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KEY NINE: THEODICY

How do I make sense of the suffering in my life?

*It is exceedingly strange that ... it has been so little weighed or understood by the generality of Christians, especially considering that it is not a matter of mere curiosity but a truth of the deepest importance.
—John Wesley (1703-91)¹*

For the creation was given over to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the choice of the One who gave it over, in hope ... (Romans 8:20)

LYNETTE LEARNS TO LOVE

On the day she was baptized, Lynette had a massive hill to climb. She married her husband Rod years prior in an act of youthful rebellion. He was almost 15 years her senior, and once the initial rush was over they realized that they had very little in common. He owned a liquor store and raced cars, and she worked at the local hospital. Their life together became one of loveless coexistence, merely tolerating each other. He was cold and rude and had little interest in her.

¹ From Wesley's Sermon titled, "God's Love to Fallen Man," based on Romans 5:15.

After Lynette surrendered to the Lord, she realized that He was calling her to do something radical—to love Rod and to honor him. Over the years she had grown to resent him. Love seemed almost impossible to her, but she prayed diligently, *Lord teach me to love him like You love him.*

Then came the trial—Rod was diagnosed with brain cancer. At first, it was just trips to the doctor, but it wasn't long before Lynette was required to serve Rod in the most humbling ways. Somewhere along the line, during the strain, confusion, and inconvenience, Lynette realized that her prayers were being answered—she was beginning to truly love and honor this difficult man. New compassion began growing inside of her, and serving him became a joy.

As the disease rapidly progressed, she became deeply burdened for his salvation and found herself praying with tears that God would break his hard heart and bring him to repentance and faith. As things worsened, Rod didn't seem to change and showed no interest in the things of God. Lynette kept interceding, *Open his eyes, Lord! Reveal Yourself to him!* Again and again, she tried to get him to come to church, but he would just brush her off.

Then one night, the strangest thing happened. Out of the clear blue, Rod said he wanted to go to church. Lynette was taken aback. Even more amazingly, during the service Rod went forward to take communion. Our entire church watched in awe. Then one of the younger church members boldly walked up to Rod and asked him if he wanted to give his life to Jesus. He said, *Yes.* I had the amazing privilege of explaining the gospel to him and leading him into the kingdom that night. That was the very last time Rod ever walked out of his house on his own strength. Though he was fading quickly and the tumor was taking its toll, Rod had

clearly changed. He died at home, passing from this life as Lynette lay beside him in bed, singing hymns to him.

If you were to ask Lynette if anything good came out of that brutal trial, she could talk for hours. She went deep into God's Word and learned things she had never seen before in that trial. She learned how to pray with tenacious faith in that trial. She experienced the love of God's people in that trial. And because of that trial, Lynette can now look forward to seeing the man she learned how to love in eternity. One of the best things of all, at least from God's perspective, is that because of that trial, Lynette became a lot more like Jesus. God didn't cause all the suffering and pain, but He used it to serve His highest purposes for Lynette and Rod ... just like He promised.²

God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. (Romans 8:28-29)

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

Warning: Countless Christians have not taken caution and have been crippled or destroyed by the issue we are addressing here—*How do we make sense of the evil and suffering in this world*. We need to begin prayerfully, with humility, fear, and trembling. We are attempting to plumb

² Since this book was written, our good friend Lynette moved to our new town, joined The Refuge Fellowship, and now oversees our women's discipleship house. She also recently joined the board of our international ministry, which helps Christians in developing countries with spiritual and economic development. (See her testimony on the "Refuge Narratives" channel on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/wntoOT-ErGQ>)

the depths of the deepest sea here—*the mind of God*. We must not crash boldly in where angels fear to tread. Human reasoning can lead to tragedy, and WE NEED DIVINE GUIDANCE.

Making sense of God's goodness in the face of suffering and evil (*theodicy*) is one of the great mysteries of human existence. It has strained the brains of the greatest thinkers down through the ages. Pretty much everyone who is anyone in intellectual history has taken a crack at it. But again, we need to be very careful when pondering the question, *Why does God allow suffering?* This is one of those places where Satan and his demons sit, licking their chops, ready to fill your mind with lies. Warning: One misstep here can totally, utterly shipwreck you.

