NOORDWES UNIVERSITEIT
(POTCHEFSTROOMSE KAMPUS)

in association with
Greenwich School of Theology UK

THE THEOLOGY OF THEODICY:
A Doctrinal Analysis of Divine Justice in the Light of Human Suffering

Mr CHRISTOPHER WOODALL, BA (Honours), MA

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Philosophiæ Doctor in Dogmatics at the Noordwes Universiteit (Potchefstroomse Kampus)

Promoter: Prof Dr Roger B Grainger
Co-Promoter: Prof Dr CFC Coetzee

2004
Potchefstroom

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TABLE of CONTENTS

1.0 ABSTRACT

There are few issues more worthy of our attention as Christians in the twenty-first century than that of justice and its counterpart, injustice. Much current comment or debate is understandably subjective, for who can say with any degree of accuracy what is just? Justice, therefore, is often perceived as a relative term. Mankind is generally unaware of a proper and appropriate standard or principle of justice. By the very definition of its functional role in society, the church should not be ignorant of such matters. Sadly, however, that has not always been the case. The research undertaken for this thesis has shown that, far from being a major topic of concern amongst Christian writers and theologians over the last two to three hundred years, there is, in fact, comparatively little material from which to be guided. Perhaps this is the right time for such a work.

The difficulty, however, is reconciling the scope of the work with the vastness of the problem. By acknowledging a need, one is almost obliged to contribute towards the satisfying of that need. This, of course, is impossible to achieve by simply writing about it. One could almost say that "man shall not receive justice by pen alone, but by every decree, statute and principle of goodness, virtue and righteousness that is found in God being characterised in the lives of his people". At the end of this thesis, many questions will have been raised; many will yet remain unanswered. I offer no apology for that, for it is as much a testimony to the mystery of God as it is an acknowledgment of man's finiteness.

The problem of suffering is not an easy one to answer – nor should it be. The prerequisite of seeking to address the issue is a recognition that to approach it in a cavalier fashion will render any debate futile. Indeed, the problem is further enhanced by a watered-down response. In this respect, truth and faith are inseparable. Many have erringly aborted any attempt to search for truth, unsure of how secure their faith would remain in the process. But absolute truth testifies to God's nature and attributes absolutely. Surely that can only quicken faith. What I suspect most mean when they say they are not sure enough of their faith to expose it to so deep a truth is that they are more protective of their preconceived ideas than they are perhaps willing to admit.

Truth must be embraced, however, no matter how unpleasant it may at first appear. Unless the problem is faced, it remains a nagging obstacle, chewing away at our subconscious. Of course, the fact that this is a theological presentation and not a philosophical one will already assume certain preconceptions. It is inconceivable to the present writer, for instance,

that God could purpose anything other than good, being inherently incapable of planning evil. The problem for the philosopher is already somewhat mitigated by a denial of these truths. Christian theism, on the other hand, finds its enigma enhanced.

Although this work is to be submitted in the first instance as fulfilling the requirements of a doctoral degree, its primary purpose is not merely literary but practical. It is my firm conviction that this should be true of any theological treatise, for these are weighty matters that are not simply to be pondered – they demand action. Knowledge is good, but it is not an end in itself; it must always be but the initial step to producing change, even if such a transformation is only in our understanding of the problem.

In many ways, I would agree with the primary themes of Shakespeare's play, *'King Lear'*. Here, the dramatist suggests that suffering which includes a spiritual dimension is often more severe than physical affliction, that it may be precipitated by moral evil, and that there is always the potential for suffering to become a catalyst for change. In the context of a work such as this, it would be more than a little ambitious of me to attempt to cover the whole gamut of human suffering. If the Christian faith stands at all, however, then it must certainly stand for integrity. Facts must, therefore, be faced honestly. I will attempt to address the problems normally associated with the pain issue with wisdom where it allows, with an acknowledgment of lack of understanding where that is called for, but – at least as importantly – without guile.

By beginning with an in depth look at the problem of (the existence of) evil from a biblical perspective and the various theories attached to that problem, the present writer intends to set the scene for the journey that follows. Suffering as a direct consequence of the Fall of Adam is the logical first step in that journey, followed by a character analysis of three Old Testament saints and how each responded to specific suffering in their own lives. A brief précis of Israel's history in the Old Testament is brought up-to-date with a look at the atrocities of the Holocaust, arguably the most abhorrent scenario of suffering in both intensity and magnitude inflicted by man upon man, with one exception. As the hinge upon which the door of history turns, the Incarnation event is key to all that both preceded and came after it. The Sufferings of Christ, therefore, are pivotal to our understanding of the principle of suffering, not only for his disciples down the ages, but also those who are deemed innocent and, indeed, the finally reprobate.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Although on the face of it theology and history are very diverse subjects, they also share some striking parallels. Apart from the fact that each may offer the prospective framework for studying the other, so that it is feasible to speak of both the theology of history and the history of theology, they are similarly susceptible to partiality depending upon the penchant of the interpreter. The study of Scripture by eminent theologians, even of the same persuasion, has consistently produced wide-ranging results. The reader need only survey the works of Lloyd-Jones (1940) and Kendall (1999), on the one hand, or Denney (1918) and Hodge (1983), on the other, for testimony of this.

My own basis of study is that of one both utterly convinced by and strongly convicted of the authority of the Bible as the written Word of God. Consequently and necessarily, many of my deductions assume this authority. What I continue to find disconcerting is not so much to discover myself in conflict with those who fail to appreciate Scripture's command, but to be faced with such a multiplicity of understanding within the body of those who do.

A subject that almost militates against the modern-day expression of those churches that I owe my background to, an understanding of its significance being crucial in my opinion to the Christian walk, is that of the place of suffering in relation to a perfect divine Being. Where traditional Pentecostalism, on the one hand, has tended to live in triumphalistic denial of suffering for the faithful, Roman Catholicism, on the other, has generally ceased to offer any explanation, choosing instead to practically demonstrate the love of the Creator to a hurting creation. The truth of the matter, or at least as much as is made accessible to finite minds regarding infinite concepts, must be tackled both intelligently and sensitively.

My personal bias towards theology constrains me to believe that it is the most neglected of disciplines amongst Christians. This is not to say, of course, that I do not understand the reasons behind such a rejection, being largely a consequence of its abuse coupled with a lamentable delusion of its real worth when appropriately employed. At its best, theology orders doctrines, analyses their relevance to each other, identifies their perplexities, maintains their exposition, applies their interpretation to other fields of

knowledge, and directs their understanding to each generation in a genre with which it may readily employ. Reformed theology is a discipline that endeavours to present a coherent doctrinal definition, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the setting of each society in a topical format and pertinent to the issues of life.

Both historically and theologically, the Church of Jesus Christ has largely engaged in a futile battle to sustain a legitimate harmony between its internal and outward functions. As a consequence, there has been evidence of two diametrically opposed expressions, both of which have failed to do full justice to the biblical presentation of their role within the social infrastructure. It has been praiseworthy in many ways, especially in times such as those in which we live, for an emphasis towards outreach, pioneer work and societal involvement in the midst of surroundings that are largely hostile and dependent upon so many manifestations of spurious philosophies, to recognise this as the more urgent demand. The very nature of that gravity, however, surely dictates that amid such a tumultuous environment the Church, perhaps more than at any other time in history, must itself be both absolutely familiar with and completely adherent to the message it seeks to present. The rebuke of Jesus to the Pharisees, in admittedly different circumstances, is surely appropriate here:

> *You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone.*
>
> **(Lk 11:42.)**

The difficulties one faces when tackling a subject like divine justice in the light of human suffering are plentiful. First of all, there is the tendency to make general statements that fail to take reasonable account of personal sensitivities. Then there is the possibility of arriving at conclusions prior to all the available facts being considered or, worse still, allowing the mind to be preconditioned at the outset. Add to this the problem that imperfect, finite intellect can only ever see but a glimpse of whole truth and already the proposition becomes a challenge (**1 Cor 13:12**). That it would be all too easy to consider the same question from the reverse angle has compounded that trial.

The medium I have tried to preserve has tended more towards the plight of man in his suffering, though from an especially theocentric standpoint. I realise, of course, that this may in itself present difficulties to some, even those of my closest working colleagues from theological backgrounds similar to my own but, in this case, I believe the end is justified by the means. The message of the Bible appears to be such that God is the

centre, root, foundation and cause of all things. To Christians, this is not a tenet that we are obliged to merely subscribe to academically, but we are charged to exemplify the truth of such a doctrine in the practical expressions of life. For the non-Christian, however, there are a multitude of questions relating to suffering that will generally remain unanswered simply because such mysteries only become resolvable by faith. The believer, on the other hand, may only presume to unveil them in so far as revelation exists to do so.

It has only recently become evident to the writer of the vast difference of opinion there is within Christendom regarding the relationship between divine justice and human suffering. Preliminary research has unearthed almost as many opinions as there are books on the subject, each claiming the authority of Scripture in support of their theses. Whilst the ethos of theology as a discipline does permit a certain element of mystery, it has to be said that not every one has made the most appropriate application of that which God has sovereignly and graciously chosen to reveal to us through his Word.

It has been a source of immense satisfaction to find my conclusions generally ratified by such men of renown as Grudem (1994), Lewis (1946), M^{c}Grath (1992), Packer (1975) and Stott (1986), for each of whom I am deeply indebted. But I have also been pleasantly surprised by the provocation of men like Brasnett (1928), Moltmann (1974), Hume (1948), Thiessen (1992) and Bonhoeffer (1948), whose doctrinal persuasions seemed to be challenged if not changed by practical experience.

Due in no small measure to the inducement to comprehensively explore outside the boundaries of my normal reading circle, I have discovered that each differing view is considerably determined by a prejudice that is often more faithful to perceived dogma than a thoroughly objective passion to search the Scriptures. For example, those who are most at ease with the overall comments of someone like John Calvin will often demonstrate an aptitude to interpret the Bible from a purely Calvinistic tradition, as will those who similarly follow Arminius, Luther, the Westminster Confession or the Council of Trent. It is this kind of bias that I hope to address and correct by presenting a balanced treatment of the nature of suffering in relation to divine justice, which must both commence and conclude with what Scripture actually says.

Of course, I openly acknowledge that this same defence could be engaged on behalf of any doctrine. I do believe, however, that the ramifications are so extensive, the potential for heresy so precarious, and the benefits of a proper understanding so liberating, that it behoves us to give this subject our utmost concern. The **reality** of suffering in the experience of every human being cannot be summarily dismissed and may only be more fully comprehended in view of its absolute **origin** which, as we will see, neither makes God the author of evil nor disarms him of his innate justice. The central question of this work, therefore, is: 'How may one establish the biblical validity of divine justice in the light of human suffering?'

The main focus of this study is to present the biblical evidence in support of divine justice in the light of human suffering. The area of research before me, however, implies that no definitive conclusions can be reached. The very fact that we are dealing with divine mysteries suggests that, in the final analysis, there will remain a certain veiling. This is not to say, however, that we cannot learn some vital lessons from the truths that are revealed to us by Scripture and other sources. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that divine matters are not ultimately subject to finite logic, though reason is a valid tool in understanding issues that God has made accessible by such means. It is my intention, therefore, to show that divine justice and human suffering are not as mutually incompatible as many in our day would have us believe. Perhaps, as in the case of Job and his associates, a revelation of Sovereign power renders all other arguments paltry by comparison.

The specific objectives of this piece of work must be seen in the context of their relation to the sole aim. This being so, I intend to approach the subject from a number of angles by asking a series of relevant questions:

i) the role that the fall of Adam plays in the concept of suffering in general – this being demonstrated from Scripture logically provides a number of others. Does their reasonableness also constitute their validity, whether in whole or in part?

ii) the distinctive nature of suffering in relation to character development, faith enhancement and the coming to maturity of believers – are there lessons to be learned from the manner by which three godly Old Testament characters dealt with suffering, not only as a concept but also in terms of practical endurance?

iii) the uniqueness of suffering in the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ as the only Son of God – what can we deduce from the soteriological, identifiable and exemplar nature of Christ's sufferings?

iv) other examples of suffering by believers throughout the history of the church age – do these throw further light upon or add weight to the argument that divine justice and human suffering are not necessarily incompatible truths?

v) what about the suffering of those perceived as innocent? Surely this gives lie to the belief that God is intrinsically incapable of administering justice fully – or does it?

vi) the final condition of those who fail to recognise in Jesus the only means to their eternal salvation. Are they victims or does this, too, further express God's justice?

The central theoretical argument of this study is that the very real and often apparently innocent suffering of human beings, whether as individuals or corporately, in no way impinges upon the biblical presentation of either the omnipotence or divine justice of a Sovereign God. Arguments that imply the contrary might be better understood in the context of the mystery of evil, of which human suffering is a product and which is resolved eschatologically in the purpose of God through the death of Jesus.

The basis of theological background for this study is done from within the broad framework of the Reformed tradition. In an attempt to answer the difficulties posed by such diverse theories within Christendom, the following methods are to be employed:

i) to research and assess the arguments of those who either reduce the justice of God to a limited authority, rendering him thereby virtually powerless to prevent human suffering or make him the direct author of such suffering which, in the case of the apparently innocent, minimises those attributes in him that are normally associated with love and mercy (Brasnett: 1928), and determine whether their findings warrant inclusion;

ii) to similarly research and assess the arguments of those who see no contradiction between divine justice and human suffering as an ethical argument, whilst at the same time admitting that any ultimate conclusions lie

outside finite reason or intellect, and also to determine the relevance of their study, (M^{c}Grath, 1992);

iii) to search the Scriptures and allow it to be the guide and basis by which each of the above arguments will stand or fall. The principles of Bible interpretation adhered to throughout will be those as recommended by Henrichsen, (Henrichsen: 1978); and

iv) to assess the validity of the central theoretical argument in the light of Scripture by subjecting the collected information to a selection process determined by analysis, interpretation and synthesis.

I am greatly indebted to the following persons, whose professional or personal support have contributed to making this work possible:

Mrs Barbara Woodall
Revd Prof Dr Roger B Grainger
Prof Dr Callie Coetzee
Revd Prof Dr D Byron Evans
Mrs EM Evans
Mr AJ Thurlow
Mr David A Wilson
Revd Jeffrey Cox
Mr Stephen Matthew
Mr Russell Andrews
The Staff of the Bible College of Wales, Swansea
The Staff of St Deiniol's Residential Library, Hawarden.

3.0 THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I shall be seeking to formulate and give theological credence to my conviction that there is no incompatibility between the justice of God and the suffering of humanity.

> *It is one of the paradoxes of modern history that in hardly any previous epoch has there been so much discussion of, and so vehement demand for justice as in ours; and that at the same time it is precisely those movements to which this demand for justice has given rise which have led us into a condition that seems to be further off from justice than any other.*

The reader will at first note that I have intentionally separated the above quotation from its source reference, for without it one might readily believe it to be a current statement. It was actually attributed to Emil Brunner in 1947 as part of his Gifford lectures delivered at the University of St Andrews (Brunner, 1948: 106). Admittedly, Brunner's address came less than two years after the conclusion of the Second World War, but that if anything goes some way to excusing the political and sociological uncertainties of his day. Here we are, almost sixty years later acknowledging the very same sorry state of affairs, largely isolated from the throes of such widespread international hostility.

3.2 GOD'S NATURE

The relationship between the attributes of God cannot be overstated. His goodness, for example, is inextricably linked to his love, his righteousness, his mercy, his grace, etc. Man was created in God's image and, though tarnished by sin, he yet retains a semblance of that image. God looks favourably, therefore, upon acts that he finds are consistent with his own goodness. The converse of this is equally true. Not only can the Psalmist affirm that God has "loved righteousness" **(Psm 45:7)**, but that this is commensurately balanced by his diametric opposition to all that is not good. Hence, God similarly hates wickedness.

3.2.1 God's Omnipotence

It is irreconcilable with Scripture's presentation of God as omnipotent to defend the existence of evil along the lines of finiteness or potential deficiency in God. It must be pointed out, however, that omnipotence does not embrace everything that can be conceived to the human mind as a possibility for God to perform. His power is restricted by his wisdom, for instance, because his attributes are fully consistent with his nature.

To deny God's omnipotence on the basis of the evidence for suffering is to treat his all-powerfulness with less than biblical warrant. There are Christians today who seem to speak of God as being able to do all things without valid Scriptural testimony. Because he is perfect he cannot, for example, suspend one spiritual law within himself in order to express another more freely. We must define omnipotence, therefore, as God's ability to perform those things that are natural functions of his power and in perfect harmony with his Being. If this seems that I am suggesting limitation in God's power, then I must plead guilty, for he is governed by his own intrinsic personality; he cannot deny himself.

It must be admitted, however, that not all theologians adopt this stance. According to ES Jones:

> *The laws of the universe are God's habitual way of running that universe, and to say that he cannot do otherwise is to make him less than his own modes of action. God has chosen to run the universe by order rather than by whim and notion. The laws are orderly because God's mind is orderly; they are dependable because God is a dependable God. But to say that he cannot do other than he does habitually is to leave us a God who is the victim of his own ways.*
>
> (Jones, 1933: 20.)

This is certainly true insofar as it goes, but does it extend far enough? To apply the same criteria to all facets of theology might provoke us to consider that God could do absolutely anything at all, since he has the power. But surely his perfections are such that there are some things that lie essentially outside of his capabilities. In this sense, therefore, I would have to say that although God is ***not*** "the victim of his own ways", he is nevertheless bound by the parameters of his own nature.

Something else that God cannot do is to deny himself or violate the essence of his Being. It is impossible for God to behave in any way that would contravene his essential nature. And so, he cannot lie, he cannot be anything other than holy, he cannot cease to love, he can do no other than fulfil a vow, he cannot lapse into injustice, he cannot break covenant. The widow whose husband was killed in action cries that God would put an end to war; the mother whose only daughter was raped by a total stranger pleads for an end to such things; the small girl whose father was the victim of a hit and run motor accident is not impressed by theological debate – she simply wants her daddy back. In the final analysis, however, these are weighty matters and there are immense doctrinal implications. John White has the following to say:

> *We may see no good reason why* [God] *should not so control man that wars would cease. But to do so would render man less than human and make void God's covenant with man. And even if God could do that, would any of us seriously want to be part of a race of benign humanoid computers, manipulated by a Celestial Scientist? Machines cannot suffer – yet what a price to avoid suffering!*
>
> (White, 1980: 11.)

Any sense of understanding God's omnipotence that fails to acknowledge his justice is sheer folly. Although the word 'omnipotence' derives from two Latin words that when taken together mean literally 'all-powerful', this should not imply that God has the ability to do anything beyond that which he has decided. Any such decisions are always incontrovertibly associated with his character. He cannot decide to act on impulse towards evil, for it is in his nature to be good – he hates wickedness to such an extent that his wrath is consistently extended towards it. In other words, God's omnipotence means that he is able to do all his holy will.

3.2.2 God's Love

Clive Staples Lewis married late in life. His bride was a divorcee with a son to her previous marriage. This in itself caused quite a stir amongst his close circle of fellows. But the anguish he faced in the midst of hostility from some of his contemporaries was nothing compared to the trauma of Joy's death in 1960 after four happy years of marriage. She was some years younger than he and, although her death was not unexpectedly sudden, it would not be unreasonable to consider it as premature. In his attempt to deal with the tragic loss, Lewis kept a diary account of the period

immediately prior to, during and after this sad turn of events. Later published as '*A Grief Observed*', he is forthright about his emotions at the time:

> *Not that I am... in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not "So there's no God after all" but "So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer."*
>
> (Lewis, 1966: 9, 10.)

False claims to love can be detected in their lack of authenticity by the scope of their limitation, degree of manipulation and resultant dissociation towards, over and from the perceived object of love. The love of God, however, which is after all love in its truest and purest form, is limitless, unconditional and vulnerable in the sense that it is ungoverned by subjective response.

To help us in our understanding, it may be beneficial to consider two similar statements in John's writings concerning God's essential nature – God is spirit **(Jn 4:24)** and God is light **(1 Jn 1:5)**. Although some translations add the indefinite article 'a' to the noun in each case, this is grammatically incorrect. The whole point of John's argument is that God is not merely a spirit amongst others or just another light of many, any more than he is simply living. In contrast to flesh, he is essentially spirit, without limitation of time or space; over against darkness, he is wholly light, with not a hint of anything that would diminish his intrinsic purity. In the same way, the fact that he is love must be perceived as the greatest measure of love that we could possibly comprehend and then to acknowledge that such a perception is totally inadequate. The love of men may not be taken as a valid starting-point, projected on to God and then magnified, for even the most righteous of human love is tarnished by sin. The love of God, however, is perfect, constant and totally devoid of sentimentality or partiality.

To critics of the biblical revelation, the fact of suffering militates against the concept of God's love. Such a view is in part fostered by a misunderstanding of the relationship between love and justice in the divine Being. It is significant that John's repeated statement that "God is love" **(1 Jn 4:8, 16)** does not stand in isolation, but assumes everything else we know of God in its embrace. This same God who **is** love, therefore, is the one who penalised Adam's race for his federal sin, who judged the world of Noah's day by deluge, who devastated Sodom and Gomorrah for gross immorality, who

chastised his own chosen people Israel by conquest and captivity, and shortly prior to John's declaration had brought about the promised destruction of Jerusalem. This God, says John, ***is*** love.

3.2.3 God's Goodness

To ask the question "If God is good...?" demands a qualifying response to the term 'goodness'. Often when we speak of a thing as being 'good', we have in mind simply that which is worthy of approval. The difficulty lies in whom it must be approved by. A vacation that was 'good' usually means that the holiday-maker approved of the weather, climate, accommodation, scenery, food, company, etc. Someone else on exactly the same trip, but with a completely different set of criteria, may have offered a wholly diverse judgment. One man's meat may well be another man's poison.

God is inherently and exclusively good **(Mk 10:18)**. He is the source of all goodness and blessing, because it is within his nature to be no other. His disposition is to be only good, for he is good **(Rom 8:28)**, creation itself testifying to his goodness **(Gen 1:31)**. In reply to those who would question God's goodness on the grounds of social inequality, economic injustice and universal disarray, the following must be noted:

- **i)** that these are a consequence of man's departure from God, itself an exercise of the freedom he has,
- **ii)** that God's goodness continually restrains the prevailing evil and thereby secures a measure of common grace, and
- **iii)** salvation ultimately effects a new heaven and a new earth, which negate all such inequality, injustice and disarray.

In an attempt to extract the sufficiency of the word 'good' in this context, RT Kendall concludes that:

> *... at the beginning... God looked over his unfallen creation and said, "It is good". Over the next forty-nine chapters* [of Genesis] *every evil under the sun transpired, not least of which was the sin of Jacob and his sons. But at the very end of it all, God could use the word 'good' to describe what happened to Israel, the product of fallen nature. Therefore, when I read that "all things work together for good", then learn what God can call 'good', I am content with the word 'good'. For what God calls good is good enough.*
>
> (Kendall, 1995: 254.)

If this is so when the alternative judges are of the same race (ie humans), then we can only imagine the vast difficulty we face as finite beings coming to some agreement with the Divine Being on what constitutes goodness in absolute terms. Perhaps the best definition on this matter is that offered by Wayne A Grudem: "... there is no higher standard of goodness than God's own character and his approval of whatever is consistent with that character" (1994: 197).

3.2.4 God's Severity

According to Jim Packer (1975), the alleged 'problem of evil' is a by-product of what he calls the 'Santa Claus theology'. With justifiable reason, he asserts that the prominence of the question regarding evil historically coincided with the liberal promotion of the concept of a 'good' God. Now God ***is*** good. In him is only goodness, and goodness in its purest form abides in him alone. But it would be remiss of any biblical theologian to so promote God's goodness at the expense of devaluing his severity (see **Rom 11:22**). The goodness of God and the severity of God go hand in hand. Neither are they parts of which God's essence is the sum – he is wholly good as he is wholly severe. The product of this so-called 'enlightened' view of divinity is that it leaves the nominal church with a well-meaning though impotent God, which in turn produces a fatalistic, almost pessimistic, approach to life.

So what is the severity of God? Well, the key lies in the context of the apostle Paul's usage. The Greek word is *'apotomia'*, translated 'sternness' in the NIV, but really akin to 'cutting off'. The sense of it is, therefore, to be separated from the availability of God's goodness by a decisive act to spurn its provision. Israel as a nation was thus 'cut off' because they largely failed to receive Jesus as Messiah, which itself serves as a warning to Gentile believers **(Rom 11:20)**. Although the intent of God's goodness is to lead all who discover it to repentance **(2:4)**, a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its design by clinging to the rule of autonomy cannot be surprised to meet God's severity **(vv 5-8)**.

3.2.5 God's Justice

Although there is a slight colouring of difference of meaning between the biblical concepts of 'justice' (Heb '*mispat*'; Gk '*krisis*') and 'righteousness' (Heb '*sedeq*'; Gk

'*dikaiosyne*'), to all intents and purposes they are synonymous. It becomes obvious, therefore, that when Scripture speaks of justice, it does so in a sense altogether different from current trends that refer more to the idea of fair play, though this is included.

In respect of God's justice, Thomas Watson offers the following welcome observations:

1. *God cannot but be just. His holiness is the cause of his justice. Holiness will not suffer him to do anything but what is righteous. He can no more be unjust than he can be unholy.*

2. *God's will is the supreme rule of justice; it is the standard of equity. His will is wise and good. God wills nothing but what is just; and therefore it is just because God wills it.*

3. *God does justice voluntarily. Justice flows from his nature. Men may act unjustly, because they are bribed or forced: God will not be bribed, because of his justice; he cannot be forced, because of his power. He does justice out of love to justice.*

4. *Justice is the perfection of the divine nature... To say God is just, is to say, he is all that is excellent: perfections meet in him, as lines in a centre. He is not only just, but justice itself.*

5. *God never did nor can do the least wrong to his creatures. God's justice has been wronged, but never did any wrong. God does not go according to the* 'summum jus', *or right of law; he abates something of his severity. He might inflict heavier penalties than he does... Our mercies are more than we deserve, and our punishments less.*

6. *God's justice is such that it is not fit for any man or angel to expostulate with him, or demand a reason for his actions. God has not only authority on his side, but equity... It is below him to give an account to us of his proceedings. Which of these two is more fit to take place, God's justice or man's reason?... The plumbline of our reason is too short to fathom the depth of God's justice.*

(Watson, 1974: 88.)

To speak in terms of the suffering of humanity with divine justice as our starting-point can only add to the confusion and hinder our path to any appropriate conclusions to the problem it evokes. Justice is not the highest divine fundamental, if we are permitted to speak in such terms. Love is the all-pervading principle of God's Being. This is not to say that the two are operable within the Godhead in isolation or independence. God is essentially love; he is also essentially just. But his innate sense of justice is always shaped by the fact that he is love. This being so, the motivating factor of all believers in every function they may undertake must be one of love, even when such action

demands that justice be done. This was certainly true of Paul's advice to the church at Corinth concerning the expulsion of the immoral brother (see **1 Cor 5:1-13**). He was not merely counselling judgment for its own sake, as harsh as his words may seem to current Christian thought. Ex-communication (justice) was tempered with the hope of future reconciliation (love). As Brunner says:

> *Justice derives from love; still it is not love itself, but different from love. The unity of origin does not remove the distinction in content, just as the distinction in content does not remove the unity of origin.*
>
> (Brunner, 1948: 116.)

3.2.6 God's Holiness

The most complete revelation of God to humanity took place in the incarnation. Prior to Christ, man had to content himself with the experience of Moses. It was in response to his desire to see God's glory at Horeb that we read these words:

> *Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished..."*
>
> **(Exo 34:5-7.)**

No matter where we look in Scripture, the revelation of God that we find there is in full accord with this image and must surely provoke a similar declaration in us as that found on Moses' lips:

> *"Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"*
>
> **(Exo 15:11.)**

If any of God's attributes could sum up his whole nature as being fundamental to it, then surely it would be his holiness. And so we may rightly speak of the holiness of his love, his grace, his mercy, his holy faithfulness and so on, but we do well to remember that his innate sense of justice is no less perfect in its holiness. Holiness is essential to his character and evil is a contradiction of that holiness in even its most miniscule forms, if evil could thus be quantified. In an age where political correctness will not

allow for a biblically balanced view of God, it is vital that believers are neither deceived into paying homage to unscriptural representations of him, nor indeed become the means of conveying such images of him to others. The goodness of God and the justice of God are fully compatible truths, neither being necessarily suspended in deference to the other, but each finding its proper place in God's holy character. For this reason, it is perhaps best to follow Berkhof's suggestion of employing the term 'perfections' rather than 'attributes', especially when considered alongside what he calls "the ***unitas simplicitatis***" (cf Berkhof, 1988: 52, 62).

3.3 THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

There are essentially two Greek words that are translated 'evil' in our English Bibles. WE Vine identifies their differences thus:

> *'*Kakos*' stands for whatever is evil in character, base, in distinction (wherever the distinction is observable) from* 'poneros'*... which indicates what is evil in influence and effect, malignant...* 'Kakos' *is antithetic to* 'kalos'*, fair, advisable, good in character, and to* 'agathos'*, beneficial, useful, good in act; hence it denotes what is useless, incapable, bad;* 'poneros' *is essentially antithetic to* 'chrestos'*, kind, gracious, serviceable, hence it denotes what is destructive, injurious, evil.*
>
> (Vine, 1975: 380.)

Although there are several episodes in Scripture that identify God as causing events to take place that are described as 'evil', the Bible makes it equally clear that such actions are exclusively brought about by the wilful deeds of moral creatures. God is never portrayed as blameworthy or delighting in evil; neither are human beings ever excused on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Any conclusions to the contrary are clearly a contradiction of the biblical perspective.

Evil generally falls into one of two distinct categories. In relative terms, it is far easier to discuss the circumstances of moral evil, for it is always intrinsically linked to man's sin, either directly or indirectly. Non-moral evil may bear some oblique association with original sin, but the consequences of it are far more difficult to defend from a logical, rational or reasonable perspective. Natural disorders are obvious candidates for such a treatment. The offence that such evil produces is intensified by our inability to explain it in terms that do not hold God responsible (and thereby accountable) for its existence as

Supreme Creator. In an attempt to counter Manichæan claims of Dualism, Aquinas was one of the first to speak of evil as wholly negative, that is, a 'privation of good' (Macquarrie: 1981: 120).

The late GCD Howley, who at the time was consulting editor of *The Witness*, put it this way:

> *Evil... is essentially what is unpleasant, disagreeable, offensive. The word binds together the evil deed and its consequences. In the N*[ew] *T*[estament] *'kakos' and 'poneros' mean respectively the quality of evil in its essential character , and its hurtful effects or influence. While these aspects are different, there is frequently a close relationship between them. Much physical evil is due to moral evil; suffering and sin are not necessarily connected in individual cases, but human selfishness and sin explain much of the world's ills.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 357.)

The Bible offers no account of the origin of evil. There is clear testimony regarding the entrance of sin into human experience through what is commonly referred to as the fall of Adam by the guile of the serpent, but no indication as to how this creature assumed such a cunning and deceptive tendency. The New Testament affords several clues that, when pieced together, give a somewhat clearer picture, though even then any firm conclusions remain largely speculative. Jesus, for instance, speaks of Satan as "a murderer from the beginning" **(Jn 8:44)**, John himself adding many years later that "the devil has been sinning from the beginning" **(1 Jn 3:8)**. What exactly this 'beginning' refers to is not identified in either text.

It is assumed, however, certainly from the time of the intertestamental period, that Satan was originally a high-ranking angel who succumbed to the temptation of pride and was thus excluded from heaven. Such a view is based almost exclusively and rather loosely on a couple of obscure Old Testament passages (see **Isa 14:12-17; Ezk 28:12-19**), though there remain those who afford more credibility to this argument than is perhaps warranted by the text. The context of each shows that they principally refer to specific human rulers, who may have been driven by similar motives. The fact that both cases are of a poetic genre does allow for the possibility of this secondary implication, but a doctrine may not be appropriately formulated on such scant evidence. In short, theologians may not be dogmatic when the biblical evidence is enigmatic. Even if these verses do refer to the devil, they still offer no real solution to the origin of the principle

of evil that was expressed as sinful pride. That acknowledged, the origin of the principle of evil remains a mystery. Both Peter **(2 Pet 2:4)** and Jude **(Jd 6)** bring a little more clarity to the episode without really resolving the problem before us.

Although Scripture does not minimise the gravity of the devil's opposition to the purposes of God, neither does it offer any support for the theory of Dualism. God and Satan are not two evenly matched divinities who are engaged in a moral battle for supremacy, the outcome of which is uncertain – "The Lord, he is God" **(1 Kgs 18:39)**.

Concerning the origin of evil, Hammond concludes that:

> *Scripture does not encourage philosophical speculation on this subject and, ever keeping itself to the practical needs of mankind, focuses the attention on the acts of human responsibility. The present-day Christian would be well advised to do the same.*
>
> (Hammond, 1968: 74.)

3.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SIN AND EVIL

Whatever definitions may be offered for sin, whether it is in attitude, moral abrogation, rooted in selfishness, or the products of a God-forsaking society, we must constantly review the biblical perspective. It is 'lawlessness' **(1 Jn 3:4)**. In other words, "sinfulness is... [a] lack of conformity to the moral law of God" (Grudem, 1994: 491).

Whilst closely associated, a subtle distinction must be made between sin and evil. Although the principle of sin emanates from the existence of evil, the two are not synonymous terms. Sin may be defined as the failure to conform to God's moral standard, whether by deed, attitude or nature. Evil, however, is the realm that affords sin the opportunity to be exercised. In short, the principle of sin is only possible because of the presence of evil. Much is made of Jesus' reinterpretation of Mosaic law, particularly in regard to adultery. Not only did he speak out against the act of taking another man's wife, but also thoughts that fantasised about the possibility were condemned. But this was also an integral part of the Ten Commandments. Not only was there a divine prohibition on committing adultery, but to covet a neighbour's wife was also outlawed **(Exo 20:17b)**.

Notwithstanding the fact that Scripture speaks of God as ordaining that human beings perform sinful acts in accordance with his purpose and yet righteously holding them accountable for those deeds, we must ultimately conclude that this is beyond our comprehension. The Bible simply states that it is true without offering any explanation. We can only finally concur with Louis Berkhof when he says: "the problem of God's relation to man's sin remains a mystery" (Berkhof, 1988: 175).

When dealing with a subject that is as prone to misunderstanding as this, it is perhaps wise to think carefully about the possible ramifications of any ill-chosen statements. It may well be true that God uses evil for his own purposes, but this is vastly different from saying that God performs evil deeds. Otherwise, his goodness and righteousness might legitimately be called into question. Similarly, however, to deny that God uses evil to fulfil his purposes, though acknowledging its existence, might be construed as tantamount to denying God's sovereignty and thereby diminish the veracity of Paul's words to the believers at Rome that "***all*** things work together for good for those who love good and are called according to his purpose" **(Rom 8:28)**. If evil exists utterly outside of God's pleasure, then logic demands to know what assurance can be given that evil will not continue to increase in measure with no hope of its final defeat.

3.5 THE ENIGMA OF EVIL

Although others have since laid claim to pithy ways of formulating an argument for the problem of evil, it was the seventeenth century philosopher, Pierre Bayle, who first declared:

> *If God were all-good, he would destroy evil.*
> *If God were all-powerful, he could destroy evil.*
> *But evil is not destroyed.*
> *Hence, there is no such God.*
>
> (in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 242.)

However, a willingness and an ability are not the only components of the argument in the continuing presence of evil. That they are indicated as such gives reference only to desire and power without due recognition of appointment. In other words, God may well be both able and willing but, in the eternal scheme of things, is he ready? Insert this

commodity into Bayle's equation and transpose it to a biblical theodicist's perspective and you have:

> If God is all-good, he has the will to destroy evil.
>
> If God is all-powerful, he is capable of destroying evil.
>
> The very nature of this omnipotent, benevolent divine Being provides the basis for the assurance that, although evil is not ***yet*** destroyed, ultimately it will be.

Dr Nick Geisler of the Liberty Center for Christian Scholarship, Virginia (USA), counters Bayle thus:

> *The first theistic objection to Bayle is that evil cannot be 'destroyed' without the destruction of freedom. Love, for example, is impossible without freedom. The same is true of moral goods such as mercy, kindness and compassion. And so, contrary to Bayle's argument, to destroy freedom would not be the greatest good, for it would destroy the greatest goods.*
>
> (in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 242.)

The evil in question falls into one of two categories. Natural evil includes disease and what insurance companies rather bizarrely refer to as 'acts of God'. These include earthquake, thunderstorm, volcanic eruption, hurricane and other natural disasters. The qualification for this category seems to be that man is not involved in its precipitation, though in the light of modern understanding of global warming, some may take exception to this criterion. Moral evil, on the other hand, is that which can without doubt be traced to the acts of free and moral agents. Social injustice, policies of expedience, crimes against others and/or their properties, discrimination (negative or otherwise), war, physical/psychological abuse... the list seems endless. Although this latter category may well be attributed to man's abuse of free will, not all natural evils can be so readily dismissed.

To the philosopher, the problem of evil is a prick to the innate religious consciousness, though it is admitted as such by few. To the theologian, however, the problem of moral evil in the world (which is usually what the philosopher means by evil) is the problem of sin. In contradistinction to the evolutionist, who denotes the presence of evil as "the opposition of lower propensities to a gradually developing moral consciousness" (Berkhof, 1988: 220), Reformed theology generally traces the origin of evil to the angelic realm before the creation of man (see **Gen 1:31; 1 Tim 3:6; Jd 6**). It would

seem that the principle root of such evil was pride, the key issue facing Adam in Eden and Jesus in the wilderness, where the former succumbed and the latter resisted.

To the classical theist, the existence of evil is an enigma. Logical thought processes that acknowledge God as the author/creator of all things naturally conclude that evil must find its origins in him. Existence, however, does not necessarily imply substance. Evil is essentially a privation, an imperfection, a deficiency of goodness. To identify God as its author is to militate against his inherent nature. Admittedly, God must have allowed for the possibility of evil by giving creatures freedom of choice, whether this be in the realm of human agency or a spiritual dimension. For the choice of good to be meritorious, there must be a valid and viable alternative. The possibility, therefore, is an indirect consequence of freedom of choice.

Within Christian theology, there are essentially two views on the origin of evil, all others being modifications of these. As early as the second century, Irenæus promoted the idea that the source of evil was in human weakness. He argued that man was not created, yet with the freedom of choice to walk in perfection; but he was created imperfect, yet with the capacity to attain perfection through a sequence of correct choices. Adam's rebellion is therefore excused by virtue of his vulnerability (M^{c}Grath, 1995: 92, 93).

Augustine, on the other hand, having rejected the concept of Dualism at his conversion, argued that evil was an aversion from God, for which he could not be held accountable:

> *If there is a... turning away of the human will from the Lord God, which without doubt is sin, can we then say that God is the author of sin? God, then, will not be the cause of that movement. But what will its cause be? If you ask this question, I will have to answer that I do not know. While this will sadden you, it is nevertheless a true answer. For that which is nothing cannot be known. But hold to your pious opinion that no good thing can happen to you, to your senses or to your intelligence or to your way of thinking which does not come from God... For all good is from God. Hence, there is no nature which is not from God. The movement of turning away, which we admit is sin, is a defective movement; and all defect comes from nothing. Once you have understood where it belongs, you will have no doubt that it does not belong to God. Because that defective movement is voluntary, it is placed within our power. If you fear it, all you have to do is simply not to will it. If you do not will it, it will not exist.*
>
> (in M^{c}Grath, 1995:104.)

The reader will immediately understand why each view required serious modification. Of the two opinions expressed, I would find myself a little closer in allegiance to that of Augustine, though with severe reservations. Whilst acknowledging all that is contained above for a free but as yet unfallen race, I cannot agree that depraved man is still of himself capable of making choices of the will that are consistently good.

By the time of Augustine, the problem posed by the existence of evil in the theology of the church had become something of a thorn in the flesh itself. Gnosticism, of course, knew of no such difficulty. Spirit is good, matter is evil – end of story. This dualistic approach was contrary to the Scriptures, however, the apostle John taking great pains to speak out against such influential thought upon pure doctrine. It was Augustine, previously fascinated by a form of Gnosticism, who refused to accept that the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of mankind was anything other than the same divine Being. Augustine developed and promoted what we now refer to as 'the free will theory'. From a starting-point of God having created a world that he declared to be good, Augustine demonstrated that the presence of evil is a direct consequence of man's abuse of freedom of choice. Our first parents were given freedom of will and at the first trial chose evil, thenceforth unleashing the pollution of evil and decay upon society.

Still Augustine's critics were not satisfied. "Why should there be an evil to choose", they argued? "And whence did it come?" Augustine responded by attributing the origin of evil to Satan, knowing full well by now that he was on unsteady ground. "If God is the creator of all that is, then where did Satan come from", they taunted. Using Jesus' words regarding Satan's fall from heaven **(Lk 10:18)** and a couple of Old Testament Scriptures, Augustine spoke of the devil as a fallen angel who had sought to usurp God's throne and was thereby banished from heaven's domain. Sensing an end to all debate, those who opposed him demanded to know how such a previously good angel could possibly contemplate such evil. Augustine remained speechless (M^{c}Grath, 1995: 230).

Much of Aquinas' theology in this regard is praiseworthy. By arguing the essential negativity of evil (in the same way that darkness is an absence of light, blindness is a lack of sight, and vice prospers where there is no virtue), he nevertheless acknowledged its reality and tangible effects. In so doing, he maintained the apostle Paul's position that sin has an inherently corrupting influence upon the soul at its very core and that, in

the final analysis, both moral and non-moral evils fall within the one category because they equally misrepresent the goodness of God.

To speak of the problem of evil may in itself be considered something of an anomaly. Evil poses not one problem, but many. There are both various kinds of problems and different degrees of evil. ***The religious problem*** is a dimension exclusive to the believer. It revolves around a specific case or series of episodes that produce tension in the spiritual walk. Questions of the type "Why is God putting me through this?" and "Will my faith stand up against the torrent of such pressure?" are symptomatic of this kind of problem.

There is also ***the philosophical/theological problem*** of evil, which may similarly be subdivided into moral and natural evil. Although they may only really be separated for the purpose of analysis, they are, in fact, quite distinct. The biblical presentation is such that natural evil emanates from moral evil. The philosophical/theological problem is not as concrete as the religious problem in that it questions the concept of evil's existence rather than identifying with a particular incident. Furthermore, there is more than one enigma attached to the philosophical/theological problem. Because it arises from a theological position, there are at least as many problems as there are interpretations of that position. Perceptions of omnipotence, evil, God, free will, sovereignty, and benevolence will all affect the response to the philosophical/theological debate. The assumption by many atheists that the same problem of evil confronts all theists is, therefore, patently without warrant.

The intellectual attempts to offer more aesthetically pleasant alternatives than the possibility of evil being wrought by man's freedom of choice generally amount to ideas of God:

i) refraining from the act of creation altogether,
ii) creating but without the inherent quality of freedom,
iii) creating free beings in every conceivable area except the potential to sin,
iv) creating free beings with the potential to sin, but within the framework of universal salvation.

At the risk of sounding overtly dismissive, none of the above are valid options to reality. Allow me to address each one in turn:

i) The foundation of this premise is the incorrect assertion that nothing is more acceptable than something. For any comparable point of reference to be made, however, there must be a fixed feature of similarity. The "I wish I'd never been born" mentality can only ever expressed because the one who feels this way has been born. If that were not the case, he could neither utter the words nor be in a position to wish the converse were true. And only if the individual had some memory of non-beingness with which to compare his present plight would the statement have any real meaning.

ii) The second option falls at the same hurdle as the above. A non-free world cannot be compared with a free world to suggest which one might favour. Only in one's imagination can their differences or similarities be assessed. Even on that basis, surely such an analysis would reject the concept of a non-free existence.

iii) Greater minds than mine suggest that this is possible (see Geisler and Amanu in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 243). I am not convinced, however, that this is so. By definition, even a blackboard strategy would have to incorporate some form of divine coercion, which makes the two components of this theory not just mutually incompatible, but also a contradiction in terms.

iv) Moral good must be consistent and certainly is so within the context of God's nature. It includes mercy for the penitent and punishment for the unrepentant. The one is as legitimate an expression of goodness in the highest possible sense as is the other and so universal salvation is an unnecessary postulate.

Of all the various attempts to intellectually consider the problem of evil, arguably the one most at odds with the biblical perspective is that offered by the nineteenth century German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, of the Tübingen School. Contrary to Augustine's 'privation of good' theory, Hegel held that all apparent evil is, in fact, at present qualitatively deficient in its process of becoming good; a kind of adolescent virtue and, therefore, incomplete. This is some way short of the Dualistic tendencies associated with process theology, but is equally invalid as a serious consideration for the biblical student. Jim Packer puts the case for biblical theism under three points:

1. *Pain... is often not really evil* [but] *acts as an alarm, and living with pain can purge, refine, and ennoble character. Pain may thus be a gift and a mercy.*

2. *Virtue (choosing good) is only possible where vice (choosing evil) is also possible. An automaton's programmed performance... lacks the value of virtue. In making man capable of choosing the path of grateful obedience, God made him capable of not doing so. Though not sin's author, God created a possibility of sin by creating a possibility of righteousness.*

3. *Moral growth and activity are only possible when the consequences of action are calculable. Since God means this world to be a school for moral growth, he gave it physical regularity so that consequences might be foreseen.*

(in Ferguson & Wright, 1993: 679.)

Whilst I find myself in agreement with much of Packer's writings and would find it difficult to argue with the logical basis of his observations outlined here, the presumption that this leads to seems uncomfortably speculative. If the existence of evil in the world to the degree that we know it is essential to man's moral development, then Adam's rebellion cannot be viewed as being instrumental in its effect on both humanity and the rest of creation. Indeed, concerning the natural disasters of which he speaks, Packer goes on to say categorically that "unfallen man would have experienced them". This, I suggest, is pure conjecture. Our agreement, however, is thankfully restored in his concluding remark: "The safest way in theodicy is to leave God's permission of sin and moral evil as a mystery..."

The arguments that are offered on behalf of the problem of evil are inconclusive. They explain the possibilities without bringing a solution to the dilemma. Suffering may well be a product of the Fall, but the presence of evil at the point of original rebellion as an alternative to goodness is not so readily explainable. Human suffering by the morally innocent is similarly beyond reason. To justify on the grounds of moral development poses more questions than it resolves. To admit failure in attempting to provide an answer, however, does not necessarily mean that there is no answer. Nor does it afford legitimacy to the accusations in antithesis to the belief of an intrinsically good God. As von Hügel has said:

> *Let us quietly and deliberately admit that no man has yet explained the reality of evil in a world created and sustained by an all-powerful, all-wise, all-good Spirit – by God.*
>
> (von Hügel, 1931: 17.)

Insofar as the classic theist's position is rooted in the biblical revelation, it becomes clear that God ***is*** all-powerful. Therefore, he ***can*** defeat evil. It can similarly be demonstrated from Scripture that God ***is*** all-good. Therefore, he ***will*** defeat evil. The only stumbling-block that remains to human wisdom is why God does not do so immediately. On this matter, Scripture is silent. Therefore, we should ***not*** speculate. The frustration that exists is compounded by the difference between finite and infinite intellect, earthly and heavenly perspectives, temporal and eternal understanding. Nevertheless, there is surely cause for hope that, though evil yet abides, the very nature of God as all-powerful and all-good guarantees the ultimate destruction of evil when its purpose, which must remain a mystery, has been accomplished.

From a purely theological standpoint, the problem of evil is necessarily one of internal consistency. JS Feinberg puts the case thus:

> *... the crucial question is not whether a theological position contradicts another theistic system or even whether it contradicts the atheist's views, but whether it contradicts itself. This point has important implications for both theists and critics of theism. For the theist, the implication is that he must so structure his theology as contain views of God, evil and human freedom which, when put together, do not result in a contradictory system. In particular, he must be careful to avoid a system in which God is said to be both good and able to remove all evil, despite the system's admission of the existence of evil.*
>
> (in Elwell, ed, 1985: 387.)

The existence of evil is only really a problem for the classical theist and yet it is generally the philosophers and logicians, who do not share the problem, that invariably impose it. The inference is that the three statements:

God is wholly good,

God is omnipotent, and

Evil exists...

