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FAITH AND SUFFERING  
“A Christian View On Suffering”

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## **Abstract**

The present thesis explores how the reality of evil and suffering in the world should be understood in light of the Christian faith and how this discussion relates to the real problem of suffering in the world.

The first three chapters aim to set the context for the discussion by comparing the views of two important Christian authors, Philip Yancey and David Bentley Hart, in their reflections on the theme of suffering. Yancey strongly emphasises that suffering is part and parcel of life and that our response to it is what really matters. Yancey moves from the backward-looking question 'Why?' in the face of suffering, to the forward-looking question 'To what end?', exploring how Christian faith can help us in this. Hart looks to the causes behind suffering, addressing the spiritual and terrestrial powers that enslave creation. His reflection especially concentrates more on correcting deceptive formulas and unfair responses to human tragedies and explores the reasons behind the uneasiness caused by suffering.

The fourth and fifth chapters compare the authors' views on the nature of suffering and how to cope with suffering in light of the Christian faith. The fourth chapter stresses that the understanding of suffering as diagnosis is important, helping us to relate better to the suffering reality around us and also to understand how God relates to it. The fifth chapter looks at how the Christian faith addresses the problem of suffering in the world through the perspective of faith in the person of Jesus Christ. In this respect the Christian church, the fellowship of believers, in light of God's mission is part of God's answer to the problem of suffering in the world. It is called to live out the reality of the Kingdom of God here and now, motivated by the Christian hope that Christ will make all things new in his second coming.

## **Dedictory**

To a special Friend,

To my mother Vaní Nelda Endres Kern,

To the glory of Jesus Christ.

You sent Your only son for You are good!

*“No eye has seen, no ear has heard,  
and no mind has imagined  
what God has prepared  
for those who love him.”*

1 Corinthians 2:9 (New Living Translation)

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

**1.1 First steps in understanding: “Faith and Suffering”**

Suffering is an ever-present challenge for every single aspect of life on Earth. It deeply challenges and shapes the way we see the world and relate to it. Furthermore, it poses a challenge for all religions, demanding that they account for why evil and suffering exist. The Christian faith in this respect faces the foremost challenge, since it needs to reconcile its view of an all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing Creator with instances of evil and suffering in the created world.

However, this is not a challenge that only religions need to address, but one that every single person will face soon or later: of how to understand the reality of evil in the face of daily life. Because of this challenge, a few years ago I started to dig deeper into *The Problem of Evil and Suffering* in relation to the *Christian faith*. My first researches on this theme started briefly after finishing my Bachelor Degree in Theology back in Brazil in middle of 2009. I started reading about it to be better prepared to help people experiencing suffering, for I knew that at some point in ministry I would meet such situations. Whilst I was reading, to my surprise, God started to work in me things that I was afraid to think of, questions and fears that I knew were there, but I would not dare to touch. What started as a way of helping others in their suffering, actually became a blessing for my own self.

In bringing me to reflect on this theme, God also made me study it more diligently, and through it to see life and everything else in a different perspective. As I look back now, what really brought me into this topic was that I was not actually in a position to help others while I had doubts myself. In addition, as I began to research I was also challenged by some friends in this area, which made me treat it even more seriously. Even though my walk on the theme of suffering in relation to the Christian faith is recent, God is already challenging me to use these reflections to help others, and this thesis also attempts to respond to that. In this sense the present thesis is born out of real struggles – both my own and other people's – about how we should understand this world spoiled as it is by evil and suffering in the light of the reality of God.

**1.2 Research Question and Aims**

The most common way to reflect on the theme of suffering is to start with the classical problem of evil. Where does evil come from? The issue is especially intensified when the

discussion includes the reality of God, for if God is the creator of all things and described as loving and good, why are there such instances of evil in the world?

Despite long tradition and millennia of discussion on the problem of evil, an adequate answer to the question still remains to be presented. The present thesis is not an attempt to provide this, but is in some respects a critique of how this discussion is undertaken and how it can be seen in view of the Christian faith. The first critique concerns how the Christian faith relates to discussion of the problem of evil, where defences or theodices more often than not leave faith behind, trying to solve the problem only on rational grounds.<sup>1</sup> The second critique is that most discussions of the problem of evil and attempts to solve it through defences or theodices often stay only in the metaphysical dimension. Enquiries in relation to the problem always start well, acknowledging that evil is real and very much present, but their outcome always tends to stay in the world of ideas, while the evil remains in the world.

What comfort is there in discussing evil if nothing is done about the evil in the world? Whilst questions concerning evil deeply touch us and need to be addressed, and though sometimes the question is raised more as an attempt to prove that God does not exist because of the reality of evil in the world, the outcome of any discussion *has* in some way to touch the real problem of evil in the world, as represented in the form of suffering. To do less than that is not to be fair to our own humanity and the misery evil brings.

Even though some may exclude the existence of God because of the evil in the world, they actually fall short of addressing the problem and fail to provide an answer for why evil exists. Taking God away does not do any good at all: in His absence, life is more likely to end in despair with the understanding that its fate is always to be spoiled by evil and suffering. My research on this theme were always made in the context of our practical life, seeking answers that not only satisfy the mind but that also bring comfort and hope for the heart. If the problem is real, it demands not only metaphysical answers but real actions, too.

The present research aims to look at *suffering* by addressing two elements: 1) The need to address the dimension of faith, which has much to contribute in how we cope, understand, relate and overcome evil and sufferings; and, 2) The fact that a discussion on suffering which does not bring any actual relief to the real problem of evil in the world is not in any sense meaningful or relevant to the human misery caused by evil.

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<sup>1</sup>In view that the problem of evil says the existence of God and evil is impossible, a defence tries to show a possible way for God and evil to coexist, as not being in contradiction. While a theodicy attempts to show that God is justified in permitting evil. Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2011), 631.

### **1.3 Research Method**

The present thesis will use studies of texts in the field of Systematic Theology, with emphasis in Dogmatics and Philosophy of Religions. Those who have already ventured to study evil and suffering know that the theme is a whole world in itself, and it is neither my intention nor even possible for a thesis of present size to embrace it all. In what follows I will state my research method and delimitation of the theme in relation to the aims discussed in the section above.

In view of the vastness of the topic, the present research will be done by comparison and analyses of two relevant Christian authors on the theme of sufferings and the Christian Faith. I will be looking at Philip Yancey's book "*Where is God when it hurts?*" and also at David Bentley Hart's book "*The doors of the Sea – Where was God in the Tsunami?*"

According to its aims, this research will firstly compare and analyse how both authors can help us to *better understand* the reality of suffering in view of the Christian faith. It is helpful to stress in this perspective that we cannot fully make sense of suffering, but that understanding it better will also help us to relate to it better. With this in mind, the research will look at how the authors agree and how they differ in their views, and how important these similarities and differences are. After that, both similarities and differences will be examined against a practical background in which the answer not only has a metaphysical dimension but also addresses the evil in the world –most specifically, in relation to the Christian faith and its active hope in living out the Kingdom of God.

To fulfil this, the thesis will be divided in two main parts: The first part will have a descriptive function, reviewing the literature from both authors in view of the main aims and setting the context for the analysis chapters. To that end, the review will consider three main questions: 1. How does the author understand the reality of suffering?; 2. How is faith addressed in the discussion of suffering?; 3. How is the discussion relevant to the suffering in the world? In view of the nature of the books and their relation to the research aims, it seems preferable to start first with Yancey's book (Chapter Two), and then Hart's book (Chapter Three). The second part of the thesis will have an analytical function, comparing data from the literature review chapters as regards similarities and dissimilarities concerning the nature of suffering in the light of the Christian faith (Chapter Four), and how the reality of evil in the world can be addressed (Chapter Five). After that, I will present the conclusion of the thesis.

I readily acknowledge that there are probably other ways to deal with the present theme, either by using another type of methodology, approach or even different authors and literature as main sources. As described in section 1.1, the present project is born from my situation over the past few years and from the way I came to perceive the theme. On this

matter of faith and suffering above all others, no one will arrive at a point of knowing everything. This research, therefore, is an attempt to further this learning process in hope that these reflections will in some way bring glory to God and help the Christian Churches in their mission to proclaim and to live out the Kingdom of God.

The present authors were selected: Firstly, for their relevance to the discussions of faith and suffering and because they are widely read; Secondly, because these books are contemporary, addressing and being born out of real issues and struggles; Thirdly, because I see in both authors important aspects in this relation of faith to suffering and the possibility through their comparison and analysis of arriving at important outcomes; And, lastly, to provide a delimitation for the present master thesis in view of the vastness of the subject-matter.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Project**

The reality of suffering permeates our whole world: each nation, social class, community of people, and the life of any single individual. None can say that they are unaffected by suffering. The only difference to be noted is the intensity or amount of suffering someone faces in life. Every single person will need at some point to deal with the questions suffering raises. Sooner or later people are shaken in the face of a world that in some sense is spoiled by evil, and caused to reflect on how we should understand life and the world in face of suffering.

This reality of suffering deeply shapes the way we live our lives, the way we see our world and how we relate to it. A correct understanding of what our reality is about in the face of suffering is crucial for living our lives and relating to the world around us. With regard to evil and suffering, it is not only Christianity which *has* to address it, but any world view *has* to answer the same questions concerning suffering and give a solution to it. Christianity may not give a conclusive answer as to how evil came about because it sees it as having both human and spiritual dimensions, but it is deeply concerned about the presence of evil in the world and the part we have to play in God's mission to overcome evil now and once for all in Christ's second coming. Christianity's world view deeply matches reality, it does not overlook suffering as some world views do, or teach that life is only evil and that we should escape from it. Christianity really engages with our world spoiled by evil to bring renewal to our reality. Most especially, Christianity offers hope that neither death nor suffering will have the last word concerning life, but the final say belongs to Christ, who has conquered death. All evil, and all suffering will pass away when Jesus comes again to make all things new.

#### **1.5 Purpose of the Project**

The present project aims to provide practical help for people who are struggling to make sense of the suffering in the world and of what Christianity has to offer in relation to it. The

question “Where is God?” when suffering knocks at the door is a disconcerting one. While some use it as a way of denying the existence of God, motivated as much by calming their own consciousness as by anything else, for Christians it is an honest cry and at the same time a hunger that life is more than this reality spoiled by suffering. As Karl Goerdeler (a Christian executed for conspiracy against Hitler) stated in his final days, giving an account of the agonising doubt and despair of a Christian who found his faith called into question by the horror to which he had been a witness:

In sleepless nights I have often asked myself whether a God exists who shares in the personal fate of men. It is becoming hard to believe this. For this God must for years have allowed rivers of blood and suffering, and mountains of horror and despair for mankind to take place... He must have allowed millions of decent men to die and suffer without lifting a finger. Is this meant to be a judgement?... Like the Psalmist, I am angry with God, because I cannot understand him... and yet through Christ I am still looking for the merciful God. I have not yet found him. O Christ, where is truth? Where is there any consolation?<sup>2</sup>

There are no easy answers when we face the horrors of evil and despair in life. If that was the case, we probably would have already found them. The most striking aspect in this dimension is the way God himself deals with it, becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God went through this life facing the same struggles as us, even to the point of death – and by overcoming it, brought redemption to the whole world. God's ways of dealing with our suffering reality really puzzles us, but it is right there in fear and amazement that our hope lies. Jesus dignified our humanity: being one of us, stressing that there is good in Creation, and most especially by showing that evil and suffering do not have the final word concerning the lives of those who are in Christ.

In this respect the present thesis aims to bring light to those cloudy times when doubts come in the face of our spoiled world and how we deal and see them in view of the Christian faith. The project also aims to contribute academically to the field of Systematic Theology with reflections on this very relevant and ever-present theme.

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<sup>2</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1985), 179-180.

Chapter Two

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?” - PHILIP YANCEY

**2.1 Overview**

This chapter reviews Yancey's book “*Where is God when it Hurts?*” The author, Philip Yancey, is an American Christian writer. He now works as an editor-at-large for Christianity Today.

The review will highlight Yancey's views in the context of the main aims of the present thesis, which are understanding suffering in the light of the Christian faith and how suffering in the world can be addressed.

In his introductory chapter, Yancey stresses a real experience of suffering that overtook a young couple who were his friends. While Yancey accompanied them and heard from them how many well-intentioned people who were trying to help brought them more despair, he unfortunately had to ask if Christianity was supposed to make a sufferer feel even worse. In view of this, Yancey went further questioning “Why do people have to suffer? What does the Bible really say?” These investigations resulted in the present book.<sup>3</sup>

**2.2 How does the author understand the reality of suffering?**

*2.2.1 Why is there such a thing as Pain?*

Yancey first tries to understand the role of pain in life biologically. He stresses that pain sensors are for our own good, alerting us that our body is in danger – 'It hurts' – demanding from us a solution to the problem. However, pain is something nobody wants. It is generally defined as “unpleasantness”. Many Christians would even argue pain is God's one mistake.<sup>4</sup>

In this biological area of pain, Yancey is hugely in debt to Paul Brand (a very close friend and award-winning doctor) for his research on pain after many years of work with leprosy patients in India and related diseases of the nervous system.<sup>5</sup> While Yancey recognizes this protective service performed for us daily by the pain network, he says that not all pain is good. He gives the example of a cancer patient where pain dominates so much that any relief from it would seem like heaven itself.<sup>6</sup>

Using several examples of how important is our 'pain network', Yancey stresses that it functions either by preventing our body from harm or by producing our pleasant feelings. In this sense pain is not God's great mistake. Pain is essential to a normal life, it reveals a

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<sup>3</sup>Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurst?* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1990, Revised and expanded), 15-19.

<sup>4</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 26-27.

<sup>5</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 32.

<sup>6</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 34.

marvellous design that serves our bodies well, it could be argued, as eyesight or even circulation.<sup>7</sup> Therefore pleasure cannot be conceived without pain because there is no specific system for pain and another for pleasure. They go side by side. What differs is the intensity a certain action has on our bodies: “Pain is a part of the seamless fabric of sensations, and often a necessary prelude to pleasure and fulfilment. The key to happiness lies not so much in avoiding pain at all costs as in understanding its role as a protective warning system and harnessing it to work on your behalf, not against you.”<sup>8</sup>

Yancey argues that Jesus captured the paradoxical nature of life in his statement “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Rather than seeking 'self-fulfilment', Christianity stresses that true fulfilment comes, not through ego satisfaction, but through service to others. The Christian concept of service is his last illustration to say that in the pain and pleasure dimension those who have all they want generally tend to live broken lives, while people who are serving amidst human misery find a peace that is not from this world and true fulfilment.<sup>9</sup>

### *2.2.2 The Groaning Planet*

Yancey's next attempt to understand suffering is to examine what role suffering plays in our world. He says that the 'problem of pain' encompasses far more than the loyal responses of the nerve cells. Philosophers love to sum up the total of human suffering as if they could say to God: “How do you account for all this misery?” Yancey argues that pain may have been intended as an efficiently protective warning system, but something in this planet has gone wrong and now pain is out of control. Yancey says we need another word for the problem: “Perhaps 'pain' to signify the body's protective network and 'suffering' to signify the human misery. After all, a leprosy patient feels no pain, but much suffering.” Suffering is more than physical pain, there are even sufferings that do not go away, such as a personality flaw or a broken relationship. The question “Where is God when it hurts?” becomes “Where is God when it won't stop hurting?” How can God allow such intense and unfair pain?<sup>10</sup>

Yancey states that “Much of the suffering on our planet has come about because of two principles that God built into creation: a physical world that runs according to consistent natural laws, and human freedom.” God's committing himself to these two principles, both good in themselves, has allowed for the possibility of their abuse. Yancey even says that in an

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<sup>7</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 31.

<sup>8</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 51, 55.

<sup>9</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 57-58.

<sup>10</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 62-63. Though Yancey defines suffering as human misery here, he still uses the word 'pain' to describe both instances in the rest of the book according to their respective context.

indirect way God is somehow responsible for the suffering of this world.<sup>11</sup> If that is the case, could not God have made it in another way, keeping some of the benefits of the pain network without its disadvantages? He answers that Dr. Brand's experiments with painless people show that pain must be felt, it must 'hurt', so as to demand an action.<sup>12</sup>

The second aspect is that the Bible traces the entrance of suffering and evil into the world to the grand but terrible quality of human freedom. Unlike the instinctual behaviour of animals, we have true and self-determining choice, and as a result we introduced something new to our planet: a rebellion against the original design. Quoting Chesterton, Yancey describes it well: "In making the world, He set it free. God had written, not so much a poem but rather a play; a play He had planned as perfect, but which had necessarily been left to humans actors and stage-managers, who have since made a great mess of it."<sup>13</sup> Theologians describe this episode as "The Fall" when by mankind's initial rebellion evil first entered the world. Yancey points that "The shorthand account in Genesis 3 gives a bare sketch of the consequences of that rebellion, but enough to indicate that all of creation, not just human species, was disrupted." Based on Romans 8, he stresses that somehow pain and suffering multiplied on earth as a consequence of the abuse of human freedom.<sup>14</sup>

The Bible's story from Genesis to Revelation shows God's dissatisfaction with what has become of Creation and his plan to restore it. If this world spoiled by evil and suffering still exists at all, it is an example of God's mercy, not his cruelty. It could even have been "the best possible world", but surely it is not now, and to judge God by the present world would be a tragic mistake. But what can God use to get our attention? Yancey explores Lewis phrase "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains, it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain loudly says that something is wrong.<sup>15</sup>

Yancey argues that while "some other religions try to deny all pain, or to rise above it. Christianity starts, rather, with the assertion that suffering exists, and exists as proof of our fallen state." The view Christianity presents deeply matches reality and freely admits that the world is wrecked by suffering. All optimism fades away in face of suffering, but Christian hope looks beyond this, as Yancey points out: "I can believe God when He says this world is not all there is, and take the chance that he is making a perfect place for those who follow him on pain-racked earth." In the face of suffering we can trust God, or we can blame him and not ourselves for the state of the world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 65.

<sup>12</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 66.

<sup>13</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 66-67.

<sup>14</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 67.

<sup>15</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 67-68.

<sup>16</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 70-71.



On one hand Yancey recognizes that suffering has a value in the way this planet emits constant cries for redemption and restoration. On the other, he does not believe that God permits suffering because of its 'megaphone value', nor does he believe it carries a specific message of 'You are suffering as a consequence of this action'. What he believes is that the megaphone of pain truly announces a message of distress to all humanity.<sup>17</sup>

### **2.3 How is faith addressed in the discussion of suffering?**

#### *2.3.1 What is God trying to tell us?*

Yancey argues that even faith in God does not offer insurance against tragedies, and nor does it offer insurance against feelings of doubt and betrayal: "If you believe in a world of pure chance, what difference does it make whether a bus from Yuba City or one from Salinas crashes? But if you believe in a world ruled by a powerful God who loves you tenderly, then it makes an awful difference." Yancey thinks that most of the mental turmoil about pain and suffering hinges on the important issue of *cause*. When he looks into the Bible through this perspective he finds many different causes for suffering. In some instances God is portrayed as the direct cause. In others, suffering is caused by evil spirits or Satan, or is a consequence of a person's own actions, but he has not found yet in the Bible any unified theory of causation.<sup>18</sup>

The book of Proverbs, for example, makes clear that our actions have a moral dimension, affecting our health and comfort. Taking drugs or abusing the environment will all have direct and painful consequences to both Christians and non-Christians. Another important dimension is that even today many Christians still think God punishes people with suffering because of their wrongdoing, 'You must have done something wrong to deserve this!' However, punishment requires a clear tie of behaviour "Think of a parent who punishes a young child. It would do little good for that parent to sneak up at odd times during a day and whack the child with no explanation. Such tactics would produce a neurotic, not an obedient child." In the Bible, for instance, the Israelites knew why they were being punished, for prophets had warned them long before in excruciating detail. The examples given in the Bible of suffering as punishment tend to fit a pattern "The pain comes after much warning, and no one sits around afterwards asking 'Why?' They know very well why they are suffering." Yancey frankly believes that unless God clearly reveals otherwise, it is better for us to find other biblical models than suffering as punishment since the occurrence of disease and pain seems to be random, completely unrelated to any pattern of virtue or vice, and because the Bible shows people who suffered and yet were not being punished by God.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 71.

<sup>18</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 78-79.

<sup>19</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 80-81.

While examining Jesus' life in the Bible, Yancey says that Christians in the first place believe that in Jesus Christ God entered human history, making himself subject to the physical laws and limitations of this planet. In this sense Jesus' response to suffering is the best clue we have of how God feels about human pain. Jesus never said to a poor or suffering person, 'accept it, this is your lot for life', but rather "He seemed unusually sensitive to the groans of suffering people, and set about remedying them. And he used his supernatural powers to heal, never to punish." In addition the Bible also tells us that Jesus did not make radical changes in the natural laws governing the planet. He did not even make improvements in the nervous system, but took on the pain network with all its undesirable features. Most striking is that "when he faced suffering personally, he reacted much as we do: with fear and dread."<sup>20</sup>

How did Jesus deal with the question "Who is responsible for suffering?" Just as seen earlier in the Old Testament perspective, there are several answers. In Luke 13:16 Jesus declares that Satan caused the pain of a woman bound in disease for eighteen years. By the end of the chapter Jesus expresses grief over the future of Jerusalem as her actions of stubborn rebellion would bring about much suffering. At the beginning of the chapter, first-century Jews ask Jesus about two incidents. One was an act of political oppression, in which Roman soldiers slaughtered members of a religious minority; and the other, a construction accident that killed eighteen people. Jesus' answer is at the same time enigmatic and brilliant. He does not fully answer the question of cause, but he does make clear that it did not happen because of wrongdoing and uses both tragedies to point to eternal truths relevant to everyone, 'Unless you repent, you too will all perish'.<sup>21</sup>

Is God, then, the cause? What is God trying to teach me? Yancey argues that maybe such people have got it all wrong "Maybe God *isn't trying to tell us anything specific* each time we hurt. Pain and suffering are part and parcel of our planet, and Christians are not exempt." If suffering has any 'general' message of warning to all humanity it is that something is wrong with this planet, and we need radical outside intervention. This is what pain as the megaphone of God points to, but on the other hand, we cannot argue it backwards and link a specific pain to a direct act of God. Yancey makes this approach clear using John 9 where Jesus refutes a traditional explanation of suffering: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?' In other words 'Why did he deserve blindness?' Jesus answers bluntly 'neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.'" The disciples wanted to look backward, to find out 'Why?', but Jesus redirected their attention pointing forward to a quite different question: 'To what end?' This is what Yancey believes is the summary of the

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<sup>20</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 82.

<sup>21</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 82-83.

