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The Problem of Pain - A Christian Response

Pain is a part of life. We enter this world causing pain in childbirth, at some moment in life we inflict pain on others or receive it ourselves, physically, emotionally or mentally, and most of us die in pain. All of us at one point will experience the loneliness that spreads out like a desert or the dull aches and pains which blacken our experience of life. We have all felt the pain of loss or broken relationships that knock our hearts down with one blow. Pain hurts, that is what pain means, and it's clearly evident that human history is largely a record of crime, war, disease, rebellion, and terror. We experience just enough happiness to hold onto while it lasts and then an agonised apprehension of losing it, then once it's lost we go through the misery of remembering it in self-pity. Every now and then we improve our condition a little and what we call a civilisation appears, but no civilisation lasts. Every civilisation falls sooner or later. In a universe where the useful energy is gradually running out, every race is destined to finish as all stories will come to nothing in a universe which will end in nothing. And if the universe is so bad, or even half as bad, how on earth did we ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good God?

The question is simple: how do we reconcile the notion of an all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God in a world soaked in so much unbearable pain and suffering?

God is love

We are told that God is love, not merely in the sense of being some form of love, but that within Him the very foundation and origin of love exists. If everything was created and derived from Him this means that surprisingly we must be the subject of His love. This means we are not the centre, in the sense that God does not exist for our sake, we exist for His own sake. We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too), but everything was created in the overflow of God's nature. God loves because God is love, and He created us as a great act of self-expression.

Now it's important to understand that there is a huge difference between God's love and our love. God has no needs but our love is by definition a need, a want or lack, it's a position of poverty. Our love is caused by a real or supposed good found in something or someone which we need and desire to fulfil life. It's an attraction to those things we aspire to obtain such as intimacy, good feelings, happiness and experience. But God's love, far from being caused by goodness in the object, caused all the goodness which the object has, loving it first into existence. Therefore God's love is at bottom selfless, it has everything to give and nothing to receive. Imagine if we learned to love like that. So along with the rest of the universe, we exist not chiefly that we may love God but that God may love. The scripture declares, *"in this is love, not that we loved God but that he loves us."* Now God desires our good, and our good is to love Him and to love Him we must know Him, and if we truly know Him we shall in fact find a good God who is far beyond our wildest desires.

Yet for love to be valuable it must be voluntary. You cannot have love without the freedom of the will

because love can only be expressed when it is chosen. Freedom means the freedom to choose and choice implies the existence of things to choose between. So freedom demands the existence of something other than the self. The condition for our initial freedom is that we should acknowledge God and ourselves as distinct from God. So our first freedom is to make the single naked choice of loving God more than self or the self more than God. Free will therefore by its very nature includes the possibility of rejecting God, and through seizing that possibility mankind from our very beginning has rejected God. In rejecting God we have rejected His love, and in rejecting His love we reject the purpose we were created for. The story is simply one of disobedience, this sin can be described as the result of pride. Even though the principle for our existence lies not in ourselves, we have sought to exist for ourselves. We have chosen the terrible option of choosing ourselves over God as the centre of our universe. As we've pulled ourselves away from God, we've pulled ourselves away from our source of goodness, love and purpose. This is what we call 'the fall of man'. We have ceased directing our lives to our creator and have desired to be on our own, to take care for our own future, to plan for pleasure and for security. We want to call our souls our own, but that means to live a lie for our souls are not, in fact, our own.

In cutting ourselves off from the source of our being, we've cut ourselves off from our source of true purpose and meaning. God has made us for Himself. As St Augustine wrote, *"You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You."* We want to be happy apart from the source of happiness but this is a logical impossibility, like filing for divorce then expecting to be happily married. In as much as we reject God's moral authority we reject God, and in rejecting the God of love we shouldn't be surprised if we then find ourselves in a world drained of love.

Suffering enters the world

Since the human spirit is in rebellion against God, God has not overridden our choice to reject Him and so leaves us to the natural world. Since God gave us the authority to act as the caretaker over this natural world, as we spiritually fell, so nature fell with us. This explains the suffering we experience as a result of natural disasters. Romans chapter 8 illustrates this, *"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay... For we know that the whole creation has been groaning..."* The physical laws that now govern our lives ultimately pull us into decay and disorder. Our body and mind suffer the control of ordinary biochemical laws that weaken us and with that suffering is inevitable. *"From the dust you were made, to the dust you shall return."*

We were created to be ruled by God but we have instead chosen to fall back into the merely natural condition from which we had been raised. Hence pride and ambition, the desire to be great in our own eyes, the lusts of the flesh, the eyes, the pride of life, the envy and restless search for more, and still more, were now the attitudes that came easiest and most natural to life. This fall brought forth the emergence of a new kind of man. This new species, never made by God, had sinned itself into existence. It was a radical change of our constitution, a disturbance of that original intention and purpose. We chose self rather than God and in consequence lost ourselves. This is our dilemma.

God is all powerful

Scripture claims that God is all-powerful as it reads, *"with God all things are possible"*. Why then does God not undo our current state of depravity and suffering if it is in His power to do so? The concept of 'omnipotence' however, does not mean that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do. While God can do whatever is possible to be done, in reality, He will do only what is in harmony with His nature. For example, in Hebrews 6:18 it says that He cannot lie. Now, this does not mean He lacks the power to lie, but that God will not lie in accordance with His own moral

perfection. His omnipotence, therefore, means the power to do all that is intrinsically possible (all that is in harmony with His Word). For example, if God somehow gave a creature free-will and at the same time withheld free will from it then that God would be inconsistent.