... cannot all be entirely true for they are logically inconsistent arguments. The onus is therefore to prove their logical consistency. But can it be proved that they are logically and necessarily inconsistent?

In terms of what is revealed to us through the Bible's pages, however, TC Hammond states four underlying principles that must be considered *a priori* in any theological treatment on the problem of evil:

1. God is not the author of sin.

2. God has no need of sin in order to enhance His glory, and He did not permit it solely in order to demonstrate His moral grandeur.

3. The subsequent responsibility of mankind in relation to sin is in no way diminished nor excused on the ground that the men now living were not guilty of its inception.

4. God is not to be regarded as a 'party' to the repeated acts of sin... which man has all too successfully perpetuated, nor is He to be held as partly responsible for the perpetuation of vice simply because He has not withdrawn His sustaining power from the universe. If man freely chooses to misuse certain of his wonderful endowments and to prostitute his remarkable abilities to base ends, it is scarcely just to blame God.

(Hammond, 1968: 75.)

3.6 THEODICY

Theodicy, or at least the way it is most commonly understood, is the doctrine that intends to provide a justification of the righteousness of God. The word itself is a hybrid of the Greek '*theos*' (ie 'God') and '*dikaioo*' ('justice'); hence 'the demonstration that God is just'. The aim of the theodicist, therefore, is to present an apology (ie reasoned defence) to substantiate his claim that the omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfections of the divine Being are not mutually irreconcilable with the existence of evil. This so-called 'problem of evil' is often attributed first to the Athenian philosopher Epicurus (342-271 BC) in the form of a dilemma, which was raised in the eighteenth century by one of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume:

Is [God] *willing to prevent evil, but not able? – then he is impotent.*
Is he able, but not willing? – then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?

(Hume, 1948: 66.)

The theoretical propositions offered by the theodicist to the above (though not necessarily respectively) are:

1. God ***is*** omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.
2. Evil ***does*** exist.
3. The reason for the existence of evil (2) is not due to any lack of power, knowledge or goodness on the part of God (1), but because of the actions of free, rational and fallible human beings.

Perhaps no more accurate definition of the subject under consideration has been put forward than that of Kenneth Surin, when he says:

> *Theodicy, in what is usually taken to be its classical or canonical form, is a philosophical and/or theological exercise involving a justification of the righteousness of God.*
>
> (in M^{c}Grath, ed, 1996: 192.)

Although the word 'theodicy' is a comparatively new one, the concept it relates to bears the age of antiquity. As far as Christian doctrine is concerned, almost from its birth the New Testament church has searched for an adequate response to those who renounce theism on the basis of being offered no proper solution to the problem of evil. Amongst the Greek Fathers, there was the firmly held belief that saw human nature as a potentiality. Irenæus' initial findings teach that the creation of man was into an incomplete state, perfection only being attainable after an intermediate period of growth towards maturity, the process being aided by the presence of evil. This approach emphasises that humans are subject to a series of choices with the ambition of learning to always choose the good. Without the possibility of choosing something other than good, its proponents argue, any divine injunction to the contrary is rendered meaningless. Apart from the apparent dignity this affords to evil as an ultimately positive influence, the major horrors of our time do not seem to have necessarily prospered those who have encountered such evil as, for example, Auschwitz and more latterly New York.

The very nature of theodicy is actually a theological defence against the attack on apparent contradictions within the theistic system of doctrine. The omnipotence of God, that God is love and the continuing presence of evil in the world are regarded by the logical mind as inconsistent. The objective of the theodicist, therefore, is not to prove their logical accuracy by way of convincing those who are hitherto hostile, but to satisfactorily reconcile them in his own thinking by a reasoned process that honours the principles of hermeneutics. Because evil is multi-dimensional, the theodicist's apology will be equally so. Abuse of free will produces moral evil, but is only indirectly responsible for natural catastrophes. The theodical starting-point of this work is from a position that identifies God's omnipotence as his ability to do anything that is naturally consistent to him.

According to AA Hodge:

> *The term 'Theodicy' signifies a speculative justification of the ways of God towards the human race, especially as respects the origin of evil, and the moral government of the world. It was first exalted into a department of theological science by the German philosopher Leibnitz, in his... work entitled "Theodicy, or the Goodness of God, the Liberty of Man, and the Origin of Evil" AD 1710.*
>
> (Hodge, 1983: 243ff.)

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth called for a dramatic re-evaluation of the problem of theodicy, not so much on the origins of evil, but on the Reformed position of omnipotence, which he regarded as fundamentally and theologically flawed. Arguing for a more Christological approach to the debate, Barth maintained that much Reformed theology concerning the omnipotence of God owed more to Stoic philosophy than to the biblical revelation. This had, in fact, been a point made by many of the Reformed scholars themselves regarding Zwingli's doctrine of providence. The irony is that from a position of refuting this so-called philosophical approach in favour of one more grounded in Scripture, Barth went on to develop his own theology that borders on metaphysical hypothesis with the doctrine of the 'nothingness' of evil.

More recently, there have been further attempts to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion in the wake of yet more human atrocity and tragedy. The finite nature of man's understanding when compared with the infinite wisdom of God has often forced theologians to conclude that no conclusion is possible. Of those that do not fall into this category, three notable approaches are worthy of our attention:

i) theologians who represent victims of racial oppression have been at the forefront of what has become known as ***liberation theology***. In this case, the suffering of the poor is seen as a co-struggle with God against injustice, of which the term 'this present evil' has been coined. Assurances of ultimate victory in such a struggle have added impetus to the fight where passivity is often seen as its premier weapon.

ii) ***process theology*** takes the view that God has voluntarily set parameters around his power, and is thereafter bound by them. Coercion is one faculty that consequently lies beyond God's capabilities. Therefore, although God does not desire certain features within the social order, he is nonetheless

willingly powerless to negate their influence. This absolves him of any responsibility for the presence of evil given that it is not something he has the power to prevent.

iii) using the Hebrew Scriptures as their focal point, theologians within both Judaism and Christianity have approached the problem in the light of what they have termed ***protest theodicy***. Identifying with those passages where the Old Testament saints of God were recorded as protesting against the pervading influence of evil in the world, they see themselves as maintaining a tradition of faithfully boasting in God's commitment to them, despite their increasing frustration at the apparent injustice of sociological events.

3.6.1 John Hick

No debate on the subject of theodicy in recent times would be complete without considering the contribution of John Harwood Hick. Born in 1922, Hick's position has moved considerably from one of Christian orthodoxy to a general denial of its chief claims. So much so, in fact, that he is perhaps best described now as a philosopher of religion rather than the radical theologian of his earlier days. Educated at Edinburgh, Oxford and Cambridge, and one-time minister within the United Reformed Church, Hick currently lectures in California, USA.

Much of Hick's later work was concerned with the question of the uniqueness of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, especially when so viewed in the context of other world religions. His lack of recognition for the Christological emphasis and unique character of the Church prevails upon him to conclude that universal and unconditional salvation are certain, all world religions being equal in their theological ambitions. His argument that to claim but one path to eternal salvation runs harmfully counter to such a universalistic bias is just one arrow in his quiver to be used against an essentially Christocentric religion. That Hick favours an 'all roads lead to God' approach is evident in many of his works. His earlier tomes, however, were more concerned with attacking philosophical issues within classical theology, such as '*Faith and Knowledge: A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge*'. Arguably his most noteworthy submission to the field of theodicy, however, is '*Evil and the God of Love*', which is essentially Irenæan in content.

3.6.2 Tackling the Issues

The primary agenda of the theodicist will vary depending upon whether the approach being undertaken is essentially theological or philosophical. Although each will discuss the so-called 'problem of evil', in real terms the philosopher is more concerned with the problem of God's existence. Notwithstanding the claims that the question was first posed by Epicurus as early as the third century BC and developed from a primitive Christian viewpoint by both Irenæus and Augustine, the framework within which many contemporary theodicists operate is very different. Current trends within the sphere of philosophy (and to a degree, theology too) are very much the product of a post-Enlightenment era. For Augustine, for example, any perceived question mark concerning the existence of God simply would not have arisen. For Hume and Swinburne, this is clearly not the case. Even John Hick, with his Presbyterian background, would view the dilemma from a pluralist foundation (M^{c}Grath, ed, 1996: 192).

The main difficulty facing the theodicist is often referred to as 'the problem of evil', as we have seen. The real stumbling-block, however, in terms of understanding is the logical conflict of the three concepts: God's omnipotence, God's benevolence and the presence of evil in the world. A history of the struggle to reach a satisfactory conclusion, apart from revealing finite incapacity to express adequately such antinomy, demonstrates also a singular lack of common agenda on the part of those who have so engaged in such an undertaking. Rationale automatically leads us to conclude that all three 'truths' cannot be as true as Scripture would seem to indicate. The philosophical theodicist will steadfastly hold to the existence of evil as conclusive proof that either God does not exist at all or that he is far less than the all-loving, all-powerful Divine Being that Christianity presents him to be. For them, the problem is eradicated by minimising or removing altogether two of the problematic concepts. For the biblical theodicist, however, this is not an option. All three are true, but how can they be? In the final analysis, all one can ever hope to achieve is to demonstrate the finiteness of human intellect and plead the argument that logical conclusions do not necessarily substantiate a claim any more than apparent unreasonableness invalidates truth. This will seem grossly unsatisfactory to some. To the present writer, the alternatives are at least equally so.

Not only must the classic statements of theodicy be qualified to enable the possibility of consistency, other factors that have a significant impact on any conclusions reached must be acknowledged. Man's paucity of understanding compared to infinite knowledge and wisdom is one that the proud philosopher will rarely concede. Another is what Richard Swinburne calls "a very narrow conception of good and evil" (in Rowe, 2001: 241). When good and evil are thus restricted to degrees of sensory pleasure or pain, then this is clearly an absurdly narrow and immature perspective of the concepts of good and evil. Desire thereby becomes capable of producing both good and evil, and in some cases only the latter. Good is seen to be attained once the yearning has been realised, though evil persists in the guise of frustration whilst waiting for the hope to come to realisation.

Attempts to prove the possible logical consistency have invariably resulted in a modification of one or more of the three statements. A restricted power, diminution of goodness or misconception of the reality of evil have all been presented and rigorously defended in a noble endeavour to maintain the ***status quo*** of this particular triumvir. To the logical mind, any or all of these modifications would probably satisfy the consistency argument of the philosopher. But to maintain God's omnipotence without limitation and his goodness as absolute leaves the problem of the existence of evil unanswered. Mackie argues against the omnipotence of God in the definitive understanding of the word in what he calls 'the Paradox of Omnipotence':

> *... can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control? Or, what is practically equivalent to this, can an omnipotent being make rules which then bind himself? (These are practically equivalent because any such rules could be regarded as setting certain things beyond his control and* ***vice versa****.) The second of these formulations is relevant to the suggestions... that an omnipotent God creates the rules of logic or causal laws, and is then bound by them.*
>
> (in Rowe, 2001: 87.)

Lest there be any confusion, and by way of reminder, it may be helpful at this point to define the terms before us. When we speak of God's omnipotence or all-powerfulness, we do not imagine this to mean that he can do absolutely anything that is not consistent with his nature. And so, God is not able to behave in a way that would contravene his intrinsic goodness nor may he at any time suspend a particular attribute in order to more readily promote another. As essentially holistic beings created in his image, we may expect that any division in God is purely for the purpose of analysis and represents no

real compartmentalisation. Creation is an expression of God's omnipotence in that he has by his own volition brought everything into being that is and he retains control and direction over that creation to fulfil his purpose in and through it. The goodness of God consists in his love, mercy, patience, kindness, grace, ***et al***. The universal familiarity of evil surely negates the necessity for a definition.

In any attempt to find reason behind the existence of evil in a world created by a holy God, two possible explanations remain untenable according to the tenet of Scripture. A denial of God's omnipotence may well be considered a logical deduction to be made in the light of reasoned evidence, but it finds no resting-place in the mind of the Reformed theologian. Such a view is entirely incompatible with the biblical revelation that speaks of God creating the world ***ex nihilo***. To regard omnipotence in this way, however, is not to presume with flagrant disregard for theology that God can do absolutely anything, for he is consistently bound to his own nature, which is intrinsically and immutably good. Similarly disadvantaged is the concept of a two-fold will, perfect and permissive. That evil is not absolutely willed but allowed with a higher end in view evades the issue without solving the enigma. God's will is not presented as being thus divided. It may well be a comfortable explanation that intelligibly satisfies our own sensitivities, but that in itself does not necessarily make it either valid or viable.

3.6.3 Defending God's Omnipotence

It seems obvious that the classical theist's perception of God's omnipotence does not so much require modification as Mackie's view of that perception is in need of further clarity. As a member of the former group, I can say that the biblical position regarding omnipotence is already that such does not imply God's ability or power to do absolutely anything, but only that which is consistent with his nature and, therefore, expressed by the divine will. To give Mackie his due, however, at least he chooses to use the word 'paradox', unlike HJ M^{c}Closkey, who insists on what he refers to as a "theistic contradiction" (M^{c}Closkey, 1960: 97).

As a purely philosophical response to Mackie and M^{c}Closkey, Alvin Plantinga seems to settle the matter in a logically satisfactory manner by advocating a further proposition whose conjunction is not necessarily inconsistent with any of those that in their present form appear illogical. It is not incumbent upon any such proposition to be true as long

as its possibility yields a suitable conclusion. In the opinion of this writer, Plantinga's Free Will Defence is both logically competent and, perhaps more significantly, remains faithful to the biblical revelation:

> *A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free... is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot* ***cause*** *or* ***determine*** *them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right* ***freely****. To create creatures capable of* ***moral good****, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil; and he cannot leave these creatures* ***free*** *to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. God did in fact create significantly free creatures, but some of them went wrong in the exercise of their freedom: this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness; for he could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by excising the possibility of moral good.*
>
> (in Rowe, 2001: 94.)

Plantinga uses phrases of God that explicitly state there are things that he simply cannot do. This is the very objection the philosophical mind has to the premise of God's omnipotence. What is required, however, is not so much a ***modification*** of the concept of omnipotence as a ***qualification*** of what is generally understood by theologians who use that phrase. I have repeatedly said elsewhere that one such qualification of primary significance is that God's power may only be exercised in accordance with his nature (see **3.2.1**). Another so-called limitation might be that he is bound within certain parameters, the consequence of going beyond which might be deemed not only implausible, but downright nonsensical.

If the being, nature and character of God are so beyond our comprehension to contemplate the effects of such a qualified omnipotence, let us impose a similar argument upon the condition of man. It is generally acknowledged within biblical/systematic theological circles that God created man a free, rational and responsible being. That freedom, however, is bound by certain and various laws. My behaviour is restricted by government legislation. This means, for instance, that I am not free to drive at more than seventy miles per hour on any public highway in the UK. Although this is not beyond the realms of possibility, there are penalties in place should I breach such a speed restriction with authorities only too willing to implement them. There are other laws, however, by which I am bound with no possibility of breaking

free of their restrictions. I am not free to be in more than one geographical location at the exact same point in time. Neither can I run faster than the speed of light – I am not free to do so. I do not have the freedom to make seven multiplied by eight equal anything other than fifty-six. Is this a modification of the statement "I have free will" – or a qualification?

3.6.4 Defending God's Goodness

Another attempt at solving the problem before us has been to challenge the definition of God's intrinsic goodness. Foremost amongst exponents of this strategy has been the self-confessed hyper-Calvinist, Gordon H Clark. Whilst from a theological background not dissimilar to my own, I find it difficult to find much sympathy with some of Clark's findings. Rejecting the concepts of permissive and absolute will in God, he favours divine preceptive and decretive wills. The former refers to what should be done in accordance with revealed law, whereas the latter relates to what actually is done. So every act, however abominable it may seem, belongs to the decretive will of God. The sovereignty of God makes him the ***ultimate*** cause of every single action, though the fact that he is not the ***immediate*** cause of sin removes from him any allegations as to authorship of sin. To cause sin, therefore, is not a sin in and of itself. Clark clarifies his position further, which I have quoted in full lest there be any charges of false representation:

> 1. *Whatever God does is just and right simply because he does it. There is no law superior to God which forbids him to decree sinful acts. Sin is transgression of, or want of conformity to, the law of God. But he is 'Ex-lex'; he is above law. He is by definition the standard of right.*
>
> 2. *While it is true that it is sinful for a man to cause or try to cause another man to sin, it is not sinful for God to cause a man to sin. A man's relationship to another man is different from God's relationship to him, just as man's relationship to the law of God differs from God's relationship to it. God is the Creator of all things and has absolute and unlimited rights over them. No one can punish him.*
>
> 3. *The laws God imposes upon man literally do not apply to him. He cannot steal, for example, for everything belongs to him. There is no one to steal from.*
>
> 4. *The Bible openly states that God has caused prophets to lie (eg **2 Chr 18:20-22**). Such statements are not in any sense incompatible with the biblical statements that God is free from sin.*
>
> (Clark, 1961: 239, 240.)

It will at first be seen that the term 'goodness of God' has undergone such a drastic and dramatic transformation as to be barely recognisable from the traditionally understood concept. In response to Clark's findings, I am constrained to offer the following for consideration:

i) Whilst acknowledging the fact that the Creator is not restricted by the same obligations as created beings, the expression that the law is inherently good if used properly **(1 Tim 1:8)** seems to suggest some reflection of natural law within God, whereby every divine expression is consistent with his nature.

ii) If this were not so, then either of his wills (if it is appropriate to speak of such multiplicity within the Godhead) would thereby become arbitrary and subject to practical inconsistency. I agree that God is not subject to a law higher than himself or that itself would be Supreme to which God would relate subordinately. But he is subject to his own righteous standards, which are in full accord with his nature, expressions of which must be governed thus.

iii) The status of what is right and wrong are not subject to policies of expedience. Any promise of reward for doing right and punishment for doing wrong is an ideal that is not substantiated by the countless testimonies of those who have chosen to die rather than renounce their Christian beliefs. Of course, it may be argued that the promise of eternal reward far outweighed any threat of temporal punishment. In the case of Jesus' death, however, these same conditions do not strictly apply if we accept his claim to divine Sonship.

iv) The incident related in defence of God causing his "prophets to lie" was in the form of a vision given to Micaiah that may or may not have actually happened. It could equally be that the outcome of an eternal counsel was anthropomorphically relayed to the prophet of God in terms that were readily identifiable (a common Hebrew literary device). In such cases, the accuracy of detail is largely secondary to the message conveyed.

Despite Hick's protestations to the contrary, there is a valid point to the conclusions of men like Geddes M[ac]Gregor and JS Whale, succinctly summarised by Harry Emerson Fosdick:

> *Once I decided that I could not believe in the goodness of God in the presence of the world's evils, and then I discovered that I had run headlong*

into another and even more difficult problem: What to do about all the world's goodness on the basis of no God? Sunsets and symphonies, mothers, music, and the laughter of children at play, great books, great art, great science, great personalities, victories of goodness over evil, the long hard-worn ascent from the Stone Age up, and all the friendly spirits that are to other souls a 'cup of strength in some great agony' – how can we, thinking of these on the basis of no God, explain them as the casual, accidental by-products of physical forces, going it blind? I think it cannot be done. The mystery of evil is very great upon the basis of a good God, but the mystery of goodness is impossible upon the basis of no God.

(Fosdick, 1941: 214, 215.)

It is an interesting fact that Hick's immediate response to Fosdick's argument is to place the onus of responsibility on theists to explain the problem of evil, atheism being quite happy to do so by denying God's existence or severely handicapping his potency/goodness. But the theist could just as easily employ Hick's philosophy in (almost) its entirety by simply substituting "theist" for "atheist", "he believes it be" for "it appears", and replacing negative statements for positive ones and vice versa. The paragraph following the quotation from Fosdick would then read:

It does appear to me that this ***is*** *a sound piece of reasoning. For the* ***theist*** *is not obliged to explain the universe at all. He can simply accept it at face value as an enormously complex natural fact. It constitutes an environment that is for him partly pleasant, partly unpleasant, and partly neutral; but he needs find no special intellectual problem either in its pleasantness or unpleasantness... It is the* ***atheist*** *who claims that the situation is other than* ***[the theist] believes it to be*** *in that there is* ***no*** *invisible divine Being who is perfect in goodness and unlimited in power...*

(contra writing of Hick's argument in 1966: 11.)

The attempt to cast doubt on the goodness of God in the realm of humanity is neither new nor indeed exclusive to atheologians. It started with the serpent in the garden of Eden. Perhaps there is more of a paradigm in this event than philosophers of the current age are willing to concede. Almost from the beginning of the biblical record, humanity has been subject to instruments of natural evil, or what insurance companies would today disclaim as 'acts of God'. Famine, pestilence, earthquake and storm all befall man, affecting both innocent and guilty alike.

3.6.5 Knowledge of Good and Evil?

The concept of a finite God is essentially a twentieth century philosophical development of early Zoroastrianism, given credence by the teaching of the late Edgar S Brightman in his '*A Philosophy of Religion*'. Brightman draws the distinction between intrinsic good, instrumental good, and surd evil. Intrinsic goods are exactly that and not prone to transformation. Surd evil is equally immutable. But instrumental good has amoral qualities that are not good in and of themselves. They have the potential to promote good, but may also become instrumental evils. The image of a train travelling to a specified destination with passengers of both noble and ignoble characters on board remains largely unconvincing to Professor Brightman's argument (1940: 242). In strict antithesis to the traditional Reformed position on human free will, he counters that having discovered it, this is simply something that God must allow for.

In contrast to other finitists, Brightman prefers to speak of a God whose will is finite rather than a finite God (1940: 337). This, however, appears to be a mere play on words that does not really answer the problem it seeks to address. There is no guarantee that the problem of evil will be finally overcome, only that its existence is rationally explained. Indeed, there seems as much a possibility that evil will ultimately triumph over good. Following Brightman's observations to their logical conclusions, if God is neither omnipotent nor omniscient in the traditionally accepted understanding of those terms, then what confidence can there be in any assurance he may give concerning a conclusive victory over evil?

3.6.6 Lest We Forget

Much theodicy is guilty of insensitivity towards the victims of suffering. These are not statistics; they are real individuals. Even a soteriological emphasis of theodicy is often insufficient comfort to the casualties of affliction, whether innocent or otherwise. Divine mysteries can seldom be satisfactorily reasoned with human intellect. The most rigorous search can yield fruit of either frustration or wonder. Surin's concluding remarks betray an approach with which the present writer readily identifies:

> *The theologian who reflects on the 'problem(s) of evil' must begin from a sense of failure, an awareness of the poverty and brokenness of her or his resources. She or he must, above all, sustain this sense of failure as she or he proceeds to reflect on these 'problems'. Then, and only then, will the*

theologian's reflections begin to approximate to the form of understanding demanded by a truly Christian response to the 'problem(s) of evil', that is, an understanding which, at least where the 'practical' theodicist is concerned, forsakes the attempt to seek a (merely 'theoretical') justification of God in order to engage in a historically conditioned articulation of what is involved in the divine justification of sinners.

(in McGrath, ed, 1996: 198.)

The difficulty theologians face in answering the cynic's questions relating to suffering continues to challenge. WR Sorley expresses his frustration thus:

The dilemma of Epicurus is still with us: if God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, then he is impotent; if he could but will not, he is malevolent; if he has both the power and the will, whence then is evil?

(quoted in Harrison, Bromiley & Henry, eds, 1979: 505.)

3.6.7 Other Theories

To the Dualist, of course, the problem of evil is easily overcome by abandoning the concept of God's omnipotence altogether. In simple terms, this seems akin to overcoming a phobia of the dark by walking around in such an environment with one's eyes closed tightly. The thought that there is an uncreated, similarly matched, universal principle, though opposite in every respect to God would perhaps provide intellectual satisfaction to the difficulty if it were not for the fact that there is no scrap of evidence in its favour that is not highly speculative.

Practical theodicists, on the other hand, offer no attempt to formulate an argument based on logical deduction to linear premise. Proponents such as Jürgen Moltmann even go as far as to deny the doctrine of God's impassibility with statements indicative of divine suffering:

With the Christian message of the Cross of Christ, something new and strange has entered the metaphysical world. For this faith must understand the deity of God from the event of suffering and death of the Son of God and thus bring about a fundamental change in the orders of being of metaphysical thought... It must think of the suffering of Christ as God's potentiality... God suffered in the suffering of Jesus, God died on the Cross of Christ, says the Christian faith.

(Moltmann, 1974: 215ff.)

The arguments against divine passibility seem to hinge upon it negating God's immutability as if those who promote such a view would prefer to speak of a Divine Becoming rather than a Divine Being. In response to this, may I confirm the biblical presentation that God simply ***is***. What he was at the beginning of time he is today with not a hint of deviation along the way. (I use the time/space continuum anthropomorphically, not wishing to suggest that God is restricted by its parameters.) There is a sense, however, in which man's understanding of him is progressively developing that is consistent with Scripture's revelation. The first century apostles had a far more illuminated perception than did the Old Testament patriarchs, for example. To presume as much is not to deny God's aseity; it is simply an acknowledgment of renewed awareness concerning an attribute of God that was hitherto beyond our comprehension. It goes without saying, of course, that we can only ever comprehend its existence, not its scope or content.

There are, however, essentially four main approaches to theoretical theodicy, all others being a derivation of one or more of these. They are:

i) the free will defence

This mechanism is alleged to go back as far as Augustine and certainly elements of it can be found in some of his later conclusions. In its current form, however, the theodical enigma is largely the product of post-Enlightenment thought. Of modern proponents, Alvin Plantinga is widely accepted as one of its leading advocates. For him, the two propositions under consideration (ie God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good ***and*** the existence of evil) require a third to remove any apparent inconsistency. Plantinga does this by offering that evil exists because of the actions of free, rational and fallible human beings. In other words, God created the fact of freedom, thereby making evil a possibility; man performs the acts of freedom, rendering evil an actuality. Protesters argue that this falls some way short of a theodicy and is labelled a defence because its supporters make no attempt to prove the validity of this third proposition, only that its logical possibility would explain the major difficulty raised by asserting God's perfection in the light of the existence of evil.

ii) natural law theodicy

Richard Swinburne also employs the free will defence to good effect, but develops it along the lines that:

> *... the fewer natural evils a God provides, the less opportunity he provides for man to exercise responsibility. For the less natural evil, the less knowledge he gives to man of how to produce or avoid suffering disaster, the less opportunity for his exercise of the higher virtues, and the less experience of the harsh possibilities of existence; and the less he allows men the opportunity to bring about large scale horrors, the less the freedom and responsibility which he gives them.*
>
> (Swinburne, 1979: 219.)

The difficulty the Reformed theologian finds with Swinburne's conclusion is that it effectively makes God the creator of evil and by implication, therefore, the author of sin.

iii) process theodicy

The process theodicy of Charles Hartshorne seemed a natural progression from the philosophical theology of AN Whitehead. The core of such thinking appears to be an attempted synthesis between orthodox theism and Greek mythology, God's eternality being dependent upon how creation may affect his destiny. From the ontological argument, Hartshorne holds firmly to God's existence as ***a priori*** and thereby concludes the perceived difficulty posed by the existence of evil to be a pseudo-problem (in Dommayer, ed, 1966: 202). This same dissolution strategy is embraced by John Cobb and David Griffin:

> *God seeks to persuade each occasion towards that possibility for its own existence which would be best for it; but God cannot control the finite occasion's self-actualization. Accordingly, the divine creative activity involves risk. The obvious point is that, since God is not in complete control of the events of the world, the occurrence of genuine evil is not incompatible with God's beneficence towards all his creatures.*
>
> (Cobb & Griffin, 1977: 53.)

iv) 'soul-making' theodicy

John Hick also employs Alvin Plantinga's free will defence as a lynchpin of his soul-making theodicy. He does so, however, from a purely teleological conviction that God

created humanity as free beings for a purpose. This purpose is that we might fulfil our destiny in relation to him by the expression of a freedom that both hides and unveils God. The consummate destiny of which Hick speaks is final glorification, all forms of natural suffering being strategically constructive in its implementation (M^{c}Grath, ed, 1996: 195). Hick's view is not only inherently Irenæan, but also with a hint of Supra-lapsarianism thrown in for good measure, which imposes upon God the inappropriate and unbiblical restriction of chronology of thought.

3.6.8 Closing Arguments

The further proposition, then, that is consistent with God's omniscience, omnipotence and beneficence, whilst at the same time allowing for the possibility/actuality of the existence of evil is that God actualises a world containing moral good. This is the conclusion of Plantinga's argument and one that I find wholly satisfies the counter arguments of the philosophical approach, certainly in relation to ***moral*** evil. But what of ***natural*** evil? Is it the product of that same freedom we referred to earlier, though this time exercised by non-human agents (ie fallen angels)? Strictly speaking, neither the theologian nor the philosopher need acknowledge the validity of this argument. The universal effects of the Fall of man on the whole of creation is another possibility that is worthy of consideration. Again, the logical mind is forced only to admit its possibility for it to rebut the charge of inconsistency.

My own position of theodicy is defended from a tradition of free will. God is not the cause of evil (nor indeed the author of sin); humanity's abuse of free will is. This often begs the further question: 'Is God thereby indirectly accountable for giving man free-will, knowing in his omniscience that such a gift would be abused for the cause of evil?' As a gift of such potential value, to have withheld free will from man would have probably subjected God to a charge of moral laxity. He is not, however, the one who employs free will to promote evil and so he cannot be personally responsible for its abuse. It is not God's omnipotence and benevolence set alongside the existence of evil that are necessarily inconsistent, but its perceived alternative. It is nonsensical, therefore, to suggest that God could have created beings with the capacity to exercise free will ***and*** insist that their choices were always restricted to that of opting for good. By its very nature, free will must involve an alternative to good, whatever you may call it, and God is perfectly justified in creating a system that is inherently good, even

though there is an intrinsic possibility to use it for something that runs counter to its design.

JS Feinberg makes a valid point in relation to the actual requirements of the theodicist regarding the apparent inconsistencies of the relationship between the propositions submitted on behalf of the 'problem of evil' debate:

> *The theodicist's task is to structure an answer which demonstrates that these propositions taken together are logically consistent. It should be noted that the theodicist is required to demonstrate only that there is no contradiction in his own theological position given his own view of God and evil. It is irrelevant if the critic objects on the grounds that the theodicy incorporates intellectual commitments about God and evil that he does not accept, for the theodicist needs only to demonstrate that his theology squares with itself. This means also that the theodicist must not structure a defense of God incorporating propositions that produce internal inconsistency.*
>
> (in Elwell, ed, 1985: 1083.)

As stated earlier, the main strategy of the theodicist, particularly of the philosophical kind (though by no means exclusively so) is to reduce one of the components in the argument. Another tactic would be to challenge our understanding of the terminology employed. God's omnipotence, therefore, remains in tact, but our perception of the imposed boundaries of such power is in need of some address. Or perhaps our concept of goodness is erroneous and a thing becomes 'good' simply because God declares it to be so, whether we conceive it as such or not. Jesus himself hinted at this possibility when confronted by the rich young man **(Mk 10:18)**. Maybe even our understanding of evil is prone to inaccuracy.

3.7 OTHER RELIGIONS

Other major religions of the world have also tried to harmonise these two apparently opposite truths – the experience of suffering and the existence of a Supreme Being, though arriving at very different conclusions to the biblical perspective. From the depths of meditative calm, Buddhism encourages its adherents to consider these four sacred truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the destruction of suffering, and the way to the destruction of suffering. The deduction of such analysis is that existence and suffering are synonymous – they are one. This is the basis of the principle of *Karma*. Its purpose

the deception is still very much with us. The Christian Scientist may well think that he/she has resolved the problem of evil, but they have only really shifted the emphasis from the problem of reality to one of an illusion. How an illusion is capable of

producing such devastatingly real effects remains unanswered. Furthermore, how can such a phantom be the subject of mass experience? The vast majority of the world's population is presumably hoodwinked by this supernatural sleight of hand. Finally, the claim that this illusion of evil may be overcome by appropriate recognition of its invalidity is not substantiated by fact. Some of its most strict adherents have been victims of severe ill health, and at the end of their lifespan they have all died. Hoekema makes this telling contribution to the argument:

> *The death of Mary Baker Eddy presented a real problem for Christian Science, for supposedly someone of her faith should have overcome it. She had never really recognized death, for she never prepared an official funeral ceremony, although she had provided orders of service for other occasions. Some of her followers did not believe that she had died; some expected her to be resurrected. The officers of Christian Science, however, issued an official statement that they were not expecting her to return to the world.*
>
> (Hoekema, 1963: 188, 189.)

Of course, none of this actually solves the riddle. It merely presents an argument in the defence of one possible solution. The whole truth behind the reason for suffering ***per se*** will perhaps remain a mystery. The best we can hope to do is to offer plausible reasons in specific areas and the human element cannot be wholly perceived as blameless. Much of the pain and deprivation in the world does have a root in mankind. To view two news items side by side, one of a starving infant population, the other a concealed grain mountain, is to be made dramatically aware of their relatedness. But of course, this is the way capitalist economies function. Extreme wealth for one is always at the expense of severe depravity for another.

3.8 SUMMARY

At this point, I am particularly indebted to the remarks of Millard J Erickson, Dean and Professor of Theology at Bethel Theological Seminary at the time of writing:

> *We should not set our expectations too high in our endeavour to deal with the problem of evil. Something less than complete resolution will have to suffice for us. It is important to recognize that this is a very severe problem, perhaps the most severe of any facing theism... We are dealing here with a problem that has occupied the attention of some of the greatest minds of the Christian church...* [none] *of* [whom] *was able to put the problem to rest finally and completely.*

He concludes:

> *Although we will not be able to resolve the problem, we may be able to alleviate it somewhat and to see the directions from which final solution might come had we more complete knowledge and understanding.*
>
> (Erickson, 1990: 414.)

The reason that the concept of suffering is such a problem is that there is no single definitive and logical explanation for every instance of personal suffering. That suffering exists in the world as a product of original sin is the best that Scripture offers. Other than that it can be the fruit of actual sin, either on the part of the individual or corporately (cf **Amo 1, 2; Hos 8:7; Lk 13:1-5**), it may be divinely administered as either a punitive measure or with corrective value **(Jdg 2:22-36; Prov 3:12)**, is employed as a means of testing or purification **(Psm 65:10; 1 Pet 1:7)**, provokes dependence on God and, therefore, develops relationship with him **(Psm 119:67; Rom 8:35-37)**. Any casual observer of human society will also testify that much suffering comes as a result of private folly or accident. But there is also an unanswered element, when none of these explanations seem appropriate.

How, then, do we further explicate the apparent inequality of specific suffering that seems to bear no correlation to personal sin? This is surely something that, to the natural mind, might cause us to cry "Injustice!" It is not a new dilemma. Jeremiah's complaint against God began with the charge "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" **(Jer 12:1)**. Job, too, had asked a similar question **(Job 21:7-15)**, as did the returning remnant of Israel in Malachi's day **(Mal 3:14, 15)**. It is an analysis of this kind of difficulty that I propose to address. I can propose no definitive answer. For Job, Jeremiah and Malachi, their common mystery remained unresolved, but they all emerged changed people with a transformed perspective of God. "May it be even so for me, Lord."

In this chapter, I have attempted to address the major difficulty that the central theoretical argument proposes from what I believe to be a biblical perspective. In so doing, I am convinced that the problem of the existence of evil does not necessarily impinge upon the biblical presentation of either the omnipotence or divine justice of a Sovereign God. I continue this study fully confident, therefore, that the Judge of all the earth shall indeed do right **(Gen 18:25)**.

4.0 SUFFERING AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE FALL

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Suffering is as constant a feature of earthly existence as is the passage of time. In the words of William Shakespeare's Shylock: "For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe" (from '*The Merchant of Venice*'). Its universal appearance in the lives of all who ever drew breath renders description unnecessary. Outside of Christianity, the fatalistic acceptance of suffering by the Stoics and the escapist ideals of Buddhism have each in different ways fallen far short of the biblical approach. But what is the biblical approach? We begin with the mystery of suffering only to search the Scripture and find in our solution yet another mystery – iniquity. In essence, suffering is the product of sin, itself the result of the creature who has rebelled against the Creator. It may even be said that suffering is the fruit of cosmic disharmony, the seed of which was sown in Eden.

4.2 SUFFERING AND SIN

In common with many Reformed theologians, Louis Berkhof stresses that the sufferings of life are not only the product of the entrance of sin into the world, but are indicative of its penalty:

> *Sin brought disturbance in the entire life of man. His physical life fell a prey to weaknesses and diseases, which result in discomforts and often in agonizing pains; and his mortal life became subject to distressing disturbances, which often rob him of the joy of life, disqualify him for his daily task, and sometimes entirely destroy his mental equilibrium. His very soul has become a battlefield of conflicting thoughts, passions, and desires. The will refuses to follow the judgment of the intellect, and the passions run riot without the control of an intelligent will. The true harmony of life is destroyed, and makes way for the curse of the divided life. Man is in a state of dissolution, which often carries with it the most poignant sufferings.*
>
> (Berkhof, 1988: 259.)

He goes on to acknowledge that this can only be admitted in a general sense. To specifically attribute personal suffering to personal sin is clearly repudiated in Scripture by no less than Jesus himself. Having been informed of a certain disaster that had occurred to a group of Galileans, Jesus immediately grasped the opportunity to exhort watchfulness by all: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the

other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish", repeating the warning by citing the similar tragedy that befell the victims of the Tower of Siloam **(Lk 13:2-5)**. It seems this perceived connection between injury and iniquity has a long history (cf **Job**).

This being the case, we can see that the concept of suffering in general terms is exclusively due to the Christian doctrine of 'original sin'. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to say that the philosophical problem of evil and the theological problem of sin are essentially one and the same. More specifically, it is equally true that isolated incidents of suffering may be the product of contemporary sin. It must be stressed, however, that victim and culprit are not necessarily identical. Children may suffer at the hands of parental irresponsibility; those affected by world poverty suffer because of social, economic and political injustice; innocent traffic casualties are often caused by others' recklessness; and financial hardship and the emotional turmoil it produces can be the result of an assailant's greed. Even ecological disaster is usually attributable to a combination of man abdicating his God-given stewardship role coupled with the fact that creation itself is tainted with the effects of human sin its original form (see **Rom 8:19-22**).

4.3 THE PRODUCT OF FREE WILL

One of the objections to the inherent evil in mankind due to original sin is that it thereby robs man of his freedom of will. The argument logically concludes that if man is now subject to an inexorable law, he cannot be consequentially held responsible for involuntary acts that are determined by a principle outside of his control. The emphasis of such an argument is upon man's limitations, though it must be observed that all created beings are free to a lesser or greater extent only within the parameters of their nature. The Fall of Adam did not in any sense impose restrictions on man so much as it drew in the existing borders of his freedom. The biblical bias, however, remains on man availing himself of the opportunity to embrace the offer of salvation through Christ Jesus. It is ultimately a refusal to accept the redemptive gift that will determine an individual's destiny. We may, therefore, concur with Hammond that "Scripture does not regard man's depravity as conflicting with his responsibility" (Hammond, 1968: 78).

It is clear from the biblical narrative that suffering was not actually present in the original created order prior to man's rebellion **(Gen 1, 2)**. Equally transparent is the fact that beyond the consummation, suffering will forever be absent **(Rev 21)**. It seems not unreasonable, therefore, to identify the continuing presence of suffering with the sustained intrusion of sin into the world. Of course, this can only legitimately be embraced in general terms, as we shall see. Sin's existence is an abuse of man's free will. To blame God for allowing sin is to charge him with injustice at permitting freedom of choice. Lewis puts the case this way:

> *It would, no doubt, have been possible for God to remove by miracle the results of the first sin ever committed by a human being; but this would have not been much good unless He was prepared to remove the results of the second sin, and of the third, and so on forever. If the miracles ceased, then sooner or later we might have reached our present lamentable position: if they did not, then a world, thus continually underpropped and corrected by Divine interference, would have been a world in which nothing important ever depended on human choice, and in which choice itself would soon cease from the certainty that one of the apparent alternatives before you would lead to no results and was therefore not really an alternative.*
>
> (Lewis, 1946: 59.)

Much controversy surrounding the part that free will plays in the existence of evil would be abated with an appropriate level of understanding about freedom. If man is entirely free to choose, then he is entirely free to choose evil. But in so doing, is he aware that he is, in fact, restricting the scope of his freedom? For having once made the choice and acted upon it, he is indeed bound by its consequences and so the next choice he is faced with is largely governed by his previous selection. Of course, this would be equally true had he chosen the good. This distinction arises in the altogether unhealthy misconception that equates freedom with independence. This is the axiomatic perception of freedom in much current thought. Insofar as thought patterns are dictated by sociological influences, there may be some truth in it. But a theological understanding of an individual's personality may not legitimately be perceived in isolation from its relation to God. Emil Brunner further enlightens us thus:

> *The specific character of the Christian idea of freedom is... founded in the fact that man's freedom springs from the same spot from which comes his dependence. His freedom has its real possibility only within this dependence on God, so that the maximum of dependence on God is the maximum of his freedom, and that any attempt to get out of the dependence on God leads to slavery.*
>
> (Brunner, 1948: 131 ff.)

This was the problem of Eden. Adam was free in his relation to God within certain parameters. The imposition of but one barrier produced a desire for perceived self-sufficiency and by expressing his independence Adam, in fact, wrought bondage. The most free person who ever walked the face of the planet was Jesus, whose purpose was to do the will of the Father who had sent him **(Mk 14:36)**. It is only a rediscovery of this truth that has the power to set free **(Jn 8:32)**. Man's struggle to emancipate himself from God down the ages has always ended in abject misery and can only continue to do so, for in reality he has simply exchanged one Master for another. Instead of the Supreme Being, who is by his very essence love, being in control, man yields to another god of his own making, where finite things like materialism hold sway, where gods created in man's image are deified and worshipped. As Brunner concludes: "Atheism is the product of the will to absolute independence" (Brunner, 1948: 135).

4.4 DEPRAVED BY THE FATHER OF THE RACE

Adam's sin was not merely in the overt act of disobedience, but in the inner aspiration to "be like God" **(Gen 3:5)**. Indeed, if the sin of Adam is anything to go by, then the essence of sin appears to be a grasping by mankind for spiritual and moral autonomy. The consequences of the Fall were both manifold and far-reaching. Obviously, man's attitude towards God changed dramatically, as expressed in Adam and Eve's subsequent desire to hide from the presence of their Lord. God's displeasure towards Adam's action was the natural response of his own intrinsic righteousness.

There was also the effect on the rest of the human race. As federal representative, the Fall of our first parent ensured that we are all tainted with original sin. As one commentator puts it: "The Fall had abiding effect... upon all who descended from them; there is racial solidarity in sin and evil" (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 1117). Creation, too, is affected by the fruit of God's wrath against sin on the part of his vice-regent. From that time on, the whole of creation is engaged in a process of decay, frustrated to the point of anticipation of a day when it will be released from its present state of captivity into the freedom to fulfil its true potential (see **Rom 8:19-23**).

In terms of Adam's federal headship and the resultant corrupting influence on the whole of humanity, Louis Berkhof tells us that:

> *... by that first sin Adam became the bondservant of sin. That sin carried permanent pollution with it which, because of the solidarity of the human race, would affect not only Adam but all his descendants as well. As a result of the Fall, the father of the race could only pass on a depraved human nature to his offspring. From that unholy source sin flows on as an impure stream to all the generations of men, polluting everyone and everything with which it comes into contact.*
>
> (Berkhof, 1988: 221.)

Inherited pollution is commonly referred to as 'total depravity'. This is not to imply that all men are as thoroughly degenerate as it is possible to be, but that every aspect of human life is touched with the effects of man's fallen condition. Not everyone indulges in all forms of actual sin, nor are we incapable of either distinguishing between good and evil or admiring virtue in others. What it does mean, however, is that there is no part of man's nature left unaffected by the corruption of sin, nor has he the capacity of himself for any spiritual good. According to TC Hammond, "the totality applies rather to the field of operation of the evil principle and not to the degree of evil in the individual" (Hammond, 1968: 77). Or as **Isaiah** puts it, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" **(64:6)**.

The French sixteenth century theologian, John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1960), discusses the effects of the Fall of Adam on humanity as originally created in God's image. Although his followers may have subsequently taken his findings several steps further, Calvin himself employed the phrase 'total depravity' in the sense that "no aspect of man's original being or sensitivity has been left unaffected by sin". He spoke of two spheres of life, the spiritual and the temporal, concluding that in relation to God "mankind has been wholly depraved of all true knowledge and ability", whilst "with regard to temporal... activities, the natural man still retains admirable qualities... by which to conduct his manifold human affairs" (in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 122).

Origen's view, borrowing extensively from Plato, that the souls of men voluntarily sinned in a previous existence and brought it hence is unworthy of serious biblical consideration.

4.5 THE WAGES OF SIN

The ultimate penalty for sin, of course, was the appearance of death. The principle of death is separation. Although physical death became a reality for us all because of Adam's corporate transgression, the fundamental aspect of death is in the spiritual sense of alienation from God. It is because of this radical breakdown of relationship with the Creator that our ***moral nature*** is thus affected **(Rom 3:23)**, our ***intellect*** is restricted within such boundaries **(1Cor 2:14)**, and the ***will*** is inclined towards self-centredness, which in turn determines our desires **(Rom 1:24)**, emotions **(2 Tim 3:4)**, speech **(Jas 3:5-9)** and actions **(Gal 5:19-21)**. Louis Berkhof rightly observes that: "The sinful state is the basis of sinful habits, and these manifest themselves in sinful deeds" (Berkhof, 1988: 233). In other words, men are not sinners because they sin, but sin because they are sinners.

The word 'death' is employed in more than one sense in Scripture. There is a common proclivity within theological circles to speak of death as existing on three levels: physical, spiritual and eternal. The root idea of separation from God, however, is common to them all. But we may only really categorise physical and spiritual death for the purpose of analysis. Biblical anthropology is always holistic, which has perhaps prompted the following remarks from Leon Morris:

> *It seems better to understand death as something that involves the whole man. Man does not die as a body. He dies as a man in the totality of his being. He dies as a spiritual and physical being. And the Bible does not put a sharp line of demarcation between the two aspects. Physical death, then, is a fit symbol of, and expression of, and unity with, the deeper death that sin inevitably brings.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 273.)

Only those who have not been convicted by the Holy Spirit in regard to sin can fail to appreciate either the gravity with which God considers it or the appropriateness of a severe penalty. The wages of sin always seem disproportionate to minds that have not been cleansed.

Physical illness is also a natural consequence of original sin. It is significant that in the original language of **Genesis 2:17** where God forbids Adam and Eve to "eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", the penalty for such disobedience may be

translated "dying you shall die". The evidence for this is borne out by history, for from that moment man became a dying creature, polluted and corrupt to his very core. Thiessen goes further by informing us that:

> *Because of the intimate relationship between mind and body, we may assume that the mental as well as the physical powers were weakened and began to decay. This is not to say that every sickness is a direct result of a personal act of sin... but that ultimately and finally, physical and mental sickness are a result of Adam's sin.*
>
> (Thiessen, 1992: 183.)

Although there is an undeniable link between sin and suffering, the relationship between the two is far more complex than those who promote the 'bad-spell' of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar would have us believe. To say that affliction is never punitive, however, is equally invalid. Scripture sometimes refers to those with disease as bound by Satan **(Lk 13:16)**, oppressed by the devil **(Acts 10:38)**, or the victims of a spiritual enemy **(Mt 13:28)**, though not all illness can be so readily attributed to demon forces.

4.6 NATURAL AND MORAL EVIL

One of the chief difficulties in attempting to give any biblical perspective on the problem of natural evil is that Scripture offers no conclusive solution. This is largely due to the fact that its primary purpose is practical rather than philosophical. In the absence of evidence, the imagination can be a dangerous tool. We must content ourselves, therefore, with the assurances that we are given, without venturing so far into the realm of deduction that it becomes a speculative exercise. We know, for instance, that suffering is an alien intrusion into the created order of God's perfect design that will not even have the potential for operation in the age to come. Whilst it is a valid argument that, for the believer, perceived evil is, in fact, an instrument for God's ultimate goodness **(Rom 8:28)**, there are many instances where Satan is deemed to be the initiator of evil. In the Old Testament, the book of **Job** makes this clear, while Jesus **(Lk 13:16)**, Paul **(2 Cor 12:7)**, and Peter **(Acts 10:38)** reaffirm his role in the New.