Before proceeding further, it would be wise to visit the Scripture that hits this problem head-on—the oldest book in our Bible, *Job*. There we read about a suffering man trying to make sense of life as wave after wave of excruciating trials crash over him—*the death of loved ones, poverty, sickness, rejection*. The longer Job's season of suffering lags on the more frustrated he becomes, until he is just shouting in anger at the sky. God finally can't take anymore, breaks in, and tells Job that he doesn't have a clue about what is happening to him. *Who is this who obscures My counsel with ignorant words? (Job 38:2)*

God then asks Job several chapters' worth of questions to try and bring him back to his senses (*Job 38-41*). To paraphrase, God asks Job things like, *Do you know the aerodynamics of a hawk? Do you understand the laws of gravity? Do you know how I hold the stars in the sky? Do you know the gestation cycle of a mountain goat?* God's clear implication is this—*Job, if you don't know such basic*

things about creation, why in heaven's name do you assume you understand My ways, the "how and why" of My universe? Job then does the wise thing—he humbles himself, admits he knows next to nothing, and asks God to speak: I will ask You, and You instruct me (Job 42:4).

Like Job, we need to start by acknowledging that our incredibly limited human brains cannot encompass the infinite sea. God does have satisfying answers for the great questions, but we need to come to Him humbly, like a helpless child, to get them. It is a mistake of cosmic proportions to be hasty when approaching such things, or to blindly embrace some answer from popular culture (or even uncritically swallow what our favorite pastor has to say). If there is an answer to be had to this mystery, it must come to us *through His Spirit and His Word.*

Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, nor has even entered into the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him. But to us, He has revealed them through the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

THE INNER SANCTUM OF GOD'S MIND

In the New Testament, the problem of evil and suffering is dealt with extensively in the book of *Romans*, particularly in the eighth chapter. Whenever I contemplate this section of Scripture, I feel a sense of awe, as if I am entering into the inner sanctum, the holy of holies. Here we are told that this world is full of suffering, and yes, God allowed it. But we are also told that God had a very good reason for doing this. *The creation was given over to frustration ... in hope (Romans 8:20).*

In the following pages, I will try to break some of this down as I have come to understand it. I know that some very

good people will disagree with me on points. Still, my view has allowed me to keep intact a vibrant faith in an all-powerful, all-loving God in the midst of a world where children suffer, natural disasters strike, and young women like Lynette lose their husbands to cancer. This chapter may seem a bit more difficult and heady than some of the others, but I believe sorting through this question is really a must for every serious Christian.

Anyone familiar with the massive literature on the problem of evil will soon recognize that I am appealing (in part) to one of the most common theodicies out there, often called a *free-will theodicy*. Countless great minds have argued along these lines. Christian thinkers from Augustine (354-430) to C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) to contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932) have believed that God-given *free will* is the primary way to make sense of God's goodness in the face of a universe full of suffering.³ I agree, but what I am arguing does not stop there. I will also appeal to another sort of theodicy, often referred to as a *soul-building theodicy*. The soul-building theodicy holds that ultimately God allows suffering because it facilitates growth in us and fulfills God's intended purpose for creating us.

Romans 8 blends together aspects of both the free-will theodicy and the soul-building theodicy. In short, suffering is the by-product of our sin, which comes from an abuse of free will. God allows this because suffering serves as the crucible where we, His image-bearers, can reach our fullest potential. All this may be a little confusing to the uninitiated,

³ C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (United Kingdom: The Centenary Press, 1940) is a very helpful introduction to this view. Alvin Plantinga's landmark work *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) is written for philosophers, but (quite frankly) virtually impossible for non-philosophers to hang with.

but it will be well worth the effort to soldier on through it. The following will consider, point by point, how the apostle Paul dealt with the issue.

WHERE DOES SUFFERING COME FROM?

The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself would be set free from its slavery to corruption, into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:20-21)

In a moment, we will be looking at how God uses suffering to shape us and conform us to His image. But first, where does it come from? It is clear from Scripture that God uses suffering, but does He cause it? If we use Jesus as our lens for understanding the Father, as the Bible tells us to (*John 14:8-9*), is there any indication that Jesus was into causing suffering and pain in people's lives? *NO!* The same thing can be said of His Father—He doesn't cause it or create it ... but He does use it. So we are left with the question of just where did the horrors of this world—cancer, babies dying, tsunamis, famines, etc.—come from?

The biblical answer is quite simple and all-inclusive—SIN. A careful study of Scripture reveals that virtually all the suffering on our planet is simply a byproduct of sin. Whenever we do something in violation of God's will, it's like we sow a terrible seed, and the inevitable result will be corruption, suffering, and ultimately death. *Don't be deceived ... whatever a man sows, he will reap (Galatians 6:7)*. The earth was pristine and perfect until sin. There was no cancer, poverty, or even death until sin. So God doesn't cause suffering, pain, mayhem, and death. We did ... and do.

