

## MAN'S DILEMMA OF SIN AND SUFFERING

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"My God," he cries, "my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Spiked to a cross-beam on a hilltop, he hangs naked and forsaken in the darkness. Who is he? The tortured man, the abandoned man, choking in the dust of death. He is not nameless, for a sign nailed over his head bears his name, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37).

Jesus. His name holds the theme of Scripture, "Salvation is of the Lord." "Thous shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Men gather to mock the sign of his Name. "He saved others," they jeer, "Let him save himself!" (Luke 23:35). But the name of salvation is forever fixed to the Cross.

Man's dilemma of sin and suffering is met at Calvary not with speculation but with anguish, not in symbol but in actuality, for the forsaken Sufferer is the Son of God. The Cross has not lost its offence to worldly wise men. They see only another of those atrocities that men must be saved from, or worse, a savior who *chooses* the way to Calvary and betrays the revolution.

Yet the foolishness of the Cross remains the wisdom of God to salvation. At the Cross God reveals the meaning of the human condition and at the Cross God brings the reality of his salvation. Both the wrath of God and the grace of God at the Cross are a scandal to men. The Cross supports no worldly philosophy, it supplements no worldly religion; it is God's foolishness that is wiser than men (1 Cor. 1:18-21).

### 1. Man before God: sin and suffering

In preparation for the recent Bangkok conference on the theme "Salvation Today," a booklet was published that packed together more than a hundred brief verbal grenades, charged with rage against power and privilege, some exploding in agonized blasphemy. This shock therapy was prescribed to challenge not only orthodox theology, but any theology that offers answers from the Bible rather than struggle in encounter.

It is true that the Gospel does not give the answers men are seeking in the rage of their rebellion. But God does speak, and his Word proclaims not only struggle but victory. That victory is his salvation, and only before God can we see either the plight of our lostness or the glory of his saving purpose. The call to salvation is a call to repentance, a call to turn to the living God.

At Calvary, before God, we learn the deepest meaning of human misery. All misery measures to a degree our lostness from God. The cry of Jesus from the Cross is the cry of the final misery, the misery of the God-forsaken man. In the mystery of redemption the Son of God de-

scends into the hell of abandonment and bears the full curse of God's judgment.

In his agony Jesus is identified with the suffering of God's servant in Psalm 22. He endures physical pain (vv. 14-16), but more painful than the tearing of his hands is the crushing of his heart: he is despised and scorned (vv. 6, 7); like snarling dogs his enemies surround him and his friends have fled (*cf.* Psa. 88:8, 31:11, 12).

Yet the supreme agony of the righteous Sufferer is not that he is abandoned by his friends, but that he is forsaken by his Father. Though we cannot imagine what this meant to the Beloved Son of God, we do know in the spiritual depth of human anguish the brokenness of our alienation from God.

The man who looks into the jaws of death knows more than fear. He knows the dread that is the shadow of God's image. Our life is but a breath, a sigh, in contrast to God's eternity. The fascination in Andrew Wyeth's paintings is not simply the nostalgic realism he gives to everyday objects. It is the frightening tension between the familiar window curtain billowing toward us and the nameless immensity of the gray sky from which the sea wind blows.

"Before the mountains were brought forth,  
Or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world,  
Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psa. 90:2).

Man's misery bears mute witness to his humanity. Agony no less than ecstasy reminds us that God has made us for himself. But humanity is not constituted by misery. We are miserable, not because we are humans, but because we are sinners. Misery is not man's fate but his judgment.

"For we are consumed in thine anger,  
And in thy wrath are we troubled.  
Thou has set our iniquities before thee,  
Our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Psa. 90:7, 8).

God's thoughts are not our thoughts when we reflect on misery. Men see themselves as victims and lift proud heads "bloody but unbowed." Man fancies himself as Sisyphus, a hero of the absurd who gives meaning to his doom of meaninglessness by his own decision to go on.

If not a hero, man would be a sage, quenching the desire that leads to suffering, and anticipating by the transformation of his consciousness that absorption in the All to which the wheel of existence eternally returns.

Or man would take charge, controlling threats from without and modifying behavior within. Perhaps not at Walden and perhaps not by 1984, but in time, and planetary space, man would engineer the garden of Eden again.

Every human formula for coping with misery sees it as fate: definitive of human existence, necessary to the cosmic process, or perhaps the inevitable price of progress in the dialectic of history. There is no other way men can see it, until they stand before the living God. Then they understand why misery is so miserable, why life that ends in death can never offer rest. All along man's sense of tragedy has betrayed him. Misery is the curse of the *sinner*. Man is not the hapless victim but the willing rebel.

To be sure, not all of a man's suffering is the direct result of his sin. When Jesus was told of Galileans massacred by Pilate he assured his hearers that these were not the worst Galilean sinners singled out for judgment. Only by God's final judgment are all sins justly punished. But Jesus' next words show the gulf between man's view of sin and God's "Except ye repent ye shall all in like manner perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). The tragedy of destruction is not a strange intrusion, but a certain judgment. All men are sinners, and the wages of sin is death.

