
THE TRANSFORMATION OF SUFFERING: A Biblical and Theological Perspective

Marie M. Fortune

A religious person who is victimized by rape, battering, or child sexual abuse frequently faces the questions, Why do I suffer in this way? and, Where is God in my suffering? These profound theological questions cannot be answered simply with platitudes and then dismissed. The question of why there is suffering at all is one of classic theological debate, that is, the question of theodicy, to which there is no completely satisfactory answer. Human suffering in the midst of a world created by a compassionate and loving God is a dimension of human experience which is most disturbing and disquieting. The particular experience of suffering that accompanies victimization by sexual and domestic violence raises particular issues in regard to theodicy.

Why Suffering?

People struggle with two fundamental aspects of the experience of suffering when they ask, Why do I suffer? First is the question of cause, that is, the source of the suffering. The second aspect involves the meaning or purpose of suffering.

Why is there suffering? It suffices to say that some suffering results from arbitrary, accidental sources such as natural disasters. However, much suffering is caused by human sinfulness: sinful acts by some bring suffering to others. These acts can generally be understood as acts of injustice. God allows such sinfulness because God has given persons free will and does not intervene when they choose to engage in unrighteous, unjust acts. Other people suffer from the consequences of these acts. This explanation may be adequate for situations clearly caused by human negligence or meanness, intended or not: for example, a fatal car accident caused by a drunk driver, chronic brown lung disease in textile workers who are denied protection from occupational hazards, birth defects in families living near toxic waste dumps, or incestuous abuse inflicted by a father upon his children. Yet it is still not a wholly satisfactory explanation. Those who suffer search further for answers, or at least for someone to blame.

Victims of sexual or domestic violence have a strong tendency to hold God or themselves responsible for the abuse even though there is clearly a perpetrator whose actions resulted in the victim's suffering. While his/her sinful acts may be understood as a consequence of his/her own brokenness and alienation (sometimes rooted in his/her own victimization), he/she is nonetheless responsible for actions that bring suffering to others. Self-blame or God-blame for one's experience of victimization simply avoids acknowledging that a particular person is responsible for the abusive acts.

Another explanation that is frequently utilized by victims is really old-fashioned superstition. It seeks to explain a current experience of suffering in terms of a previous "sinful" act on the part of the victim: the current suffering is God's punishment for the preceding "sin" which God has judged. Hence a battered woman now being abused by her husband can "explain" why this is happening by remembering that, when she was sixteen, she had sexual intercourse once with her boyfriend. She knows this was a "sin" and that God was displeased with her, so God must now be punishing her teenage indiscretion. Or she may have been "disobedient" and not submitted to her husband. She understands the situation to reflect God's acting to bring about her suffering for a justifiable reason; she blames herself and accepts her battering as God's will for her. At least she can "explain" why this happened to her; unfortunately, her explanation leaves no room for questioning her suffering or for confronting her abuser with his responsibility for it.

If God is to blame for the misfortune, one can direct anger at God for causing the suffering. For whatever reason, it is argued, God has singled out the victim of sexual or domestic violence to suffer. Two things result. First she/he is driven away from God by the pain and anger; second, no one is held accountable for what he/she has done to the victims. The suffering of the victim is exacerbated by the feeling that God has sent this affliction to her/him personally and has abandoned her/him in the midst of it. Harold Kushner offers a valuable reframing of this assumption:

We can maintain our own self-respect and sense of goodness without having to feel that God has judged us and condemned us. We can be angry at what has happened to us, without feeling that we are angry at God. More than that, we can recognize our anger at life's unfairness, our instinctive compassion at seeing people suffer, as coming from God who teaches us to be angry at injustice and to feel compassion for the afflicted. Instead of feeling that we are opposed to God, we can feel that our indignation is God's anger at unfairness working through us, that when we cry out, we are still on God's side, and He [sic] is still on ours.¹

God is not only *not* the cause of injustice and suffering but is instead the source of our righteous anger at the persons or circumstances

that do cause suffering as well as our source of compassion for those who suffer.

The second aspect of the experience of suffering involves the attribution of meaning or purpose. What meaning does this experience of suffering hold for the victim? People have great difficulty accepting the irrational and often arbitrary nature of sexual and domestic violence. Instead of realizing that these things happen for no good reason, they attempt to manufacture a good reason or seek a greater good; for example, suffering "builds character" or is "a test of one's faith." The purpose of suffering is then the lesson it teaches, and the result should be a stronger faith in God. Purposefulness somehow softens the pain of the suffering. If some greater good is salvaged, then perhaps the suffering was worth it.