What we refer to as 'natural evil', therefore, may only be described thus inasmuch as it refers to nature. Natural disasters are, in fact, quite unnatural. The sin of Adam, it would appear, not only affected the inner condition of every subsequent generation, but also his environment.

The source of specific moral evil cannot always be associated with a correlative specific sin. All we can say with any degree of accuracy is that the principle of evil as it affects humanity may in one way or another be attributed to original sin. Some acts of evil are directly related to individual sin, especially those by a third party. The night watchman who is gunned down is the innocent victim of a crime perpetrated by someone else, who is probably motivated by greed or addiction. This may best be illustrated by a car being driven at 50 mph. In a crowded shopping area that has a legally imposed speed limit of 30 mph, the driver of the vehicle would be considered reckless and be facing the likelihood of prosecution. If the same scenario were to be transferred to a free-flowing motorway, this would give the driver plenty of scope to increase his speed should he choose to do so.

For those who hold to the view of Adam's federal headship over the entire human race so that all are subsequently born into original sin because of his rebellion, the fact of moral evil is not unanswerable. It would probably not provide an explanation to the satisfaction of the theodicist, but it would answer the "Why?" if not the "How?" Paul's teaching in **Romans** chapter **8**, however, also gives the same "Why?" in relation to natural evil:

> *The creation waits in eager anticipation 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.*
>
> **(Rom 8:19-21.)**

4.7 SUMMARY

Whilst I fully endorse Berkhof's suggestion that, for the theologian, the problem of evil is ultimately the problem of sin, the etymological concept of evil as found in the Bible has a much broader reference. The Hebrew word '*ra*' literally means 'to despoil', thereby causing devaluation. Applied physically and morally, it acquires the sense of unpleasantness and offensiveness, both in terms of the actual deed and its consequences. The Greek equivalents, '*kakos*' and '*poneros*', refer to the essential nature of evil and its harmful effects respectively. Whilst any given context usually suggests a distinction between physical and moral evil, they are often conjoined in the one act. This, however, must be qualified by also stating that, although physical evil may be the fruit of moral

evil, personal suffering is not always the product of personal sin. Humanity can nonetheless be said to suffer organically because of the corporate nature of sin's effects.

Before we press on, it is worth noting some of the areas relating to the image of God in man that have been tainted by sin. Man's ability to relate is affected because of his sullied personality, his spirituality is marred in its direction, his sense of reason is clouded by issues he refuses to acknowledge, progressive morality is based upon social acceptability rather than God's law, dominion gives way to domination, and man's inherent creativity is often used as a tool for shame and destruction.

In this chapter, we have looked at the entrance of sin into the world of man. Whether sin existed in another realm prior to the fall of Adam is more a matter of conjecture than conviction. What we can say with confidence, however, is that God granted free will to human beings who went on to abuse it. The Bible also presents God as omnipotent and just in a sense so absolute that there can be no comparisons. There is no justifiable reason to suggest that these truths are diametrically and necessarily opposed.

5.0 SUFFERING AS A TEST OF FAITH: PERSEVERANCE IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSITY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Anyone faced with the task of choosing just three characters from the Old Testament as exemplars of suffering would have to admit the difficulty of their undertaking. Having looked at one covenant head in the previous chapter, it could have been very tempting to continue the theme by assessing the merits or otherwise of Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Any or all of these would have been worthy models for our discussion here under the heading "Suffering as a Test of Faith". There are countless others.

My choice of Joseph, Job and Jeremiah has absolutely nothing to do with homiletic alliteration. Although they are all very diverse personalities, they each share one feature that is abundantly appropriate to a study such as this – they knew a measure of suffering that was somewhat unique in character, if not in degree. And yet there are traits in all of them with which we may readily identify. Each of them encountered God in such a way that their experience of him thereafter was never the same again. By enduring trials and difficulties they also knew the joys of success and fulfilment, though maybe not in a way that we would expect such terms to be used. Men of suffering, yes; but also men of destiny, men of patience and men of resolve.

5.2 JOSEPH – A MAN OF DESTINY

Suffering may well be an expression of divine wisdom, which biblically has moral as well as intellectual applications. When we look at the case of Joseph, it might be easy to question the purpose of his apparently harsh treatment, first by his brothers and then at the hand of Potiphar's wife. Scripture is its own interpreter in matters of such difficulty and this episode is no exception. The reason for Joseph's plight is given in **Psalm 105**, where we are told that:

> *Joseph...* [was] *sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the Lord proved him true.*
>
> **(vv 17b-19.)**

The NASB makes it much clearer:

The Word of the Lord tested him.

Joseph was chosen to be the instrument of divine purpose, the scope of which extended beyond the human limitations of his own life. The destiny of Israel as a nation was entrusted to his care. Suffering for him was the training ground for greatness, for his response to the apparently inopportune and cruel events that befell him was critical to the whole plan of nationhood for Israel and all that it signified. The steps of this essentially good man were certainly being ordered by the Lord **(Prov 20:24)**.

This apparent contradiction, or antinomy, is just that – apparently so. According to finite reason, two statements seem to be set against each other in contradistinction. They are presented as equally valid truths, however, with no attempt to explain how they may be reconciled.

The story of Joseph is a case in point. The biblical evidence is such that Joseph's brothers were responsible for their treatment of him. Their jealousy **(Gen 37:11)**, hatred **(vv 4, 5, 8)**, murderous intent **(v 20)**, abandonment **(v 24)** and final selling into slavery **(v 28)** all testify to the fact that they were morally accountable for Joseph's plight. And yet towards the end of the account, Joseph could say to them with equal conviction and veracity that "God sent me before you to preserve life" **(45:5)** and "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" **(50:20)**.

5.2.1 Favoured Son or Spoiled Brat?

Joseph was clearly his father's favourite son. He was also prone to telling tales concerning his brothers that did not cast them in a favourable light. Whether this was the reason for his father's favour or ***vice-versa*** is not clear. What is obvious is that, though his antics will have elevated his confidence, he at the same time alienated himself from his fellows. There was equally no doubt that, despite his character deficiencies, Joseph was to be used by God. To become a worthy vessel, however, would require a degree of purging. His father, Jacob, only served to fuel any hostility that already existed towards Joseph, albeit unwittingly. That notwithstanding, "God was with him" **(Acts 7:9)**.

Even in his spiritual gifting, Joseph was arrogant, though this in no way negated the genuineness of that gift. By revealing the future to Joseph, God's intent was to prepare him for that future. This, of course, is exactly what happened, though not before Joseph had taken advantage of the opportunity to further alienate himself in the eyes of his brothers. A gift from God is not intended to elevate the recipient's status in the minds of others and to flaunt such a gift will inevitably produce the exact opposite effect. In later life, after many hard-learned lessons, Joseph came to realise that his gifting in God was to save others. For the time being, however, he had yet to come to the melting-pot.

The irony is that Joseph's difficulty was compounded by the dreams God gave him simply because they tantalised his ego. Even after he had abused the contents of his first dream by flaunting them before his brothers, God gave him another one that developed the first still further. Was God encouraging Joseph in his self-righteousness? Of course not. The dreams were authentic enough. Even the interpretation was partly genuine. But Joseph had a long way to go before his motivation to see the revelations fulfilled was to promote God's glory and preserve his covenant people. It was only to be a short time, however, before his preparation would begin.

5.2.2 Sibling Hostility

On the morning that Jacob sent his beloved son to Shechem to see if his brothers were all right, little did either party imagine that the next time they would see each other was to be so many years and hardships later. Joseph finally caught up with his brothers at Dothan, still flaunting his favourite coat, token of his father's special favour towards him. How his brothers despised him! As soon as their eyes were upon him, their minds were almost unanimously fixed:

> *"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."*
>
> **(Gen 37:19, 20.)**

If it had not been for Reuben's conscience-stricken plea, they would have carried out their plan, too. Instead, Joseph found himself in a waterless desert pit. Faced with starvation, he could have possibly been excused for wishing that they had killed him. Little could Joseph have imagined that his present state of affairs was actually the

initiation of the fulfilment of his dreams or that the next stage would involve being sold as a slave to a passing horde of Ishmaelites. In a bizarre way, Joseph's preparation had begun without any preliminary notice. As RT Kendall puts it, he was reduced in a matter of moments "from riches to rags" (Kendall, 1995: 28).

Joseph will no doubt have been aware of his brothers' dislike for him. After all, they had not exactly received his revelations with much enthusiasm. But one can only presume that it came as quite a shock to discover the intensity of their hatred or to what depths such animosity could be driven. This, too, was part of the preparation. In later years, he would take advantage of the lessons he learned both now and in similar subsequent events. Misplaced confidence in frail humanity is folly compared with placing one's trust in God alone (see **Psm 118:8**). To be detached in this way also enables a more reliably objective judgment, one that is not clouded by partiality. Once Joseph was on his way to Egypt, his destiny really was out of his own hands – he had no option but to cast himself on God. Given his most recent surroundings, he would have probably considered his current plight the easier alternative.

It must be conceded that much of Joseph's early suffering at the hands of his own brothers was of his own making. The favoured eleventh son of Jacob, Joseph's arrogance of youth, coupled with the naïveté of his inexperience, in no small measure fuelled sibling hostility. Even the dreams of divine revelation he had, though accurate in their unfolding many years later, were proudly retold in a way that was guaranteed to foster resentment. Truly he was a visionary without valour, a dreamer who evoked only disdain. The circumstances of his being sold into slavery would be the envy of any modern scriptwriter, but this was, in fact, the beginning of a fulfilment of prophecy given some three generations earlier to Abraham:

> *Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years... afterward, they will come out with many possessions... in the fourth generation they shall return home.*
>
> **(Gen 15:13-16.)**

5.2.3 Shame and Honour go Hand in Hand

The next phase of Joseph's preparation was comfortable by comparison. Away from his familiar surroundings with no expectation of returning, and not much by way of inclination even if it was possible, Joseph was at least free to make a new start. Having been sold on by the Ishmaelite slave-traders, he found himself in the service of Potiphar. His new master was a man both of repute and lofty social standing. There were many qualities Joseph could learn from a man like Potiphar, little realising that this too was part of a divine plan of scholarship for future fulfilment of his dreams back in Canaan. It is interesting that, despite their differences in both status and religious allegiance, Scripture is clear to identify that not only was the Lord with Joseph, but also that "his master saw that the Lord was with him" **(Gen 39:3)**.

Everything now seemed fine. So much so, in fact, that Joseph could have been forgiven for thinking that in spiritual terms his dreams had already been fulfilled. He had come to terms with his new life. True, he was a slave, but with almost as much freedom as to be comfortable. All in all, things had worked out reasonably well. In reality, however, his schooling had only just begun. Very soon he found his comfort zone shattered when confronted with sexual temptation. This in itself is a big enough trial to negotiate successfully but, having done so, he found himself falsely accused and subsequently imprisoned anyway. Not only had Joseph been faithful in Potiphar's house, but his master had also been blessed on account of Joseph's faithfulness **(Gen 39:5)**. Potiphar trusted Joseph and his trust was not betrayed – at least not by Joseph.

Temptation is often provoked by prohibition – "Do not..." The first thing on the minds of many of us when told to "Keep off the grass" is to do exactly the opposite, because we too quickly focus beyond the parameters of our freedom. This was where Eve succumbed. She had forgotten the abundant provision of God that was constantly accessible and begun to fantasise about that from which she had been barred – the one tree in all of Eden. Notice how different is Joseph's response to a similarly proposed temptation. He was so appreciative of all that God had given him through Potiphar that there was no hint of curiosity into what been withheld. He had learned the secret already of Paul's counsel to Timothy given centuries later – "godliness with contentment is great gain" **(1 Tim 6:6)**.

Leaving aside the ridiculous argument that Joseph's past was catching up with him, he now found himself in a position where he was being punished for doing right. Truly he was numbered amongst the suffering innocent. How many others might have been tempted to think they might as well have committed the act of indecency if they were to be found guilty anyway? But Joseph's motivation was never a case of whether or not he would be found out – it was a question of bringing either honour or shame to the name of his God. The interesting thing to note is that years later, when Joseph was not only restored but elevated into the government of Egypt, Scripture gives no hint that he was ever publicly vindicated on account of these false allegations. In the overall scheme of what God had planned for him, they were insignificant by comparison.

The episode with Potiphar's wife was arguably the most magnificent and at the same time possibly amongst the most tragic pieces of narrative in the whole of Scripture. It is magnificent simply because of Joseph's steadfast faithfulness to his covenant obligations, irrespective of the fact that no-one believed him anyway. But it is tragic in that it speaks in convicting tones to those who have been similarly tempted – and failed. How many believers have forfeited the purpose of God in their lives for but a moment of abandonment! The temptation for Joseph was not just a sex issue, any more than it was merely a desire for food that caused Esau to sell his birthright (cf **Gen 25:29-34**). It was a shortcut to power, attention being given possibly at a time of an acute sense of loneliness, and the hidden suggestion that no-one need ever know. The truth is, however, that nothing is hidden from heaven's gaze. To ignore such a fact is to needlessly and recklessly invite suffering.

5.2.4 Incarcerated Freedom

Joseph's time in prison may have been a sentence as far as the judicial authorities were concerned, but it was also God's appointed location for him to be prepared further. He swiftly gained favour with the jailer and began to prosper once more in the most unlikely of surroundings. As far as it is possible to merit a noble position in such a place, Joseph did. He was quickly invested with so much trust that his only sense of confinement was the boundary walls of the prison building. The key to Joseph's success was probably not his innocence or that the jailer was being lenient because he did not agree with the circumstances of his conviction. Neither was it merely Joseph's resolve to make the most of a disadvantaged situation. He was blessed by God because he was

taking advantage of the opportunity and seeing his imprisonment for what it really was – God's training ground.

One day, quite unexpectedly, two royal servants were imprisoned with Joseph, the butler and the baker. That in itself may have raised a certain level of interest amongst the inmates, but its significance as far as Joseph was concerned could not possibly have been recognised. After a while, they each had a dream, the contents of which they found disturbing. With restricted opportunities for their dreams to be interpreted, this only served to add to their troubles. Noticing their downcast state, Joseph enquired as to the source. Realising the opportunity to use the gift that had been dormant for so long, but with increased maturity since his time in Canaan, Joseph began by giving glory to God. He interpreted both dreams precisely and the predictive element accurately, but then tried to grasp the initiative to manipulate his circumstances. But God had other plans. The butler was restored within three days, the baker was executed and Joseph stayed in prison – for another two years.

5.2.5 Potential Released and Realised

Finally, Joseph's time came. His release did not come about because Pharaoh had a dream. Pharaoh was given a dream to coincide with God's appointed time for Joseph's release. Whether Pharaoh, in fact, had two dreams or the same dream in two parts with an interlude is largely immaterial. Having exhausted all the resources at his disposal, the butler finally remembered Joseph and intervened. Possibly by now Joseph had given up hope entirely. Or at least he may have thought that if he ever did get out of prison, it would bear no relation whatsoever to his previous exploits as an interpreter of dreams.

Not only did Joseph interpret Pharaoh's dream(s), he did so with precise accuracy, though its unfolding would take a further fourteen years. Furthermore, he gave practical advice on how to manage the implications of the dream. This is a significant step forward in Joseph's gifting compared to previous episodes and has much to do with his progressive maturity. As a result of his faithfulness to the honour of God in the midst of a severe sequence of trials, God honoured Joseph by placing it in Pharaoh's heart to elevate him to government leader over all Egypt. Both his discretion and gifting in God were finally vindicated (cf **Gen 41:39**).

The modern perception of 'comfort-zone Christianity' can often be an obstacle to understanding God's purpose in suffering. Blessing and suffering are not mutually incompatible. Joseph was blessed by God in the midst of his affliction. The Scriptural evidence is such that we may not even say that this was in spite of his suffering, but more so because of it. Even as a slave we are reminded that "the Lord was with Joseph and he prospered – the Lord gave him success in everything he did" **(Gen 39:2, 3)**. In fact, such was God's favour upon Joseph that even Pharaoh was forced to acknowledge him as a man full of the Spirit of God **(41:38)** and to thereby trust him with national government **(v 41)**.

As the first part of Pharaoh's dream began to unfold before the eyes of everyone in Egypt, Joseph must have felt a sense of contentment. It may have crossed his mind more than once that in lieu of his earlier harsh treatment, first by his brothers and then by Potiphar's wife, that he had almost earned the right to be happy. And happy he could be excused for being. Married with two young sons, one of the most powerful men in the most powerful nation in the known world, popular with both courtier and commoner, and with a sense of fulfilment that only comes by living in the absolute centre of God's will for your life. Yet he remained incomplete.

Joseph would remain deficient whilst there abided unresolved issues in his life. For all his contentment, he longed to be restored to his father and his brothers. The likelihood of this, however, was remote. Yet God specialises in improbable situations and particularly the capacity to precipitate a crisis that impinges upon that remoteness. More than twenty years after being abandoned to the mercy of a group of foreign mercenaries, God began to orchestrate a reconciliation for Joseph. The process of readiness had taken the whole of the intervening years. As far as we know, his brothers had lived quite comfortably with their act of betrayal and Jacob had resigned himself to the death of his beloved son. The great famine in the land was about to change all of that.

In the midst of universal hunger and hardship, only Egypt fared well. The whole world was effectively at the mercy of its governor, Joseph. The tale of reconciliation is a long process and a thankfully familiar one. The relationship is restored principally because forgiveness is released when repentance is expressed. Why had it taken twenty-two years to be reconciled? Because that is how long it took for all parties concerned to be prepared for reconciliation. Joseph could at last say "What Potiphar's wife did with evil

intent, God allowed for good", "What evil caused the cupbearer's forgetfulness, God meant for good". And finally, after the death of Jacob, which his brothers may have thought would be an ideal opportunity for Joseph to exact revenge, he reassured them:

> *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid, I will provide for you and your children."*
>
> **(Gen 50:19-21.)**

Concerning Joseph's elevation before Pharaoh, Terry Virgo writes:

> [He] *came out of his furnace in intimate communion with God... God forbid that we should go into the furnace if we do not come out knowing God better. Paul said that our pressures are to teach us not to trust in ourselves but in God, who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:9). We lose our self-confidence as the furnace shows us what rubbish we are and we discover what God knew about us from the beginning. Joseph emerged with great confidence in his God.*
>
> (Virgo, 1987: 54.)

Furnace conditions hold no fear for those who are rooted in the stream. Difficulties cannot diminish divine allegiance, no matter how severe. Not only did Joseph continue to bear fruit, he had an abundance with which to bless all with whom he came into contact. Potiphar's household only experienced the blessing of God because of Joseph's influence there. Even his fellow-prisoners received the grace of God through him, though the baker had less cause to rejoice than did the chief cupbearer **(Gen 40:1-23)**.

5.2.6 A Lasting Legacy

The story of Joseph from beginning to end is undeniably one of the most illuminating in the history of Israel. From the privileged position of knowing his father's favour, he somewhat arrogantly began to taunt his brothers. Relating dreams of further honour only served to increase their hostility towards him. Eventually sold into captivity in Egypt and later imprisoned, Joseph's reactions to his plight are nothing short of exemplary. He maintained his integrity, despite accusations to the contrary; his submission to circumstance as being proved by God led to increased measure of

responsibility; and when the opportunity arose to choose revenge, he opted instead to bring blessing.

There are many lessons we can learn from the trials of Joseph. Externally, we can see that they all worked together to transform his character. The positive effects of this circumstantial conspiracy, however, were not operating in isolation from Joseph's response to them. His own attitude was highly significant. It could have been a very tempting route for Joseph to harbour resentment, bitterness and hostility towards his brothers. But to wallow in the self-pity of past events would have only multiplied his troubles. Tragically, many find themselves in just such a situation. Failing to acknowledge the hand of God in seemingly adverse situations has caused many believers (and unbelievers, too) to spend the rest of their days in decay instead of delight, spiritually impoverished rather than catching hold of divine purpose. And this was the key to Joseph's success – he overcame in the midst of his suffering because he knew that God really had spoken to him, despite the arrogant manner with which he related the tale. For him, it was an issue of faith – he had heard the voice of God.

Joseph's survival technique cannot be found in any armed forces' guide or military literature. A clue is given in the beautiful testimony of his father, Jacob:

> *Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring,*
> *whose branches climb over a wall.*
>
> **(Gen 49:22.)**

Jeremiah spoke in a similar fashion concerning God's faithful, when he affirmed that:

> *Blessed is the man... whose trust is in the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.*
>
> **(Jer 17:7, 8.)**

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul tells his Roman readers that "in ***all*** things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" **(Rom 8:28)**. This was certainly true of Joseph in the Old Testament. Rejected by his brothers, forcibly removed from the love of his father, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and subsequently imprisoned, Joseph could well have been forgiven for

doubting the 'good' that would come of his innocent suffering. Having been restored to his family and been instrumental in the physical salvation of all Egypt, however, he could latterly speak of such suffering in terms of his brothers intending to bring harm to him, but God using it for good to accomplish his eternally decreed purpose of saving the lives of many **(Gen 50:20)**. It was only in retrospect that Joseph's vision had been enlarged to encompass the ultimate purpose of God. It may well be the same for us, too.

5.3 JOB – A MAN OF PATIENCE

There can surely be no more appropriate introduction to a study of this nature than that penned by Frederick Brotherton Meyer:

> *The problem of the book* [of Job] *is as old as the world – how to reconcile the goodness and justice of God with the apparently arbitrary and unequal distribution of affliction and prosperity that we see about us. It shows us how, in the fierce light of reality, men who have prided themselves on their uprightness suddenly become convinced of sin and resigned to God's dealings.*
>
> (Meyer, 1979: 216.)

The enigmas associated with theodicy are not new, as the book of **Job** amply demonstrates. But neither are they exclusive to what might loosely be described as the covenant people of God. Other peoples of the ancient world addressed the apparent correlation or otherwise between suffering and religious belief. In what remains extant amongst Assyrian literature of the period, there are some amazing similarities. The Babylonian poem *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom* contains the following verse with its all too familiar refrain:

> *If I walk the street, fingers are pointed at me,*
> *My own town looks on me as an enemy;*
> *My friend has become a stranger,*
> *In his rage, my comrade denounces me.*
>
> (in Boadt, 1997: 13.)

The question raised in the writing of the book of **Job** is the one most often posed by the cynic of today. "If God is just, then why is there so much needless and apparently unwarranted suffering?" "Why famine?" "Why, in certain underdeveloped countries, is there such a high infant mortality rate?" If blamelessness was ever a guarantee of an

undisturbed existence, then Job should surely have remained untroubled. Overwhelmed by one disaster after another, ranging from loss of wealth, close family and physical wholeness, his faith is tested to the absolute pinnacle of its capacity.

Much unnecessary debate has revolved around the authorship and time of writing the book of **Job**. When all the evidence has been considered, I am inclined to agree with HL Ellison, who arrives at the conclusion that:

> *... it seems clear that we should bow to the Holy Spirit's silence and accept the book as anonymous. As regards the date of the book, we would do well to take up a similar position... The simple fact is that nothing depends either on the date of composition or on the authorship.*
>
> (Ellison, 1958: 16.)

It might reasonably be thought: "How may the book of **Job** be rewritten if it were to have twenty-first century appeal?" "What might be changed of its content to make it equally applicable to and appreciated by each society?" Its timelessness, however, renders such a consideration unnecessary. It is universally valid because it speaks of a need that is to be found in every culture. Minds as diverse as those of Luther and Tennyson have come to esteem its attraction, for what its message is to the theologian, its beauty is to the poet.

A superficial reading of the book of **Job** would reveal him as a man of angst who demanded answers from God the Judge, The fact is, however, that he was a man of integrity, though frustrated, who longed to meet God the Father.

5.3.1 A Character Worthy of Divine Approval

Job's experience was one of affliction in spite of moral integrity and uprightness. His attitude at this time was that of a man who knew what it was to be blessed by his Maker, yet he did not take such benefits for granted. His sentiment is one that has echoed through the corridors of time. King Jehoshophat, when faced with the hostile armies of Moab and Ammon and acknowledging his own inadequacy, confessed to finding strength in the faithfulness of Yahweh **(2 Chr 20:12)**. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in the midst of actually encountering Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, believed in God's ability to deliver them. Even if he chose not to, however, they made it

clear that they would still remain his servants **(Dan 3:17, 18)**. The apostle Paul, too, could commend a lifestyle that had learned to be content in all circumstances **(Phil 4:11, 12)**.

It is clear from the very beginning, therefore, that Job's moral condition played no part in his subsequent experiences. Certainly this is not so in the sense that his misfortunes were some sort of punishment for previous ill deeds. If there is any connection at all, then it is that his moral probity made him the victim of Satan's assault. This is the only example of cause and effect that is appropriate to the whole ethos of the book.

5.3.2 The Prologue

Philosopher and theist alike have looked to **Job** for clues as to how to solve the problem/mystery of evil. Each has claimed a victory over the other. The reality is, however, that the primary lesson of Job is just how futile it is for the human intellect to presume it is adequate to comprehend such lofty matters. In distinction to the thematic content of Job's associates, which prevails today in many a Christian setting despite such advice to the contrary, Job's plight is not cast-iron evidence of his having earned divine displeasure. Just the opposite, in fact; it is proof of God's confidence in the man. Of course, the reader alone is party to this information, having been given a glimpse into heaven's counsel via the prologue. As a secondary issue, we also discover that in such a complex environment, speech yields less fruit than silence.

If the book of **Job** were ever considered sufficiently commercially viable to be made into a movie, then the prologue would either be cut out altogether or repositioned near the end as a flashback item. It gives the game away and thereby removes a large element of suspense. Forty-two chapters in total and we are assured of the righteousness of Job virtually from page one. But Job is not the focal point, though he appears to be early on. And this, too, is significant in our approach to somehow cutting through the clutter of the existence of evil to find what is left of God. Anthropocentric theodicy will always seek to modify God's nature (or existence). Commence with God, however, from a position of faith and the problem may not necessarily be resolved, but it will be consigned where it belongs – to the realm of mystery.

It is a constant axiom of Old Testament theology that blessing is the reward for righteousness. The account of **Job** opens with him as the happy benefactor of such a doctrine. A case study in current prosperity teaching, if ever there was one. Vast wealth, abundant supply of riches, ideal family life, near the top of the local popularity stakes and a relationship with God that would be the envy of any twenty-first century televangelist. The constant flow of blessings only served to confirm his assurance of his fidelity before God. But that was all about to change.

If the book of **Job** bears any semblance at all to the Christian walk, then it seems amazing that in an age of increasing 'prosperity' teaching, the account of Job's fortunes begins at a place where many in our own day set their target. At the very beginning of the biblical record, God says of Job:

> *"There is no-one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."*
>
> **(Job 1:8.)**

What a testimony! What a wonderful description of a life lived in complete victory over sin! Most Christians could only hope of an epitaph like that at the end of their life. We are told this of Job at our very introduction to him and that as a commendation by God himself. If this teaches us anything at all, then surely it is that there must be a measure of development in the life of the believer before he/she is ready for the crucible of suffering, whereby such seasoning might be perfected. The complexity of human nature and the intricacies of individual personality mean that there is no single path to this place of maturing. What might be seen as a trial to the present writer may well be perceived as a pleasure to the reader, and so God deals with us accordingly. But the goal is the same – that we may all persevere unto maturity **(Jas 1:4)**, "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" **(Eph 4:13)**.

Job was, indeed, one of the most righteous men of the Old Testament. Prophesying centuries after the account detailed in the book of **Job**, Ezekiel proclaimed the judgment of God upon Israel in the following terms:

> *"... even if these three men – Noah, Daniel and Job – were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign Lord."*
>
> **(Ezk 14:14.)**

In other words, by the time Ezekiel wrote these words (circa 590 BC), the three names that spring readily to mind in the whole of Hebrew history to that point in respect of their righteousness included Job.

The Sovereignty of God is borne out throughout the account of **Job**. This flies in the face of all dualistic notions that perceive of Satan as some ruler of a rival kingdom with inherent power that is often a match for God's potency. Nothing could be further from the truth. Satan is a rebel who has only as much power as God chooses to grant him for the effecting of his own purposes. His essentially subservient role is in evidence in both the prologue and the epilogue to the story. First of all, he is restricted in his accusation against Job until God invites him to consider the moral uprightness of Job **(1:8; 2:3)**. He is further limited in his attacks upon Job and his possessions without God's permission. Satan's subjection is also implied by his very absence from the scenario in the closing chapters of the book. It is abundantly clear that, having performed his role in line with God's design (albeit unwittingly), he is of no further value to the development of the concluding scenes of the drama.

5.3.3 Sullen Comfort

In view of its extensive scope, the book of **Job** reflects a vast array of issues facing humanity. Because of this, it has often been portrayed as supplying the solution to some of the more profound moral dilemmas of human experience, specifically in regard to the problem of the suffering of the innocent. As an overview, the most striking feature of Job's concern is not so much with his affliction at the hands of God as with the diabolical (sic!) treatment he receives from his fellows. Even this, however, must be considered as forming a particular element within the overall condition of his general adversity.

As the dialogues in the book of **Job** unfold, we see a radical reconstruction of the understanding that circumstances are, in fact, consequences of action. Job's experience and his previous conduct appear to be anything but so linked. Any comfort he might otherwise draw from the knowledge that his present plight is but a temporary suspension of normality is entirely absent. Job had been stripped to the core. All those things that the prosperity teachers associate with divine reward for godliness had been systematically taken from him. His material possessions, financial resources, physical

health, family – he had lost everything. And now he was on the verge of finding his faith inadequate, too.

Commenting on **Job 1:22**, John Calvin wrote:

> *Why is it that men fret so when God sends them things entirely contrary to their desires? They do not acknowledge that God does everything by reason and that He has just cause. For if we have well imprinted on our hearts, all that God does is founded in good reason, it is certain that we would be ashamed to chafe so against Him. As soon as God does not send what we have desired we dispute against Him.*
>
> (in Willard, ed, 1999: 6.)

Although the ethos of Calvin's comments is to be applauded, the Scottish theologian, Alexander Whyte, puts things in a little more perspective when he tells us that: "till Christ came, no soul was ever made such a battleground between heaven and hell, as Job's soul was made" (Whyte, 1952: 379).

Initially sympathetic with Job's plight, the compassion of Job's colleagues swiftly turns to speculation as they begin to ponder what calamity could possibly have provoked such a change of fortunes. ***Eliphaz*** finally and gently breaks the silence. His introduction is at best but a clumsy attempt at being polite. It is an iron fist in a velvet glove. We might easily paraphrase:

> *"If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking?"*
>
> **(Job 4:2.)**

as:

> "I don't mean to cause offence, but it has to be said..."

... going on to give a whole catalogue of data with apparently little care for whether or not Job would be offended by such a tirade. A modern equivalent of his concluding remarks would be:

> "Snap out of it; pull yourself together."

There can be little doubting the genuineness of concern in Job's three friends, their initial reaction to his condition being one of deep anguish **(Job 2:12)**. However, the argument that each presents intensifies in passion to such a degree as to negate its very

purpose. Rather than soothing Job with oil, they succeed only in adding fuel to the smouldering flames of his predicament. Eliphaz bases his exchange on the pretext of experience. His observation of life's difficulties has led him to the considered opinion that sin produces suffering. Believing Job's present dilemma to be retrievable only by confession, Eliphaz finally exhorts Job to come clean and admit his failings **(22:21)**.

By contrast, ***Bildad*** resorts to tradition upon which to build his discourse. He is less than diplomatic in his assault on Job. Like Eliphaz, he appears only to succeed in rubbing salt into Job's open wounds, being even more vehement in attack. Cruelly provocative, his charges against Job are particularly insensitive at a time when he must surely have realised his colleague's vulnerability. To Bildad, the conclusions are undeniably plain – Job *must* be sinning. Out of context, his arguments may carry some semblance of soundness but, as we are constantly reminded in Scripture, God's ways are not man's ways **(Isa 55:8)**. In Bildad's mind at least, Job's condition and his confession are diametrically opposed. If he were as blameless as he pleaded, then he would not be enduring such affliction. Buffeted by the torment of it all, Job can only plead for the comfort of silence once more.

Zophar's remarks along the lines that character determines destiny provoke an ironic retort bordering on sarcasm from Job, an up-to-date version of which might be: "How on earth did the world manage to survive until you came along?" His approach varies widely from those of his two colleagues. Where Eliphaz seeks to acquiesce, Zophar is more assertive. If Bildad's is the voice of convention, then Zophar is far more categorical in his attack upon Job. To him there cannot be the slightest doubt, so dogmatic is he throughout. Job ***is*** sinning **(Job 11:6, 14)**. It must be emphasised that the three acquaintances differ only in address, for they are united in their understanding that grace is a wage to be earned and lack of prosperity is, therefore, the direct result of divine displeasure. To them, Job is obviously in need of correction.

Hendriksen summarises the (un)helpful comments of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, thus:

1. *God afflicts you because you are a very wicked man.*
2. *God afflicts you because you have not helped those in distress.*
3. *God afflicts you in order that, being chastened, you may be healed.*

To which Job responds –

In answer to 1 above: *Then how is it that God allows many wicked people to prosper? Besides, I am not wicked, but righteous.*

In answer to 2 above: *This is not true; I have always helped those in distress.*

In answer to 3 above: *Does this require that I suffer so very grievously?*

The true answer resides (still) in God –

*The reason why Jehovah afflicts the righteous cannot be **fully** grasped by mere man, who is not even able to understand the created universe... Hence, because Jehovah is so very great and infinitely wise, man must not expect to understand him fully but must TRUST him. (This is clearly implied.)*

(Hendriksen, 1995: 287, 288.)

The views of Job's three friends, though diverse in their application, are symptomatic of much of what might be considered orthodox theology today. For Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, however, they had no assurance of a future existence. There may, therefore, be some excuse for their approach given that, as far as they were aware, death was the final consummation of existence. According to such an understanding, judgment had to take place during man's earthly sojourn, for what lies beyond it? It is not difficult to understand why their perception of prosperity being God's reward for righteous living and calamity being a punishment for contravening his moral law held such sway. Of course, there is an element of veracity in this, but as is so often the case, a grain of truth paid too much honour is capable of becoming the most hideous of lies.

Having waited for the mature views of experience, tradition and dogma to have their say, ***Elihu*** cannot contain his anger any longer. Job had resorted to answering Bildad, Eliphaz and Zophar on the same basis as their accusations – that of human intellect. Job's plight was clearly not eased by such 'comfort', the words of his friends serving only to compound the misery. Elihu, on the other hand, elevates the whole debate to a completely different plane. Claiming supernatural insight, he speaks of a sagacity that is willing to acknowledge an altogether higher wisdom, a knowledge that is not too proud to concede to greater understanding. God is above all. Furthermore, he brings in an entirely new dimension to Job's predicament. Suffering may well be corrective, he argues, and can also be either the product or the cause of sin, as in Job's case.

As the narrative of **Job** clearly shows, one of the world's most ancient beliefs is that moral rectitude and material prosperity were inextricably linked. The automatic inversion of this, that affliction was a token of divine displeasure, was similarly upheld. The tragedy is that, despite the conclusive remarks of Job, there are those within Christendom still for whom such a formulaic couplet is ***prima facie***. On the other hand, it would be easy to be over-critical concerning the speculative remarks of Job's colleagues, especially in the light of Jesus' Beatific ***didache*** and Calvary's ***kerygma***. Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu knew nothing of either the Beatitudes or the Cross of Christ. Even Job himself was at first convinced he must have unwittingly erred.

After round upon round of bitter and progressively more depressing dialogue, Job can stand no more. His last resort is to plead his case to God directly. The amazing thing is that although God grants Job a hearing, he does not take it upon himself to answer any of the queries he may have. Indeed, if one were to read the whole of the book of **Job** in a single sitting with any hope of reaching a satisfactory conclusion, they would be left sorely disappointed. For those who suffer in this life, there is no promise of restitution before death. It would be imprudent to suggest otherwise. Any integral sense of reassurance is that such trials are in varying degrees common to all men. It would be many, many years after the experiences of Job that any real sense could be made of such mortal difficulties, the real conclusion to the book that bears his name being found in the pages of the New Testament where Job's faith was finally realised in the life and death of his Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

5.3.4 A Question of Balance

When God speaks, he mentions nothing by way of explanation concerning Job's dilemma. No glimmer of light is cast on the general enigma of suffering. At first glance, this is a twist the reader has not prepared himself for. The whole narrative has been building up to a climax that simply does not materialise. There is no reason to believe, however, that this is conclusive evidence of a later addition to the original material. Although man believes that understanding comes from a broader platform of data upon which to build hypotheses, God knows that his most pressing need is a higher perspective. Job's problem was not in the first instance magnified by a paucity of information, but by too narrow an outlook.

Although the account of Job's misery aids us, it dismisses any current repetitions of the arguments as presented by his acquaintances, the context of his agony seeming to have little to do with his physical suffering. Indeed, much of Job's turmoil is that his most recent experiences are incompatible with his own theology. He was a creature of God, but his understanding of divine matters was a product of his generation. The underlying tone of the book of **Job** appears to be that had he not been the victim of such cruel circumstances, his grasp of God's justice would have led him to join his companions' tirade against whoever found himself in such a plight. Evidence of this may be seen in God's response to Job's outcry. He neither justifies his actions nor gives the reasons for Job's dilemma, but simply discloses something of his own greatness. The root of Job's problem was the size of his concept of God. As the late HL Ellison commented:

> *The book* [of **Job**] *does not set out to answer the problem of suffering but to proclaim a God so great that no answer is needed, for it would transcend the finite mind if given.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 599.)

It must, therefore, be borne in mind that God does not reject the words of Job's companions because they are necessarily invalid as generalisations, but because they represent too narrow a perspective. God is far greater than our most embracing theology. Indeed, if he were so small that he could be finitely understood, then it is questionable whether he would be large enough to worship. Although Job resorted under extreme pressure to a tirade towards God, his quest was one for integrity, a sincere search for the truth of his plight. And yet it appears that, in spite of his righteousness, Job's restoration was largely dependent upon his forgiveness of his three friends, for it is only then that his fortunes are replenished.

The key verse in the whole of the book of **Job** is also instrumental to our understanding the problem of suffering. They are words that are found in God's response to Job's complaint:

> *"Who has a claim against me that I must pay?*
> *Everything under heaven belongs to me."*
>
> **(Job 41: 11.)**

As Mrs Penn-Lewis has written in commentary upon these words:

> *Job has said that Jehovah had taken away his right, but the Lord declares that Job has no 'rights'! As Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, Jehovah is under no obligation to any creature. None can demand aught of him as a* ***right****. On the contrary, they must acknowledge His claim! "MINE" is written by Him upon all things – animate and inanimate – under the whole heaven.*
>
> (Penn-Lewis, 1903: 188.)

The final lessons of Job seem to provide ample evidence that in all aspects, including the one under consideration here, the creation is subject to the Creator. In other words, any semblance of understanding regarding the enigma of suffering may only be derived from revelation, not rational human thought. Or to put it another way, understanding comes by faith, not ***vice-versa***. God's marvels are those things he has chosen to reveal; his mysteries remain yet veiled.

Arguably the most salutary lesson to be learned from the book of **Job** is to be derived from its concluding chapters. Of course, these must be seen in the context of the whole book, but the very fact that God chooses to leave Job in ignorance perfectly summarises all that the Bible has to say on the question of theodicy. Man must learn to trust God even when the reasons for his actions are beyond comprehension. Had any explanation been offered, it would have applied exclusively to Job's experience. Scripture's silence, however, has more universal application. In many ways, Job's intellect is no more advanced at the end of the book that bears his name than it had been at the beginning. But he is no longer frustrated by his ignorance. His faith has remained intact and his fellowship with God duly restored.

In any problem where there is an element of confusion, it is wise to hold on to established certainties. Two that seem to recur throughout Scripture are that God does not change and he is in charge. When God finally does speak, the questions seem superfluous, such is the majesty of his presence. Rather than seek to justify his actions, God simply declares his sovereign power over all that is. We perhaps learn as much from his silence as we do from what is actually said. The theme of God's dialogue is not that man's intellect needs to be sharpened so much as his sense of perspective heightened. The very knowledge of God's awareness should be sufficient to trust him

for the outcome of every difficulty, for it is only in him that we live and move and have our being (cf **Acts 17:28**).

5.3.5 Understanding Without Reason

The key product of Job's having come through tribulation must not be overlooked, for it is the crown of all Christian suffering – maturity. It is this theme that runs throughout the forty-two chapters. In the final analysis, it is often only when we find ourselves in extreme need of a developing and deepening relationship with our God that the therapeutic properties of his Sovereign power can effectively attain their goal in us and through us. Crisis precipitates urgency, which in turn humbles us, this itself being the principal prerequisite for receiving God's grace.

There will remain much that perplexes the mind; many cases of suffering that provoke no easy answers, only hostility, embitterment and rejection. There are instances of innocent suffering that horrify us all and beg a host of queries, unanswered and unanswerable. The highest wisdom is again acknowledged by Job:

> *The Lord said to Job: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"*
>
> *Then Job answered the Lord: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth."*
>
> **(Job 40: 1-4.)**

The conclusion of Job, though failing to bring any further clarity to the enigma of evil, does salve the curiosity. It does so by allowing the enquirer to experience God personally. Whereas before, Job had maintained a life of fidelity and integrity on the basis of second- or third-hand testimony, he was now able to do so for himself. This effectively rendered all questions unnecessary and comparatively insignificant. Temporal reality, when swallowed up by eternal truth, will always and automatically produce a heightened perspective.

Sorrow and grief in this life are inescapable. Contrary to extreme triumphalistic thought, Christians are not exempt from suffering. In fact, if we are to closely follow our Master's example, then we will find that we too learn obedience through chastening **(Heb 5:8)**. It is a sign of our sonship **(12:5-8)**. The book of **Job** records the account of

one man's search for the reason of pain against a continual barrage of verbal abuse from the 'suffering-on-account-of-sin' brigade. The three 'friends' of Job, whilst offering divergent views about the cause of his dilemma, are joined in that they each refuse to allow compassion to interfere with their neat and tidy approach to doctrine. The conclusion we draw from the implications of the book is that it is possible to sin and prosper, as it is equally conceivable to suffer for the sake of righteousness (cf **1 Pet 3:17; 4:16**). The real question is not "Why do I suffer?" but "Who is wise?" In the midst of turmoil, pressure and unresolved conflict, can finite human understanding and intellect really stand in the place of an all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful Creator God? Job does not repent because he finds the answer to his question, but because he submits to a far higher authority than he had hitherto been prepared to acknowledge.

G Campbell Morgan identified three dramatic conflicts of interest in the book of **Job**:

> *The first is controversy between heaven and hell, concerning the earth. The spiritual forces of the universe are graphically revealed in their conflict concerning man.*
>
> *In the second, the controversy is between Job and his friends, in which is revealed the impossibility of understanding the things which appear, by the application to them of measurements which are wholly of time and sense.*
>
> *In the last, the controversy is between Jehovah and Job, in which the consciousness of the greatness of Jehovah is the means by which the triumph of trust is won in the experience of a man.*
>
> (Morgan, 1909: 7.)

Job is seen as a man who, perhaps uniquely, experienced the bitterness of unexplainable suffering. He refused to accept man's wisdom and insight into its possible causes, knowing full well that he did not fall into the categories analysed by his friends. In many ways, the usefulness of Job today is in its universal and timeless appeal. Suffering can indeed be the direct fruit of sin, based on the sowing/reaping principle. It can be both punitive and corrective. But it may also be a means of testing and purification, designed to lead us to closer and more intimate dependence upon God.

Although this analogy does indeed go some way to explaining the presence of evil in the world as wrought by original sin, it does not explain either individual suffering or calamity for innocent victims. Part of the solution is in the problem itself. The conclusion reached by Job is not one attained by the testimony of others but by personal

experience. His pain gave validity to the invisible realm; his temporal troubles led him to the eternal reality that for him gave meaning to life:

> *My ears had heard of you but now my eyes see you.*
>
> **(Job 42:5.)**

Having come through the trial and been restored to fellowship with God, the blessings Job thereafter received are significant in their number. All of his lost possessions were doubled. The reason for this seems clear. His contemporaries could be left in no doubt that this good fortune was by the hand of God – it was no coincidence. It is of equal import that his lost children were dealt with in similar fashion; he was deprived of ten, he received ten more in their place. HL Ellison has the following to say on the matter:

> *In the hour of Job's greatest desperation he had been driven to the hope of life beyond the grave... All earthly things are transient, and so his lost possessions could not be restored, but only replaced and doubled. But by giving him only ten new children God assured him that he would yet meet those he had lost beyond the grave.*
>
> (Ellison, 1958: 127.)

5.3.6 Concluding Remarks

What Job teaches us most about suffering is that the limitations of the human mind make it impossible to render an accurate understanding of the subject. What we do know is that, in distinction from his friends' analyses that Job's suffering must be proof of Jehovistic judgment upon him for some concealed sin, it is actually evidence of God's confidence in the man. Where divine counsel is concerned, formulae prove futile. Any attempt to establish a working code of practice for God's dealings can only find their end in calamity. Patterns of theology that seek to erect concrete borders within which to contain the Creator of the universe are doomed to failure.

One of the conclusions we are permitted to draw from the book, whether by design or incidentally, is that, in antithesis to the common opinion that human suffering is always self-inflicted, we may perceive that this is actually an unfounded evaluation. The 'cause and effect' syndrome frequently attached to affliction, not only in Hebrew culture but also as a conditioning of the human mind, is patently undermined in the message of **Job**. In simple terms, of course, it cannot be denied that the majority of human suffering

can indeed be traced to a discordant relationship between the individual and his/her environment. This was similarly acknowledged in Hebrew culture, though always within the broader parameters of a monistic framework. In other words, and as RK Harrison has pointed out:

> *... the Hebrews ultimately related the incidence of all phenomena to God alone. While it was often assumed that righteous conduct was the precursor of divine blessing in the form of moral and material benefits, it was recognized that the nature of life in society was such that occasionally the innocent might be involved in the fate of the guilty, and that periodically wickedness might flourish unchecked.*
>
> (Harrison, 1979: 1043.)

It is common to presume that the extent of Job's suffering, though undeniably intense, exclusively fell into one or more of three distinct categories: material, emotional, physical. A cursory glance at the evidence would certainly seem to validate such a premise in almost a sequential fashion. His possessions had been taken by force, both of human origin and natural events, which resulted in financial hardship, personal bereavement, distress and disease, a desperate family environment, and contempt from his contemporaries. All this obviously took its toll, placing the full burden of its unrelenting agony upon Job to the point where he cursed the day he had been born. But the spiritual dimension of his misery should not be overlooked. So intense was his sense of religious despoliation that when he has a personal revelation of the Divine Being, what follows by way of material, emotional and physical restoration is almost unnecessary. In some ways, his experience of desolation was the ploughed ground in which the seeds of recognition of his utter dependence upon God could bear fruit.

Gärtner succinctly instructs us that:

> *The book of Job in particular is radical and uncompromising in its attitude to the view of suffering... In his own case Job can acknowledge no causal connexion between guilt and suffering* ***(Job 6:24)****. He comes to see one thing very clearly: that mere man cannot enter into litigation with Almighty God* ***(9:32f)****; and the book therefore ends with a hymn in which God declares his own omnipotence; his inscrutable wisdom reduces men to silence even in the face of unaccountable suffering* ***(38:1-42:6)****. For what man can claim to understand the mysteries of human life or presume to give God counsel or reproof? Thus the book of* ***Job*** *challenges us not to offer blind allegiance to a theological scheme linking sin with suffering, but rather to submit to God himself.*
>
> (in Brown, ed, 1978: 721, vol 3.)

The hymn-writer put it this way:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain

(William Cowper, 1731-1800.)

One way in which theologians can make the path to truth less cluttered is by putting aside any previously attained misconceptions or half-truths, whether denominationally cultivated or personally harboured, concerning the nature of God. I am fully aware that the finite can never fully or appropriately comprehend the infinite. But I am not speaking here of a lack of comprehension: I refer to a misguided or misinformed understanding. The beauty of the book of **Job** in the Old Testament is that the author's primary concern is to do just that. The prologue dictates the agenda. It is one of which the characters are unaware; it is also one that, in this instance at least, the reader has access to. Although Job's friends call his faithfulness into question, that is not the overall tone of the book, for Job is not its central figure – God is. Where we begin our search will often dictate the conclusions we form. This is why in the New Testament,

the writer to the Hebrews so earnestly pleads with his readers to "fix [their] eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of [their] faith" **(Heb 12:1)**.

