

The Problem of Evil and Suffering.

My friend is struggling with issues of suffering which naturally arise following the vast carnage of the last month's tsunami. He wrote about this on his blog. I offered the following comments to him, which I now offer also to you.

Aaron,

Your blog comments are summarized thusly upon the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004.

Crushing Waves of Glory

I have been listening to various opinions and commentary on the Tsunami disaster. Like 9/11, people begin to ask the questions as to religious hope in the face of natural disaster. I am not sure there are any easy answers and I am not satisfied with many of them. NPR and the BBC both did segments on reactions and it was quite interesting to hear similarities and differences. Talk of the Nation took calls from all over the spectrum including a Muslim who proceeded to not only believe that the will of Allah for disasters like this to happen but that it is punishment for evil, or that it could be "martyrdom" because Muhammad had spoken of something having to do with drowning as a martyr. If you forgot the fact he was Muslim, it was identical to some of the "Christian" perspectives I've heard. Muslim or Christian, god purposefully causing these events makes for a scary god.

You are perhaps rightly affronted by some of the poor responses to the question of evil and suffering given by religious leaders, Christian and otherwise, in response to this most recent of world cataclysms. I will not presume to suggest I have an ultimate answer on this question, nevertheless, I have had to face it much in the practice of psychiatry and medicine. People suffer and God seems to make little apology. He does not always rescue them from the pain in what you or I would consider is a reasonable period of time. It is witnessed by some that God saves them from dire circumstances at times. Others, however, are swept away by the flood never to return in this life.

The Greek philosophers insisted that God was "impassive". By this they meant that suffering was not a part of God's experience. Christian theologians, seeking to coordinate their thought and teaching with the philosophies of the day, did the Christian imagination a grave disservice when they agreed with the Greeks and fostered a picture of God as removed from human pain. "How could a God who was so infinite as to have no needs, experience pain," they reasoned. "Pain is an experience based on unmet needs or desires. Surely God who has no needs cannot therefore suffer pain." Had theologians concerned themselves with their Semitic roots as much as they did their Greek neighbors, perhaps they would have remembered Isaiah.

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:1-6

“But surely” they argued, “this is not God in His essence who is suffering. It is the Logos. Somehow that must be different than God Himself.”
Yet echoes the Creed,

He suffered under Pontius Pilate.... True God of Very God.

And Paul redounds,

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

So if we are going to be true to scripture, we must create the picture for ourselves of God as Sufferer. But how does He suffer, and of what benefit is it that He suffers?

Have you ever suffered and had God come alongside? Surely then you would know the answer to this question.

In 1991, God bade me enter into His darkness. It was not a random event that led me there (if such things as “random events” in fact even do occur). It was an event prophesied as a coming suffering for me. One is seldom given such privilege as to know of a coming onslaught. A month following the prophesy, I was in the ICU with toxic shock syndrome. Then, the ICU was a walk in the park compared to the breakup of my medical practice group that same year. Almost all energy left my human spirit. I could think of nothing to say to friends; I had no libido; I could share in no one’s joy or creativity. I could go to work and complete my tasks, but a fog descended upon my intellect, and a heaviness was in my steps.

Nevertheless, when I went to pray, a Light sprung up from my deepest recesses. A Companion was present in my deepest soul. There was empathy and peace coming from a Source deep within me which had no trouble surviving the onslaught and Who had no intention of pulling away. She knew the integrity of my heart, and He knew the intentions of my spirit. The world could not understand or appreciate me, but the Savior of my soul stood ready to companion my walk and defend my cause. It definitely mattered to me that God understood and had suffered. Else wise, how could he relate?

Henceforth, I am able to testify that God involves himself in human suffering in the same way a good psychiatrist or friend is present in pain. They give presence and attention. They resonate a holy light of love. They say little, but mean volumes. They offer comfort and enter into prayer and unitive states of mind, and in so doing, they mediate the Love and Glory of God. In their doing so, I am affirmed and blessed. My pastor and an elder did this for me in the hospital. My wife loved me though it all. But mostly, my God never left me, and gave presence throughout the ordeal, resurrecting the energies of my soul when the tumultuous night was done.

Brothers, we do not want you to ... grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

1Thessalonians 4:13

What is it like to grieve and have no hope? Thankfully, I have not had to endure such a darkness. There are people who nevertheless enter great darkness and who have no hope. What is God’s involvement with them?

Great loss and great pain create wounds in the mind. When hostility and pressure is all around, and if there is no one to comfort, it is impossible for grief to run its course to healing. An example of this situation is when children are abused by parents. Such abuse by the

untrustworthy care giver creates fractures and divisions of soul. Complexes arise where one part of the mind feels anger, another fear, and third one guilt and so on. These cannot resolve or reintegrate unless comfort and hope can arise again. The fragments reside in the unconscious compartment of soul, ready to spring forth when life presents a safer time, when comfort arrives, or when a parallel event triggers their reemergence.

