

Making Sense Out of Suffering



Making Sense Out of Suffering

Study on the book by Peter Kreeft

“Evil is the absence of a good that ought to be there”

The Problem

- How can an all-powerful and all-loving God allow his innocent children to suffer? This is the crux of the problem; not just suffering but the scandal of suffering in a God-made and God-ruled universe.
 - God is part of the solution, but he starts out being part of the problem.
 - There is no neat set of answers. It is an account of a real, honest and personal lived journey to explore life’s darkest cave. We cannot solve this mystery of suffering, but only provide some light . . . a few answers to live by.
 - There is no expectation for you to agree with all that I will say throughout this journey . . . only to come along.
 - Like Job of the Bible, we have all wrestled with God about suffering . . . maybe not to the extent that he did. We will journey through the process of suffering as well as the results of this wrestling match. In the end we will realize we lose this wrestling match with God, but that is, ironically, the only way to win!¹
- The answers for making sense out of suffering come from 5 sources:²
 1. Experience
 2. Traditions
 3. Reason
 4. Imagination
 5. Faith

¹ Pg. 17, 18. “Making Sense Out of Suffering”. Peter Kreeft.

² Pg. 19

- Three basic types of evil³
 - Suffering - Disharmony or alienation between **ourselves** as embodied creatures and something in this physical **world**.
 - Death - Disharmony or separation between the **soul** and the **body**.
 - Sin - Disharmony between the **soul** and **God**.

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Ten Easy Answers to the Mystery of Evil

- The 10 answers the world gives are irrational and do not solve the problem when it hurts and where it starts - in the **gut** and the **heart**. These are answers the world gives to explain the mystery of suffering. It starts with . . .
- The Apparent Inconsistencies Among Four Propositions ⁴
 - A. God Exists
 - B. God is all-powerful
 - C. God is all-good
 - D. Evil exists
- The denials of God
 - A. Denials of God's reality
 - Atheism: No God
 - Demythologism: the fairy tale God - e.g. The Jesus Seminar
 - Psychologism: the subjective God - e.g. Relativism

³ Pg. 24

⁴ Pg. 29

B. Denials of God's power

- Old (polytheistic) Paganism: many Gods
- New (scientific) Paganism: naturalistic God - e.g. Scientism
- Dualism: two Gods (one good and one evil) - Zoroastrianism

C. Denials of God's goodness

- Satanism: the bad God
- Pantheism: the blob God
- Deism: the snob God - God is removed from his creation

D. Denial of evil

- Idealism - e.g. Christian Scientist, Buddhism - Evil only a subjective feeling in the observer rather than real qualities of actions and character.

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The Problem

- Job's question, "Why do the righteous suffer"? is answered by God with a question:
 - Who do you think you are, anyway? Why do you assume you can know the answer to that question? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Are you your own creator and designer? (Job 40:42ff)
- Job presupposes that he can know the answer. His question is a problem to be solved rather than a mystery.⁵

Evil is a Mystery not a Problem - Understanding Mystery

⁵ Pg. 48

1. A problem is solvable, but a mystery is not
2. Mystery concerns seeing, contemplating, insight - it is the 1st act of the mind. Problems concern solving, defining through reasoning - the 3rd act of the mind. (The second act of the mind is propositions, "this is either true or false".
3. Mystery is a question whose object is the questioner, a question we can't be detached from and objective because we are always personally involved (e.g. falling in love is a mystery . . . getting to Mars is a problem)
 - Evil is a mystery because we are in it. That's why we can't solve it.
4. Mysteries of faith are truths we couldn't possibly come to know by our own reason and experience but which God has revealed to us (e.g. The Trinity).⁶
 - Is the universe like the relationship between the storyteller (God) and the characters (ourselves) or is the universe a meaningless darkness with little artificial theaters that we light up with little artificial lights (our reasons) and put on little artificial plays (our lives) whose meaning is assigned by their sole authors (ourselves)?
 - Science asks, "**What** is there and **how** does it work"?
 - Philosophy asks "**Why**"?
 - Religion asks, "**Who** is there? **Who** is the author"? This is what we really long to know.

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Seven Clues from Philosophers

- Truth has an abstract aspect, but truth is not a concept. Truth is reality.
1. Socrates - Intellectual Humility⁷

⁶ Pg. 50

⁷ Dogmatism is intellectual pride (thinking you have all the answers). Skepticism is intellectual despair (believing there are no answers). Neither of these question. (pg. 58)

- There are 2 kinds of people: The wise who know they are fools and fools who think they are wise.
- All that we understand with regard to the meaning of suffering depends on intellectual humility.
- Job's implicit question: *Is my suffering worth it?* Only the author of the story knows the answer and the meaning of man. (pg. 59)

2. Plato - No Evil Can Happen to a Good Man

- My essence is not this physical body, but my soul. I am a person, a spirit, an "I", a self, a personality.
- The only person that can harm my real self is me.
- The soul cannot be harmed by hurting the body unless it lets it be hurt. Bad things can just happen to my body but not to my soul. We are tempted to anger by being physically hurt, but we don't have to succumb.

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3. Aristotle - Happiness Is Not A Feeling

- The most important question of all is the question of the greatest good. What is the ultimate end? What is the purpose of human life?
- Aristotle's answer to this question is happiness. Happiness is the end of life. Everyone always pursues, desires, and seeks everything else for happiness.⁸
- In Greek, happiness literally means "good soul" or "good spirit". Happiness is an objective state not a subjective feeling. To be happy is to be good. Happiness is goodness.

