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Is Christianity Credible in a Suffering World?

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Although it's a long time since I met him, I have never forgotten James. When he was a toddler, James had fallen down several flights of stairs in an Edinburgh tenement, and as a result he suffered irreparable brain damage. For many years until his eventual death, he lived in a little cot, helpless and unable to do anything for himself. Life was exceedingly difficult for James and, of course, for his family.

It was when I was a student for the ministry that my own minister asked me to visit James. Apart from caring for others in Christ's name, it was probably meant to face me with the issues arising from the reality, extent and mystery of human suffering. If there is a God, and if he is both all-powerful and loving, why do such things happen?

It's the question posed by Heather, a lady who was raped in her own home; she reflected, "I had to make sense of what happened. Was God unable to stop the rape? Or was he able to stop it and he didn't?"¹ These are the questions. The "problem" of suffering and evil is a problem for believers; if you don't believe, then the practical issues related to coping are obviously still the same, but you don't have the problem of reconciling such harsh experiences with your underlying worldview and beliefs.

Three factors constitute the problem: the almightiness of God, the love of God and the reality of suffering. If any one of these should be undermined, then the "problem" disappears. That's what Heather grappled with.

- Perhaps God is not, after all, almighty and therefore He is unable to do anything about the problems which affect so many.

- Perhaps He is not a God of love; maybe He doesn't care about what happens to people. In the past some religions have suggested that God or the gods are far removed from any experience of human pain. Such attitudes might be expressed as, "Don't worry, the gods are too remote to have any interest in your life." Christianity says the very opposite with its assertion that the God of creation does understand our lives and He does care about our trials and sufferings. He has Himself entered into the experiences of this world.

- Or, unlikeliest of all, perhaps pain is unreal and illusory. Joni Eareckson Tada has suffered more than most since she broke her neck in a diving

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accident when she was a teenager. She has been quadriplegic ever since and she has had to deal with severe pain and also with cancer. Her testimony about the grace of God takes account of the very real pain she has suffered against the background of people's efforts to avoid it. "We do everything we can think of to escape it; we medicate it, mask it, surgically remove it, entertain or drug it, institutionalise it, divorce it, or even euthanize it – anything but live with it. Suffering, however, isn't about to go away."²

But if God is almighty and loving and if pain is real, how can these things fit together? How could I reconcile what I saw in my visits to James with what I was studying in the class-rooms of the divinity college?

One of Dostoevsky's characters is a man called Ivan who kept a notebook in which he wrote down the details of particular instances of suffering and evil that came to his attention. He described it as his laboratory for proving the non-existence of God. Sadly, we could think of many entries to include in such a notebook. The names of Dunblane, Hungerford, Lockerbie, Newtown come to mind as instances of evil, perpetrated on innocent men, women and children. There are also the individual and personal tragedies that afflict individuals whose stories never hit the headlines. And of course there are also the earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, etc that raise so many question-marks in people's minds.

Was the nurse correct who said, "No-one who has nursed cancer patients can believe in God"? Well, of course, she wasn't right; many people do believe even in the midst of much suffering, but we can feel the heat of her statement. Hers is not the objective comment of someone in an ivory tower trying to build a philosophy, but of a practical person trying to cope with life as she was meeting it day by day.

So is the existence of suffering an insurmountable barrier to belief, or can Christianity give any explanation of the existence of suffering; is faith in a loving and almighty God credible in a world of suffering?

It has been claimed that, although suffering is one of the ultimate mysteries of life for everyone, Christians

do not need to be embarrassed by the question because we have a better answer than anyone else! This is a bold claim, and the aim of this article is to examine that claim. It is written from the perspective of more than forty years of pastoral experience, in which I have sought to minister to people in all manner of life-situations. In other words, it is not about theories and ideas but about hard reality – the real trials that come upon real people in this real world.