All suffering, whatever its source or degree, is a trial of faith. The book of **Job** provides ample testimony to this truth. Of all possible avenues to pursue in the midst of suffering, such as self-pity, self-assertion, self-accusation and self-discipline, only self-surrender is a viable option. Such abandonment is not giving in to the weight of the difficulty or intensity of pain, much less forsaking hope. It is to yield to the goodness of God. As John Stott puts it:

> *The reasonableness of trust lies in the known trustworthiness of its object. And no-one is more trustworthy than the God of the cross. The cross assures us that there is no possibility of a miscarriage of justice or of the defeat of love.*
>
> (Stott, 1986: 328.)

5.4 JEREMIAH – A MAN OF RESOLVE

Although the book of **Jeremiah** as found in the Old Testament contains a number of literary genres, RK Harrison is right to affirm that, in spite of such diversity, "there is a remarkable coherence of language and thought-forms" (Harrison, 1973: 29).

5.4.1 Personal Background

As far as Jeremiah himself is concerned, it is virtually impossible to construct an exhaustive biography from the biblical data available to us. Prior to his calling to prophetic office we know nothing, and even after that there is but an outline of his life as it relates to the message he brought. Add this to the complexity of details that are at our disposal and the reader will perhaps begin to understand the difficulty that exists in formulating a composite picture of Jeremiah the man. There is much, however, that we can infer for the purpose of his place amongst those who serve as an example of extreme suffering.

He was born into a priestly family, possibly a descendant of Abiathar, who had served as David's priest but been deposed by Solomon. If this possibility could be proven, then Jeremiah would thereby claim direct descent through Eli to Moses. His name can mean

either 'the LORD exalts' or 'the LORD throws down', doubtless symbolic of his parents' desire to see a return to pure worship in Judah. In him we see such a typical representation of the Christ that many in Israel thought Jesus to be a further manifestation of Jeremiah (cf **Mt 16:14**). He was a man capable of so many extreme emotions simultaneously, not through being fickle, weak-willed or unbalanced, but because he constantly battled with the spirit against the flesh. He could be both mellow and purposeful, loving and rigorous, tolerant and at the same time severe. As one commentator puts it: "The tragedy of [Jeremiah's] life springs from the conflicts which raged within and around him... which... compelled him to find in God a refuge" (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 561.)

We may presume that Jeremiah was a similar age to the young king, Josiah. He may have been instructed at home in the traditions of his people, his early preaching bearing all the features of one acquainted with and influenced by the prophet Hosea. It is unclear whether Jeremiah was formally trained in priestly matters, though his heritage alone would have no doubt educated him as to the obligations and responsibilities associated with the priesthood. This appreciation clearly conditioned Jeremiah's hostility towards the clergy of his own generation. As a keen student of Yahweh's covenant law, it is little wonder that he found the syncretism of paganism with Judah's religion so repulsive. Whilst we must be careful how far we consider the possibilities without due warrant, it seems safe to suggest that when the call of God came, it was not to a heart that was totally unprepared.

His initial reluctance to accept the responsibility of the prophetic office was as much a credit to his humility as it was a realisation of the enormity of the task before him. There even seems to be evidence that suggests Jeremiah never felt comfortable about his prophetic gifting (cf **Jer 1:6; 20:7; 23:9**). Perhaps he resisted any association with those of his peers who abused the privilege and this brought the genre into disrepute. It seems a strange factor of the human condition that those who are least recognised by men as suitable candidates are often the ones most gifted by God.

Jeremiah never married. It is quite feasible that this was because he had a sense of the gravity of his calling and the seriousness of pending judgment for Judah from an early age. His first recorded message is hardly the nervous mutterings of a debutant. Provoked by godly indignation, Jeremiah savagely thundered against the prevailing

apostasy and warned of the potential consequences of their ingratitude concerning God's gracious provision. Lack of moral integrity, deficiency of faithfulness to their covenant obligations and a positive running after strange deities had all contributed to the nation's dire predicament.

Such a description might easily conjure an image of religious zealot, so full of truth that he was totally devoid of grace. His accusers conveniently chose to so present him. The fact is, however, that in amongst Jeremiah's vehement opposition to what Judah had become, was compassion for their condition and hope that all was not irretrievably lost. Though he probably welcomed reform initially (despite views to the contrary), he grew to realise that nothing short of repentance could have any permanent value. If we may deduce anything from Scripture about Jeremiah's later attitude towards Josiah's reforms, then it is that he was dissatisfied with the long-term results, not necessarily their initiation. Jeremiah was not a born pessimist; he adopted a proclivity towards pessimism based on a realistic evaluation of the facts of a degenerated social, religious, moral and political framework – and this on a national scale.

In many respects, we struggle to find too many similarities between the Old Testament prophets; such was their variety of temperament, social class, levels of tact and diplomacy, and geographical sphere of ministry. However, they do share at least two things in common – they were all totally committed to the God of Israel and they were equally united in their belief that the words they spoke were of divine origin. Their emphases were as diverse as they themselves, but each carried the same potency; Yahweh is strategically involved in his own purposes for the world in general and his covenant people in particular.

5.4.2 Historical Background

The background to Judah's state of affairs at the time of Jeremiah must be understood in some measure if we are to grasp anything of the man's frustrations and sufferings. The time of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry coincided with a period of intense political activity in the ancient Near East that was to have devastating repercussions for God's covenant people. During his lifetime, he saw both the collapse of the Assyrian empire, which had previously subdued the northern kingdom of Israel, and the ascendancy of the Babylonian regime, which proved a worthy match even for the might of the

Egyptian army (see **2 Kgs 24:7**). In Judah meantime, crisis followed crisis, with national instability compounded by events going on elsewhere. Periods of relative independence were all too sparse, as dominion changed hands between the three controlling powers.

Jeremiah's ministry effectively ran from 626 to 587 BC, covering the reigns of the last five kings of Judah. The nation had adopted much of the idolatry and paganism of her near-neighbours (cf **Jer 7:30, 31; 19:3-5; 32:32-35**). As a result, she was to follow in the footsteps of the northern kingdom by being carried into exile, this time at the hands of a newly emerging power, Babylon **(25:8-11)**. Alien to Judean nationalistic thought came Jeremiah's declaration to his countrymen that they should accept the inevitable and yield to their captors **(29:4-6)**. His words were considered to be both treacherous and blasphemy. Not only was he advocating surrender, he dared to also suggest that Yahweh is impotent to prevent their downfall. The truth was that because of Judah's rebellion, God's hand was actively against them and that their captivity was, in fact, divine judgment for backsliding on such a national scale.

Thanks chiefly to over-ambition and the effects of war finally taking their toll, Assyrian might began to subside. By the time of its collapse, the young Josiah was on Judah's throne and Jeremiah was on the verge of his calling as a prophet. In the aftermath of Assyria's struggle against the combined attack of Babylon and Media, Judah became a free country once more. From early in his youthful reign, Josiah began to seek the God of his ancestral heritage **(2 Chr 34:3)**. Within a few short years, he had begun to realign national policy in a manner more befitting a country that could legitimately and exclusively claim to be God's chosen nation.

There seemed to be a bright future for Judah. Bizarrely, however, Scripture tells us nothing of the long-term effectiveness of Josiah's plans. The Bible paints a glowing picture of Josiah's reign as demonstrably the best king to rule the divided southern kingdom (cf **2 Kgs 23:25**). His reforms and strict adherence to them during his lifetime no doubt account for much of this eulogy, but if the expectation was for a legacy of national repentance ushering in an age of covenant righteousness, then it cannot be said to have succeeded.

For those who anticipated more radical and enduring fruit from Josiah's efforts, Jeremiah among them, there was only disillusionment. The discovery of the Book of the Law had promised much **(2 Chr 34:14-32)**, but its legalistic imposition stifled the prophetic voice that was beginning to be heard once more in Judah. However much of a paradox it may seem to be, the fastidious employment of this new-found Deuteronomic law probably did ultimately contribute to Judah's complacency. It is almost as if the reform itself had become an object of worship rather than the God of whom the reform gave direction.

Social justice and economic policies that promote 'getting back to basics' are always to be applauded. Such was the essence of King Josiah's reforms (see **2 Kgs 23:4-25**). External reformation without any inner transformation, however, merely amounts to an exercise in papering over the cracks. Jeremiah recognised this in his day, which is a salutary lesson for every successive generation. It is an issue of the heart. Worship without relationship is idolatry, even if the object of such praise is Yahweh. He will not be simply added to a growing list of socially acceptable deities. He is a jealous God because he is the only true God. He commands a relationship, the essence of which is moral and spiritual. The valid expression of such a relationship is no less moral and spiritual.

The year of Josiah's death (609 BC) also signalled the end of Judah's freedom as a nation. Prior to this, government policy had been such that Manasseh systematically and effectively repudiated all the reforms that his father Hezekiah had initiated (see **2 Chr 29:3ff**). In subjection to Assyria, who commanded at least nominal recognition of their astral deities, Manasseh went far beyond a mere perfunctory compliance. Local shrines were restored, pagan practices were actively encouraged, temple prostitution associated with the fertility cults became common-place, even within the holy temple, and occultism was rapidly growing in popularity (see **2 Kgs 21:3-5**). Just when things seemed to be at their lowest point imaginable, there were reports of human sacrifice, anathema to all true children of the covenant **(2 Kgs 21:6)**.

Far from bringing a period of peace and stability, Assyria's demise actually added to Palestine's already growing insecurity and uncertainty. There was an empire waiting to be claimed and a number of interested parties, including Babylon, Media and Egypt. Media effectively took herself out of the equation as far as posing any threat to Judah

was concerned by restricting her efforts elsewhere. The rival ambitions of Babylon and Egypt, however, proved a fatal cocktail of conflict for Judah, especially as she was caught in the geographical centre of their mutual hostilities. Eventually, the Babylonian army won the day **(Jer 46:2)** and it was only a matter of time before Judah's king was nothing more than the vassal of a far greater imperial power (see **Dan 1:1**).

Judah's morality declined once more under Jehoiakim. Clearly unfit to rule, Jehoiakim displayed the true state of his heart by insisting upon a new palace from which to flaunt his heritage **(Jer 22:13, 14)**, despite lack of both financial means and regal wisdom. Jeremiah's confrontation with him set the pattern for their relationship thenceforth. He challenged the spoilt king to consider the hallmarks of royal leadership; a luxurious lifestyle or covenant faithfulness **(vv 15, 16)**. Jeremiah's position increasingly became as one who was subject to hatred, harassment, opposition and abuse. He belonged to an exclusive ministry, which dwindled as others who shared his conviction were put to death **(2 Kgs 22:20-23)**.

5.4.3 Getting to Grips with Reality

The confessions of Jeremiah are unparalleled in the whole of Old Testament literature. Seldom are we treated to anything approaching such an honest self-appraisal and genuine sense of inadequacy at one's calling. Not even David's Psalm of repentance after the episode with Bathsheba comes close (see **Psm 51**). This is no mere attempt to display sorrow in some Uriah Heep-like fashion. Neither do we see in the book that bears his name two concurrent narratives as if theme **b)** is Jeremiah at home, offered to balance theme **a)**, which is Jeremiah at the office. On the contrary, his self-analysis of incompetence is the product of his prophetic vocation.

Jeremiah's agonising frustration is captured in the heartfelt cry to God: "I would speak with you about justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" **(Jer 12:1)**. The repetitive sound of Jeremiah's plea has echoed through the ages. It is still to be found on the lips of the suffering saints. Whilst no definitive conclusion may be reached, given that Scripture offers no such riposte, several notes can be identified that may help to ease the discomfort of such a dilemma.

First of all, it must be pointed out that God often uses the wicked as instruments of fulfilling his purposes. Any accompanying good fortune may indeed be viewed as divine protection; whilst possible resultant well-being may, in fact, be but a temporal reward. Similarly, there is an element of common grace extended to all for the sake of God's elect.

Another clue might be that God's long-suffering is to leave the unrepentant without excuse (see **Rev 2:21**), so that when they are judged it will be seen that such judgment is perfectly just. No-one will be able to cry "Innocent!" to the charges brought against them. It is also not entirely correct to say that the wicked prosper, for this is patently not true of all the wicked. Not even those who can rightfully claim to be of the household of faith are immune from God exercising his retributive justice towards them. This is as valid under the new covenant as it was in the old (cf **Num 25:14, 15; Acts 5:1-10**).

5.4.4 Challenge to a Nation

From the outset, Jeremiah tackles the problem in Judah head on. The nation had become corrupt. Faithfulness had given way to idolatry, love had been replaced by selfishness, and commitment was now expressed in apostasy. God's gracious provision throughout Israel's history was forgotten in the euphoria of their so-called 'developed' religion, gleaning whatever they considered to be profitable from other nations' faiths. The life-giving flow of God's eternal spring had become muddied somehow and, despite repeated calls for them to renew their allegiance, Judah must bear the consequences for her continued rebellion. Judgment was now inevitable. Bondage, degeneration and complacency could not be averted by mere words of devotion when their actions clearly contradicted their meaningless 'prayers'.

The faith of Israel faced a monumental and, certainly in terms of intensity, unprecedented threat. It was not that they had necessarily committed an act of wholesale abandonment of the national religion. In many ways, that may have proved a problem less difficult to deal with. But they had allowed their integrity to become compromised to such a degree that the exercise of pagan rituals was accommodated within the context of a by now bedraggled monotheism. It was an all too short step from the Assyrian practice of worshipping heavenly bodies as astral deities to Judah giving more than due recognition to angelic beings. Were that ever to be realised, then Yahweh would

effectively be reduced in their thinking to nothing more than the head of a pantheistic infrastructure. In this context, it is all too easy to see how Israel paying scant regard to God's covenant with them so quickly produced a lapse in the fulfilment of their covenantal obligations. Hostility and injustice were the order of the day **(Zeph 1:9; 3:1-7)**.

It was in the context of this kind of background that Jeremiah felt so much anguish. Time and again, he declared that religious symbolism meant nothing if it was not a time for reflection on that which it had come to represent. Circumcision as a God-given token of covenant relationship was devalued if the covenant obligations had been broken (cf **Jer 6:10; 9:26**). Similarly, devotion to the Temple, its sacrificial systems and hierarchical priesthood was without merit unless it revolved around a heart that was committed to Yahweh **(7:4-26)**.

Reinforcing his message with a sequence of pictorial metaphors, Jeremiah compares Judah's rebellion to that of a bride who has broken faith with her husband, resulting in spiritual divorce. He goes on to speak of her as a well-watered vine that has turned wild. Even the natural events of Jeremiah's personal life served as parabolic illustrations. His celibacy was to be a sign of the barrenness about to befall his people, a visit to the potter's house to break a finished pot depicted the irreparable damage with which Judah would shortly be afflicted, and a vision of two baskets of figs (one good, the other bad) told their own story. Jeremiah boldly spoke out against the corrupt priest, false prophet and unfaithful shepherd alike, so sure of his calling was he.

By now, Judah's immediate destiny was no longer a precarious one – it was too late for that. In the words of RK Harrison:

> *Loyalty and obedience were fundamental to any true spiritual relationship with God, and if this kind of motivation did not characterize both life and worship there could be no real expectation of blessing for the nation.*
>
> (Harrison, 1973: 41.)

Even in the midst of such utterances, Jeremiah was swift to remind his people that judgment could yet be averted, but only by repentance **(Jer 4:3-31)**. Superficial promises to try harder had failed before and would again prove futile. Circumcision must be of the heart if it is ever to be productive. Because the catastrophe from the north

had the divine seal of approval on it, Jeremiah warns of the folly of combat. Still the rich oppressed the poor, false prophets spoke deception and priests dishonoured their office. And yet God appealed to them to seek righteous paths, but to no avail.

Jeremiah's disposition was largely the result of him having a measure of the sense of abomination with which God regards idolatry. Baal, Molech, and the queen of heaven are all treated with similar disdain. Worship of false gods on such a widespread scale was intolerable enough, but a combination of this and its resultant immorality, often expressed in the practice of child sacrifice, was almost too much for mere flesh to bear. A lack of respect for God's law almost inevitably produces a generation of lawlessness. Those charged with the responsibility to remind Israel of its heritage were often the ones most guilty of promoting carnality and profligacy (cf **Jer 6:13-15; 14:14**). In what seemed to be almost a prototype for later Pharisaism, priest and prophet alike remained fervently and bizarrely passionate about ceremonial law at the expense of their moral obligations.

Jeremiah was neither a pacifist nor pro-Babylonian. He simply spoke the words and visions he had been given. Yet even after the captivity had begun, those who remained in Jerusalem were speaking of swift victory for Judah. After all, they argued, they were God's people. When the city was laid to siege, Jeremiah's counsel was simple – "Surrender!" **(Jer 34:1-7)**. Because of his stance, Jeremiah is often perceived as a prophet of doom and gloom. But his countenance was conditioned by the prevailing culture. The fact that he was not committed to resistance did not thereby make him a traitor. To advise submission gave him no pleasure at all. Indeed, when offered secure passage by the invading hordes, who themselves believed Jeremiah to be pro-Babylonian, he steadfastly refused **(40:1-6)**. Neither was he a pacifist in the modern understanding of the term. Jeremiah shared an understanding with his compatriots that Yahweh was indeed involved in the struggle, but that he was actively engaged against Judah.

Jeremiah did not set out with the intentions of being a prophet of gloom and despair. Indeed, he did not even seek out the prophetic office and on more than one occasion would have gladly given it up, were that possible. His motivating desire was to see Judah's relationship with Yahweh fully restored on the basis of the previously established covenant. As he came to terms with the resoluteness of Judah's apostasy,

however, so he came to realise the remoteness of such a prospect. The more fearless he became in pronouncing divine judgment on the national level, the more fearsome was the hostility directed towards him. In fact, so characteristic was he of the pathos displayed by Jesus some six hundred years later, that the latter was identified with Jeremiah in public opinion.

5.4.5 A Glimmer of Hope

Despite all this, however, Jeremiah's message of judgment carried with it a thread of godly optimism. Judah's pending exile was certain, but their release from captivity was also guaranteed **(Jer 25:11; 29:10)**. This was not a later addition to Jeremiah's original message in the face of hostility, as some attempt to appear less confrontational. He spoke of Judah's survival from the very beginning of his ministry **(3:14-25)**. As the twilight of Judah's faithfulness grew darker, so the glimmer of hope in Jeremiah's words intensified **(23:1-8; 30-33)**. When Judah's night was at its darkest, Jeremiah's message shone all the more brightly **(32:1-15)**.

Jeremiah was undoubtedly a prophet of judgment; he was equally one of hope. Striving to draw the hearts and minds of his fellows away from an immoral reliance upon the surrounding nations and an idolatrous dependence upon their gods, he preached only the kingdom of God. Prophet, priest, layman and city official alike taunted, ridiculed, beat and imprisoned him for his faithfulness, but still Jeremiah remained true to the revelation with which he had been blessed. Jeremiah was not popular – prophets of truth seldom are. His address book would not have been bulging with the contact details of close friends. But he was deeply sensitive, acutely conscious of his calling, resolute in mind and spirit, and unashamedly a worshipper of the one true God in Israel.

Although divine judgment and Jeremiah's personal frustrations are prominent throughout the book that bears his name, there *is* a positive thread that is difficult to ignore, as the introductory notes of the New International Version Study Bible point out:

> *Jeremiah's message illuminated the distant as well as the near horizon. It was false prophets who proclaimed peace to a rebellious nation, as though the God of Israel's peace was indifferent to her unfaithfulness. But the very God who compelled Jeremiah to denounce sin and pronounce judgment was the God who authorised him to announce that the divine wrath had its bounds, its 70 years. Afterwards, forgiveness and cleansing would come –*

and a new day in which all the old expectations, aroused by God's past acts and his promises and covenants, would yet be fulfilled in a manner transcending all God's mercies of old.

(NIV Study Bible, 1987: 1098.)

The message Jeremiah brought was as misunderstood as the man himself. It was his appointed responsibility to proclaim God's indictment against the apostasy of his own chosen people and so usher in the end of an era. But also prominent in the words of Jeremiah was the news that Yahwistic mercy and covenant faithfulness would finally prevail. Rebellion had brought its own reward; repentance would pave the way for restoration, the basis of which was to be a ***new*** covenant, far superior to the old one that now seemed to have failed. It was to be a law written on the fleshy hearts of God's people by his Spirit **(31:31-34)**, prompting them internally, not accusing as an external schoolmaster. David's house would again rule in righteousness and faithful priests would once more serve the Lord. The guarantee of such a day was as firm as creation itself.

In chapter **33**, Jeremiah spells out exactly the kind of restoration Israel can expect. Yahweh's sovereignty is reiterated. He is the source of all power, knowledge and life, and as such has a perfect plan of redemption, which he is working out according to his predetermined will. History is not merely a collection of random events taking place in time. They are the "all things" working together for good, having been decreed in the counsel of the Godhead. Where there is grief, God desires jubilation; where calamity, he chooses success; were it not for sin, then we would find the righteous walk to be free from burden. Jeremiah declared the way to spiritual prosperity, but it could only find expression in the promise of the Messianic hope, David's greater Son, Jesus Christ.

From the depths of his personal anguish, Jeremiah will have taken no pleasure from the fact that the course of history fully vindicated the validity of his office – but vindicated he was. The level of apostasy he witnessed was nothing short of arguably the most grievous sin imaginable for the people of God – covenant-breaking. There were many ways in which this could be expressed and Judah seemed particularly adept at discovering new ones, and with increasing intensity. They all amounted to the same thing, however, and their ritual sacrifices offered by way of appeasement were considered reprehensible by a God for whom exclusive allegiance was non-negotiable.

Cultic corruption had replaced faithfulness amongst prophet, priest and king alike. They had each effectively abdicated their peculiar responsibilities as custodians of the law. Gone were the days of moral and righteous integrity; gone, too, were days when these highly respected officials simply turned a blind eye to immorality and idolatry – they actively encouraged them.

Few men are capable of enduring all that Jeremiah faced in his lifetime without being affected either emotionally or mentally (or both). Jeremiah was neither unbalanced nor unstable, but he was human. As such, he often became angry, inconsolable and, on occasion, desperately suicidal. In many ways, he was hardly the model victim, his reaction to those who opposed him being singularly lacking in mercy. His isolation fostered bouts of loneliness, the hostility attracted by his office provoking a longing to abandon his calling. He even railed against God for taking advantage of his vulnerability at an early age **(Jer 15:15-18; 20:7)**, arguing that his confidence in this fount of living water had become a dry brook in his hour of dire thirst (cf **2:13; 15:18**). At the point of abject humiliation, Jeremiah agonisingly cried to be allowed the peace that only death could bring **(20:14-18)**.

But Jeremiah was not a quitter. Despite his despair, he was compelled to honour his calling. Indeed, it was his own sense of inadequacy that became his greatest strength. Not simply because he was naturally ill-equipped for the challenge ahead, but that he acknowledged the fact and thus realised that he needed to draw on divine resources if he was to achieve his purpose in God. Convinced that Babylon was to be Yahweh's vehicle of bringing judgment upon Judah, little remained for Jeremiah except to proclaim the coming disaster as of divine appointment. Resistance was futile; the moment of opportunity had passed. Despite his conviction, however, when the moment finally arrived we do not find Jeremiah to be given to smugness or self-vindication, but as one who is heart-broken, lamenting the suffering of his people and who would have probably preferred to have been proved wrong.

5.4.6 Weeping Prophet

Jeremiah had been acutely aware of his calling from an early age. His sense of vocation was as intense as the feeling of inadequacy, his reluctance always in tension with the knowledge of Yahweh's presence with him. It is perhaps ironic that for a man so

patriotic, he should be perceived by his fellows as a traitor; strange, too, that for one so compassionate, he should be viewed as insensitive. Jeremiah's personal heartache caused him to pursue intimate relationship with his God, firm in the belief that the exile of which he spoke, though of divine conception, would last for but a season.

A précis of Jeremiah's life almost mirrors that of the apostle Paul, when the latter recounts his death threats, shipwrecks, stonings and ill-treatment by his own fellows **(2 Cor 11:25)**. Jeremiah's experience, too, was one of persecution **(Jer 15:15-18)**, being plotted against **(11:18-23)**, imprisonment **(20:2)**, and being pronounced deserving of death **(26:10ff)**. And his crime? To simply stand resolutely and alone against the hypocrisy and apostasy of those who were known by God's name. Jeremiah's life was one of apparent contradictions, a series of paradoxes that betrayed his inner turmoil. A man of meekness and tenacity, at once both all-embracing and exclusive, is there any better example in the Old Testament of one so engaged in the battle of flesh and spirit? He, too, was hated by those he loved, this fervent patriot accused of treachery. It is perhaps exactly because of such ignominy that Jeremiah pursued his God all the more as his only hope and refuge. Anguish, despair, a sense of utter helplessness and futility, coupled with a perception of abject self-failure are a tragic combination if they do not conclude in a relationship with God. But Jeremiah's concept of Yahweh was as Creator and sovereign Ruler, who governs all things in accordance with his divine will **(25:15-38)**.

In an age where success is measured in terms of political correctness, prosperity and popularity, Jeremiah will no doubt be deemed as an unmitigated failure. Spiritually, however, he was a giant. Despised in life, his legacy today is that of one not necessarily unafraid to swim against the tide of public opinion, but unwilling to allow such natural fear to prevent him from doing so. It would be grossly unfair to accuse Jeremiah of being resolutely opposed to the sacrificial system in Judah as inherently repugnant to Yahweh ***per se***. He saw it rather as an invalid external display unless indexed to an inner disposition, the evidence of which would be a lifestyle marked by obedience.

Jeremiah was a man who was acutely sensitive to the prompting of the Spirit of God. His evaluation of the political situation was underpinned by his understanding of the spiritual condition. His judgment, therefore, was concise, candid and clear-cut. He was also a prophet who, arguably like no other before him, understood perfectly the concept

of covenant in relation to Yahweh and his people. Covenant blessings demanded covenant obligations. Otherwise, there should be little surprise that covenant penalties are eventually imposed.

Although Jeremiah was not unique in the fact of his suffering, even amongst those who had been called to the prophetic office, there seems to have been a definite shift of emphasis in the way his suffering made a significant contribution to him carrying out his prophetic duties. Others before him had been frustrated that their messages seemed to go unheeded, some even suffered persecution because of their oracles, but Jeremiah's affliction was in itself a prophetic declaration. He was a witness not by virtue of charisma, but in the expression of his humanity.

5.5 SUMMARY

Joseph, Job and Jeremiah – three very different characters, but all men of destiny, men of patience and men of resolve. Each of them experienced a measure of suffering that contributed towards the development of their relationship with God. Indeed, it may also be said that without the basis of a relationship with Yahweh, it is doubtful whether such adversity would have produced the results it did. But not only was their affliction part of a positive process, they each affected others for good, even if the beneficiaries failed to acknowledge it at the time.

Having endured half a lifetime of hostility and apparent evil, Joseph finally emerged the desired vessel, suitably refined to take on the task of saving his generation. Job, from a position of faith, ultimately found the object of his faith more personal than he had previously understood. Jeremiah, out of an acknowledgment of inner weakness and sense of inadequacy, became resolute in the face of increasing hostility towards the message he had to bring. Each served God's purpose in their own setting by their example of suffering as a test of faith; that they continue to do so is a testimony to their lasting legacy.

In this chapter, we have seen examples of real suffering by individuals who were innocent in all but their identification with human sin. Each came to the conclusion, through first-hand experience, that suffering in no way impinged upon their understanding of God's omnipotence or justice.

6.0 THE SUFFERINGS OF ISRAEL

6.1 OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

6.1.1 Introduction

The formulation of the problem of suffering as outlined in the Old Testament is arguably the most comprehensive survey there is from the point of view of theistic religion. Given that this also presents the fundamental background to our understanding of New Testament theology, we do well to search its contents intently. The successive compilation of its documents in the developing history of Israel also liberates its value from any accusation of either convention or manipulation. What is consistent, despite the lessons to be learned from the book of **Job**, is the belief in moral consciousness. Simply put, this found expression in the understanding that if men were just, merciful and continued to walk in humility before God, then they fully expected to prosper. This was the essence of their faith and is, in many respects, highly commendable. The difficulty arose, however, when the antithesis proved equally true. In other words, if they did not prosper, then they must have violated their covenant obligations.

It must be observed that Scripture offers little that would satisfy the philosophical mind concerning suffering in general. It does speak extensively, however, about the sufferings of God's people under both New and Old Testaments. Nevertheless, there remains an expansive mystery as not all suffering on the part of the saints may be attributed to an infringement of covenant responsibilities. Even under the terms and conditions of the Mosaic law, which seemed to offer some clarity on the issues of cause and effect, there are frequent examples of the wicked in Israel prospering, while the righteous were afflicted. Similarly, God's judgment against apostasy was often meted out on a tribal or national scale, which in reality meant that the godly suffered the same fate as the wicked.

6.1.2 From Moses to Joshua

For the Old Testament saints, the question of theodicy (or at least the concept that the word has come to represent) was inextricably linked to the providence of God. Faith in such providential care developed as an essential response to Israel being delivered from the bondage of Egypt to the land of promise. The years in between were certainly ones of divine provision, as they journeyed from town to town, fought battles against hostile peoples and spent a considerable part of the intervening period in wilderness conditions.

Suffering was thereby not regarded as necessarily evil, but of essentially therapeutic value and, therefore, a token of divine favour. In this sense, a positive victory is won over evil, for it is robbed of its negative effect. This is not to say, of course, that suffering was particularly welcomed, much less eagerly anticipated, but it did perhaps ensure a more appropriate sense of perspective when the degree of suffering allowed for the possibility of behavioural remedy.

Contrary to much contemporary thought that law is restrictive and may often be regarded as an infringement of civil liberties (eg Schuller, 1986), the design of God's law is to prevent human exploitation. It is meant to protect the disenfranchised from tyrannical rule, the poverty-stricken from the self-indulgent, and orphans and widows from those who might otherwise take improper advantage of their lowly plight. In the Old Testament, for example, the law preventing the charge of excess interest on a loan was to protect the needs of those who had fallen on difficult times financially through no fault of their own. Even the principle of Jubilee Year, in which all property would automatically to its rightful owners, ensured that land, labour and rights of freedom were never sold, only hired out for a fixed period.

In many ways, the Pentateuch may be perceived as a preamble to all that follows in Scripture. Not only is it the gateway to God's dealings with mankind, it also serves as an indicator of how man will relate to his Creator, both in general terms and more specifically in the history of Israel. The account continues after the death of Moses when Joshua, his appointed successor, leads God's chosen people into the land of promise. The lessons of Egypt still fresh in their memories, Israel had every opportunity to display God's goodness in all the earth – if only they would learn from their own shortcomings.

6.1.3 Towards the Monarchy

Following Joshua's death, Israel soon struggled to adapt to life as a settled nation in a land overrun with the pagan religions of their near-neighbours. Too often they found it easier to lapse into syncretistic Baal worship than to be bound together by their common faith. This period proved to be transitional, falling as it did between the initial conquest of the land and the institution of the monarchy. Strictly speaking, the judges were really administrators of justice, raised up specifically for the task of leading God's people from rebellion, through repentance and on to recovery against a harsh backdrop of foreign hostility and tribal weakness. The theme of the **Judges'** period is two-fold. We read first of the continual failure of the Israelites to remain faithful to Yahweh, and then we see ever more clearly the grace of God being extended towards his people in loving forgiveness. The root of their backsliding was compromise; the response demanded to have blessing restored was commitment. Where God required active worship, Israel offered only apostasy into their relationship. Mesopotamia, Moab, Hazor, Midian, Ammon and Philistia were successively employed to bring God's people to their senses, the swiftness of their restoration matched only by their subsequent return to rebellion.

As God's chosen people, Israel did not immediately see themselves as anything other than recipients of divine protection, blessing and chastisement. It did not occur to them that such favour might be to equip them for some ambassadorial role to other nations. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that for the large part, other people groups were only considered at all inasmuch as their history coincided with that of Israel. It was not until the time of the prophets that such boundaries were expanded. Inter-communal responsiveness gradually increased as foreign cultures were seen to have value both commercially and economically. Sadly, however, Israel leapt from exclusivism to all-embracing universalism without allowing sound judgment to dictate their choices.

In the early stages, accounts were retold of God having demonstrated his covenant integrity merely by way of giving testimony to that faithfulness, not necessarily as an example of expectation. Such providential care almost exclusively centred on either certain leading figures, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Gideon or Samson, or on national corporeity as in the exodus. It was not really until the time of Jeremiah that lesser individuals began to see themselves as equal beneficiaries of divine providence. Under the conditions of the covenant, however, this not only brought with it the

anticipation of blessing for obedience, but also in the sense of a heavenly Father/earthly son relationship, paternal correction as a source of testing and refinement.

The whole history of Israel, as presented in the Old Testament, is a chequered affair indeed. From entering Canaan under Theocratic rule to conquering the land as a monarchy, there were few plateaux on the landscape – only peaks and troughs. Seldom do we read of successive triumphs, except perhaps in the early part of David's reign. For much of the rest of the time, the pattern of the **Judges'** period is typical. Israel's backsliding caused God to withdraw his protection; the people would then repent, effecting divine forgiveness and, after a season of prosperity, the sequence would recommence.

This pattern continued throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Israel's desire for a king "such as all the other nations" had **(1 Sam 8:5)** was perhaps born of militaristic ego as much as it was a need for national identity. From the time of the monarchy onward, two contrasting patterns seem to emerge in Israel's history. First of all, the poor in spirit are seen to be blessed; secondly, the proud of heart degenerate into profligacy and ultimately death. The first king was 'a disaster waiting to happen'. Chosen solely on the basis of his natural ability and intellect, Saul soon betrayed his heart. Displays of jealousy, envy, rage and murderous intent quickly saw an end to his dynasty and the beginning of that of David. Things began well for Saul's successor, but before long David's moral laxity by way of adultery, deception and murder brought its own reward. Yet the glimmer of encouragement in all of this is God's boundless grace towards a truly penitent heart.

6.1.4 A Kingdom Divided

According to the biblical narrative, the division of the kingdom following Solomon's death was in many ways inevitable. Essentially the nation of Israel rebelled against Rehoboam because he had revolted against the kingship of Yahweh, yet for the sake of God's covenant with David, a portion would remain. Jeroboam's return from exile in Egypt fuelled the north/south divide to such an extent that only Judah and (ironically) Benjamin remained loyal to the house of David in Jerusalem. Following his proclamation as 'king of Israel' by the remaining ten tribes, Jeroboam quickly turned the hearts of the people to run after pagan gods. This was an act that arguably more than

any other paved the way for foreign ascendancy by Assyria in 722 BC. Judah fared a little better, their decline being momentarily postponed by the reforms of first Hezekiah and then Josiah. Repentance was short-lived, however, and the south too became captive to another rising power, Babylon, in 587 BC.

God often uses very different circumstances in his people to affect the same results. We can see in the object lesson of Job, for instance, both similarity and contrast with the way in which God deals with other individuals of the Hebrew Scriptures. The language of David in **Psalm 49** is reminiscent of **Job**'s words in chapter **30**, insomuch that each of them was led to a similar destination though by an entirely different route. When we analyse chapters **3** of both **Job** and **Lamentations**, we find again that for Jeremiah and Job there was a familiar expression of grief at the moment of their most severe trials. It is noteworthy, too, that the same words were uttered by Elisha when Elijah departed this earth as were spoken by King Jehoash at Elisha's demise, though they were very different departures. Elijah was translated by a chariot of fire, not having tasted death, whilst Elisha simply had an "illness from which he died". Yet both events produced the same response in those who observed their final moments: "My father, my father... the chariots and horsemen of Israel" (cf **2 Kgs 2:12; 13:14**).

Despite their differences historically, the one unifying theme of the two kingdoms was the depth of their degeneration, if not the rate. The reason for the fall of both Israel and Judah is oft-repeated throughout the books of the **Kings** – they forsook the Lord their God, turning instead to pagan idolatry, in clear breach of their covenant obligations. Alongside a continuing prophetic voice were the false prophets, who spoke only to please the royal throne in order to be rewarded for their lies. By contrast, the men of God were often severely punished, and in some cases murdered for their unfaltering obedience.

Judah's history was chequered by comparison with that of the northern kingdom, who never had a godly king from Jeroboam to Hoshea. Even in their hour of dire need, Israel failed to turn to Yahweh for help, instead looking to their former captors, Egypt, to come to their rescue against the Assyrians. It is perhaps significant that the last monarch of each kingdom, Hoshea (meaning 'Saviour') and Zedekiah (meaning 'the Lord's righteousness'), should particularly fail to live up to their names, and yet both ministries were especially fulfilled in David's promised son, Jesus Christ.

6.1.5 An Overview of the Old Testament Concept of Suffering

For an understanding of the biblical uses of the English word 'suffer' in most current translations of the original languages, one need look no further than the scholarly insight of RB Edwards:

> *'Suffer' in the sense of 'feel pain or anguish' renders a wide variety of Hebrew terms; in the N*[ew] *T*[estament] *it usually represents the Greek **'pascho'**, but also occasionally **'kakopatheo'**, **'synkakopatheo'** ('share in suffering') and **'sympascho'**. Hebrew has no general word for the passive experience of suffering; hence the infrequency of the word in English versions of the O*[ld] *T*[estament]... *rendered... by such expressions as 'affliction', 'distress', 'grief', 'misery', 'oppression', 'pain', 'plague', 'sorrow', 'straits', 'travail', 'tribulation', 'vexation', 'woe'.*
>
> (in Bromiley, ed, 1988: 649.)

Edwards goes on to identify the word 'suffer' as being used in the sense of enduring an unpleasant experience. He informs us that in such cases: "'suffer' primarily represents the Hebrew '***nasa***', '***raqah***' or Greek '***anechomai***' and '***lambano***' in the context of suffering reproach, disgrace, fools gladly and mocking." It may also be used in connection with affliction, loss, wrong and hunger (Hebrew '***ana***', '***raheb***'; Greek '***zemioo***', '***adikeo***').

As a broad overview of the Old Testament perception of suffering, it is possible to identify six distinct categories:

i) Retributive Suffering

The most comprehensive principle of suffering as portrayed in the Old Testament is in the ***retributive*** sense. The whole ethos of retributive suffering is captured in God's proclamation to Israel immediately prior to Joshua's succession of Moses:

> *"This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice and hold fast to him."*
>
> **(Deut 30: 19, 20a.)**

This was, of course, more expansively developed on Mount Sinai and Mount Gerizim under Joshua's leadership as instructed by Moses beforehand (cf **Deut 27:11-28:68; Jos 8:30-35**).

As a nation, Israel had an intense sensitivity concerning divine justice. The very concept of original sin bears testimony that the consequences of the Fall were the product of disobedience (see **Gen 3**). The deluge of Noah's day was also announced as holy retribution against the sinfulness of an entire generation, Noah and his family being spared because of their faithfulness **(6:13)**. Built in to the idea of covenant is the two-fold promise of blessings for obedience and curses for defiance. This is the framework upon which the whole law is built and with very good reason – a holy God demands a holy people. The history of Israel is one long catalogue of suffering as a punishment for sin, whether individually or corporately. What is equally clear, as we shall see later, is that God did not wield the axe vengefully or without mercy, but he caused such suffering because of his great love for them **(Amo 3:2)**. Given this information, it would be easy to assume that suffering is exclusively the punishment for sin. Even in our own day this line of thought has once again proved popular (see Watson, 1984: 114, 115). Jewish thought, however, did not accept this as the whole picture, as the story of **Job** clearly demonstrates.

It must be observed, therefore, that the doctrine of retribution is not necessarily irreconcilable with the love of God. Neither, it must be said, should we allow the fact that finite minds can find no apparent harmony between any two equal and valid truths to rob them of their veracity. By admitting such failure, we only concede our own ineptitude to understand divine matters. It would be arguably more inconceivable to imagine God as both the moral Governor of the universe and at the same time exercising wanton disregard for man's deprivation. Perhaps an analogy of the potential consequences of such a relationship is to be found in the episode of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas. The priest's toleration of his sons' wickedness resulted not only in their premature death, but also ultimately in Israel's defeat at the hands of her enemies and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant **(1 Sam 2:22, 27-34; 4:1-11)**. Might a more definite stance for righteousness have presented such a catalogue of disasters? Quite possibly.

A further example in the Old Testament brings even greater clarity to the issue. If it was for sentimental reasons that David allowed his judgment to be swayed in dealing with Absalom, he thereby inadvertently paved the way for moral disaster. His subsequent fleeing to Geshur had far more to do with his understanding of the law's punishment for such a crime than remorse for wrongdoing. Joab, as head of David's army, sensed that the king was set on restoring Absalom, but could not be seen to so publicly disregard the demands of the law concerning his son. So Joab contrived a scenario whereby clemency was exercised at the expense of justice. This was not an act of forgiveness in the true biblical sense, for when such is the case a penitent heart must precede its release. It was not long before Absalom conspired against his father with the intention of usurping the throne. Restoration without repentance had produced only further rebellion.

ii) Disciplinary Suffering

The ***disciplinary*** aspect of suffering is not an entirely New Testament concept. Indeed, the fact that much is said of it in the letter to the **Hebrews** suggests that the writer was reminding his readers of those things that would have been familiar to them. Chastisement was a regular feature of home life in the ancient world. The very idea of God as a loving Father presupposed his inclination to bring correction. There are many examples of those who learned great lessons in their suffering and who were blameless. Abraham **(Gen 22)**, Job **(Jas 5:11)**, Daniel **(Dan 6)**, and others could all testify to the fact that discipline does not always ride side by side with retribution. Prevention through discipline is often an easier pill to swallow than cure through chastening, though the immediate taste may be bitter indeed.

Thank God that as real and valid as the retributive precept of suffering is in the Old Testament, it does not stand alone as the only principle. Indeed, the **Proverbs** especially seek to encourage the devout to interpret their personal suffering as disciplinary (see **3:11; 13:24; 15:5**). The word 'discipline' (or 'chastening' as some other translations have it) is common in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the word '***musar***', which is usually associated with that discipline in family households by which a father educates a son. There are many other passages in the Old Testament that speak of this disciplinary aspect of imposed suffering, whether experienced corporately (cf **Hos 10:10; Jer 6:8**) or individually (see **Psm 6:1; 32:3-5**). In one of the Apocryphal

works, the author even contrasts the disciplinary nature of Israel's suffering with the retributive dimension of that of the Egyptians by saying:

> *"For these, as a father, admonishing them, thou didst prove;*
> *But those, as a stern king, condemning them, thou didst search out."*
>
> **(Wisdom of Solomon 11:10.)**

iii) Probationary Suffering

A principle of suffering not to be devalued is to be found in the patience of the righteous as they wait for the retributive principle to be unveiled against evildoers. This may well be a cause for concern in our own day, but it is also widely recognised throughout the pages of the Old Testament. How easy it would often be to echo the words of Habbakuk out of sheer frustration at the seeming injustice of oppressive tyranny going unpunished (see **Hab 1:13; 2:1**). Despite his incredulity at God's response to the situation, Habbakuk concedes his frustration to God's purpose by concluding his debate with a psalm of praise, which ends:

> *"... yet will I rejoice in the Lord,*
> *I will be joyful in God my Saviour."*
>
> **(Hab 3:18.)**

It is this "yet", like the "nevertheless" of Gethsemane, that yields the will of the individual to that of God. It is the beginning of a character development that provides the basis for true martyrdom – a witness through suffering. As Wheeler-Robinson has said:

> *There is no way of demonstrating a conviction more forcibly than by suffering for it. The blood of the martyrs, and not the ink of its theologies, is the seed of the Church. Martyrs in this sense are always in a minority, but they are the most powerful of minorities.*
>
> (Wheeler-Robinson, 1940: 61.)

iv) Revelational Suffering

Because of the very nature of the ***revelational*** principle of suffering, this is implied rather than explicitly expressed. It is the prophetic application of a situation that produces a more enlarged understanding of how God relates to humanity. The most

obvious example of this would be the prophet Hosea, whose devastating personal circumstances in some measure mirrored God's own sense of betrayal. As a result, Hosea's conscious awareness of the suffering of God over his 'bride' was prophetically heightened. This brought a completely fresh revelation of God's intimacy of relationship towards Israel that would have been otherwise even more incomprehensible.

Jeremiah may be cited as another example of this revelational principle of suffering in operation. The **Lamentations** of Jeremiah are well documented, his sense of utter isolation from his fellows thrusting him almost inconsolably upon the favour of his God. This, too, produced a more developed understanding in Israel of the personal dimension involved within the sphere of corporate relationship, as is amply attested to in many of the subsequent Hebrew writings.

v) Sacrificial Suffering

There is more than a hint of ***sacrificial*** suffering in the Old Testament. Many of the ancient figures that are now identified as types of Christ are so primarily in this one feature. Moses clearly identified with the sufferings of the people he was chosen to lead and almost felt the whole weight of their troubles as if they were his own **(Num 11:1-15)**. The longsuffering of Hosea's relationship with his wife as a living parable of God's husbandry over unfaithful Israel was in many ways vicarious **(Hos 1-3)**. At various times, all the major prophet felt the immense weight of their prophetic burden, so much so in Jeremiah's case that he could barely carry it (see **Jer 15:18; 20:7-12**).

The pinnacle of Old Testament prophecy as far as substitutionary affliction is concerned is surely that of Isaiah's 'Suffering Servant', of whom it is recorded:

> *... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*
>
> **(Isa 53:5, 6.)**

Whatever the immediate significance of these words may have been to their original hearers, there can be no doubting their prophetic fulfilment in Jesus Christ some seven hundred years later. It is in the light of Isaiah's concept of the 'Suffering Servant' that

the early Church preached relating to the cross of Christ. In natural terms alone, it was the most supreme offering possible, thereby rendering any subsequent sacrifice both unnecessary and without value. The death of Christ was not just sacrificial in the basic sense, however, but was also substitutionary and final.

vi) Eschatological Principle of Suffering

The ***eschatological*** principle of suffering is seen, in seed form at least, in the writings of both Daniel and Isaiah (cf chapters **24-27**). It is the concept of national catastrophe producing its most intense level of suffering immediately prior to divinely appointed deliverance. It may otherwise be known as 'the storm before the calm' principle. In **Daniel**, the bitter persecution that preceded the Maccabæan revolt is widely acknowledged as the beginning of the end. It is here that we are first introduced to the idea of opposing angelic powers being so actively engaged in the affairs and outcome of earthly matters (see **Isa 24:21, 22; Dan 10:13**). It also sees the beginning of any real understanding of resurrection theology within Judaism **(Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2)**. This, of course, was developed still further during the intertestamental period (sometimes not entirely devoid of Hellenistic influence), in the teaching of Christ and the writings of Paul the apostle.

6.1.6 Summary

All the above are but partial attempts to unveil the mystery of the various applications of human suffering. Not only are they incomplete as they stand alone, but also the sum of the retributive plus disciplinary plus probationary plus revelational plus sacrificial plus eschatological principles of suffering fall some considerable way short of the whole picture. When seen together, however, they do give some insight into the diverse aspects of suffering. Their inadequacy to offer more than this also confirms the underlying theme of this work that the challenge of suffering cannot be engaged by logic alone – faith is its definitive combatant.

It will come as no surprise to the biblical scholar to learn that the most comprehensive treatment on the subject of justice is not to be found in the New Testament, but in the Old. That is not to say, of course, that the concept of earthly justice is nowhere to be seen in the New Testament, but its overriding concern was not the framing of worldly

infrastructures. The circumstances of the early Christians, however, were radically different from those of the old covenant people of God. Theirs was a time, at least between the periods of exodus and captivity, of comparative national independence. Their devotion to the one true God as a people was not to be limited to the personal expressions of individuals, but in the corporate life of the community serving God together. Now, this is equally true of the new covenant, except that the early Christians were largely restricted in their expression by parameters outside of their control. Israel, for a time, enjoyed the freedom to establish a complex system of social justice as initiated by the command of God.