⁸ Pg. 64

- The issue at hand is the most important question in the world. What is our end? What is the greatest good? What gives meaning to our lives?
 - Modernity answers, “feeling good”. The ancients say, “being good”.
 - Feeling good is not compatible with suffering. Being good is.
- Suffering does not refute belief in a good God because a good God might sacrifice our **subjective happiness** for our **objective happiness**.⁹

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4. Boethius - All Fortune Is Good Fortune

- Point 1 - from Experience
 - He states that that bad fortune is better for us than good fortune. Bad fortune teaches while good fortune deceives.
 - When we foolishly put our hope in worldly happiness and it is then taken from us, our foolishness is also taken away and brings us closer to true happiness. (This assumes the honest mind realizes that we need truth more than comfort).
- Point 2 - from Principles
 - The skeptic concludes that all suffering is bad and therefore there is no all-powerful, all-good God in charge of this world.
 - Boethius concludes that there is such a God and thus not all suffering is bad. (Rom 8:28 “All things work together for good to those who love God”).
 - If the skeptic is sure all suffering is bad, then he has never learned from suffering.¹⁰

5. Freud (atheist) - The Life-Wish vs. the Death-Wish

⁹ Pg. 65
¹⁰ Pg. 66

- According to Freud we have **eros**, life wish, that flows from the pleasure principle even at the expense of suffering.
 - He said everyone needs love and work and both involve suffering (Eros). Suffering is not the worst evil if it is at the service of eros.
- We also have **thanatos**, the death wish.
 - This accounts for aggression. We resent life for birthing us into pain and we take our vengeance on life by destruction.

6. Marcel (existentialist) - Hope

- Gabriel Marcel - The denial of death is to see a deep truth that there are things stronger than death, such as life, love and meaning. The alternative is utter despair.
- The alternative, hope, says that beyond death and suffering there is life and joy - the point of everything. And thus the point of suffering, too, is life and joy.
- Beyond suffering and death there is a hope of a new birth. It is not proven to be true by believing in hope, but no one has ever proved it to be false, either. ¹¹

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7. C.S. Lewis - The Principle of First and Second Things

- Things have different values, some greater than others.
- It never works to put lesser things before greater one. Values are as objective as math. It never works to consider a smaller number as more than a greater number, no matter how clever you get.
- We are creatures of both body and soul, with the soul being the greater of the two.
 - If the soul is greater in value than the body, then the good of the soul is greater than the good of the body and the evil of the soul is greater than the evil of the

¹¹ Pg. 69-70

body.

- The good of the body is health, pleasure, freedom from suffering. The good of the soul is wisdom and virtue. If we need to suffer to become wise, sacrifice some pleasure to be virtuous or if an easy life would make us less virtuous, then suffering would not contradict a good God.
 - God may use suffering to train us, sacrificing the lesser good for the greater good.
- Why do we have to suffer to attain a spiritual good? Why can't we learn wisdom and virtue without suffering?
- Because we are fallen creatures and sin has made us stupid so we can only learn the hard way.¹²
- Why do people like Job, who apparently don't need suffering to attain wisdom and virtue, suffer?

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Seven Clues from the Artists¹³

1. Clue One: Children's Stories - Suffering Makes You Real

- "Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. . . When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt" (The Velveteen Rabbit).
- "When we take responsibility ("taming") for a thing, we give it a new, second life, a realer life, a life as part of our own." (The Little Prince)

¹² Pg. 72

¹³ Pg. 75

- The thing becomes a part of our life, as we can become part of God's when we let him do the same to us. Perhaps we suffer so much because God loves us so much and is "taming" us.
- Perhaps we don't understand the reason we suffer because we are the object of a love (or a lover) we don't understand. Perhaps we are becoming more real by sharing in the sufferings of God as part of Christ's work on earth. (Col 1:24)

2. Clue Two: Fairy Tales - Good Stories Need Monsters and Mystery

- Question #1 - Which story would you write?
 - Story #1 - The princess is under a curse and is asleep and cannot be awakened. An apple in the garden at the Western End of the World can save her. The King summons a well-run, no risk operation. Gets the map, sends his generals, gets the apple and applies it to the princess. She awakens, eats and lives happily until she dies at the age of 82. A serious, responsible, respectable: no freedom, no risks; just a smooth, obedient show.

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- Story #2 - *The Third Peacock* by Robert Farrar Capon. (Much struggling and many monsters)¹⁴
 - Question #2 - Which story do you want to be in? One with or without meaning?
 - The second one makes a much better story. Isn't it true that what we want and need and demand in our lives is to be in a good, a great and meaningful story? (Think about what you desire in your life.)
 - But why does a story need suffering to be meaningful? Why not meaning without suffering? Meaning without suffering is like story #1. (this is difficult to understand, but remember we are at the "clue" stage. These are clues not answers.)

¹⁴ Pg. 79

- Let's look at our life:
 - Before we were born, we were in a nice and comfortable environment in our mother's womb.
 - If someone showed us a script of our lives, the trauma of birth, growing up, the disappointed love, suffering, sadness, all the tragedies of your life, all the weeping and wondering, all the monsters and mystery, would you have chosen to be born? Would you choose total security to total insecurity? Probably not.
 - How fortunate that we were not consulted before we were born. None of us would be here if we were consulted. Thank God for forcing us into a world of suffering against our will! How can we say that . . . to thank God for forcing us into suffering?
 - We, in a sense, have said that by not having committed suicide. In the middle of our story, which is our life, are you glad you are in it? You have answered yes by choosing to stay alive. You believe there are more pluses than minuses in your life.
 - Why do we make this strange choice to live?
 - "Love life more than the meaning of life, love life in spite of logic." (Ivan Karamazov)
 - Looking back at your life . . . was it all worth it? Do you accept it with all its suffering as a package deal? Or would you exchange it for a womb, not to have been born?

We are willing to accept suffering if we believe its has meaning. We don't have to understand its meaning.¹⁵ We walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)

- Why do we accept this life?
 - We anticipate the vision of eternity, the *eucatastrophe* that make the story of our whole life worth it. (Eucatastrophe is coined by J.R.R. Tolkien as a sudden turn of events at the end of the story to make sure the hero does not die - a happy ending.)
 - Some may say that justifying suffering by the happy ending sounds like hitting yourself on the head with a hammer because it feels so good when you stop. No. Joy is more than the relief of sorrow.

¹⁵ Pg. 86

- It takes the frame of darkness for us to realize the light. It takes the threat of death to make us appreciate life. We appreciate things only by contrast.