Sin is not capable of illuminating analysis; it does not offer its own coherent theme to be traced. It is rebellion, self-destructive madness, exploiting the gifts of the Creator to pander to the vain illusions of the apostate heart. Faith is coherent: it is grounded in knowledge of the truth of God, it gives full assent to that truth, and commits the believer to the Lord in whole-hearted trust. Sin is unbelief: it does not escape believing, but chooses to believe the lie; in assenting to the lie it constructs a fabric of illusion and becomes self-deceived. Finally it commits itself to the lie in idolatry.

All the dimensions of sin are determined by its direction against God. As *alienation* it seeks to escape from God — by concealment in the garden, by flight east of Eden, or by setting up a boundary complete with a golden calf (I Kings 12:28f). As *rebellion* sin does not so much seek to escape from God as to defy him. The rebels will take counsel together to cast off God's rule; they will abuse his servants, kill his Son, and divide his inheritance among themselves (Psa. 2:1-3, Matt. 21:35-58). If the alien is driven by fear, the rebel is moved by hate (Rom. 8:7).

As *corruption*, sin seeks revenge. Licentious lust has a theological motif. It is not simple desire, for it rushes past satiety into perversion. It is spite against God, not simply in seizing the objects of desire in violation of God's order, but in profaning God's image, destroying his creation, and defacing the beauty of his glory. Delighting in the abuse of God's good gifts, sin pollutes language with the oaths of blasphemy, love with the vices of lust, and worship with the degradations of idolatry. Sin's corruption assaults the holiness of God: Cain murders Abel because Abel reflects the beauty of God's righteousness (I John 3:12). On the walls of God's holy place the sinner writes his obscene graffiti in blood. When God tabernacles among men in human flesh, sinners mangle, mock, and murder him, delighting to spit in the face of the Holy One of God.

As *guilt*, sin transgresses the law of God. God's goodness gave Adam a paradise dwelling, and a path for living. His commandment was also promise, directing man's steps to the tree of life. By his revealed will, God binds himself to man in personal communion; his *torah* points the way along the path of proving and sonship. Sin is lawlessness, disobedience to the Word of God. The clear and binding authority of God's commandment demonstrates the reality of sin and increases the guilt of disobedience (Rom. 5:20). Both the Old and New Testaments have words for sin that mean "missing the mark," but in biblical use the "mark" is the law of God, established in his covenant with his people.

Jesus teaches the God-centered meaning of the law by showing that the first and great commandment is whole-souled love for God, and

further, that the second commandment depends upon the first. Lawlessness in the light of the heart of God's law is *lovelessness* — "He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love" (I John 4:8).

If the revelation of God's law heightens sin by making it "exceeding sinful," then the full and final revelation of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ gives to sin its ultimate horror: disobedience becomes the apostasy that spurns God's love and tramples under foot the blood of the Cross (Heb. 6:6; 10:29).

In spite of sin's irrational madness and self-destructiveness it remains guilty. The Apostle Paul presents the full wickedness of sin under God's law; "That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God" (Rom. 3:19). Part of the judgment that sin merits is the exposure of its guilt. Those who are condemned must confess the justice of that condemnation; at the last judgment the scandal of disobedience must cease.

Sin is also *bondage* — not just through its own deceitfulness and the irreversible drive of its depravity, but through the fatal alliance of the sinner with the power of the devil (Eph. 2:1, 2). God's salvation "delivered us from the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col. 1:13).

The power of evil is not exercised only by the individual and by society, but by principalities and powers. According to the New Testament these are not symbolic designations of such things as imperialism or patterns of economic exploitation. They are, quite simply, the devil and his angels.

Closely linked with the bondage of sin is its deceitfulness: the god of this world has "blinded the minds of the unbelieving" (II Cor. 4:4). If false teachers fashion themselves into apostles of Christ it is no marvel, "for even Satan disguises himself into an angel of light" (II Cor. 11:14). God in judgment abandons those who believe not the truth to the lying wonders of Satan (II Thess. 2:9-12).

The consummate manifestation of sin and evil is therefore not secular but religious. Antichrist sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God (II Thess. 2:4). The climax of sin in the world is true to its beginning: the lie by which the creature would usurp the place of the Creator.

From this dominion of sin, because it is against God, there can be no deliverance that does not come from God. Sin has its seat in man's heart (Jer. 17:9) from which all unrighteousness proceeds (Mark 7:21-22). "Proceeding from the heart as center this pollution darkens the understanding (Rom. 1:21), inclines the will to do evil and makes it powerless to do the truly good (John 8:34 and Rom. 8:7), taints or defiles the conscience (Tit. 1:15) and makes of the body with all of its members . . . a weapon for unrighteousness (Rom. 3:13-17 and 6:13)"

The sin that pervades the whole man pervades also the whole of mankind. "There is none righteous, no not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God" (Rom. 3:10, 11). "There is no distinction; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22, 23). Not only do all men become sinners in word and deed; they are born in sin (Psa. 51:5). The apostle Paul traces back

the course of sin in the world by following the course of death (Rom. 5:12-21). When the death-knell sounds, sin is being judged. At what point did sin enter, and death through sin? Evidently in the sin of the first man, Adam. Through *one* trespass death ruled over many (Rom. 5:19), including those who did not repeat Adam's sin and who could not yet be held accountable by the law given to Moses. How does death pass to the many through the sin of the one? The many bear the judgment because they share in the sin. Paul stresses the representative role of Adam because he wishes to show the parallel in Christ: as one act of sin made men guilty, caused sin to be charged against them — for all men sinned in Adam (Rom. 5:12, 18), so one act of righteousness brought justification and life to the new humanity in Christ. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive . . . Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at his coming" (I Cor. 15:22, 23).