6.2 THE HOLOCAUST

6.2.1 Introduction

The English word 'holocaust' is a direct translation for the Greek term for a whole burnt offering (cf **Lev 6:23**, LXX). Its current usage almost universally applies to the horrors endured by European Jews at the hands of the Nazi regime immediately prior to and during the Second World War. In excess of six million human beings of Jewish descent were murderously tortured under a German policy of genocidal ethnic cleansing. It is questionable whether there has ever been such a rigorously enforced campaign of persecution against one people group. This was racism in the extreme. So much so, in fact, that the word 'unique' hardly does justice to the extent of evil that was perpetrated. Some have instead opted for the phrase "uniquely unique" (ie Roy Eckardt, quoted in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 315).

I feel it appropriate to point out at this juncture the context of the use of the word 'Jew' in this chapter. When referring to Jewishness in the section on the plight of Israel under the Old Testament (see **6.1**), there was no distinction between religious affiliation and ethnic identity. By and large, the one assumed the other. This, however, is no longer the case. It is possible to be a Jew and not adhere in part or at all to any form of Judaism. Unlike a Christian, whose religious beliefs determine the validity or otherwise of such a classification, a Jew remains a Jew by virtue of his heritage. And so, amongst the six million primary victims of the Holocaust were Jewish Christians, Judaistic Jews, nominal Jews and quite possibly Jewish atheists – they were all Jews. But neither is it a term of strictly national association. The offspring of English expatriots who are born and raised in Australia, for instance, thereby become citizens of Australia as a birthright. Jewishness is not similarly transferable. Thus there are British Jews, French Jews, American Jews, Russian Jews, ***et al.***

Whether a subject like the Holocaust is one that is appropriate for a theological discussion is still open to debate. It may well be that it resides more comfortably within the realm and discipline of sociology or psychology, if it is not too much of an aberration to use the words 'Holocaust' and 'comfortability' in such close proximity. By looking at the evidence, however, I make no attempt to explain or comment upon either the maintaining or transformation of religious behaviour by observers or non-observers

as a result of the Holocaust. Those who seek to do so often fail to take into account other contributory factors that may be beyond the scope of analysis. I cite the experiences of Jews during this period of history solely in an attempt to reflect the horrors of suffering by way of ethnic victimisation and to glean how this affects the premise of divine justice. My conclusions will not be shared by all, perhaps only a minority. But I can no more deny them than I can faith itself. Perhaps if I were to experience a fraction of the pain of Auschwitz but for a second, then my opinion would be radically altered. The point is, however, that God's existence and by implication, therefore, his essence is neither enhanced nor minimised by either my faith or my opinion.

6.2.2 The Cost of Survival

Almost sixty years have elapsed since the end of the Holocaust. During that time, the majority of its survivors have died as peaceful a death as the torments of their memories will have allowed. Many refused to even consider the religious implications of their ordeal, electing instead to leave it in the past almost to the point of disowning it as theirs. Some have so filled their lives with conscious and intense activity that there is little room to think, lest the undying questions once more be raised in their subconscious. Others, albeit a minority, console themselves with a deliberate effort to harangue God that they might finally justify him. Here follows an example of the latter case:

> *"It is **all** I think about... My life is a running, nagging dialogue with God... He is always on my mind. Why? Why? I sometimes find I have been walking the lonely, crowded streets of Tel Aviv, wandering aimlessly, conducting a question and answer session with Him – with no satisfactory answers forthcoming. I believe in Him with the same certainty as ever. The Holocaust couldn't change that. But I find I want very much to keep after Him and try to the best of my ability to overcome the obscurity of His ways and I can't escape Him, however much He may have wished to escape us. I will do this to my last breath. I know it. More than this, I believe this is precisely what a Jew must do, to keep after Him for answers. And it brings me a measure of repose and comfort to conduct these conferences, to be God's interlocutor, to keep after Him by creating and inventing, like the traditional Jews of the past in history, new arguments **against** Him, and new justifications **for** Him. For me, it is the entire Torah, the **Etz Chayyim*** [ie Tree of Life]. *Although I have no choice to the contrary, I am happy to hold fast to it."*
>
> (quoted in Brenner, 1980: 98.)

The continuing horror for the survivors of the Holocaust is that they were "condemned to life" (Brenner, 1980: 25). They are not the lucky ones; they are the ones for whom their sentence did not terminate in execution. Daily images indelibly etched on the minds of parents and siblings, partners and children, snatched from their lives forever, and that without mercy. To observe a crime in peacetime, no matter how minor the offence, can be a harrowing ordeal; to witness mass murder in the midst of war does not simply add to the torment – it multiplies it.

For those who survived the Holocaust, their perspective of God may have been affected, even radically so, but it seems to have changed in only a minority of cases. Those who were religious observants of Judaism prior to the Holocaust see it as concrete evidence for divine justice and are, therefore, further confirmed in their conviction. Similarly, those who were previously non-observant would claim that the events of Nazi-infiltrated Europe prior to and during World War II have helped to ratify the validity of their decision. Consider the following as generally representative of each party:

Example 1: *"I made a lot of decisions about my life during the years I was in hiding... One of the decisions was that I'll never 'serve the Lord with gladness nor come before Him with singing'... It was a very conscious decision on my part. I actually asked myself should I become a religious Jew or not, should I do this or that when it is all over. I wasn't a religious Jew up to that time in the late 1930s but I had often thought about it... And many times I had come almost to the point of resolving to do so. But then, during those dreadful years, my final decision, which I have kept to this day, was not to serve God because He doesn't really want me to and because He let it all happen. It proved I was right all along in my behavior and my belief. There was no outward change, of course; it was all inside. But the Holocaust convinced me not to become a religious Jew."*

Example 2: *"I do believe the Holocaust strengthened and reinforced the* ***mitzvot*** *I keep. I can also say that the* ***mitzvot*** *I keep are the same as I kept before the war, but I keep them much more intensely and regard them much more seriously. I've grown up as well as older because of my experiences so close to death. The Holocaust has matured me in my religious thinking and attitudes. I am more convinced than ever that being a religious Jew is the right way to behave. I am a much stronger Jew because of the Holocaust than I was before. So, I believe, are many others like me."*

(both quoted in Brenner, 1980: 59, 60.)

Again, it must be pointed out that these extracts are not included with any attempt to comment either way on the opinions expressed, but merely serve to illustrate that for the most part religious opinion was unchanged though not unaffected by the Holocaust in the lives of those who experienced first-hand and survived its horrors.

One Jewish survivor of the Bergen-Belsen camp, as part of an intense survey conducted by RR Brenner, had the following to say:

> *"God gave man free will. God did not create man a robot, but rather capable of making decisions and free choices. He can be barbaric and bloodthirsty or kind-hearted and humane. If every time man was about to do evil God intervened and prevented it, man would not have been created free to act as he wished and would in fact have been created a different creature than God intended him to be. He would not have been man. This way man can do as he will but he is also responsible for his actions and I will not allow the Nazis off the hook by saying they were not responsible for what they did."*
>
> (quoted in Brenner, 1980: 217.)

Although the opinions of this interviewee are far from representative of the thousand who were questioned, it does demonstrate that even in the midst of the most abject suffering imaginable, not just personal but proximal, it is possible to survive with one's faith in tact.

6.2.3 Is Christianity Anti-Semitic?

If ever there was a time in history when the whole world was tempted to question the existence of God, then it was in the aftermath of the death camps. Some argued that "after Auschwitz it [was] impossible to believe in God" (ie Richard Rubinstein). Others demanded a radical re-evaluation of traditional theology in the light of what had taken place at Belsen, a chamber of horrors in the most unimaginable meaning of the phrase (eg Arthur Cohen). Jürgen Moltmann, on the other hand, saw the futility of such an exercise, believing instead that if the Holocaust disproved anything, then it was the long-held view of the impassibility of God (see Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 315).

Moltmann's argument, whilst a genuine attempt to reconcile the God of Christianity with that of Judaism, provoked an unfortunate response. Although there were pockets of believers who sympathised with the plight of the Jews in Europe (some known to the

present writer who actively interceded on their behalf with prayer and fasting), the majority of those associated with the public face of Christianity were complicit in their mediocrity. Anti-Semitism is not a product of Christianity, nor can its promotion be defended on the basis of any legitimate New Testament exposé, any more than can apartheid. As Louise Schottroff commendably argues in her '*Anti-Judaism in the New Testament*':

> *With regard to the present... it is not enough to foster an awareness of actual anti-Judaism in the N*[ew] *T*[estament] *and later Christian theology; it is irresponsible simply to quote* [such] *passages without providing them with a hermeneutics which reflects their social milieu. Such a hermeneutics must take account of the present reality of Christianity and Judaism and of their shared history.*
>
> (quoted in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 316.)

Whilst wholeheartedly supporting the ethos of Schottroff's treatise, I would have to question her use of terminology. There is some evidence in the New Testament, certainly in Paul's writings, of Christianity containing a hint of anti-***Judaistic*** flavouring. Indeed, Christ's claims to be the only way to salvation, though perhaps designed to encourage recognition by the Jews of him as their Messiah, could be said to contradict Judaistic expectations. But there is a vast difference between being perceived as anti-Judaistic and fostering anti-Semitic traits. Paul's opposition to legalism and religiosity did not prevent his compassion for those bound by them. Those who equate New Testament antithetical teaching against traditional Judaistic practices with anti-Semitism must presumably also see in Paul's harsh words against carnal Christianity some trace of anti-believerism. This would be considered ridiculous, and yet it employs the same consistency of argument.

6.2.4 Summary

It is estimated that more than six million Jews died at the hands of Nazi Germany during its ethnic cleansing crusade. The victims of the Holocaust, however, immeasurably exceed that number. They are the survivors, witnesses and offspring; thankful to be spared, yet guilty that they escaped. In truth, only those who were perceived to be commodities of expedience were tolerated until they were of no further use to the authorities. Few places in Europe were safe and no class of citizen, for all Jews were deemed second-class whatever their rank or profession. Plumbers, shoe-

repairers and clothiers in the Baltics were at risk, as were Greek craftsmen. Bankers and peasants alike shared the same fate. Jewish teachers, doctors and lawyers were under threat, whether they practised in Amsterdam, Charleroi or Milan. From the beggar in Budapest to the veterans of Vienna – all feared the fiend of Nazi occupation.

The means of death were as diverse as they were similar. Some were starved to death, some mercilessly shot by the side of the road or railway track, others were gassed, many more burnt in ovens or even buried alive. Women were often raped, their eventual deaths being a welcome release from the torturous degradation. What they each shared in common with their fellows was a sense of abject humiliation.

This chapter has focussed on the sufferings of the covenant people of Israel, both in the Old Testament and during the twentieth century Holocaust. If any one race on earth should be favoured in terms of escaping that which is common to all men, then perhaps it is the Jew. In reality, it might more easily be argued that they of all people groups seem to have been marked out for unimaginable levels of suffering. Within the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures, some of this can legitimately be accounted for as chastisement on those occasions when they failed to meet their obligations. The same cannot be said of more recent events. And yet the evidence we have considered suggests that for those who survived the horrors with their faith in tact, there is no perceived conflict between the hostility and apathy they were faced with by their fellow human beings and the existence of an omnipotent, just God.

7.0 THE SUFFERING SERVANT

7.1 INTRODUCTION

It is clear from reading the New Testament that significant developments had taken place since the conclusion of the Old Testament writings. This is only to be expected in what amounted to almost four hundred years of apparent silence. We leave Darius as head of Medo-Persia to find Caesar as head of the Roman Empire with not a hint of the Greek rule of the intervening years, except in the fact of the common language, architectural developments and transport system. Yet much of the intervening years can be filled in by a thorough investigation into the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings of this period. Although neither can claim canonical authority within the Reformed tradition (and rightly so), they do offer an insight into the progression of thought concerning issues like Messianic expectation, eternal judgment and the kingdom of God on earth. There is a continued belief in punitive or retributive suffering (Wisdom 4:18-5:23), disciplinary chastisement (3:1-6) and communal substitution (2 Maccabees 7:37-8:3). Rabbinic theology, however, also developed the element of propitiatory suffering (Bromiley, ed, 1988: 651).

The recent rediscovery in the media of the Jesus of history, thanks largely to the BBC production *'Son of God'* and accompanying book (Tilby, 2001), has provoked a commensurate reaffirmation of his humanity within the Church. This is not merely because of Christ's historical position as the founder of the faith. His occupancy as the head of the Church is of a vastly different order to that of Mohammed within Islam or Siddhartha Gautama's relationship to Buddhism. Jesus is proclaimed as the ***only*** way there is to the Father of creation for ***all*** men, irrespective of race, colour, creed, nationality or cultural affiliation.

We may legitimately infer, therefore, that our perception of God the Father is necessarily incumbent upon our understanding of God the Son **(Jn 6:43-46)**. In his life, he has revealed to us a fresh dimension of God-consciousness, previously hidden to all who lived before him. The outstanding feature of this life is that it is predominantly one of suffering. Scripture is silent in respect of many years of Christ's sojourn on earth. We may reasonably assume, however, that even they were times of frustration as he came to terms with the reality of who he was and the enormity of what he had come to do. To

reflect upon his limitations as God within a human frame must have produced some anxious moments. His dependence upon others to execute tasks, the results of which would have been far inferior to his own capabilities, will also have evoked a suffering of sorts.

7.2 THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Christian theology speaks of the various sufferings of Christ as his humiliation (Greek '***tapeinosis***'), and his subsequent victory over sin from the point of resurrection as his exaltation. According to Louis Berkhof, who is fairly representative of the Reformed school in such matters, Christ's humiliation consisted:

> *... in that He became subject to the demands and to the curse of the law, and in His entire life became obedient in action and suffering to the very limit of a shameful death.*
>
> (Berkhof, 1988: 332.)

Although Berkhof identifies five stages of this humiliation (Lutheranism speaks of eight), only the first three concern us at this point. He classifies them as incarnation, suffering and death, the other two being his burial and descent into Hades. In this context, the Reformers usually refer to the incarnation as the events surrounding and including the birth of Jesus, and suffering as the afflictions he endured in his earthly existence. I personally prefer to speak of the whole of his life as the incarnation event and so, to avoid confusion, will adhere to the same three categories but under the following headings: birth, life and death. I can fully understand Berkhof's reluctance to speak of the birth of the Logos lest this implies either passive inactivity on his part or leads to a misunderstanding concerning his pre-existence, but as long as both are acknowledged I feel comfortable employing the above terms as cited.

It may seem strange to some to speak of a person's birth in terms of suffering, but it is appropriate to do so here in terms of Christ's pre-existent divinity. That the Word became flesh clearly demonstrates not only the possibility but also the actuality of the Supreme Being entering into relations with finite beings, though in the final analysis the mechanics of that are beyond the scope of human intellect.

The sufferings of Jesus must include his birth if for no other reason than, in accordance with Berkhof's definition of the state of humiliation (1988: 331), this was the inception of Christ's obligation to fulfil the demands of the law. But even in the sense of human suffering, he not only thus became subject to natural stipulations. he was also experiencing for the first time the sensations of frustration, dependence, restriction of capability and confinement within the time/space continuum.

When faced with the prospect of considering Christ's sufferings, it is all too easy to focus exclusively on his agony on the cross. A broader perspective might even include the torment of Gethsemane or, wider still, the frustration he faced in the general apathy and unbelief of his own people. The humiliation of Christ, however, began with his birth. We should remember that this was God, the second Person of the Trinity – all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, infinite and eternal. Yet he voluntarily took upon himself the flesh of humanity, limited, restricted in understanding, confined within the temporal environment that he had created. Thomas Watson puts it this way: "In the creation, man was made in God's image; in the incarnation, God was made in man's image" (Watson, 1974: 192).

7.3 THE LIFE OF JESUS

It may be a point worthy of consideration at which level or in what official capacity the humiliation of Christ took place. The answer, indeed its vitality, will depend upon the view of Christology being imposed. Those who view his central purpose as exclusively soteriological will submit his Prophetic role as representing God to humanity, but are obliged to do so only in a secondary sense that is subject to his Priestly function gaining the ascendancy. If one perceives his principal objective to be in terms of establishing the kingdom of God, then obviously his position as King is much more to the fore. There may even be some truth in the concept that his purpose was not singular and, therefore, central to an ever-increasing circle of effectiveness, but must be viewed as an ellipse with two equal foci – kingship and redemption. Perhaps the one role that subsumes all of these is to be found in the classic prophetic utterance of **Isaiah**, wherein he is designated simply 'Servant of the Lord' **(42:19)**.

One perceived aspect of Christ's suffering that cannot be legitimately defended from Scripture is that which was birthed in the '***kenosis***' theory. Based upon a

hermeneutically inaccurate understanding of **Philippians 2:7** (in conjunction with **2 Cor 8:9**), proponents of the '***kenosis***' theory argue that part of this 'emptying' on the part of Christ involved a reduction of deity. Some offer the view that only the Son's metaphysical attributes were temporarily suspended (eg Thomassius, 1965; Delitzsch, 1908), whilst others suggest that he also relinquished divine power and awareness (eg Gess, 1870; von Frank, 1886), the latter being progressively reaffirmed throughout his earthly ministry (see also Berkhof, 1988: 327-330). In one attempt to respond to the philosophers of his age, Bishop Gore (1922) took up the '***kenosis***' theory to explain Jesus' apparent lack of higher critical understanding concerning the Old Testament. A culturally conditioned Christ is the product of Gore's theology. The biblical position, however, is that any emptying that took place was not of divine attribute but of divine glory (cf **Jn 17:5**). Wesley's famous hymn lyric is also particularly unhelpful on this matter, for the Second Person most certainly did not "[empty] himself of all but love". For a more comprehensive study into a biblical presentation against Gore's supposition, the student would be well rewarded by reading Jim Packer's excellent treatment on the subject, where he concludes that:

> *The impression of Jesus which the gospels give is not that He was wholly bereft of divine knowledge and power, but that He drew on both intermittently, while being content for much of the time not to do* so [in submission to the Father's will]. *The impression, in other words, is not so much one of deity reduced as of divine capacities restrained.*
>
> (Packer, 1975: 63.)

7.3.1 Submission the Key to Overcoming

It is noteworthy that in the life of Jesus as presented to us in Scripture, he offers no voice on the questions relating to the 'whys and wherefores' of human suffering. At the risk of stating the obvious, neither did he choose to avoid the issue but rather offered a way of triumphing in the midst of suffering that was paradoxically anything but triumphalistic. He did so not by magic formula or by adopting a mind-over-matter philosophy, but by submitting his own will to that of the Father **(Jn 6:38)**. It is only by following Christ's example that we, too, may experience what it is to "reign in life" by learning to deal with difficulties, problems, pressures and real suffering, whether they be physical, mental or spiritual.

Even those sufferings of Christ that are common to all men cannot be described as 'ordinary' in relation to him. For one thing, his capacity for suffering, in terms of both measure and intensity, far exceeded that which is typical of humanity. No-one could have appreciated the level of pathos he experienced in relation to the mediocrity with which Israel considered its covenant obligations. Only he was subject to that degree of opposition and temptation from the devil and his hordes, for only he had such a will to resist. And he alone was so touched by the immensity of deprivation and degradation that contravened his divine nature.

A clear distinction needs to be made between two English words that have somehow become fused into synonymity in contemporary writing. They are 'empathy' and 'sympathy'. A modern English dictionary would serve only to compound this misunderstanding that they may be used interchangeably. Etymologically, however, there is a subtle, though significant, difference. 'Empathy' refers to what I suspect most would understand by either term in common usage. It is to comfort, to feel sorry for, have some, though limited, understanding of a victim's plight. 'Sympathy', on the other hand, in its original sense is to actually be involved in the suffering of another and, wherever possible, seek to alleviate such affliction. RHL Slater paints just such a picture of Jesus:

> *Our attitude to the problem of evil is profoundly affected if... we remember that a large part of Christ's ministry was spent in relieving human pain. It is a fact with important implications. In an age which spurned and outcast lepers, he sought them. He cured mental cases regarded as bewildering and hopeless. He restored sight to the blind. Certain other Eastern teachers would never have done such a thing. They would have regarded it as an interference with the moral order which makes the punishment, sooner or later, fit the crime. Christ clearly had no such conception of the moral order. His ministry, if we regard it as expressing the mind and purpose of God, leaves no ground for the view that God is indifferent to human pain.*
>
> (Slater, 1941: 53.)

But Jesus did not just adopt suffering personally in a positive manner. He actively engaged against its consequences for those with whom he came into contact. As tokens of the coming kingdom of God, he challenged disease with healing, social marginalisation with an inclusive embrace, hostility with love, deceit with integrity, and death with resurrection. Even the elements were subject to his authority over them.

7.3.2 The Prize is Worth the Price

Perhaps the highest point of his sufferings apart from the crucifixion were in the temptations he faced. These were by no means restricted to the wilderness experience immediately after being baptised in the Jordan. Writing on the incarnation, Jim Packer penned the following laudable words:

> *It was a state of temptation and moral conflict, because the incarnation was a true entry into the conditions of man's moral life. Though, being God, it was not in him to yield to temptation, yet, being man, it was necessary for him to fight temptation in order to overcome it. What his deity ensured was not that he would not be tempted to stray from his Father's will, nor that he would not be exempt from the strain and distress that repeated insidious temptations create in the soul, but that, when tempted, he would fight and win.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 513.)

Whether or not Jesus could have sinned is not a subject for debate in this context. Focus and space both contrive to render it so. What can be said, however, in relation to the real sufferings of Jesus is that Scripture presents him to be the almost constant subject of legitimate temptation.

At the beginning of his public ministry, following his baptism by John, Jesus went into the desert "full of the Holy Spirit" **(Lk 4:1)**. Here, we may picture him as undergoing unimaginable suffering at the temptations offered by Satan, the intensity of which even the gospel accounts barely do justice to. Affliction of this kind can seldom be expressed by mere words. At the end of the forty days, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" **(v 14)**. Suffering is not a sign of emptiness, but a token of fullness being transformed into power. The whole design of the temptation process, as far as the devil was concerned, was to weaken the Messiah to the point of brokenness. In the purpose of God, however, it strengthened him and completed in him his allegiance to that purpose.

From that point on, Jesus turned every assault by the enemy to his own advantage and the furthering of God's redemptive plan for humanity. Pharisaical criticism provided an opportunity to teach by way of parable. Accusations that were intended to discredit him were answered in a way that revealed the Father-heart of God. Improper insinuations by the religious leaders concerning his identity are turned into our perception of him being enriched all the more. A lawyer tries to use guile in an attempt to undermine his

ministry and the inhumanity of his effort is seen in sharp contrast to the principle of humanity expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. When even John the Baptist sends enquirers to affirm his hopes in the midst of nagging doubts, Jesus sends them away with no other credentials than the testimony of his dynamic impact upon society. His arguments were not reasoned logic; they were the evidence of transformed lives.

At the beginning of Jesus' recorded ministry, he announced that God had sent him to:

> *"... preach good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*
>
> **(Lk 4:18, 19.)**

In other words, Christ had a divine mandate to alleviate suffering in all its forms. Although a similar ministry makes up only a part of the function of the Church, it is a role that is biblically non-negotiable. The gospel is still essentially for the poor. If Jesus was physically present today in leading a church, there can be little doubt that such a fellowship would be made up of social outcasts and the marginalised. Jesus spent most of his time with beggars, prostitutes, the impoverished, lepers and sinners, setting an example that he expected his disciples to follow. Just in case they failed to get the message, he spelled it out for them:

> *"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours... But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind..."*
>
> **(Lk 14:12, 13.)**

7.3.3 Healing and Instruction

It is said of Jesus that "he went around doing good" **(Acts 10:38)**. Much of this consisted in him healing people. Many were brought to him for no other purpose than to have sight restored, limbs regain their function, deliverance from demons, to be cured from a host of skin complaints, or even raised from the dead. At no time did Jesus make the connection between their condition and God's punishment. In fact, on one occasion, when it was assumed that a certain man's blindness must have been the product of either the individual's sin or that of his parents, Jesus offered another possible alternative that the onlookers had not even considered – to demonstrate God's glory.

Christ's sympathetic identification with physical suffering is well documented in many of his parables. The 'Good Samaritan' and the 'Rich Man and Lazarus' are cases in point. In the former, it is difficult to comprehend which is the most apathetic, the priest or the Levite. One would not even cross the dusty track to assess the state of the sufferer; the other, having satisfied his curiosity, walked on by, coolly unmoved by the stranger's plight. Exhibiting nothing more than godly compassion, the Samaritan of the tale provides an example of hospitality to which we must all aspire. There can be no doubt that had the occasion arisen, then Christ would have responded in exactly the same way in the face of similar objectionable behaviour.

As with many of the parables, the primary lesson we learn is to discover the heart of God. In the 'Rich Man (Dives) and Lazarus', the stark contrast between the two details the deep-rooted sympathy of Christ with human suffering, irrespective of whether this emanates from disease, poverty or abuse. The major difference, of course, between this parable and that of the Good Samaritan is that on this occasion no kindly soul turned up. No doubt Christ had encountered a number of such incidents on his travels. Many will have looked upon the likes of Lazarus with callous indifference, yet Jesus was moved to compassion, adding weight to the warning given in the story.

The New Testament writers, whilst acknowledging the fact of suffering, make no attempt to explain its cause. Where Scripture is silent, it is prudent not to speculate. The emphasis in the gospel accounts is unashamedly on the person of Jesus and his compassion (literally 'suffering alongside') for those in distress, whether this be physical illness or disease **(Mt 14:14)**, abject hunger **(15:32)**, or spiritual anxiety **(9:36)**. Jesus regarded his fight against suffering of this kind as a strategic battle plan to advance the kingdom of God with a commensurate diminishing of the devil's domain **(Lk 10:18)**. So central was this to the ethos of Jesus' message that his disciples were instructed to continue to implement the principles of his manifesto in his pending absence **(Mk 6:7)**. Despite the Hebrew Scriptures' teaching to the contrary, many still saw an intrinsic link between misfortune and sin at a personal level. Though Jesus often acknowledged a relationship between an individual's physical condition and spiritual state, he refused to categorically systematise such a connection.

7.3.4 Perfect Understanding by Personal Identification

Although we must be careful how much of Watson's pithy comment we adopt (see 7.2), there are clear indications in the life of the Word made flesh of communicable attributes perfectly displayed. Jesus is seen in the gospels as possessing the whole range of human emotion within the holy parameters of a sinless life. He is truly loving and compassionate, though legalistic religiosity and profiteering aroused righteous anger and indignation. At various times, he knew both sorrow and joy, lament and gladness. This surely militates against the idea of a God without feeling. True enough, many of the Old Testament portrayals of him as being grieved, desirous or subject to change are anthropomorphic devices designed to enable the finite to more readily comprehend the infinite. But such devices must not be allowed to obscure the fact that they nevertheless give an authentic reflection of God's nature.

I realise, of course, that to some, theology may be understood as nothing more than philosophy from a biblical perspective. That is the very real danger of presenting a work of this sort. When we search the gospels, however, we find that Jesus simply accepted the fact of suffering. He did not seek to explain its origin or give a lengthy discourse to the Sanhedrin on how they might present a more balanced view of suffering in all its modes and manifestations. Such a philosophical approach would no doubt have involved much explanation and little transformation. Jesus was not at a philosopher; he was a life-changer. He met pain and injustice in the midst of their deepest need and elevated them to an altogether higher plane by enabling those who came to him in faith to overcome their trial. Even on the cross, he refused any medication that would lesson his own pain, lest he be deprived of the opportunity to rule in the midst of his ordeal.

7.3.5 Service through Suffering

It is common to speak of Christ's sufferings only inasmuch as they relate to his death, or at least the last days leading up to that climax. His whole life, in fact, was one of suffering. His perfect lifestyle of obedience ensured that this was the case. As such, he suffered Satanic assault, unbelief from among his own people, hatred and persecution from the religious authorities, ridicule and charges of blasphemy, abject loneliness at times and even relatively simple things like hunger, thirst and lack of sleep. Scripture is silent on the exact point of recognition when Jesus realised who he was, his mission and

his destiny. In all likelihood, it was a progressive revelation. From the point of full awareness, he will no doubt have suffered in some spiritual sense from this mediatorial consciousness. As the moment of his final battle loomed large, we are told that his soul became exceedingly sorrowful **(Mk 14:34)**.

Of course, Jesus himself suffered, more than any other person before him or since (see **Isa 53**). He suffered in all aspects and to the pinnacle of each aspect. In the physical realm, he suffered hunger, tiredness, beating and that most ignominious of deaths, crucifixion. Emotionally he suffered the loss of a close friend, even though he was probably fully aware that he was about to raise him from the dead **(Jn 11:35)**; no doubt he wept, too, over the coming destruction of Jerusalem **(Lk 19:41)**. Jesus suffered mental anguish in Gethsemane **(Mk 14:34)** and spiritual abandonment on the cross **(15:34)**. But he willingly embraced all of these in the sure knowledge that his suffering was predetermined in the counsel of the Godhead for the Son of Man **(Mk 8:31)**. Peter's inability to associate Messiahship with suffering not only earned him a stinging rebuke **(v 32)**, but Jesus actually taught that discipleship and affliction are in some measure inseparable **(Lk 9:23)**. If glory can only be entered through suffering for the Master, therefore, his disciples may truly expect to follow him **(Jn 12:23)**.

7.4 THE DEATH OF JESUS

Whilst it is perfectly true that Jesus' sufferings were not limited to the agony of his final hours on the cross, it was undeniably here that he experienced most of his suffering. His whole life had been punctuated by pain, so much so that **Isaiah** had prophesied of him that he would be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" **(53:3)**. It might reasonably be argued that the voluntary limitations of the incarnation were in themselves a kind of suffering for the Son of God. The intensity of his pain during the onslaught by Satan in the wilderness was of a type and degree that no other can ever know **(Mt 4:1-11)**. As an example to humanity thereafter, he also learned obedience through his sufferings **(Heb 5:8)**, The immense hostility he faced, especially from religious leaders, can only have added to his anguish. He will no doubt have mourned the loss of Joseph as he did John the Baptist and his close friend, Lazarus **(Jn 11:35)**. But we must turn to Calvary to see affliction on a scale that is as unique as it is diabolical.

That Christ suffered in life from the moment of his arrival at Bethlehem is undeniable. The emphasis of the gospel writers, however, as reflected in the fourth article of the Apostolic Creed, is in the sufferings associated with the Cross. From the upper room to Calvary via Gethsemane, his soul became "overwhelmed with sorrow" **(Mt 26: 38)**. Here, he experienced extreme loneliness, intense isolation, and bitter disappointment. His bloody brow coupled with the traitor's kiss, after which so quickly followed the binding and buffeting by the Roman soldiers, the mocking and scourging of the crowds, blows to the face, smiting of the body, a crown of thorns pressed against his temple and a cross of ignominy upon which he was impaled as a criminal.

One can hardly read **Isaiah**'s prophetic accounts of the 'Suffering Servant' without coming to the realisation that suffering is an inevitable consequence of divine service. As John Stott puts it: "passion and mission belong together" (Stott, 1986: 320). Not only is this true of the Messiah, but also of all who would claim him as their example. In fact, the Scriptural emphasis seems to suggest that the link between the two is such that the intensity of one determines the effectiveness of the other:

> *"... unless an ear of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me."*
>
> **(Jn 12:23-26.)**

Two significant truths must be identified from Jesus' words. First of all, he was not saying that death is merely the gateway to life but to productivity and fruitfulness. Suffering reproduces after its kind and must be viewed as essential to any evangelistic programme. Secondly, he was not necessarily presenting physical martyrdom as the norm. Death in this context is primarily self-sacrifice, of which the apostle Paul is another notable example. He could write off his sufferings as being for the sake of the Gentile believers' glory at Ephesus **(Eph 3:1, 13)**, for the sake of Christ's body, that is the Church **(Col 1:24)**, and for the benefit of the elect **(2 Tim 2:8-10)**. There is clearly no atoning inference in Paul's mind, but he is equally convinced that the persecution he endured would draw men to the saving efficacy of Christ's death on the cross.

7.4.1 Judgment Deferred

Although it is quite true that God is slow to anger **(Psm 103:8)**, his patience is not unending. The judgment had been postponed until the appointed time for his justice to be vindicated – at the cross of Christ. To have left sin unjudged indefinitely would have been an injustice to the righteousness of God. John Stott goes even further by stating categorically that this would have destroyed both himself and mankind:

> *He would cease to be God and we would cease to be fully human. He would destroy himself by contradicting his divine character as righteous Lawgiver and Judge, and he would destroy us by contradicting our human dignity as morally responsible persons created in his image. It is inconceivable that he should do either.*
>
> (Stott, 1986: 211.)

To finite minds, the goodness of God and the severity of God are truths that are not easily reconcilable. But they are never far from each other in the pages of Scripture. Even in the midst of pronouncing a process of decay on Adam and his surroundings, there is not a complete withdrawing of grace. Thorns and thistles there may be, but there would also be a continuation of seed-time and harvest. Similarly, in the declaration of judgment there was the '***protevangelium***', the first recorded proclamation of the gospel **(Gen 3:15)**. A far better covenant than that of works would one day be made available. The judgment on Noah's generation was not without warning or opportunity. His wrath on Sodom and Gomorrah coincided with his gracious separation of those who had found favour with him. And in the great exodus we see at once destruction and deliverance over Egypt and Israel respectively. But there is no place where these are more vividly on display than at the cross of Calvary, for it was here where "the kindness and sternness of God" **(Rom 11:22)** were perfectly represented.

The cross of Christ is the ultimate example of such a paradox. His crucifixion was not only predestined by God, but was also pivotal in his purpose of redemption, and thereby the hinge upon which the door of man's history turns. Nevertheless, Jesus is swift to apportion moral responsibility to those who carried out his death: "For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed" **(Lk 22:22)**. He says a similar thing when speaking of the principle of evil: "It is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes" **(Mt 18:17)**.

The cross of Christ was also where theodicy was irrefutably demonstrated. The concluding remarks of Forsyth to his saga instruct us that:

> *There is no theodicy for the world except in the theology of the Cross. The only final theodicy is that self-justification of God which was fundamental to his justification of men. No reason of man can justify God in a world like this. He must justify Himself, and He did so in the cross of His Son.*
>
> (Forsyth, 1916: 124, 125.)

Most theologians who presume the authority of Scripture would agree that Jesus' death was effectively the climax of his Mediatorial sufferings. But we must be careful to consider all the implications of this in the light of what we know of the Bible's perspective on death. It is, of course, essentially, a separation from God in all its manifestations. It is also a detachment of spirit and flesh. Let us not forget, however, that it is primarily the penalty imposed on man for sin. But Jesus knew no sin either personally or inherited. Whatever conclusions we may draw from the legitimacy of his temptations, Scripture does not veil the fact that he was without sin. He was also unpolluted by original sin. And yet he died.

It is at this point that we must make a notable distinction between sin and suffering. Although sin may begin as a seed in the mind and develop through the emotions, it does not give birth until man wills it so. Suffering is far different. As Brasnett pointed out in his apology against Baron von Hügel:

> *Man may will to suffer, he may in the power of his will hold himself in the uttermost agony and pain, but* [these] *are not felt in the will; their home is in those systems of emotions from which the feelings take their rise. Even the pain of a will that is checked and thwarted is not felt in the will; the cause of the pain is there, but not the pain itself.*
>
> (Brasnett, 1928: 123.)

The cross of Christ is where the curse of sin is dealt with in its past, present and future applications. It is through the cross that those who believe in him ***have been saved*** from the penalty of sin – ***justification*** **(Jn 5:24)**. It is here, too, that we are progressively ***being saved*** from the power of sin – ***sanctification*** **(Rom 5:10)**. But the Christian should not underestimate the fact that one day we will ***be saved*** from the presence of sin – ***glorification*** **(Rev 21:23, 27)**. Forgiveness is a very real and wondrous aspect of all that the death of Jesus on the cross achieved, but it is a doctrine of demons to assume

that we can go on to maturity by thence walking away from the place where the cost was fully met. True discipleship involves cross-bearing **(Lk 14:27)**.

I am indebted to the late GCD Howley for his concluding remarks on evil in the New Bible Dictionary:

> *God is against evil but its existence is often a stumbling-block to belief in a God of love. It can only be attributed to the abuse of free-will on the part of created beings, angelic and human. God's whole saving activity is directed to deal with evil. In his life, Christ combated its manifestations of pain and sorrow; but the cross is God's final answer to the problem of evil. His love was supremely demonstrated there in the identification of the Lord with the suffering world as sin-bearer.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 358.)

7.4.2 A Criminal Death

It must be pointed out that during this period of Roman history, crucifixion was not an unusual method of carrying out a death sentence. Reserved for rebels and delinquents, its horrors were specifically designed as a deterrent to unruly slaves and would-be anarchists. What was unique about Jesus' death, however, was the swiftness of it. As RT France writes:

> *... crucified men seldom died the same day, and then only after a long period of increasing loss of consciousness. Jesus died quickly, and apparently by a deliberate act of will. His final cry of 'It is accomplished' shows him not as the victim of circumstances, but as in control of the situation, the purposeful actor in a drama of crucial significance.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 579.)

To be sentenced to crucifixion was a shameful judgment. Those found guilty of a crime warranting such a death were often victimised, scourged, jeered and spat upon **(Mt 27:26, 31; Jn 19:17)**. The artistic impressions we are left with of Jesus' death add modesty to what would in reality have been a naked humiliation. The cross of Christ is not just the place where his earthly existence was terminated; there is deep offence in such a death **(Gal 5:11)**.

The death of Christ was unique in many respects, but especially so in this – he voluntarily took it upon himself to receive the judicial sentence for the sin of humanity.

In many ways, it was necessary to die the way he did – as a criminal. This was his destiny, the whole purpose for which he was born. Of course, he had to do so in order to fulfil prophetic writings that pointed to his death. It was vital to the redemptive plan, for instance, that he be numbered amongst the transgressors in identification with the lowest of mankind. The nature of his death was also significant. Sentenced by the Roman judiciary, which represented the highest available human power on earth at the time, his death thus became a public spectacle, and this despite the fact that the authorities acknowledged his absolute innocence. Crucifixion was an almost exclusively Roman form of execution at the time. It was not uncommon, but it was reserved for the most despicable class of criminal imaginable – the scum of the earth.

For the reasons cited above, it was necessary according to divine imperative that Jesus should not die a natural death, in a freak accident, or by an assassin's plot. In terms of his sinlessness, it is highly questionable whether any of these were a possibility anyway. In fact, the death he died, he died because he voluntarily laid down his life in death. By so doing, he fully met the demands of the law in this respect.

The place that the cross has assumed in modern art has to some degree robbed it of its true significance. The polished features of a perfectly symmetrical and often ornately decorated cross in many church buildings bear little resemblance to the Roman form of execution for all but true citizens of the Empire. When the goldsmith crafts a piece of jewellery in the shape of a crucifix to adorn the neck of a young woman or fashions a matching pair for her ears, I wonder if he realises the horror and ignominy that his finished work represents. There was no more dignity associated with the cross of first century Rome than with the guillotine of seventeenth century France or the electric chair of twenty-first century United States. The cross cannot similarly be divorced from the fact that it has to do with the execution of a criminal.

Jesus was truly "crucified in weakness" **(2 Cor 13:4)**. The Psalmist speaks prophetically thus:

> *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.*
> *My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me.*
> *My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.*
> *Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me; they have pierced my hands and my feet.*

I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

(Psm 22:14-18.)

7.4.3 The Sufferings of the Cross

Wayne Grudem identifies four levels of suffering experienced by Jesus in respect to the cross and I am indebted to his observations. The ***physical*** element of ***pain*** associated with his death is obvious. There is certainly no biblical evidence to support any claim that this was more intense in and of itself for Jesus than for any other who endured such a death. But such a death was uncommonly vile. Although frequently used by the Romans, this should in no way minimise the horrors and suffering of its victims in our understanding. To be sentenced to execution by crucifixion was more than a death penalty – it filled the criminal with fear in the knowledge that his death would be agonisingly slow and bring with it possibly hours of mocking, taunts and ridicule from a host of macabre onlookers. Grudem vividly paints the scene for us:

> *When the criminal's arms were outstretched and fastened by nails to the cross, he had to support most of the weight of his body with his arms. The chest cavity would be pulled upward and outward, making it very difficult to exhale in order to be able to draw a fresh breath. But when the victim's longing for oxygen became unbearable, he would have to push himself up with his feet, thus giving more natural support to the weight of his body, releasing some of the weight from his arms, and enabling his chest cavity to contract more normally. By pushing himself upward in this way, the criminal could fend off suffocation, but it was extremely painful because it required putting the body's weight on the nails holding the feet, and bending the elbows and pulling upward on the nails driven through the wrists. The criminal's back, which had been torn open repeatedly by a previous flogging, would scrape against the wooden cross with each breath.*
>
> (Grudem, 1994: 572.)

Of course, Jesus' death was unique in that by it he bore the sins of the entire human race. This brought with it its own ***psychological pain***. Sin may be regarded as extremely offensive even to those who would claim to own no religious fervour. This is possibly because there remains in all of us a trace of God's image from original creation. For the Christian believer, the sense of hostility towards sin is increased in measure with our delight in all that is holy (see **Heb 1:9**). Only when the process of sanctification is complete, however, will we begin to appreciate Jesus' instinctive revulsion against

wickedness. Evil is as contrary to his character as it is possible to be; sin is entirely anathema to him. And yet he chose that the horrors of it be poured out on him in its fullness because of his love for humanity and his obedience to the Father.

But neither can ***the agony of Christ's abandonment*** be underestimated. Moments before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, he had confided to his inner circle of disciples the sense of sorrow he felt. Was this just an empty statement uttered in order to fulfil prophecy? Was it merely a human cry for support in his hour of dire need? Or was he beginning to feel for the very first time the ache of his Father beginning to withdraw his presence? Admittedly, there may well have been a feeling of despair that his closest friends were starting to reject him, even to the point of betrayal. But this surely paled into relative insignificance when compared to the previously unknown emotion of being abandoned by his Father, which culminated in his cry of despair from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" **(Mt 27:46)**. Up to that point, Jesus had only known eternal relationship with the Father; for this moment in time, he faced death alone.

Finally, and at least as significant was ***the pain of God's wrath*** against human sin. Christ became what the Bible calls a "propitiation" **(Rom 3:25)**. This theological term has in itself aroused heated debate, especially for those who prefer to think of God's 'expiation' (eg CH Dodd's Bible translations). 'Propitiation', however, is perfectly in keeping with the linguistic structure and finds harmony with the general theme of the atonement. Grudem describes it as a word that means "a sacrifice that bears God's wrath to the end and in so doing changes God's wrath toward us into favour". He goes on:

> *God has not simply forgiven sin and forgotten about the punishment in generations past. He had forgiven sins and stored up his righteous anger against the sins. But at the cross the fury of all that stored-up wrath against sin was unleashed against God's own Son.*
>
> (Grudem, 1994: 575.)

7.4.4 Nothing is Impassible with God (*sic!*)

The suggestion implied by the problem of evil is that God is capricious. The cross of Christ clearly shows, however, that, far from being indifferent to suffering, God is personally and actively involved in its pain. Those who are persuaded of divine

impassibility fail to acknowledge the possibility of a suffering God, but Calvary declared it loud and clear. Sovereign apathy is not found there. Indeed, much current teaching on a God devoid of emotion derives from the early Church Fathers, who on occasion were influenced more by Greek philosophy than Hebrew thought. The implication of following the concept of divine impassibility through to its logical conclusion borders on heresy, for it is theologically considered as the incapability of suffering. If this were true, then Jesus' deity must seriously be questioned.

Whilst equally careful to avoid the dangers of patripassianism, Galot also reminds us of the unique suffering of the Father:

> *Only the Son suffers on the cross, but the Father, a distinct divine person and intimately united tot he Son, suffers with him. The Father's is a suffering of compassion, of exceptional intensity because of their complete oneness... In the suffering face of the Saviour we must also see the suffering face of the Father.*
>
> (Galot, 1992: 138, 139.)

MJ Erickson similarly places God's active involvement into perspective thus:

> *Anyone who would impugn the goodness of God for allowing sin and consequently evil must measure that charge against the teaching of Scripture that God himself became the victim of evil so that... we might be victors of evil.*
>
> (Erickson, 1990: 432.)

It is perhaps noteworthy that the first scholar to write significantly on the subject of the impassibility of God was Philo, a first century student of Platonism whose findings were also the result of an attempt to reconcile Greek philosophy with Hebrew theology. Again, it was a reasoned conclusion to draw if to be passible meant that the divine Being would thereby be subject to something outside of himself, that is, affected by external circumstances. Emotion is therefore presented as incompatible with the nature of God. On the other hand, of course, impassibility (Greek '***apatheia***') implies apathy. God is not indifferent to the needs of mankind. His decision to send the Son as an expression of his love for fallen humanity surely bears ample witness to the fact that he is passionate about our plight.

According to RJ Bauckham, Jürgen Moltmann's '*The Crucified God*' is an attempt by the author to focus his attention on the question of theodicy. He summarises its theme for us thus:

> *As an event between the Father and the Son, and as an event of divine suffering, the cross requires a Trinitarian theology and a doctrine of divine passibility. As God's act of loving identification with all who suffer, it takes the problem of suffering up into God's Trinitarian history in hope for the eschatological overcoming of all suffering.*
>
> (in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 440.)

The understanding of an impassible God is largely due to a ***mis***understanding of the concept of suffering. To regard suffering as intrinsically evil and therefore incompatible with the divine perfections is a logical assumption to make. If the view of the moralist is to be given any credence, however, then evil may only be applied to deliberate and wilful acts. Is it not permissible, therefore, to perceive of suffering that is patently not evil when it is determined by the expression of a will that is by very nature good? A classic biblical argument in favour of this supposition would be the writer to the **Hebrews'** reminder that "God... [made] the author of... salvation perfect through suffering" **(2:10)**. The reasonable conclusion that one might draw from the view that suffering is evil is not just that its recipients are wholly deserving of such affliction, which may or may not be true, but that the one who precipitates it is equally guilty. Such a charge cannot seriously be levelled against the Divine Being.

The essence of biblical Christology is such that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" **(Jn 1:14)**. To deny passibility within the Godhead, therefore, seems tantamount to refuting the doctrine of the Trinity; to restrict it within Christ to his human nature is similarly to negate the hypostatical union. One is the product of Arianism; the other has much in common with the Docetists. There is, of course, the obvious danger of allowing ourselves to foster the unhelpful concept of patripassianism, but only if we do not maintain a biblical understanding of the Trinity. What can be clearly demonstrated from Scripture, however, is that although it is Jesus who suffers on the cross, the Father's paternal suffering is beyond our comprehension in the death of his Son. As Moltmann rightly concludes:

> *The rejection expressed in* [Jesus'] *dying cry... must therefore be understood strictly as something which took place between Jesus and his Father, and in the other direction between his Father and Jesus, the Son – that is, as something which took place between God and God. The*

abandonment on the cross which separates the Son from the Father is something which takes place within God himself.

(Moltmann, 1974: 243.)

7.4.5 An Example Worth Following

In stark contrast to those who would advocate a gospel of prosperity as a token of God's favour, Scripture is inclined to show that the rewards of true discipleship are not financial well-being or materialistic riches, but suffering. The prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane was that the cup of affliction might pass from him **(Mt 26:39-42)**. Was this a desperate plea to avoid the cross? Those who renounce Christ's deity would certainly have us believe so. But the fact of the matter is that the cup did indeed pass from him in the only way possible – by him drinking its contents. The cross is the only way to victory, both for Jesus and for believers. It is as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death that we fear no evil, not by choosing the path of avoidance. Triumph truly comes in the presence of adversity.

Speaking of Christ's suffering for man's sin, Richard Sibbes draws the following contrast between the agony of Calvary and the pain of chastisement experienced by Christians:

The sufferings and forsaking of Christ were satisfactory to divine justice; but ours are not so, but only medicinal. The nature of them is quite changed. They are not for satisfaction; for then we should die eternally; disable the satisfaction of Christ. They are crosses indeed, but not curses. Whatsoever we suffer in soul or body is a cross, but not a curse to us, because the sting is pulled out. They are all medicinal cures to fit us for heaven. Whatsoever we suffer in our inward or outward man, prepares us for glory, by mortifying the remainders of corruptions, and fitting us for the blessed estate.