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- What about God? He does not need suffering to appreciate joy, so there can be joy without suffering. Yes, but we are not God. Why is it not possible with us?
 - In the Garden of Eden at the beginning, learning and growing was a joy. After sin entered, learning became painful, because learning meant submitting your mind to reality - yielding our self-will became painful. Self-yielding will be a joy again in heaven.
 - So did Adam and Eve need sin to have drama in heaven? How can you have drama without suffering? Would they have been bored, otherwise? No. There would still be drama without sin.
 - Drama isn't due to sin, or even necessarily due to suffering. Drama is good and there is drama in God. Only after sin did drama turn into tragedy. Only now do we need the contrast with suffering to understand happiness and joy. Our intellects are dark and we need the light.
 - Atrocities in this world cannot be justified, that is true. Only eternity will totally solve the problem. That is what the Bible gives us as a solution.
 - "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil." (St. Augustine)

3. Clue Three: The Myths - Paradise Lost

- Defining our terms: **Myth** means thinking in pictures rather than abstract concepts. It does not mean lie or even fiction. The Greek word "mythos" means story.

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- Certain things occur in all or nearly all of the world's myths:
 - Father Heaven, Mother Earth, sacred time and space, ritual language, initiation rites, a universal flood, the gods designing the world (creation is uniquely Jewish - the creation of all the universe out of nothing.) And one of the most persistent themes is the answer to the mystery of suffering.
 - What do myths and dreams (dreams are consistent with myth) say about the mysteries of suffering, death and injustice?
 - The answer is a myth, a mystery. That they all came about as a result of a fall or fault. ***We brought suffering into the world.*** A mystery-question is answered by a mystery-answer.
 - Why is this so unintelligible to the modern mind? Because we demand scientific answers and science knows nothing of how suffering entered the world.
 - Science has become like a religion. There is no scientific proof that only scientific proofs and methods are the only valid proofs and methods.
 - True, there is no physical evidence for the Garden of Eden, but we do have evidence from another source: *We feel* like exiled kings, fallen beings that have lost something we should have possessed.
 1. Pascal says that if man had never been corrupted, he would enjoy both truth and happiness. If man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea of either truth or happiness. But because we are unhappy, we have an idea of happiness and we cannot attain it. ¹⁶
 2. We seem to have fallen from paradise since we do not find this world enough; we are not content and have given up to suffering, injustice and death. If the only world our being ever remembered or knew was *here*, we would feel at home here, but we do not.
 - Remember, these are clues, not proofs of paradise lost, which we cannot ignore.

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¹⁶ Pg. 94

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- Paradise lost myth connects sin and suffering, sin and death. It explains suffering by:
 1. tracing it to a historical cause
 2. identifying the cause (we are the cause)
 3. seeing justice rather than injustice in suffering (it is a consequence for sin)
 - What the myth does not explain is the distribution of suffering to individuals. It is on the universal and general level, but we exist in this general level, too. WE have sinned and disobeyed.
 - We are orphaned children, separated lovers, disinherited princes, homeless wanderers like Gilgamesh, Ulysses and Aeneas. These heroes of old tell us who we are.

4. Clue Four: Greek Drama - Wisdom through Suffering

- For this lesson from Greek tragedy to be an answer to the mystery of suffering, it must be assumed that wisdom is very valuable - more valuable, in fact, than comfort or pleasure or freedom from suffering.
- Like Job, we can learn from our suffering. Like in our **fairy tale**, we admit that the suffering is worth it. Why is suffering worth it? Why is wisdom worth suffering for?
 - Because we are human beings with a mind, heart, soul, will, spirit and psyches. **Wisdom is food for our souls**. As a philosopher (lover of wisdom), we need to feed our souls with wisdom to survive.
 - Why do we need to suffer to gain wisdom? Why do we learn the hard way? Now enters the **paradise lost** story - through sin that we brought upon ourselves. The clues are beginning to fit together . . .

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5. Clue Five: Science Fiction - Freedom vs. Happiness

- The Anti-utopian Theme

- Futuristic society that has abolish suffering through technology, cured disease, abolished war and poverty, and sometimes even conquered death by artificial immortality. This world is so perfect, so boring, and so meaningless that suffering is something desired. Motherhood, childbirth, and families are regarded and seen as inefficient.
- Such a society is always a colossal fake. Apparently happy but experiencing deep failure. The abolition of suffering turns out to be the abolition of humanity. In order to remain human we need to suffer. What is missing in the stories is not just suffering but also the thing that makes suffering possible, **freedom**. Freedom is the thing that makes suffering meaningful. BUT . . . freedom is both the source and the solution to suffering.
- The choice in these stories is between freedom and happiness. Everyone wants both but the two are always in tension and often in contradiction. These stories present the truth about suffering rather than explaining why suffering is needed.
- Which is more important, happiness or freedom? **Freedom**. We are fools if we put second things first. (remember our principle of first things first)
- It seems like everything that has intrinsic value, that cannot be bought, or negotiated goes with suffering. Love, freedom, truth, wisdom, knowledge of reality all seem to go with suffering.

6. Clue Six: Creative Artists - Birth Pangs

- To be an artist is to be a creator. Motherhood is the primary art, the art of creating(procreating) people.
- For whatever reason, creation involves suffering and the greatest creativity involves the greatest suffering.
- Everyone creates an internal work of art, a real-life story. Everyone also creates a character, a person: themselves. We shape our lives into who we are by our choices.
- Since everyone is an artist and artist must suffer, then everyone must suffer. Saints suffer the most because they are the greatest artists of all.