The sinfulness of all humanity is not a survival of the jungle; it is the result of the fall. It is sin before God. Man's doom springs from his initial rebellion and grows with his multiplied iniquity. Nothing that man is or does remains untainted.

All that God commanded for blessing, man perverts to his destruction. From the earth he draws the metals that give him tools, but he seizes the sword as the tool of power and sings his hymn of vengeance (Gen. 4:23, 24). He forges social and cultural unity in the city and raises a tower for God, a ramp of religion for the descent of the divine (Gen. 11:4). But his religiosity is not obedient devotion but proud rebellion, and God comes down not in blessing but in judgment.

But God is not mocked. The sinner will reap what he sows. Because God is slow to anger and merciful he gives men opportunity to repent (Ex. 34:6; Rom. 2:4, 5). Yet his final judgment is sure, and long before that last reckoning God makes evident his wrath against sin. Indeed the dynamic of sin's development shows how God judges men by making their very sins their punishment. Men give up the glory of the incorruptible God for idols (Rom. 1:23); God gives them up in the lusts of their hearts to uncleanness (1:24). Men give up the truth of God for a lie (v. 25); God gives them up to vile passions (v. 26). Men give up the knowledge of God (v. 28), and God gives them up to a reprobate mind (v. 28). Man's abandonment of natural sexual relations is judged by God's abandonment to the chains of perversion (vv. 26, 27).

Man's sin continually perverts, twists, and destroys what God has given. Whether he tortures God's creatures or worships them he yet assaults God's goodness. Paul emphasizes the continuing witness of God's creation that makes the Gentiles without excuse. Man cannot escape God's revelation of his power and divinity (Rom. 1:20), but he refuses to have God in his knowledge (v. 28), seizes the truth in unrighteousness (v. 18) and exchanges it for a lie (v. 25).

In man's struggle against God there is progressive apostasy, leading to God's abandonment. In the spiritual state of the Gentiles of his day Paul finds a depravity that has progressed far beyond the first beginnings of idolatry. God's truth is not a settled deposit in the thoughts of the nations. Rather it has been increasingly abandoned and continually

resisted and twisted. Static models of a natural theology forget the dynamic of the psychology (and, indeed the epistemology) of sin.

J.H. Bavinck puts the right question to the religious systems of the world: "What have you done with God?"

His analysis of some of the motifs of world religions shows the fruitfulness of the question. Men deal with God by promoting him to be the "high god," a heavenly deity of no earthly concern, an otiose god who can be safely ignored in favor of the snake cult. Or men deal with God by identifying him with the cosmos, the great process polarity of *yin* and *yang*. Another religious option is to screen off God by erecting a barrier of legalism. No yoke of codified conduct seems as forbidding to the sinner as a living relationship with God! Yet another "solution" is to de-personalize and vaporize God in the world-ocean of mysticism.

From each of these motifs springs a distinctive view of sin and suffering. Yet each removes the personal depth of sin against the revealed goodness of the living God. All are characterized by the apostle as "weak and beggarly elements" that bring men into bondage to that are no gods (Gal. 4:8, 9). Gentile corruption and Pharisaical pride, animal lust and heroic asceticism, worldly irreligion and sanctimonious religion — all are expressions of man's sin against God. Indeed, as the ministry of Jesus Christ shows, publicans and harlots go into the kingdom before the righteous religionists, for they may more readily confess their sin, turn from their own ways and cast themselves upon the mercy of God, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

## 2. *The Gospel of God: salvation and suffering*

a. "*Salvation is of the Lord*" — "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever" (Rom. 11:36). Paul's doxology springs from reflection on the wonder of God's plan in salvation. Even the burden of Israel's unbelief, so crushing to the Apostle, he has brought to the throne of God's sovereignty; Paul beholds the severity and the goodness of the Lord (11:22) and worships.

Job's complaints were silenced by the overwhelming awe of God's presence ( . . . "But now mine eye seeth thee!", Job 42:5). In the revelation of Gospel mysteries, that silence before God becomes a song of praise.

God's salvation goes beyond all imagining; his purposes are hidden in the inaccessible heights of his grace (Jer. 33:2, 3; Isa. 55:8-11). Salvation is more than God's gift: in giving salvation God gives himself. In the *Lord* is the glory that outweighs suffering; in the *Lord* is the design that is accomplished through suffering; in the *Lord* is the grace that transforms suffering. Apart from God men may account suffering and death the greatest evils; they may mock a salvation that *calls* men to suffer. But those who hear the voice of the Son of God are ready to take up a cross and follow him.

