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Carrying Our Cross

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Carrying Our Cross

This paper examines the question of suffering in terms of what it means for humans to “carry their cross”. Following a brief description of the term *suffering*, eight themes are addressed, showing why believers must “carry their cross”.

The Term “Suffering”

The word *suffering* refers to a state broader and more complex than sickness, especially when considering the body and mind elements of human beings.¹ A distinction can therefore be drawn between physical suffering (“the body is hurting”) and psychological suffering (“pain of the soul”).² Additionally, the question of spiritual suffering goes beyond the pain involved in physical and psychological suffering.³ Thus, as Hauser concurs, there are three levels of suffering: physical, psychological, and spiritual.⁴ Furthermore, suffering is linked to the concept of evil – which in reality may be defined as a certain lack, limitation, or distortion of *good*.⁵ This positive thrust is based on the premise that God is love and the universe is beneficent toward humans. And so, “man suffers because of a good in which he does not share, from which in a certain sense he is cut off, or of which he has deprived himself”.⁶

¹ Pope John Paul II, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1984), 8.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Richard Hauser, *Finding God in Troubled Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 86.

⁵ John Paul II, *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11. Pope John Paul II clarifies this concept further when he writes of man that “he particularly suffers when he ‘ought’ – in the normal order of things – to have a share in this good, and does not have it. Thus, in the

The Necessity of “Carrying Our Cross”

It has been stated that Christians must “carry their cross”. Following are eight affirmations of this injunction.

Willingness in suffering. First, *the sacred Word reveals the necessity for disciples of the Lord to be willing to “carry their cross”*. The Gospel of Luke, for example, states that “if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).⁷ This imperative is similarly repeated in several other passages of the Gospels (see Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Luke 14:27).⁸ To follow Jesus requires willing self-denial, obedience, and dedication.⁹ The cross, as an instrument of suffering and death, symbolizes the necessity of total commitment – even to death – on the part of Jesus’ disciples.¹⁰ Cross-bearing, then, is a willingness to live, suffer, and die for the Lord’s sake.¹¹

Inexplicable divine design behind suffering. Second, since suffering “accompanies man at every point on earth”¹² and appears essential to the nature of man,¹³ then humans by *divine design have been subjected to “carrying their cross”* – whatever that may be in a given life.

Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always, in some way, refers to a good” (page 11).

⁷ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), 1557.

⁸ Mt 10:38 – “anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”.

Mt 16:24 – “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”.

Mk 8:34 – “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”.

Luke 9:23 – “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”.

Lk 14:27 – “And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1557.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1457.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1510.

¹² John Paul II, *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

It is part of man’s destiny on earth, inseparable from his existence,¹⁴ to partake in suffering “throughout his earthly life”.¹⁵ Similarly, the apostle Paul writes “the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it” (Rom 8:20).¹⁶ Powell notes that “why God chose to create us free and capable of sin, capable of hurting one another – this, I presume, is a deep part of the mystery of God.”¹⁷ Ultimately, “man, in his suffering, remains an intangible mystery”¹⁸ – and “in suffering is contained the greatness of a specific mystery”.¹⁹ This fact must be accepted in faith, and with respect for, every form of human suffering.²⁰ Powell asks searchingly, and then answers: “Why did he make us capable of sin? We can only love the questions and try to live in a trusting submission to mystery.”²¹

Cause and effect in suffering. Third, a transcendent moral order, based on justice, exists in the universe.²² This “objective moral order demands punishment for transgression, sin, and crime”.²³ *Due to the universal law of cause and effect, humans must reap according to what they have sown, which may require “carrying their cross”* (but which may also mean receiving blessings). The apostle Paul reminds readers of this universal law: “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Gal 6:7).²⁴ The word *karma* includes the meaning “that what is sown is unavoidably reaped . . . Every action brings a reaction. Every cause has an

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *NIV Study Bible*, 1717.

¹⁷ John Powell, *A Life-Giving Vision: How to Be a Christian in Today’s World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 283.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Powell, *A Life-Giving Vision*, 279-280.

²² John Paul II, *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 15.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *NIV Study Bible*, 1787. The apostle Paul also stated a probably well-known similar proverb in 2 Cor 9:6 – “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (page 1772).

effect.”²⁵ Indian author, Swami Rama, adds that “whatever actions we have performed in the past produce their fruits in the present and future, and that is the real cause of our pains and sorrows”.²⁶

Innocent suffering. Fourth, while suffering may be connected with fault, not all suffering is a consequence of a fault and having the nature of a punishment.²⁷ The suffering of someone innocent also occurs, as was demonstrated in the figure of the righteous man Job.²⁸ *Such suffering of the innocent must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by their own intelligence*²⁹ – and leaves them having to “carry their cross”, whatever the innocent suffering may be. In this context, Powell adds: “In the end we will confront a wall of mystery . . . [and] we will hear the small voice in the soft breeze: ‘Be still and know that I am God!’” (Ps 46:10).³⁰ Our finite intelligence cannot understand our infinite God – God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.³¹

Suffering as a test. Fifth, based on Scripture, *suffering can have the nature of a divine test*³² which necessitates faithful endurance in carrying one’s cross. Again, the example of the just man Job illustrates this. Job is not being punished, since there was no reason for inflicting

²⁵ Swami Rama, *Sacred Journey: Living Purposefully and Dying Gracefully* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 2002), 50-51.