One of the things to be emphasised at the outset is that nobody knows all the answers to all the questions, and it is no part of Christian commitment to claim to have everything neatly tied up and "sorted". But consider this illustration: suppose that you had thousands of little cards and each one had on it a symbol of a minim or quaver or some other item of musical notation. Supposing you threw them all up in the air and went away, and then came back later and found them arranged in such a way as to make a melody. Wouldn't you draw the conclusion that someone, a musician, had been there and had arranged them in sequence? You would never in a month of Sundays believe that such a result could have come about by chance. And – further – even if there were a few apparent discords, you would still be convinced that a musician had been at work. It might even be possible that the apparent discords have some place in the overall work of music.

So it is with our view of the world. Even though there are some things that seem to jar with our idea of how the tune should sound, it is clear that a Musician has been at work. The Christian claim is that, although we do not know all the answers, Christianity makes better sense of the world than any other explanation. I have often reflected on the experience of a philosophy student who wrote an essay in which he criticised a certain view. He submitted it to the Professor and when he received it back, he found a marginal note: "Every theory has its difficulties, but you have not considered whether any other theory has less difficulties than the one you have criticised."³ That makes you think. If we reject belief in God, how do we explain the existence of goodness; where indeed does our concept of goodness come from, and why should such "goodness" be valued?

² Ken & Joni Eareckson Tada with Larry Libby, *Joni & Ken* (Zondervan, 2013), 178

³ John Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage* (OUP, 1942), 15

C. S. Lewis expressed it this way, looking back on his own pre-Christian attitudes: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing the universe with when I called it unjust? . . . atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning.”⁴

Another writer gives the helpful illustration of a jigsaw puzzle: “My eldest daughter used to love doing jigsaws as a young girl, and one day I spoke to her about a puzzle she was working on. ‘Sophia, I wonder what the picture is?’ She confidently responded, ‘Dad, it’s Cinderella.’ I recognised a teachable moment and pointed out, ‘But you haven’t put all the pieces together’. She merely tilted her head and said, ‘Dad, it’s Cinderella’ . . . Clearly Sophia had seen the box and retained this picture in her mind. In fact, it would be easy to assume this was what she was referring to when I asked her about the big picture. But note what she said: ‘Dad, I have enough pieces in place.’ Sophia’s attention had shifted from the box to the puzzle pieces. These were now responsible for her confidence in the big picture. My daughter had stumbled on something significant about this broken world . . .: we can know the truth – and we can know the truth without knowing everything.”⁵

Christian believers do not claim to have all the answers but we believe that, even with the difficulties which will persist so long as we live in this world, we can still trust a Lord who has his reasons and who will one day allow us to see the pattern. A well-known poem says it:

*Not until the loom is silent and the shuttles
cease to roll
Will God unfold the canvas and explain the
reason why
The dark threads are as needful
in the skilful weaver’s hand*

⁴ *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1966 Fontana edition), 41f

⁵ Alex McLellan, *A Jigsaw Guide to Making Sense of the World* (IVP, 2012), 11

*As the threads of gold and silver in
the pattern He has planned.*

SUFFERING IN THE BIBLE

This principle was given scriptural expression in the story of Joseph. After all his trials – violence and betrayal at the hands of his brothers, false accusation and imprisonment in Egypt – he was able by faith to say to the brothers who had wronged him, “You meant it for evil but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). It was not clear at the time, but he could see that God had been working out a purpose even in the undesirable and wicked things that had happened.

Similarly, in the New Testament, Paul would affirm that in everything God is working out His plan (Romans 8:28). Faith says, with the hymn:

*Thrice blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
Is most invisible.*⁶

We will never know and understand everything in this world, but our lives fit in to a larger pattern. Consider the illustration from the traditional manner of making a Persian carpet. “It is erected vertically on a frame and on one side a number of boys are seated at different parts of the carpet at different levels. On the other side is the master weaver. He calls out instructions to the boys and they each weave in their part of the pattern according to the guidance received from a man whose face they cannot see. As the boys are able to see it, the design of the carpet is a complete mess, merely a collection of blotches and unsightly blobs. Looking at it from their viewpoint, it is hard to imagine that there is any sense about what each individual is having to do. Theirs, however, is the wrong side from which to judge. When, at the end of the day’s work, they get down from their stools and walk round to the master’s side, they can see that there IS a pattern being worked out, a thing of intelligence and beauty.”⁷

⁶ Hymn, *Workman of God* by F. W. Faber (1814-63)

⁷ James Martin, *Suffering Man, Loving God* (St. Andrew Press, 1969), 50f

It is interesting to note also that the Bible itself faces up to the problems posed by the existence of suffering and evil. Many of its writers wrestle with the issue – wrestle with God, even. Psalm 10, for instance, begins with that big little word, “Why?” It asks, “Why, Lord, do you stand far off?”