An understanding of the meaning of one's suffering begins with the differentiation between voluntary and involuntary suffering. Voluntary suffering is a painful experience which a person chooses in order to accomplish a greater good. It is optional and is a part of a particular strategy toward a particular end. For example, the acts of civil disobedience by civil rights workers in the United States in the 1960s resulted in police brutality, imprisonment, and sometimes death for those activists. These consequences were unjustifiable but not unexpected. Yet people knowingly chose to endure this suffering in order to change the circumstances of racism, which caused even greater daily suffering for many. Jesus's crucifixion was an act of unjustifiable yet voluntary suffering; in 1 Peter it is viewed as an example:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

—1 Peter 2:21-23

But it is an example not of simply being a sacrificial doormat but of choosing, in the face of the violence of oppressive authority which threatened him, to suffer the consequences of his commitment. It was a witness to his love, not his suffering. Beverly Wildung Harrison further reframes Jesus' suffering on the cross:

But those who love justice, and have their passion lovingly shaped toward right relation act not because they are enamored of sacrifice. Rather, they are moved by a love strong enough to sustain their action for right relation, even unto death. . . . Jesus's paradigmatic role in the story of our salvation rests not in his willingness to sacrifice himself, but in his passionate love of right relations and his refusal to cease to embody the power-of-relation in the face of that which would thwart it. It was his refusal to desist from radical love, not a preoccupation with sacrifice, which makes his work irreplaceable.²

Jesus' crucifixion was the tragic consequence of his faithfulness and refusal to give up his commitment in the face of Roman oppression. He voluntarily accepted the consequence, just as did civil rights workers, in order to bring about a greater good.

Like voluntary suffering, involuntary suffering is unjustifiable under any circumstance. However, unlike voluntary suffering, involuntary suffering is not chosen and never serves a greater good; it is inflicted by a person(s) upon another against their will and results only in pain and destruction. Sexual and domestic violence are forms of involuntary suffering. Neither serves any useful purpose; neither is chosen by the victim; neither is ever justified. Yet both cause great suffering for large numbers of people.

Many victims of involuntary suffering respond with the question: Why did God send *me* this affliction? In the face of the personal crisis of violence, one's deepest need is to somehow explain this experience, to give it specific meaning in one's particular life. By doing this, victims begin to regain some control over the situation and the crisis. If one can point accurately to the cause, perhaps she/he can avoid that circumstance in the future; if one can ascribe meaning, then she/he can give it purpose, can incorporate the experience more quickly and not feel so overwhelmed by it.

Neither superstition nor the search for a greater meaning necessarily encourages the victim of violence to deal with the actual source, that is, the abuser's behavior. Neither encourages the victim to question the abuse she/he is experiencing. Neither motivates the victim to act in seeking justice. Neither is theologically adequate for the person who is struggling to comprehend his/her experience of abuse in light of faith.

In Jesus' encounter with the man born blind (John 9:1-12), he is confronted with the question about the cause of suffering.³ "His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (v. 2). Jesus answers their question in terms of the meaning rather than the cause of his suffering: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." (vv. 3-4).

Jesus proceeds to make a medicine and heal the man's blindness. He dismisses the request for a superstitious cause and restates the search for meaning. The blind man's suffering is a fact. Where is God in this suffering; what can God do in this situation; and what are we called to do? Jesus acts to relieve suffering rather than discuss its cause. He is teaching that the responsibility belongs to us to act regardless.⁴ The question for us is not who sinned (in cosmic terms) or how can God allow women to be beaten and raped, but how can *we* allow this to go unchallenged? In challenging this victimization, the question is, Who is accountable for this suffering and how can justice be wrought here?

What Jesus does not address in this parable is the situation in which there is clear responsibility for the suffering of another. A more current reading of this story might include the information that the man's father beat his mother during her pregnancy with him, and the child's blindness resulted. In this case, when asked the question who sinned, Jesus might have said, "The one who beat his mother is accountable for his acts. Rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. (See Luke 17: 1-4.) Here we must work the works of the one who sent me." Part of that work, which is clearly expected in the prophetic tradition of Hebrew and Christian theology, is that of calling to repentance and accountability and making justice in order to accomplish forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. These responses to experiences of suffering at the hands of another are requisite if the suffering is to be more than simply endured.

Endurance

In both the explanation of superstition and the attribution of greater meaning, God is held responsible for the suffering itself. This presupposes a belief in God as omnipotent and omniscient. If God is in control and choosing to exercise that control by bringing suffering upon the afflicted as punishment or in order to teach them something, then both cause and meaning are clearly determined to be in God's hands.

In the face of this interpretive framework, most victims accept endurance as the means of dealing with this suffering. Deciding that being battered or molested is justifiable punishment, one's lot in life, cross to bear, or God's will, sets in motion a pattern of endurance that accepts victimization and seeks ways to coexist with it. Victims are encouraged to endure when support and advocacy to get away from the violence are not provided, when they are told to go home and keep praying, and when they are expected to keep the family together even though the violence continues and they are in danger. This "doormat theology" teaches that it is God's will that people suffer and the only option is to endure it. There is no space to question or challenge the suffering that comes from this injustice, to feel anger, or to act to change one's circumstance. The result of this theology is that a victim remains powerless and victimized and her/his physical, psychological, and spiritual survival are jeopardized. This understanding of the meaning of suffering comforts the comfortable and afflicts the afflicted but ignores the demands of a God who seeks justice and promises abundance of life.