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7. Clue Seven: The Poets - Death as a Lover and Death as Birth

- The clue that we will find in these poets and mystics plunges us into the deepest and darkest kind of suffering— **Death**—and then sees a light in this very heart of darkness.
- Death is in a sense pure suffering, pure diminishment. But in the heart of death the visionary poet finds life and birth. To them death appears as a door not a hole. Death appears as a mother birthing us from a dim little world (this universe) into a world of unimagined splendors. Death becomes our passageway to life.
- There are over eight million people in America who have had a "near-death experience" and have shared this experience of life beyond death. They all insist that their words are utterly inadequate to explain what they have seen and experienced. They usually see a great light and feel totally at peace and totally loved.
 - If somehow all suffering were connected with this unimaginable life and love then that would make suffering infinitely worthwhile.¹⁷

Eight Clues from the Prophets

- The word prophet means "mouthpiece". We will look specifically at the Jewish prophets because they are specially certified by God. Their truth is authoritative and unmixed with falsehood. They are closer to God than the philosopher or artists because they have a more face-to-face relationship with God. Of the three divine attributes (true, the beautiful, and the good), they specialize in the central and primary one, **goodness**.

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¹⁷ Pg. 103

- The answers from the prophets are not close enough to the final answer. Their solution points to the future. (We will not assume the truth of the prophets words. This journey is undertaken as a thought-experiment. That is the nature of clues; they neither assume the truth of a conclusion, nor do they prove it, but they point to it and leave us free to follow or to turn aside.)¹⁸

1. Clue One: Moses - Who Started It?

- In the book of Genesis, we read the story of the origin of suffering. We learn that suffering entered into this world because of sin. It was a necessary consequence, like getting sick when you eat poison.
 - All three evils: **sin**, **death** and **suffering** are from us not from God. It is from our misuse of our free will and our disobedience.
 - Another clue is in Gen 3:15. God does not abandon us to our fate but immediately begins the long restoration process. He promises a Messiah who will destroy the power of evil at the cost of his own life. He will restore to human nature **spiritual life**, **eternal life** and a **life without suffering**.
- This Messiah (Jesus) came but apparently did not do away with death, sin or suffering. Is Jesus a failure then? No. He came to begin the battle against death, sin and suffering through his death and suffering, but it is not over. He is like a hero in a battle that takes time to win.
- When he returns the second time he will do away with all suffering and "will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4).

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2. Clue Two: Abraham - Faith Suffers

- The Jews come from Abraham and they began with God's divine Providence. They were **protected** by divine providence and their **purpose** was from divine providence. They were to be God's instrument to save the entire world from sin and death and suffering (Gen 12:2-3).

¹⁸ Pg. 106

- The Jews were not chosen for privilege but for suffering, but their suffering has a reason, a purpose. "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see a meaning in his life. That is why man is even ready to suffer on the condition that the suffering has a meaning."¹⁹
- God takes Abraham out of comfort and leads him into the darkness rather than into light. But God will never give up on Abraham. From him all the nations will be blessed eternally. He will be the father of the Savior of the world. It will be a salvation from suffering and death through suffering and death.

3. Clue Three: Samuel - Suffering Speeds History's Cycle

- Samuel is the historian of the Old Testament. Israel's history is written for all the world to see because it is like a mirror for the world. In this history we can see the principle that is at work in the history of all other nations. The first principle can be described in six stages:
 - 1) Suffering, 2) Repentance, 3) Blessedness, 4) Luxury, 5) Pride and 6) Disaster.²⁰
 - In history, suffering leads to repentance. We learn the hard way. As CS Lewis says, "God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pains. Pain is his megaphone to rouse a dulled world."
 - Repentance then leads to blessedness. We can never have blessedness without repentance. Blessedness does not last. We are fallen creatures; when we are not climbing to God, we are falling away from him. Our blessedness becomes luxury, self-indulgence, comfort and security.

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- Our blessedness turns into arrogance by saying, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." Luxury turns into pride and then into disaster. Israel's history is full of disaster, yet disaster and tragedy is not the end. What is the

¹⁹ Viktor Frankl. Quote from his time in a Nazi concentration camp.

²⁰ Pg. 111

answer? Suffering. Suffering's historical purpose in the history of Israel, in the world and in individuals is to lead us from disaster not to it.

- But not all suffering is punishment for sin. Not all suffering is deserved. Why does God allow good people to suffer so much? The prophets answer this question in two ways:
 - 1) even good people need repentance and the better they are the more they see and say this.
 - 2) the good suffer not only for themselves but for others. We will cover this mysterious idea of vicarious atonement later in our lesson.²¹

4. Clue Four: Jeremiah - There Are No Good People

- Jeremiah's answer to the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is that there are no "good people." The question should be, "Why do good things happen to bad people?" We are good people only by the standards of bad people. (Jer 6:13-14, 64:6)
 - Our generosity and goodness is mixed with self-interest. Our passion for justice is mixed with vengeance.
 - According to Jeremiah and all the prophets sin is not just bad actions committed by good people. Modern psychology will tell us that everyone is basically good. This is a false religion. Modern psychology has its own God: the **self**.
 - The Bible and Catholic theology tell us that this "**self**" is diseased, fallen, infected with sin as with a cancer. Sin is not just a few bad deeds but a chronic condition.
- The question is a "false question", like "Have you stopped beating your wife?" It assumes something that is simply false, In this case that we are good people.

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²¹ Pg. 114

- It is true, we are good because God didn't make junk and we bear his image and likeness, but this image has been defaced and distorted by sin. Ontologically we are good, but morally we are not. We are sinners.
- Sin (the disease) and salvation (the cure) are the two points of Christian doctrine. Suffering may be necessary for the cures. Look at your heart honestly and judge by God's standards, don't we find hatred, lust, greed and idolatry there to some extent?
- In a universe created and maintained by a loving God powerful enough to abolish all suffering and who wants our blessedness; the only reason serious enough to justify God's continued tolerance of suffering is our need for it. It reminds us we are not God.
 - Our suffering is compatible with God's love IF it is medicinal, remedial, and necessary. (i.e. If we are very sick.) See Matthew 9:12-13 - the sick need a doctor.
 - Suffering is scandalous to us today, because we no longer think we are morally sick. We need to be told we are not good people and our righteousness is as filthy rags (Is 64:6).