Bible's approach to the problem of pain: "To backward-looking questions of cause, to the 'why?' questions, it (the Bible) gives no definitive answer. But it does hold out hope for the future, that even suffering can be transformed or 'redeemed'."<sup>22</sup>

### *2.3.2 Why are we here?*

Yancey says that the questions almost everyone asks in great pain are the same as Job's, even with a sense of betrayal: "Why me? What did I do wrong? What is God trying to tell me?" The book of Job is an extensive discussion on the mystery of suffering. From his friends Job hears, "No one suffers without a cause"; from his wife, "Curse God and die!" Job, however, cannot accept those options: "Against all evidence, he holds on to two seemingly contradictory beliefs: he, Job, does not deserve his tragedy, but still God deserves loyalty." Even though in the Old Testament suffering is so frequently identified with God's punishment, Job's example shines brightly "The book of Job should nail a coffin lid over the idea that every time we suffer it's because God is punishing us or trying to tell us something." Although the Bible supports the general principle that 'a man reaps what he sows' even in this life, Job shows this general rule cannot be applied to everyone.<sup>23</sup>

The main question the book of Job deals with is suffering, but underneath it there is a different issue at stake, the doctrine of human freedom:

The trials of Job stemmed from a debate in heaven over the question, 'Are humans being truly free?' In the first two chapters of Job, Satan reveals himself as the first great behaviourist. He claimed that faith is merely a product of environment and circumstances. Job was conditioned to love God. Take away the positive rewards, Satan challenged, and watch Job's faith crumble.<sup>24</sup>

The contest posed between Satan and God was no trivial exercise. Satan's accusation stands as an attack on God's character, implying "that God is not worthy of love in himself; faithful people like Job follow him only because they are 'bribed' to do so. Job's response when all props of faith are removed would prove or disprove Satan's challenge." Yancey says that a world of perfect fairness with no need of human freedom where everything would work tidily might have a certain appeal, but there is one serious problem with it, it is not at all what God wants to accomplish on earth: "He wants from us love, freely given love, and we dare not underestimate the premium God places on that love. Freely given love is so important to God that he allows our planet to be a cancer of evil in his universe – for a time."<sup>25</sup>

Such a world without freedom would be like an automaton world of action/response. Yancey stresses that God does not want it: "He loves us, gives himself to us, and eagerly

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<sup>22</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 84.

<sup>23</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 88-89.

<sup>24</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 89-90.

<sup>25</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 90.

awaits our free response. God wants us to choose to love him freely, even when that choice involves pain, because we are committed to him, not to our own good feelings and rewards. He wants us to cleave to him, as Job did, even when we have every reason to deny him hotly.” Yancey believes this is the central message of Job. If a world of perfect fairness would not produce what God wants from us and if our happiness is not God's goal, what, then, does God intend for this world? Why bother with us at all? As said before about pain in the context of leprosy, Yancey thinks that suffering in a related way can become a valuable instrument in accomplishing God's goal for human beings.<sup>26</sup>

Why are we here? Exploring C. S. Lewis and John Hick, Yancey stresses that human beings are not fully formed creatures yet and that the environment of earth is therefore to nurture the process of 'soul-making'. It is because God does not step in to have faith for us, or help us in extraordinary ways, but stands before us with arms extended, while he asks us to walk and participate in our own soul-making, even though it involves struggle and suffering. Yancey stresses that we are here to be changed, to be more like God, to be prepared for a time with him, but the process may be served by the mysterious pattern of all creation: “Pleasure sometimes emerges against a background of pain, evil may be transformed into good, and suffering may produce something of value.”<sup>27</sup>

Yancey believes it is important to discuss these issues of “the best of all possible worlds”, “the advantages of human freedom”, and “the vale of soul-making”. Even though they can deflect us from the real problem of people in pain, nonetheless they have a direct and practical effect in our response to suffering. They help Christians not to fall into two great errors of thinking: “The first error comes when we attribute all suffering to God, seeing it as his punishments for human mistakes; the second does just the opposite, assuming that life with God will never include suffering.”<sup>28</sup>

As to the first great error, Yancey stresses that if we accept suffering as a lesson from God then we end up in fatalism, if it is the way how God teaches us things, then there is no reason to fight cancer, AIDS and other diseases. In view of fatalism, Yancey recurs to Jesus example: “Jesus himself spent his life on earth fighting disease and despair. Not once did he hint at fatalism or a resigned acceptance of suffering.” As to the second great error, Yancey stresses that suffering is for all, and even Christians are no exception, we all fully share the sorrow of this world.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 91.

<sup>27</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 92-95.

<sup>28</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 96.

<sup>29</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 97-98.

### *2.3.3 Arms too short to box with God*

Yancey argues that Job is one who got the privilege of a personal visit from God (Job 38-41). Yet instead of answering questions, God turned the tables on Job with a series of questions of his own that virtually ignore thirty-five chapters worth of debate on the problem of pain.<sup>30</sup>

Although God's strange speech (which contained not a hint on the issue of cause) resolved Job's questions, it might not resolve ours. What can we, who have not had the privilege of hearing God's speech personally, learn from it? Yancey argues that what is shown in the book of Job reinforces Jesus' pattern in Luke 13 and John 9: "Suffering involves two main issues: (1) *cause* – Why are we suffering? Who did it? - and (2) *response*. By instinct, most of us want to figure out the cause of our pain before we decide how to respond. But God does not allow Job that option. He deflects attention from the issue of cause to the issue of Job's response." Besides God himself, the only thing that worried Job was his response. In view of this biblical pattern, Yancey stresses that Christians who suffer should not ask "Is God responsible?" but "How should I react now that this terrible thing has happened?", and because of it he changes the focus from theoretical questions about suffering to personal examples of actual people who responded to pain.<sup>31</sup>

Response always looks forward, for example, when the Bible says. "Rejoice in your suffering!" (Rom 5:3). That is not saying that Christians should be happy about tragedies or pain when they feel like crying. Rather it spotlights the end result, the productive use God can make of suffering in our lives. Suffering produces something, it has value and it changes us: "We rejoice not in the fact that we are suffering, but in our confidence that pain can be transformed. The value lies not in the pain itself, but in what we can make of it. The pain need not be meaningless, and therefore we rejoice in the object or our faith, a God who can effect that transformation." Yancey also stresses that we can safely say that God can bring good out of evil, but we cannot say that God brings evil about in hope of producing good.<sup>32</sup>

### *2.3.4 How People respond to Suffering*

The productive result of suffering and the crucial role of a person's response may sound fine in theory, but do these principles work out in actual life situations? Yancey then looks very closely into the life of two Christians: Brian Sternberg and Joni Eareckson Tada. He describes their lives before the accidents that made them quadriplegics and how they went through it. The concept of "the gift of pain" must sound hollow and sadistic to them, Yancey says, especially because pain is no more in its natural cycle and has become a kind of monster.

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<sup>30</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 104.

<sup>31</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 108.

<sup>32</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 110-111.

However, he sees that both Brian and Joni have found strength to continue, and even to grow, and their trust in God is an integral part of that process of healing wounded spirits. Both have endured trials and in different ways both lived out the truth of John 9, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”<sup>33</sup>

Looking at other people who also suffered and the Bible, Yancey arrives at what he calls a “Theology of Reversal” of suffering. It can be seen in Apostle Paul's strength being made perfect in weakness, or even Jesus in Hebrews 5:8, “He learned obedience from what he suffered.” Yancey stresses that this dimension, whereby pain can fortify instead of destroy, can be seen throughout the Bible where the first will be the last, he who humbles himself will be exalted, and others.<sup>34</sup> However, Yancey argues that the blessings that come out of those who depend on God in suffering can only be perceived in spiritual life, while it can be extremely elusive compared to the self-sufficiency of people who live in comfort. Paul, who had a “thorn in the flesh” which at first had no benefit for him, learned in the end that, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul's physical weakness was, in fact, being used to his own benefit. It kept him relying on God and not on himself, for strength, 'For when I am weak, then I am strong.', Paul concluded.<sup>35</sup>

It is one thing when suffering brings some good, but what about when it seems not to do so? Yancey then goes on to discuss what we understand as extreme cases, such as the Holocaust. As Yancey reads accounts of people in concentration camps who left their faith and those who continued believing despite their situation with the question 'Where was God?', he says that God was there, too. God did not exempt himself from human suffering. He too hung at Calvary, and that alone is what keeps Yancey believing in a God of love. God joined us, choosing to live among an oppressed people in circumstances of poverty and great affliction:

He too was an innocent victim of cruel, senseless torture. At that moment of black despair, the son of God cried out, much like the believers in the camps, “God why have you forsaken me?” Jesus the son of God on earth, embodied all that I have been trying to say about pain. Like Job, an innocent sufferer who preceded him, he did not receive an answer to the questions of *cause*: “Why?... Why?” he called out of from the cross, and heard nothing but the silence of God. Even so, he responded with faithfulness, turning his attention to the good that his suffering could produce: “... for the joy set before him [Christ] endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). What joy? The transformation, or redemption, of humanity.<sup>36</sup>

The Gospels tell that Jesus' suffering was not a matter of impotence. Power was not an issue, but somehow he had to go through it to redeem the fallen creation. Human suffering remains

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<sup>33</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 117-142.

<sup>34</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 148.

<sup>35</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 150-151.

<sup>36</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 159-160.

meaningless and barren unless God transforms it. In Jesus we have that assurance: “It is called the resurrection, the moment of victory when the last enemy, death itself, is defeated. A seeming tragedy, Jesus' crucifixion, made possible the ultimate healing of the world.”<sup>37</sup>

On the question “Did God desire the Holocaust?” Yancey asks another: “Did God desire the death of his own son?” Probably not, God's character would possibly never desire such atrocities and yet both happened. The question then moves from the unanswerable 'Why?' to another question, 'To what end?' We never know in advance how suffering can be transformed into a cause for celebration. That is what faith is called to believe.<sup>38</sup>

## **2.4 How is the discussion relevant to the suffering in the world?**

### *2.4.1 How can we cope with Pain?*

While Yancey explored the lives of people who were almost defined by suffering, he says that for most of us suffering comes for briefer periods and with less intensity, but one fact that holds true for both major and minor afflictions is that people respond differently.<sup>39</sup> In the context of what could be said to help those hurt and even us, Yancey stresses that there is no magic formula. The discouraging fact is that there is not much one can say to help suffering people. A non-answer, however, is surprisingly good news. When he asked suffering people “Who helped you most?” he understood that what suffering people need is love and not knowledge or wisdom. This is how God uses ordinary people to bring about healing. Through the “Make Today Count” meetings Yancey came up with four 'frontiers' which all suffering people battle and on which our response to suffering largely depends: the frontiers of fear, helplessness, meaning and hope.<sup>40</sup>

Yancey argues that fear is the universal primal response to suffering and yet beyond doubt it is also the single greatest 'Enemy of recovery'. People in suffering, whether from physical or psychological pain, often feel an oppressive sense of being abandoned by God and others. Loneliness increases fear, which in turn increases the pain, and downward the spiral goes.<sup>41</sup> Yancey says that the entire first half of the book represents his attempt to disarm 'fear'. The knowledge about pain and its role in our lives helps to diminish fear. Yancey says the Bible offers us a great antidote to fear 'Perfect love drives out fear', the God of perfect love can conquer fear as light destroys darkness. In such a world, we have the choice to fear God, or to fear everything else. Famine? No, for God can supply. Death? Even that, the worst

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<sup>37</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 160-161.

<sup>38</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 161.

<sup>39</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 167.

<sup>40</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 172-173.

<sup>41</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 175, 177.

human fear, is no permanent barrier for those who fear God.<sup>42</sup>

But how can we alleviate people's fear? Yancey stresses two dimensions: being available and being God's agents. Yancey argues that Job's friends, despite the mess they made afterwards, started well. They sat in silence with Job for seven days and seven nights, and those were the most eloquent moments they spent with him. To the question "Who helped you most?", people generally described a quiet person, who listened more than talked, who did not keep glancing at a watch, who hugged, touched, and cried with them. Someone who was available on the sufferer's terms and not their own. Suffering people often have a sense that God has left them, and because of it Yancey believes that we as the body of Christ are called to show love when God seems not to do so: "those of us who stand alongside must sometimes voice prayers that the suffering person cannot yet pray. In moments of extreme suffering or grief, very often God's love is best perceived through the flesh of ordinary people like you and me. In such a way we can indeed function as the body of Jesus Christ."<sup>43</sup>

In view of helplessness, Yancey says that suffering people already have misgivings about their place in the world. They often have to stop working. Illness and treatment change their habits, when it does not become even more difficult or tedious. Yet, like us, they need something to cling to and provide an assurance that they have a place.<sup>44</sup> He stresses that people who do not simply resign before their condition and try to dignify their suffering, in the end are the best ones to help others, simply because there is no more effective healer than a wounded healer, and in the process the wounded healer's own scars may fade away.<sup>45</sup>

As regards the meaning of suffering, Yancey stresses that while there is fruitless pain, there are other pains that have meaning in themselves, such as the pains of giving birth: though it hurts it produces something with meaning, a new life. Yancey stresses that our modern society is one which struggles with the meaning of suffering. Suffering for us is something to treat and get over with. We mostly see only a negative meaning in suffering because it interrupts health, and slams an unwelcome brake on our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.<sup>46</sup>

Yancey says that the first step in helping a suffering person or in accepting our own pain, is to acknowledge that pain is valid, and worthy of a sympathetic response. In this way, we can begin to ascribe meaning to pain. However, there is a danger that even well-intended comments in a context of intense suffering may produce greater distress in the sufferer than

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<sup>42</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 178-179.

<sup>43</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 181-185.

<sup>44</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 187-189.

<sup>45</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 197-198.

<sup>46</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 200.



the illness itself. Christians in first place should keep people from suffering for the wrong reasons, we are called to honour their pain. The search for meaning should follow the Biblical pattern, moving in a forward-looking direction, toward the results of suffering, rather on its cause. Viktor Frankl, who spent time in one of Hitler's camps, said that "Despair is suffering without meaning." Yancey stresses that suffering can produce something worthwhile: "If we turn to God in trust, the affliction itself can be redeemed, by helping to form our character in Christ's own image."<sup>47</sup>

Sometimes suffering does not allow people to draw any meaning from it, however. We need to share meaning with them, in union with the sufferer, even when the only meaning we can offer to a suffering person is that it has meaning for us. He argues in this way because "in doing so, we follow God's pattern, for he too took on pain. He joined us and lived a life of more suffering and poverty than most of us will ever know. Suffering can never ultimately be meaningless, because God himself has shared it."<sup>48</sup>

Yancey stresses that hope is medicinal. As Harold G. Wolf puts it, "Hope, faith and a purpose in life, is medicinal. This is not merely a statement of belief but a conclusion proved by meticulously controlled experiment." Hope is a mechanism of survival, it sustains life.<sup>49</sup> Hope means simply the belief that something good lies ahead. It is not as optimism or wishful thinking, for those imply a denial of reality. Hope involves a leap, like faith "... hope that is not seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." (Rom 8:24-25) True hope is honest. It even saves us from pessimism, the belief that the universe is a chaos without final meaning.<sup>50</sup>

In view of this Yancey says, "I would be remiss if I did not mention in this chapter as well the final hope of resurrection, the hope for a new world in which the 'problem of pain' will seem like a distant memory." Christians believe that no matter how painful things look in the present, something really good does lie ahead.<sup>51</sup>

#### *2.4.2 God Seeing for Himself*

Yancey argues that every religion must somehow address the problem of pain. Much of what he has presented till now applies to all people regardless of religious belief. So what difference does Christian faith make especially? "Where is God?" is a question that every suffering person eventually asks. How does God feel about my plight? Does he care?<sup>52</sup> Worse

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<sup>47</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 203-204.

<sup>48</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 207-208.

<sup>49</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 212-213.

<sup>50</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 214-215.

<sup>51</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 217.

<sup>52</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 225.

than saying that it is all right with the world is that God seems to stay in heaven despite our misery. “Why doesn't he do something?” Yancey answers “The fact is, God did come. He entered this world in human flesh and saw and felt for himself what this world is like.” Apart from the incarnation our faith would have little to hold on to.<sup>53</sup>

Yancey also recognizes that the fact that Jesus came to earth where he suffered and died does not remove pain from our lives: “But it does show that God did not sit idly by and watch us suffer in isolation. He became one of us. Thus, in Jesus, God gives us an up-close and personal look at his response to human suffering. All our questions about God and suffering should, in fact, be filtered through what we know about Jesus.” Jesus' own response to suffering should convince us that God is not a God who enjoys seeing us suffer. Quoting Dorothy Sayers, Yancey says that God had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine, and whatever game he is playing, he has kept his own rules and played fair till the cross.<sup>54</sup>

In this dimension Yancey argues that Jesus' own life on earth should forever answer the question, How does God feel about our pain? In reply, God did not give us words or theories on the problem of pain. He gave us himself. The cross offers proof that God cares about our suffering and pain. The symbol of the cross stands unique among all religions of the world. Only one has cared enough to become a man and die. Jesus' death is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, but what possible contribution to the problem of pain could come from a religion based on an event like the cross, where God himself succumbed to pain? Yancey answers, “If Jesus was a mere man, his death would prove God's cruelty; the fact that he was God's son proves instead that God fully identifies with suffering humanity. On the cross, God himself absorbed the awful pain of this world.” At Calvary, God accepted his own unbreakable terms of justice. Any discussion of how pain and suffering fit into God's scheme ultimately leads back to the cross.<sup>55</sup> The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ matters because it provides more than an abstract theological answer to the problem of pain.<sup>56</sup>

#### *2.4.3 The rest of the Body*

During his three years of public ministry, anyone could come to Jesus with problems and suffering, follow him and by observing his reactions to sick and needy people go away with a clear answer to the question, “How does God feel about my pain?”. But of course Jesus did not stay visibly on earth, How about us today? How can we sense God's love?<sup>57</sup>

Yancey answers this with two main suggestions given by the authors of the New

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<sup>53</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 226-227.

<sup>54</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 229.

<sup>55</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 230-232.

<sup>56</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 233.

<sup>57</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 239.

Testament: The first is in Romans 8 “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” The God who in Jesus walks “alongside us”, is also revealed in the Epistles as the God “within us”, through his Spirit. Romans 8 announces that we need not to figure out how to pray, we need only to groan.<sup>58</sup> The second answer the New Testament gives is “the body of Christ” as Yancey argues: “A careful reading of the four gospels shows that this new arrangement was what Jesus had in mind all along. He knew his time on earth was short, and he proclaimed a mission that went beyond even his death and resurrection. 'I will build my church', he declared, 'and the gates of hell will not prevail against it'.” (Matt 16:18) Suffering is seen differently when Christ is the invisible head of a large body. The phrase 'the body of Christ' expresses well what we are called to do: to represent in flesh what Christ is like, especially to those in need. The apostle Paul must have had it in mind when he wrote, “God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (2 Cor 1:4-5) To bear one another's burdens, as the Bible says, is a lesson about pain that we all can agree on.<sup>59</sup>

Yancey stresses that the sense of pain is what unites the body of Christ and as members of Christ's body, we should learn to attend to the pains of the rest of the body. Only then will we become an incarnation of Christ's risen body. It is easier for us to avoid people in need, but ministering to the needy is not an option for Christians, but a command, “We-you, I-am part of God's response to the massive suffering of this world. As Christ's body on earth we are compelled to move, as he did, toward those who hurt. That has been God's consistent movement in all history.” Do we listen to the cries of the world? Are we attending to them?<sup>60</sup>

Some of us perhaps will see pain as a gift, whilst some will always accuse God of being unfair for allowing it, but the fact is that pain and suffering are among us, and we need to respond in some way. Yancey says “Today, if I had to answer the question 'Where is God when it hurts?' in a single sentence, I would make another question: 'Where is the church when it hurts?' We form the front line of God's response to the suffering world.” We see it clearly in 1 John 3:16-18 “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 239-240.

<sup>59</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 240-241.

<sup>60</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 242-243.

<sup>61</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 246-247.

#### 2.4.4 *A whole New World outside*

For the person who suffers, Christianity offers one last contribution, the most important contribution of all, Jesus' resurrection. Yancey argues "The resurrection and its victory over death brought a decisive new word to the vocabulary of pain and suffering: temporary. Jesus Christ holds out the starting promise of an afterlife without pain. Whatever we feel now will not last. The Christian's final hope, then, is hope in a painless future, with God."<sup>62</sup>

Talking about belief in an afterlife may sound cowardly to modern ears or even an escape from this world's problems, but modern people seek to cope with death by avoiding it altogether. Death is an enemy, a grievous enemy. The Bible states it is the last one to be destroyed. The Bible also states clearly that this is a groaning planet, and Christians expectantly await a world where every tear will be wiped away: "Christ stands for life, and his resurrection should give convincing proof that God is not satisfied with any 'cycle of life' that ends in death. He will go to any extent – He *did* go to any extent – to break that circle."<sup>63</sup>

Yancey states that Jesus' resurrection is what best defines God, "Apart from Easter, apart from a life that continues beyond this one, apart from all that, we could indeed judge God less-than-powerful or less-than-loving or even cruel. The Bible stakes God's reputation on his ability to restore creation to its original state of perfection." What kind of God would be satisfied forever with a world like this one, spoiled by suffering and death? Jesus himself said to his disciples "Do not be afraid of those who can only kill your body; they cannot kill your soul", showing them that physical death is not the end. We need not fear it, but we should not welcome it either because it is the enemy of life. To view the role of pain and suffering properly in human history, one must await the whole story, because any discussion on suffering is incomplete without the view from the vantage point of eternity.<sup>64</sup>

Yancey says that his anger about pain has melted away because he has come to know God. Where is God when it hurts? Yancey answers that God has been there from the beginning; that He transforms pain; that with great restraint He watches this rebellious planet live on; that He let us cry out like Job; that He allies himself with the poor and suffering; that He promises supernatural help; that He has joined us, He is with us now and He is waiting for us. Then, God will create for us a new, incredible world, and pain shall be no more.<sup>65</sup>

### **2.5 Summary of this chapter**

Yancey starts his book by firstly examining pain biologically to see what role it plays in life. Through the help given by Dr. Brand he stresses that pain is part of life and as important as

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<sup>62</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 249.

<sup>63</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 250-251.

<sup>64</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 252, 256-257.

<sup>65</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 261.

other features of our bodies, though he also recognizes that not all pain is good and there are pains that have gone wrong and out of control. These pains that are out of control he mainly attributes to the abuse of two features God built into Creation, both good in themselves, which are a physical world running by consistent natural laws and human freedom. He especially emphasizes the Fall and the abuse of that freedom as the moment when evil first took place in the world. He stresses that Creation was originally good but went wrong.

Yancey also explores whether God is trying to tell us something through pain, where he recognizes that in some sense pain shows our cry for redemption in view of our groaning world, but says that God did not intend it that way. He also corrects many wrong understandings in the face of suffering, looking to the Bible and especially to the person of Jesus Christ. He emphasizes that the Bible never answers questions of the cause of suffering, but raises a more important question: that is, 'to what end?' He then concentrates his efforts on how we should respond to suffering, highlighting that suffering and pain need not be meaningless and that suffering can be transformed and dignified.

Looking at the lives of suffering people Yancey investigates how people respond when suffering strikes, and shows how the Christian faith can help us in that. He stresses that faith is what enables us to move from the backward-looking question 'Why?' to the forward-looking question 'To what end?', and consequently into the arena of transformation of suffering. He also stresses the importance of Christians as the risen body of Christ in the world making God's love visible in service to others. In God we do not need to fear suffering, because Jesus' resurrection has proved it to be a temporary reality. Lastly, he emphasizes the Christian hope that in Christ God will make all things new in the coming Kingdom of God.

