

A book based on

*The Grace concealed in Suffering: Developing Virtue and Beatitude*

*A Doctoral Thesis defended on March 5, 2020*

*At the Catholic University of America*

## **Section I: Rethinking Suffering**

# THE OUTLINE

## **Section I: Rethinking Suffering**

- Suffering as a Detector of Evil
- The Four Tasks of Suffering

## **Section II: Suffering in God's Providential Plan**

- Addressing the problem of Evil
- Divine Action
- The Theology of Suffering

## **Section III: Answering the Call**

- The Role of the Church
- The Joy in Suffering
- Messengers of God
- Called to help
- Dying Well
- Finding meaning

## SECTION I: RETHINKING SUFFERING



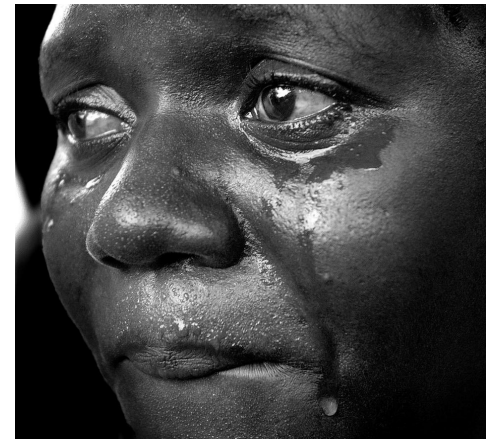
**Suffering Warns Us of Evil and Motivates Us to Seek God**

# SUFFERING IS THE TERM WE USE TO DESCRIBE THE WORST EXPERIENCES OF OUR LIVES

- True Suffering is so unpleasant, disruptive and threatening that it forces changes in us and the way we live our lives
    - Injuries and illnesses
    - Loss of loved ones
    - Loss of property or livelihood
    - Oppression and injustice
- Effects the whole person
- Physically
  - Mentally
  - Emotionally
  - Spiritually
  - Socially

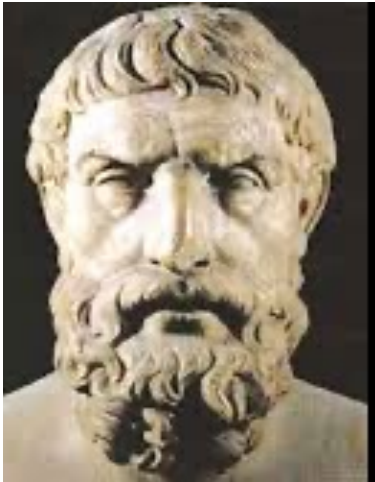
Some feel abandoned by a God they expect to protect them

Society often assumes suffering is some sort of Cosmic punishment causing isolation and additional hardship



**Why do we suffer? How do we make it stop?**

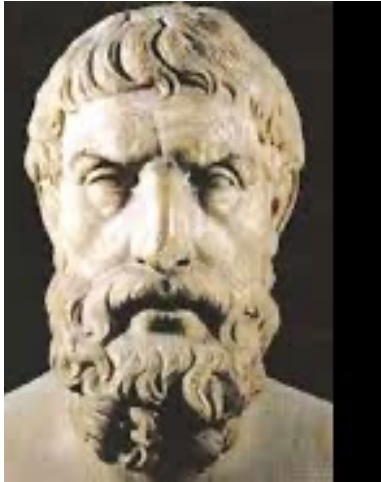
## EPICURUS' DILEMMA: WHY DOES SUFFERING AND EVIL EXIST?



- Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who attempted to answer this question over 2000 years ago
- He had two basic assumptions which he could not resolve
  - He Assumed God was good and all powerful
  - He assumed that Evil and Suffering opposed the Good.
- Based on these concepts he reasoned:
  - If God can't stop evil, then he is not all powerful
  - If God can stop evil but chooses not to, he is not good
  - Since evil exists, God must not be all-powerful, good, or not exist at all

**Even today, many appreciate Epicurus' logic, but there is another answer**

## THE SOLUTION THAT ELUDED EPICURUS



- Epicurus' dilemma is caused because he values pleasure as the greatest good and since suffering is unpleasant, it must be opposed to good
  - For God to be good, he must therefore oppose suffering
- He failed to consider that God might value something higher than men's pleasure and that suffering and evil could be the means to attain that greater good

**Epicurus failed to consider JOY**

## MAN CAN ASPIRE TO MORE THAN PLEASURE HE CAN ASPIRE TO JOY

### PLEASURE

- a brief and superficial sensation caused by contact with some exterior good
- It lasts only as long as that contact lasts
- Suffering is unpleasant by definition
  - The two cannot co-exist

### JOY

- the direct effect of an excellent action, like the savor of a long task finally accomplished.
- must be earned, born of trials, of pain endured, of sufferings accepted with courage and with love.
- To be joyful is to experience perfection, to share in the divine nature; in some sense, to become like God
- Joy is the term we use to describe the best experiences of our lives
- It is God's reward for a job well done.