(Sibbes, 1973: 361, 362.)

The apostle Paul identifies Christ's sacrificial suffering as the demonstration of God's justice **(Rom 3:24-26)**. Having already established that no-one can base his hope for acceptance with God on his own merits **(v 23)**, he then goes on to remind his readers that the atonement was beneficial for the faithful of both dispensations. William Hendriksen puts it this way:

The merits of the cross reach backward as well as forward. By not allowing the earlier sins to be left forever unpunished but loading them on to Christ, God [showed] *that he was, is and forevermore will be just. And since he is just, who can deny that he... alone has a right to be, and actually is, the justifier of all who repose their trust in Jesus?*

(Hendriksen, 1982: 134.)

Hendriksen cites the following as a legitimate poetic interpretation of the believers' plight in suffering, based on **Romans 5:3-5**:

And sufferings, too, we greet with cheer
Because they make us persevere
And mould our character, and then
This character builds hope again,
A hope that disappoints us ne'er;
For through his Spirit, which is e'er
Our portion, did our gracious God
His love so richly spread abroad.

(Hendriksen, 1982: 186.)

We will look more intently at the subject of Christian martyrdom in the following chapter. In this context, however, it is worth pointing out that:

... our own death does ***not*** *involve what it involved for Jesus, and what our own death* ***would*** *have involved were it not for his dying in that way... If there is any change in the human experience, and particularly the human experience of death, as a result of the death of Jesus, it is the impact of sin upon us.*

(Prior, 1985: 100.)

The purpose of the cross in the life of the believer is to bring us to a realisation of our utter dependence in God, having found our own resources absolutely futile. To bear one's cross, therefore, is not a pseudo-spiritual game of charades. Although it is used figuratively, the figure of which it speaks is a death sentence. In the words of the late Arthur Wallis:

That this ugly emblem lies at the heart of the Christian message should remind you that the gospel was never intended to give you a mere spring-clean, brighten you up, or make you a little more acceptable to your Creator... The cross is not to titivate, but to terminate. It offers a radical final solution to the problem of ongoing sin, and so opens the way to bring us into all the blessings that lie on the resurrection side of the cross.

(Wallis, 1993: 105.)

Christ's example in the face of the most desperate act of suffering in history instructs us in a number of ways. As Stanley Jones puts it:

> *He told us not to escape suffering, but to use it... Christ suggests that we are to take up pain, calamity, injustice and persecution into the purpose of our lives and make them contribute to higher ends – the ends for which we really live. He implies that the Christian has learned the secret of an alchemy by which the base metal of injustice and consequent sufferings can be turned into the gold of the purposes of the Kingdom of God. Jesus accepts the fact of human suffering. He does not explain it, much less does He explain it away. Jesus undertook to explain little, but changed everything in sight... When Jesus was hanging on the Cross in dreadful suffering, someone tried to put a drug to His lips to deaden the pain. He refused it. He would take no dodging, no easy way out, no refusal to face the final issue, no opiates. He would match against the suffering and rejection of that hour His inner courage of spirit and turn the whole thing into a testimony. He would turn the world's supreme tragedy into the world's supreme testimony – and did!*
>
> (Jones, ES, 1933: 78-80.)

7.4.6 The Problem of Sin Resolved, though the Problem of Evil Remains

The point of correlation between the perceived problem of evil and the atonement of God's Son is alluded to by Robert Lewis Dabney:

> *It is... the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice, coupled with His proper divinity, which enables us to complete our '**theodicy**' of the permission of evil... It is the sacrifice of Christ* [that] *gives the humble believer, not a solution, but a satisfying reply. There must have been a reason, and a good one, and it must have been one implying no stint or defect of God's holiness or benevolence. For had there been in God the least defect of either, he certainly would never have found it in his heart to send His infinite Son, more great and important than all the worlds, to redeem any one.*
>
> (Dabney, 1996: 537, 538.)

Over the centuries, Christianity has done itself no favours by offering glib answers to the problem of evil. All that can legitimately be presented as a balance to the vast sum of human misery in the history of the world is the demonstration of God's love at Calvary. The theological student will, of course, be aware of the different types of love presented in Scripture, as denoted especially by the Greek verbs '***eros***', '***philio***' and '***agape***'. An understanding of their difference is key to grasping the significance of Jesus' post-resurrection dialogue with Peter **(Jn 21:15-19)**. Of all the gospel writers,

however, **John** is the most enlightening on the subject of love, declaring that outside of the cross none of us could possibly know the extent of true love: "We know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us" **(1 Jn 3:16)**. Stott illumines us further, by telling us that:

> *... only one act of pure love, unsullied by any taint of ulterior motive, has ever been performed in the history of the world, namely the self-giving of God in Christ on the cross for undeserving sinners.*
>
> (Stott, 1986: 212.)

We can observe suffering in one of two ways, either through the kaleidoscope of global tragedy or from the vantage point of Calvary's cross. Although the crucifixion of Jesus offers no solution to the problem of the existence of evil, whether moral or natural, it does furnish an eternal perspective with which to view it. It is exclusively at the cross of Christ where God has demonstrated his love for mankind, an event in history that is as final as it is undeniable. The atoning efficacy of the cross is ultimately a matter of faith, not debate. Similarly, the extent of agonising that took place there overwhelmingly supersedes any suffering that we may be called to endure.

It is vain to attempt any calculation as to the full extent of Christ's suffering in death as a vicarious representative of humanity's sin. That said, however, I am indebted to the laudable attempt by Professor AB Bruce who offered the following, whilst at the same time denying any actual mathematical measurement:

> *The value of Christ's sacrifice was equal to His divine dignity, multiplied by His perfect obedience, multiplied by His infinite love; multiplied by suffering in body and soul carried out to the uttermost limit of what a sinless Being could experience.*
>
> (Bruce, 1905: 345, 346.)

7.5 SUMMARY

The bridge between the Old and New Testament concepts of suffering is seen in the redemptive work of Jesus. Christ not only fulfilled **Isaiah**'s prophetic 'Suffering Servant' role, but he also provided an example that all who are truly his disciples should expect to follow, though obviously not in any mediatorial role. Affliction was Christ's destiny from the beginning. This progressively increased throughout his life, in both awareness and actuality, until it culminated in the cross. And it is the cross that must

become the focal point of all Christian perception regarding suffering. As RK Harrison has observed:

> *The supreme exemplar of the righteous sufferer was Jesus Christ, who neither explained nor dismissed suffering, but instead absorbed it into His own spiritual experience, and through His fellowship with God achieved... **'the wresting of profit from the suffering'**, which has been of incalculable value to subsequent humanity.*
>
> (Harrison, 1979: 1046.)

The timing of Jesus' coming into the world is highly significant. In the economy of God, he knew that this was just the right time and that the most dire need of humanity could only be met in his Son. Despite a whole host of different problems and varying levels of difficulty, the solution was the same. Mankind was not in need of a political figure, an environmentalist, a warrior-king or an economist, but a Saviour. The same is true today. Only someone who can redeem the world from the ills caused by self-indulgent egotism and self-assumed autonomy can truly claim the authority that Messiahship brings. In order to make that claim, he had to be as unsullied by sin as those for whom he came to die are spoiled by selfish motivation. Only then could his death produce life, his resurrection bringing order out of chaos.

It is no coincidence that the central chapter to this study contains a discussion on the central figure in Church history. Indeed, the incarnation of Christ is the hinge upon which the door of world history turns; it is what separates BC from AD. As far as the concept of suffering is concerned, the atoning figure of Jesus is pivotal to our understanding of the problem of evil. It is through Jesus' sacrificial death that the purpose of God is to be worked out eschatologically, which will in turn resolve the mystery of evil of which human suffering is a product. The apparent conflict between innocent suffering and divine justice will thereby be removed of any perceived disharmony.

8.0 THE SUFFERING SAINTS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Before we look closely at suffering in the realm of Christendom, it may be prudent to establish a biblical understanding of the concept of sainthood. Contrary to the beliefs of those of a Roman persuasion, the Bible never speaks of a saint as someone who is elevated to such status after their death as an act of veneration by councils or committees for deeds of an especially noble nature. The words "saints" **(Acts 9:32)**, "family of believers" **(Gal 6:10)**, "Christians" **(Acts 11:26)**, "disciples" **(Acts 21:4)**, and "follower(s) of the Way" **(Acts 24:14)** are employed in a broadly synonymous fashion throughout the New Testament. Paul consistently used this form of address in the introduction to many of his letters (eg **2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:4; Phm 5**). In fact, when he speaks of those at Rome as ones "who are loved by God and called to be saints" **(Rom 1:7)**, he is not speaking of some future eschatological event when sainthood will be conferred any more than he is when referring to himself as a servant "called to be an apostle" **(1:1)**. The tense is present continuous in both cases.

Christians share with unbelievers the possibility of suffering as a direct result of their fallen human nature. The regenerate are no less vulnerable to the potential of sorrow, sickness, ill health, disease, poverty or death than the rest of mankind. God may, and often does, cast his protective arm around them when such calamity might otherwise frustrate his purpose. But he does not always do so and the Bible makes us none the wiser as to when we may or may not expect such divine intervention.

Christian suffering should not come as a surprise, therefore, for Christ himself prophesied as much to the early disciples **(Jn 16:33)**. Paul even goes as far as to imply that we are to welcome suffering as a proof of our sonship, given that it "produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" **(Rom 5:3, 4)**. The apostle had already warned his early converts that access to the kingdom of God would be gained by "many hardships" **(Acts 14:22)**. As Dr D Martyn Lloyd-Jones has offered:

> *There is no more important, and no more subtle test of our profession of the Christian faith than the way we react to the trials and the troubles and the tribulations of life in this world. There is no test which is more delicate,*

> *more sensitive than this particular test. I have sometimes ventured to describe it as the acid test of a man's profession of the Christian faith.*
>
> (Lloyd-Jones, 1974a: 60.)

In other words, true Christianity endures in the midst of persecution; mere 'believerism' will look for a way of escape in the face of pressure. Peter commented in a similar vein when he reacted in bewildered astonishment that his readers should "be surprised at the painful trial [they were] suffering" **(1 Pet 4:12)**. He, too, implied that to share in Christ's sufferings in this life is to share also in his eternal glory **(v 13)**.

Sadly, there is an increasing tendency in some Evangelical circles to present the gospel as an escapist religion from the trials, difficulties and hurts of life (eg Hinn: 1996). This is not only unbiblical, it is potentially damaging. As well as encouraging an almost analgesic adventure-like existence, those who find themselves stricken with disease are either accused of lacking in faith, made to feel guilty for some hidden sin as the harbinger of their lot, or live in some mind-over-matter denial of their condition. Speaking as a Charismatic Reformed Evangelical by both conviction and experience, my discomfort in recent years within those circles has been largely due to what M^{c}Grath calls "the M^{c}Donaldization of Christianity" (M^{c}Grath, 2002: 50). A major contribution towards this state of affairs, particularly in the West, has been the idea that regards suffering as an ungodly intrusion into the norm of Christian tranquillity. In such cases evangelicalism clearly needs to be redefined. RT Kendall makes a noble attempt by having the honesty to admit that:

> *Suffering will always be a mystery until we get to heaven. But we can find some meaning in suffering to the degree we affirm God's wisdom in everything – even if we don't understand what is happening.*
>
> (Kendall, 1999: 380.)

The reason for our suffering is clear from the text of **Romans 5:17**. It is "in order that we may also share in his glory". This corresponds favourably with similarly passages in the New Testament, which clearly teach that "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" **(Acts 14:22)** and "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" **(Heb 12:6)**. There remains a certain amount of enigma surrounding our understanding of how the logistics of suffering can contribute towards preparing us for glory. The process that transforms us from a state of

justification to one of glorification is indispensable – it is sanctification. Other words that readily spring to mind are 'character-development' and 'Christlikeness'. Forgiveness of sins is an essential aspect of salvation, but it is only the beginning of the journey – we ***have been*** saved. Becoming more like Jesus in our behavioural response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit is a vital part of the Christian walk, but it is only the divinely appointed means to a God-purposed end – we ***are being*** saved. The final act in this trilogy of transformation is that we share also in Christ's glorification – we ***shall be*** saved.

Whatever mystery may yet remain, we can have confidence in Paul's words to the church at Rome:

> *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*
>
> **(Rom 8:28.)**

8.2 EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

In many ways, the persecution of the early Church may be viewed as but a continuation of their Judaistic heritage. Although there are clues as to the relationship between witness and martyrdom in the Old Testament (see **Heb 11:37**), the concept was a much more developed reality by the time of the New Testament. This was largely due to the period of hostility towards Judah as an occupied territory and the staunch refusal by a minority to relinquish their sense of covenant identity (see 4 Maccabees 17:8ff). Whilst Judaism was officially tolerated, certainly in the early years of Roman occupation, a degree of resentment prevailed towards a people who seemed to emulate their forefathers some centuries earlier in exile. It was almost as if the more harshly they were treated, the more they prospered, which served only to increase the intensity of hatred towards them (cf **Exo 1:12, 13**). And so it was that the first Christians, by virtue of association, inherited a legacy of animosity that had previously been reserved for adherents of Judaism.

Although Israel had long had the book of **Job** to give some insight into the complexity of suffering (if only to reveal it as a mystery), there remained a strong association between specific sin and personal calamity, right up to the time of Jesus **(Lk 13:1-5; Jn 9:1-12)**. Even the closest followers of Christ were slow to grasp the redemptive

significance of his suffering **(Mt 16:21; 17:12; Jn 2:19-22)**. Indeed, it was not until after the resurrection that the doctrine of believers sharing in Christ's suffering as a prelude to also enjoying his glory as co-heirs with him was more precisely formulated. Whilst the Old Testament saints were encouraged to anticipate prosperity in return for obedience – not unlike some current denominational trends (eg Savelle: 1982) – the New Testament emphasis on sonship tended more towards an expectation of affliction.

Messianic expectation in Israel had not prepared them for the horror of the cross. It was, in fact, "a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" **(1 Cor 1:18, 23)**. For those who believed, however, Christ's sacrificial sufferings were the unfolding of God's redemptive purpose and therefore the heart, indeed the very crux of the gospel. It is central to the apostolic teaching of the early church, and any gospel presentation that devalues the suffering Saviour in our own day is surely diminished in its effectiveness. In its formative years, as recorded in the book of **Acts**, the church welcomed trial, embraced suffering and invited persecution as a privilege and a blessing to be counted worthy of sharing the same fate as their Master. The apostle Paul is often on the verge of boasting concerning the catalogue of hardships he endured for the sake of the gospel (see 2 **Cor 4:7-12**). Peter, too, actually encourages believers to rejoice at the threat of persecution as those who are called to share in Christ's sufferings **(1 Pet 4:13)**. The writer to the **Hebrews** points out by way of reminder that discipline is a hallmark of sonship **(Heb 12:5-11)**, even as it was for Jesus **(5:8)**. John urges perfect endurance in the face of the most intense hostility as a form of testing, as gold in the crucible **(Rev 2:10)**.

As crucifixion became the common form of execution in every Roman province and colony, part of the victim's humiliation was to carry his own '***patibulum***' (ie cross member). The disciples of first century Palestine could have understood Jesus' words solely in terms of taking up the position of a condemned man – daily. As Bonhoeffer so adroitly put it: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die" (Bonhoeffer, 1948: 79). Over the centuries, this has not been a merely figurative application for some, but has included physical martyrdom. But for every Christian, for whom this command is non-negotiable (cf **Lk 9:23; 14:27**), self-denial in its many forms is implied in the daily cross we are called to bear. Paul surely had this in mind when he reminded the believers at Galatia that: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its

passions and desires" **(Gal 5:24)**. The old divines spoke of this as mortification, putting to death the sinful nature.

Even from the outset of the apostolic age, Christians were encouraged to expect suffering as the norm:

> *... do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*
>
> **(1 Pet 4:12, 13.)**

Much maligned by the populace, believers of this new '***Way***' became easy prey for the bloodthirsty lusts of Roman Emperors (see Foxe, 2000: 1-37). False representation, fuelled largely by rumour, sustained the beliefs that Christians were atheists because they denied all other forms of religious expression but their own; that they were cannibals, who spoke of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their founder; their love for one another and form of corporate address (ie brother/sister) led to the charge of incestuous behaviour; and they were accused of being isolationists, who refused to participate in pagan revelry (cf Dowley, ed, 1977: 72).

The first recorded instance of Christian martyrdom in the whole of Church history is to be found in the Bible. The account of Stephen in **Acts** chapter 7 is but the first of many thousands of such deaths occasioned by faithfulness in the face of the most severe of persecutions. Ten years after the death of Stephen, James the brother of John was executed in a sweeping wave of hostility by Herod Agrippa against the leaders of the church (see Foxe, 2000: 5). According to John Foxe, the early historian Clemens Alexandrius writes of James' accuser – purportedly inspired by the apostle's unequivocal bravery – that he begged his forgiveness, accepted Christ and thence shared the crown of martyrdom with James (Foxe, 2000: 6).

Other notable martyrdoms of the first century include Philip who, having been charged and imprisoned, was crucified at Heliopolis in AD 54. Matthew, the writer of the gospel that bears his name, was slain in Ethiopia in AD 64. James, the brother of Jesus, was beaten to death and stoned by Jews at the age of 94. Matthias, who had been chosen by lot to replace Judas, was also stoned at Jerusalem and then beheaded. Andrew, the

brother of Peter, was crucified at Edessa, the angular fixation of his crucifix well represented in the Scottish national flag (St Andrew's cross). Mark was literally torn apart at Alexandria in an act of idolatrous retribution on behalf of their god, Serapis. It is reported by Jerome that Simon Peter was crucified upside down, allegedly choosing this position for himself as one unworthy to so replicate his Master's death. Paul was beheaded by two of Nero's henchmen who, it is said, were later baptised at Paul's burial tomb. Jude, also known as Thaddæus, was crucified at Edessa in AD 72. Bartholomew, having translated the gospel of **Matthew** for the benefit of the Indian tongue, also suffered crucifixion at their hands. Thomas, too, met his death in India, being thrust through with a spear by pagan priests. Luke is reputed to have died by hanging from an olive tree at the hands of a band of idolatrous Greek priests. Simon Zelotes was crucified for his evangelistic efforts in Britain in AD 74. Barnabas, too, was martyred around the same time. Only John, it would appear, that beloved disciple, died in the fullness of time, though he had escaped a premature end having been cast into a cauldron of boiling oil and miraculously emerging unscathed (see Foxe, 2000: 6-11).

In the midst of all this and worse atrocities, the fire of burning passion for the cause of Christianity was not quenched. Indeed, as Foxe observed:

> *... notwithstanding all these continual persecutions and horrible punishments, the Church daily increased, deeply rooted in the doctrine of the apostles and of men apostolical, and watered plenteously with the blood of the saints.*
>
> (Foxe, 2000: 5.)

All the evidence of early church history seems to suggest that for almost two hundred and fifty years, Christianity was unlawful in the Roman Empire. There is, however, no definitive point in time at which this act became real. There is no record of any edict having been issued, no clear testimony as to what crime was being perpetrated. It does appear, therefore, that Nero's persecution in AD 64 became a catalyst for illegality. What is remarkable is that within this contextual framework, that particular generation of Christians did not generally abandon either their faith or the motivation to witness.

Many of the regional governors inflicted punishment on Christians with absolutely no understanding of the precise point of law that was supposedly being flaunted. In a letter to the emperor Trajan, Pliny's ignorance is such that he presumes those he has ordered

to be executed guilty of incest and infanticide. These were apparently common misconceptions, largely drawn from uninformed "ideas of brotherly love and of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ in the Eucharist" (M^{c}Kechnie, 2001: 112).

In his '*To the Gentiles*' of AD 197, the Christian apologist Tertullian contrasts the plight of arrested believers with that of other 'criminals'. Paul M^{c}Kechnie paraphrases Tertullian's words thus:

> *Normally, when arrested criminals deny their crimes... torture is used to make them confess; but with people accused of Christianity, torture is used to make them deny the accusation against them. Criminals who deny their crime are disbelieved, but Christians who claim not to be Christians are immediately believed. Criminals are normally punished for past actions, but when a suspect denies being a Christian (now), anything he or she did in the past is disregarded: there is no punishment for having been a Christian. What is punished is the name.*
>
> (M^{c}Kechnie, 2001: 113.)

The Great Persecution under Diocletian was probably a reaction by the Emperor to a perceived lack of respect shown by Christians at imperial sacrifices. Once again, Paul M^{c}Kechnie takes up the story:

> *... at a public sacrifice with Diocletian and Galerius present... in 302, some... servants crossed themselves. When repeated sacrifices failed to produce acceptable results, the chief of the '**haruspices**' (inspectors of entrails of sacrificed animals) told the emperors that the gods refused to give an answer because profane persons were in attendance. Angry, Diocletian ordered that everyone in his palace must sacrifice, and be whipped if they refused.*
>
> (M^{c}Kechnie, 2001: 224.)

Within twelve months, the Prætorian guard had razed the church at Nicomedia to the ground and an edict was issued whereby sacred books were to be destroyed, churches throughout the Empire pulled down and Christians deprived of human rights. The death penalty was not officially imposed, though it was variously implemented by some provincial governors who were keen to be viewed as loyal to the Emperor. On Diocletian's retirement from office in AD 305, Galerius assumed the sole responsibility for attempting to stamp out Christianity, though a constant struggle for power in the face of other claimants to the title 'Caesar' diverted his efforts somewhat. Persecution

lasted a little less than two years in the West, but went on until around 313 in the eastern half of the Empire (M^{c}Kechnie, 2001: 226, 227).

The history of the Roman Empire from the time of Christ onwards is punctuated by occasions of mass persecution against Christianity by the Emperor in residence. Many suffered abominable ends to their earthly existence at the hands of Nero in AD 67, Domitian in AD 81, Trajan in 108, Marcus Aurelius Antonimus in 162, Severus in 192, Maximus in 235, Decius in 249, Valerian in 257, Aurelian in 274 and Diocletian in 303 (see Foxe, 2000: 12-37). Throughout the whole of this time, the effect was distinctly far-removed from its design, increasing rather than diminishing the spread of Christianity. Indeed, a close inspection of the state of the church in its early years indicates that its slowest rate of growth coincided with its most sustained periods of non-hostility (the inverse also being true). Almost bizarrely, we find that during the so-called Christianisation of the Empire by Constantine and for the following thousand years, we read of no general bouts of persecution against Christians at all ***per se***, nor indeed much spread of the gospel. For a time, at least, the devil seemed to have learned that the secret to negating this threat to his kingdom was to convince its members that there was no battle in which to engage.

8.3 THE DARK SIDE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

As the papal system developed through the middle ages, a commensurate persecution of the truly godly began to take place. So-called radicals were suppressed, ill-treated and labelled 'heretics'. They were chiefly hounded by Dominican black-friars, known as 'the Lord's watchdogs' from a play on the Latin '***Domini***' and '***canus***' (Matthew, 1985: 84). Their victims' only crime seems to have been that they chose allegiance to the truth of Scripture, rather than the religious system being imposed by Rome.

In the latter part of the first millennium, a group of believers known as the Paulicians fell foul of the established church and its puppet politicians. Scattered largely in and around Asia Minor, these Christians emphasised personal repentance, faith and baptism by immersion. They administered the presbyterian style of church government where elders were appointed by laying on of hands in recognition of godly character. Although the Paulicians were not without fault and occasional internal difficulty, the persecution they encountered at the hands of the official church establishment seems wholly

undeserved. It is estimated that between AD 842 and 867 in excess of 100,000 Paulicians met their death on the orders of the Empress Theodora, who played Pilate to the Sanhedrin of Rome (Matthew, 1985: 88).

Another such group who had previously flourished in present-day Bulgaria was the Bogomils (meaning '*Friends of God*'). In the tenth century, they found themselves at odds with the Eastern Church, based in Constantinople (Istanbul). One of their outstanding leaders, Basil, was summoned by the Emperor Alexius on the pretext of seeking his scholarly counsel in religious matters. Having concluded his affairs with the Emperor, Basil was hurled into prison and subsequently released, only to be set alight in the public Hippodrome. Thence began a spate of persecution against others of Basil's conviction (Matthew, 1985: 88).

From the early part of the tenth century onwards, the main source of Christian oppression appears to have come from within its own ranks. Controversies over doctrinal orthodoxy, or more strictly allegations of removal from it, became sufficient grounds for ungodly persecution in the name of 'pure religion'. In the majority of cases, however, the victims were the real perpetrators of biblical purity, whilst the accusers upheld an orthodoxy that was more a syncretism of godly virtue and pagan belief, the latter being the touchstone for the former and not vice-versa. The later persecutions meted out to the Waldensians and Albigenses, and the Bartholomew massacre at Paris were all examples of papal interrogation against what developed from this root of Protestantism (Matthew, 1985: 89, 109).

By the end of the twelfth century, papal power was such that the bishops' inquisition was established with the authority to hound out all suspected heretics. Although the death penalty was not officially recognised until some time later, there had been instances of non-conformists being burned at the stake as early as the beginning of the eleventh century. Because of the close link between church and state, 'heresy' soon became acknowledged as a treasonable offence. Cistercians and later Dominican bishops were despatched throughout Europe on a quest to retain the concept of papal purity. In France, Louis VIII proclaimed a decree whereby the state would execute punishment on those whom the bishops ruled to be worthy recipients.

Accusations of heresy have often brought the severest of penalties for those so accused. Derived from the Latin '***haeresis***' meaning nothing more contentious than the exercise of choice, it seems reasonable to conclude that very often one man's heresy is another man's orthodoxy. In the early part of church history, up until the Middle Ages, most of those branded heretics were either individualistic fantasisers or logicians who focused so resolutely on their attempt to reconcile apparently opposing truths that they opened up a theology that was in other ways deficient to the overall consensus. It must be pointed out that in the context of first century Judaism, the teaching of Jesus would have presented an argument for heresy on the lips of many of the religious leaders of the day.

In the thirteenth century, and as an attempt to wipe out the threat of a Protestant revolution, Pope Innocent III delegated certain representatives of his power to exercise that authority as inquisitors against heresy. The 'lords' of the Inquisition instilled such fear that even the kings of Spain were afraid to speak out against them. Individuals suspected of heresy were, at the instigation of Emperor Frederic II to save his own reputation, given one of two choices: in the event of their repentance, they would be imprisoned for life; otherwise, they would be burned. To be found guilty of reading the Scripture in the common language was deemed to be guilty of heresy. Suspicion was not required to be verified for sentence to be carried out. To the condemned, having been mercilessly tortured, shamefully abused and undergone torment of an unscrupulous nature, to be finally allowed to die must have been perceived as a welcome release. As Ronald Finucane informs us:

> *Distinctions were made between heretics who had additional beliefs and those who denied orthodox beliefs, and between perfected and imperfect heretics; or again, since mere suspicion was sufficient cause to be summoned, individuals were classified as lightly suspect, vehemently suspect, or violently suspect.*
>
> (in Dowley, ed, 1977: 318.)

In the early part of the thirteenth century, the Pope initiated a crusade against the Albigenses of southern France. Tens of thousands were slaughtered in Provence, Languedoc, Albi, Béziers and La Minerve, many opting to climb their own corporate funeral pyre rather than deny the truths of Scripture. The Dominicans were once again at the forefront of these atrocities and were largely responsible for maintaining the Inquisition from 1232 onwards. The Waldensians (or '*Poor Men of Lyons*') were a similar group who suffered at the hands of papal fallibility, though despite intense

persecution, they did manage to maintain some spiritual witness right up to the time of the Reformation (see Matthew, 1985: 89, 90). For the most part:

> *The unsung heroes of medieval church life were the much-maligned Bible-believers who lived out and taught the simple faith of the New Testament and for their pains were harassed, tortured, burnt, drowned, beheaded or allowed to live only under appalling pressures. And their persecutors? The 'official' church.*
>
> (Matthew, 1985: 92.)

The Inquisition was essentially a religious court invested with a strange power to exercise judgment on a defendant's intentions as well as his/her activities. Consisting of a network of officials, delegates, examiners, advisers, guards and special agents, the fear instilled by the mere drama of the occasion often produced instant confession rather than endure a prolonged defence. Torture was commonplace, civil liberties often impinged upon and, in cases of those classified as finally relapsed, the stake was their inevitable destiny (in Dowley, ed, 1977: 318-323).

Foxe's vitriolic summary of what he calls "the image of... popedom" is only moderately tempered when he says that:

> *It might have spread literature, peace, freedom, and Christianity to the ends of Europe, or the world. But its nature was hostile; its fuller triumph only disclosed its fuller evil; and to the shame of human reason, and the terror and suffering of human virtue, Rome, in the hour of its consummate grandeur, teemed with the monstrous and horrid birth of the INQUISITION!*
>
> (Foxe, 2000: 63.)

The Inquisition evolved into a militaristic arm of what became known as the 'Counter-Reformation' of the sixteenth century. Rome was not prepared to simply allow the Reformation to take place without comment and so the Council of Trent was convened. Amongst the many decisions agreed here were a denial of the supreme authority of Scripture in church affairs, the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible accorded sole recognition (though episcopal tradition ranked equal to it in matters of faith), papal authority ratified, each doctrine of the Protestant Reformation anathematised and all faithful Catholics bound to the official interpretation of Scripture as decided at Rome. In 1545, four thousand believers were killed by the Inquisition at Provence for their allegiance to Waldensian principles. A little later, more than 100,000 Protestants were

butchered in the Netherlands, their mode of death having been previously reserved for severe criminal activity. In Spain, the Inquisition all but wiped out the entire Lutheran church in just over a year (see Matthew, 1985: 108,109). Tragically, the history books record that not all such butchery was carried out by hands who were committed to the Roman cause. As David Matthew reminds us:

> *Equally horrifying atrocities were periodically carried out by Protestants against Catholics. There were fanatical devotees of both viewpoints who were devoid of any real spiritual life and who carried out the persecutions for political advantage.*
>
> (Matthew, 1985: 109.)

Restricted space will not permit a more detailed account of the persecutions of John Wycliff, John Hus of Bohemia or John de Trocznow (nicknamed Zosca). Suffice it to say, they all endured terrible deaths for no legitimate reason besides their unwavering faith in the midst of adversity. John Hus even prophesied as the flames licked his body that "You are now going to burn a goose" (a literal translation of his name), "but in a century you will have a swan which you can neither roast nor boil" (Foxe, 2000: 143). Approximately a hundred years later emerged Martin Luther, whose family coat of arms bore a swan.

The Church of Rome has not been the sole instigator of crimes by the church against the church, however. Calvin's part in the execution of Michael Servetus, the Church of England's extreme opposition to the Lollards (followers of Wycliff), and Queen Elizabeth I's merciless pursuit of all that had stood by Mary's anti-Protestant regime are just a few more of the many examples recorded in history where persecution of an ungodly origin has been wrought in the name of Christianity.

In an age where freedom of speech is at the hub of most civilised societies, it seems odd, almost unbelievable, to conceive of an age in history where religious thought was so defined that any deviance from the norm could provoke such hostility. More strange still that the very ethos of all that Jesus spoke out against in terms of religiosity and tradition taking precedence over godly understanding became associated with Christianity through the church that claimed to own him. Many of those who suffered at this time did so either through ignorance or a genuine desire to pursue their holiness. Many died simply because their conviction was so great they refused to recant. Could it

be that the majority of those whose names appeared in the papal list of heretics found their names also duplicated in the Lamb's book of Life **(Rev 21:27)**?

I am again indebted to the scholarly insight of the sixteenth century Puritan theologian, Thomas Watson:

> *The trials and sufferings of the godly are to refine and purify them... Is it any injustice in God to put his gold into the furnace to purify it? Is it any injustice in God, by afflicting his people, to make them partakers of his holiness? What more proclaims God's faithfulness, than to take such a course with them as may make them better?*
>
> (Watson, T, 1974: 90.)

8.4 TOWARDS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

8.4.1 William Carey

Not all suffering endured by the saints, however, is the result of anti-Christian persecution. Perhaps the most amazing tale – outside of Scripture – of resignation to God's will in the midst of apparently ill-deserved affliction is the case of William Carey. In early March 1812, tragedy struck the Serampore mission when an accidental fire burned down the printing facility. In a moment, the missionaries had lost not only their entire stock of paper, but also the typesetting casts for both the Chinese and Tamil translations of the Bible they had just completed. Vital manuscripts were also lost. According to Samuel Pearce Carey, the loss of William Carey's work was the main cause of their anguish:

> *Portions of nearly all his Indian Scripture versions; all his Kinavese New Testament; two whole large Old Testament books in Sanskrit; many pages of his Bengali Dictionary; all his Teleyn grammar, and much of his Punjabi; a year's work of Marshman and himself on the* ***'Ramayana'****, and every vestige of his well-advanced* ***'Dictionary of Sanskrit and its Indian Cognates'*** *– the* ***magnum opus*** *of his linguistic life – an overwhelming disaster.*
>
> (in Carey, 1924: 288.)

As William Carey stood amongst the debris, he was offered consolation by the Anglican Chaplain of the East India Company. His response fittingly revealed a heart of humility:

In one night, the labours of years are consumed. How unsearchable are the divine ways. I had lately brought some things to the utmost perfection I could, and contemplated the Mission with, perhaps, too much self-congratulation. The Lord has laid me low, that I might look more simply to him.

(in Carey, 1924: 290.)

On the following Sunday, Carey preached to the expectant hordes, using **Psalm 46:10** as his text – "Be still and know that I am God". He spoke, first of all, of God's right to dispose of us as he pleases, and secondly of man's duty to acquiesce in his purpose. It seems that that which brings the most honour to God is also that which bows unconditionally to his sovereignty.

8.4.2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer

From an early age, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an eloquent preacher. Even in his final moments on earth at the age of only thirty-nine, he sought to lead his fellow-prisoners into a redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ before the Nazi guard led him away to be executed. His crime had been to oppose the nationalistic policies of 1930s Germany. Within days of Hitler's coming to power, Bonhoeffer broadcast his assault on the very concept of dictatorship. He was one of the first to voice his objection to the anti-Semitic fever that had swept across the fatherland.

Having publicised his stance in both London and America, he decided to return to Germany, against the counsel of his advisors, that he might identify with what he described as "the shame and the sacrifice" of his own race. He joined the resistance and was allegedly involved in the failed assassination attempt upon Hitler's life. Bonhoeffer was finally discovered trying to smuggle a small band of Jews into Switzerland. From his prison cell, he penned theological tomes that continue to influence modern understanding of Christian doctrine. On 9th April 1945, so close to the end of hostilities in Europe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was summarily executed by the Gestapo at Flossenbürg. Ten years after the event, the camp physician concluded his eyewitness account with the following words:

In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

(in Zimmerman, ed, 1966: 232.)

A short time before his death, Bonhoeffer wrote the following which, when published three years later, became a fitting epitaph:

> *The Christian life is a life of crucifixion... Anybody living in the strength of Christ's baptism lives in the strength of Christ's death. Their life is marked by a daily dying in the war between the flesh and the spirit, and in the mortal agony the devil inflicts upon them day by day. This is the suffering of Christ which all his disciples on earth must undergo... When Christians are exposed to public insult, when they suffer and die for his sake, Christ takes on visible form in his Church. Here we see the divine image created anew through the power of Christ crucified. But throughout the Christian life, from baptism to martyrdom, it is the same suffering and the same death.*
>
> (Bonhoeffer, 1948: 273.)

8.4.3 Joni Eareckson

There comes a time when a realistic acceptance of suffering is the only plausible avenue left open to us. Enduring persecution for the sake of the gospel, for instance, is abundantly more acceptable than denying Christ in the midst of affliction. According to the New Testament, due punishment is not praiseworthy, whereas undeserved suffering brings eternal rewards (see **1 Pet 2:20, 21; 3:17**). Of all the examples we may take from the life of Jesus, none is more powerful than the manner with which he endured the cross. In the moving account of Joni Eareckson, we see how she came to terms with her own plight through a deepening understanding of the crucifixion of Christ.

In 1967, this attractive teenager seemed to have the world at her feet. Beauty, intelligence, athletic prowess were virtues that may well have provoked envy among her peers. Then she had a tragic diving accident that left her permanently paralysed from the neck down. As she relates her emotions at this time, Ms Eareckson (now Eareckson-Tada) is frank and forthright. Seasons of bitterness and rage only gave way to periods of depression and despair. In the course of time, however, and with the help of family and friends (the like of whom Job could have wished for), she gradually began to trust in the sovereignty of God. Her closest friend spoke to her of Jesus' sufferings some three years after the accident, drawing parallels between Joni's state and the condition of Christ on the cross. "Why, he was paralysed too", affirmed her friend. Only then did it strike her that in his last hours, Jesus was similarly disabled, his movements restricted by the coarse Roman nails (Eareckson, 1976: 96).

8.4.4 Georgi Vins

At the beginning of 1975, Georgi Petrovich Vins, a leader of the Reformed Baptists in the former Soviet Union, was sentenced in Kiev to five years' hard labour, to be followed by a similar period of exile. His 'crime' was to be found guilty of "damaging the interests of citizens under the pretext of religious activity" (Vins, 1976). His parents, Petr and Lidia, had also suffered in this way for their faith, his father having died in a Far East labour camp in 1943. Having already spent previous periods of imprisonment on like charges in Lefortovo and at Chapechanka, Anyusha and Odintjov (Krasnoyarsk), Georgi Vins prepared for Siberia in the knowledge that his children would comprise the third generation of his family to be systematically victimised for their adherence to the gospel.

8.4.5 Terry Waite

In more recent times, there can have been no more riveting a tale of suffering for one's conviction on behalf of others than that of Terry Waite. Having travelled the world as personal envoy to the Archbishop of Canterbury, seeking to find support in his attempt to secure the release of political hostages in Beirut, he himself was taken prisoner early in 1987. In total, he spent almost eighteen hundred days in captivity, during which time he was deprived of natural light, liberty of movement and the level of companionship we without such restrictions take for granted. After his release, he concluded his extempore speech on arrival at RAF Lyndham on 19th November 1991 in the following laudable fashion:

> *... it would not be right for me to leave this podium without remembering all those, and in particular all those in the Middle East, who are held captive. It is wrong to hold people in such a way, it is self-defeating and those who do it fall well below civilised standards of behaviour no matter who they are, no matter what nationality or what organisation they belong to. We have lived in these last years through the appalling sufferings of the people of Lebanon, we have been in the midst of shelling, we have seen people die and killed in most brutal ways, and those from whom I have just come can be assured that we in the Church for our part will not rest until all are freed and there is justice and peace brought to people who deserve a better deal.*
>
> (Waite, 1994: 451, 452.)

8.4.6 Closer to Home

For those who are disciples of Jesus, death can be the ultimate form of healing. A little over a year ago, one of the elders of the church of which I am a member, and his wife, were confronted with some terrible news. Their only son, James, an otherwise healthy fourteen year-old was admitted to hospital after suffering intense headaches whilst on a spring break. Advised by the medical staff to prepare for the worst, they imagined meningitis – the diagnosis was a brain tumour. The church was called to prayer, many taking it upon themselves to accompany their petitions with fasting in the hope that full health might be restored.

After six weeks of intensifying pain when even the morphine provided no barrier and courses of treatment that were more in desperate hope than any conviction of success, James slipped away to be with his Saviour in the early hours of one Friday morning in May 2002. Emotions were confused for all. Relief, sadness, disbelief and failure all battled with a sense of joy that James was now truly at rest. "Why one so young?" some asked. "If only we'd had more faith in our prayers," others offered. Why was James not healed? In a strange, yet glorious way, he was. Perhaps the greatest gift we can know as Christians in age where the very word 'death' is mumbled in hushed tones is not necessarily to know how to live well, but how to die with dignity. This is our privilege and marks Christians out as unique, not only in contrast to the rest of the world, but also when compared to adherents of other faiths.

8.4.7 Further Afield

Perhaps the largest geographical location of the suffering church today is in Latin America. It may well be no coincidence that it is also the place of its greatest expansion. What is startling to discover is that Christians in other countries are rarely persecuted for their religious beliefs, but they are suffering because of their commitment to practically express Christian love for others. Arrest, interrogation, imprisonment, torture and exile often await those who are not afraid to be a mouthpiece for the voiceless, speak out against the abuse of human rights, and assist political refugees and their families. Victims of perverse government and ungodly policies are selflessly offered

rehabilitation and pastoral care, sometimes openly, though mostly through networks of underground safety.

For many years, caring for the poor, progressive politics, and an identification with the need to bring relief to unnecessary global suffering has been the domain of what became known as the Liberation Theologians. Largely confined to the work of Roman Catholicism in Latin America, certainly in its early days, liberation theology was criticised for "adopting socialism as an aim and Marxism as a tool for the analysis of society" (in Keeley, ed, 1985: 226). Much theology has in general terms been perceived as purely academic and with little focus on practical expression. Liberation theology, on the other hand, emphasises biblical themes such as the exodus, the social impact of Jesus' teaching, the gospel as essentially good news to the poor, and an attack on political injustice as being diametrically opposed to the ethos of God's heart for humanity. The evidence of its success is quite different, therefore, from other branches of theology. As essentially non-academic in composition, liberation theology will not be judged on whether it remains fashionable or can be dogmatically proven or otherwise, but whether or not it retains, and in some measure achieves, its objectives – to represent the poor and downtrodden.

8.5 SOME SALUTARY LESSONS

There are many paradoxes in the Christian walk, apparent contradictions that convince us that from the moment we become believers we enter an upside-down world **(Acts 17:6)**. There is more blessing to giving than there is to receiving; only by dying to self can we truly know life; the way to victory is through adversity; true freedom is achieved by being willing bondslaves of Christ. To be free in this sense means to be whole-hearted, single-minded and have but one objective and purpose. Conversely, spiritual bondage exists where there are a multiplicity of masters, when we have no clearly identifiable goals, and where our time is divided amongst many projects. Many adherents to what we might call worldly systems of philosophies and ideologies, we would brand as fanatical; the Sanhedrin probably said the same about Jesus, who quite simply overcame by not going under.

Physical pain is arguably the most common form of suffering. Very often we can be thankful for it, especially in its role as an alarm system, warning of further danger. A

child who falls from a bicycle may be in some discomfort for a short time, but the lesson to take greater care will reside much longer than any graze to the knee. Suffering of this kind can be welcomed for its brevity, but what of pain that is sustained and unremitting? Those who suffer the onset of motor neurone disease or the effects of cerebral vascular accidents can hardly be blamed for failing to see their plight as anything but academic. Sympathy fails to alleviate. Comments akin to "I know how you feel" are of little value when uttered by someone who clearly does not. For someone who seldom has a headache to express oneness with a colleague in the midst of a migraine attack is both futile and folly, as is a husband's feeble attempt to identify with his wife's labour pains.

8.5.1 Blessed Assurance

Perhaps one of the most underestimated causes of suffering for the believer is that brought about by a lack of assurance. Of course, those who do not seek such an assurance are hardly likely to feel the weight of its absence. Because it is neither physical affliction, nor strictly mental, it is all the more difficult to come to terms with. My own conviction is that not only is assurance available to the Christian, but that suffering is a token of God's favour, not his displeasure. But the fact remains that many who are genuine in their faith often experience an acute sense of being far from God. My own background as a young Christian within a traditional Pentecostal environment often promoted the guilt associated with such feelings. "God walks close with those who walk close with him" and similar retorts have in themselves been the cause of many a stumbling amongst my fellows.

This is why theology is so important to even the simplest of Christian minds. For without a correct understanding of God's nature, his person, his attributes and the consistency of his dealings with us in relation to those features, any confusion that arises from the instability of affliction may seriously lead an individual to question his/her salvation. Again, it has not been without cost within certain charismatic circles to be so preoccupied with especial and miraculous tokens of God's favour, such as those displayed from Mount Sinai, that some have missed the still small voice that calls each of us by name (see **1 Kgs 19:13**). And note the context. Elijah heard that hushed voice of divine comfort at his most desolate and despondent. Scripture abounds with testimony about God's voice being powerful, thunderous, awesome. But it was not the

volume that satisfied the prophet of God; it was its familiarity, for it was a voice he knew all too well.

Very often, a major contributing factor to our suffering is not necessarily the pain we endure but the sense of inadequacy and worthlessness that it produces. Our lack of contribution yields frustration, which in turn only serves to compound the anguish. Western culture in particular provokes this mindset, an individual's value being seen as largely governed by tangible achievement. Not only do we have to deal with our own feelings of failure; others impose a sense of guilt for not measuring up to their expectations of normality. The truth for the Christian, however, is that an acknowledgment of our own inability is an opportunity to know God's power. Of course, this is a valid observation whether we are suffering or not. But by following Christ's example and identifying with the path he chose, we too may find that the human spirit is capable of stretching beyond the perceived boundaries that adversity brings. True joy is usually experienced far more fully by those who have also known extreme sorrow, just as resurrection life is only promised to those who embrace the crucified Christ.

8.5.2 The Cross of the Christian

When Jesus invited those who sought to be his disciples to "deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow [him]" **(Lk 9:23)**, he was not speaking of minor nuisances or middle-aged susceptibility to arthritis as a cross we may have to bear. The cross is admittedly a place of suffering, but it is ultimately a place of crucifixion, of death. For some, this may mean physical death; for all, it will mean a dying to self. It will also serve us well to align ourselves with the attitude of Christ in his affliction as we, too, face suffering. When Jesus says, as he still does, that believers must take up their cross as a daily event, he is effectively pre-warning us as to the potential outcome of following him. If we can settle that in our own minds from the very outset of our Christian walk, then we place ourselves beyond the power of the enemy. If we are prepared to die as an expression of our commitment to Jesus, any other threat is minimal by comparison.

David Prior, who at the time of writing was vicar of St Michael's, Chester Square, London, reminds us that:

> *The tension between our call to suffering and our call to glory is nowhere more painful than in facing death. In human affairs life precedes death; in God's kingdom death precedes life. In our natural shrinking from death in its every aspect, we often miss out on the fullness of life in the kingdom of God because we are unwilling to negotiate death first.*
>
> (Prior, 1985: 80.)

In other words, we can only be free to truly "reign in life" **(Rom 5:17)** when we are set free from the fear of death:

> *Suffering for the Christian is not an accident; it is a divine appointment and a divine opportunity.*
>
> (Denney, 1918: 163.)

For Jesus, the cross was a place where the greatest act of selflessness was demonstrated. A call to take up our cross and follow him will require a similar denial of self-interest, personal motivation and self-pity. To rule in life is not to be blinkered to reality or deny the existence of affliction – it is to triumph in the midst of adversity. In the midst of human despair, there is comfort in the cross of Christ for believers. Resolution of purpose comes through suffering as well as identification in affliction. When we speak of the relational link between Christ's sufferings and our own, we are helped by John Stott, who identifies six such lessons:

i) *patient endurance*
ii) *mature holiness*
iii) *suffering service*
iv) *the hope of glory*
v) *faith*
vi) *the pain of God.*

(Stott, 1986: 315-337.)

To choose the cross of affliction is absurdity to those who are accustomed to being cushioned by affluence. For many there is no choice. For those who have the option, the path of Christ and the cross is immeasurably more rewarding than the route of self and security. Complacency and comfort are twin enemies of the gospel; insisting on them as rights is incompatible with the message of the cross. Indeed, this may well be presented as the crux of Calvary, that to embrace the achievements of Jesus is to renounce all other privileges.

It seems that this is the theme of Scripture regarding the difficulties of how to face up to the problems of the concept of pain – ***solvitur patiendo***. No amount of theological treatise, heated debate, preferred explanation or taking account of cultural sensitivities can possibly produce the effect we seek – the answer may only be found in bearing it. This is not to be confused with 'bearing or cross', as it is often presented. To bear one's cross, in spiritual terms, is essentially unto death. When we have borne our cross up to that point, we die to self; to self-interest, self-congratulation, self-motivation, self-esteem, self-pity and any other suffix you may care to append to the pre-requisite self-, except self-control, self-denial, self-examination and the like. Indeed, it is only a renunciation of self that can evoke a realisation of self. Thence only can we be free to suffer righteously – ***solvitur patiendo***.