And there is a whole book that deals with the issue. The book of Job tells the story of a prosperous and upright man who suffers one calamity after another. In sequence he loses his property, his family and his health. The famous “Job’s comforters” come along and, for chapter after chapter, ring the changes on one main theme – that Job must have done some terrible things to deserve such sufferings. Job is sorely tested by his sufferings – in the book he gives vent to some of his agonies – and by the easy equations offered by his so-called comforters. Nowhere does he claim to be a perfect or near-perfect man, but he insists that the easy equation (all suffering is the result of wrongdoing) doesn’t fit.

And if we ask what solution the book of Job gives, the answer is that it does not give a full and complete philosophical explanation. What it does is to encourage faith in a God who is bigger than we can comprehend, who has His purposes. The book also tells us that, through it all, Job had come to a stronger and more personal faith. Whereas previously it may have been a kind of second-hand or inherited faith, now it was personal (Job 42:5).

That phrase, “through it all” brings to mind a song by Adrae Crouch. He wrote:

*I’ve had many tears and sorrows,
I’ve had questions for tomorrow,
There’ve been times I didn’t
know right from wrong.*

*But in every situation,
God gave me blessed consolation,
That my trials come to only make me strong.*

And then in the chorus:

*Through it all,
through it all,
I’ve learned to trust in Jesus,*

I’ve learned to trust in God.

Jesus also rejected the simple idea that all suffering is a direct punishment for sin. Luke 7 refers to two incidents which would have been in the headlines of the time: “There were some who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’” It is a passage which tells us that, although persistent sin and rebellion will have consequences, we cannot conclude from any instance of trouble that the sufferer has done things that deserve that punishment.

One of the practical consequences of this is that if we suffer in any way we do not need to torture ourselves with “what did I do to deserve this?” and when it comes to the sufferings of other people, it would be cruel to say or imply that they are being punished for bad things they have done.

So (to return to our main questions) does Christianity give any explanation of the existence of suffering; is faith in a loving and almighty God credible in a world of suffering?

There are several factors which need to be taken into account as we think through these issues.

THE LAWS OF NATURE

The first is the fact that the world works in terms of certain laws of nature which are uniform and reliable. Life would clearly be very difficult if (say) the law of gravity applied some of the time but not all of the time, and presumably we would not want that changed even if we could change it and even though we know that it entails the possibility of hurt when people fall. If a workman on a high ladder slips and falls – it would be very convenient for him if the law of gravity did not apply at that moment and he could be spared injury, but such a world would be a very different one from the world we know, and (it’s an amusing picture) a

game of soccer or rugby would become somewhat difficult!

The laws of nature which God has written in to his creation make life possible even if there are risks.

HUMAN FREEDOM

A second factor which must be taken into account is human freedom. The simple, if unpalatable, fact is that a great deal of human suffering – most of it – is the result of human sin, folly or stupidity. In other words, much suffering is caused by the misuse of the freedom we have to make choices about how to act. Most of the things Ivan would write in to his notebook come into this category – consequences of our choices.

God gives us freedom even though that entails risks. Why? Well, why do parents allow their children to take the risks involved in learning to walk, ride a bicycle or ski? They do so in order for the children to enjoy life and be all that they can be. God has given us freedom with all the risks that involves, so that we can develop and grow as human beings. This means that if a drunk driver injures or kills someone, it is not God's fault. It would be understandable that grief-stricken people should cry out against God for "allowing it to happen", but God has given us free will, along with the ingenuity to develop motor cars, and this desirable fact involves the possibility of hurt and disaster.