5. Clue 5: Hosea - Suffering Is a Note in a Love Song

- Hosea is commanded to marry a prostitute who was continually unfaithful to him. It was to show how this prostitute, like Israel, was an unfaithful wife to the God who loved her as a husband.
 - Because she was an unfaithful wife, he would make her like a wilderness and set her like a parched land and slay her with thirst. And he would have no pity on her children because they are children of harlotry. (see Hos 2:2-8)
- This doesn't sound very loving, but it is. He is making her suffer to win back his faithless bride. What seems at first to be an expression of God's wrath turns out to be an expression of God's love. When she returns he will take her back and make a covenant with her. He will abolish the sword and war from the land and will make her lie down in safety. And he will betroth her to himself forever in steadfast love and mercy. (Hos 2:9-10, 14-19)
- What we call the wrath of God is really the love of God as experienced by a fool. The wrath of God is the form His love takes when we fight it. God shines steadily with love, as the sun with light. God does not change. We do.

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- We have to remember that God is a person, a father. The father's love for his children often has to take the form of punishment. A father's punishment is not from hatred or for harm. It is from love and for good. (see Heb 12:5-10)
- In the love poem written in the book, *Song of Songs*, the bride (Israel/the Church) longs for union with her bridegroom (God). But the Bride attains this consummation only after going through the wilderness which is symbolic of suffering.
- Before that, she only longs for the touch of his love. He has to convince her to come out of hiding. She gives excuses for not responding immediately to his call. Only after she comes out of the wilderness does she (1) trust her beloved, (2) actually touch him and (3) consummate their love. Love is strengthened and perfected by suffering. True love needs to suffer and only true love can endure this suffering. Mere kindness to one another cannot endure suffering.²²

6. Clue Six: Joel - The Day of the Lord

- Joel speaks of a great future event which he calls "The day of the Lord." On this day the mystery of suffering, death and sin will be solved. Not just explained but removed.
- The four most important things the prophets say about the day of the Lord:
 - The solution will be God's not ours. We have tried to solve the most basic forms of human life and have failed. We have tamed the moon, but we have not tamed man.
 - The solution is in the future, therefore it is not yet. We are in a story and only the end of the story explains the rest of it.

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- Since the problem is real— real people really suffer, sin and die - therefore, the solution must be real. God must do something not just say something. His word must come into history.

²² Pg. 122

- Since "The day of the Lord" is future, it is therefore mysterious to us because we are not God and not yet at the end. "The day of the Lord" is of course the coming of Jesus. His three appearances, past, present and future, are the solution to the problem of evil.²³

7. Clue Seven: Isaiah - Messiah, Atonement and Resurrection

- Three clues that most clearly point to Jesus as the solution are from Isaiah.
 - First, the idea of the **Messiah**, or promised one. God's intervention in history will be the work of one man.
 - Second, the Messiah will make atonement, reconciliation between **man** and **God** by conquering sin; between **man** and **man** by conquering war; and between **man** and **nature** by conquering suffering. How? By suffering himself. "With his stripes we are healed" (Is 5:5). Vicarious atonement, the innocent suffering for the guilty, seems grossly unjust. We need to find sense, purpose and use for what seems to be the most useless thing in our lives, the sufferings of the innocent. It must do *someone* some good . . . we may never know. God can use even what seems like the waste of one life to fertilize another.²⁴
 - Third, Isaiah states that at some future time God will raise the dead. The most direct and simple answer to the problem of death is **resurrection**. Death is swallowed up in resurrection and sin in atonement. Then suffering will cease, but it will take some time. We are in a long story, after all.

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8. Clue Eight - John the Baptist - The Lamb of God

- John the Baptist is the greatest of all the prophets because he was to be the one to identify Jesus the Messiah.
- John summarizes the message of all the prophets – Repent – turn. That is, turn around and face God instead of running away from him.

²³ Pg. 123

²⁴ Pg. 125

- John points to God's definitive answer to the problem of suffering, the Lamb of God, who would solve the problem of suffering by suffering, who would solve the problem of death by dying and in doing so, transform the meaning of suffering and death.
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The Clues Converge: Jesus, the Tears of God

"Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or of our death, of God or of ourselves."²⁵

- We have finally reached home. We find at this point in time the answer, the only adequate answer, to our problem of man's suffering and God's silence. We are led not to the answer but to the source of the answer. As in Job, God ends his silence and speaks his word. Christ is the Word of God, the answer of God.
- All the clues we have heard converge to Christ. The answer must be someone, not just something.
 - The problem (suffering) is about someone (God - why does he . . .?) Rather than just something. It is a little child with tears and its eyes looking up at Daddy and weeping, "Why?" It is a question put to the Father in the context of relationship.
 - The answer is not just words, but the Word; not an idea or concept but a person. He is our answer in our story, our history. Our story is also his story. He came into our **sin**, like a surgeon, to get it all out. God became man; we touched him, we handled him. Eternity entered time.
- Many fear religion (Man's search for God). Why? Blaise Pascal said it best, "There are two types of men, those who are afraid to lose God, and those who are afraid that they might find Him."

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²⁵ Blaise Pascal, Pg. 129

- Jesus came like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness. Not happiness. He came in all the way into our tears, our darkness, our loneliness and our weeping when we cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
- Who cares about cars and success and miracles and a long life when you have God sitting beside you? He is there in our difficulties. That is the only thing that matters.²⁶
 - Are we broken? He is broken with us. Do people despise us? He was despised and rejected. Do we weep? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Do people treat us as outcasts like a leper? Is our love betrayed? Are our relationships broken? He too loved and was betrayed by the ones he loved.
 - He endures our spiritual scabs and scars, our screams, are hatreds, just to be with us. He descends into our hells. Even the darkness is not dark for him. Even the darkest door of all, death, has been shoved open and light streamed into our world. He has changed the meaning of death.
- Love is why he came. It is all about Love. Every tear we shed becomes his tear. He may not yet wipe them away, but he makes them his.
 - Our own failures help heal other lives. Our own tears help wipe away the tears of others. All our sufferings are transformable into his work, our passion into his action. The solution to our suffering is our suffering! All our suffering can become part of his work, the greatest work ever done, the work of **salvation**.
 - How? To receive and believe in the work that Christ has already accomplished and let it work itself out in and through our lives, including our suffering. When we suffer it is an invitation to follow him. Christ goes to the cross, and we are invited to follow in the same way. The cross gives new meaning to suffering. Christ allows us to participate in his cross so that we participate and share in the very inner life of God like him.