**Joy is not in opposition to suffering, it is the outcome from successfully meeting its challenges.**

## EPICURUS'S DILEMMA REVISITED

Epicurus's perception	The Truth
<b>God is weak</b> because He can not stop suffering	<b>An omnipotent God</b> is using suffering to motivate change in human actions and attitudes
<b>God is uncaring ,envious, or malicious</b> because he will not remove what is making him uncomfortable	<b>A benevolent God</b> desires for all people to separate themselves from sin and vice and to join Him in paradise

Thus, it becomes clear that Epicurus's dilemma results not from any weakness or envy on the part of God, but from a lack of perspective and understanding on the part of Epicurus himself.





## GOD USES BOTH SUFFERING AND JOY TO LEAD US TO HIMSELF

- Suffering and joy are like a divine carrot and stick combination
  - Suffering is the stick that is used to guide us where the master wants us to go
    - It makes it uncomfortable when we stray off the path and motivates us to stay on it
  - Joy is the carrot that is the reward when we get there.
- Everyone prefers the carrot to the stick but without the stick, it is much more difficult to earn the carrot
- The thought that God guides us with a stick might suggest God is angry or vengeful
  - This view must be wrong because it contradicts the image of God presented to us by Jesus in the famous *Parable of the Prodigal Son*

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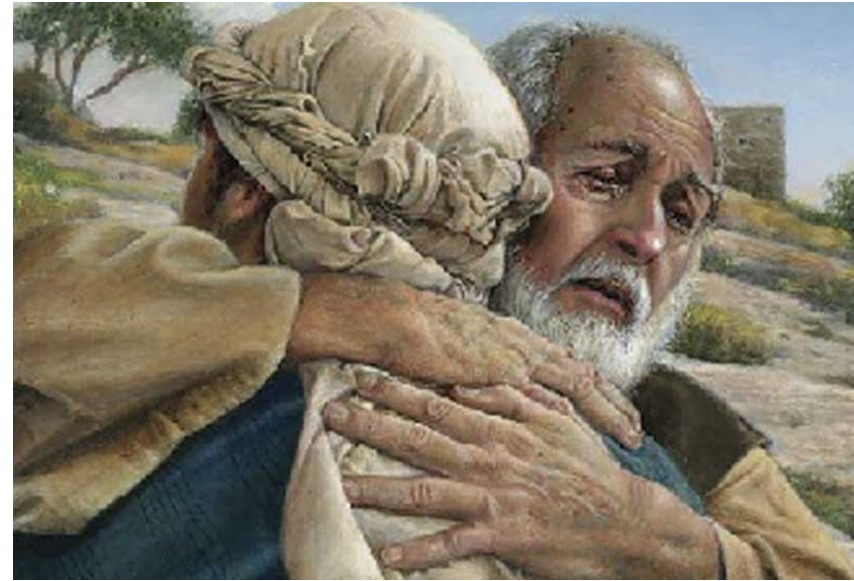
## GOD IS THE FATHER IN THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON



- “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them.
- After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need so he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any.
- Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”’
- “So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.
- His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.
- But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began. Luke 15: 11-24
- **God wants all his children to be united with him . If we return to him, he will welcome us back with open arms**

## SUFFERING CONSISTENT WITH THE FATHER OF THE PRODIGAL SON

- If the Father is as compassionate, loving and forgiving as Jesus describes him in the parable of the prodigal Son, then we need to re-evaluate how we think about suffering.
- Any true theology of suffering must be consistent with this understanding of the Father's love for all his children
- It must be an instrument for God to use to reunite with his wayward progeny



## SUFFERING BRINGS US BACK TO GOD



- In the parable, it is suffering in the form of hunger that brings the young man to his senses and facilitates a return to his father.
- It also makes the son realize that his father loves him very much and provides everything he needs
- The ultimate role of suffering:
  - to facilitate our return to our heavenly Father, who loves us more than we love ourselves and in whose presence, we will find joy and fulfillment.
  - It is how he calls us to return home to him

## WHY WOULD A LOVING FATHER SUBJECT HIS BELOVED SON TO SUFFERING

- The suffering that the Prodigal Son experiences in the parable is hunger.
- But hunger, like all suffering, is nothing more than a sensation that warns us of the presence of evil in our midst.
- Hunger did not threaten the son, it warned him that he was starving to death and motivated him to return home to his Father, who had what he needed.