The sad truth is that we human beings have a poor track record in our use of this freedom. We have a sad tendency to cause pain to one another. As has been pointed out, it is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets and bombs. A. N. Wilson, after referring to the writings of the unbelieving poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, wrote, "Whatever song we choose to sing after the century of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot, Franco, Ataturk, and politicians and scientists who pioneered nuclear bombs, it is not very likely to be Swinburne's 'Glory to man in the highest! For Man is the master of things'."⁸ We human beings have a pretty grim track record in terms

of neighbourliness, compassion and love.

I have written elsewhere⁹ about Nicol, a middle-aged member of the congregation in which I ministered. His life-story was a catalogue of trouble. His father suffered a stroke and was unable to speak thereafter (although sometimes he could sing some words). Nicol's mother devotedly looked after her husband and Nicol for many years before, worn out with her labours, she died. Nicol's brother was lost at sea and he himself was paralyzed by multiple sclerosis; he also saw the break-up of his marriage. It was a family which had suffered so many disasters that it would be hard to imagine many more that could have come upon them.

During one of my visits, Nicol said with his slowed-down speech, "The one thing that really bothers me is . . ." – and I braced myself for a tirade. I imagined he might be about to talk about the unfairness of it all and to ask how anyone could believe in a God who allowed such things to happen. What he said, however, was, "The one thing that really bothers me is all these murders and crimes." He was more bothered about man's inhumanity to man than about the disasters which had crowded into his own life. I have observed in pastoral ministry that often it is not the people who do the suffering who raise the big questions about God's power and love and how to reconcile the two.

These are two factors in a Christian response to the "problem" of suffering: the uniformity of the laws of nature and the reality of human freedom. Both necessarily contain the possibility of suffering.

But what about other cases where there are no discernible reasons for their suffering?

OUR LIMITED KNOWLEDGE

The third thing is that we must take account of our limited knowledge. We have made the point already that we do not know all the answers and indeed do not need to have all the pieces of the jigsaw in order to know what the picture is.

At present we are like short-sighted people who stand

⁸ A.N.Wilson, *God's Funeral* (John Murray Ltd, London, 1999), 206

⁹ David J Randall, *believe it or not* (Rutherford House, 2000), 14-15

close to a huge painting and study a little section of it. Then we move along and study another section, but we can never stand far enough back to take in the whole picture. Christians believe that there will come a day when God enables us to see the whole picture, but meantime we are people with limited knowledge.

Consider it this way: if we knew nothing about surgical operations and we were taken in to an operating theatre where we saw someone using knives and other instruments on a helpless patient, we might think it was terrible and cruel. Obviously, however, the problem would be our lack of knowledge, our inability to see what is really happening. On the larger scale, perhaps it is often our lack of information and our inability to see the whole picture that causes us problems.

THE SUFFERINGS OF JESUS CHRIST

A fourth point concerns the sufferings of Jesus. This is a central thing for Christianity, since its whole message centres in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The point has been made that the Bible itself poses the “Why?” question and if the issue can be crystallised in that word, it is also true that Christianity’s answer centres in another “Why?” – Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) God in Christ has come right into our world of pain and suffering to redeem it from the inside.

This – if it may be so expressed – is the glory of the Christian religion: it is about a God who is not far-off and remote from our suffering and pain. Its principal symbol, the cross, is not a logo that any advertising executive would have selected – at least not in its un-cleaned-up form as an instrument of agonising torture and slow death. Tim Keller responds to the assertion that philosophical arguments don’t get God “off the hook” for the world’s evil and suffering by pointing out that God “came to earth to deliberately put himself on the hook of human suffering. In Jesus Christ, God experienced the greatest depths of pain. . . . Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture and imprisonment. On the cross he went beyond even

the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours.”¹⁰

The strangeness of this fact that Christianity’s symbol is a cross is hidden from us by familiarity. One writer has tried to bring the point home with this scenario¹¹ : “A woman has been asked out by the man of her dreams. He is handsome, charming, strong and considerate. He has hired a box at the theatre and greets her with a single red rose and a heart-shaped box of chocolates bearing her name in gold-leaf letters. They hold hands throughout the performance and, during the interval, he presents her with a jewellery box. She opens it and pulls out a long, delicate silver chain. Here wide-eyed pleasure quickly turns to open-mouthed confusion when she realises that on the end of the chain is a replica electric chair depicting a man being electrocuted. Far from being the man of her dreams, maybe he is the madman of her nightmares.” The story goes on, “It’s interesting to note that although she recoils at the replica electric chair, she would have been charmed if she had found a crucifix at the end of the chain.”

