖες ποὺ ἀντανακλοῦν πῶς γίνεται ἀντίληπτος σὲ συγκυριακὲς φάσεις τῆς ζωῆς καὶ πῶς συνδέεται μὲ τὴν πρόνοια τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὴν ἐλπίδα. Οἱ βιβλικὲς ἐρμηνεῖες φωτίζουν συγκεκριμένες ἐκφάνσεις τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου πόνου, ἀλλὰ δὲν ἐξαντλοῦν ἐρμηνευτικὰ τὸ μυστήριο τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου πόνου σὲ σχέση μὲ τὴν θεϊκὴ πρόνοια καὶ ἀγάπη. Παρ' ὅλα αὐτὰ παρέχουν αὐθεντικὲς ἐρμηνεῖες τοῦ πόνου ποὺ δὲν μποροῦν νὰ ἀγνοηθοῦν ἢ νὰ ἀξιολογηθοῦν μεμονωμένα ἀνεξάρτητα ἀπὸ συγκεκριμένες ἱστορικὲς καὶ προσωπικὲς ἐμπειρίες ποὺ διαμορφώνουν τὴν ἀντίληψη τοῦ ἀνθρώπου γιὰ τὴν ζωὴ σὲ ἄμεση σχέση μὲ τὸν Θεό.

Πῶς μποροῦν οἱ Χριστιανοὶ νὰ ἐπιβεβαιώσουν τὴ δύναμη καὶ τὴν καλοσύνη τοῦ Θεοῦ σὲ ἓναν κόσμον ὅπου τὸ κακὸ καὶ ἡ θλίψη φαίνεται νὰ θριαμβεύουν κατὰ τρόπο ἄνισο, ἄδικο καὶ ἄσκοπο; Ἡ ἀποψη ὅτι ὁ Θεὸς προκαλεῖ ἀδιακρίτως ἀνούσια ταλαιπωρία γιὰ νὰ συνειδητοποιήσουν οἱ ἄνθρωποι τὸ πεπερασμένο τους, νὰ ἐξευγενίσει τὴν ψυχὴ τους ἢ ἴσως

51. Rev. 21, 3-4.

νά τοὺς τιμωρήσει γιὰ τὴν ἀλαζονεία τους δημιουργεῖ μία ἀποτρόπαια εἰκόνα ἐνὸς σαδιστῆ Πατέρα, ἰδιαίτερα ὅταν τὰ θύματα τοῦ πόνου εἶναι ἄθῶα βρέφη. Σὲ αὐτὲς τὶς περιστάσεις, εἶναι σημαντικό νὰ τονισθεῖ πῶς ὁ Θεός μισεῖ τὰ βάσανα καὶ τὸν πόνο στὴν καλή του Δημιουργία, πὸ εἶναι ἀποτέλεσμα τραγικῶν ἀνθρώπινων ἐπιλογῶν ἢ ἐκφάνσεις τῆς θνητότητας τοῦ κτιστοῦ κόσμου. Ἡ ἐρχομένη Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ δὲν ἔχει καμμία σχέση μὲ τὴν τραγωδία τοῦ ἀδίκου, ἀνίσου καὶ ἀκατανοήτου πόνου. Οἱ Χριστιανοί πρέπει νὰ γιορτάζουν τὴν ἐρχομένη Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ σὰν ὅπου: «ἡ κατοικία τοῦ Θεοῦ εἶναι μαζί μὲ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους. Θὰ κατοικήσει μαζί τους κι αὐτοὶ θὰ ἀποτελοῦν τὸν λαό Του. Ὁ ἴδιος ὁ Θεὸς θὰ εἶναι μαζί τους. Θὰ διώξει κάθε δάκρυ ἀπὸ τὰ μάτια τους κι ὁ θάνατος δὲν θὰ ὑπάρχει πιά· οὔτε πένθος, οὔτε κλάμα, οὔτε πόνος θὰ ὑπάρχει πιά, γιὰτὶ τὰ παλιὰ πέρασαν» (Ἀποκ. 21, 3-4).