Now if God was truly limited by anything other than Himself, even logic itself, then He would not be the ultimate power, so not the God of Christianity. However, because God is the foundation of logic and limits Himself according to His own nature, His limitations are no challenge to His claim to ultimate power.

Now it is us, not God, who have produced whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bombs. We have begun wars, discriminated, lied and acted against one another, and it is through our actions that this world is in its present condition of unrest. The problem with this world is not from outside ourselves but from within. If God corrected the results of the abuse of our free will at every moment so that a knife became soft as rubber when used as a weapon, or that we automatically became mute every time we were tempted to lie or insult, then that world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible and in which therefore freedom of the will would not exist. If you try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the existence of free will involves then you find that you have excluded life and true love itself.

Learning from our mistakes

There exists a rare disease called CIPA in which someone may have a body that looks normal and acts normally, except for one thing: it cannot feel physical pain. That sounds as if it would be a blessing. But the reason it's a problem is that a person with CIPA lives under the constant threat of injuring themselves without knowing it. If you stepped on a rusty nail or worse a lego brick, or placed your hand on a burning stove, you would not know it. You would need constant vigilance because you could sustain an injury that could take your life or debilitate it. When a parent of a girl with CIPA was interviewed she said, "I pray every night for my daughter, that God would give her a sense of pain." The mother desired her daughter to feel pain and be able to recognise what it portends. So I ask this: is it that difficult to grant the possibility that an infinite God can use pain to point us to a greater malady?

The suffering we experience teaches us something, it shatters our self-sufficiency. It allows us to see that we have made a stupid mistake. We will never begin to surrender as long as all seems to be well with us. Pain shatters the illusion all is well and that what we have is enough for us. Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well in life. When we say we 'have all we want' what we're suggesting is that 'all' does not include God. We find God an interruption. We regard God as an airman regards his parachute, it's there for emergencies but he hopes he'll never have to use it. Now God, who made us, knows what we are and that our deepest happiness and fulfilment lies in Him. Yet we won't surrender what we call 'our own life' to Him. In that case, what can God do for us but make our 'own life' less agreeable to us and take away our source of false happiness? So God in his wisdom allows us to feel pain by the rule of the natural world, although He did not cause or desire it, so that we realise something is wrong with the world.

God must shatter our pretence of self-sufficiency for **our own sake**. It's no wonder that in many cases it is the prostitutes and desperate sinners who in their unsatisfying present life turn to God while the proud, self-righteous and comfortable are the ones who are in danger of never acknowledging God. The pains of life shatter the illusion that the self apart from God is enough. Our real sufficiency lies in God. Until we return to God, a few moments of happiness, love, a beautiful landscape, a symphony, a joyful meeting with our friends or a pleasant relaxation does no more than refresh us on our journey of life. These are pleasant stops, teasing us of something greater, but we

should not mistake these for home.

God is all knowing

Home is where we belong, and we belong in the love of God. What is required of you is to give back the self to him, made possible through the cross. In Jesus' crucifixion we find a God so longing to reach us that he was willing to suffer pain Himself. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* was Jesus' very cry as he endured the cross for you and me. His life, death, and resurrection point to the life-defining reality that our present sorrow is not worth comparing with the glory of eternity with Him. Christ presents an answer to the deepest struggle of pain by providing a solution beyond death: eternal life.

Where there is no answer for death, hopelessness inevitably evades life. The Christian, therefore, does not blame God for the suffering of this world, but instead thanks God that through Christ, death and suffering will be nothing but a forgotten memory in the face of eternity with our heavenly Father. That is the gospel. God offers an answer to suffering by promising to erase it the day all things are reconciled back to Him. The scripture reads: *"When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come to pass: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'"*

God will look to every soul like it's His first love because He is its first love. Your place in eternal life will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it, or else that it was within your reach and you have lost it forever. God is the final answer to the problem of pain, that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life to be spent with God. Even though God knew many would reject Him, He was willing to create life for the few that would accept His love and glorify Him in this. God being all knowing, knew it was worth it.

Alternatively, If you persist that God does not exist then we are locked without hope in a purely naturalistic world filled with pointless and unredeemed suffering. If God does exist then we have the hope of redemption.

So, in summary:

1. **God is love** – Out of this love He formed us and out of this love He has destined us to delight in Him and He in us. Love comes with the freedom to choose and the basic choice to accept or reject.
2. From the beginning we have rejected God which has manifested itself in our rebellion against His moral authority.
3. Since all life is ultimately derived from God, as we have run away from Him we live in a world where life is physically and spiritually decaying. Therefore we are by nature morally fallen and physically suffering.
4. **God is all-powerful** – But His power will not act in contradiction to His own character. All things He can do, but not all things He will do. He gave us free will and our will shall be lived.
5. Seeing the condition of man, God demonstrated His grace when Christ suffered the ultimate consequences of our moral imperfection, becoming sin to bear its consequences on our behalf. Christ's resurrection shows that death has been conquered and through Christ, we can give ourselves back to God. We have hope.
6. **God is all-knowing** – knowing the beginning from the end God saw that the glory of eternal life given to those who accept him surpasses the judgment on those who reject Him, it is worth it. God will restore His people to eternal glory in complete unity with Him. Our purpose will be fulfilled.

This article contains references from 'The problem of pain', by C.S.Lewis.