Chapter Three

“THE DOORS OF THE SEA” - DAVID BENTLEY HART

**3.1 Overview**

The present chapter reviews Hart's book “*The Doors of the Sea – Where was God in the Tsunami?*” The author, David Bentley Hart, is an Eastern Orthodox theologian, philosopher, and cultural commentator. He was most recently a visiting professor at Providence College, where he also previously held the Robert J. Randall Chair in Christian Culture.

The review will focus on the relation of Hart's views to the main aims presented for this thesis, which are understanding suffering in the light of the Christian faith and how suffering in the world can also be addressed.

The book was written as a response to the many critics to the Christian faith in view of the tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean in 2004. It was first a brief column in *The Wall Street Journal* which Hart was asked to expand into another paper. Later, at the suggestion of friends and following responses to both papers the present book came to press.<sup>66</sup>

**3.2 How does the author understand the reality of suffering?**

*3.2.1 Tragedies and unfair responses to suffering*

Hart's first approach is to examine how people react to suffering. Hart argues that we should probably have all remained silent for a while in view of the dread caused by the scope of the catastrophe in the Indian Ocean and of the agonies and sorrows which had visited so many: “The claim to discern some greater meaning – or, for that matter, meaninglessness – behind the contingencies of history and nature is both cruel and presumptuous at such times. Pious platitudes and words of comfort seem not only futile and banal, but almost blasphemous; metaphysical disputes come perilously close to mocking the dead.” There are moments, simply said, when we probably ought not to speak. However, we must speak.<sup>67</sup>

In this respect Hart literally challenges both religious people and sceptics who in the wake of a great disaster have the need to announce their own responses to it. Religious people generally tend to announce whatever greater significance they find in the event, mainly moved by an urgent moral need to sow light in the midst of darkness or by taking the torments of others as an occasion for reiterating one or another set of personal convictions. Not much different are the pretentious atheists who leap in, asserting that in view of such vast

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<sup>66</sup>David B. Hart, *The Doors of the Sea – Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Cambridge: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), ix-x.

<sup>67</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 5-7.

horrors there is no possibility of reconciling it with the belief in a loving and omnipotent God, and that faith now is shattered into pieces. Hart stresses that when a tragedy such as the Indian Ocean Disaster befalls it has absolutely nothing to teach us about the world we live in, or the nature of finitude that we did not already know perfectly well.<sup>68</sup> Secularists themselves do not imagine that Christianity has never at any point in its long intellectual tradition considered the problem of evil, or confronted the reality of suffering and death, or even responded to these issues.<sup>69</sup> If the Indian Ocean tragedy raises any challenge for a belief it is surely for the belief in the God of supreme goodness and love.<sup>70</sup>

The main problem with such assertions is that they think they can put God in a box and simply judge him on human grounds, as if God could be measured upon the same scales as ours, and whose ultimate ends for his creatures do not transcend the cosmos as we perceive it. Hart stresses that no one can draw conclusions about God and his infinite experiences unless one knows everything about God's own reality such as see the beginning and end of all things, or grasp infinite wisdom. In this respect one may still hate God for worldly suffering, or even deny him, but no one can disprove him on rational grounds.<sup>71</sup>

Hart argues that it is fairly easy to dismiss such argumentation by simply ignoring it, but we should not, because if we do not respond to their complaints we will give them permission to go even further in such thinking. Hart says that Christians should not only give them attention but also some measure of sympathy, because “the secret irony pervading these arguments is that they would never have occurred to consciences that had not in some profound way been shaped by the moral universe of a Christian culture.” Such unbelief is marked by an authentic moral horror before the misery in the world, a rage for justice, and by a refusal of easy comfort, which are just mirrors from Christian beliefs.<sup>72</sup>

### *3.2.2 What kind of God are they talking about?*

Intrigued by such complaints, Hart then examines what kind of God they are addressing. He starts by looking at Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, which was a response to the great earthquake that struck Lisbon on all Saints' day in 1755.<sup>73</sup>

Hart states that Voltaire was not an atheist, but an austere deist who had a quite genuine admiration for the God who had made the universe and then left it to its own immanent devices. Voltaire's poem was not an attack on the idea of a creator God, but an

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<sup>68</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 7-8.

<sup>69</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 9-10.

<sup>70</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 12-13.

<sup>71</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 13-14.

<sup>72</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 15.

<sup>73</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 16.

attack on the sort of theodicy that had become standard in his time with the metaphysical optimism of the works of Leibniz and others. Voltaire attacked the imbecility of popular theodicy's attempt to explain away cosmic evil by appealing to universal laws that were set in place to assure the greatest possible good for creatures.<sup>74</sup> In the poem Voltaire invites all philosophers who say that 'all is well' to come and contemplate the wreck and ruins of Lisbon and explain what universal good they can unfold from the cosmic necessity of such tragedy.<sup>75</sup>

Even though Voltaire's poem is not directly concerned with the God of Christian doctrine, it does concern a God who directly governs a cosmos that is exactly as he intended it to be. Hart argues that nowhere does Voltaire address the Christian belief of ancient alienation from God that has wounded Creation so deeply, reducing the reality we know to a shadow of what God intends and enslaved Creation to spiritual and terrestrial powers which are hostile to God. Nor he is concerned with the biblical narrative of redemption.<sup>76</sup>

In this sense, the main problem with Voltaire, with theodicy's attempts, and with the atheists' assertions is precisely: What kind of God they are talking about? Hart says that actually no one has ever believed in such kind of gods as are the focus of their complaint, and this is not even the God of other religions.<sup>77</sup> Hart points out that "if we are honest in asking what God this is that all our skeptics so despise, we must ultimately conclude that, while he is not the God announced by the Christian Gospel, he is, however, a kind of distorted echo of that announcement." Christianity does not only proclaim a God of infinite goodness but equates that goodness with infinite love, and the truth behind this mask of a God in whom no one really believes, is that at its very heart lies a shadow memory of the God Christians proclaim.<sup>78</sup>

### *3.2.3 Some 'well intended' Christian responses*

Besides the atheist's complaints against God because of the tsunami, there were a number of unfair statements made by people claiming to speak from Christian convictions. The main topics attributed the disaster to God's wrath against those countries for persecuting Christians or said that God had sent the tsunami to teach a very important lesson to all of us. When Hart was asked to write his column for the *Wall Street Journal*, they invited him to view a number of Christian websites in order to respond to their queries. What most struck him besides silliness and eloquence was how incompatible and different were the many theological positions.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 17.

<sup>75</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 18-19.

<sup>76</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 21-22.

<sup>77</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 23-24.

<sup>78</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 24-25.

<sup>79</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 26-27.



He mentions a Calvinist pastor who, intoxicated with divine sovereignty, attributed the tragedy to a direct expression of divine will. Another said that suffering and death possess an epistemic significance to show us some attributes of God that would not be otherwise displayed. Hart himself wonders what those attributes are. Yet another stressed it was a privilege for those innocent people to bear scars like Christ's, resulting in a higher beatitude that could never been achieved otherwise. One clear thing in all such responses was that they tried to believe "that there is a divine plan in all the seeming randomness of nature's violence that accounts for *every* instance of suffering, privation, and loss in a sort of total sum."<sup>80</sup>

However, God's providence does not work that way, otherwise the world would be both arbitrary and necessary, both meaningful in every part and meaningless in its totality, and an expression of pure power and nothing else from a God who creates some people for eternal bliss and others for eternal torment. Hart argues that "Such a God, at the end of the day, is nothing but will, and so nothing but an infinite brute event; and the only adoration that such a God can evoke is an almost perfect coincidence of faith and nihilism." Hart says that such an incoherent view of God only provides room for critics of the Christian faith.<sup>81</sup>

Equally problematic is the view that all suffering and death should be seen as the precise recompense for human sin. It becomes a banality in view of the death of an infant because of a disease compared to the death of a serial murderer late in life from a heart attack. Hart makes it clear, using the example Jesus gave forbidding his disciples to believe that there is a reason behind misfortune and culpability, that "neither those whose blood Pilate mingled with the sacrifices nor those eighteen upon whom the Tower of Siloam fell met their fates on account of some especial degree of iniquity on their parts." (Luke 13:1-5) Even grace does not follow this pattern in that there is no distinction between the rewards reserved for the righteous corresponding to the diversity of their merits: "those who labor all the day and those who labor but an hour receive the same wages." (Matt 20:1-16)<sup>82</sup>

In addition, on the concept of the original sin Hart stresses that while all Christians must believe that we are born in sin, subject to death, corrupted in body and soul, suffering disturbances of will and desire, that our minds are darkened, and that we are unable to save ourselves; it is only according to Western tradition that the additional idea of an inherited guilt became a feature of original sin, asserting that what happens is simply what we deserve. However, neither in Western nor in Eastern tradition "is it possible intelligibly to assert that the death of a small child is in some unambiguous sense an expression of divine justice."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 27-29.

<sup>81</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 30.

<sup>82</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 30-31.

<sup>83</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 32-34.

Hart stresses that what struck him most forcibly in those views was that in their evident need to produce an apologia for God that precluded the possibility of any absurd or pointless remainder in the order of creation and redemption, they lost sight of some vital aspects of the language of the New Testament. He says that little was said about the fullness of grace, the 'free gift' of salvation, or the 'unjust' mercy that distributes the same rewards to all who have laboured, no matter the length of their service, or even God's gracious and magnanimous indifference to what we deserve. Nothing was said regarding the triumphalism of the Gospel or the Johannine and Pauline imagery of spiritual warfare, or that death and its power has been overcome. He sums up by saying that in the New Testament suffering and death have no true meaning or purpose at all considered in themselves, and this is in a very real sense the most liberating and joyous wisdom that the Gospel imparts.<sup>84</sup>

#### *3.2.4 The moral complaint of Ivan Karamazov*

Still reflecting on what lies behind such complaints, Hart considers the case for 'rebellion' against 'the will of God' in view of human suffering posed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov.<sup>85</sup> Hart suggests that Ivan's complaint is important to be addressed because no one who is not a Christian could ever understand the spiritual and moral motives of such rebellion against innocent suffering with such fullness.<sup>86</sup>

In this respect Hart says that "Ivan does not much concern himself with the randomness of natural calamity, as Voltaire does; The evils Ivan recounts to his brother Alexey (or Alyosha) are acts not of impersonal nature but of men, for which one can at least assign a clear culpability." Differently from the common views on the kinds of evil<sup>87</sup>, Hart points out that humanity's moral evil is no less a part of the natural order than earthquakes and floods are, and that this human propensity for malice should be no less a scandal to the conscience as compared to the most violent convulsions of the physical world:

Whatever else human evil is, it is – considered apart from any religious doctrine – a cosmic constant, ceaselessly pouring forth from hidden springs of brute impulse and aimless will, driven by some deep prompting nature as we know it, and so it raises all the same questions concerning the world and its maker that are raised by natural disasters: *unde hoc malum* – Whence this evil? And what sort of God permits it?<sup>88</sup>

Ivan does not really represent himself as an atheist, he does not know if there is a God or not, especially because he says that the very idea of God is so implausibly wise and holy for a

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<sup>84</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 34-35.

<sup>85</sup>"Grand Inquisitor" is the name of the section where Ivan's conversation with Alyosha takes place in Dostoyevsky's book *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part Two, Book V, Chapters 3-5.

<sup>86</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 36.

<sup>87</sup>Moral evil is that caused by human willing agency such as crime and violence, or by unintended agency such as an accident; While natural evil is that caused randomly by nature such as a flood or an earthquake. (Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 615.)

<sup>88</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 36-37.

Euclidean mind<sup>89</sup> to grasp. Ivan even says that it is better not to worry about ultimate things because our minds are conformed to the circumstances of this world, which is the only thing they can meaningfully judge. Ivan's complaint is not against the idea that there is a God who has a perfect plan for the whole creation. It is creation itself that he rejects.<sup>90</sup>

Hart stresses that this splendid perverse genius of Ivan's (or Dostoyevsky's) argument is what makes him a rebel rather than a mere unbeliever. Ivan even willing grants that in the end all will be fine, that all suffering and evil will be gone and explained; but he still rejects the world that God has made and that final harmony with it. To elucidate his complaint, Ivan tells Alyosha many stories about the torture and murder, principally of innocent children, but Ivan specifically emphasizes one:

He tells a story of a 'cultured and respectable' couple who tortured their five-year-old daughter with constant beatings, and who – to punish her, allegedly, for fouling her bed – filled her mouth with excrement and locked her on freezing nights in an outhouse. And he invites Alyosha to imagine that child, in the bitter chill and darkness and stench of that place, striking her breast with her tiny fist, weeping her supplications to 'gentle Jesus', begging God to release her from her misery, and then to say whether anything – the knowledge of good and evil, for instance – could possibly be worth the bleak brutal absurdity of that little girl's torments...<sup>91</sup>

Ivan's struggle is mainly to 'what sense can a finite Euclidean mind make of such things?' He cannot accept a future promise of justice that will be worked out. Ivan wants to see that final harmony now and hear the explanation for why such horrors were necessary, and cannot conceive the suffering of innocent children as part of that final equation.<sup>92</sup>

Hart argues that what makes Ivan's argument so disturbing is not that he simply accuses God of failing to save the innocent, for he even grants that in some sense God will 'save' them and will show the role it played in the final beatitude of all creatures. However, what Ivan rejects is salvation itself as he understands it and, on moral grounds, he rejects anything that would involve such a rescue, anything that would make the suffering of children meaningful or necessary. Ivan can accept neither the harmony nor the knowledge of such ultimate truth at such a cost, since for Ivan nothing is worthy of the tears of a tortured child. Ivan therefore is not denying that there is a God or a divine design in all things. He simply has nothing to do with such a God and his Kingdom.<sup>93</sup>

Hart is convinced that Ivan's discourse constitutes the only challenge to a confidence

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<sup>89</sup>Euclidean mind refers to a finite mind bound to the conditions of time and space, unable to grasp those transcendent designs by which God undoubtedly guides all things toward their final harmony. Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 38.

<sup>90</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 37-38.

<sup>91</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 39-40.

<sup>92</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 40.

<sup>93</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 40-42.

in divine goodness that should give Christian serious cause for deep and difficult reflection. It even attempts to be higher and purer than God himself who governs the world, which at its deepest level is profoundly and almost prophetically a Christian argument.<sup>94</sup>

Hart says that a proper response to Ivan's manifesto is woven throughout the novel that follows. Those who doubt that any satisfactory answer is given do so because they have either failed to appreciate how radical that answer is, or most especially they have not appreciated how radical is the question. The good thing about Ivan's argument is its spiritual clean break with all unsound theologies, fatalistic and deterministic views of the world, and on the confidence of rational theodicy, showing on moral grounds that there is no reasoning that can justify suffering. Ivan's argument is a Christian argument because it works on a *sub contrario* certitude in the justness in all things, highlighting the radical and magnificent theology of the Gospel: "Ivan's rage against explanations arises from a Christian conscience, and so – even if Ivan cannot acknowledge it – its inner mystery is an empty tomb, which has shattered the heart of nature and history alike (as we understand them) and fashioned them anew."<sup>95</sup>

### *3.2.5 A disenchanted Natural World?*

After establishing that it is God's own revelation that creates the complaints against God, Hart then looks into evil and how it relates to our reality. Hart starts by addressing the fact that people from the modern scientific age do not believe nature to be a source of compelling moral truths, but something essentially neutral, mindless. Though nature in itself is glorious in all its benefits and majesty, it also astonishes and horrifies us with its power and sublime indifference, exciting on the one hand, but terrible, pitiless, and destructive on the other.<sup>96</sup>

Hart says that in a way it is correct to argue that the world has long been considered disenchanted, simply because through the revelation of the one God in whom all things live, move and have their being, Christianity has freed the human imagination from its subjugation to the cosmic and elemental principalities of the world.<sup>97</sup> However, Hart argues that this is not the case compared to late antiquity or even the early and higher Middle Ages, which evacuated the world from all supernatural agency, regarding the old gods as myths.<sup>98</sup>

One example Hart emphasizes of the modern view of nature is "Natural Theology". It is concerned with the evidences in nature of a designing intelligence of a craftsman God to be found in the complexity of his handiwork. Yet Hart argues that such theology is dangerous, because at the same time as the natural world overwhelms us with its splendour and beauty,

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<sup>94</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 42-43.

<sup>95</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 43-44. "Empty tomb" refers to Christ's resurrection.

<sup>96</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 46-47.

<sup>97</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 47-48.

<sup>98</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 48-49.

all this glorious loveliness of the natural world is preserved by death, where life feeds on life in a perpetual struggle to survive and increase at the expense of other beings. Hart even argues that it is as if the entire cosmos were somehow predatory, “creating and devouring all things with terrible and impassive majesty.” Nature as we see it is a cycle of sacrifice, and religion has often tried to reconcile us to this reality.<sup>99</sup>

However, the Christian vision of God, of the world, and how God is reflected within his Creation, is different from that. It sees the glory of God in all things, but it is not a glory conformed to the dimensions of logic of nature as we see it. It renders nature as mysterious, alters it, elevates it, judges and even redeems it. In this sense Hart argues that the uneasiness caused by evil and suffering is just a shadow cast by the light of the Gospel. It is but an echo of the moral freedom proclaimed by the Gospel, and can even be considered a kind of unwilling confession of belief, but obviously not faith. That is why for the sceptic there is no other God than the Christian God of infinite love who merits the effort of active unbelief.<sup>100</sup>

### *3.2.6 The Creation in chains*

Following the discussion above, Hart argues that the Christian metaphysical tradition both in the East and in the West points out that God is not only good but goodness itself, not only true or beautiful but infinite truth and beauty, everything perfect is in him who is the source and end of all things. Therefore, everything that comes from God must be good and true and beautiful. Christians are called to see the whole created order through God's love and goodness. If God is the sole source of being, then everything that is created is entirely worthy of love.<sup>101</sup>

Hart quotes St. Bonaventure and Thomas Traherne to depict the multitude of wonders and delights that are displayed in the created order, “The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it. It is a temple of majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of light and peace, did not men disquiet it. It is the paradise of God.”<sup>102</sup> Hart suggests that this dimension can be perceived neither by an optimist, nor any theodicy, nor even the natural theology which sees God as a mere wise and powerful engineer. Christians, however, are called to see a deeper truth in the world than mere 'nature', and this truth gives rise not to optimism but to joy.<sup>103</sup>

Hart argues that to see the world in view of God's glory reflected in it, requires the cultivation of charity and an eye purified by love, as he quotes Isaac the Syrian:

The heart of such a man is humbled by the powerful and fervent mercy that has

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<sup>99</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 49-52.

<sup>100</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 54.

<sup>101</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 54-55. It is important to notice here for the discussion that will follow Hart's emphasis in that *all created things*, all that have their beings, are worthy of love, because God is the one who created them.

<sup>102</sup>The quote is from Thomas Traherne. Hart, *The Door of the Sea*, 55-57.

<sup>103</sup>Hart, *The Door of the Sea*, 57-58.

captured it and by the immense compassion it feels, and it cannot endure to see or hear of any suffering or any grief anywhere within creation. Hence he constantly lifts up tearful prayers for God's care for and mercy upon even unreasoning brutes and enemies of truth and all who do him injury.<sup>104</sup>

Christians, therefore, should not see only one reality, but two realities at once, one world within another: seeing on the one hand the world as creation, radiant with the beauty of God in every part and innocent of all violence, and on the other seeing this Creation in chains of anguish and death, which is the world as we know it, though still beautiful as in the beginning.<sup>105</sup>

In this dimension Hart suggests that it is strange how sceptics demand that Christians account for evil, both physical and moral in such a way that it will fit in with God's will for his creatures and the conditions of earthly life. It is impossible because the Christian thought simply denies that suffering, death, and evil have any ultimate value or spiritual meaning at all – even though God may use these things of a fallen reality which in themselves are intrinsically devoid of substance or purpose as occasions for accomplishing his good ends.<sup>106</sup>

Surely no other doctrine strikes non-Christians as more offensive than the claim that we exist in the long sorrowful consequences of a primordial catastrophe. That this is a broken and wounded world, that we live in between creation in its fullness and the nullity and struggles of subjection to the 'powers' and 'principalities' of this age, which never cease in their enmity toward the Kingdom of God. Even Christians can be struck by this mythological and dualistic image, assuming forms of fundamentalism or even fearing that denying evil and death would mean denying divine omnipotence as well. As disturbing as it may be, within the New Testament there is a kind of 'provisional' dualism, “not an ultimate dualism, of course, between two equal principles; but certainly a conflict between a sphere of created autonomy that strives against God on the one hand and the saving love of God in time on the other.”<sup>107</sup>

In this dimension Hart argues that in the Fall of humanity all of material existence was made subject to the dominion of death and to a more reckless hand by the misuse of the freedom God granted his creatures. Even with the possibility of God's will being resisted by an autonomous force, which is only possible by grace, it does not mean it can ruin the final realization of the good which God intends in all things as he brings the divine victory.<sup>108</sup>

### **3.3 How is faith addressed in the discussion of suffering?**

#### *3.3.1 The Two Kingdoms*

On the understanding of creation as in chains of anguish and death, Hart emphasizes that the

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<sup>104</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 59-60.

<sup>105</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 60-61.

<sup>106</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 61.

<sup>107</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 61-63.

<sup>108</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 63.

word 'world' (*kosmos*) appears in the New Testament with two and quite distinct and even opposed meanings. The first is when it is used as a synonym for 'Creation' (*ktisis*) signifying the handiwork of God and the object of his redemption (John 3:16-17; 12:47), and also when 'world' is used to indicate the 'present order' (the proper meaning of *kosmos*), an order that enslaves creation and is in enmity against God (John 1:10; 8:23; 17:14, 16; 18:36). Therefore "The 'cosmos' (in this sense of the word) is an empire of cruelty, aggression, envy, misery, violence, falsehood, greed, ignorance, and spiritual desolation: it is death working in all things, the power to dominate or slay, but not to make new. It is that 'present evil world' (Gal 1:4) to which Paul says we must never be conformed (Rom 12:2)."<sup>109</sup>

In the New Testament our condition as fallen creatures is explicitly portrayed as subjugation to the subsidiary and often mutinous authority of angelic and demonic 'powers'. It clearly states that this age is ruled by spiritual and terrestrial principalities (Col 1:16; cf. 1 Cor 2:8; Eph 1:21; 3:10), by the 'elements of the world' (Gal 4:3), and by the 'prince of the power of the air' (Eph 2:2), which ultimately cannot separate us from God's love (Rom 8:38), but contend against us (Eph 6:12).<sup>110</sup> The two kingdoms dimension is even clearer in the fact that "John's Gospel calls the Devil 'The Prince of this world' (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), while 2 Corinthians call him (somewhat shockingly) 'the god of this world' (2 Cor 4:4), and 1 John says that 'the world lies in the power of the evil one' (1 John 5:19)." God will nevertheless triumph, though till that moment death remains mighty and terrible as the 'last enemy that shall be destroyed' (1 Cor 15:26).<sup>111</sup>

The New Testament does not teach (contrary to what some Christians might assert) 'total' and 'direct' divine sovereignty in all eventualities of this fallen world. Nor is anything to be found in Scripture resembling theodicy's attempt at a moral justification of the present cosmic order. This is simply because at the heart of the Gospel is the truth that this battle has been already won. In Jesus' resurrection God made an open show of the powers and principalities of this world, death and evil were defeated and led captive under Jesus' authority. But it is a victory that is still to come in its fullness, still there are light and darkness, death and life, like the wheat and the weeds that were sown side by side and will grow together till the harvest.<sup>112</sup>

While it still is to come we are left with two ways of seeing reality: The first is that from Ivan Karamazov in which God needs death and suffering as a means to achieve his perfect will for his creatures; or the reality given by the New Testament which sees the world

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<sup>109</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 63-65.

