

Suffering: *Personal Experience and Reflections* | BY IVAN T. BLAZEN



T rue enough, life presents us with good moments when we experience love and joy, beauty and refreshment, but like a thread running through all our days is what Paul calls “the sufferings of the present time” (Rom. 8:17).¹ M. Scott Peck gives expression to this in a now-famous dictum at the beginning of his book, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*.² He solemnly intones, “Life is difficult.” Indeed it is.

In terms of my own experience, it is difficult to lose a father—his name was Matthew—to a massive gangrene-producing heart attack; to watch him suffer excruciating pain and fast-dwindling reserves of life over a period of three weeks, and finally die. It is difficult to lose a brother, another Matthew, to the effects of alcohol; to watch him hemorrhage profusely and die with my hands hold-

ing him as he scrunched up his face, breathed his last, and took leave of life. It is also difficult to lose a wife to breast cancer, to watch her on a downward spiral toward death over the course of a year and a half.

And it is difficult beyond measure to marry again, and in the first few days, receive the unbelievable message that just as my new wife had lost her first husband to a massive heart attack less than two years before, she had now lost a beautiful sixteen-year-old daughter and a wonderful nineteen-year-old son in a tragic automobile accident on the way, and almost there, to Grandma’s house. A husband and now her only children, gone, wiped out. A Job-like reversal of fortune with a new set of children could not make up for such a loss as this. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1).

These incidents do not even begin to measure the volume and intensity of experiences that bring on pain, suffering, and death. But they, along with encounters with others who suffer, and reflection on the whole issue, lead to the question: What can be learned from suffering? I offer a number of my own personal observations.

Learning from Suffering

No Quota on Suffering

First, I would affirm that there is no such thing as a quota of suffering, so that one could say, “I have suffered enough”; as if God says to Job, “Thus far and no further.” Job’s “no further” included everything he ever possessed and loved, and all that was left was his own wretched existence and a body headed straight to the grave. As for “Thus far, no further,” the agonizing question mounting up to the throne of God itself, is: If no further, why so far in the first place? I conclude that there really is no quota when it comes to suffering.

A mother-in-law. The losses that my new wife endured were not hers alone, but also those of her mother-in-law, who lost not only her son and his two children, but before that had lost also her daughter and her two children, when their lives were burned away in a fire. All this was followed by the suffering and death of her husband from Alzheimer's disease, an agony she witnessed over a long period of time.

A woman at a campmeeting. Then there was the woman I met at a campmeeting. She had lost nine members of her family—her husband and eight children—to disease, accidents, and murder. There is no limit. We have a mystery before us. But that mystery to which we are all connected can, if thought and prayed about, lead us to more sensitivity and tenderness—tenderness toward those who suffer before our very eyes. It can make us all better caregivers.

No Respect of Persons in Suffering

In the second place, I believe there is no respect of persons when it comes to suffering. It comes to all alike, the righteous as well as the unrighteous. In view of this, we must surely avoid the too frequently held opinion that those who suffer must have done something wrong, and God is punishing them for it. True, bad habits can lead to disease, but the factors that dispose one to disease and hurt are so much broader than this. It is much better to see in every person a child of God. If the suffering person feels that caring attitude directed toward them by others, a new peace and healing of the spirit, and even in some measure, the body, may result.

No Discontinuation of the Laws of Nature

Thirdly, it becomes clear that notwithstanding their sometimes negative consequences for human life, God does not suspend or destroy the laws governing the world, such as cause and effect, gravity, and so on, as well as such entities in the world as bacteria and parasites, which like human beings, have both positive

and negative potentialities. These all play a role in the drama of life. Without the laws of nature, for example, there would be no stability in the world, no possibility for science or for that research whereby disease might be studied, controlled or cured, and pain eased. It is appropriate, therefore, to thank God for the good order of Creation, even as we face what is painful, and when there is no miracle.

