

# God, Sin, Suffering

## Speech Delivered to a Retreat of Medical Practitioners<sup>1</sup>

God, sin and suffering—can these be related to each other in any way? If not, why not? If yes, how? And on what basis must we seek such a relationship?

The assignment given me is to first of all to discuss this relationship. That's one topic. Then there is another, namely the relationship of evil and sin to suffering.

Well, I don't believe that these are separate subjects. One cannot discuss the relationship of God to suffering without at the same time discussing sin and evil. Nevertheless, I will try the impossible, namely say a few things about God's relationship to suffering before touching on the subject of evil without confounding the two. So, get set for an impossible assignment.

Most of you have heard, I believe, of the famous Christian writer C. S. Lewis. He has written many books and is often seen as an evangelist to intellectuals. His books are popular among Christians of all denominations; they all love his writings. There probably is no writer with greater and wider esteem among Christians.

At one time, Lewis was an atheist. He begins his little book, *The Problem of Pain*, with the statement that if someone were to ask him why he was an atheist, he would respond that all rational evidence in the world points to their being no God. But *if* there were a God, He would either be an evil spirit or a god indifferent to good and evil.

Lewis based this remark on the fact of widespread suffering and evil. Everything in life and in the universe points to death. Any new life is based on the death of another among human beings and animals as well as in the realm of the inanimate. Birth always causes pain and sometimes death. Creatures cause pain by being born; they live by inflicting pain; in pain they mostly die.

The history of man

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<sup>1</sup> Held at the Jos headquarters of ECWA—Evangelical Churches of West Africa--, May/1980 (.pp.). For background see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 225. This speech was followed up by its twin "Medical Practice and Christian Faith," also found in this lineup of articles.

is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, with just sufficient happiness interposed to give them, while it lasts, an agonised apprehension of losing it, and, when it is lost, the poignant misery of remembering. Every now and then they improve their condition a little and what we call civilisation appears. But all civilisations pass away and, even while they remain, inflict peculiar sufferings of their own probably sufficient to outweigh what alleviations they may have brought to the normal pains of man (pp. 1-2).

In view of all this, he wrote, the atheist argument is the most reasonable. There is no God and if there is, He does not care for good and evil. Thus for the atheist there is no problem about relating suffering to God. He just ain't there! He does not exist. It is, he wrote, *Christianity* that makes a problem out of it, a problem out of nothing.

### Christianity

...is not a system into which we have to fit the awkward fact of pain: it is itself one of the awkward facts which have to be fitted into any system we make. In a sense, it creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving (pp. 9-10).

Lewis quotes from Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the most famous of all medieval theologians who laid the foundations of Roman Catholic theology:

If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both." This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form. The possibility of answering it depends on showing that the terms "good" and "almighty"; and perhaps also the term "happy" are equivocal: for it must be admitted from the outset that if the popular meanings attached to these words are the best, or the only possible, meanings, then the argument is unanswerable (p. 12).

The Christian faith affirms both. It affirms the reality of suffering. It is real. You people in the medical professions know that better than anyone else, for you see it right in front of you and you handle it physically every day.

At the same time, we affirm, we believe that God is good and loving. In fact, that is His major attribute by which He wishes to be known. And, yes, He is also all powerful. So, why then does He not stop pain? How can we believe in a loving God while seeing all the suffering around us?

How can we solve this apparent contradiction? That is the question of pain as Lewis defines it. That is the problem with which that theological enterprise known as “*theodicy*” attempts to deal.

Theodicy is an attempt to explain God’s gracious rule over the world in view of this global suffering. It is an attempt to “defend” God against complaints and accusations. How can we possibly square these terribly realities of suffering and death with a loving all-powerful God? Theodicy seeks to replace doubt with certainty and faith.

### **Selective Answers to the Relationship**

A number of answers have been given over time and I would like to summarize a few for you. Some are by Christians; some are not.