God's dealings with Israel focus on the bond of possession between Yahweh as the Lord and the people as his servant. The heart of God's salvation is not the escape from Egypt, as a sign of God's deliverance, or the possession of the land, as a sign of his blessing. It is the trust at Sinai where God claims the people for himself. "Ye have seen what I

did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself" (Ex. 19:4-6).

Israel is a nation of priests, God's own possession. After the sin of the golden calf, God proposes to go before the people and give them the land, but not to dwell in their midst (Ex. 33:1-3). Moses rejects this proposal with dismay, and pleads for the declaration of God's name of grace. Receiving this assurance of divine favor, Moses prays, not that the people be given *their* inheritance, but that God take them as *his* inheritance (Ex. 34:9). The tabernacle, and later, the temple, are built to be the abiding sign of the dwelling of the Lord in the midst of his people.

Scholars have isolated the themes of redemption and of blessing in the Old Testament; they have contrasted the episodic drama of redemptive history with a continuous experience of life, health and *shalom*. But the Old Testament message is neither a theology of liberation nor a natural theology of prosperity. It is the theology of the covenant: the bond of favor that joins the living God with his chosen people.

Because of that favor God hears the cries of his people, and comes to deliver them. Yet God's presence and even God's deliverance do not at once end Israel's suffering. Instead, God leads his people through the desert to prove and strengthen their faith in him. At Marah, where bitter water mocks their thirst, the people receive the sign and promise of God's healing presence, "I *am* the Lord that healeth thee" (Ex. 15:26).

The Lord who heals also wounds in discipline or in judgment when his people are unfaithful to his covenant. As apostasy in the land of promise leads to destruction and captivity, it is God who judges his people. From God too must come their restoration, a restoration that centers in the knowledge of the Lord (Hos. 6:1-3). God's mercy causes restoration to become renewal. The dry bones in the valley hear the word of the Lord, and live before God with new hearts (Ezek. 36:26; 37:1-14). So great are God's promises that they can be fulfilled only by the coming of God himself. When God's glory shines upon his people, then "nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isa. 60:3). God's glory transforms the city, the land, and the world. The curse even in the animal world is changed to the blessing of God's peace (Isa. 11:6-10).

If in the blessing of that day the very pots of Jerusalem shall be holy and the feeblest citizen as David, then "the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them" (Zech. 12:8). The ensign that God lifts up for the gathering of the nations is the rod that grows from the root of Jesse, the individual "Remnant," God's anointed Servant (Isa. 10:33, 34, 11:1-5, 10). The Servant is God's elect, in whom his soul delights (Isa. 42:1); he bears God's Name (Isa. 9:6) as God's Son (Psa. 2:7) and will share God's rule at his right hand (Psa. 110:1).

The Gospel proclaims the coming of salvation with the birth of the Savior, Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). Then as now salvation had many meanings. For the slave it meant freedom, for the citizen, prosperity. Emperors stamped the title on their coins as divinized guardians of the "Pax Romana." To the devotee of the mystery cult it meant immortality, to the mystic the transport of ecstasy. To the zealous Israelite, salvation meant military deliverance from Rome.

But the angelic announcement of the Savior came not to zealot captains but to shepherds; the sign of the angel presented a Savior in a feed-bin, despised from his birth (Isa. 1:3, LXX). The angelic hosts did not come to the fields of Bethlehem as avengers, but to bless God for giving his peace to the men of his good pleasure, the humble poor made heirs of the kingdom by grace.

All the words and deeds of Jesus Christ fulfill this heavenly plan of salvation. He preached the good news of the kingdom of God, the coming of God's rule of righteousness. But Jesus is more than a herald, he is the Deliverer. In Nazareth he reads Isaiah's prophecy of the great year of jubilee and says, "Today is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21).

His miracles are signs of kingdom cleansing and power. He can restore the world of creation and the hearts of men from the pollution of demonic evil. He is Lord over the wind and the sea, life and death, men and demons. Because he has bound the strong man, Satan, in his wilderness ordeal he can free his captives (Luke 11:14-22). He is the second Adam, the Son of Man who has authority to subdue the earth and to fill all things (Gen. 1:28; Eph. 1:21, 23; 4:10; Matt. 14:33). Christ crushes the head of the serpent in the conflict of his life and in the triumph of his death. He is the seeking Shepherd who gathers the "little flock" (Luke 12:32), calling his sheep by name and promising to gather others "not of this fold" (John 10:16). He raises up the afflicted, ministers healing to the suffering, and feeds the fainting crowds in the desert.

Yet he hid himself from those who would make him king by force; he would not lead a march of political liberation to Jerusalem (John 6:15). When he entered the city among the crowds, it was as the meek and lowly king of Zechariah's prophecy (Matt. 21:4-11). He refused Peter's sword in his defense and would not call down from heaven either fire or angels for his vindication (John 18:11, Luke 9:54, 55; Matt. 26:53). Set before Pilate he said, "My kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight" (John 18:36).