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²⁶ Pg. 133

- Freud says our two absolute needs are **love** and **work**. Our suffering now becomes the work of God constructing his kingdom. Our suffering now becomes the work of love, the work of redemption, saving those we love. True love is willing to suffer.
- In summary, Jesus did three things to solve the problem of suffering:
 - First, he came and suffered with us. He wept.
 - Second, in becoming man he transformed the meaning of our suffering. It is now part of his work of redemption.
 - Third, he died and rose. Dying, he paid the price for sin and opened heaven to us. By rising he transformed death from a hole into a door, from an end into a beginning.
 - The last item, the **resurrection** makes all the difference in the world. When a loved one dies, no matter what comforting words may follow, the Christian faith says something to the bereaved that makes all the rest trivial. Something the bereaved longs infinitely more to hear: “God can and will bring back to life your dear one. There is resurrection.”
 - Because of resurrection, when all our tears are over, we will look back at them and laugh. We do a little that even now. After a great worry is lifted or a great problem is solved, it all looks very different as past than it looked as future. St. Teresa said that from heaven the most miserable earthly life will look like one bad night in an inconvenient hotel.

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- How could this crazy idea this crazy desire (love, resurrection, eternal life) ever have entered into the mind and heart of man? How could a creature without a mind desire knowledge? How could a creature without a digestive system learn to desire food? And how could a creature with no capacity for God desire God?
 - We began with the mystery of suffering in a world supposedly created by a loving God. How did God get off the hook? God's answer is Jesus. Jesus is not God off the hook but God on the hook. If that is not God on the cross but only a man, then God is not on the hook, not in our suffering. And if God is not on the hook then God is not off the hook. How could he sit there in heaven and ignore our tears?

- There is one good reason for not believing in God: The problem of evil. And God himself has answered this objection not in words but in deeds and in tears. Jesus is the tears of God.²⁷
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So, What Difference Does It Make? Seven Lessons from the Saint

- If all we have studied so far is true, What difference does it make to us here and now? If we believe it, what's next? What do we do about it?
 - How do we find out what is next? We ask those who have experienced the difference it makes, the Saints. Saints are simply people who love Christ most dearly, know him most clearly, and follow him most nearly.

1. "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden"

- The Saints expect suffering since Jesus had specifically told us to expect it. Since we are in the body of Christ, suffering is part of our destiny. (*Lk 9:23, Jn 15:20*)
- The point of our lives in this world is not comfort, security, or even happiness, but training for preparation – for holiness. This world is a lousy home, but it is a fine gymnasium.²⁸
 - The point of this life is not to be happy but becoming real, like the Velveteen Rabbit; to be tamed by God as the Fox says in *The Little Prince*, to become the person God can love perfectly to satisfy his thirst to love.
 - God wants loving persons not perfect performances; he is not a stage manager but a lover. We learn by the mistakes we make and the sufferings they bring. Even Jesus, according to Scripture, "learned obedience through suffering." Are we better than he is?

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2. "Everything Is Grace"

²⁷ Pg. 140

²⁸ Pg 142

- St. Teresa says simply that **everything is Grace**. Suffering is something, therefore suffering too is Grace. (Grace is the very life of God; his essence and being.)
 - We know that God is absolute Love. Everything he does, therefore is love, even though sometimes his kiss is full of tears. "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom 8:28).
 - The skeptics are wrong. Bad things do not happen to good people because God is weak or because nature limits God. Nature is only the stage set for life. Nature is a trivial aspect of our lives, like the props to a play. Everything is meaningful, because everything is Grace.
 - We cannot know what the meaning of every event is, but we can know that every event is meaningful. How? Because we have been told by God (Rom 8:28) and we know by the experience of loving. Love alone understands love. If we love God, we will understand that everything is Grace. Even the delay of grace is Grace. Suffering is Grace. The cross is Grace. The grave is Grace. Even hell is made of God's love and Grace, but experienced as pain by those who hate it. There is nothing but God's love. Everything is Grace.
 - Our struggle against suffering and every form of evil, physical and spiritual, is part of God's will for us and part of our growing. God's overall plan includes both our efforts and their failure to fully conquer sin and evil.²⁹ Fighting the evils of the world, not fighting God— that is our destiny.

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3. "Fiat"

- Mary's single word (fiat) is all we need to know – "Be it done to me according to thy word." For "thy word" has been revealed as Jesus.
- Pascal says: "not only do we know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves."

²⁹ Pg. 145

- Remove Jesus and the knowledge of God becomes questionable. If the knowledge of God is questionable, trusting this unknown God becomes questionable. And then our fiat becomes questionable.
- Suffering is the obstacle. Suffering is the evidence against God, the reason not to trust him. Jesus is the evidence for God, the reason to trust him. And the result of trust, of resting in his will, is peace.
- To die to self and what self wants is the essence of suffering. **The way to perfect joy is incredibly simple.** It is simply to die– **to die to self-will and self-love**– To say to God, "Thy will be done," and mean it. To put God first, to consecrate everything – *everything* – to him.
- To die to self and what self wants is the essence of suffering. If I want only God's will, I do not suffer, because I always get what I want, God's will. We suffer because we are out of line with reality, God's will. If we follow God's first and greatest commandment wholeheartedly, he turns suffering to perfect joy. We must love, will and worship him alone and above all.
- True, none of us ever do that perfectly because we are fallen creatures. But we can do a little of it.
- Suffering it is created by selfish desire. If there were no gap between what we desire and what we get, there would be no suffering. Suffering is that gap. Most people try to close the gap by getting more of what they want. It never works.

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- The saints teach us to change our desires and thereby change our world by wanting in a new way.
 - First, wanting God's will instead of our own.
 - Second, consolidating all our desires by wanting only one thing.³⁰

³⁰ Pg. 148

- This leads to perfect joy. Paradoxically, the thing that leads to perfect joy is the essence of suffering: "Not my will." The core of suffering, death to self-will, can lead to perfect joy, when it is freely offered to God. How do we offer it to God? Through faith hope and love. These are three catalysts that turn suffering into joy.