(1) **Dualism**—This term can be used in several ways. Here we use it to refer to the opinion that from the beginning there were two principles in the universe, one of good and one of evil. Both always existed alongside each other. Neither was created. There is the good and merciful god on the one hand. Independent from that god on the other, is his enemy the devil and his workers. He is as eternal from the beginning as god. He it is that causes suffering and evil. The latter have nothing to do with god.

Augustine (354-430), the great ancient North African theologian, before his conversion, was such a dualist. After his conversion to Christ, he fought hard against this dualism .

Its *advantage* is that it makes the problem of pain easy to reconcile with a good God. It says they have nothing to do with each other. You cannot blame a good and gracious God for the evil of this world, for He has not caused it. You must blame that other power, the devil.

The *disadvantage* of this view is that it does not agree with Scripture. The Bible does not allow for an eternal existence apart from God. Neither does it allow for a separate power that is unrelated in any way to God's power and designs.

(2) **Teleological**—This is another simple answer to a complex problem. It does not deny suffering, but says that we must not stare ourselves blind at it. We must look at its final product, its final aim. Then we will see that, even though we cannot see it at this point, suffering and evil will eventually merge with the good to make for a final good product.

The problem with this theory is that it gives a legitimate place to evil and suffering. And though it acknowledges the reality of suffering, it does not have a deep appreciation of the terrible nature of suffering. Furthermore, it is not supported in the Bible.

(3) **Marcionism**-- Marcion (AD 85-160) was born in Asia Minor, today's Turkey. He was burdened by the amount of suffering in the world and sought to find a way in which man could not blame the God of Christians for it. So he made a distinction between the God of the Old Testament (OT) and of the New Testament (NT). The God of the OT is a righteous God, who taught and practiced an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:24). The God of the NT, however, is a totally different God (Matthew 5:38). He is loving and merciful. He is not the one causing all this suffering. We cannot blame Christ and/or His Father.

Eventually, the church rejected Marcion's views as heresy, because he separated the God of Abraham in the OT from the God Father of Christ in the NT. He was excommunicated.

(4) **Christian Science Church**—This is a church with congregations all over the world, mainly in cities and predominantly in the US. It teaches that only the spiritual is real, while the material or physical are mere figments of the imagination. The body is not real. Therefore, suffering is not real either, at least, not physical suffering. Even death is said to be an illusion, a lie; it has no real reality.

This teaching is obvious contrary to the Biblical teaching of creation. It is also obviously false in its denial of the reality of suffering. I hesitate to describe someone else's worldview as "nonsense," but this comes close to it. It probably does not even deserve to be listed here, but I present only because you may possibly meet such people, especially among the intellectuals. Whether you would get to treat them as patients I do not know.

### (5) **African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African Traditional Medicine (ATM)**

I am hesitant to treat this part of our topic, for I would expect you as Nigerian medical professionals to be thinking often and deeply about this subject. You may have experienced it yourself when western medicine failed you.<sup>2</sup> I place ATR and ATM together in one heading, because they are so closely related and even intertwined. One can hardly think or practice ATM without involving ATR. Though the details of the various ethnic versions of both may vary, there is a deep-going Black African consensus about the causes of sickness. (At this point, I asked the audience to list them and wrote them on the blackboard.)

Broadly speaking, these traditional ideas include witchcraft, ancestors and spirits. All of these are close related to evil or sin.

(6) **Islam**—Islam strongly emphasizes God's will as the main cause of sickness. It so emphasizes the majesty and power of God, that even to question these things is considered offensive. We have no right to question God's way of doing things. He owes us no explanation, let alone apology. Medicine is His gift to us and so is healing. It is quite simple and straight forward. Islam makes no problem of suffering and does not struggle with it as do many Christians.