It follows then, that for a believer to demand his rights is anathema to the cross of Jesus Christ – dead men have no rights. In fact, had God's justice not been tempered by his love, then our 'rights' were eternal separation from him. As it is, we who were 'by right' the objects of his wrath have become subjects of his mercy, by which the grace of God abundantly flows to us. It can only be an inappropriate understanding of the cross that causes us to willingly enter God's kingdom through the door marked 'grace' and then demand justice when safely inside. Any apparent injustice or unfair treatment must be accepted according to "the mystery of his will" **(Eph 1:9)**. If we truly embrace the offence of the cross and its eternal reward, we will not be offended by temporal difficulties or setbacks.

There seems no Scriptural warrant for the belief that such instruction is for the minority of believers – it is for all Christians. True enough, physical torture and martyrdom is not the lot of every one of us, but in some measure we are all advised to be prepared for such an outcome. Tragically, the majority of those who confess Christ are not. Having never lived in an environment where intense persecution for my faith was a real possibility, it would be almost immoral of me to criticise those who bow under such pressure. I will, therefore, restrict myself to commending those who have refused to honour false gods, whether they be kings, status or ideologies, when it has meant those things usurping the throne of Jesus. In the process, my brothers and sisters have suffered hardship that we find unbearable even to imagine, been stripped of civil liberties we mostly take for granted, and brutally treated almost to the point of death where dying would have been a welcome release.

However, believers also suffer in ways that are strictly confined to them as partakers of the divine nature. In terms of discipline, they suffer as sons by way of correction. Sometimes, in geographical areas or periods of history where persecution is rife, Christians suffer for no other reason than their association with Christ. Finally, only Christians can possibly know the inner battle and its consequences between the flesh and the spirit (see **Rom 7:14-25; Gal 5:17**). Although Jesus promised his followers a life of tribulation, he also assured them of a comforter in such times **(Jn 14:16, 26)**. DW Anderson offers some insight into his role:

> *The Christian's capacity to receive the comfort of the Holy Spirit in the midst of suffering is commensurate with an appreciation of the paternal sovereignty of God, who is the ultimate cause of a bewilderingly diverse variety of proximate causes that can impinge upon their lives, until God 'will wipe every tear away from their eyes' **(Rev 21:4)**.*
>
> (in Ferguson & Wright, 1993: 668.)

Most of us, however, live in societies where there is religious freedom unparalleled in history. So are Jesus' words equally valid where there is little risk of our profession of faith causing offence? First of all, of course, religious tolerance for Christians has increasingly meant the same level of liberty for Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Buddhists and the like, all of which produces a very different kind of suffering. At its basest form, to take up one's cross is to perceive things in a Christlike manner. It is to consider the kingdom of God as the highest attainable prize, like a pearl of great price **(Mt 13:45, 46)**, and all else pales into insignificance by comparison. It is not so much that we necessarily renounce the pleasures of life as worldly, whether they be pursuits of leisure, academic advancement, artistic expression or material blessings, but we re-evaluate them in the light of their kingdom potential.

8.5.3 A Servant Disposition

The following words, cited by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and attributed to Martin Luther, are reinforced by their prophetic injunction:

> *Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend – it must transcend all comprehension. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension, and I will help you to comprehend even as I do. Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. My comprehension transcends yours. Thus Abraham went forth from his father and not knowing whither he went. He trusted himself to my knowledge, and cared not for his own, and thus he took the*

right road and came to his journey's end. Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it yourself, so you must let me lead you as though you were a blind man. Wherefore it is not you, no man, no living creature, but I myself, who instruct you by my word and Spirit in the way you should go. Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you desire, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire – that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple. If you do that, there is the acceptable time and there your master is come.

(in Bonhoeffer, 1948: 82, 83.)

To many, the very concept of servanthood conveys an image of suffering, irrespective of the nature of any service being rendered. It must surely be presented, however, that any intrinsic suffering in the idea of servanthood is wholly dependent upon whom one is bound to. Certainly those who are slaves to sin, drug abuse, immoral lifestyles, materialistic pursuits, ungodly ideologies and heathen philosophies can know little of the inherent freedom that comes from serving Jesus. As Packer observes:

Whether being a servant is matter for shame or pride depends on whose servant one is. Many have said what pride they felt in rendering personal service to Sir Winston Churchill during the Second World War. How much more should it be a matter of pride and glorying to know and serve the Lord of heaven and earth!

(Packer, 1975: 35.)

8.5.4 Perfecting the Saints

It is a mystery of the biblical revelation that the perfect Christ was perfected through suffering (cf **Heb 2:10; 5:8, 9; 7:28**). This is not to imply a progressive development from sinfulness to sinlessness. But the evidence of perfection is seen in circumstances where the potential for imperfection exists. This is why sin is overcome in the midst of temptation. In the same way, Jesus learned obedience by refusing to rebel when given the opportunity. What is true of Jesus is equally valid for believers. James in particular emphasises this truth when he writes:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature [NASB perfect] *and complete, not lacking anything.*

(Jas 1:2-4.)

For Christians, of course, it is a progression from immaturity to maturity. It is the sanctification process, the present continuous tense of 'being saved'. In other words, we have in mind here that period of development whereby we are being changed into Christlikeness and God's usual ***modus operandi*** is suffering. Scripture employs many analogies to describe this transformation, like refining, as gold in the crucible, or pruning, like a vine at the hands of its gardener.

The most accurate description, however, is that of a father disciplining his sons. In this, there is an element of both pride and humility. We are proud to be so loved by the Father as to incur discipline, but there is nothing of self-sufficiency with which to promote egotism. For this reason, any talk of such personal suffering as in itself containing redemptive value for the individual is wholly and biblically inappropriate. Neither is suffering creative in and of itself, though it may frequently stimulate creativity as a positive reaction in the individual. Determination often conquers obstacles where an easier alternative would have provided insufficient motivation.

It goes without saying, of course, that suffering can prove unproductive if we entertain an improper attitude towards it. If we refuse to learn how to deal righteously with pressure situations, mental anguish, physical disability or areas of temptation, then we, like Israel of old, will continue to meander through life in the desert of mediocrity, ever failing to press into the purpose of God. The worst possible scenario is that in so doing we sow seeds of dishonour towards the name of the Father in the hearts of unbelievers (see **Rom 2:24**) if our reaction to suffering is anything less than exemplary.

As far as suffering in the case of believers is concerned, the Puritan theologian John Owen related it as an inevitable consequence of sonship. Citing such passages as **Hebrews 12:3-6**, he encouraged the Christian to embrace such chastisement as possessing maturing qualities. His scholarly research led him to the following conclusions:

- *there is nothing properly penal in the suffering of believers*
- *chastisement... is a companion of them that are in the Way, and of them only*
- *there is no chastisement in heaven, nor in hell. Not in heaven, because there is no sin; not in hell, because there is no amendment*
- *Divine love and chastening are* [therefore] *inseparable.*

(in Ferguson, 1987: 91.)

The products of such a view of discipline are as significant as they are transparent. Suffering for the sake of Christ, when coupled with faith, yields spiritual fruit that in turn enhances holiness. Seen in this light, it is but a short step to associate suffering with sanctification, whereby the Holy Spirit precipitates and maintains the process of character development. This is why the apostle Paul could speak so readily in terms of being overjoyed by troubles **(2 Cor 7:14)**, that he could boast in others' perseverance through persecution **(2 Thess 1:4)**, and counsel Timothy to "endure hardship... like a good soldier in Jesus Christ" **(2 Tim 2:3)**.

Indeed, the Trinitarian aspect seems never far from Owen's theology, especially when considering their respective functions in the work of grace. It is through union with Christ that adoption is made accessible by the Father and the gift of the Spirit of sonship is bestowed. An intrinsic part of that fellowship is for the believer to identify with Christ's sufferings in the world. In his role as the Comforter, the Holy Spirit thence draws alongside each Christian to safeguard against "the twin temptations of chastisement: to despise it: to despise it and be deaf to God's voice, or to faint and sink under it by failing to recognize his presence" (in Ferguson, 1987: 97).

Jesus promised that towards the end of the age, certain signs would accompany its approach. In **Luke**'s account **(21:8-19)**, we can identify nine such occasions of suffering that assure us of the imminence of that day. The following table demonstrates how these may be seen as correlative to the beatitudes as recorded for us by **Matthew (5:3-11)**:

Luke 21			Matthew 5		
Signs of Suffering			**Blessings of the Beatitudes**		
(warning)		**(command)**	**(condition)**		**(promise)**
ungodly and deceptive counsel bringing confusion within established religion	**v 8**	do not follow them	"the poor in spirit"	**v 3**	"theirs is the kingdom of God"
conflict of human interest within society expressed through war	**vv 9, 10**	do not be frightened	"those who mourn"	**v 4**	"they will be comforted"
geological and natural disasters	**v 11a**	treat them as signs from heaven	"the meek"	**v 5**	"they will inherit the earth"
economic distress caused by agricultural famine	**v 11b**		"those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"	**v 6**	"they will be filled"
physical malady caused by biological pestilence	**v 11c**		"the merciful"	**v 7**	"they will be shown mercy"
personal assault for refusing to conform to secular standards	**v 12a**	Do not worry – take advantage of the opportunity to proclaim the gospel	"the pure in heart"	**v 8**	"they will see God"
persecution by both religious and government authorities	**v 12b**		"the peacemakers"	**v 9**	"they will be called sons of God"
betrayal in the form of covenant-breaking by those closest to us	**v 16**		"those who are persecuted because of righteousness"	**v 10**	"their is the kingdom of heaven"
victimisation by virtue of association with the body of Christ	**vv 17-19**	stand firm	"you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me"	**vv 11, 12**	"great is your reward in heaven."

As Jim Packer succinctly puts it:

> *Scripture does not allow us to suppose that because God is love we may look to Him to confer happiness on people who will not seek holiness, or to shield His loved ones from trouble when He knows that they need trouble to further their sanctification.*
>
> (Packer, 1975: 135.)

8.5.5 Pauline Exemplar

The testimony of the apostle Paul is something that all believers should seek to emulate. When writing to the church at Rome, he assesses his own situation thus: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" **(Rom 8:18)**. He expressed a similar thought to the believers at Corinth: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" **(2 Cor 4:17)**. Commenting on this verse, James Denney observes:

> *One can imagine that [Paul] was dictating... eagerly as he began the sentence; he 'crowds and hurries and precipitates' the grand contrasts of which his mind is full. Affliction in any case is outweighed by glory, but the affliction in question is a light matter, the glory a great weight; the light affliction is but momentary – it ends with death at the latest, it may end in the coming of Jesus to anticipate death; the weight of glory is eternal; and if this were not enough, the light affliction... works out for us the weight of glory which endures for ever, 'in excess and to excess,' in a way above conception, to a degree above conception.*
>
> (Denney, 1918: 169.)

In an age of cynicism that has invaded even the ranks of Christendom, it might be tempting to dismiss Paul's sentiments as those voiced by someone who was unacquainted with affliction. On the contrary, however, we are told that he was frequently the victim of false imprisonment, beatings, shipwreck, stoning, harsh treatment from his own countrymen, found rest difficult to attain, knew intense hunger and thirst, and suffered adversity from extreme weather conditions as well as the fervent pressure of responsibility that came from his calling in God **(11:23-28)**. And yet his perspective of eternity was such that he could speak of this kind of lifestyle in terms of "light and momentary troubles".

For the Christian, suffering is best seen in the context of an eternal perspective. However traumatic the believers' affliction may be (and it is often more so for a helpless bystander than for those who endure its onslaught), Scripture makes it unequivocally clear that it is restricted to our temporal existence. We must not lose sight of eternity, therefore, lest we be robbed of an appropriate sense of proportion regarding our plight. Holding on to such a dimension may not cause the intensity of grief to diminish, but it will enable us to embrace the immediacy of our pain with an outlook that is less filled with despair. As Alister M^{c}Grath so adroitly puts it:

If the Christian hope of heaven is an illusion based upon lies, then it must be abandoned as misleading and deceitful. But if it is true, it must be embraced and allowed to transfigure our entire understanding of the place of suffering in life.

(McGrath, 1992: 100.)

It is often difficult to treat the sovereignty of God as anything more than a biblical doctrine that appeals to our sense of intellectual propriety. It is only as we learn to submit to God's purpose in every aspect of daily living, however, that we can accept hardship, suffering and ill-treatment as the will of God by which he works for the good of his children. Paul unmistakably saw this as one of the major evidences of true sonship (see **Rom 8:14-17**). When we begin to accept suffering as part of God's agenda to produce character development in the lives of believers, then we can proceed also to embrace persecution, welcome illness and invite hostility for the sake of righteousness as means of enhancing the sanctification process of God's Holy Spirit within us. Perhaps then we too may say with the hymn-writer:

Since all that I meet
Shall work for my good
The bitter is sweet
The medicine is food.

(John Newton: 1725-1807.)

It is important to approach the word structure of **Romans 8:17** with a clear understanding of the original language, which sadly not all versions adhere to. The NIV translates the Greek '***eiper sumpaschomen***' as "if indeed we share in his sufferings", whilst the KJV offers the even more ambiguous "If so be that we suffer with him". The New English Bible is completely misrepresentative when it gives us "if we share his sufferings now". None of these really do justice to the phrase construction, possibly because there is no direct equivalent in English. What appears from the above, however, is a condition that does not occur in the original. Our sonship, heirship and co-heirship with Christ is not dependent upon our suffering now in the present life. If that were so, then salvation would not be by faith but by works. This is clearly not the position. I am once more indebted to the scholarly enterprise of Dr D Martyn Lloyd-Jones in this regard:

We have a key to Paul's meaning in verse 9: "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man

have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." We have there the same expression 'if so be'. And we have seen that it can carry only one meaning. It means 'since' there; and it means 'since' here.

(Lloyd-Jones, 1974b: 426.)

A similar expression appears in Paul's puzzling exhortation to the believers at Colossæ **(Col 1:24)**. Commenting on this verse, PS Wallace, a former professor at Columbia Theological Seminary (Georgia, USA), offers:

*Since the sufferings of Christ are sufficient in themselves to set all men free **(Isa 53:4-6; Heb 10:14)**, it is entirely by grace, and not in any way by necessity, that the sufferings in which his people participate with him can be spoken of as filling up what is lacking in his affliction... and as giving fellowship in his vicarious and redemptive suffering.*

(in Douglas, ed, 1992: 1148.)

8.5.6 Overcoming Evil with Good

Shortly before his untimely death to cancer in 1984, David Watson wrote the following, the simplicity of which is matched only by its profundity:

It is worth noting that suffering becomes a problem only when we accept the existence of a good God... If there is no God, or if God is not good, there is no problem. The universe is nothing more than random choices and meaningless events. There is no fairness, no vindication of right over wrong, no ultimate purposes, no absolute values... If there is no 'good God'... to protest about suffering is as foolish as to protest about a number thrown by a dice.

(Watson, D, 1984: 111, 112.)

In response to the perceived objection that many of God's children who commit themselves to his care and protection seem to have misplaced their trust, Richard Sibbes enlightens us thus:

If he keep them not out of trouble, yet he will preserve them in trouble... nay, God many times by a small trouble preserves us from a greater. Even the sufferings of the godly are oft preservations to them. Was not Jonah preserved by the whale? What had become of him if that had not swallowed him up? A whale that one would have thought should be a means to destroy him, was a means to carry him to the coast, and bring him safely to land.

(Sibbes, 1973: 420.)

It has become a tragic pattern in many Christian circles to regard the devil as being the causal factor behind every experience that is remotely associated with unpleasantness. The natural conclusion of such practice is that it creates a spiritually unhealthy environment that leaves little scope for the realities of behavioural accountability or experiential complexity. This is almost inevitably the seed of the dualistic parody of truth that defines every incident as belonging essentially to one of two spheres – good or evil. There is, admittedly, an element of truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. We, too, must remind ourselves, as Paul to the church at Rome, that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" **(Rom 8:28)**.

Paul also enlightens us that "where sin increased, grace increased all the more" **(Rom 5:20)**. He is clear to point out, however, that this should not provide an excuse for continuing in sin **(6:1, 2)**. The part Judas Iscariot played in the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion may well have been in keeping with the purpose of God for the redemption of humanity, but that does not negate the fact that Judas' actions were simply evil. In relation to personal suffering, some have carried the inverse of this principle to extreme measures by embarking upon a lifestyle of rigorous asceticism that has amounted to nothing more than self-affliction. This seems to produce the very opposite effect that suffering from God is designed for. Surely the biblical presentation of suffering is as a means to render man's will in submission to God's, as was in evidence on the occasion of Jesus' travail of soul in Gethsemane. Asceticism, on the other hand, appears to strengthen the will to a position of dominance over the natural desires of the mind.

Not only are Christians encouraged in their suffering and, indeed, may expect it as a sign of their sonship but, when it comes at the hands of positive persecution, the apostle Paul says simply "bless them" **(Rom 12:14)**. Neither is this a version of the gospel that is peculiar to him (cf **Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27**). This can include the demonstration of good works towards those who seek to inflict harm upon us and, in so doing, believers thereby engage in overcoming evil with good **(Rom 12:21)**. The context of Paul's instruction, however, is to invoke God's blessing by petition. Even in those for whom there is but a remnant of the sinful nature this is a difficult requirement, as Calvin points out:

... this is more difficult than to let go revenge when anyone is injured; for though some restrain their hands and are not led away by the passion of doing harm, they yet wish that some calamity or loss would in some way happen to their enemies; and even when they are so pacified that they wish no evil, there is yet hardly one in a hundred who wishes well to him from whom he has received an injury; nay, most men daringly burst forth into imprecations. But God... not only restrains our hands from doing evil, but also subdues the bitter feelings within; and not only so, but he would have us to be solicitous for the wellbeing of those who justifiably trouble us and seek our destruction.

(in Hendriksen, 1982: 417.)

8.5.7 Humble Interdependence

The enigma surrounding the identity of the apostle Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' **(2 Cor 12:7)** has been hotly debated (and written about) for centuries – and the mystery yet remains. It has often been discovered, usually after hours of fruitless research, that where Scripture is silent it is sagacious not to speculate. The danger with embracing a policy of seeking out the obscure is that we become unsighted in regard to the obvious. The absence of any detail concerning the exact nature of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' renders it immaterial, though there are very clear and valuable lessons to be learned in respect of its purpose.

First of all, it is not without significance that Paul closely associates his 'thorn in the flesh' with the revelation he has just described as receiving from the Lord. Suffering and splendour are thereby inextricably linked. Furthermore, Paul goes on to explain that this relationship is not merely subjective. In his own experience it was found to be full of purpose, that in the midst of intense unveiling and immense blessing he might be preserved "from becoming conceited". It is only the humble who are promised grace; the proud of heart can expect only opposition from God **(Jas 4:6)**. Although Paul was acutely aware of the value of such a humbling experience, on three occasions he pleaded with God for its removal. Each time he was told "My grace is sufficient for you" (see **2 Cor 12:9**). Grace may sometimes be sufficient to remove us from the sphere of suffering; more often than not it enables us to draw upon God's power in acknowledgment of our own weakness in the midst of such trial. Like Paul, we too may then readily affirm that it is when we are weak that we discover real strength **(v 10)**.

It is a significant help in our understanding of the purpose of suffering to realise that even Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered" **(Heb 5:8)**. Paul, too, saw a lesson of empathy in his own afflictions that God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" **(2 Cor 1:4)**. The apostle's attitude here and elsewhere (cf **12:7-9**) must surely be a model for all of us. Though he pleaded for the removal of his own particular thorn in the flesh, his specific prayer is not left wholly unanswered, though the divine response may not have been what Paul had hoped – "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" **(2 Cor 12:9)**. Like Job before him, Paul learned to submit to a higher wisdom without full comprehension of the details he sought. All he ever knew (as far as we are aware) was that this was God's strategy for sustaining Paul's humility.

It cannot be denied that included in the scheme of suffering for the believer is the design to root out independence and trust only in divine providence. The hymn-writer puts it this way:

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

I hoped that in some favoured hour
At once He'd answer my request
And by His love's constraining power
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils in my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,
'Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?'
'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
'I answer prayer for grace and faith.'

'These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st seek thy all in me.'

(John Newton, 1725-1807.)

In a corporate setting like the Church, the place of suffering, whether by design or incidentally, does evoke community welfare. Or at least it provides the opportunity to demonstrate such care. The difficulty arises in many church settings where the biblical identity of church is engineered rather than fostered. In many ecclesiastical structures, the concept of interdependency within a small framework seems to derive its ***modus operandi*** more from Rousseau's '***contrat social***' than any Scriptural blueprint. In such cases, community is legislated for instead of growing out of a common desire to genuinely care, so that compassion gives way to agenda, grace is superseded by government and true community spirit is replaced by a "What's in it for me?" mentality. And we add disbelief to the arsenal of the unbeliever.

8.5.8 A Spiritual Battlefield

Much more serious a violation of validity is the idea of Christ and the devil as, not simply representative heads of two opposing kingdoms, but as rival and similarly matched competitors in the arena for which the prize is human allegiance. Nothing could be further detached from the biblical evidence. Such a conclusion can only be reached either through ignorance or a failure to appreciate the 'now and not yet' of Pauline theology. This, of course, echoes Jesus' own emphasis regarding the kingdom that it has arrived and is yet coming (cf **Mt 3:2; 12:28**). Neither Jesus nor Paul are to be understood as implying that Christians are but pawns in some unearthly power struggle where we may find ourselves being repeatedly transferred from one domain to another. Those who are "in Christ" have been irrevocably translated "from the dominion of darkness and brought... into the kingdom of the Son" **(Col 1:13)**. This is not to say, however, that we are immune from the conflict with the powers of darkness, whereby we may anticipate being exposed to "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" and "the flaming arrows of the evil one" **(Eph 6:12, 16)**.

Although many would refuse to admit it, the spiritual side of suffering is one that afflicts everyone at some point in their life. For those who refuse to accept God's solution to the problem, it is something that extends beyond death. Questions about man's existence and role in life are often precipitated by cries that fall under one of the categories we have already looked at. An awareness of apparent insignificance in the light of the grand scheme of things may pave the way for a quest towards spiritual insight. Sadly, there are those who look outside the God of heaven only to find their

problems exacerbated rather than eased. Eastern mysticism, drug abuse and so-called '*Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare*' are experienced as promising much, but ultimately failing to deliver. Psychoanalytical helps are equally unproductive in the long term.

It has to be said that, although suffering is in some measure the lot of all Christians, the level of that affliction is often more intense than it needs to be. If only more believers would heed the words of the apostle Paul and prepare for battle by taking on the spiritual armour that is at our disposal, then surely the scars would not be so great.

For the apostle Paul, then, suffering and discipleship are inextricably linked. His unspoken assumption in many of his writings seems to be that "everyone who wants to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (cf **Phil 1:30; 1 Thess 3:1-3; 2 Tim 3:12**). Believers, therefore, are not mere spectators at the cross of Christ; they are participators with him in his sufferings, and it is the hope of glory that makes it bearable **(Col 1:24-27)**. Again, this can only legitimately be viewed as the completion of the sanctification process – we shall be saved. In her autobiographical account, Margaret Clarkson recalls how she progressively came to view her life of trauma and illness as God displaying "his sovereignty over evil by using the very suffering that is inherent in evil to assist in the working out of his eternal purpose" (Clarkson, 1983: 37).

For unbelievers, however, this principle is wholly inappropriate. The problem for them is not easily answered and attempts to bring some sort of redemptive quality to incidents like the Holocaust, for instance, are thoroughly devoid of biblical warrant (cf Simon, 1967). The present writer can do no more than to reassert an earlier cited principle that where Scripture is silent it is prudent not to speculate. What we may affirm is that Christ fully demonstrated that ultimate blessing comes through suffering in the purpose of God. We may expect things to be no different for his followers.

8.5.9 Victory, not Triumphalism

It has to be said, though I will restrict myself to nothing more than a passing comment, that the current obsession in many Christian circles with what has become known as 'the prosperity gospel' is anathema to the biblical picture of suffering. Personal success in material terms is not guaranteed; lack certainly is. This is not, of course, to deny that God does bless his children with material success according to his Sovereign good-

pleasure, but to demand it as the norm is a travesty of the Scriptural position. The shape of the Christian walk is cruciform, not ingot-like.

Although I do not fully embrace Søren Kierkergaard's understanding of the concept of suffering, I have some sympathy with his thoughts on rejoicing over its absence:

> *All this talk about thanking God for not being involved in adversity... can so very easily be fraudulent. This kind of talk actually transforms God into a shopkeeper who discriminates among his customers or does not have fixed prices, but to a few gives good, cheap deals under the counter. On the other hand, one easily deceives himself by living in the conceit that he possesses the highest good, even though he is exempted from the burdens. One who prays in this way has obviously made up his mind concerning the extent to which the highest good is so good that it is the highest good at any price.*
>
> (Hong, HV & EH, eds, 1975: 372.)

When circumstances converge to ensure that we narrowly miss being the victim of a serious accident, it is easy to speak in terms of God's protection; "Someone up there likes you", "God is smiling down at me", etc. These are often automatic and very understandable reactions, provoked by a sense of relief and thanksgiving. The difficulty, however, is that they logically presume that those not so fortunate have earned God's ambivalence, displeasure and apathy. Is God really thereby opposed to all who suffer? Surely not. If we claim that he must be on our side because we seem to reside in a danger-free vacuum, do we thence imply that all who suffer receive only the punishment due for their hostility towards God? The very fact of Christian martyrdom appears to contravene this theory.

Under the influence of abstract triumphalism, the church has all too often become guilty of embracing an unhealthy dualistic approach towards suffering. This has tended to attribute all negative experiences and unpleasant sensations exclusively to the devil's doing, whilst all else we give thanks to God for. This has largely arisen from the wrong perception of that which is most assuredly true. It is the testimony of Scripture that God ***is*** good, that in the absolute sense of the word he ***alone*** is good, and from out of that goodness he can do ***only*** good (cf **Psm 118:68; Mt 10:18**). To categorise the origin of our experiences on the basis of the above is to employ finite judgments on infinite matters. We err grievously in so doing, for we thereby place ourselves outside of Scripture's counsel.

8.5.10 Part of the Training Strategy

All true believers can surely testify to the wonders of their initial joy, where God's abundant blessing is their portion almost constantly. The difficulty arises not so much in these experiences being withheld, but in equating such suspension with necessary guilt. As many an adult knows, the pathway to maturity is paved with a Father's discipline. The expression of a parent's love towards an infant is vastly different from that of an adolescent, though the measure of love is undiminished. Conflict is not a sign of broken relationship; it is sure evidence of sonship. To teach otherwise is to produce Christians who view all episodes of perplexity as tokens of subnormal Christian experience.

For the believer, there is the real sense in which suffering is the training-ground of discipleship. So much so, in fact, that the apostle James exhorts his readers to "Consider it pure joy... when you encounter trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" **(Jas 1:2-4)**. This does not mean that we are to adopt an ascetic lifestyle of looking for every opportunity to be hurt that our character might be thus developed, nor indeed helping others who we may feel have not encountered their fair share of pain. The goal is discipleship, not sado-masochism. But when circumstances conspire to present themselves in a way that we find difficult, whether that be physically, emotionally, spiritually or psychologically, then we need to recognise the opportunity it affords for our development and progressive transformation into Christlikeness. "For the moment all discipline seems painful", remarks the writer to the **Hebrews**, "later, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness for those who have been trained by it, **(12:11)**.

Just as the natural body requires training to keep in shape, so faith develops best by being exercised, far from the comfort zone of a cavalier lifestyle. The young mother of a small child who prays for patience, therefore, should not be surprised to find her troubles increased. This is perhaps the argument of the writer to the **Hebrews**. These Jewish believers had become so accustomed to the playthings of their new-found experience in God, that they did not want to grow up into spiritual adulthood. The milk of infancy had become more palatable than the meat of maturity and they were not the only ones to be affected by this bout of contented passivity. Others who should have been benefiting from their discipling were thus denied that privilege **(Heb 5:12)**.

For the believer, therefore, there is no biblical warrant for the premise that to become a Christian is to escape suffering as if to become clothed with Christ is to adopt some mystical cloak of immunity. Although this is true of eternal judgment, the evidence of Scripture overwhelmingly suggests that far from being a demonstration of God's wrath, it is in fact a solemn token of his love. As the writer to the **Hebrews** reminds his readers:

> *My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. nor faint when you are reproved by him; for those whom the Lord loves he disciplines; and he scourges every son whom he receives.*
>
> **(Heb 12:5, 6.)**

Therefore, given that God is sovereignly disposed to treat his children thus for their chastening, then surely we should accept suffering as principally included in his will for us. We must begin by acknowledging that God's divine prerogative to mould the clay is not restricted merely to his elective will but extends to embrace our life in this age. In this regard, we need look no further than the words of Paul to the church at Rome for our encouragement: "Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it 'Why did you make me thus?'" **(Rom 9:20)**. He is still the Master Potter and we remain as clay within his hands to fashion as he wills. If we are to accept suffering in this manner, then we must foster an understanding of God's sovereignty that is much more than a biblical principle upon which we base our theology; it must become a practical application by which we both live and possibly die.

Suffering in terms of chastisement may take many different forms. Indeed, circumstances that seem harsh to one person may appear trivial to another. Cultural awareness, personal ideals and differing levels of comfortability all affect perception in regard to degrees of discomfort. Financial loss, sudden unemployment, physical injury or sickness, immobility, deep concern for the plight of others, personal disappointment, sense of betrayal or hope deferred are all examples not only of suffering, but also of potential areas of chastisement. The tragedy is that we as individuals have the capacity to compound our suffering by how we respond to such chastising. It must be pointed out, however, that not all suffering is chastisement, much less punishment. As Dr D Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out:

> *The Bible does not teach that everything everyone suffers is sent from God; the teaching is that illness may be sent by God and that God does chastise*

us sometimes by means of illness... we must never say that every unwelcome happening is, of necessity, a chastisement from God.

(Lloyd-Jones, 1972: 248, 249.)

Suffering as a learning experience is one of those aspects of life that is difficult to gain the maximum possible benefit from. At the time, the effect of pain is so acute that our sensitivities are often unable to cope with anything but the pain itself. Thus, we are largely incapable of directing our minds to the substance of the situation. Retrospect is restricted in its potential. By the time we are no longer gripped by the intensity of the moment, its vividness has become blurred in our memory, and we are in danger of contemplating but a caricature of reality. We then become prone to interpreting a previous experience in the light of subsequent reflection, which may well be true now, but was not necessarily so at the time. This is why the instructional qualities of our suffering often prove so elusive, because we usually reflect upon the memory of the experience rather than the experience itself.

Much of the barrenness that has existed in the way the church has failed to deal adequately with the social implications of a suffering generation are not so much due to indifference as an inability for orthodoxy to produce orthopraxis. James conveyed the same idea much more simply when he said: "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" **(Jas 2:17)**.

The difficulty facing the logical thinker is that he demands to know the mechanics of suffering and in what specific ways training takes place. It may also be useful to know whether a particular episode of suffering is primarily the product of sin, folly or God. The cause is largely immaterial, however, for all suffering may be instructional by degrees. Burnt fingers, for instance, teach us not to play with fire. We may not fully understand the whys and wherefores of suffering at the time. The essence of learning is rooted more in our reaction to pain than the pain itself. When we can come to terms with God's ways of training, though we acknowledge the incapacity to fully understand, then we can often recognise potential training-grounds sooner rather than later, and perhaps be saved the embarrassment of answered prayers that we subsequently regret uttering. As implied earlier, a mother who finds difficulty in coping with the apparently unceasing demands of her two-year old son and cries to God for patience, for example,

may be somewhat bemused to find an addition to the family nine months hence. Busy schedules produce better keepers of time management – semi-retirement does not.

Arguably one of the most misunderstood of Christian concepts is that God always answers prayer. My own Evangelical background constrains me to affirm the truth of such a statement; my experience will only oblige me to do so when accompanied by reserved qualification. God ***does*** always answer prayer, but it is not always in the affirmative. It is sometimes "Yes"; it is at other times "No"; and it is quite often simply "Wait". Even when it is the former, it is seldom in the manner we condition our minds to expect favour from God. A dear friend of mine, struck down by multiple sclerosis in her mid-20's, is testimony to the providential nature of God, not because he has given her the gift of being healed. Prayers, tears and fasting by all who know her have resulted in the gifts of strength despite physical weakness, peace in the midst of adversity, gentleness in spite of inner turmoil. She has received the grace of endurance and hundreds are touched by its witness.

It seems a strange paradox to finite intellect that the most genuinely charming people prove to be those who have learned to be content in the midst of severe trial. They are often those who have endured tremendous personal affliction over a sustained period, which has moulded their character for the better. Sadly, the opposite is equally true. A life of relative ease and consistent success are usually a recipe for arrogance, self-centredness or petty moaning in the face of relatively insignificant mishap. Even the charm on display is so obviously superficial when compared to those who have been matured by the process of life's difficulties.

As the late David Watson penned shortly before his death:

> *There is no doubt that millions of Christians all down the centuries have become more Christlike through suffering. I know of many who have an almost ethereal beauty about them, refined through pain. In fact, those who have experienced more of the love of God than anyone I have ever met have also endured more suffering. When you crush lavender, you find its full fragrance; when you squeeze an orange, you extract its sweet juice. In the same way, it is often through pain and hurts that we develop the fragrance and sweetness of Jesus in our lives.*
>
> (Watson, D, 1984: 119.)

There can be no doubt that faith flowers in the soil of deprivation. Thus we may adopt the attitude of the hymn-writer:

I thank thee, Lord, that all our joy
Is touched with pain,
That shadows fall on brightest hours,
That thorns remain;
So that earth's bliss may be our guide
And not our chain.

I thank thee, Lord, that here our souls
Though amply blest,
Can never find, although they seek,
A perfect rest,
Nor ever shall, until they lean
On Jesu's breast.

(Adelaide Anne Proctor, 1825-1864)

8.5.11 No Diplomatic Immunity

When I first became involved in Christian practices some twenty-seven years ago (what in any other medium I would refer to as 'being saved'), there was a general mindset in the circles I frequented (ie Pentecostal) that Christians were generally immune from some of the suffering that seemed common to the rest of humanity. Now, I personally know those who could testify to God's providential rescue in situations that should have resulted in death, and such men and women have gone on to achieve wonderful things in the purpose of God. One could say that their time had not yet come. I know others of whom that was sadly not the case. Marital infidelity causes pain, most often to the innocent party who may happen to be a Christian. Reckless driving causes accidents that sometimes result in death. Again, many Christians have been the innocent victims of such tragedy. Experimenting with drugs can kill and Christian teenagers are not automatically exempt if they succumb to peer pressure.

There is no virtue in suffering for its own sake, but when our standing before God is at stake we must choose to hate all else. This will often cause misunderstanding, as it did for Jesus, and that too can be a suffering of sorts. But to hate the things of this world is not necessarily to shun pleasure, any more than to hate one's parents is to disown them and thereby break the fifth commandment (see **Exo 20:12**). It is that in the context of our commitment to Christ, the cost is such that we esteem something of infinitely more

value. Suffering, then, only has merit in the context of its fruit. To set fire to one's own limb in an attempt to mortify the flesh displays nothing more than an inappropriate understanding of the biblical use of the phrase. To be set ablaze in the attempt to rescue a child from a burning building, however successful the effort may be or disastrous the consequences, is significantly more meritorious.

8.6 SUMMARY

In comparing the various religious and philosophical approaches to dealing with the problem of suffering, E Stanley Jones concludes:

> *The Stoic bears, the Epicurean seeks to enjoy, the Buddhist and the Hindu stand apart disillusioned, the Moslem submits, but only the Christian exults!*
>
> (Jones, 1933: 235.)

It has to be said that one of the major contributors to unnecessary frustration in the lives of Christians is evangelical Christianity. As someone who has wholeheartedly endorsed the essential ethos of evangelicalism for almost thirty years, I must acknowledge the role I have played in perpetuating such suffering. Messages like '*The Triumph of the Cross*', '*Victorious Christian Living*', '*Spirit-filled Success*', '*Living in the Good of God's Blessing*', '*Prosperity not Poverty*' all have fundamental truth as their starting-point. They have also had a tendency to erroneous application by understating other equally valid Scriptural issues. Spiritual warfare, godly discipline, natural difficulties in life, occasional walks in the valley all conspire to convince the immature believer of unfounded folly. The Christian walk is not a perpetual stroll in the park. To present it as such is dishonest, unbalanced and downright cruel. At best it produces a superficial Christianity that has more to do with 'mind over matter' than faith; at worst it imposes harmful guilt that can be extremely destructive in the lives of certain individuals.

Christians are not generally immune from the same principle of suffering as the unbeliever. It must be noted, however, that Christians are unique in their experience of suffering on three distinct levels:

i) only believers are subject to the Fatherly discipline of moral chastisement that is both preparatory and intrinsic to character development **(Heb 12:5-11)**,

ii) the nature and intensity of suffering that Christians endure when they are persecuted for Christ's sake is something that the unregenerate can never know **(1 Pet 4:12-16)**, and

iii) the inner battle between the spirit and the flesh is again an exclusively Christian domain **(Rom 7:14-25; Gal 5:17)**.

One might also argue that the unbeliever is incapable of appreciating the depth of anguish caused by a sense of guilt associated with breaking God's law and thus offending the Father. Whilst this is true, such a moral lapse initially belongs under **iii)**, but might ultimately find itself under **i)**.

The eschatological view of suffering as far as the redeemed are concerned is perfectly alluded to by TB Kilpatrick:

> *The Christian view of pain does not warrant the conclusion that in the case of the individual all suffering will cease... The doctrine of divine providence, however, rests on the eternal victory of love, of which the time-development of the world contains the progressive achievement. It, therefore, becomes a prediction of that which will emerge out of time – the complete reconciliation of the world. Without this, comfort in suffering would be incomplete. God has no comfort to give if he is uncertain of victory. Love is triumphant over sin and suffering; therefore both sin and suffering will cease to be. The final message of Christianity to a suffering world is one of an immortal hope: 'There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away'.*
>
> (in Hastings, ed, 1921: 9.)

It is only when suffering is set in the context of eternity that it can be appropriately evaluated. When such a perspective becomes the norm, then we too can consider pain and affliction as less of a problem and more of just "light and momentary troubles" **(2 Cor 4:17)**. This is not the power of positive thinking; it is the acknowledgment of divine purpose. And it is that purpose of God, put into effect through the death of Christ Jesus, that will resolve the seemingly incongruous realities of innocent human suffering and divine justice. The only positive response we can have is by cultivating an understanding of suffering that perceives it as a preparation for the glory of eternity.

The following poem by Amy Carmichael is both a fitting testimony to its author and an appropriate conclusion to this chapter:

He said, "I will forget the dying faces;
The empty places,
They shall be filled again.
O voices moaning deep within me, cease."
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in forgetting lieth peace.

He said, "I will crowd action upon action,
The strife of faction
Shall stir me and sustain;
O tears that drown the fire of manhood, cease."
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in endeavour lieth peace.

He said, "I will withdraw me and be quiet,
Why meddle in life's riot?
Shut be my door to pain.
Desire, thou dost befool me, thou shalt cease."
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in aloofness lieth peace.

He said, "I will submit; I am defeated.
God hath depleted
My life of its rich gain.
O futile murmurings, why will ye not cease?"
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in submission lieth peace.

He said, "I will accept the breaking sorrow
Which God to-morrow
Will to His son explain."
Then did the turmoil deep within him cease.
Not vain the word, not vain;
For in acceptance lieth peace.

(Carmichael, 1937: 40.)

9.0 THE SUFFERINGS OF THE INNOCENT

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The words of the ***Qoheleth***, traditionally attributed to Solomon, might easily have been penned by a philosophical atheologian of the twenty-first century:

> *There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.*
>
> **(Eccl 8:14.)**

It seems that almost daily we are being informed that the universe is more vast than we imagined it only twenty-four hours earlier. And yet for all that, there is a sense in which it remains a prison from which humanity cannot escape other than by death. With all our perceived intellect, there abides some cry deep within each of us that pleads to know whether our very existence is after all just meaningless, or if we are in the hands of someone who is perfect in wisdom and working out a purpose according to his good will, in which all suffering will finally be justified. As John Stott points out:

> *The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair.*
>
> (Stott, 1986: 311.)

At a recent ten-week evangelistic course in my home city, where unbelievers were invited to listen and discuss the essentials of the gospel, the subject that raised the most questions was the problem of suffering. "If God exists, then why... disease, catastrophe, abortion, rape, poverty, malnutrition..." The list was almost endless, and my understanding is that the same level of concern was replicated nationally. Like so many learned scholars before me (eg Lewis, 1946; M^{c}Grath, 1992; Packer, 1975), I can offer no easy solution. That is not strictly the directive of this work. The best I can offer within these confines is to invite the evolutionist/ agnostic/atheist to explain human consciousness, morality and wonder. But I do write as one who believes that there is an answer, though at the same time regarding such as beyond the realm of human reason. For some, suffering may well be the greatest obstacle to faith in God; it can also be the greatest incentive.

9.2 A PALE REFLECTION OF THE TRUTH

At an individual level, some form of suffering affects every one of us to a lesser or greater degree. Depression, disappointment, loneliness, unemployment, abject poverty, rejection, unhappy marriages, and involuntary singleness may not fall into the category of suffering for some of us. For those affected, however, they can be just as real a threat to pain-free existence as sudden bereavement, physical sickness, mental handicap or terminal illness. The broad concept of suffering is no respecter of persons and absolutely no-one is beyond its clutches – we are all potential victims.

It might reasonably be argued that there is no such thing as innocent suffering, "for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" **(Rom 3:23)**. The victims of the terrorist attack on New York on 11th September 2001 were surely blameless of any crime that would directly justify such an atrocity. That they were sufficiently human to have contributed in other ways to the general problem of sin that is the root of social decay does not bear close scrutiny, for there must surely be a just relationship between the measure of offence and that of penalty. For many, that was patently not the case. Towards the middle of the last century, Emil Brunner was forced to concede that:

> *Unjust suffering does not merely thwart man's desire for happiness; it also destroys an established order... Unjust suffering raises indignation; it affects the life of the spirit; it eats into the personality. It is the injustice which constitutes the real suffering, not the wrong which has been unjustly done.*
>
> (Brunner, 1945: 13.)

As a small boy, I remember being emotionally disturbed by news of a tragedy in a small Welsh mining village. Graphic newsreel filled television screens across the country of the Aberfan disaster. Early that October morning in 1966, a nearby coal heap collapsed, slid into the valley and buried Pentglas Primary School alive. Aberfan was all but completely covered, killing 116 children and 28 adults. Although only six years old at the time, the memory has stayed with me as being my first encounter with the death of those my own age. Many years later, one of the survivors reflected on that fateful day thus:

> *We believed that, at the moment when the mountain of Aberfan collapsed, "something went wrong". Our faith is in a Creator who does not abandon even this, not those who suffered, wept and died in it. Our preaching on the Sunday after the tragedy was not of a God who, from the top of the*

mountain, caused or permitted, for his own reasons, its disruption and descent; but of one who received, at the foot of the mountain, its appalling impact, and who, in the extremity of endeavour, will find yet new resources to restore and redeem.

(in Jones, J, 1994: 52.)

Today we see news of rail crashes, earthquakes, famine, floods and other such catastrophes that claim the lives of thousands on an almost daily basis. On a much larger scale, the two world wars are possibly what the twentieth century will be most remembered for. Never in the history of humanity had its attention been so focused on global suffering in such an acute form. Yet despite their horrors, the principles of conflict are constantly being replicated in pockets of war-torn areas, almost as a fact of life.

If God is as we believe him to be, whatever the arguments for the place of God's justice in the midst of human suffering, we must take care not to accuse him of ever being capricious. Circumstances may often conspire to make that a plausible explanation, but it is simply untrue. Though our lives be in turmoil, and our minds either forget those occasions of God's goodness towards us in the past or else reinterpret them as some kind of divine mocking, we must hold on to the essential truth of God's nature that he alone is good and only goodness resides within his Being. On the basis of this and emanating from it is the further principle that God is never unjust in his relations with us. That is not to say, of course, that we can always see the justice of the situation. But this is more to do with our restricted field of vision than a question of moral probity on the part of God. Our perception of righteousness is marred, our understanding of any given situation incomplete, and sense of partiality determined by warped allegiances.

James Jones makes the following interesting comparison regarding the divine initiative:

A photograph of a three-dimensional object only ever has two dimensions. The viewer can see only the image, not the whole situation. It is limited in that it does not allow the viewer to feel, to smell, to taste, to hear that which has been photographed. In the same way, eternal truths about God are passed to human minds through picture language... [and] *what they are able to convey is limited. Through them we see only a part of the truth.*

(Jones, J, 1994: 16.)

The pure logistics of how something that has sin as its root may be perceived as being finally good is difficult for finite minds to comprehend. I am once again obliged to CS Lewis for bringing such clarity to an otherwise difficult issue:

> *In the fallen and partially redeemed universe we may distinguish:*
>
> *i) the simple good descending from God,*
> *ii) the simple evil produced by rebellious creatures, and*
> *iii) the exploitation of that evil by God for His redemptive purpose, which produces*
> *iv) the complex good to which accepted suffering and repented sin contribute.*
>
> (Lewis, 1946: 98, 99.)

9.3 MINIMISING THE EFFECTS BY IDENTIFYING THE ROOTS

As with many phenomena, our understanding of the principle of affliction will usually determine how we respond to a personal experience of it. With this in mind, it may be helpful to outline what I would define as three levels of suffering. First of all, we discover that at the ***biological*** level pain can be a warning sign for us, in much the same way as an oil indicator light to the motorist. It initially informs us that something is not quite right and thereby provides a stimulus to rectify the situation. Secondly, at the ***moral*** level, we find that we are provoked in the area of character development. In simple terms, and using the same analogy, if our motorist friend is found guilty of driving too fast in a restricted area, the consequences should prompt him to adjust his speed accordingly in the future. Finally, there is the ***spiritual*** level. On the one hand, the enigmatic quality regarding spiritual suffering is that we find it difficult to formulate a definitive statement about it. On the other hand, however, it opens up such a vast expanse of divine resources in order to endure the actual experience of that suffering.

In his short work, subtitled '*The Scandal of Pain in God's World*', James Jones identifies four basic types of suffering: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual (1994: 13). He rightly argues that even imaginary phobias are real to those beset by them. This may even be a key to understanding the subtle difference between truth and reality. Truth is essentially unchanging fact, whereas reality seems to be the individual's grasp of that truth, its lack of valid substance having little effect on the one affected by it. An agoraphobic, for example, may logically consider his fears to be irrational, but

this in no way minimises his state of paralysis when confronted with the prospect of venturing into open spaces.

The products of emotional turmoil are as varied as its level of immediacy Ranging from a minor nuisance to a raging torrent, depending on the specific circumstances, sense of loss is usually its harbinger. Death and divorce, bankruptcy and betrayal, loss by theft, injury and disease all bring an emotional imbalance that can have devastating consequences. Most people in adulthood have had to deal with the passing from life of someone dear to them. Mature years do not weaken its impact, even if the death was expected. The sudden death of a child is even more difficult to cope with. The numbness of disbelief very quickly gives way to anger. Those who sought to bring relief become targets of blame, which soon turn to self-pity and shadows of disappointment that hover like a spectre. Dejection and depression are often just around the corner. Well-meaning acquaintances remind us that life must go on which, far from lifting the gloom, only serves to add despair to our already growing catalogue of tumult.

As we have seen, suffering may take many forms and levels of intensity, combinations of which may be evident in one prolonged episode. There are occasions when the victim may be the subject of a revenge attack in which there has been some form of initial provocation. This is not to minimise the evil or excuse the act of villainy, but merely to point out the possibility of shared responsibility. Suicide bombers are victims of their own choosing. On a far lesser scale, we too may contribute to our own misfortune by unwise actions (though the story of **Job** makes it clear that this is not always the case). Very often, this will be on a limited damage scale where ignorance or minor folly are to blame. In business enterprise, we have all seen the major effects of financial mismanagement or a failure by hospital executives to fully implement health and safety protocols.

To disobey the proper law of the spirit by choice is to find oneself uncontrollably obedient to God's lower law of nature. By way of example, to walk rashly across a busy road during rush hour traffic is to neglect to behave in a responsible manner and thus apply the law of wisdom, the potential result of which may be that we very quickly find ourselves obeying the law of gravity.