Just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

Each one is tempted when he is enticed and carried away by his own desires, and when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived. (James 1:14-16)

Of course, this does not mean that every time you suffer, it's because of some sin you just committed. It's way more complicated than that. Often you and I are just happily walking through life and—*WHAM!*—we stumble smack into chaos that someone else created. Your suffering today could have its origin in something someone else did decades, centuries, or even millennia ago. The fact is that we simply live in a world full of fire, full of suffering—some of it caused by us, much of it caused by others.

Why doesn't God just smash in and keep all the consequences of human sin—all the suffering—from taking place? Why doesn't He run around with a magic wand erasing all the negative consequences of our stupid, selfish, sinful human choices? I don't have all the answers, but for one thing—if God did this, then sin wouldn't really make any sense to us. We wouldn't think it was such a bad thing. The fact is that every sin carries destruction and death with it. Sinful actions by their very nature ruin the goodness of God's creation. This is what makes them sinful.

What benefit were you deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed (sin)? For the outcome of those things is death. (Romans 6:21)

What is clear is that God gave us a real choice—the ability to love and obey Him, as well as the ability to reject and disobey Him. He also determined that as a rule, He would allow us to experience the consequences of both. He chose to let evil decisions run their natural course—destruction and death—resulting in a world full of suffering and pain. We may not like it, but AS A RULE, GOD LETS THE PROCESS PLAY OUT. In the lives of those who don't love Him, the fire of suffering may have no good outcome at all. But for those of us who love Him, He uses this fire for a glorious purpose. *(It is worth reminding the reader that we are not left completely helpless down here. God's kids do have the powerful weapon of prayer to change outcomes, but that is the subject of another chapter.)*

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Whom God foreknew He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. (Romans 8:29)

To make a little more sense of the issue of suffering, it is helpful to consider why God created us in the first place. God had something in mind when He made us, and it doesn't take a Bible scholar to figure out what it was. He made us to be like Him (in a limited way).

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ..." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Theologians have let loose an ocean of ink trying to explain just what the image of God (the *imago dei*) is, but allow me to narrow it down to a few very obvious things that

the Bible emphasizes. The image of God in us has a lot to do with certain capacities or abilities that God has given to human beings—things that separate us from all the creatures around us. What are some things that we have that other living things (orangutans and amoebas) don't possess? The most obvious answer would be these three—*intellect, emotion, and will*. We possess these capacities way beyond anything other creatures on earth do.

Someone might be quick to answer that certain animals, like their dog Fluffy, clearly seem to have intellect, emotion, and will. But seriously, if a human being had Fluffy's mind, emotion, and will, they would be living in a special facility under 24-hour care. Your dog can't count to two, has no moral compass, and if you died today, tomorrow she would be chasing squirrels as if nothing happened. Even the most intelligent animals, like dolphins, elephants, or chimps, obviously do not even come close to matching the metacognitive functions of a human.

But we need to take this idea a little bit further. The Bible also clearly seems to refer to the image of God in a more exalted sense. It's not just about having mind, emotion, and will, it's about using these gifts properly, like God does. We might call this *the realized or mature image of God*. (The perfect example of this, of course, is seen in the life of Jesus Christ.) This means that in one sense, we can say that every person on earth, bad or good, bears the image of God, because they have intellect, emotion, and will. But, in a more exalted sense, the image of God refers to the use of those abilities as God intended. The reason God created us was so that we (His image-bearers) would learn to function the way He functions; this is the mature, or developed image of God. Basically, God created us to share His *modus operandi*.

SHARING GOD'S *MODUS OPERANDI*

The last chapter of this book is largely devoted to the most foundational description of God in the entire Bible, *Compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in kindness and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6)*.⁴ These are God's definitive words about Himself, spoken directly to Moses, and repeated down through biblical history by prophets, poets, and apostles. If we were created to bear His image ... well, you can do the math. This is the divine *m.o.* This is what the Father is like, this is what Jesus Christ is like, and this is what we, His image-bearers, were created to be.

The Bible could not be much clearer about all this. Again, *Exodus 34:6* is God's *modus operandi*, and it's supposed to be our *modus operandi*, too. This truth is stated dozens of times in dozens of different ways. The apostle Paul could not have been much clearer. According to him, what does the fulfilled or mature image of God in us look like?