(7) **Modern Western Medicine**—Now we are coming close to home, for most of you practice basically and, probably, exclusively modern medicine. Strictly speaking, modern medicine by and large has no problem trying to relate suffering to God, for it largely ignores God. The practitioners—people like you—may be fervent Christians, but that hardly affects your medical methods. They are no different from your secular colleagues. There is a strong tradition to regard disease, sickness and functional failures of the body as mechanical failures, not much more. I believe I detect change in the air with greater emphasis on psychological and even spiritual factors playing their roles. Traditionally, however, the question of

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<sup>2</sup> See our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 99-100. For a full discussion, check out the Boeriana page, Section 1, under the heading "Wholistic Health Care."

God's relationship to suffering is irrelevant to modern medicine. It simply ignores the question.

Christian practitioners may have certain beliefs from the Bible that the origin of suffering is relation to the fall into sin, but that teaching seldom makes any difference in the method of treatment, except that they may be more conscientious and display greater concern for their patients. Sometimes they may even witness to their patients, but the actual *medical* practice is like that of everyone else.

Whatever faith aspects there may be, they are not integrated into the medical programme. If there is an evangelistic programme in the hospital, the chaplain mostly works separate from the medical staff; the two programmes are parallel without much interaction.

I know of one missionary doctor who worked himself to the bone. He did more surgery than anyone else. He slaved and almost worked himself to death. The local people praised him for his dedication. And indeed, he did relieve a lot of suffering. But he finally returned to his home country, where he began to reflect on his medical ministry. After some time, he returned to Nigeria to confess that he had done it all wrong, for his work had been based purely on the philosophy of modern medicine—purely mechanical. He had come to recognize that his practice had been based on unbiblical principles. God had been irrelevant; He play not real part in it, though, no doubt, he did believe that God was ultimately responsible for every healing. Modern medicine largely ignores God, even when practiced by serious Christians.

### **The Biblical View**

After all this, we still face the question as to the Biblical view of the relationship of God to sickness and suffering. The Bible does not deny the reality of pain and suffering. It affirms it. But it also affirms the love and goodness of Almighty God. How does one understand that goodness and power in relation to suffering? That is the basic question Christians face, but which most other philosophies do not face, do not *need* to face.

The answer to this question is not only of importance simply to bring peace to our hearts and minds. It is also important to you as Christian medical professionals, for the answer will make a difference in the way you do your medical work—or, at least, it should.

This question cannot be answered by purely human reason. Some of the answers I have summarized *are* the product of reason. People want to defend God by reason. They begin with the world and then seek to reason their way to a loving God, but that will not work. C. S Lewis has already been quoted as saying that if you go purely by reason, then you end up an agnostic or atheist, for reason cannot possibly square suffering with a loving God. Don't even go there.

Theodicy does just that: begin with the world and reason you way up to God. A better way is to begin with Scripture. It does not reason its way from human suffering to a kind God; it simply affirms both and calls us to believe, not to reason it all out. We begin not with reason, but with faith. *But that is also the case with reason: It begins with faith in itself* on basis of a set of human assumptions. The justice of God is for the Christian not a product of human reason but an article of faith. We are not called upon to *defend* God's love and justice by reason; we are called upon to *declare* His love, justice and compassion, to witness to it. This does not mean we know all about it or that we understand exactly how God relates to suffering. There is a limit to our understanding of God and His ways.

Let us check our a few related Biblical passages:

Isaiah 40:28—There is no searching of His understanding. God's ways and thoughts are far above and different from ours. There is no way in which we will be able to give a complete and systematic answer to His relationship to suffering. There is a lot of mystery surrounding it. But, perhaps on the other side.

I Timothy 6:16—God dwells in unapproachable light.

I Corinthians 13:12—Now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we will understand.

Even Israel experienced this mystery and would ask, "Why?"

Psalm 10:1—Why do you stand afar off, Lord? Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?"

There is a limit to our understanding and knowledge within which we must find peace, that peace that passes all understanding. It is not a mental or rational understanding that satisfies the human heart, but peace with God. *That* is the more important.