There is no virtue in enduring suffering if no greater good is at stake. Certainly, being battered or sexually abused is such a situation. There *is no greater good* for anyone—certainly not for the victim and children and others who witness the violence but also not for the abuser. Endurance that merely accepts the violence ignores the abuser's sinfulness and denies him a chance for repentance and redemption

which may come from holding him accountable for his acts. Endurance in order to “keep the family together” is a sham because the family is already broken apart by the abuse. There is no virtue to be gained in these situations is where everyone loses; there is no virtue in encouraging a victim of abuse to accept and endure it.

Transformation

For the Christian, the theology of the cross and the resurrection provides insight into the meaning of suffering and transformation. God did not send Jesus to the cross as a test of his faith, as punishment for his sin, or to build his character. The Romans crucified Jesus and made him a victim of overt and deadly anti-Semitic violence. It was a devastating experience for Jesus’s followers who watched him murdered. They were overwhelmed by fear, despair, and meaninglessness. They left the scene of the crucifixion feeling abandoned and betrayed by God. The resurrection and subsequent events were the surprising realization that in the midst of profound suffering, God is present and new life is possible.

This retrospective realization in no way justified the suffering; it transformed it. It presented the possibility of new life coming forth from the pain of suffering. Sometimes Jesus’s crucifixion is misinterpreted as being the model for suffering: since Jesus went to the cross, persons should bear their own crosses of irrational violence (for example, rape) without complaint. But Jesus’s crucifixion does not sanctify suffering. It remains a witness to the horror of violence done to another and an identification with the suffering that people experience. It is not a model of how suffering should be borne but a witness to God’s desire that no one should have to suffer such violence again. The resurrection, the realization that the Christ was present to the disciples and is present to us, transformed but never justified the suffering and death experience. The people were set free from the pain of that experience to realize the newness of life among them in spite of suffering.

Personal violence presents a victim with two options: endurance and acceptance of continued suffering, or an occasion for transformation. Endurance means remaining a victim; transformation means becoming a survivor.

In order to become a survivor and transform one’s suffering, persons must use their strength and all available resources within themselves and from others to move away from a situation in which violence continues unabated. God is present in this movement as a means to transform. A young woman, raped at age eighteen, reflected on her rape experience in light of her faith. As she recovered, she observed that her prayer life had shifted dramatically after the assault. Prior to the rape, she recalled that her prayers most often

took the form of “Dear God, please take care of me.” As she recovered from the rape, she realized that now her prayers began, “Dear God, please help me to remember what I have learned.” She moved from a passive, powerless position of victim in which she expected God to protect her to a more mature and confident position of survivor in which she recognized her own strength and responsibility to care for herself with God’s help. In addition, her compassion and empathy for others increased and she was empowered to act to change things that cause violence and suffering. She was able to transform her experience and mature in her faith as she recovered from the assault with the support of family and friends.

One of the most profound fears experienced by one who suffers is that God is literally abandoning her/him. The experience of suffering and the resulting righteous anger in the face of that suffering need not separate us from God. Paul gives witness to this in Romans.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38

God is not responsible for suffering; God is not pleased by people’s suffering; God suffers with us and is present to us in the midst of the pain of sexual and domestic violence; God does not abandon us even though everyone else may. This is the promise of the Hebrew and Christian texts—that God is present in the midst of suffering and that God gives us the strength and courage to resist injustice and to transform suffering.

Just as God does not will people to suffer, God does not send suffering in order that people have an occasion for transformation. It is a fact of life that people do suffer. The real question is not, Why? but, What do people do with that suffering? Transformation is the alternative to endurance and passivity. It is grounded in the conviction of hope and empowered by a passion for justice in the face of injustice. It is the faith that the way things are is not the way things have to be. It is a trust in righteous anger in the face of evil which pushes people to action. Transformation is the means by which, refusing to accept injustice and refusing to assist its victims to endure suffering any longer, people act. We celebrate small victories, we chip away at oppressive attitudes cast in concrete, we say no in unexpected places, we speak boldly of things deemed secret and unmentionable, we stand with those who are trapped in victimization to support their journeys to safety and healing, and we break the cycle of violence we may have known in our own lives. By refusing to endure evil and by seeking to transform suffering, we are about God’s work of making justice and healing brokenness.

Notes

1. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 45.
2. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 18-19.
3. "It is assumed that sin, by whomsoever committed, was the cause of the blindness. This was the common belief in Judaism; see e.g., Shabbath 55a: There is no death without sin (proved by Ezek. 18:20) and no punishment (i.e., sufferings) without guilt (proved by Ps. 89:33). When a man has been blind from birth, the sin must be sought either in the man's parents, or in his own ante-natal existence" (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* [London: SPCK, 1955], 294).
4. In light of the Holocaust some have asked, Where was God? and many Jews have reframed the question to, Where were the people who could have stopped this?

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