Yet we find that Paul could speak about glorying in the message of the cross (Galatians 6:14) and hymn-writers have echoed the sentiment:

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o’er the wrecks of time*¹²

And even

*Here is love, vast as the ocean,
loving-kindness as the flood,*

*When the Prince of life, our ransom,
shed for us His precious blood.*¹³

The death of Christ at Calvary means that we never again have to accuse God of being One Who could

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), 27 & 30

¹¹ Richard Cunningham, *Crucifixion: con trick to start a religion?* (UCCF, 2011), 1-2

¹² Hymn by John Bowring (1792-1872)

¹³ Hymn by William Rees & William Edwards

never understand our sufferings and our Why questions. It means that we never again have to doubt His ability to sympathise with our sufferings. It means that never again do we need to doubt the lengths to which He will go to effect salvation, forgiveness and eternal life for those who will accept these gifts from His hand. God has come right into this suffering world to redeem our humanity from the inside through what is the epitome of innocent suffering.

EXPERIENCE

Finally, we must take account of the testimony of many people who have claimed that, far from Ivan's notebook proving the non-existence of God, it has been in times of trouble and trial that they have come to have a stronger faith than they had before.

We mentioned earlier the experience of Joseph. Joseph came through many bitter experiences, but later could look back and see the guiding hand of God. God hadn't abandoned him but had been working out his purposes (Genesis 50:20).

The cruel execution of Jesus must have seemed to many to be the moment when evil achieved its greatest triumph, yet Christians have always believed that it was through that outworking of utter wickedness that God was effecting His plan of salvation for the world. He Himself was taking the weight of human sin and wickedness on His own shoulders as He died the death that is the outcome of sin.

It is a principle that has been seen many times. Last century, "It is estimated that 20 million Chinese lost their lives during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Christians stood firm in what was probably the most widespread and harsh persecution the Church has ever experienced. The persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since 1977 the growth of the Church in China has no parallels in history. Researchers estimate that there were 30-75 million Christians by 1990. Mao unwittingly became the greatest evangelist in history."¹⁴

Two remarkable individual illustrations of this theme come from different parts of the twentieth century.

¹⁴ William Lane Craig, <http://www.bethinking.org/suffering/the-problem-of-evil.htm>

Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent a decade in a Soviet prison-camp and he wrote about it, "It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good from evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart. That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: 'Bless you, prison, for having been in my life'."¹⁵ It is a remarkable statement of the principle that positive results can come from dire circumstances.

The other instance is from the life of Joni Eareckson whom we mentioned earlier. Even with all her struggles and trials, she now heads up a wonderful ministry among disabled people ("Joni and Friends – International Disability Center"). She tells of how her spinal cord was severed – "I've got pretty good shoulder muscles, half-way decent biceps, but that's about it. I can't feel from the collar-bone level down, so I'm paralyzed, I guess you would say, from the shoulders down". Joni could have spent her years in anger and complaint, but instead she testifies to a sense of peace that comes from the Lord in Whom she trusts. She has even said, "I'd rather be in this wheelchair knowing Him than on my feet without Him."

