

GOD'S PRESENCE IN SUFFERING: The Theology of the Cross

by Rev. Dr. Herbert C. Mueller Jr.



Why? Even “good families” with fine Christian parents may have it. In spite of their best efforts, one of the children develops schizophrenia and the family is torn apart. Where did that come from? “We did all the right things. We raised him in a loving home, we took him to church and we taught him the Word of God,” his parents say, “but why did this happen? We must be horrible parents . . .” as their voices trail away. Why?

Those feelings are real. My wife and I know them personally. We once had to watch them take our 13-year-old daughter by ambulance to be locked up in a juvenile psychiatric ward. My wife and I were absolutely numb. How could this happen to us? I’m a pastor, for heaven’s sake. Who would walk with us? A natural impression many have is that if you are suffering or in pain, God must be far away from you. The cross of Jesus actually teaches us the exact opposite. Let me explain how in a very practical way the biblical theology of the cross gave us hope and a very real assurance that Jesus was walking with us, even in the midst of deep pain.

The world is full of senseless killing, seemingly meaningless suffering. It happened in the life of Jesus even when He was a baby. While Joseph and Mary were escaping to Egypt with Him, fleeing by night, King Herod, in a fearsome jealous rage, was putting to death all the boy babies in Bethlehem. Why? What purpose could that serve? In the area where I live, just a few days before Christmas, two children ages 2 and 3 are killed in a house fire. Why? What about the mother suffering from chronic pain no doctor can pinpoint, or relieve. Why?

Philosophers and theologians debate these questions. Some people seem to have more than their fair share. Everyone searches somehow for an answer. Why do we suffer? What about those who are dealing with severe mental illness? Could there be a purpose for it? What sort of being would impose pain for a reason?

The initial, often superficial, answer, of course, is that we suffer because we have done wrong. It is our fault. And yes, we can understand that if I go out and drink myself silly, I have no one to blame but myself for driving into the concrete bridge abutment. Others blame “karma” — the idea that the evil you experience now is balancing some previous (or future!) good. Of course, it’s a fallen

world, still others will say. People are bound to suffer. Eliphaz, the friend of Job, in the ancient biblical examination of this question, follows this opinion: “Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). It’s just part of the nature of things, so why fight it?

Try telling that to a mother whose child has just been diagnosed with cancer, or a father whose daughter, despite his best efforts, seems to be slipping away into the terrifying emotional darkness of serious mental illness. “My God, why?” is a natural human response in the face of evil or pain. All illness brings pain and suffering, but perhaps one of the most misunderstood forms of suffering is that experienced by those with major mental illness and their families. Not only do they bring suffering, but individuals who are living with serious mental disorders may feel isolated from others, even family members. Siblings are divided, parents feel cut off from their children. Again, the only words that will come at times are “My God, why?”

There was Another who voiced this same cry we have all expressed from the depth of our own souls. Suspended between heaven and earth, with the total darkness of evil descending on Him, nailed to a Roman cross, abandoned for a time even by His Father, Jesus Christ Himself, in the same anguish of soul we experience — only far worse — shouted into the darkness, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46)

God Comes

In the mystery of the incarnation, the Christian theology of the cross, God does not give a reasoned-out three point logical answer to our “Why?” No, what He does is far more profound. He comes. To Job, God appears in a whirlwind, not to explain Himself but to call Job to account (Job 38:1ff). But He comes.

In Jesus Christ God Himself comes to us. He is the Word of God “made flesh” for us (John 1:14). In Jesus, God Himself experiences our suffering. God’s answer to our “Why?” is Jesus, nailed up to the



cross for us. God does not give us a theological treatise, but He gives us His Son to suffer with us and to suffer for us. On the cross, our sin becomes His. Our suffering and pain are all given to Him. Our death He dies for us. In the midst of that suffering He also cries out with us, “My God, why?” When we ask, “What could be worse than the suffering I am experiencing?” we could also ask, “What could be worse than the Son of God Himself lying dead in a grave late one Friday?” Nothing!

Yet the Christian Gospel promises that God was not finished when Jesus was crucified. Three days later God raised Him from the dead, signaling a new reality in which God has given Him “the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). Jesus rises from the dead to say to us, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the Living One; I died and behold I am alive forever more, and I have the keys of death and hell” (Rev. 1:17-18). Jesus is the one who will “wipe away every tear,” who promises, “Behold, I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:4-5)

A Realistic Picture

This crucified Jesus, now raised from the dead, brings not a simplistic sentimental view of suffering but a fully realistic picture. Jesus will not say to you, “Oh, it’s not really so bad!” or “God has a purpose for all this, one day you will see.” Jesus will never fool you or minimize your suffering. He knows that your pain is real, because Jesus knows pain. He understands rejection and has faced death as well. Probably you are reading this because you or a family member are faced with something beyond your understanding or control. You have just been told your daughter has borderline personality disorder. Perhaps the diagnosis has begun to explain the confusion you have experienced, but sometimes it all just overwhelms you. We pray that you come to see that Jesus does not shrink back from the horror we humans have done to one another, or the terrible things that happen to us. Jesus does not explain away the difficulty you are facing. On the cross He let it all happen to Him, because He wanted to connect with you. On the cross Jesus took it all, knew it all, suffered it all, simply so that He could be with you and know what is happening to you. Here is why our theology of the cross can be so helpful even when we are facing the terrible effects of mental illness.