John the Baptist, his forerunner, sent to him from the prison where he was soon to die, "Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?" (Luke 7:20). John had preached the coming judgment of the kingdom. Jesus' miracles demonstrated the blessings of the kingdom; but Jesus did not lift the axe of judgment against the oppressors. How could kingdom blessing come without kingdom justice? What could explain the restraint of kingdom power that left John in prison?

Jesus reaffirmed his miracles as the fulfillment of prophecy (Isa. 35:5, 6) and said, "Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in me" (Matt. 11:6). John must accept his refusal to use kingdom power to bring in kingdom judgment. In that refusal lies the mystery of the Gospel: the true purpose and program of the kingdom. Christ did not come to slay the wicked but to be slain for the wicked; not to bring the judgment upon men but to bear the judgment for men. Justice apart from justification is not the blessing that men complacently imagine. Full justice will be brought upon all those that know not God when Christ comes again (II Thess. 1:7-9).

Without God's justifying righteousness, God's justice must bring upon men not what they desire but what they deserve: God's wrath and curse in the day of judgment. Those who speak of "salvations" in the plural deny the Gospel at its heart. Without the salvation of Christ's justifying righteousness and atoning death, there is no other salvation. God's salvation is indeed comprehensive, and includes total justice at the last day, but apart from forgiveness of sins through the Gospel of the Cross of Christ total justice means final doom for every sinner. The kingdom of God is not a composite of personal awareness and political action to be entered individually by conversion or socially by revolution. Rather, God's kingdom is the operation of his power to accomplish his plan through his Savior, Jesus Christ. God's plan includes the withholding of his judgment so that the Gospel may be preached and men may repent and believe in Christ. Neither peace of mind nor peace in society as human achievements can bring in God's kingdom. The rich fool of Jesus' parable was well content and the builders of Babel demonstrated social unity. Neither was prepared for divine judgment. The distinction is not between the individual and society, for the kingdom of God is manifested not only in the individual lives of those who have been born of the Spirit, but also in the corporate life of God's new community, the Church of Christ, set as a light in the world.

The abiding question is the meaning of salvation itself — whether it means deliverance from God's wrath into the blessing of his peace or whether it means whatever personal aspirations or social structures seem desirable or right to men who reject the counsel of God about this purpose and plan of salvation.

b. *The suffering Savior* — Jesus came in the power of the kingdom, yet he did not bring in the judgment of the kingdom. Instead, he sent his apostles to the ends of the earth to disciple the nations. But the time of the mission of the church is not just a worldwide extension of the ministry of John the Baptist, calling men to repentance. Jesus did not simply announce the postponing of judgment; he bore the judgment. At the Cross he gave his life a ransom for many, bearing in their place God's judgment for sin.

The Cross is not merely a sign of judgment, a warning that in spite of delay, God's justice is sure. Rather, it is the execution of judgment. Paul's whole doctrine of salvation rests upon the meaning of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The believer was chosen in Christ before the world began; when Christ died, he died, too; when Christ rose, he rose in Christ and ascended in Christ. The Holy Spirit brings to the church the fruits of Christ's victory. The new life in Christ is a beginning of the life of the world to come. Further, Christ's triumph has cosmic dimensions. The principalities and powers are defeated; Christ now has all power in heaven and earth. No power can thwart his purpose in gathering all that the Father has given him. Even the final revelation of his power in judgment is not a new victory but the full outcome of the victory of the Cross (Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:9).

Only in the full meaning of the Cross do we find the Gospel for suffering humanity. The triumph of the Cross forms the hope of the Gospel: the resurrection victory of Jesus Christ that enables the believer to cry, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?" (I Cor. 15:55). The Gospel does not glorify suffering but promises that God will wipe away every tear . . . "and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more" . . . (Rev. 21:4). That consolation of joy in God's presence comes through the Lamb that was slain — the Cross of Christ (Rev. 21:22, 22:3).

The Gospel of the suffering Savior has yet a deeper meaning. The promise of an end to suffering and death would be utterly incredible apart from the God who makes it. The passage that declares "death shall be no more" begins, "Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God, and he shall wipe away every tear . . ." (Rev. 21:3).

Only God's power can remove all suffering; but more is declared here — the divine compassion that wipes away the tears of men. The God who "forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases" (Psa. 103:3) is the God of mercy. In the Old Testament he reserves healing to himself to show his covenant love. King Hezekiah who cries to the Lord and is healed confesses, ". . . thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit . . ." (Isa. 38:17). To the prayer of anguish, "Heal me O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me and I shall be saved" (Jer. 17:14), God responds, "For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the Lord" (Jer. 30:17, 33:6).

Only the Lord heals, and it is by the Spirit of the Lord that his anointed will bind up the broken-hearted and comfort the mourning (Isa. 61:1, 2). Not only will the Servant of the Lord comfort those that mourn, he himself "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows . . . but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:4, 5).