However, having stressed the limits of our understanding and knowledge, we are not saying that we know nothing about the relationship between God and suffering. The Bible itself gives us plenty of indications of a very close connection. It is that which we will explore at this point, but within the compass of faith and revelation.

The Bible insists strongly on one thing: Suffering is *not* part of the original creation but is the result of the fall into sin. When God finished creation, He described it as “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The first Biblical *reference* to suffering is in Genesis 2:17—the day you eat of the forbidden tree, you shall surely die. The first Biblical *instance* of suffering is in Genesis 3 *after* the fall—immediately sin and suffering are connected:

- **Rebellion** against God, disobedience to God creates problem in human relationship as well as in Human-God relationships. Shame, fear and blaming other begin to enter these relationships.
- **Humiliation** in nature—the snake will crawl from here on.
- **Enmity**—harmony was broken, including human-nature harmony, for farming is now difficult as was all work.
- **Pain**—especially in giving birth.

That is as the story tells how it happened; it is not an explanation how this was possible. It does not tell us how a good and almighty God could allow this to happen. Why did He not stop it? We are not told; we are only told that something like this happened and it leaves us with no doubt as to the relationship between sin and suffering. And this is the only context in which we can understand *something* about the relationship between sin and suffering, in the context of sin and guilt. It is little and it is vague.

What would the world have been like if there had been no fall? Would there have been any suffering at all? Gerrit Berkouwer, one of the foremost evangelical theologians in Europe, refuses to discuss the question. The Bible, he writes, does not speak of “if not” situations. It tells us what is, what will be and was only in so far as we need to know the way to serve God. You can speculate about it, but that does not help anyone.

Lewis, on the other hand, feels that suffering is a natural possibility in creation. God created man with a free will—that is, the possibility of obedience and disobedience. It is inherent in the nature of mankind to be able to sin and abuse the good creation. This is a *sort of* explanation as to how evil and suffering are



possible and it still connects them both with sin. Berkouwer would reject this explanation, but he would agree with the connection.

Immediately after the fall in Genesis 4 there is the anger of the rebellious and jealous Cain, who kills his brother. Jealousy led to anger and anger, as you as medicals know only too well, is not only a mood, a psychological state of mind and heart, it also produces all sorts of chemical reactions in our physical bodies. It causes our heart to pump faster and blood to run faster. It makes us breathe faster. Our facial expressions change. These are all *physical* changes in our bodies. Sin has results not only in our spiritual and psychological life, but also in our bodies. There is a close relationship between the physical, psychological and spiritual. Things spill over from the one to the other.

The flood was a physical event and brought tremendous suffering, all of it caused by sin. It had a spiritual background. The history of Israel is full of unbelief, sin and disobedience that had repercussions in the natural, physical and political worlds. That's the clear language throughout the OT. It brought floods, droughts, earthquakes, all natural disasters due to spiritual conditions. It brought wars, coups, change of dynasties, exile and destruction, all political disasters due to spiritual conditions. Often these disasters were described as God's punishment for disobedience and faithlessness.

At times suffering overcame a person because of his/her personal sin, but frequently not because of personal sin so much as being caught up in a general situation of the presence of evil. Take the example of Job. He suffered not because of his own sin, but because of the existence of evil in general. The Bible speaks of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children. When Christ healed the demoniac, the demon went into someone else's herd of pigs that drowned in the sea—deep economic suffering for no particular sin on the part of the owner. John the Baptist along with thousands of martyrs throughout history suffered not because of their sin but because of their faith they lived by in a context of general evil. We all suffer in one way or another due to the presence of evil all around us.

So, we can say that, basically suffering is related to evil and sin as the **result**, often the natural result that naturally develops from the nature of the dominant evil whether. At other times it has been inflicted by God as **punishment** that may not necessarily have arisen from the situation.