- It is a lot like a smoke alarm in our house.
  - When a fire is present, the alarm goes off in a very loud, even piercing way to alert us to the threat
  - .Although the alarm is extremely irritating, we recognize that the alarm itself is not dangerous to us and that it needs to be unignorable in order to alert us to the threat and motivate us to take action to save our lives and property
  - It is there to protect us, not to sooth us.

## SUFFERING IS NOT EVIL, IT IS AN EVIL DETECTOR



- Suffering needs to be persistent and uncomfortable to warn us of the threat from evil and motivate us to take action to eliminate it.
- When we are hungry, it is not the feeling of hunger that is dangerous to our well-being, it is the lack of food, which is alleviated by attaining nourishment
- Breaking a leg is bad, the pain merely tells us it happened and motivates us to stay off it, allowing the leg to heal
- When we are lonely, it is our need for companionship that is the problem, not the feeling.

Suffering is not evil, it is an evil-detector, put in place by a loving God to protect us from evil in the same way that a smoke detector is designed to protect us from fire.



## SUFFERING NOT ONLY ALLOWS US TO DETECT EVIL IT PROTECTS US FROM IT AND PERFECTS US

- If a man drinks too much alcohol, he will get drunk and suffer with a hangover the next day.
- That next night, the man, chastened by his experience of suffering and deducing that the cause of it was too much drinking the previous night, does not drink and wakes up without a hangover.
- Suffering has taught the man that excess drinking is evil while also teaching that controlling his drinking is good and will alleviate the suffering.
- It protected him from further harm by motivating him not to drink in excess again
- If the man habituates what he has learned, it perfects him because by his moderation, he is practicing the virtue of temperance and experiencing proper self-love.



## A HANGOVER, LIKE ALL SUFFERING, IS A GOOD THING



- Drinking so much that you get a hangover is bad for you
- The hangover makes it an unpleasant experience
  - This provides motivation not to do it again
  - The hangover itself is therefore protecting us from future damage
    - This is a good thing
- In the same way, any type of suffering is a good thing because it warns us of things that threaten our existence and motivates us to avoid them and seek the good instead



## THERE MUST BE A BETTER WAY



- Although a hangover is harsh, it is not harsh enough to keep some people from drinking excessively to the point of addiction or death
- While the warning is unpleasant, the lack of warning leads to death



- For example, if we did not have the uncomfortable sensation of hunger, it would be like driving a car without a fuel gauge:
  - It is only a matter of time before we found ourselves stranded with no fuel in sight, dead in our tracks

SUFFERING IS OUR INNATE ABILITY TO SENSE THE PRESENCE OF EVIL  
(OR TO MORE ACCURATELY DESCRIBE IT, THE ABSENCE OF GOOD),  
SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH TO THREATEN OUR EXISTENCE PHYSICALLY,  
SOCIALLY, PSYCHOLOGICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY



- The sensations it produces are persistent and hard to ignore to warn us of danger
  - Just like any alarm system
- It is discomfort that gives suffering its protecting and perfecting capabilities
  - It needs to be that way to motivate us to change
    - IF suffering was soothing, it would encourage us to stay in the presence of evil.
- Suffering directs us to the good we need



## BUT WHY COULDN'T THE FATHER KEEP THE PRODIGAL SON FROM STARVING



- In today's world, a wealthy father can wire funds anywhere in the world to keep his son from starving, couldn't an all-powerful God do at least as much?
- Of course God can provide for all of our needs- that's not the problem
- The problem is that the son severed ties with his father, losing access to all that was good for him
- It's not that God can't help us, it is that we are refusing God's help

## WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW EVIL TO EXIST?

- God is good and everything he made is good for its planned purpose (Genesis 1)
- Evil is the absence of loss of good, like darkness is the absence of light and silence is the absence of Sound
- Evil can exist in the following ways
  - Incompleteness the thing is not yet perfected
  - Corruption the loss of form (wine turns into vinegar or you dent your car)
  - Disfunction - the loss of function ( a person can no longer see)
  - Misuse - using thing is the wrong way; (pounding in nails with a screwdriver)
  - Disorder choosing a lesser good over a greater good – this is the definition of sin
- Evil does not oppose good,, it lacks good and thus represents an opportunity to achieve goodness

## WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD WITHHOLD ANYTHING GOOD FROM A SON HE LOVES?

- God has infinite goodness, more than anyone could take
- Like a good human father, God knows it is better to let his children work for what they need so they develop skills and a sense of purpose and achievement
- Those that are given everything they want suffer from a lack of purpose and are unhappy
  - Those that earn their keep are satisfied
- God is good and gives us what we need, when we need it, just as the Father of the Prodigal Son did in the parable.