<sup>110</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 65.

<sup>111</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 65-66.

<sup>112</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 66-67.

as paradise working in subjection to evils that God has overthrown and will finally destroy, and that the world as we know it is not simply the work of one and all-determining will.<sup>113</sup> When one understands these dimensions one is confronted with only this bare choice:

... either one embraces the mystery of created freedom and accepts that the union of free spiritual creatures with the God of love is a thing so wonderful that the power of creation to enslave itself to death must be permitted by God; or one judges that not even such rational freedom is worth the risk of a cosmic fall and terrible injustice of the consequences that follow from it. But, then, since there can be no context in which such a judgment can be meaningfully made, no perspective from which a finite Euclidean mind can weight eschatological glory in the balance against earthly suffering, the rejection of God on these grounds really cannot be a rational decision, but only a moral pathos.<sup>114</sup>

### 3.3.2 Freedom, 'privatio boni' and 'apatheia'

Hart says that we are inclined to think about freedom in arbitrary ways. We tend to think that freedom is exercised every time one chooses a particular course of action from a variety of other possibilities. But these possibilities are exclusive to one another, because if I choose a course of action I make all the others impossible. Such freedom is no more than a form of subordination and confinement that depends upon other limited and limiting options.<sup>115</sup>

However, a higher understanding of freedom is that where to be free is to flourish as the kind of being one is, attaining the good towards which one's nature is oriented, which end is consummate freedom and happiness. This richer understanding of human freedom is that which provides some analogy to the freedom of God, where a mere arbitrary "choice" would be a limitation placed upon his infinite power. God's being free means that nothing is able to interrupt the perfection of his nature, or be a hindrance to the realization of his goodness in himself or his creatures.<sup>116</sup>

Hart recognizes that this claim is not only doctrinal but blatantly metaphysical. In this sense the classical Christian metaphysical assertions from the patristic to the medieval period are in themselves a logically necessary consequence of the Gospel, such as the doctrines of the Trinity and creation *ex nihilo*. In addition to these, Christian believers are required to be able to articulate the inherent rationality of their faith. Another doctrine also popular among Christians is the metaphysical understanding of evil as *privatio boni*, as a deprivation of good, as a purely parasitic corruption of created reality, possessing no essence of its own.<sup>117</sup>

Evil in this dimension is only a shadow, it is born on the will, it is not something alongside other things in creation, it is a turning away from the light of God into nothingness:

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<sup>113</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 67-68.

<sup>114</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 68-69.

<sup>115</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 70-71.

<sup>116</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 71-72.

<sup>117</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 72-73.



“This is not to say that evil is then somehow illusory; it is only to say that evil, rather than being a discrete substance, is instead a kind of ontological wasting disease. Born of nothingness, seated on the rational will that unites material and spiritual creation, it breeds a contagion of nothingness throughout the created order.” To say otherwise would either deny God's transcendence as the source of all things or his goodness, suggesting that evil similarly participates in the being that follows from him.<sup>118</sup>

This understanding of evil is important because it sets aside theodicy's attempt to conciliate evil with good, and the view that God wills evil as a way to bring a greater good:

Hence evil can have no proper role to play in God's determination of himself or purpose for his creatures, even if by economy God can bring good from evil; it can in no way supply any imagined deficiency in God's or creation's goodness; it has no 'contribution' to make. Being infinitely sufficient in himself, God has no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest his glory in his creatures, or to join them perfectly to himself, or to elevate their minds to the highest possible vision of the riches of his nature.<sup>119</sup>

That is why it is wrong to say that the drama of the Fall and redemption will make the final state of things even more glorious than it could have been otherwise. It would mean on the one hand that there are certain ends that God can accomplish in his creatures only by way of evil, which grants evil substance and makes God its cause; and on the other hand that God chooses to reward transgression with greater blessings as a demonstration of his sovereignty, which means he is unjust, his righteousness is divided against itself, his original prohibition of sin was a kind of lie, or even means that evil is something real that he confronts and to which he reacts like a finite subject. In this respect sin, suffering, and death cannot reveal any attributes of God, they are precisely what blind us to seeing God's true nature.<sup>120</sup>

A further doctrine that is intimately associated with the doctrine of *privatio boni*, is the equally necessary doctrine of divine *apatheia*, or impassibility, meaning that God cannot change or be moved to change by any external force. In this respect Hart stresses that this teaching has never denied the full reality of Christ's suffering on the cross once the divine Word truly became man and there is but one Person in Christ, meaning that God the Word has experienced pain and death in their fullest depths. It is because susceptibility to suffering is a natural property of Christ's humanity, and secondly because the experience of the cross does not alter or improve anything about the infinite God. God did not need to learn to love us.<sup>121</sup>

However, the term “impassibility” may bring some difficulties, such as fear of suggesting a God who is 'unfeeling' and therefore 'uncaring', or the opposite – a God who has

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<sup>118</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 73-74.

<sup>119</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 74.

<sup>120</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 74-75.

<sup>121</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 75-76.

passionate love for us and so is in need of us. Hart argues that such views counterfeit the very nature of love, for love in its inmost essence is not a reaction. God is sufficient in himself, the Trinity shows that he has no need of anything external to waken or nurture his love:

We are not necessary to him: He is not nourished by our sacrifices or ennobled by our virtues, any more than he is diminished by our sins and sufferings. This is a truth that may not aggrandize us, but it does, more wonderfully, glorify us: for it means that, though he had no need of us, still he loved us when we were not. And this is why love, in its divine depth, is *apatheia*.<sup>122</sup>

That is why it is a logical absurdity to assert simultaneously that God is the source of all things and that he can become something more than what he previously was. God's love is not shaped by sin, suffering or death, otherwise such a God could not be love, nor good, he would be a synthesis of death and life.<sup>123</sup>

Inevitably this whole discussion must be kept in mind when one reflects upon the relation between Christ's sacrifice upon the cross and the suffering of creation. The cross of Christ is not, after all, an eternal validation of pain and death, but their defeat. If all tribulations of this world were each necessary for redemption then Christ's sacrifice would not be a unique saving act, suffering and death would be part of the sublime and inevitable fabric of finitude and God's providence would be indistinguishable from fate. These doctrines are of crucial importance, reminding us how radically we must understand the sacrifice of Christ on the cross not as an act of divine impotence but of divine power.<sup>124</sup>

### *3.3.3 God's Providence*

One might well ask, what then is divine providence? It is not “that God has eternally willed the history of sin and death, and all that comes to pass therein, as the proper or necessary means of achieving his ends”, because that is mere determinism. But in a theological sense it is instead “that God has willed his good in creatures from eternity and will bring it to pass, despite their rebellion, by so ordering all things toward his goodness that even evil (which he does not cause) becomes an occasion of the operations of grace.”<sup>125</sup>

Because God has fashioned creatures in his image so that they might be joined in a perfect union with him in the rational freedom of love, this is why God permits rather than violates the autonomy of the created world, even if that is contrary to what he wills. In his omniscience, omnipotence and transcendence of time, God can both allow created freedom and still order things so that nothing can prevent him from bringing about his Kingdom:

Indeed we must say this as God did not will the fall, and yet always wills all things

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<sup>122</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 76-77.

<sup>123</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 78.

<sup>124</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 79-80.

<sup>125</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 82.

toward himself, the entire history of sin and death is in an ultimate sense pure contingency, one that is not as such desired by God, but that is nevertheless constrained by providence to serve his transcendent purpose. God does not will evil in the heart. He does not desire the convulsive reign of death in nature. But neither will he suffer defeat in these things.<sup>126</sup>

Hart stresses that providence does not work in or depend on secondary causes. God can create beings other than himself without conflict, but it is important to say that nothing that is can be completely alienated from him because all things exist by virtue of being called from nothingness toward his goodness.<sup>127</sup> In this sense the highest freedom and happiness of the creature is exactly the perfection of the creature's nature in union with God, and that does not include God's immediate determination of his creatures' wills. Hart argues that if we want to learn how God relates himself to sin, suffering, evil, and death, we necessarily need to look to Christ: "sin he forgives, suffering he heals, evil he casts out, and death he conquers. And absolutely nowhere does Christ act as if any of these things are part of the eternal work or purposes of God."<sup>128</sup> For instance, the tears of that little girl suffering in the dark of whom Ivan speaks are not a result of divine will, nor a necessity to bring about a great plan that will be unfold in the Kingdom of God. Hart says that God may permit evil to have a history of its own, not to despoil creatures of their destiny of free union with him in love, but that history is not shaped by him in view of eternal arbitrary decrees.<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore Ivan's love for that little girl is always in danger of becoming a kind of demonic compassion. As a conviction that it would be better if she had never been called into rational union with God than to suffer the wrongs done to her by the hands of fallen creatures. Ivan refutes such freedom and its benefits in view of the risk of sufferings.<sup>130</sup> Hart, however, argues "For Christians, though, to be is the first good, the first gift of God's gratuitous love, and the highest good is to be joined to God in the free movement of the soul."<sup>131</sup>

A final example of God's providence given by Hart is his complaint against Calvin's assertion on predestination, that God has already in his omnipotence eternally predestined people either to salvation or damnation. If that is true then God would be the author of both good and evil. The absurdity in all this is that those who try to defend God's transcendence against the genuine creaturely freedom end up threatening that same transcendence, making it in direct identity with the world, with us and with the devil. Hart argues that such a God

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<sup>126</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 82-83.

<sup>127</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 84.

<sup>128</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 85-87.

<sup>129</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 87.

<sup>130</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 88.

<sup>131</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 89.

would be nothing but will, only glory and sovereignty and so an infinite banality.<sup>132</sup>

That is why Hart stresses that behind Ivan's argument against God's design in creation one can hear the suppressed but still prophetic voice of a deeper, truer, more radical and revolutionary Christianity. If in Jesus Christ God had not overthrown all the principalities that enslave the world, and set us free from fate, fear and slavery, then we would have reason to think of him as malevolent, hate him, or even seek a better God than he.<sup>133</sup>

### **3.4 How is the discussion relevant to the sufferings in the world?**

#### *3.4.1 Final Remarks*

Hart himself stresses that it has not been a book of consolations. He rather says that his main aim has been simply to elucidate as far as he understands it what is “the true scriptural account of God's goodness, the shape of redemption, the nature of evil, and the conditions of a fallen world, not to convince anyone of its credibility, but simply to show where many of the arguments of Christianity's antagonists and champions alike fail to address what is most essential to the Gospel.”<sup>134</sup>

However, his reflection does help to correct many common misunderstandings that can create doubts, increase the experience of suffering or even lead people to unbelief. He says that if something cannot be said when another's sorrow is most real, then it should never be said, but we should never deny to a suffering person the knowledge central to the Gospel:

... the knowledge of the evil of death, its intrinsic falsity, its unjust dominion over the world, its ultimate nullity; the knowledge that God is not pleased or nourished by our deaths, that he is not the secret architect of evil, that he is the conqueror of hell, that he has condemned all these things by the power of the cross; the knowledge that God is life and light and infinite love, and that the path that leads through nature and history to his Kingdom does not simply follow the contours of either nature or history, or obey the logic immanent to them, but is opened to us by way of the natural and historical absurdity – or outrage – of the empty tomb.<sup>135</sup>

It is simply because, after all, ours is a religion of salvation, but not only that. Until that final glory, the world remains divided between two kingdoms, where light and darkness, life and death grow up together and await the harvest. In such a world “our portion is charity, and our sustenance is faith, and so it will be until the end of the days.”<sup>136</sup>

Hart concludes by saying that now we are able to rejoice because we are saved by grace, through Christ's victory, and that God “rather than showing us how the tears of a small girl suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, he will instead

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<sup>132</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 90-91.

<sup>133</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 91-92.

<sup>134</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 92-93.

<sup>135</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 100-101.

<sup>136</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 101-103.

raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes.” Then this older order of things will pass away and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, and he that sits upon the throne will say, “Behold, I make all things new.”<sup>137</sup>

### **3.5 Summary of this chapter**

Hart starts by addressing some unfair responses given both by Christians and atheists in the wake of great tragedies and discusses what lies behind those responses and what kind of God is being addressed. Looking into Ivan Karamazov's moral problem, he shows that the root of the problem of suffering from the perspective of the Christian faith is due to God's own revelation, or to be precise a misrepresentation of it. He stresses that the whole problem of suffering is only possible to a mind shaped by the message of the Gospel, where critics of the Christian faith are in fact positions of rebellion against God and not simply positions held from unbelief.

After that Hart addresses our rational understanding of a disenchanted nature, opening the way for his next argument on the reality of the two kingdoms. He stresses that God is not the only one shaping our reality, but also evil and terrestrial powers. Based on the New Testament Scripture, Christian formulas such as the freedom defence, the concepts of *privatio boni* and *apatheia*, and God's providence, Hart stresses that God is not the author of evil. Evil is a result of the misuse of our freely given freedom, and even the misuse of that freedom cannot in any way be a hindrance to God's plan and his goodness. He emphasises especially that God has no need of evil, sin and death to achieve any good ends.

In this sense Hart's reflection stresses that Christ's death and resurrection was not a validation of suffering, evil, and death, but their astounding defeat. Hart says that Ivan's moral argument helps to clear up all misconceptions related to the Christian faith's position in view of suffering, these arise simply because they are all a shadow of the message imparted by the Gospel. Lastly, Hart stresses that the Christian faith is a faith of salvation, our portion is charity and our sustenance is faith, till the moment when Jesus will make all things new.

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<sup>137</sup>Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 104.

Chapter Four

THE NATURE OF SUFFERING

**4.1 Overview**

The present chapter is the first part of the comparison and analysis section, which aims at how we should understand the reality of suffering in the world in view of the Christian faith. The topics selected for comparison and analysis are in my view the most important ones to shed some light when times of doubt come, helping us to understand suffering better and therefore relate to it better. I recognize that there are other relevant aspects that could be addressed in this discussion. However, that will not be possible in view of the limitations of space for the present thesis.

Firstly I will discuss the importance of 'understanding' and how it can help us in the face of suffering. After that I will deal with the issue of evil and the main aspects related to it. In the following section, I will explore a little God's purpose in creating a world, how we are part of that, and what is the effect of suffering on life. In the fifth section I will address 'The Fall' and its consequences for life and the world. After that I will discuss the question "Why does suffering matter?", and what lies behind it. In the seventh section I will deal with the most common responses to suffering as a way of avoiding misunderstandings in how we relate suffering to God. Lastly I will present a summary for the chapter.

**4.2 Should we look for the Cause? - Different ways of seeing the cause**

A general impression we might get considering Yancey and Hart is that they seem to differ on the issue of what *causes* suffering. Yancey on the one hand stresses that backward-looking questions have nothing to contribute to those who are suffering and that we should look at suffering from the perspective of *to what end* questions. Hart, however, deals straightforwardly with causes, addressing the evil powers and principalities that bring misery into the world.

Obviously, both authors deal with the issue of *cause* in one way or another. Their books are attempts to bring some understanding into the arena of suffering. By this 'seeming' difference I want to stress a little one of my aims, which is how to make sense of suffering in view of the Christian faith. I agree with Yancey that the backward-looking questions are more likely to bring more despair than help us with questions which have no proper answers, and that they do not help at all. However, there is also the question of looking for a diagnosis, to see what causes the problem, looking for what is wrong, and if this is not known in some sense it can restrict the healing process, our freedom, and keeps us insecure in the face of suffering. The

line between the two views is very thin: the first does not accept reality and questions the experience of suffering, the second accepts the reality as it is and searches for understanding.

In this sense backward-looking questions do not help, but on the other hand we need to diagnose what ails us. Without diagnosis, we compromise understanding of the experience of suffering and therefore the way we relate to it, which can even heighten the suffering. Understanding helps us to fight despair, whereas treatment of a disease whose cause is unknown, does not. Understanding is the first step necessary to overcome the experience of suffering, not letting doubts take over, and crush us even more.

A friend of mine, when I was sharing this dimension of my thesis, asked “But can we really make sense of suffering?” Of course we cannot know all the reasons behind a suffering experience, but trying to understand it helps us to relate to it better. The danger, however, is if we try to explain suffering when we should keep silent, as both Yancey and Hart have stressed, especially when suffering is painfully real and when we do not truly know what has caused it. This 'trying to understand' is not for the time when suffering strikes, where keeping silence is most appropriate, like Job's friends did for seven days and seven nights when they knew what happened to Job (Job 2:11). Yancey says that those days probably were the most eloquent time they spent with Job.<sup>138</sup> Burrell says that a tentative answer to what made Job's friends so alter their character after that is simply that we all get tired of waiting in incomprehension, so we must explain things in order that we can carry on.<sup>139</sup> There is a proper time for understanding and that will help both the suffering person and us to cope with the situation, and not repeat the same mistakes made by Job's friends after their initial silence.

Soelle argues that to this very day people continue to ask questions which can neither be answered nor dismissed, such as “Why must we suffer? Can pain possibly have any meaning?”<sup>140</sup> My point, however, is that even though we cannot fully answer these questions we need to seek understanding. Obviously there are limits to what we are able to know and whether we can know anything at all. After all, understanding is what precedes transformation. Hall argues that understanding something does not mean mastering it: analysis is not the cure, but cure in a real sense already begins with courageous analysis.<sup>141</sup> He also says that “Understanding something of the suffering of human beings, and its cause, is already to enter the realm of transformation.”<sup>142</sup> Soelle also stresses this dimension, highlighting lament as an

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<sup>138</sup>See section 2.4.1.

<sup>139</sup>David B. Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the puzzle of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 132.

<sup>140</sup>Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>141</sup>Douglas John Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 89-90.

<sup>142</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 91.

indispensable step towards the stage of change, where lament as a cry to God denotes hope, setting us free from the submissiveness of the suffering experience.<sup>143</sup> The discussion from now on will focus on how to understand suffering in view of the Christian faith.

### **4.3 A bigger reality**

Hart brings an important dimension to the discussion on suffering, especially in view of natural evils<sup>144</sup>, which is the image of spiritual warfare emphasized by the New Testament. He argues that according to the New Testament we should not assert that all eventualities which happen in this fallen world are directly willed by God or represent God's desire for his creatures. The New Testament clearly states that the world is ruled by spiritual and terrestrial principalities which are in enmity to God and his Kingdom<sup>145</sup>. He says also that we are not excused from failing to grasp this radical image of brokenness given by the New Testament, of seeing two realities at once, of seeing the world as at one and the same time *ktisis* and *kosmos*, as Creation and fallen nature, as creation in subjection to death and to a more reckless hand.<sup>146</sup> Yancey, however, does not touch on this theme, as he concentrates more on how we should respond to suffering.

The first two chapters in the book of Job suggest that Satan was behind the suffering that befell Job. It shows that Satan had his reckless hand inflicting the Sabceans and Chaldeans on Job's properties, and on nature's trigger, causing fire to fall from heaven and a mighty wind to sweep the house killing Job's sons and daughters, and finally afflicting Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Tada also endorses this dimension, but she stresses that Scripture does not say that Satan routinely has his finger on nature's trigger, though it surely shows that the possibility is there.<sup>147</sup> But there is a danger in all this. Hall stresses that we need to be careful to not attribute all human suffering either to spiritual agencies, or all to human agency alone, but we need a balance between the two.<sup>148</sup>

In view of these two realities, the angelic and the human one, the answer for the question "where does evil come from?" is one out of our reach. We may account for how evil entered our reality, but we cannot know with certainty how it came about in the angelic

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<sup>143</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 71-74.

<sup>144</sup>Related to the natural evil, generally the free will defenders argue it to be realized by non-human free spirits acting in the world. See William L. Rowe, *God and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 117.

<sup>145</sup>It is interesting to note this dimension of spiritual warfare even in the Old Testament in the book Daniel chapter 10. It is said that a messenger sent by God to explain future things to Daniel was delayed in view of opposition to him and that he also needed help from Michael, one of the leading princes. In the New Testament Michael is attributed as an angel of God, see Jude 1:9; Revelation 12:7.

<sup>146</sup>See sections 3.3.1, 3.4.1.

<sup>147</sup>Joni Eareckson Tada and Esteve Estes, *When God Weeps: Why our suffering Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 79.

<sup>148</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 88.



one.<sup>149</sup> C. S. Lewis is one who spends some time reflecting on this matter. He says that the angels also must have some kind of reality or world like ours, something which is to them as 'matter' is to us.<sup>150</sup> Lewis also stresses the dimension of rebellion as does Hart, and says that we are living on the side occupied by the rebel, so that this world is enemy-occupied territory. Drawing from the doctrine of *privatio boni* Lewis argues that the mighty evil spirit who holds the power behind death, disease and sin, is actually created by God, was good when it was created, and somehow went wrong. He also emphasizes evil as a parasite, not an original thing, and that the powers which enable evil to carry on are powers given to it by goodness. For this very reason Lewis argues that dualism is not an option.<sup>151</sup> Here Lewis has in mind the dualist concept of two equal powers, one good and another bad, that are in enmity to each other. Hart on the other hand stresses that there is a 'provisional' dualism, not in the ultimate sense, but a kind of rebellion from *created* autonomous will against God.<sup>152</sup>

This dimension of spiritual warfare is important to help us understand that there are other powers, created good by God, which by the misuse of their freedom can inflict suffering into our reality. Jesus himself teaches us to pray "deliver us from the evil one" in the Lord's Prayer. The understanding of how evil took place in our reality will be examined through the Christian doctrine of the Fall. Before that, let us reflect on why we are here.

#### **4.4 What is it all about?**

The Bible states on many occasions that reality as we know it is not all there is. There is more, found in eternal union with God in his coming Kingdom. But surely the question "Why is there a world at all?" is a very pertinent one. Both Yancey and Hart touch on this question. I will firstly consider the main reasons they give for God's creating us and secondly I will address this inherent dimension of unfairness in the world.

##### *4.4.1 Why are we here?*

Yancey draws on Lewis and John Hick to say that we are not fully formed creatures and that the environment of the world is to nurture the process of soul-making, to be more like God in preparation for a time with him. He summarizes it as rather like God stepping in and having faith for us and helping us in extraordinary ways: God stands before us with open arms and asks us to come to him and participate in our own soul-making.<sup>153</sup> Hart has a similar view, stressing the wonderful union of free spiritual creatures in the free movement of the soul with

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<sup>149</sup>There are some passages in the Old Testament that *may suggest* how evil came about in the angelic reality. See Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezequiel 28:12-19. Jesus also address Satan's fall from heaven in Luke 10:18.

<sup>150</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 22.

<sup>151</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 45-46.

<sup>152</sup>See section 3.2.6.