Self-pity is another inappropriate way of dealing with personal injury. Exaggeration of the problem is usually an accompanying factor in the arsenal of those seeking to be thus consoled. It is both deceptive and crippling. The tragedy is that many so enlarge the magnitude of the initial problem that they are facing in their minds that, given time to ferment, the exaggeration becomes fully realised.

9.4 A DIVINE MANDATE

From New Testament times, the relief of suffering amongst the deprived and underprivileged has been at the focus of Christian missionary endeavour. Now, however, there seems to be a growing awareness that in many parts of the world the poor are no longer exclusively objects of evangelism – they are increasingly subjects of the kingdom (see Mohabir, 1992). This has brought with it a freshness of understanding that centuries of missionary preaching largely failed to accomplish. As the poor share the gospel in their own indigenous communities, whether it be Latin America, Africa, China or the former Soviet Union, the Christian faith is being re-examined without the inspiration of Western cultural ideologies. As urban slums, industrial zones, villages and plains are responding favourably to the message of Christ, those whose vocation takes them to such places are seeing that the gospel is still essentially for the poor (cf Ortiz, 1977).

A significant part of the Church's commission is to embrace the words of the prophet **Isaiah** – "to preach good news to the poor... [to] bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion" **(61:1-3)**. Although these words were prophetically Messianic, discipleship involves following in the footsteps of Jesus and so his commission becomes our blueprint. Many relief agencies exist, both Christian and otherwise, primarily, I believe, because the Church has generally abdicated its responsibility to the world's suffering millions. Para-church organisations abound as a result. Groups like *Christians Against Poverty*, *CAFOD*, *Christian Aid* and similar bodies are all doing a fine job with limited funds and resources.

To give an example, in 1968 *The Evangelical Alliance Relief* (*TEAR*) Fund came into being. Its purpose was initially parochial, with a vision simply to enable Christians to

bring good news to the poor. *Tearfund*, as it is now known, operates in over eighty countries and supports more than 600 projects. Its gross income for 2000/2001 was in excess of £32 million. According to government statistics (and purely in terms of voluntary income), *Tearfund* is now the sixth largest UK aid agency and the sixteenth largest UK charity. It is one of fifteen member agencies of the Disaster Emergency Committee, to whom public donations are directed following national appeals on behalf of international crises. With a total of 432 full-time staff dealing with almost 20,000 enquiries per year, its General Director, Doug Balfour, is in no doubt as to the concerns of his heart at this time:

> *I want to see Christians... making a difference where they live in their communities, whether in the inner-city, town, country or desert. Apart from the two-thirds of the world where people live on less than 60p a day, we must be engaged with those around us, demonstrating the Kingdom where we live... Secondly, of course, I am passionate about world mission and the needs of the poor around the world, whoever they are.*
>
> *I am excited about initiatives such as the Micah Network, which brings together over 170 evangelical relief and development organisations from around the world... because they are seeking to build a truly global and co-operative approach. United, we can speak boldly to the UN, World Bank and IMF as well as resource the world-wide church.*
>
> *It's a cliché to say we live in a globalised world, but it's true. I believe that the one eternally multi-national – the Church, which is also the biggest voluntary organisation on this planet – has enormous potential to see a harvest of both souls saved and stomachs fed.*
>
> (from an interview with Mark Landreth-Smith for *NFI magazine*, Issue 17, May/July 2002: 39.)

9.5 THE GOD WHO CARES

It might reasonably be argued that history is chiefly concerned with the record of human suffering. Consider the first ten historical figures that readily spring to mind and you will bear witness to the legitimacy of my proposal. Factors that may be seen to account for this are man's freedom of choice and human responsibility, or more strictly speaking, their respective abuse and abrogation. To the atheist, there seems ample evidence in history that there is no Supreme Being overseeing matters. Until comparatively recent times, progress in matters of civilisation has been almost snail's pace, expenditure far outweighing productivity. The element of opportunism in society has always provided the cynic with ready ammunition against the pious. In particular,

the evolutionary principle of 'survival of the fittest' in world politics has been used to discredit the belief in a Sovereign God. But history itself has its own history of always being subject to the bias of the historian. Whilst pessimistically, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" **(Psm 53:1)**, the truly sagacious favour the optimism of Jesus, who openly declares to us that "In this world [we] will have trouble. But", he goes on, "take heart! I have overcome the world" **(Jn 16:33)**. In his closing remarks on the question of natural warfare, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones cites this verse before concluding that:

> *Here perhaps, in the briefest compass, we have the most comprehensive, and the most final answer to all the various questionings and complaints that tend to rise within our minds and our hearts during a time of trial and of difficulty.*
>
> (Lloyd-Jones, 1940: 103.)

Throughout the ages, men have devised ways of dealing with suffering that have been contrary to the biblical revelation. Utopian ideals of recreating the world with the fantasy of suffering being absent are just that – fantasy. Outside the eschatological expectation of "a new heaven and a new earth" **(Rev 21:1)**, it remains utterly unattainable. The attitude that always meets trouble half way by anticipating in advance is, on the face of it, not without appeal. However, it is usually expressed as cynical disillusionment that fails to enjoy the true blessings of God, for its proponents live continually with the phobia that these things are about to be snatched from them. God is not a malicious trickster; he is a loving Father.

One of the difficulties in arriving at a satisfactory conclusion to the problem of suffering lies not so much in finding a definitive answer, but in ***asking the right questions***. Rabbi Harold S Kushner's assertion, therefore, that paediatric malformity, natural disaster and fatal disease are phenomena that cannot be levelled against a God who is less than Sovereign cannot be defended biblically (Kushner, 1983: 28f). Much perceived logic involving the rejection of God because of suffering in the world is bizarrely illogical. To refuse to believe in his existence because of his apparent inadequacy is akin to denying reality when it offends us. God cannot be inadequate ***and*** non-existent at the same time. Besides which, his existence is not dependent upon our assent; neither is his adequacy determined by human appraisal.

In his Question and Answer section on the thesis that '*God is a Loving Person*', WA Pratney offers the following:

> *Q: If there is a Creator God, why do the innocent suffer?*
>
> *A: If there is no God, why are they innocent and who cares if they suffer? Innocence implies moral standards, and the sadness of suffering implies that someone cares about suffering, that it is not natural or ordinary, right or just. Only believers in a personal, omnipotent and loving God ask this kind of question. If there is no personal God, there are no morals, no innocence, and suffering is a first truth of existence.*
>
> (Pratney, 1988: 167.)

For some, the pain of God consists in the synthesis of his love and wrath. Kitamori presents this in a way that is typically Lutheran, in that it seems to suggest divine tension that almost produces frustration due to conflict of interest in the Divine Being (1965). There seems little biblical evidence, however, to presume any such pressure between any of the divine attributes, which are held together ***not in unison, but in perfect harmony***. God suffered in Christ and, it may reasonably be argued, identifies with the suffering of his people still. He is forever 'Immanuel' – "God with us". He is with us in the slums and ghettoes of El Salvador; he is with us in the terminal care unit of the hospitals; he is with the abused, the victims of expedience, the impoverished, the socially unacceptable, the downtrodden, the unclean. But most especially, he is with the poor.

I would like to substantiate this by citing John Stott's description of the following graphic scene from the play '*The Long Silence*', and no apology is offered for quoting it at length:

> *At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne.*
>
> *Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly – not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.*
>
> *'Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?' snapped a young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. 'We endured terror... beatings... torture... death!'*
>
> *In another group, a young man lowered his collar. 'What about this?' he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. 'Lynched... for no crime but being black!'*

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. 'Why should I suffer?' she murmured. 'It wasn't my fault.'

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a young black man, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly formed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man!

'Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.'

At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.'

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No-one uttered another word. No-one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.

(Stott, 1986: 336, 337.)

9.6 SUMMARY

As part of a lecture given to the Faculty of Theology at Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, South Africa, in May 2000, entitled '*The Challenge that Secularism Presents to the Christian Churches of the UK and Western Europe*', my good friend and colleague, the Reverend Professor Dr D Byron Evans said: "it is clear that most suffering is either due to what the individual or society imposes upon himself or herself" (Evans, DBE, lecture notes, 2000: 7). Although Professor Evans' context

was very different from that under review here, the validity of his conclusion is nonetheless universal.

All suffering is, in the final analysis, associated with sin. That is not to say, however, that all personal suffering is as a direct result of personal sin. This was the thematic argument of Job's acquaintances, which was proved to be without foundation. Sin in its most basic form may be defined as moral evil in its relation to God – it is the transgression of God's law. Develop this still further and you will discover that sin is essentially the promotion of autonomy at the expense of Theocracy – self-rule instead of God's authority. It is no coincidence that this implies a measure of free agency within humanity; to be able to choose, we must primarily be free to do so. In this sense, we can surely see that a major proportion of suffering encountered by the world's population, whether individually or corporately, is principally on account of the abuse of freedom by some one or some organisational representative. It would be remiss of me, of course, not to acknowledge that some suffering can be attributed to mere accident of nature. Whilst that particular study lies outside of the brief of this work, suffice it to say that most (if not all) accidents are largely due to some measure of irresponsibility (even if by a third party), which equally demonstrates the principle identified above – that of sin in action.

Whatever relationship there may be between sin and suffering in all but its original sense, it is by no means mechanical. The argument is not without merit that in the case of the believer suffering may contribute towards character development and moral probity. Indeed, godly discipline is of inestimable value in the process of sanctification. Any attempt to either quantify or qualify the seemingly pointless suffering by the apparently innocent must be finally subject to the mystery of evil.

Much of what is contained in this work deals with specific cases of suffering in a general and semi-biographical manner. Obviously, it would be beyond the scope of human resources to account for every conceivable case individually. If all that could be committed to script was written down, there would still be perplexities that baffled the understanding, particularly in the realm of victims whose degree of suffering is deemed to be wholly without warrant. Whilst offering nothing to the subject by way of revelation, nor claiming to do so, RHL Slater admits that:

> *There are cases of innocent suffering which we cannot reconcile with the goodness of God. If we knew more about the universe or the divine purpose, and the means to its realization, we might understand more clearly. But this is supposition. In the present state of knowledge we can offer no explanation which satisfies all criticism and removes all doubts.*
>
> *The problem, therefore, is not solved. What is more, can we ever expect that it will be? The reverent agnosticism which is found in the Book of* ***Job*** *is surely, in the last resort, the highest wisdom* [cf **40:14**].
>
> (Slater, 1941: 117.)

In this chapter, we have looked at the suffering of the innocent in relation to the problem of evil. Of course, the intrusion of sin into the world means that no-one is truly innocent in the absolute sense of the word. Within acknowledged parameters, however, even the plight of apparently innocent human beings cannot be presented as incontrovertible evidence against the Bible's claim for the omnipotence or divine justice of a Sovereign God. I have maintained from the outset that the mystery of evil, of which human suffering is a product, will be resolved eschatologically in the purpose of God through the death of Jesus. It is to that eternal aspect that we must now turn.

10.0 THE SUFFERING OF THE ETERNALLY LOST

10.1 INTRODUCTION

There is one theme that is common to all major religions, each with views as divergent as one might expect from such a subject. What happens after death? Even proponents of Christianity cannot agree as to their expectations beyond the grave. When we speak of death thus, of course, we have in mind the general idea of absence of life in distinction from the more specialised sense of separation from God, though the one inevitably includes the other. Physical death, as such, is universal **(Heb 9:27)**. Because the context of our investigation is to look at the concept of death in relation to suffering, we must confine ourselves here to the fate of the unsaved. In this regard, MJ Harris points out that the intermediate state (ie between death and judgment) "affords no second chance to repent and embrace the gospel" (in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 339.)

For something so universal, the very subject of death is as unwelcome a topic of conversation as its reality is to the most prepared of hearts. Throughout the ages and in every culture, death has been the most feared of phenomena (see Addison, 1932). The uncertainty, apparent finality and emptiness usually associated with passing from this life always seems to arouse the strangest of unpleasant feelings, fostering nightmares, panic attacks and emotional breakdown. For many Christians, their salvation has failed to remove the fear factor, though this is perhaps primarily due to a misunderstanding of how we presently stand in relation to death (see Pannenberg, 1972).

10.2 AN UNWELCOME REALITY

It is my understanding of the revelation of Scripture that a final judgment awaits all men. There seems hardly a more apparent doctrine in the whole of the Bible than this:

> *... man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...*
>
> **(Heb 9:27.)**

According to Vine, the Greek noun '***thanatos***', translated 'death', is the opposite of life; it never denotes non-existence. As spiritual life is "conscious existence in communion

with God", spiritual death, therefore, is "conscience existence in separation from God" (Vine, 1975: 268).

The Old Testament depicts the dead as being disembodied spirits in '***Sheol***'. This is itself portrayed as a dark, dank, mysterious underworld, which offers only a faint hope of future release (cf **Psm 16:10; Eccl 9:10**). Almost the same idea is conveyed in the use of the Greek equivalent '***Hades***' in the New Testament until Jesus brings fresh revelation of a distinction between '***Gehenna***' and '***Paradise***'. These are not perceived to be the final destinies of the rebellious and righteous respectively, but provisional locations permitting no passage between the two **(Lk 16:19-31)**. Their temporary status subsists until God's judgment on the last day for the former and the resurrection of Christ for the latter, whereupon believers await only their resurrection bodies and rewards for things done in the old, earthly tent **(Mt 16:27; Rev 22:12)**.

The unnaturalness of death is depicted in Scripture by the language it employs. It is described as the devil's domain **(Heb 2:14; Rev 20:13)**, an unwavering despot **(1 Cor 15:26; Rev 6:8)**, and a condition of captivity from which Christ sets the righteous free **(Rom 8:2, 38, 39)**. The unleashing of emotions normally associated with death tells its own story. It is the enemy of humanity. Even the most hardened of hearts cannot help but be touched with sorrow at the passing of a loved one. Grief, despair, anguish, tears and painful memories all overwhelm us without invitation when we suffer such loss. And Christians are not immune from this kind of pain, even when the sadness is eased by the knowledge that the deceased is now with Christ. Far from being dissuaded from feeling such desolation, there is some comfort in the fact that, after the death of his close friend Lazarus, Jesus too wept **(Jn 11:35)**.

10.3 THE WAGES OF SIN

The biblical revelation concerning the origin of death is that it is the penalty imposed by God upon mankind for the unfaithfulness of Adam in the garden of Eden (cf **Gen2:17; 3:19,22-24**). Indeed, Scripture speaks of death with three main connotations. ***Physical death*** is the one most commonly considered and refers to the termination of bodily activity. In this regard, Louis Berkhof has rightly pointed out that "death is not the cessation of existence, but a severance of the natural relations of life", adding that "life

and death are not opposed to each other as existence and non-existence, but are opposites only as different modes of existence" (Berkhof, 1988: 668).

Whereas ***spiritual death*** denotes man's relational alienation from God as brought about by original sin, ***eternal death*** (or 'the second death') describes the future destiny of all who refuse to be reconciled by the only prescribed way (ie faith in Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice). The wages of Adam's sin was death for humanity in all of its aspects, insomuch that the way to eternal life was barred thereafter. Adam's federal (or representative) headship is implied in the New Testament where Paul affirms that it was "by the trespass of the one man [that] death reigned" **(Rom 5:17)**. Whatever mysteries there may yet be regarding death, there can be no doubt that the biblical evidence clearly points to the fact that the reality of death is a direct result of Adam's sin **(6:23)**.

Just as there are to be rewards for the righteous acts of the saints, dependent upon the appropriation of individual talent, so there are to be commensurate degrees of torment for the human inhabitants of hell. It was the one who offered redemption who also warned that some "will be beaten with ***many*** blows", whilst others "will be beaten with ***few*** blows", the determining factor being personal accountability to given revelation **(Lk 12:46, 47)**. Allowing for the fact that such punishment is characterised as everlasting, we may only thereby conclude that the difference is in terms of severity. Believers are encouraged to take no delight in the plight of the ungodly, nor to stand mocking. The truth of hell must surely provoke only a diligent lifestyle and the urgent promotion of the gospel.

When Scripture speaks of the final judgment, it is clear that unbelievers will face unimaginable suffering: "on the day of God's wrath when his righteous judgment will be revealed... he will give to each person according to what he has done... for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger" **(Rom 2:5-7)**. Although there are hints at degrees of punishment in accordance with what each has done **(Rev 20:12, 13)**, there is no biblical support for the argument that even the least of these will merit further opportunity to escape condemnation. As Dr SH Travis of St John's College, Nottingham, points out:

> *Salvation and condemnation are best understood in terms of relationship or non-relationship to God. The criterion by which people's destinies will be determined is a double one – their failure to worship and serve the God revealed in the created order and their attitude to Christ – their relationship*

to him, of which their deeds give evidence. The destinies themselves consist in being either in God's presence or excluded from that presence.

(in Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1993: 358.)

The wrath of God has never been a popular subject to broach, even in Christian circles. His righteous judgment, however, must not be swept aside under a carpet of objective sentimentality. Where this has been the case, the accompanying danger is to commensurately devalue an appreciation of his grace in the atoning work of Jesus. As far as the biblical revelation is concerned, the realities of both heaven and hell are dependent upon each other, for they are each referred to in terms that are mutually exclusive (see **Mt 5:18-30; Lk 12:5, 33**). We must, therefore, do with one as the other, whether that is acceptance or rejection. But to dismiss either as a mere concept will not diminish their existential reality. It is only as we come to acknowledge the overwhelming horrors of the one that we may fully appreciate the beauty of the other; heaven's sun seems all the more bright when compared to the shadow of hell's pit. For as Paul reminds us via the believers in Rome:

Since we have now been justified by [Jesus'] *blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him?*

(Rom 5:9.)

The Reformed theologian, William Hendriksen, defines God's wrath as "his settled indignation". He goes on to say that:

God's wrath... differs from fury, which generally points in the direction of rage, sudden outbursts of anger. Whenever God's wrath is mentioned in the New Testament, the final manifestation of divine vengeance is either indicated or... is at least in the background.

(Hendriksen, 1982: 67.)

The biblical presentation of the wrath of God is that it is always in harmony with his divine Being and, therefore, consistently judicial. In other words, those who experience God's wrath are not, in fact, victims of mistaken identity, but recipients of the product of their deeds. Suffering of this nature is in strict accord with divine justice. Eternal judgment, according to John, is a condition opted for by voluntary rejection of the only one who can render it unnecessary – Jesus **(Jn 3:18)**. Understood in this way, damnation is not a positive and cruel imposition on the part of God to those who are

undeserving of such a fate, but a natural consequence of the choice they have made in life.

It is true that the basis of our judgment is to be what we have done in this life. In the strictest possible terms, this means what each of us has done with the opportunity to receive God's pardon by accepting the provision of atonement through his Son, Jesus Christ. At its most basic, we might say that eternal destiny is determined by temporal choices. For the church, however, the converse is equally true in that our eschatology largely governs our ecclesiology. In other words, how we view the end times, return of Christ and the events surrounding it, and what happens to the unbeliever beyond death all contribute towards how urgently or otherwise we concern ourselves now with those who presently stand outside of God's kingdom.

Scripture is clear regarding this issue of moral responsibility, whilst at the same time acknowledging God's sovereignty in all matters (cf **Exo 20; Dt 5**). That his purposes are often worked out by a sequence of events that in themselves may be evil neither impugns God's righteousness nor makes him in any way worthy of blame. The sagacity of John Calvin informs us thus:

> *Thieves and murderers and other evildoers are the instruments of divine providence, and the Lord himself uses these to carry out the judgments that he has determined with himself. Yet I deny that they can derive from this any excuse for their evil deeds. Why? Will they either involve God in the same iniquity with themselves, or will they cloak their own depravity with his justice? They can do neither.*
>
> (Calvin, 1960: I: 217.)

Lest there be any proclivity to think of God's justice as an exercise of tyranny without passion, the following words surely provide ample testimony against this: "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways!" **(Ezk 33:11)**. Jesus' plea is similarly evocative:

> *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate."*
>
> **(Lk 13:34, 35a.)**

The Judge of mankind is also the Saviour of the world – Jesus **(Acts 17:31)**. His judgment, unlike man's sense of justice, is inherently pure. There are no hidden agendas or unrighteous motives with the Son of Man, nor is there a shadow of turning with him. The sentences to be meted out are deemed final and unalterable. There is no Scriptural basis for a theology that embraces purgatorial discipline, for the atonement of Christ is exclusively and amply sufficient to both justify and sanctify. Equally, the idea of some interim period of probation is to be rejected. God's Word gives powerful warning that only on this side of physical death is humanity presented with the opportunity to accept or reject his Messiah (cf **Mt 12:32; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 2:1-3; 9:27**).

10.4 HELL WILL NOT FREEZE OVER

The difficulty facing the Evangelical is that the same lips that spoke of the Paradise of God also uttered warning against the pains of hell:

> *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"*
>
> **(Mk 9:43-48.)**

However, it is noteworthy that, although the kingdom of heaven is said to be the prepared resting-place of the redeemed (cf **Mt 25:24; Jn 14:2**), hell is nowhere recorded as being specifically created for the ungodly. It is the fate of the devil and his angels **(Mt 25:41)**, and becomes that of the unrighteous solely by virtue of their refusal "to love the truth and so be saved" **(2 Thess 2:10)**. In the words of RJ Bauckham:

> *Hell is the destiny of all the powers of evil: Satan, the demons, the beast and the false prophet, death and Hades. It is the destiny of men only because they have identified themselves with evil. It is important to notice that there is no symmetry about the two destinies of man: the kingdom of God has been prepared for the redeemed, but hell has been prepared for the devil and his angels and becomes the fate of men only because they have refused their true destiny, which God offers them in Christ.*
>
> (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 347.)

Paul's testimony is no less equivocal:

> *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed.*
>
> **(2 Thess 1:8-10.)**

Dr Bauckham rightly concludes: "The New Testament doctrine of hell... is never mere information; it is a warning given in the context of the gospel's call to repentance and faith." He goes on to say: "The gospel sets before men their true destiny in Christ and warns them in all seriousness of the consequence of missing this destiny" (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 347).

The prospect of hell is not an easy one to contemplate. Relentless torment is no less difficult to comprehend or fathom. Clearly, a more attractive alternative would be preferable, and there is one – heaven. In terms of presenting an aesthetic gospel, there would perhaps be less discomfort in joining the ranks of the Universalists, who claim that all will ultimately be saved (eg Hick, 1976). Some have even gone as far as Origen in suggesting that this includes the devil and his hordes (see Ferguson & Wright, eds, 1994: 702). There is admittedly something similarly endearing about the Annihilationist view that speaks of hell as a cessation of existence. May I respectfully submit that both are based on a combination of fear and speculative proof texts, which give little consideration to the balance of Scripture?

Jim Packer tells the story of a question being asked: "What is the difference between Unitarians and Universalists?" to which came the reply: "The Unitarians believe that God is too good to damn anyone; the Universalists believe that man is too good for God to damn" (Packer, 1988: 184). Any casual observer could not help but notice that the latter is wholly without warrant, whilst the former reveals a lack of insight into where the responsibility lies for man's damnation:

> *... those who are perishing... perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.*
>
> **(2 Thess 2:10, 11;** cf **Rev 16:9.)**

In response to DK Innes' comment that the word 'eternal' "does not necessarily mean never-ending" (in Douglas, ed, 1992: 473), I can only concur. However, the fact that the same word is used concerning the life of believers in contrast to the experience of the reprobate seems to suggest that in whichever sense it is employed for the one must equally apply to the other. If eternal death is not an everlasting state of conscious existence, then we have no assurance that eternal life will be.

Objections to the doctrine of eternal suffering for the finally reprobate seem to stem from a misappropriation of the word 'destruction' as found in Scripture (see **Psm 9:5; 92:7; 2 Thess 1:8**). Destruction is not a synonym for annihilation, any more, for instance, than a child's toy may be destroyed though still in existence. That which has been destroyed is generally understood to be beyond the confines of the purpose for which it was designed. The weight of biblical evidence seems to suggest that this is so for those who make a conscious choice of refusing to believe the truth. A similar argument could be employed against those who defend the use of the word 'perishing' as meaning 'to annihilate' (see **Psm 37:20; Prov 10:28; Lk 13:1-3**).

Contrary to John Stott's argument that "the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should be accepted as a legitimate biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment" (Edwards & Stott, 1988: 320), the most that can be conceded is that such a fantasy is more aesthetically pleasant to the sensitivities of human emotion. Evasion of the facts as presented in Scripture on account of what Jim Packer calls "secular sentimentalism" (Packer, 1998: 193) is not the domain of the biblical theologian. It is, in fact, an abrogation of his responsibility.

Most annihilationists believe that the reprobate will suffer God's wrath for a period of time, but that it will cease at the point of annihilation (see Hughes, 1989: 405-407). A variation of this, which promotes the idea of an immediate cessation of existence at death for the unbeliever, is the doctrine of conditional immortality. Here, the gift of immortality – in the sense of a spiritual continuation of existence – is a gift associated with salvation. Those who respond favourably to the offer of redemption on account of Christ's atoning sacrifice are the exclusive recipients of such a gift. Proponents of this theory argue, therefore, that those who fail to respond to the call of the gospel cease to exist at death simply because they are not in possession of the gift to do otherwise (see Grudem, 1994: 1150). This would be the most appealing scenario of all to the

unbelieving philanthropist (and I suspect to many a believer). It fails to do justice to the biblical perspective, however, for there is no consciousness of pain and, therefore, where is the suffering? It might be argued that failure to inherit eternal life is sufficient punishment, but can it really be described as such when there is no conscious element associated with such lack?

Grudem makes an excellent point against annihilationism when he asks:

> *Does the short time of punishment envisaged by the annihilationist actually pay for all the unbeliever's sin and satisfy God's justice? If it does not, then God's justice has not been satisfied and the unbeliever should not be annihilated. But if it does, then the unbeliever should be allowed to go to heaven, and he or she should not be annihilated. In either case, annihilationism is not necessary or right.*
>
> (Grudem, 1994: 1151.)

The finally destiny of the rebellious is hell. In the New Testament, this is dramatically pictured as a place of unquenchable fire **(Mk 9:43)**, undying worm **(v 48)**, outer darkness **(Mt 25:30)**, a lake of fire and brimstone **(Rev 10:20; 21;)**, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth **(Mt 8:12; 22:13)**, and the body and soul of the unrighteous are to be destroyed by the second death **(Rev 2:11; 20:14)**. The use of the word 'destruction' is not to be understood as annihilation, but usually refers in Scripture to the irrevocable giving over of something (or someone) to the Lord's displeasure. Whilst acknowledging at least some degree of composite symbolism in the language employed, it becomes apparent that the text is representative of a destiny far worse than our natural minds could otherwise comprehend.

Without extraordinary literary inconsistency, it is difficult to escape the meaning of hell as a place of unending suffering.

10.5 SUMMARY

It may seem simplistic to suggest that all evil will be finally dispensed with at the great judgment seat of God. It is no less true for its simplicity. Evil will then no longer be a problem. The charge that hell is a token of antipathy in God is both unwarranted and ignorant. There will not be a person in hell who has not chosen it for him/herself. Death in all its forms, physical, spiritual and eternal, is a state of existence without God. Those

who have constantly refused the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ and thus with it the invitation to be spiritually awakened have effectively said "No!" to fellowship with God. Their temporal wishes on earth will simply be matched in eternity.

The doctrine of eternal conscious punishment is one that is not comfortable. It is a doctrine that, whilst I may not be happy to contend, the weight of biblical evidence in support of it means that I must do so. How much more at ease human intellect would feel if there was some substance to the annihilationist theory! How less difficult we would find the grieving process for relatives who die in apparent unbelief, were it not for those verses that speak of everlasting torment and unquenchable fire **(Mk 9:43; Lk 16:22-28; Rev 14:9-11)**! And how lacking in incentive we would be to fulfil what has been called 'the Great Commission', given by Jesus to all who would follow after him **(Mt 28:18-20)**.

Answers to difficult problems are seldom easy, even when they are incomplete. The fact remains, however, that the apparent incongruity between the suffering of humanity in the context of what the Bible has to say of the omnipotence and divine justice of a Sovereign God will find eschatological resolution. The process of restoration began in the death of Jesus; it will be brought to completion on the day of judgment.

NB: For a more in depth treatment on the subject covered in this chapter, see my own MA dissertation – 'A Race in Need of Redemption: The Necessity, Reality and Benefits of the Atonement' (section 5:2 – What About Death and Hell?), held in the library of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, South Africa.

11.0 CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to this work, I stated that its main focus would be to "present the biblical evidence in support of divine justice in the light of human suffering" by demonstrating that "divine justice and human suffering are not as mutually incompatible as many in our day would have us believe" (p 6). I believe I have fully honoured that commitment by demonstrating what the Bible actually says about this lofty subject, without intentional prejudice or bias, and that the fact of human suffering in all of its expressions does not automatically negate the justice of God.

My research has led me to the works of authors whom I would not normally consider worthy of attention. Coming from a strong Reformed Evangelical background, there is a tradition that would render such an exercise futile on the grounds that "what fellowship can light have with darkness?" **(2 Cor 6:14)**. Whilst I fully endorse this view, I would respectfully suggest that fellowship is determined by relationship and there is a relationship between light and darkness, albeit one of antipathy. This has proved a challenge to me. But light always shines more brightly in the midst of darkness and truth is more positively perceived in the presence of error. Equally, never has freedom been so gratefully appreciated as by those who were previously in chains of bondage. Jesus expressed a similar idea when he implied that: "He who is forgiven much, loves much" **(Lk 7:47)**. And so, it has been largely through reading the works of scholars like Schleiermacher and Kant that my quest for truth has been honed, conviction finding itself most vociferous in antithesis to folly. After all, the Credal statements we value as Christians were not essentially the fruit of pure doctrine, but a reactionary answer to the promulgation of heresy.

As a relative newcomer to the discipline of theodicy as an area of valid research, perhaps those more learned than I (for whom I have the utmost respect) will forgive my naïveté. But an approach that focuses on reducing God's justice to a level that the human mind finds comfortable, even if such a level results in his existence being denied either absolutely or at least in the way that Scripture reveals him, seems not to be the brief of the theologian at all. On the other hand, however, those within this field who maintain God's justice to be fully compatible with his omnipotence, omniscience and ambivalence, and lay the blame for sin firmly at man's door should perhaps consider whether their findings rightly appear under the heading 'theodicy' or whether they

might, in fact, be more suitably labelled 'anthropodicy'. I unashamedly find myself in this latter category.

God's ways are far loftier than those of man **(Isa 55:9)**. Even the most accurate understanding of him is not only a drop in the ocean, but that ocean is itself found to be a mere drop in a far more vast ocean still, until the process is repeated ***ad infinitum***. What we can affirm with any assurance is that, contrary to many current songs of worship, there are certain things that are beyond the realm of possibility even for an omnipotent God. Generally, these fall into one of two categories. First of all, God cannot behave outside of his own true nature. He is, in that sense, bound by his intrinsic characteristics and does not have the power to temporarily suspend one attribute in order to promote another. But neither is God capable of contravening certain laws that he has initiated. In other words, those things that are by their very nature impossible. To imagine God being able to produce a true equilateral triangle where any of the angles was either more or less than exactly 60° is nonsensical. To prefix such a statement with the words, "God can..." does not make it any less so.

In his wisdom, God has given man the freedom to choose – to subsequently deny him that freedom would be a similar nonsense. The creation of man as a free moral agent carried with it automatic features of both fact and potential. If freedom of choice does not include the liberty to opt for that which is contrary to the desired alternative, then the concept of freedom must be redefined. The potential for evil, therefore, is a natural consequence of man's relative autonomy. Because free will means the freedom to choose evil, the consequences of that choice in reality affects others. The increased level of moral evil in the world is surely due to man's proclivity to choose in accordance with his now tarnished nature since the Fall.

Free will plays no small part in the problem of suffering. Scripture sets it in antinomy to the sovereignty of God, apparently contradictory though equally true. Moral accountability demands it, for a robot cannot be responsible for actions that are not governed by choice. The personality of humanity, both corporately and as individuals, bears witness to the goodness of God. His concern is for the welfare of each of us, he knows us all intimately and treats every one according to the complexity of his or her personal constitution. But human freedom is also partly responsible for the problem of suffering, or at least the abuse of such freedom is. Freedom plus ignorance equals

danger; that is a tragedy waiting to happen. Freedom plus greed or selfish ambition equals decadence; and that is a travesty beyond measure.

We often speak of 'the love of God' and 'God is truly love', but what he is and what we mean by saying what he is are often poles apart. The love of God is not couched in sentimentality like some favoured uncle who turns a blind eye to petty mischief. Such a caricature is devoid of biblical support, for it produces a brand of Christianity that has as its motto 'Come to Jesus and all will be a bed of tulips' (sic! roses have thorns). Appeal may be made to the parable of the prodigal son, especially the father's response to his homecoming, and God is certainly a welcoming Father. But it is no less an act of love for him to release us to our own desires for a season, to taste uncleanness, to feel separation and to experience the shame of sin. A similar approach may mar our understanding of the character of Jesus, but his love for humanity was not at the expense of his zeal for righteousness.

The other extreme, of course, is equally alarming. If God is not a slushy plaything, neither is he a stern 'sober sides' in the sky. To portray him as a cruel, vengeful deity without Fatherly instinct is in many ways a more noxious assumption to make. Once again, the book of **Job** cleverly deals with this false conception, though it still abides today. Religions that promote the idea of reincarnation even attribute present difficulties to a previous existence. Yahweh finds no pleasure in the sinfulness of mankind, but neither is he the outraged tyrant that some would have us believe.

For justice to be truly just, it must be grounded in the principles of divine justice. Otherwise, it is simply a word that denotes a different meaning dependent on the user. My comprehension of what is just may vary considerably from another, though our backgrounds and circumstances remain similar. Whenever a man pleads for justice, he is essentially appealing to a loftier government than humans are capable of initiating, though he may not be aware of it. Even the polytheists of a bygone age understood their gods to be guardians of the principles of justice. The Christian is at least in agreement on this one point – that the nature of justice is outside of man's domain, determined by the counsel of that which is wholly ***other***. Because justice is such a holy standard, and therefore inflexible, it is beyond arbitrary use. Just as absolute truth is incapable of but a hint of deception, so absolute justice knows nothing of partiality. In fact, the

relationship between the two cannot be overlooked, for man can devise neither; he can only seek to discover them.

When we consider the terms 'good' and 'evil', it is important that our impressions of them are not environmentally conditioned. Where these are considered in their extremes the case may be clear-cut. But somewhere in the midst of that we can easily identify good with that which is aesthetically pleasant and evil with that which disturbs us. In its absolute sense, good may only appropriately be defined as that which lies in conformity with God's will. For the Christian, Christlikeness is the highest good one can ever hope to attain; how this is achieved, however, may embrace a journey that is less than comfortable.

Although no firm conclusion is possible as to the problem of suffering as a fruit of evil, we may at least go some way to explaining the existence of evil. Logic suggests that if God is truly sovereign (and he truly is), then somehow he is responsible for suffering. Even if this is only by indirectly allowing it to happen, he is responsible for the conditions that wrought it. If we say that abuse of free will has produced suffering, then remove the cause and its effect will immediately be nullified. The writer of the book of **Job** does not sweep God's sovereignty under the carpet hoping we will not notice, but is forthright in its proclamation. Perhaps the analogy of light and darkness will help our understanding of the relationship between good and evil. I am sitting here in a residential library near Chester at four o'clock in the afternoon and the light is fading – fast. We might say that it is becoming dark. (Thank God for electricity.) At the other side of the world, it is approaching dawn – it is getting progressively lighter and darkness must soon give way. But is darkness a natural phenomenon? Does it exist in its own right? Or is it simply the absence of light? Goodness is a primary positive fact. The existence of evil is a secondary reality, occurring only where goodness is either absent or deficient. In just the same way, much disease may be perceived as an unnatural absence of health due to poor nutritional standards, codes of sanitation or ethics of hygiene.

There is also some merit in the idea that our understanding of evil is incomplete and, therefore, any conclusions are necessarily governed by a restricted perception. If only we could view circumstances from a higher plain, then perhaps we would begin to see the overall good. In the final analysis, of course, much of this must be conceded to be

the only possible explanation, that the problem is, in fact, unexplainable. The difficulty arises when we take successive steps that appear logical from this position that results in a '***che sarà, sarà***' approach. If all is mapped out and beyond redirection, then why waste effort promoting change? Of course, the apparent incompatibility between divine justice and human suffering is not unique in this regard. Theologians have similarly struggled to bring intellectual harmony between the sovereignty of God and 'anthropo-responsibility', with equally limited success. The major drawback in this instance is that, far from man becoming less conscious of evil the closer in fellowship he walks with his God, the converse is true. In inter-divine communication, the Father says of the Son: "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness" **(Heb 1:9)**. They are diametrically opposed qualities that are nevertheless related to each other. As we begin to co-operate in the process of becoming Christlike, so we commensurately come to find ungodliness distasteful.

I do not for one moment doubt either the integrity of John Hick when he affirms that his approach to the problem of evil is "with the utmost humility and sincerity of spirit and from a standpoint of firm Christian commitment" (Hick, 1966: 7). Neither would I deliberately neglect his work on the basis of any preconceived disagreement. But, having had the opportunity to read of his observations, I can only conclude that he is sincerely wrong. It is most certainly not impious to try to understand God's dealings with mankind. On that we are agreed. If I believed otherwise, then the existence of this current work would rightly open me to the charge of hypocrisy. But theologians are not duty-bound to reach a logical conclusion regarding statements that are clearly examples of antinomy just for the sake of saving face in some intellectual game of one-upmanship, where philosophers are seen as the opposition. Statements of faith are not mathematical formulæ, the equation being subject to adjustment in order to produce the desired answer. Such apparent contradictions must be held in tension until revelation brings further clarity.

This is no mere abrogation of theological responsibility, any more than Hick's would be deemed to be in relation to the position of theism. But there is an almost universal presumption within the field of philosophy that natural science is the god to which everything, including the divine being (intentionally uncapitalised) must submit, explain itself or both. The perceived incompatibility between science and theology has very little, if anything, to do with the strength or weakness of argument or evidence. It is

because even the finest human intellects available are intrinsically flawed simply by virtue of their finiteness. There is no such incompatibility between God and nature.

Lest it be thought that I am critical of philosophy to the point of rejecting its value altogether, allow me to counter this. I realise that many of my comments regarding the philosophical/atheistic/atheological approach will have appeared exclusively negative. In truth, however, the pursuit of theology owes these disciplines a great debt of gratitude. Attempts to solve the problem of evil have generally sharpened the wit, aided understanding and in some cases quickened faith. That this has been largely due to the provocation aroused to investigate their claims in purely antithetical fashion is neither here nor there. I have written elsewhere that my principal motivation for studying theology is not to pigeon-hole God or even necessarily to increase my understanding of him, though that is admittedly a welcome bonus. Paradoxically, the more we search God out, the more we discover the vastness of him and how utterly beyond human comprehension he is. Theology that does not end in worship is arguably as futile as a philosophy that never sets out with that on the agenda. For being given the opportunity to once more discover the infinite wisdom of God, though little understanding it, I am duly grateful.

But further than that, the discipline of biblical theology is not primarily an intellectual attempt to give a reasoned treatise or evidence on the existence of God, nor indeed his character or ways. Matters of faith are thought through from that basis to enable those who employ the same platform to articulate and understand the essence of their faith. Arguments and counter-arguments effectively achieve very little that is productive. Genuine faith will not be moved by fine-sounding arguments that run counter to the biblical revelation; lack of faith makes it impossible for those who are hostile to the theological position to adopt such a belief for themselves, certainly not by way of reasoned debate. The only product really is the fruit of confusion in the minds of those who simply observe.

The problem of evil, if we accept all else concerning creation as revealed in Scripture, finally comes down to whether the Creator was wholly prudent in making available to created beings the capacity and power to abuse freedom of choice. To Christians of most traditions, the question is absurd of itself on two counts. First of all, it is morally elusive to speak of the Creator as being capable of imprudence. Secondly, if man's

choices were restricted to always choosing good, then he quite clearly was not invested with true freedom of choice. It must be deduced, therefore, that although it provides for the possibilities of both sin and suffering, God regards such freedom to be far more in line with his purpose than coercion.

When all things have been considered, even the most noble attempt to resolve the problem of evil belongs in the realm of speculation. That God chose to create in the way he did is a matter of faith; to those who believe, it is fact. What is equally true is that he considered the possibility of man abusing his freedom to be altogether better than introducing him into an antiseptic environment with no choice at all. Why he did so remains a mystery. Why he does not eradicate evil, however, is not such an enigma. To do so would probably involve commencing again from the same starting point, so pervasive is the influence of evil. And this is something else that lies beyond his power, for he has promised not to – and he cannot break a promise **(Gen 6, 7)**.

Scripture gives no definitive answer to the myriad questions posed by the problem of evil. What we are assured of is the final goodness of God, a goodness that is not restricted by finite reason, human understanding or tarnished intellect, but that is perfect and absolute. Although the existence of suffering is a product of original sin, its final abolition awaits another age of which we may have the utmost confidence. In the meantime, Jesus' suffering brings hope and comfort to all who now suffer for the sake of his gospel. There is hope because our sufferings now, however severe, are but temporal – a glory awaits that is eternal (see **2 Cor 4:17**). There is comfort because, despite our incapacity to discern the mechanics of God's purpose in the midst of affliction, we may rest in the fact that distress, tribulation, famine, pestilence or sword cannot possibly separate us from the love of God that is to be found in Christ Jesus, our Lord **(Rom 8:35-39)**.

The problem for the practical theodicist, therefore, is not 'Does the existence of evil negate the existence of God?' but 'Is God able to offer comfort in the midst of adversity?' The question does not even demand a positive response in order to remain valid. Theodicy is therefore absorbed into Christology (or perhaps a better word might be 'Cruxology'), whereby the actuality of the atonement renders all problems associated with theodicy obsolete. If one could allude but momentarily to the biblical narrative of Job, his colleagues who mistakenly sought to offer some comfort would have readily

identified with the theoretical theodicists (actual arguments aside, of course). Job, on the other hand, had a distinctly more practical theodicy. To necessarily equate personal suffering with private sin is potentially disastrous. Seldom is this the case, though there are incidents where affliction may be the natural consequence of folly. Those who teach the exclusivity of such a doctrine, however, have not understood either the biblical concept of God's love or the message of the book of **Job**.

It has to be admitted, however, that suffering can be the result of personal sin. God has set certain principles into operation that govern the outcome of our action – they are natural consequences. The simplest illustration of this is that fire burns. These are the physical laws of nature. In the moral realm, there may also be a direct connection between contravention and consequence. Drug abuse, sexual immorality, persistent theft, driving whilst under the influence of alcohol can all be said to be the sin that inevitably produces suffering to one degree or another. Similarly, avarice, lust, pride, foul temper and self-centredness may also lead to breakdown of relationship that reinforces the argument for this sin/suffering relationship. The difficulty is, of course, that very often it is innocent victims who are the ones to suffer the most.

There have also been occasions in world history, graphically retold in the Bible, where God has judged specific sin in the present realm. Universally, this took place in Noah's day with the global deluge **(Gen 6:5, 6)**; community disorder provoked the geographical judgment of God on Sodom and Gomorrah **(19:1-25)**; individuals are often seen as 'reaping what they sow' in this way (cf **2 Kgs 5:27; Lk 1:20; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:30**). It must be pointed out, however, that individual suffering is not always the result of God's judgment on personal sin. The whole story of Job's dilemma is dedicated to eradicating this devilish theory (see **Job 42:7, 8**). Jesus also embraces the opportunity to repudiate such a link **(Jn 9:1-3; Lk 13:1-5)**. Peter, too, distinguishes between consequential and unjust suffering **(1 Pet 2:19, 20)**. Sadly, many believers have guilt imposed on them by those who are ignorant of such a distinction. The misery of my own mother's final battle with cancer was compounded by just such a display of ignorance on the part of those who associated her condition with 'some hidden sin'.

It would be theologically inappropriate to speak of suffering ***per se*** as a moral evil. That it is effectively a consequence of original sin is biblically irrefutable. The fact that God is often presented in Scripture as the dispenser of suffering, whether as a punitive,

corrective or schematic measure, renders its essential association with evil open to misunderstanding. The negative perception of suffering in the Old Testament, and which Jesus had cause to address in the New (cf **Jn 9:1-3**), is largely due to how the Sinaitic law was interpreted, so that health, prosperity and material success were the rewards for covenantal obedience; disease affliction and failure were to be expected by the unfaithful. God's ways, however, are not to be predicted in such controllable routines.

Proximal magnification may also temper our judgment. The pain of post-operation trauma is soon forgotten when we begin to see the remedial effects take shape. Similarly, Paul's admonition to weigh all things in the balance of an eternal perspective sounds like prudent advice **(Rom 8:18)**. Self-indulgence has a part to play, too. The phrase 'one man's meat is another man's poison' may not be biblical, though it is nonetheless true. The weather forecast that failed to predict last Sunday's heavy rain shower may have been an inconvenience to those who had planned a family barbecue, but to the neighbouring farmer it might just have made the difference between a plentiful crop and loss of livelihood.

Imperfect wisdom may also contribute towards a lack of proper judgment. In relative terms, a child may believe it to be good for him/her to eat nothing but ice cream, burgers, chips and chocolate. The dietician, of course, knows better. Project this same image to the Creator of the Universe and it immediately becomes apparent that our own ideals may not be quite so legitimate.

There can be no doubt that suffering is multifunctional, the full extent of its purposes being beyond our comprehension. Even in Scripture, there seems to be a progressive development of revelation concerning its part in God's overall scheme of things. This was largely due to Israel's unfolding as a nation called by God to be his instruments of righteousness in the world and the self-induced affliction that their continuing disobedience wrought. The incarnation of Christ and all that it entailed heralded a radical reassessment of the problem of suffering. Even within the confines of the New Testament, we find differing emphases as each writer highlighted a different facet of this particular diamond, so singularly lacking in beauty. The common feature, however, of all those who penned the Scriptures, in both Old and New Testaments, is their

unyielding confidence in the overall purposes of God and the conviction of the transcendent Sovereign Being immanently accessible in the midst of their anguish.

It seems to me, that when all the theologians from every persuasion have had their say and the philosophers of the age have been allowed their contributions to the argument, there must remain little doubt that the root of most of the world's suffering can rightly be apportioned to man's inhumanity towards his fellows. If we could but eliminate all moral evil, for which man is either directly or indirectly responsible, then the problem of evil would diminish considerably. Covetousness, greed, egotism and cruel intent account for much of the world's suffering. Admittedly, there would remain an element that could be attributed to carelessness or folly, but it would surely be negligible by comparison.

Furthermore, if the assumptions of my conclusion are correct, then by not finding a solution to the problem of evil, we go some considerable way towards removing its nature as a problem. For a problem only remains so long as it is acknowledged that a solution may be found and is capable of discovery to the rational and logical finite mind. My position is that such is not the case and that, for me at least, the appropriate terminology would be to henceforth speak not of 'the problem of evil', but 'the mystery of evil'. To some, it may seem that I am simply adjusting the vocabulary to minimise the dilemma, but it does appear that if a more stringent distinction was acknowledged between 'problem' and 'mystery', 'theodicy' and 'anthropodicy', indeed 'theologian' and 'atheologian', and a proper understanding by the latter of what is meant by the former of 'divine omnipotence', then the arguments and counterarguments of each might be met with somewhat less hostility.

It might reasonably be argued that, in the final analysis, my conclusion approaches something more of an 'antitheodicy' than a theodicy. In other words, having defended my understanding of the difficulty to the best of my (albeit limited) capacity, I must finally concede that there are serious aspects of God's dealings with man, both as individuals and corporately, that must remain a mystery. In that sense, they are unknowable. May I remind the reader that the central theoretical argument of this study, as identified in the Introduction is "that the very real and often apparently innocent suffering of human beings, whether as individuals or corporately, in no way impinges upon the biblical presentation or either the omnipotence or divine justice of a Sovereign

God. Arguments that imply the contrary might be better understood in the context of the mystery of evil of which human suffering is a product and which is resolved eschatologically in the purpose of God..." (see p 7).

Although integrity dictates that we search relentlessly for truth, the profundity of the subject restricts our quest to but fragments of it. Is there a tangible, rational, reasonable and logical answer to the problem of evil? Yes – it is Jesus Christ.

12.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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