4. Humility and Gratitude

- **Pride** is the root of all the vices and fights against all virtues. The antidote to pride is **humility**.
- We resent and resist suffering because we feel that we have a claim to perfect happiness. How dare this suffering intrude on my self-sufficiency and control.
 - This is exactly the attitude nearly all modern psychology teaches along with the popular media and advertising. The alternative seems to be weakness, something spineless and inhuman. It is a lie.
 - The saints are not spineless and inhuman. They are humble. Humility is therefore not spineless and inhuman. They know that their very existence is pure gift and they are grateful for it.
 - What do we have to be thankful for? God, infinite joy, heaven, which was purchased by Jesus at an infinite cost. Our world and our self, too. God's eternity presents itself as an opportunity to us now. Suffering adds to this opportunity rather than takes away from it.
 - This is a verified fact both from observation of others and from our experiment. An attitude of humility and gratitude in suffering brings deep joy, while an attitude of pride and ingratitude brings joylessness. Proud people are simply not happy.

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5. Faith

- Jesus came but was not recognized by all because he demanded faith. It is the same today. Jesus' solution to the problem of suffering is available only through faith. Faith is not found in feelings, but in fact.

- Joy is not a feeling at its core but a fact. Joy does not enter into us. We enter into joy.
- Heaven is where Christ is, for heaven is not first of all a place but a person.
- All creation exists in the Mind of God. The Mind of God = heaven, and heaven = joy. If we believe we are in the Mind of God, even suffering becomes part of joy. It is not felt as joy, of course, but that is where faith comes in. What is the alternative? Without faith we are lost, we are not in the Mind of God. We are slugs crawling along the surface of some third-rate slag heap.

6. Weakness Makes Strength

- The paradoxes of Jesus:
 - When we are poor we are rich, when we are weak we are strong and the lowly are exalted (The Beatitudes - Mt. 5:3ff).
 - Modern psychology says to love and accept ourselves as we are. To feel good about ourselves. Jesus says to put others first ahead of ourselves and our interests, to reject self-will. Psychology says this is the source of what is wrong. Jesus says it is the origin of salvation (Lk 14:26 - "hate father and mother. . .").
 - Only when we turn away from this world, when we are dissatisfied and weak, failures in ourselves, can we let God come into our hearts. For God to assimilate us into himself, he must break our mold and recast us, remold us into himself.³¹ This mold-breaking process causes suffering, but it is necessary to be with Him.

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7. The Ultimate Theology of Suffering: In the Trinity

- Have you ever wondered why that when joy is so overflowing that all other expressions are inadequate and we turn to tears? It is because we secretly longed for a kind of suffering and a kind of dying that is mystical in some way.

³¹ Pg. 152

- The mystics speak of their deep desire to die in God, to become everything and nothing (St. John of the Cross).
 - What do all these sensations mean? If it is true, it is the ultimate reason why we suffer and locates the model and source of suffering. It is a way for God to conform us to his very self. We are spiritually 'married' to God and the two become one. In this spiritual marriage we share God's very life. In this union we die to self (a type of suffering) and in this self-giving we touch upon all creation and all being – the Blessed Trinity.
 - In the Trinity, each person empties himself to the other – they die to self. The Father to the Son, the Son to the Father and that expression of love is the Holy Spirit.
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Back to the Problem

- "That's all good on paper, but . . ."
- The answer is not on paper, but on wood . . . Jesus doesn't give the answer to suffering; he is the answer. Our picture is now complete, but Jesus did not lead us to the clues, the clues lead us to him. He is the answer to not only **suffering**, but **sin** and **death**.
- St. Teresa of Avila recounts that when she fell into the mud God said, "That's how I treat all my friends." And Teresa replied, "Then it is no surprise that you have so few."
- **Objection #1** - God is not good. **Reply:** But God's goodness is different from ours, because God isn't one of us. God is omniscient and knows perfectly what is best for us in the long run. He has the right to say to us: You need to suffer now.

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- An analogy: When a hunter's dog is caught in a trap, the hunter has to push the dog further into the trap to lessen the tension on it before he can get him out. If the dog were a theologian it would question the dogma of the goodness of the man since it can't understand what we can: that the mechanism of a trap requires this push further in that causes much pain because this is the way out. God does the

same to us sometimes and we can't understand why he does it any more than the dog can understand us.

- ... so we have to trust God. if we trust, we won't scream, pull, rebel and make it harder to get out.
- **Objection #2** - Why does God's suffering sometimes work for our bad instead of our good? **Reply:** All suffering is at least potential good, an opportunity for good. It is up to our free choice to actualize that potentiality. Not all of us benefit from suffering or learn from it, because that is up to us and our free will.
- **Objection #3** – Suffering is the will of God just accept it! **Reply:** There are three attitudes towards this comment:
 - First - ***fatalism***. Accept whatever comes as God's will and don't fight it. Assumes predestination, but no free will. This makes no sense. We must fight against evil.
 - Second - ***No fate*** - we make our own destiny. Assumes free will, but no predestination (no trust that God destines us to salvation).
 - Third - ***The Christian answer*** - Belief that we are both predestined and have free will. That is why we have to both trust and fight the good fight against evil.
- Once God made us free, the choice between heaven and hell is really up to us. The only way to guarantee everybody makes it to heaven would be to make that choice for us, to take away our power to choose hell, our free will.

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- **Objection #4** - Couldn't God have made the world with a little less suffering? **Reply:** God has given us some of the responsibility for this world and we messed it up. He did his part perfectly; we didn't. The only way to guarantee a world without people is to create us without freedom. Do an experiment: imagine you are God. Now make a better world in your imagination, but think of all the consequences of your improvements. Every time you prevent evil by force you remove a little more freedom and eventually even the freedom to do good.
- **Objection #5** - I prefer a compassionate God to one who allows small children to suffer even for the sake of preserving free will. **Reply:** First, you can't pick a God as

if picking a car or a hat – by what you prefer. Secondly, God is so demanding of us because he is love, and love is more than kindness, more than compassion.