²⁶ Rama, *Sacred Journey*, 51. From personal observation, there are at least five laws of harvest which may be summarized as follows: (1) likeness – like yields like; one reaps according to what one has sown; (2) abundance – the harvest is more than what is sown; (3) delay – a delay exists between when sowing occurs and reaping takes place; (4) initiative – no sowing results in no reaping; and (5) amount – whoever sows sparingly reaps sparingly; whoever sows generously reaps generously.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Powell, *A Life-Giving Vision*, 278-279.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² John Paul II, *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 16.

punishment on him.³³ Rather, God permitted this testing with suffering as a result of Satan’s provocation³⁴ – in order to demonstrate Job’s righteousness.³⁵ In our test of suffering, Powell would reassure us that God promises to sustain us and to give us strength.³⁶ In return, he “asks only a trusting submission to divine wisdom and will.”³⁷

Voluntary suffering in faith. Sixth, *Christians may need to suffer voluntarily and accept their cross because of the name of Christ.* At such times, “those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Pet 4:19).³⁸

The apostle Peter clarifies the voluntary nature of suffering when he contrasts other suffering: “If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler” (1 Pet 4:16).³⁹ Rather, he states that “if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Pet 4:14).⁴⁰ Powell draws the same conclusion: “Suffering asks me to live with and to love the mystery of a God whom I cannot fully understand . . . [and] to make a submission of faith to this God who urges me at the edge of my pain: ‘Trust me!’”⁴¹

Suffering as a teacher. Seventh, “carrying our cross” is both a practice of faith,⁴² and a source of instruction. Suffering, in whatever way it is experienced, may well be a danger signal and a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Powell, *A Life-Giving Vision*, 283.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *NIV Study Bible*, 1895.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Powell, *A Life-Giving Vision*, 279.

⁴² Ibid., 287.

warning.⁴³ The pain is our teacher.⁴⁴ Powell concludes that “without any doubt, suffering always teaches us something and often invites us to change and to grow.”⁴⁵ Nothing more effectively results in greater self-understanding than suffering.⁴⁶ Our various discomforting situations can be alerting us to “our distorted and crippling attitudes”.⁴⁷ However, it is only by entering into our pain that we can seek to learn from it – rather than running from pain.⁴⁸ The most life-transforming insights are often connected with and grow out of some experience of pain.⁴⁹ *Suffering, then, is a valuable teacher – because in it is “the challenge of ‘metanoia’, the invitation to life transformation and personal growth”.*⁵⁰

Suffering as a means for transformation. Finally, for Christians, their cross signifies all the “obstacles impeding [their] call to imitate Christ in living fully for the kingdom of God.”⁵¹ Their cross may be physical, psychological, or spiritual suffering.⁵² The suffering may be internal (such as physical or moral weakness) or external (such as difficulty in relationships).⁵³ However, their cross consists of more than obstacles. *The obstacles carry with them the promise of transformation*⁵⁴ – achieved only in continuing to “carry our cross”. As a result, suffering is seen as “a transformative experience rather than as an illness to be cured, an internal conflict to be resolved, or a social inadequacy to be amended.”⁵⁵ Each person’s cross

⁴³ Ibid., 289.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 287.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 288.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 290.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 296.

⁵¹ Hauser, *Finding God in Troubled Times*, 159.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Helen K. Black, “Elders’ Narratives of Suffering,” in *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, vol. 2, ed. Melvin A. Kimble and Susan H. McFadden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 268.

– every suffering – “is an occasion for experiencing the power of God.”⁵⁶ Hence, the apostle Paul could claim: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).⁵⁷ His cross – human weakness and suffering – provided the ideal opportunity for the display of divine power.⁵⁸ Finally, the cross (understood as suffering) as a means for transformation is reflected in Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).⁵⁹

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show why it is that Christians *must* “carry their cross”.

This is imperative because:

- (1) The sacred Word reveals the necessity for disciples of the Lord to *willingly* “carry their cross”.
- (2) By *divine design*, humans have been subjected to “carrying their cross” – whatever that suffering may be in life.
- (3) Due to the universal law of *cause and effect*, humans reap according to what they have sown, which may at times require “carrying their cross”.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, 1776. The power of transformation is also reflected in the words: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:13 NIV).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1735-1736.

- (4) Suffering of the *innocent* must be accepted as a mystery, which an individual cannot comprehend completely by their own intelligence, and leaves them having to “carry their cross” in faith.
- (5) Suffering may be a divine *test* which requires the faithful carrying of one’s cross.
- (6) Christians may at times need to suffer *voluntarily* because of the name of Christ and to faithfully accept their cross in this way.
- (7) Suffering is a valuable *teacher* because therein lies the challenge of ‘metanoia’, the invitation to change and growth.
- (8) Suffering carries within it the promise of *transformation*, achieved only in continuing to “carry our cross”.