Generally, No Direct, Miraculous Intervention by God

The previous observation about the continuance of basic laws and realities in the world is fundamental to what I say now. Generally, there is no direct miraculous intervention by God. Hospitals and clinics would be out of business if there were. God does not answer all our prayers for healing with yes, despite biblical statements that may seem to affirm an almost ready-made yes. This raises the question of how God's power is manifested in the world, and whether our availability as healing persons, and our developing knowledge and expertise, constitute main loci of God's saving activity. If God does not regularly work directly or miraculously, then does he work through processes and persons in the world? Persons like all of us, who are here today? I say yes.

I teach a course called "Medicine, Humanity and God" to first-year medical students. At the beginning of the course, I write the title of the course on the board, and point out to the students that humanity is the middle term. Then, I draw a cupped arrow from medicine to humanity, showing medicine's interest in the healing of humanity. Next, I draw a cupped arrow from God to humanity, showing that God likewise is interested in the healing of humanity. Last, I draw a long, broad arrow from medicine to God, suggesting that medicine and God are partners in the work of healing in the world. I believe it is of the greatest significance that all of us who care about people see ourselves in this partnership with God. This cannot help but affect the personal and spiritual quality of the

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care we give, especially in a person's last days.

A sense of God's loving presence, mediated through a caring person who knows they are in the employ of the God of redemptive love, is just what a sufferer needs. It is as in the book and film, *Dead Man Walking*. The Catholic nun says to the young, soon-to-be-executed prisoner, whom she has visited many times, "The last face I want you to see is the face of love," in this case, her face. As human faces are bearers of the face of love, they are also bearers of the face of God.

Generally, No Divine Interference in Human Decisions

As we think further, just as the laws of nature are not suspended, so also the freely willed decisions of people are not obstructed. God is so interested that people freely embrace the good that he is the guarantor of freedom, even when that freedom may be misused. People may make choices that are contrary to current and available health knowledge, and may refuse both medical advice and treatment. God respects this freedom; so should we, his children.

God Does Not Prevent Health Care Professionals from Making Mistakes

As God does not block people from making poor choices, so he does not prevent health care professionals from making mistakes.

Though my first wife had a very strong family history of breast cancer, her gynecologist, a very genial and good man, did not order a mammogram for a period of eight years. He did so only when there was a discharge from one breast, and this was largely to calm us down. I can still hear his words, "I don't think there is a serious problem here, but if it will make you feel better, let's do a mammogram." When calcium deposits were reported in the breast, he once again gave us assurances that this probably was nothing to worry about. But since he wanted to make us feel better, as before, he then sent us to a surgeon for a biopsy. The rest of the story is history with a fatal ending.

God does not prevent these mistakes or mis-

judgments as a matter of course. However, an attitude of humble dependence upon God and constant prayer for his guidance and insight, along with continued study and consultation with others in the community of God's caregivers, might minimize some of these mistakes.

Importance of Developing Spiritual Resources Before Suffering Hits

Now, turning to a different kind of observation, I have found it to be true that spiritual resources gained before suffering are what sustain a person through suffering. Suffering needs to be prepared for. When the realities of suffering and loss hit, it seems that one has no resources at all, nothing to help in coping with these dark situations. But if one has been developing a connection with God and a sense of his presence and love, these will operate through the darkness to bring one's spirit through. The attitude of love and appeal to the spiritual on the part of those who minister to the dying will only enhance these resources. And if these resources have not been developed, the faith, hope, and love of those who minister can stimulate a kind of "thief-on-the-cross" experience. The thief, truly seeing Jesus and his goodness for the first time in that last moment of his life, becomes the recipient of a sustaining promise of love and life: "You shall be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Those we minister to can receive Jesus's promise from us at the end of their days.

Human Support and Identification with Sufferers is Crucial

All of this means, therefore, that human support and identification with suffering people is absolutely crucial. Though sufferers need spiritual resources from God in heaven, they need God's people on earth to identify with their pain, suffering, and fear. They need healing people who are willing to suffer with them. Interestingly, the word "compassion" means "feeling with," hence, "identifying with," and is the ultimate form of empathy. It is incarnation, and its model is Jesus.