## BUT ISN'T IT TYRANNICAL FOR GOD TO USE COERCION TO BRING PEOPLE BACK TO HIM?



- This reflects a flawed view of God as if He were human.
- God is all powerful and has no needs that He cannot fulfill Himself
- When he desires us to return to him, it is for our benefit, not his
  - at his word, we could be replaced instantly by others who could take their places at his side.
- God shows His love for each us by warning us when we get off track to what will lead to joy by making it uncomfortable through suffering.
- We know this because everyone suffers in life.

## DOES THIS MEAN EVERYONE WHO SUFFERS IS OFF TRACK?



- No, it means everyone is called by God to do his will
  - Sometimes we are called to suffer for the benefit of others
  - Like Jesus, who was sinless, yet suffered for our sins
- When we suffer, we are being called to help carry out God's plan
  - It is not always a curse or a punishment (but it can be)
  - Even in the case of punishment, we are being called to return to God.



# WHY WOULD THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF MAN BE TO UNITE WITH GOD?



- God is all that is Good and True
- If you can unite with God, it is like hooking into a divine “internet”- It is called the “Beatific Vision”
- Instant and unending access to all that is good and true in the universe
  - Mountain vistas, shore sunrises, cosmic beauty, cuddly puppies and the warm embrace of the person who loves you best in a continual kaleidoscope of joy
  - If the human –developed internet can enthrall us, it is easy to see how the Beatific Vision would be something no one would desire to leave



TO UNITE WITH GOD, WE MUST BE LIKE GOD  
SUFFERING IS A CALL TO CONVERSION  
ITS TASK IS TO TEACH US TO LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY  
THROUGH 4 TASK STAGES

**Developing Virtue:**  
**(Love of Self)**

Avoiding suffering =  
building virtue  
Eliminating vice clears  
the way for the grace  
of conversion

**Reorienting the**  
**Soul**  
**(Love of God)**

Suffering makes one  
think of the existential  
questions  
Suffering can lead one  
to seek God

**Unleashing Love**  
**(Love of Neighbor)**

Suffering provides  
opportunities to love  
and be loved;  
To act towards others  
according to God's will

**Redeeming the**  
**sufferer**  
**(Redemptive Love)**

One recognizes they  
suffer for the benefit of  
others  
They share in the  
suffering of Christ (and  
his glory)

God also sent his Son, Jesus to demonstrate how to answer this call to conversion through his words and actions

## CHAPTER 2- THE FIRST TASK: DEVELOPING VIRTUE



Temperance  
Fortitude  
Justice  
Prudence

Suffering provides the impetus and validation for the development of virtue (proper self-love) which opens the way for grace

## THE FIRST TASK: THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUE WHICH CLEARS THE WAY FOR GRACE



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- The first task is to teach human's proper self-love while attending to our own material needs
- People do not have to have faith or to even acknowledge God, it merely requires acting naturally to avoid suffering.
- To alleviate their suffering, people pursue the good that they are lacking. If they are hungry, they eat. If they are lonely, they seek companionship. If in pain, they seek healing.
- Once people choose the best way to do things, they will repeat them forming habits. Good habits = virtue
- The development of virtue clears the way for the acceptance of grace

## CHAPTER 3 – THE SECOND TASK: REORIENTING THE SOUL TO GOD



When there is no other way to resolve suffering, people contemplate their mortality and many turn back to God

## HOW SUFFERING WORKS ON HUMANS ILLNESS IS THE CATALYST OF CONVERSION

In **illness**  
man experiences  
his powerlessness,  
his limitations and  
his Finitude.