Humanly speaking, there is little in life more hopeless than a child in the hands of a malevolent parent. Shelly was chosen by her father to be "his" special child from before birth. Mother was too depressed to protest. From earliest infancy, Dad loved to finger her vagina. His little slave girl had to be at his beck and call. When she was old enough, his "ownership" of her body and soul netted him money from friends and acquaintances. The money was such a "blessing" he would tell her, using his best church language. He would savagely beat her in order to "get off", then he aborted their children with fists and coat hangers. She once had an out of body experience of heaven when she nearly died, but she was sent back to earth. What is God's involvement for the one suffering such savagery and perversion? Why did He not let her die?

Yet, along the way a grandmother loved her. An uncle treated her with kindness. A teacher recognized the potential of the sad little girl with the tic in her face. Miracles enabled her to survive, and the Lord revealed himself to her mystically at a very young age. Certainly every abused child does not have such a story of God's sustenance. In fact many adults who arise from such a family would say their history is proof that God does not exist. Bitterness and hardness obscure the deeper, more trusting regions of soul, and mystical awareness often is obscured. But peculiar provisions of love will often come, known or unknown, through various people in such a one's life. These subtle provisions hint to the little one that there is more to life than meets the eye.

We look across the history of mankind and see that God rarely apologizes for suffering he allows other humans or the cosmos to inflict upon us. Yet we experience Him as manifesting such kindness when He draws near that it seems to make no sense when juxtaposed with chronic pain, Nazi torture, and bubonic plagues. All that we are left to conclude is that this earth is not all there is and that pain on the earth is a mystery that potentially makes us better somehow in God's great design. Spirits are made better by means of grief and wrestling with pain and God. Relinquishing control to God's lordship in spite of one's risk of loss is a sacrifice that enlarges us in the eternal sphere. Were it not for pain, we could show no sacrifice, and were it not for loss, we could show no courage. It is not the system I would likely have thought to design, but it is apparently the one Creator chose. So, in resignation, with Thomas we are prone to say, "Let us also go [to Jerusalem], that we may die with him." Can you just imagine your spirit saying to the other spirits when it is time to exit timelessness for the body-trek here on earth, "Here I go to Terra Firma, so I can die like Christ."

As we enter the sphere of limitations, perhaps we are aware that creation is set up *in advance* to frustrate our desire. As Paul wrote,

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8:19-23

Through submitting to this ordeal of bodily limitation, we become more mature sons and daughters of the King. We learn the value of sacrifice, and we practice the virtue of hope.

So what is the relationship of God to human suffering? He is present, and She has promised to remain present even if we feel *not* that presence at any particular moment. He further assures us, that His presence is enough. As *I Am* said to Moses, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33:14) Then Moses and we likewise reply, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." Yes, we are afraid in this terrestrial sphere, but it is our hope that, in fact, "the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials." (2 Peter 2:9) and that in his goodness He *will*, in fact, rescue us. Further, if that rescue is belated beyond our death, we reasonably expect that the exercise of hope in the middle of the frustration will pay eternal dividends. In addition, we can trust that in this subjection of ourselves to frustration and our hope to waiting, that nothing is wasted. God's economy suffers no waste of good hope and pain. Everything will have meaning when the story unfolds completely. And when the story is told, we, with all the saints, will know, that it has been worth it. This is the testimony of the best of the church through the ages, and it is the testimony of those who have briefly entered death through near-death experiences. Other great faith traditions also share this hope.

So does this answer the question of how a loving God can allow the death of 100,000 tsunami victims? Well, yes and no. First let us remember that the suffering of 100,000 is no worse in intensity than the suffering of one; for no single person suffers more than his or her individual maximum. All the individuals' sufferings are never added to any one person. The newsworthy spectacle of the large number of souls lost at once impresses the observer, but it is no more difficult for a soul to die that way than in any other way.

Also, it is important that, in order to be able to forgive God for the great suffering of this planet, we enlarge our imagination to perceive how "unimaginably" grand is the Great Dance of God's sending forth and lifting up of souls through this earthly pilgrimage. I recommend two sources to aid the imagination in this regard. First is C.S. Lewis' science fiction novel, *Perelandra*. Its culmination in the scene of the Great Dance has informed my hope greatly through many decades. This scene is included on my web page essay *The Glory of God*. (www.troycaldwell.com). Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* has played a similar role for some, though it is less overtly spiritual in nature. Finally, the genre of near-death experiences is a fantastic enlarger of one's imagination to appreciate "the breadth and length and height and depth, [of] the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge." (Ephesians 3) A good starting place for this is www.near-death.com.

Warmly,

Troy Caldwell