Jesus knows that our suffering and pain often strip us of our possessions, our power and our pride, so that we are left alone with Him. And then He is alive to show Himself to us in His Word, the Word that invites us, “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Looking to Jesus on the cross, we can say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You are my hope, just as I was in your despair on the cross. You are my sanity, just as I am your confusion; my joy, just

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as I am your sorrow. You are my healing, just as I am your pain. Indeed, you are my life, Lord Jesus, just as I was your death on the cross.” Therefore, no matter what we suffer now, we can cling to Him and know that He will never abandon us.

Jesus will not give you a step-by-step approach to overcome your disorder on your own. But He will walk with you through

all the medical tests and psychiatric treatments. In Him, God gives us hope — He holds us even when we cannot see the way out. Sometimes I hear people say, “You know, God won’t give you more than you can bear!” as though God delights in loading us up just about to the breaking point. But they’ve quoted only the middle part of the passage. Here is the whole verse: “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). First, God is faithful! You can count on Him always to keep His promises. Then the last part assures us, “He will provide the way out.” The Scripture also says of Jesus, “A bruised reed He will not break, a dimly burning wick He will not quench” (Is. 42:3). In other words, when we are at our weakest, God will not break us, but will always seek to renew and restore us. He is faithful to His promise.

All of this is assured to us in the resurrection of Jesus. Even when we feel defeated, the final victory is ours, because Jesus is alive. The Scripture says, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of them that have fallen asleep. . . . Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:19-20, 58). The victory does not depend on our feeling or our state of mind, but on His Word and on His resurrection. That’s what is sure. That’s how we can still live in hope.

Two Realities

We now live under two realities. The Bible says “we walk by faith not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). What we see with our eyes is sin and death. What God gives by faith in Jesus is life now and forever. Which of these two realities is the more real? In Jesus it is the eternal reality of life in His resurrection. In the meantime, His promise to be with us is most clear in His cross. There Jesus shows us “God with us” most vividly in His suffering and death. For when our suffering in this world takes everything else away, even when mental illness has done its worst, Jesus is still there, He is still alive for us. He is still the one who suffered for all your sins, who died and rose that you might be forgiven, that you might be and remain a child of God. Now His life is still hidden under the cross — Jesus is God with us even in suffering and death. Now it is contained in the water connected to the Word of God in Baptism, by which we are buried with Jesus and raised to new life in Him. Now it is given under the simple forms of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Now we receive it by faith. Then it will be fully revealed when we see Him face to face.

There is a Bible event familiar to many that can help us wrap this all up. Jesus was teaching the crowd one day in a house — in fact it was so crowded no one could go in or out (Mark 2:1-12). This made for a dilemma for the four friends of one quadriplegic. Since they couldn't get in the normal way, they decided to take matters into their own hands. They took their friend up to the roof, cut a hole, then let him down right in front of Jesus.

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What was the first thing Jesus did when He saw their faith? He went right to the heart of the matter. “My son, your sins are forgiven you,” He said. Your sins are forgiven you? I thought the man was paralyzed! Yes, but Jesus knew the healing needed to begin from the inside out. Specific sin does not usually cause specific suffering, but we do suffer and die because we are sinners. So Jesus forgave the man his sins, washed him clean for the sake of the blood He was soon to shed, and then Jesus did the easy thing, telling the man, “Get up, take up your bed and go home!”

There is forgiveness for you and me, too. Forgiveness for any bitterness we have toward God or others because of our condition, forgiveness for our lack of faith — forgiveness in the cross of Jesus. The Scripture says: “You who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this He set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:13-14). Jesus is alive to forgive, to strengthen, to bear us up no matter what.

He is alive to heal us, either now or in the resurrection to come. That's why we have hope. That's also why Paul writes to the Galatians, “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal. 6:14-15). No illness can take you away from Jesus and the new creation He will give.

Who will go with you now? Now that you or your loved one has been diagnosed with a mental illness? Jesus will. This Jesus we have been talking about, the crucified and risen Jesus, will walk with you every step of the way you have ahead of you. No matter what unknown fears you may face, no matter what anyone else says or does, nothing is more certain, more real, than this: Jesus lives! For you! There's the biblical comfort of the theology of the cross.

Oh, and there's one more thing. What about our daughter? A number of years have passed with more than one hospitalization. She will always struggle to some degree with her disorder but, thanks be to God, she is doing very well at present. She is happily married and seeks to live each day as a gift from God, trusting His strength and His mercy for that day. May God give you the same assurance in Jesus!

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