<sup>153</sup>See section 2.3.2.

the God of love, though he does not address this question directly.<sup>154</sup>

These views reflect a general sense of life being a kind of pilgrim way. Jesus' prayer in John 17 stresses that those who believe in him are 'not of this world' but they are 'in the world', and they will be 'in this world' as he goes ahead of them to prepare the way. Jesus even prays for God's protection over them from the evil one during this waiting time, underlining what we have just discussed in the last section. This dimension can also be seen in that the first disciples were called "people of the way" before they were called "Christians" (Acts 9:2; 11:26; 24:14). There is indeed a gap between what is now and what will come.

It is interesting in this respect to note the distinction made by Origen between 'image' as referring to our humanity and 'likeness' as referring to the perfection of human beings in the resurrection:

"And God said. 'Let us make man in our image and likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). He then adds: "In the image of God he made him" (Genesis 1:27), and is silent about the likeness. This indicates that in the first creation man received the dignity of the image of God, but the fulfilment of the likeness is reserved for the final consummation; that is, that he himself should obtain it by his own effort, through the imitation of God.<sup>155</sup>

Origen's view is relevant in two respects: the first is the dimension that God is still creating, first making us in his image and then into his likeness, depicting this eschatological dimension of life; the second is that we are to achieve this likeness by our own efforts.

The first dimension stresses the view that we are on the way towards being made into God's likeness. It introduces an eschatological dimension to the present life that the One who began this good work will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6). There are many passages in the New Testament Scripture which stress this dimension of being made into God's likeness<sup>156</sup>. Lewis deals more with this theme of likeness than Yancey and Hart do, He says that "The son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God."<sup>157</sup> He emphasizes that in very truth we are a divine work of art, but not a finished one, for God is still in the process of making.<sup>158</sup> Yancey also points to this eschatological dimension when he says that we only understand a play when it finishes and without the vantage point of eternity any discussion on suffering is incomplete.<sup>159</sup>

The reason we have a world instead of nothing is that God has a purpose with Creation. If God had already finished Creation, why would he bother with us at all? Why

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<sup>154</sup>See sections 3.3.1; 3.3.3.

<sup>155</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Third edition, 2007), 407-408.

<sup>156</sup>See 1 John 3:2; Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18. Jesus as is also referred as being made into our likeness, see Romans 8:3; Philippians 2:7.

<sup>157</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 178.

<sup>158</sup>Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 34.

<sup>159</sup>See section 2.4.4.

would he send Jesus Christ to become one of us? Or why would even Jesus send us as the Father has sent him in mission into the world? God has revealed himself since the very beginning, which is merciful to us because we could never guess 'who' he is, even though we could guess that 'there is' a Creator as we look into the wonders of Creation. He has made himself known and present, even becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. He is very present in our lives through the Holy Spirit, but more than that: he has said that there is more to life than the life here on earth, which brings us to the second point of Origen's view.

Both Origen's, Yancey's and Hart positions involve a degree of our own effort in this process of being made into God's likeness, either by the imitation of God in a kind of soul-making process or even loving God, as if the power to be made like God or to love God lies in our hands. To make it a bit more interesting I want to bring Luther's view that we are saved by grace alone into this discussion. While reading Genesis 1:26 once again, where the Trinity talks about the creation of humankind, I could see in that very talk what Luther means by saying that we have nothing to contribute to our salvation, that it is pure grace, simply because everything comes from God. It is very clear since the beginning with the statement, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ...", that whatever purpose God has with the universe, it is *He who is going to do it*. If we consider the perspective of 'image' and 'likeness' given above as showing God still creating till the final consummation, we can see that we do not have much to contribute in this process: it is *He who will make it all* from the beginning to the end. Even Lewis stresses this dimension, saying "When you come to knowing God, the initiative lies on his side. If he does not show himself nothing you can do will enable you to find him."<sup>160</sup> It may sound a bit scary to us at first, but our existence is in God's hands, either giving us a life that enables us to love him, and even this 'love for him' dimension depends on whether he makes himself known. That is why it all is grace, and all is God's doing.

We may rebel against the fact that we are not free, and that God did not give us freedom at all. However, this brings the need of addressing the view of those who may assert that God has given us freedom to draw close to him or even go astray from him.<sup>161</sup> We will consider this dimension of what is freedom and the distinction between freedom and free will when addressing the Fall of humanity. But for now it is enough to know that there is no contradiction between 'no-freedom' and being saved by grace, and to explain this I will bring in the philosophical question "Is there any purpose or meaning to life?"

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<sup>160</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 164.

<sup>161</sup>"For the fact is that we simply cannot accept an almighty God. We cannot handle the idea of someone 'above' who we fear is controlling our destiny. When we come up against Almighty God we are bound, bound to say 'no'. Be it much or be it little, we must claim at least 'some freedom' to control our destiny." Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will – Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., edited by Steven Paulson, 2005), 50.

Bonhoeffer makes an important observation on this question of 'finding meaning', saying "But the truth is that if this earth was good enough for the man Jesus Christ, if such a man as Jesus lived, then, and only then, has life a meaning for us. If Jesus had not lived, then our life would be meaningless, in spite of all the other people whom we know and honor and love." On the one hand what Bonhoeffer says keeps us from the error of considering that life here is not important because God is preparing another reality for those who love him, and therefore we do not need to care for Creation and other people. Jesus being made one of us strongly suggests that there is good to be found in life and in Creation: even though while in midst of suffering. Jesus' own life emphasizes Creation as good and life as worth of living. On the other hand Bonhoeffer stresses that there is meaning to life, but he says that the "unbiblical idea of 'meaning' is indeed only a translation of what the Bible calls 'promise'."<sup>162</sup>

God's promises are what make our 'no-freedom' in relation to him and being saved by grace not to be in contradiction. Salvation is only possible by God's promise to us, and in a promise the whole responsibility lies on the one making the promise, therefore given the possibility of trusting such promise and receiving it by faith.<sup>163</sup> Even our very trusting and believing are dependent on God's giving his promise as Paulson stresses "Getting a silent God to speak is what the struggle of faith is all about, but this is literally out of our hands, depending completely upon whether or not a preacher is sent by the Holy Spirit. It is exactly beyond the power of the human will."<sup>164</sup> It shows that we indeed have nothing to contribute to this process of being made into God's likeness: it is pure grace. That in a real sense is the most joyous knowledge about God and the life he has given us, of a God who freely loves us and accepts us the way we are, and that salvation is not dependent on our own efforts.

In view of all this, the issue of suffering is only a problem when we do not know the purpose of our lives here, and try to make sense of reality based on our own perspectives. What is life all about? Just living here? Is there something else? Should there be something beyond? Knowing God's plan helps us to cope with suffering and even rejoice because suffering is not an ultimate end. As Jesus says, "I am making everything new!"

However, the reality of space, time, matter and the struggle within nature, make us question, "Was it all needed? Why this world?" Lewis has a quite interesting tentative answer: "Was nature – space and time and matter – created precisely in order to make many-

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<sup>162</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967, edited by Eberhard Bethge), 207.

<sup>163</sup>"In Christ's story faith and word are properly fit. Faith alone justifies; faith comes by hearing the promise of Christ: 'I forgive you!'" See Steven D. Paulson, *Doing Theology: Lutheran Theology* (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 60.

<sup>164</sup>Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 26.

making many natural creatures, in a universe, and then spiritualising them?”<sup>165</sup> But he himself says it is just guess work. This brings us to our physical world and to the 'matter' in creation.

#### *4.4.2 A Groaning Planet?*

Some may argue, “Yes, God has a really nice plan, and he is going to make it all, but why at the cost of pain and suffering?” Both Yancey<sup>166</sup> and Hart<sup>167</sup> say that our present reality is a 'cycle of life ending in death'. Hart even criticizes Natural Theology, questioning “which God are you to find in this world where life feeds on life?” He says that according to which way one chooses to look at it, one will see the universe as a closed economy of life and death. Both authors also say that it was not meant to be like this. God is not pleased with this cycle of death, which the Bible calls the worst and the last enemy to be destroyed. Yancey stresses that God did even go to the extent of tasting death himself to break that circle Jesus' death and resurrection as God's answer, being 'the empty tomb'. Yancey says that apart from Easter and the life that goes beyond this one we could indeed judge God as less-than-powerful, less-than-loving, or even cruel. Hart says that this present reality is but a shadow of what the message of the Gospel imparts. It does highlight that there is suffering and evil, but also that there is much good to be found in Creation.

Yancey stresses that much of the suffering in the world can be summarized in two principles God built into Creation, both good in themselves, but which also allow for the possibility of their abuse, namely a physical world that runs according to consistent natural laws and human freedom.<sup>168</sup> I will discuss for now this physical dimension of the world, which I consider important in our understanding of suffering, while freedom will be looked at in the next section, The Fall.

I find it really pertinent the way Yancey starts his book dealing with 'pain' biologically and its importance to life. As he draws into Dr. Paul's Brand experiences of and researches into pain and the nervous system, he shows that what many people consider “God's one mistake” is actually extremely necessary in our daily lives. Most of us tend to complain about pain, and not without excuse, for it restricts our freedom in various ways: think about any disease, to not mention the effect of pain on us. Yet, Yancey stresses we cannot imagine pleasure, without the possibility of pain, since the nervous cells that tell us of an experience of enjoyment are the same ones that send the signals of a painful experience, varying only in the intensity of the experience, meaning “no pain, no pleasure”. Yancey also recognizes this protective function of the pain system for us, of those pains that are intrinsically good, but he

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<sup>165</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 185.

<sup>166</sup>See section 2.4.4.

<sup>167</sup>See section 3.2.5.

<sup>168</sup>See section 2.2.2.

also says that there are pains that are not good at all, such as the experience of a terminal patient in a hospital.<sup>169</sup> This point needs to be stressed: that suffering is an original part of God's Creation, but in the beginning it was constrained within a safe and harmonious environment, where pain was intended to serve life. This reality, however, changed after the Fall.

Hall is one who explores deeply this dimension of suffering as already present in the Garden of Eden. This he calls 'suffering as becoming', which reflects our amazing capacity to grow and develop in many areas of our lives. Hall argues that those sufferings were part of life, but not like the suffering we know today, which makes life a misery. He makes a distinction between suffering before and after the Fall. The first 'suffering as becoming' he names is the feeling of 'loneliness', without which we would never experience the joy of human fellowship. The second is that human beings encounter limits to our existence, such as in power and intelligence, simply meaning that we are not gods. The third condition is the possibility of temptation, which certainly is a source of human suffering. Lastly is anxiety, how can one know what tomorrow will bring?<sup>170</sup>

Hall also stresses that loneliness, limitation, temptation, and anxiety are not the only forms of human suffering. While they do describe dimensions of suffering, they were not restraints to our freedom but part of the very foundations of our being, as sufferings that were intended by God as part of life. This dimension is extremely important, showing that "Not all of what we experience as suffering is totally absurd, a mistake, an oversight, or the consequence of sin."<sup>171</sup>, there is some degree of struggle that belongs to the created order. Hall also stresses that while there is a dimension of struggle in Creation, that does not mean that God actually wills the massive, unbearable, or seemingly absurd suffering of any creature, and that the line must be drawn at the point where suffering ceases to serve life.<sup>172</sup>

As Yancey and Hall have stressed, pain is part of our lives and God's intention with it was to serve life and not to destroy it. Yancey grasps this dimension well in his last example of 'pain and pleasure', stressing the biblical view that life is not only about self-fulfilment and ego satisfaction but that real fulfilment comes through serving and loving our neighbour in the Christian concept of service to others.<sup>173</sup> Hart also comes to this conclusion but sees it through the analogy of the two kingdoms, of seeing one world within another, requiring from us the cultivation of charity and an eye purified by love.<sup>174</sup>

In this respect Hart's critique of Ivan's complaint over the little girl in suffering as

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<sup>169</sup>See section 2.2.1.

<sup>170</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 54-60.

<sup>171</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 56-57.

<sup>172</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 64, 74.

<sup>173</sup>See section 2.2.1.

<sup>174</sup>See section 3.3.1.

being demonic, is that it includes a denial of reality in asserting that it would have been better for the girl never to have existed rather than suffer, and so she would never have been called into union with God.<sup>175</sup> This is a quite pertinent observation, even though not an easy one to accept: that it is better to exist than not exist, that existing for only a second is better than not existing at all, especially if it is understood in the context that life here in this world is not all that it should be. The danger here is that we might miss the point, trying to explain or even to understand the role of suffering only in view of our present reality: our criticism of the present reality can easily deceive us about what God is doing and what he will do.

It is not an easy task to reconcile God and suffering in this dimension of existing and not existing, Lewis stresses: “Some comparison between one state of being and another can be made, but the attempt to compare being and not being ends in mere words. 'It would be better for me not to exist' – in what sense 'for me'? How should I, if I did not exist, profit by not existing?”<sup>176</sup> If we are to stress that suffering is in contradiction to God's goodness in creating a world at all, how then can we even consider or understand the world as we see it? Creation was good and is still good, Yancey even states that before the Fall it could even be described as 'the best of all possible worlds', but it surely that is not the case now – all the suffering around us shows us that. It would be a tragic mistake to judge God only by the present world.<sup>177</sup> This brings us into the Christian doctrine of 'The Fall'.

#### **4.5 The Fall**

The Christian faith points to the event of the Fall as the beginning of suffering that has gone wrong and is out of control. The doctrine of the Fall in a general sense refers to the first sin ever committed, which brought tragic consequences into the created order in such a way that it affected the entire cosmos. The apostle Paul emphasizes that even Creation waits in eager expectation for redemption (Rom 8:19), and not only the human one. Yancey similarly links the entrance of evil into our reality to the event of the Fall, where the initial rebellion of Adam and Eve somehow multiplied pain and suffering as a consequence of the abuse of human freedom, and that is why we live on a groaning planet.<sup>178</sup> Hart's view of the Fall also asserts that the first alienation from God wounded Creation so deeply, reducing reality as we know it to a shadow of what God intends and enslaving it to spiritual and terrestrial powers that are hostile to God. Our broken and wounded world is the result.<sup>179</sup>

Groothuis highlights an important dimension about the doctrine of the Fall, which is

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<sup>175</sup>See section 3.3.3.

<sup>176</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 27.

<sup>177</sup>See section 2.2.2.

<sup>178</sup>See section 2.2.2.

<sup>179</sup>See section 3.2.2, 3.2.6.

the understanding that the world has not always been a wreck<sup>180</sup>, because if it had been it would render little hope for human or cosmic improvement and the defects in Creation would probably be permanent. If the 'wreck' in Creation is an abnormality, then it gives hope for a substantial recovery or healing of humanity and the cosmos. Like Hart when speaking of *privatio boni*, Groothuis stresses that “Evil is then an injury to a healthy body for which there is a cure, at least for those who consult the Great Physician.” In this sense the doctrine of the Fall preserves both the original goodness of Creation and the goodness of God in creating it.<sup>181</sup>

The Fall also helps us to understand others aspects of God's revelation. If we stress that God made us sinful and a world broken as it is now, or even if God had predestined people so that they were fated to be evil, he could never charge us with responsibility for doing or not doing anything, whilst the Bible suggests that he will do so at the final judgement. Hart even suggests that there is no other doctrine that strikes non-Christians so offensively as this one, and I would say that it is not even easy for Christians. Questions like, “If Creation was created good, how could it go wrong?”, or “How could such consequences result from a single sin?”, do disturb us. More than not these denote the bigger reality discussed earlier in section 4.3: that there is much more at stake in the universe than human reality we can perceive. This is why I emphasized earlier that evil in our realm has both spiritual and human dimensions: spiritual in the sense of Satan's temptation bringing it in, and human in terms of our responsibility in succumbing to it. Let us reflect a little more on these issues.

#### *4.5.1 God and our Freedom*

Though we cannot address how evil started in the angelic realm, the Bible points to how it started in ours, as described in Genesis chapter 3, where Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent against a command from God. The thread here is, if God created everything good how could something go wrong? The main answer traditionally given to this question is, the God-given gift of freedom. If we were created in God's image and God is free, so he also made us free. Many defences on the problem of evil ground their arguments on the feature inbuilt in us called free will, meaning that God did not create us as automatons which would have made for a world of action and response. This free will perspective is correct in how evil became a reality through the misuse of our freedom, but wrong in that we have such autonomy in relation to God. As discussed before, Luther's concept of freedom<sup>182</sup> is important here, especially because it might sound as though we are not actually free, and Luther means just that.

Though we are not free in relation to God a distinction between free will and freedom

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<sup>180</sup>He emphasizes that it is a position held by Eastern religions, Gnosticism and Naturalism.

<sup>181</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 627- 628.

<sup>182</sup>See section 4.4.1. The discussion here and in 4.4.1 are important for section 4.7.5 “The free will defence”.



needs to be made. Free will implies choosing, it puts you in charge of taking decisions, you define what it ought to be, the power lies in your own hands. Freedom, however, if understood properly, means not being bound to anything, even the choice between good and evil.<sup>183</sup> In Luther's view the language of free choice should not be used at all, but if we must use it we should use it with regard to those things that are beneath us but not with regard to those things above us:

For now the point is that in the area 'beneath' we do pretty much as we please, and God does not "interfere" even if he controls all things. We might, of course, and we most often do, call God to account for tragedy, failure, and disaster. But when we do we are already invading the territory of what is above us. The point here is that we are willing beings, relatively successful in 'doing as we please.'<sup>184</sup>

Hart himself states that freedom (I would rather say free will) is more a form of subordination and confinement depending upon other limited and limiting options is to think freedom in arbitrary ways. He stresses that the freedom of God is what can provide us some analogy to the freedom God gave us, where a mere choice would mean a limitation upon his infinite power.<sup>185</sup> If God created us in his image, then the freedom he gave us must resemble his, with the difference that we are not free from God. There is nowhere we can run from him, and here is where Luther stands. Paulson points out "The question of all theology is whether or not you have free will. If you have it, then God is not omnipotent and therefore you have something to render to God for which you must be recompensed." It shows that if there is something which can put the almighty God under any legal obligation to justify you, then he is not that almighty, "but if you do not have such free will, then everything depends upon how God is disposed toward you, that is, whether or not you have a gracious God."<sup>186</sup> Therefore, from it follows "God is omnipotent; your will is not free."<sup>187</sup>

If, then, freedom does not depend on such choosing, freedom is freedom simply because God is the only one who can set anything free. If God is free and love, he probably would wish us to experience that also, which cannot be done by imposition, but it does not mean we can change our will.<sup>188</sup> However, this dimension that God saves by grace alone can

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<sup>183</sup> Alfsvåg stresses this dimension quoting Lossky's conclusion of Maximus' anthropology: "Freedom of choice is already a sign of imperfection. ... A perfect nature has no need of choice, for it knows naturally what is good. ... The hesitation in our ascent towards the good, we call 'free will.'" See Knut Alfsvåg, "God's fellow workers - The understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine in Maximus Confessor and Martin Luther", *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 62:2, (2008): 175-193, 181 (Endnote 40), available from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00393380802439852>; Internet; accessed 11 May 2013.

<sup>184</sup> Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 49.

<sup>185</sup> See section 3.3.2.

<sup>186</sup> Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 23.

<sup>187</sup> Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 20.

<sup>188</sup> As Forde stresses "We are under necessity but not forced. We are not puppets controlled by a transcendent puppeteer, yet the will cannot change itself. It goes on willing what it wills and will not change because it wills immutably. It cannot change by itself because it does not want to. It is afflicted by a necessity of immutability, a

also bring difficulties on how to understand the human cooperation that is stressed in Jesus' own incarnation as not carrying a connotation of merit, as Alfsvåg points out:

If God is human and believers are called to partake in this divine-human unity, what else could possibly be the outcome of this union than a kind of cooperation? The very foundation of the Christian faith in the doctrine of incarnation thus seems to call for an exploration of this concept that lets its Christologically established necessity inform a balanced interpretation of the contribution of the human part.<sup>189</sup>

While Alfsvåg consider Luther's views, he stresses that Luther's critics are not in relation to 'good works' themselves, but the interpretation of good works as meritorious: "For Luther, it is obvious that we are rewarded for what we do; to maintain, however, that we deserve eternal life by virtue of our own choices, is something entirely different." He also argues that this merit misunderstanding which is so deeply engraved in human nature after the Fall, can only be freed from its bounds by faith.<sup>190</sup> In this dimension there are works to be done by the human part, but they are not dependent for salvation, they are a result of that.

Brian Davies (based on Thomas Aquinas) is one who argues that the free will defence is a failure. If we understand God to be the one who brings about the existence and continued existence of everything other than himself, then it is God who causes everything's activities inasmuch as he gives it the power to act, maintains its existence and applies it to its activity. He argues that it is a failure because the free will defenders argue as if human freedom existed independently of God's causal action, as if God adopts a 'hands-off' attitude to them, as a mere observer or onlooker. However, Davies emphasizes that it does not mean that there is no such thing as human freedom, and he is neither denying its value, which he says is that our making a choice depends on God's making it to be.<sup>191</sup>

Another important dimension Yancey stresses with regard to freedom, is Satan's challenge to God's character: that such a freedom was bribed, that Job's love for God was a result of God's blessings in his life. Job's response to the sufferings which overtook him would prove or disprove that.<sup>192</sup> These views shows firstly that we are free to do anything else but not in relation to God, and secondly that the use of our freedom is not constrained by something else. This will help us to consider the dimension of sin in the event of the Fall.

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not-wanting, a refusal to change. It will change externally only when it is forced to and this shows up in resentment. Or it may appear to change when attracted by something more enticing, in which case it still does not will freely but is still under immutability." (Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 56.)

<sup>189</sup>Alfsvåg, *God's Fellow Workers*, 176. This is the main problem Alfsvåg discusses comparing Maximus' the Confessor and Luther' views on how this cooperation between human and divine takes place in relation to being saved by grace and the implications that follow from it.

<sup>190</sup>Alfsvåg, *God's Fellow Workers*, 182, 184. For more see Alfsvåg's article in its entirety.

<sup>191</sup>See Brian Davies, *An Introduction to The Philosophy of Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, Third edition), 220-223. And Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 116-129.

<sup>192</sup>See section 2.3.2.

#### 4.5.2 Original Sin

Hart stresses that in the West, differently from the East, the understanding of Original Sin makes us all guilty and therefore everything that happens is just out of lot.<sup>193</sup> There is no space in the present thesis for discussing if either the ransom position (that Jesus is the one who comes to free us from the enemy's hands) or the satisfaction position (where Jesus pays the price of our sin before God) is the correct one. The Bible portrays both views and shows sin to be a really complex matter. We cannot stress only the ransom position, because if it were just a matter of power God would not need to go to the cross. On the other hand, the Bible also stresses that Jesus had to suffer<sup>194</sup> and therefore die because sin is in us or, as Paul puts it, in our corrupted flesh. A middle position between the two would be that the initial harmony in Creation was broken, especially in view of the fact that suffering was already present before the Fall. It was Luther who pointed out that after the Fall we ended up with three big enemies: The Devil, the world, and our flesh<sup>195</sup>, showing that sin is a very complex topic.<sup>196</sup>

As discussed above, the human creature was not created 'finished' on day one. It is a work in progress. God did not give any assurance as to what would come, save that the Creator would be with the creature as it moves into the future. The only thing the creature was called for is 'trust'.<sup>197</sup> Genesis' picture of God forming us from soil denotes that we were not eternal in the beginning because we were formed from physical matter and the tree of life was what nourished life from its perishable state into a kind of non-dying possibility.<sup>198</sup> Hall says that we are finite beings with a capacity for the infinite<sup>199</sup>, though this capacity depends on God alone: we cannot even make a stone into a living thing, which is physical and temporal, so what can we do about a spiritual and eternal one?