In the background of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy is the figure of the righteous sufferer in the Old Testament. ". . . The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me" says the psalmist (Psa. 69:9). Beyond the problem of undeserved suffering in the lives of the righteous, the Old Testament perceives the mystery of suffering endured for the sake of righteousness. For his righteousness Abel is killed, Joseph is sold into slavery. Moses is threatened with stoning, and David, the Lord's anointed, is outlawed in the wilderness. The theme finds ritual expression in the sacrifice of a perfect lamb for the sin-offering. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah reflects both the righteous Servant theme (especially with Moses in view) and the theme of the sin-bearing sacrifice.

Yet the wonder of this Suffering Servant theme lies in the union of the Servant with the Lord who sends him. This Servant does not remonstrate with God as Job did; he silently endures outrage and anguish, knowing that it pleased the Lord to bruise him and put him

to grief. The Lord and the Servant alike rejoice in the outcome of the travail of his soul "by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; and he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:11).

How can the disfiguring anguish of the chosen Servant become a hymn of salvation? Because of the wonder of the Servant's consecration; and because of the wonder of God's grace.

When God calls his servants to bear reproach for his sake he reveals also the love of his own longsuffering mercy. From the depths of the Old Testament there flows like a river of life from the throne of God the stream of divine compassion. It shines through the figures of the shepherd, the lover and husband, the father, — and even the vine-dresser as they describe God's care for his people. It appears at Maasah-Meribah where the people charged God with covenant breaking. God himself appears before Moses in the place of the accused and receives the smiting of judgment. The Rock on which God stands and which symbolizes his presence and his name is struck by the rod of Moses to bring forth the water of life to Israel. The people, not the Lord, have broken the covenant, but when they demand a trial, he bears the judgment.

At Mount Moriah, too, God's love is symbolized. Abraham is spared the offering of his beloved son Isaac, for God provides a ram in his place. Yet the oracular ambiguity of the name "Jehovah-Jireh" suggests more. "God will see for himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son," says Abraham. "He (God) that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all," testifies the Apostle Paul (Rom. 8:32).

"In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them . . . and carried them all the days of old" (Isa. 63:9).

When Jesus comes as the true shepherd who gives his life for the sheep, he manifests the mystery of the divine love. He is the beloved Son of the Father, the true Isaac; the smitten Rock (I Cor. 10:4).

His compassion joins him with the suffering people; it motivates his healing and teaching ministry. His hand of compassion leads the blind, touches the leper, raises the dead. His eye of compassion sees the multitude as sheep without a shepherd. Ministering among the sick at Capernaum, he "himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses" as the Gospel testifies (Matt. 8:17). His vicarious suffering endured the misery of affliction as well as the judgment of sin, and he endured personally and willingly — "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1).

In the parable of the "Good Samaritan," Jesus taught that the love of the kingdom is the love of compassion. Confronted with the law of love to God and to one's neighbor, the lawyer has asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

That question revealed the lawyer's misconception of God's law. Love must not draw boundaries to minimize its obligation, for love must be modeled on God's love — the love of compassion by which God sent his only begotten Son into the world. "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love" (I John 4:8). To refuse to minister mercy where God offers opportunity is to deny the saving love of the Father and the compassion of the Son.

At the Cross the love of God triumphs through suffering. The actuality of Christ's atonement excludes sentimental dilution of the love of God. The troubling of Christ's soul as he took the cup of suffering witnesses to the reality of his sin-bearing in his once-for-all sacrifice (John 12:27; Heb. 10:10). In that transaction "he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Cor. 5:21). His prayer as he came to the Cross was not that he might be delivered from this hour (the prayer of the afflicted psalmists), but rather, "Father, glorify thy name!" (John 12:28). Christ's prayer was heard and answered. God's name was hallowed in the justice of Calvary; God's name was hallowed in the love of Calvary. Beyond our expressing is the price of the Cross — the price the Son paid as he gave his life a ransom for many; the price the Father paid when he gave his only begotten Son. All our problems with suffering are overcome by the mystery of that divine sacrifice. Hear again the cry of the beloved Son from the Cross. "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" Hear, too, from the darkness the silence of the Father while the soldiers prepare a sponge of vinegar.

The compassion of Calvary is God's answer to human suffering. The doom of suffering is inevitable and just, for the wages of sin is death, and man is a rebel not a victim. But God provided a victim, the only sufferer without sin, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The finished sacrifice of Calvary redeems the people of God, but Calvary does not end Christ's ministry of mercy. The risen Christ remains a priest forever, and because his priesthood is unchanging he continues to be "touched with the feeling of our infirmity" (Heb. 4:15). His heavenly priesthood shows the same compassion that moved him in the streets of Capernaum.

c. *The suffering church* — Only in the perspective of Calvary can the calling of the church to suffer be understood. When James and John asked for places of honor in Christ's glory, Jesus promised them rather a portion of his cup of suffering and his baptism of agony (Mark 10:35-40). He called his disciples to take up a cross and follow him (Luke 9:23) and blessed those who would be persecuted for his name's sake (Matt. 5:11).