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Romans 8:17. There is a curious statement about Jesus and us in Romans 8:17. Paul says that since we are God's children, we are heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided "we suffer with him in order that we also may be glorified with him." In order to be a part of the glorified world, the world that is coming, this text says that we are called to suffer with Jesus in this world. What might this mean? I am led to this application of the text: we can suffer from the hurtful things of this life, the "slings of outrageous fortune," but according to Paul it is not what we suffer from, but who we suffer with, that qualifies us for a part in God's new world. Suffering with Jesus is what makes this possible. To suffer with Jesus is not only to identify with his personal suffering, noting for example his pain upon the cross. Rather, it is to identify with his cause and enterprise. What he suffered for is what we need to be into. Who can fail to be moved by the portrait of the suffering servant of God in Isaiah 53, a depiction that the New Testament applies to Jesus, when it says in verse 4, "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." To suffer with Jesus is to suffer with those who suffer. To suffer with Jesus is to have our cheeks wet with the tears of those who cry out in pain, loss, and the frightening prospect of the future. We come so close to them that we bear their griefs and carry their sorrows. What a privilege to do so!

A caring surgeon. I learned something about identification when my first wife died. I wanted to spend time with her in the hospital room

where she lay. The surgeon who had operated on her took me to the place. I expected to be there alone, but when I walked into the room, the surgeon walked in with me. When I moved to one end of her bed, he moved to the other. When I drew closer, he did also. When I bent down, he bent down. He was my alter ego. He had worked so hard with her just before she died to dislodge a clot in her pulmonary artery. Now, he worked to identify with me. He suffered with Jesus by suffering with me. In identifying with the person whose time is short, we help to ease their emotional pain and make them ready for what is to come—ready not merely for death, but to meet the Author of Life.

A cancer victim. Some years ago, a dear and longtime ministerial friend and I were summoned to anoint a physician who had suffered for over twenty years from cancer in her jaw and face, and from all the unsuccessful surgeries to halt its growth. The most recent surgery, at first thought to have finally done the trick, also proved to be futile. Now, in harmony with scripture, she called us for anointing. I feared the event, for I thought if our prayers and touching her with oil in the name of Jesus did not bear the fruit of healing, she might despair and grow weak in faith. I was extremely concerned about this. What she said when we arrived, however, healed me of my fear. What she wanted from us was to gain assurance that she was ready to meet God. This is what all those we care about need as well in their final days.

A student with Lou Gehrig's disease. A while back I visited a long-ago student of mine after he learned that he had Lou Gehrig's disease, which was advancing swiftly. He was a brilliant person who would have made uncommon achievements if he had not had horrendous physical and emotional suffering along life's way. He called me to come, not for an anointing, but to help him avoid bitterness against life and God. What a privilege to be in a place where my friend would expose his wounds to me. It was difficult to keep from crying with him, but perhaps being with him in his agony brought him some peace and

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softening of his just resentment. I certainly hope so. I believe that all of us are called to identify with those who are victims of life's cruelty. The boomerang of love and compassion will return to us as well in our afflictions.

An oncologist at Michael Reese Hospital. I can still hear the voice of our Jewish oncologist at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago during a telephone conversation. When he heard that my first wife, who had just had the last of many surgeries, now had cancer of the lung, he shouted "No!" I had shouted it myself, but to hear his "No!" gripped my soul redemptively. It was a shout of identification that said, "I hurt, for I really care." Paul is right; we are called to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15), and by doing so, to suffer with Jesus.

Suffering Not Caused by God, but Used by God for Good

A father. My reflections on suffering lead me to the further consideration that while God is not the cause of our suffering, he may use it for good. Years ago, my father went back to Croatia to visit his homeland. While there, he had a severe heart attack. I was able to get there in time to spend ten days with him before he died. One could think that his sufferings were meaningless; that no good could come from such an experience. Not so!