Also, the sinner and the suffering victim can be oceans and continents away. For example, the shareholders of the western multinational may decide on policies,

crops or products that may undermine the economy of the host society far away by forcing the replacement of a traditional food crop with a cash crop. They may go in cahoots with the government of a distant nation to evict whole societies from their traditional lands to start modern mega-agriculture. The resulting suffering and evil are *probably* not the consequence of sin on the part of the victims, but it *could* also be punishment on them for gross evil they themselves commit. The point here is not to seek to place blame on anyone for the presence of general evil so much as to pinpoint that suffering in this world is usually the result of sin and evil, whether personal or social, whether local or global. The connection can be either the natural result of the evil committed or it can be inflicted as punishment without a natural connection. Often the best policy is to relieve the resulting suffering and to rectify the evil without pinpointing the party known behind it all, except where the guilty party is clearly recognizable.

Now it is this relation between God, sin/evil and suffering that some people say proves that God is not loving or just. Underlying this accusation is a very superficial view of sin and evil. It is so deep, so serious and so widespread that God in His infinite wisdom decided to take action, not to just dismiss or ignore it. Here human reason, understanding and knowledge have their limits so that we can only accept this situation through faithful reading of Scripture. The “understanding” we arrive at is at best superficial.

Neither do these people have any idea of divine love as portrayed in the Scriptures. The concept of love in contemporary culture is so wilted and withered that it has no resemblance to that of God. It is sentimental and super-sexualized. God’s love on the one hand is very tender, but on the other it includes discipline, teaching and chastisement. He often lets people suffer the consequences of their own choices.

Having decided that the relation between God and suffering is basically through evil, we have not yet answered the question *how God uses suffering*. If it is that closely connected to evil in many cases, can we attribute any good to it? Anything positive? For long, Christian tradition has been rather, well, traditional about this issue. Yes, it has been said for many centuries, He uses it for a good that we cannot always predict or identify, a good that may be long in its realization. Today, many Christians are not so glib about this. I have a friend, a very dedicated orthodox Christian and teacher of theology, whose wife has suffered much for many years. He has come to reject that glib answer as annoying. He has not replaced it with any other causation or reason. But he won’t accept that God has caused it. There are many like him.

The details of that traditional answer includes the notion that God uses suffering for the good of His people or His Kingdom. Its adherents will point to the story of Joseph in the OT, who, after much suffering, came to the conclusion that God meant it for good: for the rescue of Joseph's family (Genesis 50). It is admitted that God basically does not want suffering any more than evil, but, since evil is here, He makes the best of it and blesses His children through it.

As to Christ's suffering, we all know it was determined by God and for the salvation—the good!-- of the universe.

Lewis also recognized yet another positive value in suffering. It evokes, he wrote, the best in a person. When one person suffers, others become more compassionate, feel pity and feel urged to render help. The suffering of one individual or group brings out the best in another. In a world of evil and sin, human selfishness etc. are often checked when confronted by suffering. And that is a gain.

Another positive value Lewis finds in suffering is that it shakes us out of our false securities. When we think that we are secure in our wealth, position, power, etc., then, suddenly unexpected suffering and deprivation can bring us back to reality and remind us that there is nothing secure in this world and therefore nothing worthy of our ultimate loyalty.

People have proposed other positives for suffering. God sent suffering to warn Pharaoh and to make him change his mind. God can use it to teach patience. He can even allow it for His own glory (John 9:1-3). The suffering of a witness leads to her being acknowledged before our Father in Heaven (Matthew 10:32).

So, within a world marked by sin and evil, God can cause or allow suffering for a number of positive purposes. But, except for examples in the Scriptures where we are told the reason for specific case of suffering or where the cause is too obvious to deny, we must be very careful in pretending to know why a person or a group suffers. We often do not know God's intentions with a people or person and can thus only believe that ultimately He is seeking our benefit. This understanding is very limited and is based on faith. St. Paul did not know why he had a thorn in the flesh and why it would not heal. He simply accepted it as God's way with him.

In our next presentation I plan to explore with you the practical consequences of knowing that, for the most part, suffering is in one way or another related to evil. This should have an effect on how we go about our medical work.