And put on the new self, who is being remade according to the image of the One who created him ... therefore put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. (Col. 3:10-12)

This is what Jesus was telling us in the parable of the Good Samaritan—like God, let *compassion* motivate you to extravagant *kindness (Luke 10:30-37)*. This is why we were created, and this is why we were recreated in Christ (2 *Corinthians 5:17*). But now the question arises, how does God move us from potential to actualization? From simply

⁴ This foundational description of God was first spoken directly to Moses and subsequently repeated and alluded to dozens of times by the biblical authors (e.g., *Numbers 14:17-19; Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2*, et. al.)

having *intellect, emotion, and will*, to using these gifts as God intended? Pay close attention here because this is precisely the point where suffering and evil come into play. God needed a plan, a process, and a place to get His work in our souls done. According to *Romans 8*, this is precisely why He placed us in this world full of suffering.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE ... THROUGH SUFFERING AND TRIALS

We are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ if we suffer with Him, in order that we might be glorified with Him. (Romans 8:17)

In the Bible, suffering is often compared to fire, and it is this fire of suffering that forges us, forms us, and matures us. It takes us from our potential as image-bearers (*mind, emotion, and will*) to our fulfillment as image-bearers (*Exodus 34:6*). Suffering is the thing that God uses to move us from ignorant, selfish, and useless, to what God wants us to be—*compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and great in kindness and faithfulness*.

The idea that suffering is the place where God perfects us, matures us, and grows us is such a dominant theme in Scripture, if we miss it we are just not reading our Bibles. Here is a sample from several biblical authors:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance, proven character, and proven character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. So let endurance have its

perfect result so that you may be perfect and complete, not lacking in anything. (James 1:2-4)

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. (1 Peter 5:10)

What is it about suffering that makes it such a good place for spiritual growth and maturity to happen? If we lived in a world with no suffering, we would all just sit around sipping lattes and playing on our smartphones. The truth is that we are just plain lazy. Because of the sort of beings we are, we tend to grow only when compelled to—by fire. Test this out for yourself. Look at the lives of the greatest saints in history. Where did God forge His image in them? Suffering! Go talk with the godliest, most useful Christian in your life, and ask them how they got that way.

It's in the midst of suffering that we desperately cry out to God with prayer and fasting, and that's when He reveals life-transforming truths to us. In the fire of affliction we ransack our Bibles, we burn the midnight oil seeking, and we plead for wisdom and grace. It's there, in the midst of suffering, that we are most profoundly *transformed through the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2)*.

You learn that God is a provider when you are suffering because of lack. You learn that God is a comforter when you are in pain. You learn He is a mighty warrior when your enemies are too powerful for you. You learn that God can give you peace of mind when you seek Him in the midst of confusion and chaos. The fact is that suffering is one of God's great transformative tools. Even Jesus Himself, as a man, *was perfected through the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8-9)*.

HOW TO MAKE TRIALS WORK FOR YOU

The Bible does not say, *All things work together for the good of anyone and everyone*. It says, *All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28)*. This means that you have to trust Him and participate with Him in the fire. It is not inevitable that our suffering and trials will produce Christlikeness in us. In many Christians, they produce brokenness and bitterness (see the warning in *Hebrews 12*). This is because, like every other spiritual blessing we can experience, we must *believe/have faith* in what God has said. If we believe that He will turn all of our sufferings into glory, He will. If we don't believe, there will be no glory.

We began this chapter with the story of Lynette, who found herself in a failing marriage with her husband dying of cancer. Lynette chose to submit herself to God, and she chose to allow God to use her trials for His glory. From our perspective, we could say that Lynette's choice to cooperate with God in faith freed up God to turn her suffering into blessing. Did God put her in a bad marriage? No, she did that herself. Did God create the cancer that was destroying her husband? No, that sort of thing just happens to us as a part of living in a cursed creation—cursed because of original sin.

Lynette could have done what so many people do—whine and complain, blame God and slump into self-pity. Instead, she pressed into the Word and learned that if she would invite God into the situation, He would supernaturally transform it. In my opinion, this is one of the most amazing abilities of God—the way He can take anything, absolutely anything, that is humbly given to Him, and bring glory out of it. But we need to give up our bitterness and blame,

humbly hand Him all our pain, and believe He will do what He has promised: *Work all things together for good.*

A pastor friend once rightly said, *Everyone on earth is in one of two places—they are either in a trial or headed for a trial.* So the next time you find yourself suffering, in small ways or great ways, whether you caused it or someone else did, remember what God's Word tells you—God wants to use it to conform you to His image and bring blessings into your life. This becomes one of the most powerful survival tools we have on this side of heaven.

When He created this world, God knew that His little image-bearers (us) would unleash evil, mayhem, suffering, and death by the misuse of our gifts. Before He set the universe in motion, He had a plan. He knew what He was going to do with the mess we would create. He would make it all serve His purposes. He would use the byproduct of our sin—all the pain and suffering on earth—to become the fire that forges us more perfectly into His image. *Whom He foreknew He predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).* When we really begin to get this, we can see the unfathomable love of God behind it all, and we can say with the apostle:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... But in all these things, we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from God's love, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)