It is this very possibility which the enemy uses to tempt Adam and Eve, but in a corrupted manner: that they would be the ones in charge of the process. The outcome, however, was that it turned things the other way around. They did not become like God in the strict sense and also they made evil part of their reality. Hall argues that those who wish to be

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<sup>193</sup>See section 3.2.3. We will see more on this theme on the section 4.7.2 on punishment.

<sup>194</sup>“If Christ died on the cross, the problem we all inherited must have been grave indeed.” Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 32.

<sup>195</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 28: 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy, Editor Hilton C. Oswald, 1 Co 15:26–27: 131-140 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973).

<sup>196</sup>Paul denotes it “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.” (Eph. 2:2–3a).

<sup>197</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 79.

<sup>198</sup>“God gives not just 'things', or 'effects', but his own self. When Adam and Eve ate the good fruit from the garden, they consumed not just an object of creation, but God himself. When God gives, he gives sacramentally, not figuratively, he does not give signs of his affection, he gives-him.” Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 53.

<sup>199</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 111.

'like God', but being human, end up becoming 'unhappy gods'.<sup>200</sup> The freedom God gave us shows that we are responsible for the consequences, since we had no need to accept that evil invitation. Hall says that we are not simply victims, but we consented in that rebellion.<sup>201</sup>

It is interesting to see Jesus himself praying before his death “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” (Luke 23:24) Is Jesus pointing to the unreasonable dimension which is sinning? Of how much sin defies God's own goodness and love for us? Unfortunately, what happened at the Fall was an exchange of everything for nothing, as is the same in an opposite way for those who receive Jesus as their Saviour, who exchange nothing for everything (Rom 5:18-19). Freedom to do evil is what the temptation of the enemy was about, and therefore slavery, but freedom in God's way is only freedom in achieving the good towards what it was created for, which is union with God. Suffering out of control is not a necessity according to the doctrine of Creation and Fall. The problem with that particular sin is that the harmony of Creation was broken.

As Hart argued that evil is born of the will, its existence is always dependent on goodness, or properly said, in spoiling it. We can have good without evil, and Creation before the Fall witnesses that. However, there is no evil without good. This is why the option for God to end all suffering through his power does not work. If we understand that suffering is inextricably bound up with human freedom, it means that eliminating freedom would imply a virtual elimination of the creature at the same time.<sup>202</sup> In this context it is important to note that most of the suffering in the world is human made. Lewis argues that it is men and not God who produce racks, slavery, wars, and all sorts of things that make life miserable.<sup>203</sup> For all that, could not God have imposed a less heavy penalty for that single sin?

#### *4.5.3 The consequences of the first sin*

There is a quick and easy answer for suffering that is based in a simple aspect of creation: that life is a gift from God, which means we are not in a position to complain about him or (to use the freedom dimension) we did not have an option of saying yes or no. If life is a gift it is undeserved and therefore we cannot complain. However, such an easy answer does not satisfy us, and I especially think that Job's reply “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.”(1:21), is stressing this aspect, that life is a gift, and not that God is performing evil in a first person sense – even though we see in Job 2:3 the strange dimension of God saying to Satan that it was God himself who ruined Job's life “though you incited *me* against

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<sup>200</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 82.

<sup>201</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 85.

<sup>202</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 97-98.

<sup>203</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 86.

him to ruin him without any reason”, we know from the discussion in chapter one that the sufferings were inflicted by Satan. God's speech shows not that God had done it himself but indirectly through Satan's own freedom. More important than that is the dimension that God took on the responsibility for what had happened, which means we are safe in his hands in view of the wrongs caused by others. Job's wife and his friends did not like his easy answer, and neither do we, so let us examine this matter of the consequences.

Some people say that God could have been lighter in his curse because of that sin, but many people tend to overread what is said in Genesis 3. There are only two curses: the first is directed to the serpent and the second to the ground. To the woman God *says* (it is not a curse) that the pain of child birth will increase greatly, and to the man God *says* that work from now on will be harder than before, and he ends with what was said in the command not to eat that fruit. Yancey even says that the short account in Genesis 3 barely shows the consequences of this rebellion, but enough to see that the whole Creation was disrupted.<sup>204</sup> Complaining against God now without considering that there was another possibility before is in itself unfair. The 'punishment' God gives to the man and the woman if we are to be honest is fair in comparison with what they threw away. The curse we do not see at work is that which came with the entrance of evil, the subjection to decay that Paul refers in Romans, which Yancey and Hart stress makes a misery of our reality.

Even death, our biggest enemy, is not caused directly by God. Hall argues that the human being is the only creature that knew of its own finitude and whose vocation is to accept and rejoice in precisely that finitude.<sup>205</sup> As seen earlier, they were not eternal in their first state, but they were blameless, without sin. Death comes because sin came into the world. Sin is what makes God go away and the tree of life also goes with him. God's making the tree of life not a possibility any more is in this dimension a result of his mercy and not cruelty. If natural life with sin is unbearable, imagine an eternal. For instance, how could we cope with an eternal Hitler? God denotes it “He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever.” (Gen 3:22b). Death comes because we no longer have access to the tree of life which nourished life in its perishable state, and in some sense death also serves to set a limit on evil. What brought death was our moving away from God and choosing unbelief rather than trusting in God. It simply left us to what we were made of “to the ground you will return”. God created us with the possibility of eternity and not for sin, and we scorned who God is and what he wants us to be.

The account in Genesis 1 and 2 gives a small glimpse of what life was like before the

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<sup>204</sup>See section 2.2.2.

<sup>205</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 80.

Fall. Since Adam and Eve were naked even at night this indicates how congenial the weather conditions were. At this stage plants would be enough for food for us, work would be a very easy load, and the biggest loss of all was that God was not meant to be hidden. His hiddenness was and is caused by the fact and act of our sin. For those that still say that God could remove all the results of sin Lewis says “It would, no doubt, have been possible for God to remove by miracle the results of the first sin ever committed by a human being; but this would not have been much good unless he was prepared to remove the results of the second sin, and of the third, and so on forever.”<sup>206</sup> In some sense God did remove these in Jesus Christ.

#### **4.6 Why do we ask “Why?” to suffering?**

##### *4.6.1 Why does suffering matter?*

If there is a single question that sums up the reaction of every single person in the face of suffering it is, “Why?” Even when we are responsible for what has happened. Suffering really challenges us and shapes the way of how we see the world and relate to it. Willing or not, suffering disturbs us with ultimate questions, as if they seem to be telling us that something is wrong, that life should not be in the way as it is.

Yancey refers to the fact that this feeling of doubt and betrayal in the face of suffering especially comes to those who believe in a world that is ruled by a powerful and loving God.<sup>207</sup> Suffering does disturb us. Hall stresses that this sense of wrongness in the world inevitably leads us to ask with an existential urgency, “What then should be?” denoting that the world should not be the way it is.<sup>208</sup> Lewis goes even further, asking “Is it rational to believe in a bad God? Anyway, in a God so bad as all that? The cosmic sadist, the spiteful imbecile?”<sup>209</sup> Surely people who have reflected seriously on this matter of suffering have also considered this option of God being a cosmic sadist. Lewis himself shows what is behind his scepticism “All that stuff about the cosmic sadist was not so much the expression of thought as of hatred. I was getting from it the only pleasure a man in anguish can get; the pleasure of hitting back.”<sup>210</sup> The displeasure suffering brings is not avoidable, it deeply challenges us and it makes us challenge God and his goodness. Lewis says that pain is not only immediately recognisable evil, but evil impossible to ignore.<sup>211</sup>

Is it this sense of betrayal, the fact that *God does not do anything*, that creates the problem of evil? Surely we feel betrayed by God in view of the sufferings that befall us.

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<sup>206</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 65.

<sup>207</sup>See section 2.3.1.

<sup>208</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 50.

<sup>209</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 30.

<sup>210</sup>Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 39-40.

<sup>211</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 90.

Lewis has a tentative question about this cruel and unjust universe: “But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”<sup>212</sup> This is what I refer to when I say, why do we ask this “Why?” question. What makes us challenge reality and suffering? Yancey and Hart help us considerably in these dimensions as we will see now in “Pain as the megaphone of God” and “What lies behind it?”

#### *4.6.2 Pain the Megaphone of God?*

In view of our broken world Yancey asks “What can God use to get our attention?” which he links to Lewis' well known expression “Pain, the megaphone of God.”. Pain says that something is wrong. Though Yancey recognizes that suffering and pain denotes our fallen state and that this planet emits constant cries for redemption, he does not believe that God permits suffering because of its megaphone value, as if suffering was a kind of punishment for wrong doing. What he stresses is that indeed suffering says by itself that 'something is wrong'.<sup>213</sup> This dimension is important to note because suffering can either bring people closer to God or do the opposite, setting people in rebellion to him. Lewis himself recognizes this possibility: “No doubt as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment.”<sup>214</sup>

Suffering raises questions that are not easy to answer. There is complexity wherever we turn for answers. Soelle is one who also argues that there is no reply to this search for a cause and if the word 'why' helped in any sense such a reply would be easy. Soelle differs from Yancey in the fact that it is a search for an end and the problem is that this whole universe is empty of finality, and the soul in affliction that cries out continually for this finality, touches the void.<sup>215</sup> Yancey, however, when directing the questions of 'causation' to questions of 'to what end', is not referring to an end in the sense of finding the cause but in the sense of how we can transform a suffering experience. We can agree with Yancey that causation questions only bring more torment to the suffering person. Is God trying to tell me something? Does God have a purpose in sending suffering? Yancey answers that maybe God is not trying to say anything, pain is just part and parcel of our planet. Yancey uses the megaphone of God in such a way that suffering sends a general message of warning to all humanity, showing our fallen state and the fact that we need radical outside intervention, but we cannot argue it backwards and link suffering to a direct 'shout of God' to raise a dead world.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>212</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 38.

<sup>213</sup>See section 2.2.2.

<sup>214</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 93.

<sup>215</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 155.

<sup>216</sup>See section 2.3.1.

It is interesting to note is that Lewis himself tasted his megaphone formula in the death of his wife. From defending a God who shouts in our pain, he finds a God that is silent, “But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”<sup>217</sup> The truth is that in times of trouble no one has the courage to say that God intended suffering as a way to bring us closer to him. Also interesting in this dimension is the tendency we have to pray more often to God in times of trouble, Bonhoeffer says that it is something we should be ashamed of, when we need trouble to shake us up and drive us to prayer.<sup>218</sup> Bonhoeffer highlights that our relationship with God should be nurtured by loving God for who he is, and not for the benefits he can give us, just as Job has shown us, for God was his ultimate concern, not his blessings. But if God did not intend suffering for that reason, though it does shake us, what is actually behind our 'Why?' to suffering?

#### *4.6.3 What lies behind?*

Before reading Hart's book, Lewis helped to see that suffering had something to say, as in the earlier example of the crooked and straight line: how do I know that the crooked line is wrong? That the problem is born because of God's own revelation is clear in Lewis. He even expresses it using another image “If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good creator? Men are fools, perhaps; but hardly so foolish as that.”<sup>219</sup> Lewis stresses that we could never come to such understanding without comparing it to something else. I wonder how Lewis did not come to the real issue behind it all that Hart has unfolded to us, but surely Lewis came really close and might have helped Hart in that, as they share certain similarities in their writings.

Would evil be a problem if there were no God? Probably not, and this is what Hart points out looking at Ivan's complaint against God. Hart unfolds that such arguments and complaints would never occur to consciences that had not in some profound way been shaped by the moral universe of a Christian culture.<sup>220</sup> Hart stresses that such an attitude is not a position from unbelief, but is rather a rebellion. The uneasiness caused by evil and suffering is just a shadow cast by the light of the Gospel, as a kind of unwilling confession of belief working in a contrary way. It also explains why sceptics find no other God than the Christian God of infinite love who deserves such efforts of active unbelief.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup>Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 6.

<sup>218</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 106-107.

<sup>219</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 3.

<sup>220</sup>See section 3.2.1.

<sup>221</sup>See Section 3.2.4.



Lewis stresses that Christianity creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain<sup>222</sup>, whereas Hart says that it is actually our rebellion against the “empty tomb” that causes it, rebellion against a life that should not be like it is now with death reigning absolutely in all things. Willing or not, our rage against suffering is just a proof of our fallen state, which we would not know if we had not gone astray from God by choosing the way of unbelief.

#### **4.7 Correcting misconceptions**

The themes discussed till now have tried to help us in how to make sense of suffering in light of the Christian faith. Even though it has helped to solve some problems, there are some misconceptions that inevitably follow any experience of suffering, which if not properly addressed can make the suffering even worse, and therefore, need to be addressed.

Questions like, “Is there any reason for suffering to be? What is the role of it in humanity? Why has God allowed suffering to be?” really haunt us. God himself has said that there is 'no reason' behind suffering “although you incited me against him, to destroy him *for no reason.*” (Job 2:3), but we need to find a justification for it, either by blaming God or trying to excuse him from it. Let us reflect a little on the main misconceptions related to God and suffering, which if correctly addressed can help us drastically in the healing process.

##### *4.7.1 What kind of God are we talking about?*

Hart is the one who raises this question when trying to understand what kind of God is behind Voltaire's understanding, theodicy's attempt, and the atheists' assertions about God. He asks who would ever worship such a kind of God or even would be willing to die for him? Though it is not a God portrayed by any other religion, and neither is it the God announced by the Christian Gospel, it is surely a misunderstanding or a distorted representation of the Christian God.<sup>223</sup> Hart's reflection is really important in solving the most common problem related to suffering, that we are dealing and wrestling with a fake God.

The main issue here is God's own nature, Who is God? We always end up with the most important questions of life. Any answer to who God is depends exclusively on God's giving us any clue, and the way we answer this simple and ultimate question will change not only the way we see suffering but everything else. Yancey says that by trying to fathom what purpose God has with this world he learned a great deal. Not only he had come to understand the suffering of this world better but also his attitude towards God changed dramatically.<sup>224</sup>

Suffering indeed casts doubt on God's nature, his goodness and love for us. A question like Tada's “Who is this God, I thought I knew?”<sup>225</sup>, indeed shows this cloudy state of our

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<sup>222</sup>Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 3.

<sup>223</sup>See section 3.2.2.

<sup>224</sup>Yancey, *Where is God?*, 21.

<sup>225</sup>Tada, *When God Weeps*, 27.

understanding before an experience of suffering. Lewis arrives at an important reflection: that God does not need to try our faith and love to find out their quality because God already knows it, but it was he himself who did not know it. While his first observation is important in the sense that God does not need such a test, in the latter, Lewis puts God in charge of suffering: “He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down.”<sup>226</sup> Such understanding still reflects his 'megaphone' view of suffering, which brings us to suffering as punishment. Is suffering a punishment from God?

#### *4.7.2 Suffering as punishment*

Both Yancey and Hart crush down this understanding of suffering as punishment using Luke 13 where Jesus forbid his disciples to think of any reason behind misfortune and culpability and also by using other examples. Yancey adds that Jesus used those episodes to depict eternal truths, “Unless you repent, you too will perish.”, in the sense that tragedies should abruptly alert us to the brevity of life. Another important dimension Yancey brings is how punishment works in the Bible. He says that it tends to fit a pattern where the pain only comes after much warning, and that no one sits around afterwards asking “why?” because they know the reason they are suffering. He stresses that unless God makes it all clear we should find other biblical models for suffering rather than punishment.<sup>227</sup> Hart also draws on the concept of Original Sin to state that suffering is not a result we all deserve because of the first sin.

Soelle argues that it is almost incomprehensible how this punitive nature of suffering has survived and been renewed again and again throughout the centuries: “Job's friends don't die out!”<sup>228</sup> Hall might give us an answer for it in the fact that the view of suffering as punishment can only be understood in what Luther called “justification by works.”<sup>229</sup> When we think that we are the ones who can make our own salvation, we have plenty of space for thinking in terms of reward and punishment. Yancey also stresses two common errors: the first where all suffering is seen as punishment from God and the second where it is said that life with God will never include suffering. Yancey stresses that the Bible so clearly denies this position in the book of Job that it should forever nail a coffin lid over this idea of punishment. It can even be seen in Jesus' own example, who had no sin and yet was tortured to death. Davies cites a rather unusual example against deserved punishment over non-rational things. He suggests that when his video recorder breaks or a corn field is hit by a disease it does not make any sense to say that they deserved such punishment because of their wrongdoing.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>226</sup>Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 52.

<sup>227</sup>See section 2.3.1.

<sup>228</sup>Soelle, *Sufferings*, 114.

<sup>229</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 77.

<sup>230</sup>Davies, *God and Evil*, 149.

It is interesting to note how Eliphaz' accusations cast doubt into Job's own heart. Job even uses the same language used to accuse him while he prays to God, "What have I done wrong?" It shows that people in sorrow are very fragile and vulnerable and the way we react to their suffering can affect them deeply, either for good or for ill. Yet, most interesting is Job's own question to God if retribution is the case, "Why do you not forgive my sins?" (Job 7:17-21) Here, Job literally puts God on the cross by asking the most crucial question ever. He says that instead of punishing God could simply forgive, and God actually did precisely this in Jesus Christ. Soelle argues that this old doctrine of retribution where sin is followed by suffering has been reversed on the cross: "atonement results from suffering."<sup>231</sup> Or as Isaiah 53:4 states, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

In this dimension of God punishing and especially with reference to several Biblical passages that claim God brought evil upon some person or group such as Isaiah 45:7, Groothuis stresses that God did not directly cause or create evil in the same way he created the universe: it does not mean God created something evil *ex nihilo*. It rather shows that God does bring judgement on evildoers by thwarting their plans and punishing them. It is their own evil that causes God's judgement.<sup>232</sup> This is often seen especially in the Old Testament narratives and it denotes an uneasy attribute of God: that is his sovereignty, which is what Paul refers to in Romans chapter 9, a chapter that is hardly preached in pulpits. In verse 20<sup>233</sup> Paul refers to Isaiah 29:16, which says, "You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'You did not make me'? Can the pot say to the potter, 'You know nothing'?" Paul is simply asking, where is our autonomy before God's sovereignty? Hart himself says that atheists think they can put God in a box and simply judge him, but things do not work like that.

In Isaiah 45:6c-7, for instance, where God is presented as forming light and creating darkness, this can in some way disturb us. Nielsen's study on these verses states that they are frequently decontextualised because their historical background and literary analysis are rarely taken into account when one reads it. Nielsen says when one looks into these verses against the historical and literary background and how those keywords also appear in the context of Isaiah and other Biblical texts, the verses refer to historical and political events, especially in the context of exile and its end, with God being the one who creates the exile.<sup>234</sup> Here is a clear example of what Yancey refers to when speaking of suffering as punishment in the Bible.

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<sup>231</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 21.

<sup>232</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 627.

<sup>233</sup>Isaiah 45:9 also refers to the same position.

<sup>234</sup>Tina Dykesteen Nilsen, "The Creation of Darkness and Evil (Isaiah 45:6c-7)," *RB* 115 (2008): 5-25.

Though God is sovereign and he does whatever pleases him, his sovereignty does not work independently from his other attributes, such as his justice. Even Romans 9 ends with God's unrestrained mercy.<sup>235</sup> The many wars in the Old Testament, the flood and the incident with Sodom and Gomorrah surely challenge us in how we should understand them. These events do refer to God's judgement upon sin, and not as God simply doing evil himself. It is interesting to note this dimension in Genesis 15, where God appears in a vision to Abraham restating his covenant with him and Abraham's scepticism in questioning how he would know that all this was to come true. While Abraham fell into a deep sleep God revealed to him a summary of what would happen in the next 400 years. The interesting thing to note here is that God would rather let his people be slaves in Egypt during this time because "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.", as they would take this nation's lands as their own possession when they went up out of Egypt. It shows that God is not a bloody-thirsty God, killing without reason.<sup>236</sup> In Leviticus 18 after giving a long list of things detestable to the Lord, in verses 24-25 it is said, "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants." Here the sin of those nations has reached its measure. Genesis 15:19-21 also gives a longer description of the nations that were under that judgement. In Deuteronomy 20 we can also read further on this theme. It first gives commandments about how the Israelites should deal with the nations around the judged ones, offering peace first on the basis of their becoming subject to the Israelites and if this were rejected, then fighting, killing all men and taking women, children and everything else as plunder (Deut 20:10-15), but as for the nations God was giving them as an inheritance God says, "do not leave alive anything that breathes." (Deut 20:16-18). God's judgement upon those nations in Genesis 15 is happening here, and by comparing Genesis 15 to Deuteronomy 20 it can be seen that the nations are the same, with fewer in Deuteronomy probably because the neighbouring ones defeated them in war. It seems that at the same time God is on the one hand applying his judgement to evil nations, and on the other he is carrying out his redemption plan. With this background war takes on a different dimension in the Old Testament. It also enables a correct reading of Deuteronomy 7, which deals with the issue of war and why God had chosen Israel as his treasured possession.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup>See Romans 9:22-33.

<sup>236</sup>It is important to note that the Bible does not only refer to wars of conquest. On many occasions Israel engaged in wars to defend themselves and they also suffered defeat. The Old Testament especially *spends much more time* dealing with the defeats of God's people in war and the Exiles because of their stubborn hearts than on conquests.

<sup>237</sup>This paradoxical dimension of judgement and redemption going side by side can also be seen in the flood episode where the same water which condemned the evil ones was the same that made the ark sail. The ark can even be compared to Jesus, as John 3:18 stresses: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does

In the same way we should see the episodes about the Flood (Gen 6-9), and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), where those people were condemned because of their violence and because the thoughts of their hearts were evil all the time. These narratives are not easy to deal with because they address the ultimate reality of God's judgement upon evil. It brings to mind what Yancey stressed through Jesus' own words in Luke 13, "Unless you repent!" These narratives of God's judgement should point us to that final judgement which is to come, as Jesus has stressed in many occasions in the Gospels. If God said he is going to punish all sin, make a note, God will! However, God's mercy and love always comes first before his justice and wrath<sup>238</sup>, Ezekiel 18.29-32 makes this clear:

Yet the Israelites say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offences; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

Another important dimension to be noted concerning the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah is for those who complain that, if God is powerful why does he not do anything? The flood is a clear example that extinguishing evil people does not solve the problem of evil. The problem is deeper than we think it is, and Jesus came to deliver us from that, as we will consider later.

