

# COMMON OBJECTION

## The Crisis of Faith in Suffering

Ultimately, the questions which arise out of injury to the self through failure, loss, and abuse become religious questions. For those with religious convictions, the experience of suffering devastating and tragic losses in life, and the pervading presence of evil, can produce a crisis of faith. In the struggle to find meaning and purpose in life, God is the one we hold to be finally accountable.

The depth of human pain is nearly always perceived in contrast to the height of human aspiration. Yet the apostle Paul found that God's truth incorporates both as a paradox.

God's power is made manifest in weakness, wrote Paul, following his own experience of unanswered prayer with regard to his "thorn in the flesh." This is the power of Christ who has Himself entered into the domain of suffering and evil and has overcome that power with the greater power of divine love and restoration to life (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

The starting point for faith in God, as the Hebrew people came to understand, was in their experience of a God who shared their own suffering. (see For an insightful treatment of divine power and human suffering Richard F. Vieth, *Holy Power, Human Pain* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988).

"Only the suffering God can help," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he experienced the collapse of the good when confronted by the evil of Hitler's program of destruction.

"The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross... Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 360-61).

When I looked again at the standard theological textbooks, I saw that they had missed this essential starting point for coming to grips with the reality of suffering and the reality of God. When theology begins by defining God as a being located outside of the world, it is impossible to speak of God as participating in the reality of the world without diminishing God's transcendence over the world. When supernatural power is taught as the primary attribute of God, those who become powerless in the face of suffering and evil find it difficult to believe in the existence of God.

Faith in a God who intervenes on behalf of those who are suffering can turn to unbelief when the "righteous" suffer. We who are adults often try to find reasons why our suffering may be deserved. Few of us would claim to be so righteous as to merit God's intervention in every case. But when children suffer and die, our faith is tested to the utmost.