Life has been hard for her over these many decades since the accident and she has learned to live with unanswered questions. "Sometimes when we ask Why, I don't think that we're looking for answers. I don't know that even if we had answers, they would suffice. So when I ask Why (and sometimes I do ask Why even now – because of new levels of pain on my shoulders and neck; getting older - it's harder), I'm more like the kid who has ridden his bike, fallen off, scraped his knee and looks up at Daddy and says, 'Why, Daddy?' That child doesn't want answers. That child just wants Daddy to pick him up, press him against his breast, pat him on the back and say, 'There, there, honey; it's going to be OK – Daddy's here'. That's what I want when I say Why. I just want God to be near and to hold me and say 'I'm not going

¹⁵ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 615-17.

to leave you'. And that helps."¹⁶

AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

Sometimes we can see the positive outcome of hard trials in this life, but the full realisation of it lies ahead. A famous hymn looks forward to this revelation "in Immanuel's land". The hymn-writer looks forwards to a time when:

*I'll bless the hand that guided,
I'll bless the heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's land.*¹⁷

Life does not end with our death. This is another factor in a Christian view of the problem of suffering and evil. I have conducted hundreds of funerals in my years in pastoral ministry and have often wondered what people make of it when, standing at the head of a grave (most have been burials rather than cremations), I proclaim Christ's victory over the power of death, quoting His words from John 11:25-6: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me shall live, even though he die, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die". If this is a delusion, then not only does it mean that I have wasted my life (!) but it also makes it hard to cope with the apparently enduring injustices and cruelties of this world.

Paul wrote, "If only for this life we have hoped in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:19), but of course he goes on to assert that Christ conquered death's power by his death and resurrection, and that our life here in this world is a brief prelude to what lies ahead. It is not so much that that life is the "after-life" but that this is the "pre-life". We are in the position of viewers of some crime-thriller film in which the writer introduces many characters and events at the beginning and, as viewers, we feel totally confused about "whodunit". We generally trust, however, that there will come a time when the various plots and sub-plots will be seen to point to a certain conclusion.

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ua9BPbAdCJY>

¹⁷ hymn *The sands of time are sinking* by Anne Ross Cousins (1824-1906)

I began this booklet with the story of James and, despite all that has been written, I still do not understand why that horrible accident should have been allowed to happen. Unbelief shouldn't have a problem with such events, because, without a "divinity that shapes our end"¹⁸, without a sovereign and loving God, there would be no reason to expect coherence and meaning in what happens. If it is true that "there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference"¹⁹, then we still have the practical problem of coping with pain and suffering, but we no longer have any "philosophical" problem.

Some people have allowed grim events to drive them away from God. One can only feel sympathy for Elie Wiesel who wrote about his first night in a Nazi concentration camp: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times more cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget these flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."²⁰

These are powerful and poignant words and we must hear them with sympathy and compassion. Can we hear them also with faith? If this life were all, if Hitler and his cronies "got away with it", if there is no greater and fuller picture, then it would be difficult to maintain faith in a divine purpose. It does make a great deal of difference, however, to view even such dreadful sufferings in an eternal context. The Author will one day bring all the threads together.

This is not to go down the road of "pie in the sky when we die" – as if people, especially downtrodden people, should simply be told that they must endure their trials in hope of a better life to come. Maybe

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, v.ii.10

¹⁹ Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 133

²⁰ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (London, Robson Books, 1974 edition), 43

that idea has been perpetrated sometimes, but it is a perversion of real Christianity. Real Christianity is about serving God in this world as well as looking for the “far better” (Philippians 1:23) life to come; in fact, it has often been pointed out that those who have been most sure of the life to come who have done most to improve life in this world. The Bible has no time for an attitude of complacent acceptance of injustice in this world; it calls for people to be committed to caring for others and seeking to alleviate the sufferings of others.

At the same time, however, it sets these sufferings in an eternal context, so that Paul can also say, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). He goes on to say that creation itself waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

When we think of our sufferings in this world, it makes a great deal of difference to remember that this life is not all that there is, and that, even in this life, it is not our happiness that is God’s chief concern but our holiness, that is, our growth in Christ-likeness. And sometimes that growth comes about in times of trial. It was written of Hudson Taylor who founded the Mission known originally as the China Inland Mission that he found this principle to be true. “It was not until many years later, when Taylor could look back over all the way in which the Lord had led him, that he was impressed by the fact that every important advance in the development of the Mission had sprung from or been directly connected with times of sickness or suffering which had cast him in a special way upon God.”²¹

Obviously suffering and trials are not to be desired; Christianity has nothing to do with masochism. Yet one thing that is clear from Scripture and from subsequent experience is that, whatever happens, God has a plan that he is working out (Romans 8:28).