There is punishment for sin. The Bible shows that when God punishes it comes after much warning, and it is intended to bring repentance "because the Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb 12:4-11; Prov 3:11-12; 15:5; Rev 3:19) On the other hand, there is also the dimension of punishment as God's ultimate judgement over sin. Concerning both instances the Bible assures us that "Yes, Lord God Almighty, *true and just* are your judgments." (Rev 16:7; 19:1-2; Gal 6:7). In this sense we should not link all the suffering in the world to direct punishment from God because the Bible is also clear about this. If we think like that, Soelle is right in stressing that "The ultimate conclusion of theological sadism is worshipping the executioner."<sup>239</sup>

#### *4.7.3 Submission to God*

Both Yancey and Hart show this dimension in the fact that they wrestle with God. Their

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not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." My reflection on war in the Old Testament has in some respect been influenced by Pierre Gilbert, "The Problem of War in the Old Testament", available from [http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pgilbert/articles/problem\\_of\\_war.pdf](http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pgilbert/articles/problem_of_war.pdf); Internet; accessed 21 May 2011.

<sup>238</sup>Unless, as the Scripture shows, the first is not a possibility because they have set their hearts to evil only. In the book of Revelation (16: 9, 11) it is stressed that even the plagues of the final judgement is the last attempt to bring evildoers to repentance, which they deliberately refuse.

<sup>239</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 28.

books are attempts to challenge suffering and not to accept a resigned position before it. Yancey, however, provides more in examples of people who say, “You must accept it and know what God is trying to say”, and most especially emphasizing that even Jesus never said to a poor or suffering person, “accept it, it is your lot”, Jesus rather was sensitive to their situation and performed many miracles. He also says that if we accept suffering as punishment, and therefore submission, we end up in fatalism, and if that is the case there is no reason to fight AIDS and other diseases. Jesus' own example does not give any hint on fatalism and while he was here he fought disease and despair.<sup>240</sup>

This position can also be seen in the replies of Job's friends, where mostly submission is mixed with the understanding of suffering as punishment: “submit to God and confess your sin.” Still, from beginning to end Job wrestles with God. He does not take a resigned position before his suffering. Even Jesus wrestled with God in Gethsemane. Though he had predicted his death many times in the Gospels he pleaded three times to God take his suffering away. If even God did not take a resigned position in relation to human suffering, sending Jesus Christ to redeem the world, we also should not.

#### *4.7.4 The greater good theodicy*

Hart is one who fiercely contends this position to be wrong. Yancey on the other hand does not touch this issue, beyond saying that God does not send suffering for its megaphone power. Hart starts with Voltaire's poem, where Voltaire invites all those who hold the position of suffering as necessary and willed by God for a greater good to come and explain what universal good is behind the tragedy that overtook Lisbon.<sup>241</sup> Hart also criticizes some Christian responses which hold that there is a divine plan behind all suffering as a direct expression of divine will, and also the perverted providence that will bring God's good ends in view of every single evil. Hart stresses that such positions only create room for critics of the Christian faith. Lastly, Hart refers to Ivan's complaint against the final harmony that is to come, which Ivan himself cannot conceive at the cost of the suffering of innocent children.<sup>242</sup>

Using the concept of *privatio boni*, Hart stresses that the understanding of evil as a privation of good by itself shows that there is no way to reconcile good with evil, or assert that God wills evil to bring a greater good, simply because evil has no contribution to make. That is why it is wrong to think that the drama of the Fall and redemption will make the final state of things even more glorious than it would be otherwise. God does not need evil to achieve any end. If it were otherwise, it would give evil substance and make God its cause.

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<sup>240</sup>See section 2.3.1, 2.3.2.

<sup>241</sup>See section 3.2.2.

<sup>242</sup>See section 3.2.3.

Therefore sin, suffering and death cannot reveal any attributes of God. They are what blind us to God's true nature. In addition, the cross of Christ is not a validation of pain and death. There is no greater good behind it, it is their defeat. If all suffering is necessary to God's final harmony, then Christ's sacrifice is not unique, making sin, death and suffering an integral part of reality and rendering God's providence indistinguishable from fate.<sup>243</sup>

Hart's arguments definitely help us to see that God has no need of evil, sin, death or any kind of suffering to bring about any greater good end. However, we can agree that God can bring good out of evil as already stressed but not so as to imply that God wills evil in view of the good. In relation to sin, evil, death, and suffering the greater good theodicy seems to be defeated, but I would rather argue that it cannot be dismissed so easily. The greater good theodicy can take an even more disguised form of rationality in a position very well known to all of us, where it does not address the bad side, but the good in the free will defence.

#### *4.7.5 The Free Will Defence*

While reflecting on the free will defence I came to perceive it as a variation of the greater good theodicy. Lewis poses the following problem: "Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary, for no even moderately good being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't."<sup>244</sup> Lewis depicts in some sense the necessity of suffering, otherwise God would never permit it. The tricky side of the free will defence is that if freedom implies the possibility of going wrong and if God thought it a price worthy of paying, then there is a greater good behind such autonomous freedom in relation to God.

I am raising this issue because while Hart on the one hand dismisses the greater good theodicy, arguing that God does not need evil and suffering to build up Heaven, on the other hand both Hart and Yancey stress a greater good in view of suffering in relation to our freedom. It is because their 'freedom' formulas depict a kind of autonomous and rational freedom in relation to God which is worth the risk of a cosmic fall and the terrible consequences that follow from it. However, according to Luther we do not have such freedom in relation to God.

Lewis himself interestingly links the free will defence with the greater good theodicy: "It is probably the same in the universe, God created things which had free will. This means creatures which can go either wrong or right. ... If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will ... then we may take it it is worth paying."<sup>245</sup> This clearly shows that there is a greater good behind our freewill. If we are to hold the freewill defence

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<sup>243</sup>See section 3.3.2.

<sup>244</sup>Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 43.

<sup>245</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 47-48.

then we need also to hold the whole greater good theodicy and its consequences, including all evil, sin, and cruelty. The other option, however, is to dismiss both. Freedom might explain evil, but as to Heaven, it is God who makes it, we are saved by grace alone, and this is why I am insisting on Luther's position that there is nothing we can do concerning our salvation. Evil comes from the very possibility of misusing our freedom. This freedom God gives us can only be free in view of what it was created for, to say, our relationship with God, and here I believe is its right place, it has nothing to say about building up heaven, because that depends on God alone. The greater good theodicy can be simply dismissed with Genesis 1: if there was an option for life without sin, death, and suffering, then it could have been otherwise without them. Only then does it make sense to talk about sin and the Fall as an abnormality and evil as a corruption of what is good, but to make it all a necessity is to scorn who God is and what is his purpose with Creation.

If Jesus healed people from their diseases it means that there is no greater good behind it, as he himself has stressed in John 9: that no one sinned, it is only for the glory of God to be displayed, and that is for our own sake because nothing can make God's glory any higher or lower, God is God. Groothuis even argues "Yet without human rebellion against God, God's own unparalleled work of reconciliation in Christ could never have occurred. Scripture intimates that the final plan was set forth from the beginning when it refers to Christ as 'the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.' (Rev 13:8)"<sup>246</sup>, but it is because God foreknew how all things would work out, this is why he is not running out of options, and that is why what he says comes true. God's providence is what it is because of God's omniscience. If God knows what is to come he can intervene in our reality to achieve what he wants in the best possible way, though this does not imply he has determined every single aspect of our reality since he made us free. The Bible stresses that Jesus had to suffer from the beginning because God knew what was going to come. If this is not the case then positions that stress that God has determined all suffering are true, which also conflicts with the understanding of freedom and the fact that we are not responsible for our actions.

It might sound disturbing, but if we want to hold our autonomous freedom before God, with Heaven depending on it, then we need to hold also the greater good defence and all that comes with it. If that is the case then we need to agree with Soelle, saying, "An all-powerful God who imposes suffering, who looks down on Auschwitz from above, must be a sadist."<sup>247</sup> Groothuis points well to God's providence: "These unsearchable paths of God – the thick, dark, heavy mysteries of providence – are not absurdities; they are not meaningless.

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<sup>246</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 644.

<sup>247</sup>Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflection on God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 65.



Their meaning is, however, largely opaque to us now.”<sup>248</sup> There is much more at stake than what our Euclidean minds, to use Ivan's expression, can perceive, as Paul stresses “ what no human mind has conceived” (1 Cor 2:9).

#### **4.8 Summary of this chapter**

The main aim of this chapter is to emphasize the importance of seeking understanding about the reality of suffering in relation to the Christian faith, though 'this understanding' is somehow limited to us. In this respect, Christian faith in view of God's own revelation in human history and its theological reflection can help us to see suffering in a very different perspective compared to other world views. This understanding does not seek someone or something to blame. It rather seeks a diagnosis which helps us to relate better to our own selves and to people around us and the world, since suffering is an integral part of life.

In this sense the image of spiritual warfare stressed by New Testament Scripture helps us to see that not all things that happen in the world are directly willed by God. Hart stresses that there is a 'provisional dualism' of other powers, created good in themselves by God, which by the abuse of their freedom and their enmity to God and Creation, can inflict harm upon our reality. It shows that the world as we see it is more than just matter. Considering the Creation itself, we have seen that suffering is foundational to life. God intended suffering to serve life and not to destroy it. We have also considered that the fact that God is creating a world at all shows that God has a purpose in creating all things, especially with humanity.

When God created the world, suffering was constrained into a safe environment, it served life, but our going astray from God by choosing the way of unbelief brought evil into our reality and also caused suffering to become out of control, as stressed in the doctrine of the Fall. By the misuse of our freedom, sin, death, and despair took root in the world. In this dimension of the Fall as an accident, we have also considered what creates the feeling of unfairness we have in relation to suffering, as if it should not be the way it is. This displeasure in the face of suffering is intrinsically related to God's own revelation in human history, most especially in the resurrection of Jesus Christ where sin, evil, and death were defeated. Lastly we have considered the most common mistakes that tend to follow an experience of suffering, which if not correctly addressed can even increase suffering, create despair, and lead people to unbelief.

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<sup>248</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 643.

## Chapter 5

# HOW DOES FAITH HELP?

### **5.1 Overview**

The present chapter discusses the second aim of this thesis, which is how a discussion about suffering can also address the dimension of evil in the world. The problem in view of suffering comes about because it is real, but generally discussions on this theme tend to stay in the world of ideas. An answer to the problem must also touch the real problem of evil somehow. If it does not, then the discussion is not relevant and is not interested in the misery suffering brings to our reality. It becomes just a search for easy comfort and peace of mind, therefore foolish. This chapter is all about “What comes next?” What do we do when we have a better understanding of what our suffering reality is? Here is where the Christian faith comes in: of a Christianity that follows the Jesus Christ who, rather than discussing evil, fights it and overcomes it with good, and even sends us out to do the same.

Christianity does not ignore our suffering reality. It does not say that suffering is not real, or even that we should run away from it. Christianity's world view deeply matches reality and gives a real account of what suffering is and genuinely engages with our suffering reality to bring relief from its misery. In the book of Revelation chapter 21 it is said that there will be an end to all kinds of suffering in the New Heaven and Earth, and why is it saying so? As we have seen in the last chapter we can indeed ask, 'How could God at the same time inflict suffering and also fight against it?' From beginning to end of the Bible the truth of God fighting evil stands, and I believe we also are part of that.

To explore this dimension of Christianity I will first address how we cope with suffering and how faith helps us. After that, I will stress the answer God gives concerning the reality of suffering, and how we relate to it. In what follows I will deal with God's answer in relation to his mission, the reality of the Kingdom of God as already here, and the Christian Hope of Christ's final victory, concluding with a summary of this chapter.

### **5.2 How to cope with Suffering**

Yancey clearly show this dimension in his move from causative questions such as, “Why are we suffering?”, to how we should respond to it. He stresses that before God himself, the only thing that worried Job was his response to God. Yancey argues that the Biblical pattern to suffering does not answer “why” questions, but rather points to “What should I do now?” The “Rejoice in your suffering!” of the Bible is very challenging. However, Yancey stresses that it

does not mean feeling happy about tragedies, but rather shows that God can change our misery.<sup>249</sup> Yancey helps us to see that suffering has value, but only if we do something with it, or better, if we dignify it by bringing it to God, as we will see in what follows. Hart on the other hand does not deal with this dimension. He himself recognizes that his book is not a book of consolations, especially because he aims more to correct misunderstandings.

Yet in his complaint against Ivan's negation of reality Hart does point to an important dimension in helping a suffering person or even ourselves. In relation to this Yancey says that the first step in helping a suffering person is to acknowledge that pain is valid, and worthy of a sympathetic response.<sup>250</sup> As we have seen in section 4.4.2, suffering is part of our reality and denying it is to deny existence itself, so this step is needed even though it is a truth hard to accept. Hall highlights two basic affirmations concerning suffering: the first is that suffering is real and is the essential lot of 'fallen' humanity, and the second is that suffering is not the last word about the human condition, therefore it should not become our preoccupation because Jesus holds the last word.<sup>251</sup> Soelle is one who spends time in this acceptance dimension of life in the face of suffering. She stresses that "we can remain the same people we were before or we can change", and change opens us up to an indestructible hope.<sup>252</sup>

Soelle clearly identifies the dignified suffering that Yancey refers to in Brian Sternberg's and Joni Eareckson Tada's examples when she reflects on the distinction Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 7:10 between the 'sorrow of the world' and 'godly sorrow'. She says that the question is no longer, "How could God permit that?" but the more difficult question which we still need to learn to ask: "How do our pains become God's pain, and how does God's pain appear in our pains?"<sup>253</sup> Here we can understand when the Bible says "Rejoice in your suffering.", suffering is for everyone. What differs is how we respond to it. The disconcerting conclusion Paul takes from the sorrow of the world is that it produces death. Soelle even adds that it knows no hope and leads life to nothing.<sup>254</sup>

But what dignifies suffering? Soelle says that "Paul contrasts this 'sorrow of the world' with another one: 'for godly sorrow produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly sorrow produces death' (2 Cor. 7:10)". How then "are our pains, which so often express the sorrow of the world, to be distinguished from God's pain?"<sup>255</sup> She answers that the transformation from fruitless and meaningless pain into God's pain only

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<sup>249</sup>See section 2.3.3.

<sup>250</sup>See section 2.4.1.

<sup>251</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 19-20.

<sup>252</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 126-127.

<sup>253</sup>Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 71.

<sup>254</sup>Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 72.

<sup>255</sup>Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 73.

occurs when we learn to move from the sorrow of the world to the sorrow of God, but first we must learn how to perceive God's pain.<sup>256</sup> Here she is not talking about a robotic God who will send joy again after any pain as sun after the rain, but seeing the sun within the rain.<sup>257</sup> In the face of suffering we have only two options, as she wonderfully states: "I am free to go around grim, frustrated, despairing with my suffering or to 'offer it up to Christ'."<sup>258</sup>

This reminds us of Jesus own words in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." This a disconcerting truth: that suffering without God ends up in death and leads life into despair, but the suffering that is brought to God brings joy, even though all around seems to say the opposite. Jesus' own example shows us that. He did not hear from God on the cross. He was in despair, as most of us would be in such a situation. 'Why have you forsaken me?', is it not familiar to us? But Jesus still trusts his spirit to God. Suffering when brought to God turns into joy. Jesus' own suffering, however, turned the world into joy. Faith is how we know that, as considered below.

#### *5.2.1 Is faith a kind of antidote to suffering?*

Yancey stresses that both Brian and Joni found strength and courage to continue in their trust in God, and this was an integral part of the process of healing their wounded spirits. Faith is how we move from the unanswerable "Why?" to the question "To what end?" entering the realm of transformation.<sup>259</sup>

When I first started my reflections, the provisional title for this thesis was simply "Suffering", especially because of the understanding I had that suffering had something to say. However, I knew something was missing, such as a kind of counter to suffering. My insistence on faith came through reading Swindoll's book on Job<sup>260</sup>, where he shows that it was actually Job and not God who defeated Satan. It was Job's faith in God that overcame Satan and after all the suffering Satan inflicted on him, Satan was silenced by Job's faith.<sup>261</sup> Burrel also emphasizes this faith dimension, reflecting on God's answer as Job saying what was right and his friends not. He highlights that Job's mode of discourse was speaking 'to' rather than 'about' his Creator. This distinction between Job and Job's friends mode of speech denotes a dialogue dimension that creates a relationship. Job would never address God if he was not susceptible of being addressed as well as capable of responding.<sup>262</sup> This truly shows us this particular dimension of faith as being a relationship with God. Burrel also stresses that

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<sup>256</sup>Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 77-79.

<sup>257</sup>Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 78.

<sup>258</sup>Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 81.

<sup>259</sup>See sections 2.3.4, 2.4.1, 2.4.2.

<sup>260</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *Job: A Man of Heroic Endurance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

<sup>261</sup>Swindoll, *Job*, 305.

<sup>262</sup>Burrel, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, 105, 109.

Job helps us to understand this authentic freedom given us to respond to God's call, which only happens in the act of faith in a free Creator.<sup>263</sup>

Another important dimension in Job is 'what brings us to God'. Would we still love God if we were greatly affected in the most important areas of our lives as Job was? Soelle denotes this profound dimension of faith in the fact that "The only salvation for a person in this despair is to go on loving 'in the void', a love for God that is no longer reactive, in answer to experienced happiness – the gratitude of a child – but instead an act that goes beyond all that has been experienced."<sup>264</sup> This is the most disturbing question Job asks us all: Is God our first and foremost interest simply because of who He is? Or do we actually look for the blessings rather than the One who blesses?

Hall links this faith dimension to the fact that God's answer to suffering is not made up of words. In reality God does not give us an answer but "... *an Answerer!*"<sup>265</sup> Hall stresses that it does not matter if the Answerer brings more questions than answers. What matters is the presence itself<sup>266</sup>, the key being relationship. Yancey also stresses this dimension: that God did not give us words or theories on the problem of pain, He gave us himself.<sup>267</sup> His question "Who helped you most?" and the answers he got from suffering people denote this important dimension of presence. In Jesus Christ, God is present: he became one of us and shared our afflictions, is within us through the Holy Spirit, and will be till the end of time. Though sometimes God seems silent, the Bible assures us he is always with us, as in Job's case – he listened to every single prayer and complaint both from Job and his friends.

The knowledge that God answers the problem of suffering with friendship in Christ helps me to understand better what faith is about. I have long wrestled with the question of whether faith was an antidote God gave us for fighting suffering, especially considering Job's example where he defeated Satan and suffering through his faith in God. What I actually realized later is that it is just one characteristic of faith. I would rather say it is an extra, because faith has a higher mission, which is bringing us to God. Faith is what links us to what God is doing on this Earth, as reflected on section 4.4 "What is it all about?" If I stress faith as just an antidote for suffering, I would rather give suffering importance and I would not be fair to God's purpose for Creation. Job defeated suffering through his faith, his relationship with God, but he did not use faith to that end. God was his first and foremost aim. The real end for suffering and despair rests in God alone, and that can only be perceived by faith, not as

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<sup>263</sup>Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, 134.

<sup>264</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 156.

<sup>265</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 94.

<sup>266</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 118.

<sup>267</sup>See section 2.4.3.

an antidote, but because our relationship with him is what really matters. If then unbelief, the moving away from God, brought evil into our reality, then faith, the coming closer to God, is what brings good into our reality. For that we depend on the author of our faith, Jesus Christ.

### *5.2.2 Jesus Christ – God sharing our sufferings*

Yancey asks, what difference does Christian faith make? He answers that the question “Where is God when it hurts?” is a question that every sufferer asks, How does God feel about my plight? Does he care? He says that apart from Jesus' incarnation our faith would have little to hold onto, for no other God takes on the limitations and suffering of his creation. He also recognizes that Jesus' coming to suffer and die does not remove our pain, but it surely shows that God did not sit idly by and watch us suffer in isolation.<sup>268</sup> Both Yancey and Hart point to Jesus' incarnation if we want to see how God feels or responds to our suffering, where sin he forgives, diseases he heals, death he overcomes. Never in a single moment was Jesus resigned before suffering, even his own suffering, where he expressed the same emotions and fears as ours in face of great affliction.

God's becoming one of us and undergoing suffering deeply amazes and challenges us. How could salvation and redemption spring out of suffering in Jesus' death and resurrection? In view of this dimension I came to perceive that suffering had a role to play, as a kind of mysterious servant of God. Jesus' passion shows clearly that we could never imagine or create something like that, nor even could we give such a meaning to it. It depicts a God who seems to enjoy playing with paradoxes in the Bible: the last will be the first, those who lose their life will find it, blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the persecuted, of new life from death, or even how God's goodness and justice meet in the passion of Christ whose punishment brought us peace. It all reinforces the dimension that God is still creating, moving into the chaos and ordering it and creating life as in the beginning. While we run away from suffering God goes literally into it. He came into our chaos and created *new life* within our sin and darkness.

There are those who say that if God is really God then he cannot suffer. Hart stressed that the concept of *apatheia* has never denied the full dimension of Christ's suffering on the cross, because if the divine Word truly became flesh in Jesus Christ, this means that God has experienced suffering and death in their fullest depth.<sup>269</sup> Soelle says that this theological question of whether God could suffer or not is usually resolved “in such a way that 'one of the persons of the trinity' suffered, the other two, however, only in him.”<sup>270</sup> Hall argues that it is

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<sup>268</sup>See section 2.4.2.

<sup>269</sup>See section 3.3.2.

<sup>270</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 43.

the strength of “The theology of the cross” highlighted by Martin Luther, of a God who is revealed in the crucified one, of a God who does not relate to us through power but through participation, not by might but through self-emptying. Hall suggests that 'engaged' is the right word, implying that God meets us and takes into his own being the burden of our suffering, while a show of power would only destroy the sinner with the sin.<sup>271</sup>

McGrath notes that in the theology of the cross, God works in a paradoxical way, where his strength lies hidden under apparent weakness and his wisdom under apparent folly.<sup>272</sup> The secret behind the crucified Christ is that he did not undergo the cross for his own benefit, but for ours. He suffered and became sin on our behalf in order that his righteousness might become our righteousness. Reason is totally unable to comprehend this astonishing mystery, by which we are made the righteousness of God. It is only through faith that the believer appropriates this salvation in a spiritual union with Christ where his righteousness becomes ours.<sup>273</sup> McGrath argues that Luther's theology of the cross, of the Christ forsaken on the cross, brought new hope for those who felt themselves abandoned by God and unable to discern his presence anywhere. It is a theology of hope for those who despair.<sup>274</sup>

Soelle argues that love does not cause suffering or produce it, and neither is the cross a symbol of masochism which needs suffering in order to convince itself of love, but it is above all a symbol of reality, simply because “Love does not require the cross, but *de facto* it ends upon the cross.”<sup>275</sup> Hall also stresses that God freely did this. He was not under some external compulsion to enter into solidarity with Creation, even though the passion predictions said that ‘... the Son of Man must suffer...’, but “behind the 'must' of Jesus' passion there is the 'must' of the divine *agape* – and that is visible all the way from Eden.”<sup>276</sup> Groothuis states that no other worldview teaches that the almighty God humbled himself in order to redeem his sinful creatures through his own suffering and death, and no other religion is based on the death, burial and resurrection of its divine founder.<sup>277</sup> This is really something we could never come up with, a God who wins by losing, and on our behalf.

Why through suffering? I confess have struggled with this dimension of how salvation could spring from suffering. I even wondered whether the only way for God to overcome evil was by being overcome by it. The issue at stake is that evil raises a tricky challenge of how to destroy it without doing further evil. Bonhoeffer helped me to solve this problem:

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<sup>271</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 105, 113.

