

## Why Does God Allow Suffering?

By Graham Osborne

In my previous column, I looked at why God allows evil. Much of what I wrote there applies to suffering as well. So building on this foundation, and well aware of the complexity of this topic, I want to limit my focus specifically to two aspects of Christian suffering.

St John Paul II gives us the perfect place to start. In the very first line of his great Apostolic Letter, “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering”, he reveals the heart of Christian suffering by quoting from Colossians 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh / *complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions* for the sake of his body, that is, the church”.

What on earth could be “lacking” in the sufferings of Christ? Absolutely nothing... unless Jesus has made it this way. And that is exactly what he has done!

In 1 Cor 6:5, St Paul confirms that our “bodies are members of Christ”, and through this mystical but real connection, our sufferings can be united to Jesus’, both in power and effect. This is exactly why St Paul says he “rejoices” in his sufferings – because he knows that his suffering is united to Jesus’ and has power to help others.

This is the profound doctrine of salvific suffering: suffering that has a real and saving effect for us because Jesus gives it power by uniting it to his own suffering. Our old Catholic grandmas were absolutely right when they told us to “offer it up”. They knew the value of suffering when it was offered and united to Jesus’, an understanding that seems greatly diminished, even forgotten, as of late.

St Peter echoes this understanding, writing: “rejoice in so far as you *share Christ’s sufferings*” [1 Peter 4:13]. And St John Paul II outlines this teaching perfectly: “in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings... to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world.

But someone might rightfully ask: why did Jesus have to suffer at all? This is a book all to itself. But simply put, God made a covenant with his chosen people, promising blessings or curses – life or death – depending on how his people kept this covenant [Deuteronomy 30:19]. But they broke this covenant, repeatedly and seriously.

But instead of justice, God chose mercy, and decided to take these agreed on covenant punishments *on himself* [cf Gen 22:16-18], to show his unquestionable love for his people: no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends [cf John 15:13]. When you are willing to suffer for someone, you clearly show your love for them.

And so he “sent his only Son” [John 3:16] to do exactly that: to take on the just sufferings and death demanded by this broken Covenant. He then instituted a new Covenant with a new sacrifice [Jesus death on the cross] and new graces – adopting all people, and literally making them his sons and daughters – so they could become rightful heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven.

But again, did Jesus really *have* to suffer and die on that cross? The short answer is, “no”. There were many ways God could have chosen to repair the broken covenant with his people. But he chose to suffer and die on the cross so he could show us, unquestionably, *just how much he loves*

us. So if you ever doubt that God loves you, simply look at a crucifix...

But suffering plays yet another important role. It tests, purifies and perfects our faith. -“Life is a test... humanity’s greatest test”, writes St John Paul II. Hebrews 2:18 confirms this aspect of suffering stating that, “*Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*”

Similarly, St Peter reminds us that “you may have to suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” [1 Peter 1:6-7].

And likewise, St James underscores the importance of suffering in perfecting our faith, emphasizing again that paradoxical connection between rejoicing and suffering: “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” [James 1:24]. And Hebrews 5:8-9 also reminds us that even Jesus “*learned obedience through what he suffered*” – so the implications for us are obvious!

But despite the powerful testimony from Scripture, suffering is often seen as “outdated” in a world that tries, often to extremes, to deny the role of suffering in the message of the Gospel.

But right off the top, Jesus challenges all of us: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and *take up his cross daily* and follow me” [Luke 9:23]. 1 Peter 2:21, 4:1-9 repeats this exhortation: “For to this you have been called, because *Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps... Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought*”.

And St Paul also emphasizes the unique role of salvific suffering, writing, “we are children of God... and joint heirs with Christ, *if only we suffer with him* so that we may also be glorified with him” [Rom 8:14-17].

But let me conclude with a sequence from 2 Corinthians and see if this doesn’t deeply resonate with every single Christian’s experience of suffering: “We are afflicted in every way... but not driven to despair... struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body [2 Cor 4:8-11 ] “For as Christ’s sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow [2 Cor 1:5]. “Therefore, we are not discouraged... although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us *an eternal weight of glory* beyond all comparison [2 Cor 4:16-18].

St John Paul II, a saint that literally captured the world with his heroic example of Christian perseverance through suffering, summarizes all of this beautifully: “Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering... he says: ‘Follow me!’ Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world... Gradually, *as the individual takes up his cross*, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him... Your sufferings, accepted and borne with unshakeable faith, when joined to those of Christ take on extraordinary value for the life of the Church and the good of humanity”.

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” [Romans 12:1]. This is the Christian meaning of human suffering...