I was reading a book in the intensive care unit late one evening. A nurse was there, reading as well, and I asked her what she was reading. She responded, "I'm reading a novel." I

asked, "Is it good?" She replied, "Yes, it's very good. What are you reading?" I had a thick, heavy, complicated tome on justification by faith, and didn't know how to describe it. So I said, "Well, I am reading a book about the goodness of God." Her surprising response was, "God is not good. I am good!" What she meant became clear in that context: "Here I am doing all I can for these people who are critically ill, but what is God doing?"

It was a just reflection on her part, but before I got to Croatia, God had already been doing something in my father's situation. Christians of my own faith, which my father had resented bitterly when I, as a teenager, converted from Catholicism to Adventism, were ministering to him. A husband and wife visited him. They brought him food, which he could not eat, and drink, which he could only take a little of. They touched him, lifted him up, put him down, turned him over, and talked to him about God's love. When I arrived, one of the first things my father said to me was, "If they make people like this, then I want to be a part of this people. If I live to get out of this hospital, I want to be baptized into this people." My father was moved by the love of those Adventist Christians in Croatia, and gave his heart to God. He died in the peace of a new relationship with God. God may not save us from suffering, but he does often work in our suffering to bring about good.

A brother. My brother experienced a similar situation as he lay dying in a coma—the result of alcoholism. Contrary to all expectations, he awoke. During this brief period of lucidity, I was granted the opportunity of talking with him about the love, forgiveness, and kingdom of God. In the strongest terms he expressed his sorrow for his misdirected life, and his desire for forgiveness and entrée into God's kingdom. When the darkness returned, he was ready to meet his Creator and Lord. Providence had granted him an opportunity to gain a new vision of himself, and a new possibility for the future.

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The Encouragement of the Biblical Vision of Eschatological Hope

The future. My last reflection is about hope. In 1 Corinthians 15:19, Paul says that if the hope of believers extends no further than the borders of this life, then we are of all people in a most pitiable condition. However, this chapter makes clear that the resurrection of Jesus is the promise of the resurrection of all. As Paul says, “Each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (15:23). I am grateful for this promise of the future, when in a twinkling of an eye we shall be changed and death will be swallowed up in victory. “Pie in the sky by and by,” a sometimes-maligned idea, is a meaningful correlate of the death and resurrection of Christ, which the apostle underlines as being of “first importance” (15:3–4).

The present. Their importance has to do with the present as well as the future. When for Jesus’s sake we go through the sufferings of the present time, the death and resurrection of Jesus are at work in us, and it is the power of the resurrection that gets us through. We may note the following comparisons in 2 Corinthians 4:7–12:

Death of Christ	Risen Life of Christ
4:8 We are afflicted in every way,	but not crushed;
perplexed,	but not driven to despair;
4:9 persecuted,	but not forsaken;
struck down,	but not destroyed;
4:10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,	so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.
4:11 We are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake,	so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.
4:12 So death is at work in us,	but life in you.

The climax of Paul’s thought in this passage comes in verses 14–17:

14 We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. . . . 16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. 17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.

Last words. When my wife, after her last surgery, opened her eyes on Saturday morning, she asked the nurse what day it was. The nurse, an Adventist, answered, “It is the Sabbath.” My wife’s words, her last in this world, were, “Oh, Sabbaths will be nice in heaven.” It was then that a clot blocked her pulmonary artery, and her breathing stopped. I am glad for our hope for the future, which God alone can give, which the resurrection of Christ assures, and to which scripture strongly testifies. ■