Personal Reflections

From the foregoing study of suffering and why Christians must “carry their cross”, the explanation of suffering becomes multifaceted. In fact, the complexity of suffering demands an even wider range of categories than physical suffering (“suffering an illness”), psychological suffering (“suffering as grief”), or spiritual suffering (“suffering as the fear of finitude”).⁶⁰ Furthermore, “no definition of suffering, however broad, can show what suffering looks like or means to those who experience it.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, is there an overarching paradigm that would assist in bringing all aspects of suffering together? I would like to suggest that the *principle of karma* – here referring to cause and effect – is insightful, although in the final analysis is also limited since suffering involves a sacred mystery of life.

⁶⁰ Black, “Elders’ Narratives of Suffering”, 268.

⁶¹ Ibid.

The Godhead is the First Cause of all that exists in the universe. Understood as a Trinity, the Godhead operates on the principle of *love*. Downey writes that “the doctrine of the Trinity affirms the truth that God [the Godhead] is Father, Son, Spirit – three in one Love – Giver, Given, Gift/ing.”⁶² He elucidates by noting that “this God is personal, that is, Love’s Pure Source is expressed in the Word and is active in the Spirit, bonding source and its expression.”⁶³ Finally, it is “possible for human persons to enter into this communion in the one Love.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, the universe is *interconnected*. Downey argues that created in the image of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Spirit), our personal identity – who, what, and how we are – is constituted by being in relationship.⁶⁵ Humans are not purely self-contained individual beings where personhood is achieved in autonomy, independence, self-determination, or self-sufficiency.⁶⁶ Rather, everything that exists is from God, in God, for God – and that self-giving, mutuality, equality, and interdependence are at the very heart of God’s being God.⁶⁷ Downey adds that “from our origin we are related to others”⁶⁸ – we are “from others, by others, toward others, for others, just as it is in God to exist in the relations of interpersonal love”.⁶⁹ One can conclude with Downey that “such a view is also in accord with the emergent awareness and appreciation of the relational character of all reality, of the whole cosmos, of the interconnectedness inherent to everything in the universe.”⁷⁰

⁶² Michael Downey, “Bonded in the One Love: A Share in the Divine Life,” in *Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 60.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 62, 75.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 75. Also important to note here is that the Godhead (Trinity) is “not some all-pervasive, ethereal, benign” force (page 63).

Inherent in the principle of love is free will – allowing persons the freedom of choice. The Godhead has not created humans as automatons. Nevertheless, freedom of choice is not arbitrary. A universal law of cause and effect exists. From actions (causes), resulting consequences (effects) are a reality. Equally a reality is the need to accept individual responsibility for causes and their effects.

In this context, then, suffering may be explained as the effects of choices (causes) made contrary to the principle of love which operates in the universe. Created beings live within, and must accept, the universal law of *cause and effect* – which is the intention and will of the Godhead. This is part of the *divine design* behind suffering.

As a result, suffering can only ultimately be *willingly* and *voluntarily* accepted. Suffering is also indeed a *teacher*. A person who is suffering will hopefully in time be able to see how the principle of love has been violated and will then seek to avoid future similar suffering. When suffering is thus seen as a teacher, it also becomes a means of *transformation*.

At times, individuals may suffer and not know why. However, causes are operative that persons are not aware of. This can account for seemingly *innocent suffering* for a given person at a given time. However, understood in the broader context, the suffering could be explained.

The universal law of cause and effect also governs created celestial beings in the universe that the sacred Word alludes to – for example, seraphim, cherubim, archangels and angels. The Scriptures suggest that some angels have chosen to act contrary to love and in the process became demons. These beings can and do influence events on earth – as is presented in the books of Job, Daniel, and Revelation. This helps to account for the suffering of Job and the divine *test* involved.

Since the Godhead is love and sovereign, the ultimate outcome for humans is beneficent. Downey writes that “God is revealed as Love in Word and Spirit . . . Trinity is a way of speaking of a *personal* God who exists.” [emphasis mine]⁷¹ Finally, “God is Love in excess, excessive of what reason might demand or justice require – gift.”⁷²

Certainly, grace (divine free and unmerited pardon) also exists in the universe – the sacred Word reveals the Godhead as merciful, kind, patient, loving, compassionate, forgiving and generous to all. However, grace operates in the realm of cause and effect. Take for example the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) – he squandered his inheritance. The father forgave and accepted his son back (this is grace) – however, it was to the older son that the father said “everything I have is yours” (v. 31).⁷³ Likewise, Christians are forgiven their shortcomings and will not be consigned to eternal separation from God or destruction – however, their lives function within cause and effect.

While the principle of cause and effect can to some extent explain the nature of suffering and the need for Christians to “carry their cross”, suffering ultimately remains as a mystery in the context of a universe governed by an omnipotent and benevolent Deity.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *NIV Study Bible*, 1571.

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