The sequence of sufferings first and glory to follow was the pattern of Christ's own ministry (Luke 24:26; I Pet. 1:11; Heb. 2:9, 10), and it must be the pattern for the ministry of his disciples (Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; I Pet. 4:13). The apostle warned new converts that "through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Not only is apocalyptic tribulation to precede the return of Christ (Matt. 24:29-31), but suffering marks faithfulness to Christ when "ye shall be hated of all the nations for my name's sake" (Matt. 24:9). "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (II Tim. 3:12).

The ordeal of suffering is not simply to be endured but received as a means of proving and strengthening. Christ was proved through his passion, and as the Son of God learned obedience through the things that he suffered (Heb. 5:8, 2:10). He endured fiery trial with-

out sin; sinners who have not yet resisted unto blood striving against sin must also be corrected by the chastisement of suffering, the fatherly discipline that proves them to be true sons. (Heb. 12:4, 8).

Suffering for the Christian is also a means of witness. Paul's calling includes not only the commission to bear the Lord's name before Gentiles and kings but also "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). The apostles rejoice that they are "counted worthy to suffer dishonor for his name" (Acts 5:41). The Old Testament theme of the righteous sufferer, now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, has new meaning and depth. Those who suffer for righteousness' sake sanctify in their hearts Christ as Lord (I Pet. 4:14, 15); they rejoice in their abiding possession (Heb. 10:34) and future glory (Rom. 8:18; II Cor. 4:17); they know that the trial of their faith works patience and hope (I Pet. 1:6, 7; Rom. 5:3, 4). But above all they rejoice with the apostles that they are made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and men (I Cor. 4:9) for Christ's sake (II Cor. 12:10).

At the heart of Christian joy in suffering is the deepening of fellowship with Christ that suffering provides. "We suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Rom. 8:17). Paul also writes, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. 3:10). Here the apostle is thinking of Christ's righteousness that is his by faith (v. 9) and of the application to his own life of the liberation from sin wrought by Christ's death. But he also has in view that his identification with Christ in his death has required that he suffer the loss of all things (v. 8). Because he has died with Christ, he dies daily for Christ (I Cor. 15:31), and desires only that "Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death" (Phil. 1:20). Paul speaks of his sufferings as the "sufferings of Christ" in the sense of Christian sufferings, suffering for Christ's sake (II Cor. 1:5-7), but these sufferings are borne in fellowship with Christ. (How close the two themes are appears in I Peter 4:12-16.) The apostle can rejoice in his sufferings as completing that which is lacking in the full amount of affliction for Christ. That is his own calling on behalf of the church (Col. 1:24). Suffering intensifies the bond of fellowship with Christ and with the church. In suffering the love of God is "poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit . . . for while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly..." (Rom. 5:5, 6).

Christ's sufferings and death also transform the ministry of the church. Paul sees his own experiences in suffering as well as his experience of God's comfort as aiding him in ministering comfort to the afflicted (II Cor. 1:3-6). Christians who remember the thirst of Christ's anguish on the Cross are bound by his love to give a cup of cold water in his name (Mark 9:41). The other side of Christian fellowship that Christians have with Christ in his suffering is the fellowship Christ has with Christians in theirs. When Saul persecutes the church he persecutes Christ (Acts 9:4); when men minister to Christ's brethren who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or imprisoned, they minister to Christ himself (Matt. 25:31-46). The relief of need among

the brethren became a distinguishing mark of the apostolic church, binding together rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, bond and free in the sharing of possessions so that none would lack the necessities of life or the ministry of love (Acts 4:32-35; Rom. 15:26, 27).

d. *The Gospel in the suffering world* — In the suffering world the Church of Jesus Christ preaches his passion, his resurrection, and the hope of his *parousia*. To preach the Cross is to reprove the wisdom of men even as they describe their own plight. The Gospel confronts the man made in God's image with the profound depth of his misery before God. That realization comes not from the analysis of suffering but from the revelation of the living God.

Apart from that revelation all the options of human speculation about suffering are fatally flawed. In the Confucian tradition a moralistic theme of due reward and punishment in this life is modified by insight into the educational value of suffering. The law of karma in the Hindu tradition binds suffering to a strict causality operating through successive reincarnations. Buddhism would break the chain of suffering by subduing desires. The ancient dualism of Zoroastrian religion explains suffering in the conflict of the ultimate light and darkness.

Modern mythologies struggle to open a door of hope for the despair of alienated man. Marxists proclaim the economic root of misery, neo-Freudians trace misery to repression, and Darwin still has followers who preach the inevitable agony of the evolutionary process.

All these views of suffering fail to express the seriousness of man's misery before the holy, living God. Far less can they express the mystery of the suffering Savior on the Cross. Paul was resolved to know nothing but Christ crucified, closing his mind against all temptations to lessen the offense of the Gospel by compromising the message of the Cross.

Today we must cling to the Cross to be faithful to men in their misery and to God in his love. The new political gospel takes away the centrality of the Cross. Politically the Cross was foolishness. The theologians of political liberation must therefore leave the Cross behind to discover what the "politician God" is up to as he works in contemporary history to advance the revolution.