²¹ Dr & Mrs Howard Taylor, *Biography of James Hudson Taylor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), 337

We do not at present see the whole picture, but there is a picture, and the great thing is to learn to trust God here and now.

We have thought about Job who suffered so much. The end of the story tells of him saying, “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes sees you” (Job 42:5). He still couldn’t say “I see it all”, but he can say, “I see him” and that made all the difference.

It has been written, “God can use catastrophes to awaken people out of the great earth-dream that this present existence is everything. . . . anything that awakens us to that reality is a mercy, even if a severe mercy.”²²

Christians do not claim to have all the answers, but it is to be hoped that these pointers we have mentioned may help to demonstrate the credibility of Christianity even in a suffering world. We need to take account of the reliability of the laws of nature, the reality and consequences of human freedom, the limitations of our knowledge, the sufferings of Jesus Christ, the testimony of many who have found a stronger faith even through suffering and the eternal perspective within which our trials are to be seen.

One of Jesus’ disciples once put the question to Jesus, “Don’t you care?” They were in a little boat on a stormy sea and it appeared that Jesus was nonchalant. Later, however, that same Peter would encourage others, “Cast your cares on him, for he does care about you” (1 Peter 5:7).

*Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a brother’s eye;
Partaker of the human name,
He knows the frailty of our frame.*

*Our fellow-sufferer yet retains
A fellow-feeling of our pains;
And still remembers in the skies
His tears, His agonies and cries.*

In every pang that rends the heart

²² Dennis Lennon in *Encounter With God* (Scripture Union notes, 22 October 1994)

*The Man of sorrows had a part;
He sympathises with our grief
And to the sufferer sends relief.*²³

(This article was written by David J Randall, Locum Minister at Grace Church, Dundee. A shorter version is available at: <http://www.godsearchscotland.org.uk/bigissues/suffer.htm> - the transcript of a talk on the CD Facing the Issues)

²³ Hymn Where high the heavenly temple stands by Michael Bruce (1746-87); Scottish Paraphrases 58

Appendix

Interviewing Job

Interviewer: Job, your story comes from long ago and from a world very different from the world of the twenty-first century. Why should we pay any attention to it now?

Job: Although my story is ancient, it's also contemporary. The world may have changed but the issues people face in life haven't?

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Job: Human beings are still born in the same way, find joy in the same life-experiences, struggle with suffering in many forms, and then die in the same way as people have always done.

Interviewer: Yes, but people now know so much more about life, the universe and everything than people did in your day. By the way, when was your day?

Job: People have expressed different views about when I lived – and even whether I was a real person! – but such issues don't really matter.

Interviewer: Why not?

Job: Because, as I say again, the experiences and problems that affected me affect people still. People still have to find ways of coping with life and especially with the hard experiences of life.

Interviewer: Were you ever tempted to deny God's existence?

Job: Not really. My dilemma was that of trying to understand how a loving God could allow so many disasters to come into my life.

Interviewer: We heard that your wife urged you to give up believing.

Job: Yes, she saw my suffering and concluded that I would be better to curse God and then give up.

Interviewer: How did you react to that?

Job: I didn't accept her advice! I believed that God is God and that we human beings have to accept whatever comes from His hand. That means maintaining faith even when everything seems to point away from God's existence.

Interviewer Can you tell us – briefly – what happened to you.

Job You can read it in the book! But briefly: I was living a happy and prosperous life for many years. My wife and I had ten children, and we owned large herds of livestock. I suppose I would have been one of the richest men of my time. But one calamity after another saw me lose it all. And then one day a messenger came to tell me that our family had been wiped out. They were sharing a meal at our oldest son's house when a tornado hit the house, and the house collapsed. All of them were killed.

Interviewer Yet still you maintained faith in God?

Job: I believed that the Lord who had given me so much could also take things away from me.