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References

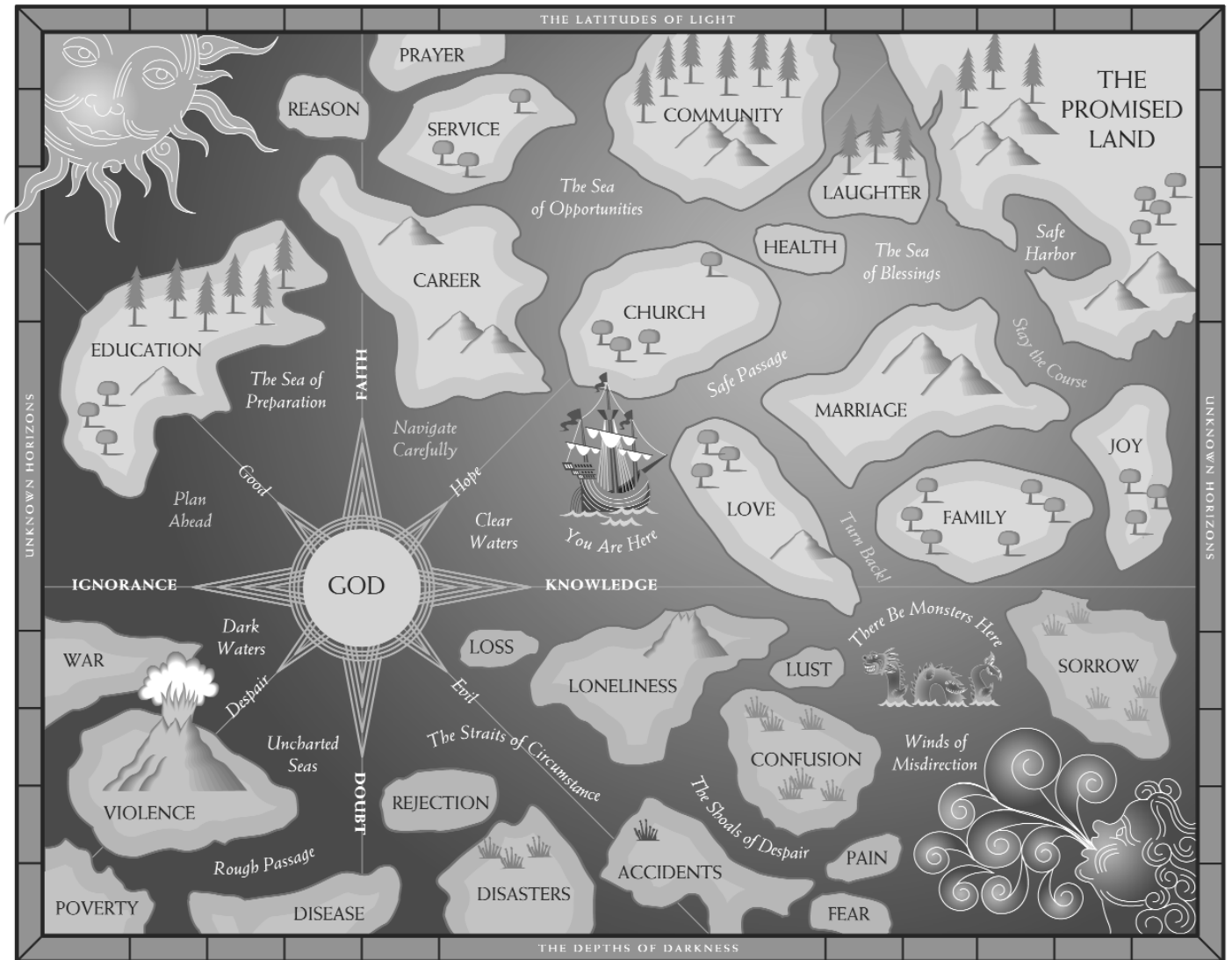
1. All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1988).

A note about the illustrations in this section:

William Blake (1757–1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. In 1826, he completed a series of twenty-two engraved prints using the intaglio method of engraving, illustrating the biblical Book of Job, which was published by John Linell.

**He suffered
with Jesus
by suffering
with me.**

A Map of Life with God as Our Compass | ILLUSTRATION BY MAX SEABAUGH



A theodicy is a kind of map. Its purpose is to locate our suffering on the landscape of human experience and help us find a way through it. —Richard Rice