We must cling to the Cross, too, when men would destroy its centrality by reducing substitutionary atonement to one theory among many describing reconciliation. The biblical doctrine of the atonement is not a "contextual" theology offering a culture-bound interpretation of an ineffable event. It is the message that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:3). The God who gave his Son gave the meaning of his sacrifice in the words of his apostles and prophets.

The Gospel of Christ crucified cuts across the theories of the sinner's darkened mind to meet the need of his rebellious heart. It is the power of God to salvation. We must neither conceal it nor minimize it. Our concern must be to proclaim the whole counsel of God, including the "hard sayings" of Jesus about his sacrificial death and the Father's sovereign drawing of men (John 6:26-65). Man-centered theology puts God in debt to man, and demands universalism

if there is to be salvation. God-centered theology bows with the Apostle Paul before the sovereignty of God in salvation, and marvels at his grace.

But to preach the Cross in its offense could become a frightening caricature if the *love* of the Cross were not proclaimed in the compassion of Christ. In a suffering world Christians both proclaim and manifest present salvation and joy in Christ. The new life that can rejoice in suffering finds expression in a new community where all are ministers of mercy in Christ's name. When that ministry fails in the church its witness to the world is jeopardized.

The vivid reality of the Christian *hope* is equally vital in a world of war, famine, and despair. The church awaits not the grinding of cosmic process but the coming of the risen Lord who already fills all things with his power and will subdue all things to himself. The cosmic power and purpose of the Lord of glory frees the Christian to serve God in this groaning creation, even as he tastes in the Spirit the powers of the age to come. The redeemer is the Creator, the Lord, the Spirit.

The life of the Spirit is the fountain of joy for the church's ministry in a suffering world. The comfort and encouragement, the tenderness and power, the burden-bearing sharing of the Spirit, these are the spiritual gifts that ministry to suffering requires.

The true comprehensiveness of salvation is the fullness of the Spirit's work in the church by which the saints are rooted in the love of Christ and grow to minister in his name, working that which is good "unto all men, and especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

As the opportunity is given in our time of famine and need, the church must show the compassion of Christ to the world. The genuineness of deeds as well as words, of sacrifice to care for the forgotten will manifest the reality of the love of Christ. A renewed diaconate must manifest continuous rather than sporadic concern; the fellowship of the ministry of the Word and of tables reflects the permanent structure of office in Christ's Church. As the risen Lord bears in his body the marks of his sufferings, so must the Church, his body, bear the marks of Jesus (Gal. 6:17) not only by suffering in his name, but by ministering in his compassion to an afflicted and guilty world.

## MAN'S DILEMMA OF SIN AND SUFFERING

*Chairman: D. Pantupong*

*Secretary: D. Penney*

### 1. Major points of agreement

a. The depth and meaning of human suffering can be understood only in terms of man's relation to the living God. The doom and dread of suffering in God's wrath is inescapable and final. Salvation from suffering is God's promise and work, wrought through Christ's atonement. Fellowship with God in Christ transforms suffering both in its experience and its fruit.

b. The many aspects of suffering are probed in the Bible with profound realism. In prayers of anguish and in meditations of reflection, the experience of suffering is brought before God. Yet all of these aspects are taken up in the unity of God's revelation and the climax of his work of redemption in Christ. The Bible presents the origin of sin and suffering in man's first disobedience. God's initiative in grace promises salvation through suffering (Gen. 3:15). Suffering is related to the divine discipline of the covenant people as well as to the covenant curse. The suffering of the righteous is a growing theme, climaxing in the redemptive suffering of the Servant of the Lord and the promise of a new order without suffering and sin.

c. Sin must be defined in terms of the right relation to God that it rejects and perverts. Sin is alienation from God, rebellion against him, and the corruption of all of his good gifts. The sinner is in bondage not only to his own error, illusion, and idolatry, but to the powers of darkness. Suffering may be pathetic, but sin is heinous, guilty and damnable. The folly and absurdity of sin can never conceal its guilt.

No part of man's nature escapes the taint of sin or stands outside the dynamic of sin's direction against God. Only salvation by God's grace can provide the new birth of the Spirit and the total reversal of direction that breaks the dominion of sin in the heart of man.

e. No part of mankind escapes the condemnation of God's righteousness. All are guilty, deserving God's wrath; the death penalty is pronounced against all. They are guilty in Adam's first transgression; they participate in progressive abandonment of God, and are abandoned by God in judgment.

f. Religious and cultural achievements reflect to some degree not only that man is made in God's image, but also that God's grace restrains human corruption. But the religion and culture of fallen man do not escape from the apostate direction of his rebellious heart. Indeed, man's spiritual iniquity gives the deepest expression to his sin. Man's religions, in distinction from the true worship of the living God, seek to do away with God, not to seek his face.

g. Salvation is not only God's gift, but God's own presence and fellowship. It is the bond that joins the redeemed to the Redeemer. Neither a "theology of liberation" nor a "theology of creation" can be isolated from the theocentric core of biblical salvation. God's delivering, healing, leading, proving, chastening, and blessing are