Interviewer: You weren't tempted to give up on God?

Job: No, but more trouble was to come. My health gave way. I was troubled with festering sores all over my body. They were agonising; I remember sitting with a bit of pottery scratching at these wretched sores – which only made them worse. I had scabs and boils which became infected so that I had fever, I lost weight and experienced daily insistent pain that was unrelieved (no ibuprofen then). People found my appearance repulsive and it came to the point where I cursed the day of my birth. I felt it would have been better never to have been born than to experience all of that suffering and pain.

Interviewer: What about the famous "Job's comforters"? Didn't they help you?

Job: Not really. To begin with, they came and sat with me in silence. That was the most helpful thing they did for me! But then they started, day after day, to insist that I must have done some wicked things to deserve such sufferings. That was their message: I needed to repent of wrong-doing and then God would remove my sufferings.

Interviewer: So what did you make of their advice?

Job: Well, I never claimed to be perfect. I'm a sinner like other human beings, and of course I need to repent of my sin before God, but I couldn't accept their simple equation.

Interviewer: But doesn't the Bible say that devotion to God and obedience do lead to joy and true blessedness? And doesn't it say that wrong-doing won't go unpunished?

Job: Yes, it does, but that doesn't mean that all suffering is a punishment for sin. I accept that if I rebel against the ways of God there will be consequences. That's written large in history for individuals, societies and nations. But it doesn't follow that all suffering is the direct result of some sin or other.

Interviewer: Yet they kept hammering away at this theory day after day.

Job: Yes, they hammered me with it. There were days when I wanted to die. I even prayed that God would end my life. And all the while these friends tried to wear me down with their suggestion that I **MUST** have done something wicked and needed to repent.

Interviewer: So what do you say to people who maintain that you can't believe in God when there is so much suffering and pain in the world? How do you explain it all?

Job: I can't explain it all. There are questions and mysteries that remain with me and I do believe that one day God will explain the reason why. But it makes more sense to believe in God even with these unanswered questions than it does to deny His existence.

Interviewer: And what about that famous word of yours about the Redeemer.

Job: Yes, I became more and more sure that God would vindicate me. I didn't mean that he would argue that I was a perfect human being. I know my faults and sins, but I believed that there would come a day when God would take action to demonstrate His love for the world. I was sure that my Redeemer was alive and would act.

Interviewer: And He did!

Job: Yes, in the fulness of the times He came, and what to me was a future hope became a historical reality.

Interviewer: And what about your own faith? Were you eventually worn down into unbelief?

Job: On the contrary, I found that my experiences led me to a greater belief – or belief in a greater God – than I had previously imagined. When I was prosperous and healthy, I believed in God, but, looking back, maybe it was a kind of inherited faith. Through my experiences I came to a more clear-sighted view of Him. It was as if I could now see Him clearly.

Interviewer: So what's your message for people today who suffer?

Job: Trust in God even in the darkness. We don't need to know all the answers before we can trust in God. If people don't believe in God, then suffering is still real but the "problem" of suffering doesn't really arise. It's when we trust in a God of love and goodness that we face these difficult questions.

Interviewer: It's recorded that you once said, "Even if he should slay me, I will still hope in him". What did you mean?

Job: Another time I suggested to my wife that if we accept good things from the hand of God, we should be prepared to accept trouble also if He allows that to come to us. I believe in the principle stated by someone else that even when people do wicked things to hurt people, God has plans to bless them. It's all about the nature of the God we believe in.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Job: That God doesn't just exist to please us. He has his plans and doesn't always explain them to us. And eventually the Redeemer I spoke about would work out that plan through terrible rejection and suffering.

Interviewer: You're talking about Jesus and the cross.

Job: Yes, that cross tells us that God has acted for the salvation of the world, and it also tells us that God has plumbed the depths of suffering himself. It means He knows, He understands, He sympathises. And that makes all the difference.

Interviewer: So, you'd encourage people to continue trusting even in times of darkness?

Job: Yes, because even in the darkness light shines and the darkness will never be able to overcome his light.