Every illness can make  
us glimpse death

**Illness** can lead to  
anguish,  
self-absorption,  
sometimes even  
despair and  
revolt against God

**Illness** can also make  
a person  
more mature,  
helping him discern  
in his life what is not  
essential so that  
he can turn to  
that which is

Very often **illness**  
provokes a search for  
God and a return to  
Him

- CCC 1500-1501

**In Suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace**

**- John Paul II, Salvifici doloris, 26**

## CHAPTER 4 - THE THIRD TASK: UNLEASHING LOVE



**"Parable of the Good Samaritan" (1647) by Balthasar van Cortbemde [Wikipedia]**

THE THIRD TASK OF SUFFERING IS TO PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO LOVE OTHERS

## THE WORKS OF MERCY

Feed the Hungry  
Give drinks to the thirsty

Heal the Sick  
Visit the imprisoned

**Cloth the Naked**  
**Shelter the Homeless**

Bury the dead

Instruct the ignorant  
Admonish the sinner

Council the doubtful  
Comfort the sorrowful

Forgive all injuries  
Bear wrongs patiently

Pray for the living and  
the dead



## CHAPTER 5

### THE FOURTH TASK: REDEEMING THE SUFFERER



When we willingly suffer for the benefit of others we share in the suffering and Glory of Christ



## THE FOURTH TASK: REDEMPTION

### WHEN WE WILLING SUFFER FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS WE SHARE IN THE SUFFERING AND GLORY OF CHRIST

Some ways our suffering  
benefits others:

Our suffering provides an  
opportunity for others to be  
charitable, gaining spiritual merit

People may gain medical or pastoral  
knowledge from caring for us which  
will aid future patients

People may follow our example and  
find meaning for their own suffering  
and thus, resolve it

It can activate the consciences of  
others, causing them to cease  
activities that cause others harm

It can cause others to let go of  
material goods and seek the higher  
goals (union with God) which lead to  
human happiness

It can increase the empathy of others,  
which will benefit future sufferers

It can serve as a warning to avoid physical and natural dangers and to avoid sin and punishment

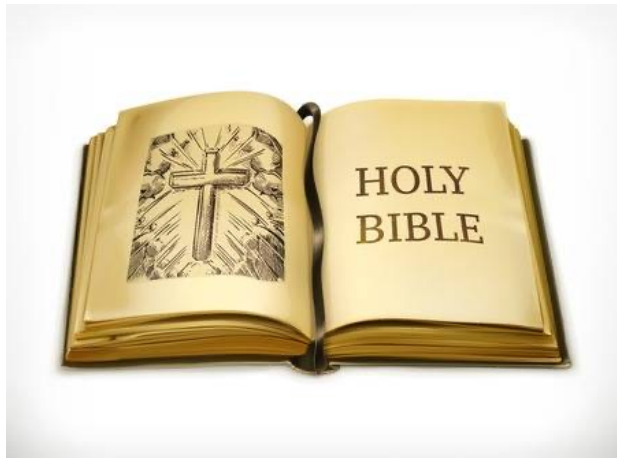
## RETHINKING SUFFERING



- Suffering is poorly understood in the modern era because God is poorly understood
- God is like the Father of the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable: anxious to welcome his wayward progeny back with open arms.
- Suffering is not evil, it is our ability to recognize evil
- Suffering has four tasks to bring humanity from sin to eternal salvation
- Suffering must be harsh and persistent to motivate a recalcitrant humanity to return to God, which is what causes joy

**Suffering is Beneficial to Mankind**

## SUFFERING AS A FORM OF DIVINE REVELATION



- Suffering reveals divine direction by making deviations from it painful
- There are better, less painful ways to align yourself with God:
  - By heeding the teaching of the Church which Christ commissioned to pass on the revealed truth
  - By heeding the message of others who have suffered before you
  - By heeding the rules put forth by human organizations

Suffering will identify any wrong direction discerned from others

# THE NATURE OF SUFFERING

## **Dr. Eric Cassell (Medicine)**

*The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine, 1991*

Suffering only occurs when people perceive a threat to their existence, not merely to their lives but to their integrity as persons

## **Simone Weil (Philosophy)**

*The Love of God and Affliction, 1940s*

Only affliction and beauty are piercing enough to penetrate the human soul and allow it to hear the word of God.

## **Redefining Suffering from Mid-Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Insights**

Suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense when they lack some good so significant that it threatens their existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually

## **Pope John Paul II (Magisterial)**

*Salifici doloris, 1984*

Suffering is an experience of evil  
Evil is the privation of good just as darkness is the absence of light

## **Dorothee Soelle (Theology)**

*Suffering, 1975*

Suffering threatens every dimension of life, encompassing physical and psychological pain as well as social isolation, loneliness and ostracism

# SUFFERING IS FOR THE BENEFIT OF MANKIND



Highlights the good that people are missing and makes it uncomfortable to live without it

**Suffering**

Motivates people to attain the good and leads them back to God and eternal joy



**God and virtue**  
What people really need

Suffering is God's Answer to Original Sin: Designed to Lead Humanity Back to Joy