<sup>272</sup>McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 167.

<sup>273</sup>McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 173-175.

<sup>274</sup>McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 179, 181.

<sup>275</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 163.

<sup>276</sup>Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 109.

<sup>277</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 644-645.

The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. Resistance merely creates further evil and adds fuel to the flames. But when evil meets no opposition and encounters no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn, and at last it meets an opponent which is more than its match. Of course this can only happen when the last ounce of resistance is abandoned, and the renunciation of revenge is complete. Then evil cannot find its mark, it can breed no further evil, and is left barren.<sup>278</sup>

Bonhoeffer stresses that suffering willingly endured is stronger than evil; it spells death to evil.<sup>279</sup> McGrath (also quoting Bonhoeffer) says, “God let himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which He is with us and helps us (...) The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.”<sup>280</sup> It is interesting to link this pattern with Job's own example of endurance in the face of evil that can only be through faith.

Bonhoeffer also helps us to understand that non-resistance and non-violence does not mean ignoring the reality and power of evil, Jesus' whole life was one long conflict with the Devil. Jesus calls evil 'evil', and he is the one who vanquished evil though suffering. It all looked like evil had triumphed on the cross, but the real victory belonged to Jesus. The cross is the only justification for the precept of non-violence, which alone can kindle faith in victory over evil.<sup>281</sup> What a God and what a defeat – winning with the enemy's apparent victory. Evil deceives even itself in its rebellion.

To put it all in one single sentence: Christ's death and resurrection has somehow put us and the world right with God and given us a new beginning, but only by faith.

### *5.2.3 Where is God?*

Both Yancey and Hart share similar questions in the title of their books. Yancey's question is “Where is God when it hurts?” and Hart's is “Where was God in the Tsunami?” This question Where is God?, is a disconcerting one. In some cases it is an honest cry for help when there is none, in others its scepticism denotes a rebellion which cannot see God in the middle of the storm. In some way evil and suffering have an intrinsic dimension in them that take away our peace. We always imagine it as one way questioning, Yancey goes a little further, saying, “We usually think of the problem of pain as a question we ask of God, but it is also a question He asks of us. How do we respond to hurting people?”<sup>282</sup> If faith is a relationship with God, then the questioning might happen the other way round. The problem is that we do not ask this question when everything is well, but only when we are in the middle of the storms of life.

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<sup>278</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1995, Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson.), 317.

<sup>279</sup>Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 317.

<sup>280</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Fifth edition, 2011), 211.

<sup>281</sup>Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 318.

<sup>282</sup>Yancey, *Where is God*, 10.



The problem is not even with the question, but that the answer is one we do not want to hear. The most frustrating part in the divine victory over suffering is that it does not come about in the way we think would best answer the problem of evil. I do struggle with God's insistence in working with us, and God's answer to suffering is a kind of "you messed up you will help to clean", but not as a father who punishes the child by making it clean up the mess it made itself, but as a father who is with the child in cleaning the mess. God's way of teaching us (or his plan) involves the transgressor in the process. It resembles the beginning, where God sets the creature free to reflect his own image. This dimension of God's setting free to be a blessing to others is all over the Bible, even in Christ: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free"(Gal 5:1).

Hart does not directly present an answer to his question, but he notes that Christianity is a religion of salvation and that our portion is charity and our sustenance is faith.<sup>283</sup> Yancey on the other hand gives two answers: firstly, he would reformulate the question as, "Where is the church when it hurts?" stressing that you and I are part of God's answer to the massive suffering in the world<sup>284</sup>; secondly, he provides a long list of where God is.<sup>285</sup> I particularly like his first answer because it best fits how God carries out his mission in this world, sending us out into the world to be salt and light. A mission that on the one hand is risky insofar as God becomes vulnerable by sending us out to announce the good news of the Gospel, but on the other he is the one who empowers us through his Holy Spirit to live out the Kingdom of God proclaiming the Gospel.

Strangely, these dimensions of God's mission and the reality of the Kingdom of God as already here are often left aside in discussions of God and suffering. These tend to end on Christ's victory on the cross and nothing more. In my view this is the most important part of the discussion. For me, God sending the church in mission is how God addresses the evil in the world. If everything related to God and suffering is only a discussion it is not relevant. It is, as Hart has argued, like 'mocking the dead' or being indifferent to human misery. Mere words or ideas do not satisfy where suffering is concerned. That is why God came in blood and flesh. If even God did not stay static before suffering, why should we?

Suffering tells us that there is a problem, which according to Hart, is the Gospel 'Who' is hidden there in an opposite way. Running away from suffering does not solve it; it only furthers evil.<sup>286</sup> The understanding of what is related with suffering is one side of the coin. The other, however, is to face the suffering and evil in the world, to face it even in us.

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<sup>283</sup>See section 3.4.1.

<sup>284</sup>See section 2.4.3.

<sup>285</sup>See section 2.4.4.

<sup>286</sup>"Everyone's natural reflex is flight from suffering; but even when it succeeds it is at the same time the perpetuation or universal suffering." (Soelle, *Suffering*, 45.)

Understanding better our suffering reality helps us to relate and respond to it better and most especially to not be insensitive to it, as Jesus himself was not. Groothuis stresses that if man's cruelty and its results are abnormal, contrary to what God made, that means we can fight evil without fighting God.<sup>287</sup> It is the reason why Jesus sends us out to overcome evil with good. If suffering has no meaning, why should we stay silent and static before it?

In this sense Yancey asks, "How can we sense God's love?" He answers with two main suggestions: the first is stressed in Romans 8, as the God within us through the Holy Spirit; the second is the church and he adds that bearing one another's burdens is a lesson from the Bible that we all can agree on.<sup>288</sup> In Romans 14:7 the apostle Paul highlights, "For none of us lives for himself and none dies for himself." Soelle is even more direct and to the point "There is no alien sorrow, we are all part of it, we share in it."<sup>289</sup> God's insistence is that he wants to use people in order to work on the completion of his Creation.<sup>290</sup> The church needs to know where it is that the crucifixion is happening today.<sup>291</sup>

### **5.3 God's Mission**

#### *5.3.1 What is God's mission?*

Mission is a word that does not appear in the Bible in the way it is used in Christianity. Mission came to mean what God is up to in our world. In this respect *Missio Dei*, has been the most preferred way of articulating mission, meaning that it is from God, and not from human invention, but it has human participation through Jesus' sending of the church, the community of believers, into the world to witness the Gospel (John 20:21). Bosch stresses this dimension, stating that "Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate."<sup>292</sup>

The church therefore is the main instrument by which God's mission is carried out in the world. Mission is the very nature of the church. The church came into being because of God's mission, so that the church exists because of God's mission and not the opposite. Yet the church should not be proud of its position because God's mission is wider than the church. God's mission both embraces the church and the world and God may have also other means outside the church.<sup>293</sup> It does not diminish the mission of church in its privileged task, but

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<sup>287</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 628.

<sup>288</sup>See section 2.4.3.

<sup>289</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 172-173.

<sup>290</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 146.

<sup>291</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, 2-3.

<sup>292</sup>David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 392.

<sup>293</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

calls for faithfulness. In this sense the church is the appointed ambassador of God in the world, empowered by his Spirit to witness to the gospel in words and deeds: that through Jesus' life, death and resurrection God is reconciling the world with himself. The call is to witness to God's love and grace in Jesus Christ as the one who disrupts evil systems and establishes the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom that Jesus has started in his first coming, which can already be experienced partially right now and that will come fully in his second coming.

### *5.3.2 Is God's Mission an Aid for our Suffering World?*

As the two main fields of specialization of my Master Degree are Systematic Theology and Theology of Mission, and my Bachelor Degree also had an emphasis on mission, I could not relate to the theme of suffering without seeing it within the context of God's mission. I even wondered if God's mission was strictly speaking a way of transforming our reality in the face of suffering, as if God's mission was an aid in view of the Fall.

In one of the last assignments of my Bachelor Degree in Theology God helped me to learn something that ever since has hugely changed my approach to life, ministry and this world. The task was to build up a missiological perspective from my own understanding based on the Bible. My first step was questioning, "When did God's mission start?" No sooner did I ask, the episode of the "Fall" came into my mind. There is mission because humanity has chosen to be away from God and mission was his attempt to bring us back. But I was not satisfied with this and while rereading the first chapters of the Bible I could see that a kind of prototype of mission was already there. It depicts a God who went into the chaos and ordered it, created life and everything else just by his creative Word "Let there be..." and it was. It is interesting to note that "we", the creation of his own hands, have not reflected his image when "chaos" attempted to take hold of this world and of us. Mission was already there: it was not sin, evil, the Devil, suffering or anything else that creates it, or even defines it. Mission is born in God's own heart, the God who created all things, whose Word goes and does not come back without accomplishing what it is sent for. The God who took the first step towards a fallen world to redeem it, who called a nation to be a blessing to the whole world as being God's ambassador on Earth, but which ran away from him, till God himself came to show us his own heart in Jesus Christ. God's mission is God himself moving into our brokenness and in his didactics he trusts his mission and makes those who once were transgressors into the ambassadors of his Kingdom in this world till it will come in fullness.

### *5.3.3 The Church in Mission*

Yancey refers to the fact that we are part of God's response to the massive suffering in the world. The church as the body of Christ is compelled to move into the world as he did, to

disrupt evil structures and establish the Kingdom of God here and now. He asks if we listen to the cries of the world and if we are attending to them.<sup>294</sup> Are we? I imagine how the world would look if the church indeed was mission, or what would happen if the whole church became a missionary movement, instead of the few that have an interest in mission. Probably suffering would still be there, but at least God would not seem to be silent or hidden when the church is his hands and feet in our groaning world.

Root, influenced by Bonhoeffer, stresses, “We must follow the incarnate Christ as he walks into the center of the world's suffering. When we turn from the suffering of the world, we turn from the cross, which is to turn from the Christ who is found on the cross.”<sup>295</sup> This depicts the intrinsic dimension of God's mission that reaches out to send, which lives now by that hope that has rescued them, of a Christianity which is always looking and moving forwards, is on the way. As it goes, it transforms and changes the reality around it with the message of the gospel, because “... in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”(2 Pet 3:13)

Christianity is challenged to show and provide good reasons for why we have chosen the Christian God. Why do we not give then? Do we actually have good reasons? God's love in Jesus Christ is our motto and motivation to bless the world, as a church that is called to be the salt and the light of the world living out the Kingdom of God. Bosh emphasizes the idea so well formulated by archbishop William Temple, “that the church is the only society in the world which exists for the sake of those who are not members of it.”<sup>296</sup> The Gospel is not only a message or just ideas, it is a person, Jesus Christ. The Gospel needs flesh because the Gospel is Christ living in us (Gal 2:20). Therefore our living is not our own: as Christ gave his life for the whole world, we should follow his steps.

Jesus' sending the church out in mission resembles in some way the beginning of Creation, as making us *new creations* and setting us free again to be a blessing. God's goodness always sets free, it never enslaves. The difference, however, is that evil is already in the world, or more emphatically in us. Jesus came to heal us and sent us out to heal the world through his love and grace. *God's mission* is concerned with our suffering world and therefore through *Christian mission*, which is born in suffering from the theology of the cross, Christianity identifies itself with our suffering world and is called to live out the Kingdom of God.

#### *5.3.4 The Kingdom of God*

We see in both Yancey and Hart this dimension of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>294</sup>See section 2.4.3.

<sup>295</sup>Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Illinois: IVP Books, 2007), 94.

<sup>296</sup>Bosh, *Transforming Mission*, 375.

Yancey especially develops it a bit more, stressing the dimension of the church living for others as Christ lived for us.<sup>297</sup> This dimension can be seen without doubt in Jesus' own life, not only in the many teachings related to the Kingdom of God, but his whole life was a living expression of that Kingdom: forgiving sins, healing people, feeding the hungry, setting the oppressed free, and others. Knitter highlights well this dimension of the Kingdom of God. After a whole discussion about religious plurality within Christianity and outside of it, he says “After all, all Christians, no matter what their theological or denominational ilk, can agree that the reign of God was at the heart of Jesus' message and that this Reign calls and empowers people to care about each other and about creation.”<sup>298</sup> Understanding the reality of the Kingdom of God already here shows us that God is worried about more things than our piety and the hope of what is to come. He is deeply concerned about our lives here and now, the tension between 'now' and 'not yet' is lived at the same time.

Bosch puts really well how this future salvation has come near, and because it has come near the church is called to live it out:

Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the needs and exigencies of human existence. Mission therefore means being involved in the ongoing dialogue between God, who offers his salvation, and the world, which – enmeshed in all kinds of evil – craves that salvation. “Mission means being sent to proclaim in deed and word that Christ died and rose for the life of the world, that he lives to transform human lives (Rom 8:2) and to overcome death”. From the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the reign of God, from the tension between the salvation *indicative* (salvation is already a reality!) and the salvation *subjunctive* (comprehensive salvation yet to come!) there emerges the salvation *imperative* – Get involved in the ministry of salvation! Those who know that God will one day wipe away all tears will not accept with resignation the tears of those who suffer and are oppressed *now*. Anyone who knows that one day there will be no more disease can and must actively anticipate the conquest of disease in individuals and society *now*. And anyone who believes that the enemy of God and humans will be vanquished will already oppose him *now* in his machinations in family and society. For all of this has to do with salvation.<sup>299</sup>

The Kingdom of God is already here. Salvation is not only a reality to be waited for, salvation begins in this life and will be completed when Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead.

Living the Kingdom of God now is the answer for those who think the idea of a New Heaven and Earth is too idyllic, or even out of our reach. The call is to live it here and now, Jesus started his Kingdom on earth and it can already be partially experienced now, but not in its fullness. It is not as Hart said seeing one world within another but it is a world within another, within another. It is not seeing only Creation and Fall at once, but seeing Creation-Fall-Redemption at the same time. We generally tend to forget the last one, and do not give a

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<sup>297</sup>See section 2.4.3.

<sup>298</sup>Paul F. Knitter. *Introducing: Theologies of religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 245.

<sup>299</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400. [Author's emphasis]

proper space for it in our lives. “Let your Kingdom come!” is something we do not actively pray and live for, we do not allow this reality of the Kingdom of God shape us and therefore the world altogether. It is only Christ who can make this reality possible:

Within the risen Christ the new humanity is born, the final, sovereign yes of God to the new human being. Humanity still lives, of course, in the old, but is already beyond the old, humanity still lives, of course, in a world of death, but is already beyond death. Humanity still lives, of course, in a world of sin, but we are already beyond sin. The night is not yet over, but day is already dawning.<sup>300</sup>

Jesus is our redemption and the redemption of the world. Healing already starts here in living the Kingdom of God. Bosch stresses that the Kingdom of God comes wherever Christ overcomes the power of evil.<sup>301</sup> If the church is God's ambassador on earth as sent by Jesus himself then we are the ones to show the world in words and deeds the reasons for our hope.

### *5.3.5 Christian Hope*

This active hope is what it is because of the final hope that is to come. Yancey stresses that hope means simply the belief that something good lies ahead. It even saves us from pessimism because Christian hope holds the belief that the universe is not a chaos without final meaning.<sup>302</sup> Lewis stresses, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>303</sup> Hope is something that we cannot explain, and neither could we create it if the world has no meaning. Hope is what enables us to continue, hope says yes to life.

Yancey also says that Jesus' resurrection and victory over death has brought a decisive new word to the vocabulary of pain and suffering: temporary.<sup>304</sup> The Christian final hope stresses that evil and suffering will have an end because Jesus is making all things new. Revelation 21 clearly denotes that this is a temporary reality. Even suffering points to this transitory reality of the world. Stephenson argues that warfare, natural disasters, famine, and other things which make up much of the history from the Fall to the present, are not only proofs of the brokenness and sorrow of life in the order sin, but they are also eschatological pointers to the coming of Christ. He says that Jesus himself points to this dimension: “All these are the beginning of birth pains.”(Matt 24:8). Jesus identifies them as signs that will happen before he will come to put an end to suffering.<sup>305</sup>

The fact that the risen Christ has successfully overcome the terrors of evil, the

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<sup>300</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, Editor Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr.), 92.

<sup>301</sup>Bosh, *Transforming Mission*, 377.

<sup>302</sup>See section 2.4.1.

<sup>303</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136-137.

<sup>304</sup>See section 2.4.4.

<sup>305</sup>John R. Stephenson, *Eschatology* (Indiana: The Luther Academy, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume XIII, Editor Robert D. Preus, 1993), 67-68.

injustices of this world, and death, shows us that we are safe in God's hands. Groothuis stresses that if even Jesus' own people, the powers of darkness and death itself could not stop him, then we have every reason to trust him as 'the beginning and the end' (Rev 21:6).<sup>306</sup> But this hope is only hope if it shares the life here, hope for tomorrow will always define how we live today. Lewis remarks that because Christians have largely ceased to think of the world that is to come, this is why they have become so ineffective in this one.<sup>307</sup> The hope of our salvation disrupts evil now. This is how God addresses our suffering world, raising up his church to be a blessing to the world, to be salt and light witnessing the Gospel.

Hart, holding fast to Jesus' victory and our salvation by grace, says that we can rejoice over the evils and suffering of the world, simply because suffering has nothing to say. God will not show us how all the suffering in the world was necessary for building up the Kingdom. God will instead raise us up, wipe away all tears from our eyes and will make all things new.<sup>308</sup> Jesus is the One who holds the last word.

#### **5.4 Summary of this chapter**

The reality of suffering shapes who we are and the world around us. More than that, it makes us challenge God and his goodness. Suffering is an ever-present struggle. It is part of our reality, so that denying suffering is the same of denying existence itself. Christian faith first and foremost says that suffering is real. The Christian world view does not only match reality but engages with it to bring relief to our misery. If suffering is for all, then what really matters is how we respond to it. Yancey stresses well that our first step to transform suffering is simply to accept it is real. Though suffering has nothing to contribute, Paul stresses that suffering that is brought to God turns into joy, while suffering without God ends in despair.

Faith is how we bring our sufferings to God; faith is what enables us to enter the realm of transformation. Jesus Christ, God with us, is the very author of our faith, a God who does not sit idly in heaven but shares in our brokenness and most especially came to set us free from sin, evil, and death to bring us back to God. In Jesus, apparently defeated and crucified on a cross, God overcame the reality of suffering, raising Jesus from the dead. In Jesus, God reconciles the world with himself by grace alone in a simple word of promise "I forgive you!" Such love is the love of God in Jesus, who as the Father has sent him sends us out into the world to share that same love. God's way of dealing with our suffering overwhelms us, shares our misery and challenges us by sending us out to live the Kingdom of God.

In this respect Mission is a word that tries to describe the greatness of God's love and

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<sup>306</sup>Groothuis, *Apologetics*, 645.

<sup>307</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 134.

<sup>308</sup>See section 3.4.1.

grace in creating us to share eternity with him. This is a God who deeply engages with his creation and especially human beings, who are called from the beginning to reflect God's image and be a blessing to the world. Even in the Fall of humanity God makes the one transgressor the agent of God's healing in witnessing to the Gospel and living the reality of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus started and will bring in fullness in the end of times. With a hope that waits for the Kingdom that is still to come, where sin, evil, and death will be no more, but also of a hope that lives that the Kingdom is already here. Of a Christianity which is called to overcome evil with good here and now, making that future salvation already present. Hope for tomorrow is a hope that shapes how we live today. Jesus says "I am coming soon!"



Chapter Six

CONCLUSION

I see in my journey on this theme of faith and suffering something similar to what Job experienced, moving from the God whom he heard about to the God his eyes could see, but without such afflictions. As I spent time reflecting on these matters, God helped me to see my own self, other people, the world, and he himself in a whole new perspective, but I know it is not the end yet, for Christ is coming. It is interesting to note in this respect how much we can know about God in our brokenness, especially the truth of how much we are powerless before sin, suffering, and death. Simply because in this process we come to know who we really are and how much we depend on God to bring relief into our reality.

This dimension of understanding more about who we are, what our reality is about, and God's plan for us can indeed help us in the face of suffering. God made us rational beings who are supposed to use our intellect, and also God has given very clear evidences of himself and about the nature of evil and suffering, so that there is no reason to let doubts reign when they should not. Faith is about confidence and assurance. Yet this doubting dimension shows that we are also emotional beings. Evil and suffering deeply challenge and shape us, and when they hit us, it really hurts. Invariably doubts come, the question "Why?" is always there, the unmistakably message suffering sends cannot be *not heard*, "you have no way out...", "it is not fair...", and others. My first thoughts on the theme were that "suffering says by itself that something is wrong", but I can only know something to be wrong because something else is right. Now I clearly see that what truly shouts in our suffering is that God has not created us for this, suffering has nothing to say, our cry is for what God created us for and wants us to be, suffering does not play any role besides hurting us. The rebellion against suffering has its foundation in God's own goodness and revelation to us. In the same way that we would never know what light is if we only knew darkness, our unpleasantness with death is that God made us for eternal purposes. If not, why would there be something such as hope?

Job did not resign before the evil and suffering that hit him. He wrestled with God, he exercised his faith in the only One worthy of receiving it, and willing to receive it. By Job's example we learn that we should also not resign before suffering, as Jesus himself did not. Evil is there. Rather than only discussing it, Jesus shows that we must fight it. God's mission is about living the Kingdom of God here and now. Suffering does not cause God's mission, but its dimension is addressed in God's mission. God is the only one who can transform

suffering into joy, the only one who can make all things work for the good of those who love him, simply because he is God.

In Jesus God call us to bring meaning where there is none, to dignify what has no dignity, to overcome evil with good, to come into the chaos and order it through Him who is the creative and redemptive Word of God. The faith that helps us see reality in a new perspective and understand what our reality is about is the same faith that set us ablaze with God's love to bring healing to this suffering world. Not as a command or a 'must do this or that', but by the fact that love creates love. It is not a reaction to God's love for us in Jesus Christ, but it is God's own love working through us. As the apostle Paul says, 'it is Christ living in me'. The Gospel needs flesh, because the Gospel is a person, it is Christ, and Christ in me.

Sufferings matters, and Christianity assures us it is a temporary reality. Jesus has conquered and overthrown sin, evil, death, and the powers that turn life into misery through his death and resurrection. Jesus holds the last word concerning this world, for Jesus is the beginning and the end. However, suffering is still very present. It especially indicates that we need each other. The dimension of charity highlighted by Hart and the body of Christ by Yancey are fundamental, since we are part of God's answer to our suffering world. Jesus has sent us out to be God's ambassadors in this spoiled world: "as God has sent me I send you!" We are sent out by God's own love to live the reality of the Kingdom of God already now till it will come in fullness in the end of time when Jesus will make all things new. Through the Christian faith we see that night is not yet over, but we already see that the day is dawning.

I end with two prayers that sum up my aims in writing this thesis and have for long helped me to cope with our suffering reality:

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Psalm 23*

*"Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God."<sup>309</sup>*

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<sup>309</sup>Quote from Robert Pierce, World Vision founder, in "World Vision's history"; available from <http://www.worldvision.org/content.nsf/about/history>; Internet; accessed 05 April 2013.

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