- Sometimes we feel like this story, this picture isn't enough. Maybe it's a solid argument and maybe our objections are answered, but it is still not enough– We can't accept a God who let's my child die, or my spouse leave, or friend commit suicide.
 - We must understand that no words can be enough. We feel like there needs to be someone to hate and resent for the terrible things in God's drama, God's story, God's plan–there must be someone to blame. How can I pray or smile when I feel like screaming?
 - The solution: crying instead of screaming. Then? Wait–wait for God to come and wipe your tears and melt your hardness. Only he can do that. But will he? Yes, because we are searching for truth. And God is truth. Jesus promised that all who seek, find. **Seek and wait.**
- Even after all this, it may seem to us that something is STILL missing. What? Because the modern mind has some key difficulties understanding and seeing the Christian vision of things, especially as it applies to suffering.

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Why Modernity Can't Understand Suffering

- There are two obstacles to believing you in the Christian answer to the problem of suffering: the **intellect** and **free will**.
 - Words can help overcome the intellectual obstacles, but only Grace can overcome the free will obstacles.
- The modern mind has forgotten seven things to answer the problem of suffering:

1. Modernity's New "Greatest Good"

- In history, the chief problem of human life was how to conform the soul to objective reality. The solution was wisdom, self-discipline and virtue. This "objective reality" meant God.
- To the modern mind, the new objective reality is power, or man's conquest of nature. Conquest of suffering is what is really meant by the conquest of nature. Suffering, to the modern mind, is the greatest problem there is and the thing that must be overcome. This is why the story of paradise lost is hard to comprehend. The Christian story is therefore incomplete and a failure to the modern mind.
- If the most important thing in life is union with God, conformity to God, then any price is worth paying to obtain that end, if necessary. But if the most important thing in life is conquering suffering, attaining pleasure, comfort and power over nature then Jesus is a fool and a failure. (remember about putting first things first)

2. Modernity's Loss of Faith in Ultimate Meaning

- If life as a whole has meaning, then suffering has meaning, for suffering is an inherent part of life. But to the typical modern mind, life as a whole is meaningless. The secular mind discounts supernatural meanings, transcendent meanings and is left only with man-made meanings.
- But life is not man-made. We did not create or invent ourselves. If there is meaning to our lives and our very selves it must be there by nature. It must be objective. It must be God-made not man-made. The meaning of life therefore requires a God.

3. Modernity's Forgetfulness of Heaven and Hell

- Every traditional society before modern society, gave its people some transcendent perspective on this world. (like a womb to the next world, peaks and valleys in life)
- If there is a life after death and a heaven, then we can consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed (Romans 8:18). If there is no life after death then suffering is a purposeless scandal.
- Hell as well as heaven helps to explain suffering. Not all suffering is a way to God; some is a foretaste of hell. Suffering is a reflection of death, a reminder of mortality.

4. Modernity's Forgetfulness of Solidarity

- The two mysteries of Original Sin and vicarious atonement are both rooted in the mystery human solidarity or mutual support.
- Solidarity means that the human race is like a body: Organically one. Each of us is responsible for all of us, since we are our brother's keepers and all men are our brothers.
- The Eucharist is the ritual of solidarity: Christ in the Christian, The Christian in Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ and the Christian become one, Thus heaven and earth become one. The Eucharist is the solution to the problem of suffering. Human punitive suffering becomes one with divine redemptive suffering (the mark of eternal life).

5. Modernity's Forgetfulness of Original Sin

- How can God fairly punish us for Adam's sin? He doesn't. He punishes us for our own, but it is conditioned by Adam's sin ("my will be done"). Original sin is the fallen condition of human nature after his disobedience.
- The price God had to pay to create a world in which we are free to love each other and to express that love was a world in which we are also free to harm each other. Original sin is unfair, but you cannot give what you don't possess. Adam no longer possessed perfected human nature and, therefore, could not pass it on to us.

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- Fairness or justice is important but love is more important. God had to risk justice to guarantee love.³² God's essence is love not justice. To create a race capable of freely loving, he will risk injustice and consequent suffering so as never to compromise love.

6. Modernity's Forgetfulness of Vicarious Atonement

- We are not born into this world as mere individuals but as parts of a family. We are all Adams children by physical birth; we can all become God's children by spiritual rebirth through baptism and faith.
- Vicarious atonement means that what Christ did atones for our sin: "by his stripes we are healed." (Is 53:5) It is Christ's surprising solution to suffering. He destroys

³² Pg. 176

suffering by suffering. We still suffer, but only for a short while. We are presently in preparation for a world called heaven, or God's house.

7. Modernity's Forgetfulness of Justice

- Objection: if suffering is punishment for sin, why can't God just not punish us, if he is so loving? The modern mind asks this question because it does not understand justice. Justice is above and outside all human minds and wills. It is objective, necessary and absolute.
 - The modern mind says that only human laws make things not permissible. "If it feels good, do it." "If it doesn't hurt anybody, why not?" This stance is absurd. It would mean that we would have absolutely no justification for opposing tyranny, genocide, racism or any other barbarity if it were only included in a law.
 - The incarnation is Christ tying himself to our humanity; His death is taking the impact of justice. The bad news is that "the wages of sin is death." That is justice. The good news is that "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus." That is Grace. (Rom 6:23)
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A Last Word

- This journey did not promise an answer to the problem of suffering, only an exploration of the mystery of suffering. This picture did not include the whole of the Christian faith, there is much, much more.
- What is left is the will. Will I trust this God who lets me and my loved ones suffer? Will I trust him that he's doing it for love, not out of spite or in difference?
- In trying to get some answers, we have not eliminated questions. We're left with both questions and answers. In the end our answer turned out to be a person, one who fulfilled the clues.

Rev. 21:1-5 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away." The one who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Then he said, "Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true."

- Those who believe the man who made these and other incredible promises are called Christians. Life's greatest adventure is to be one.