

# THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HUMAN SUFFERING

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*Pain alone does not bring sense to life. Pain alone does not reveal the meaning of history. Pain alone does not ennoble humanity. And pain alone does not make the present worth living. There must be, besides pain, hope. There must be, besides the present, a future. There must be, besides one dreadful destruction after another, one joyful construction after another. Life is a race against pain.(1)*

Who can say that suffering itself is not a destructive force? Evidence of this can be found everywhere. From daily newspapers and television programs one can discover cases of people who give up their lives simply because they cannot face unbearable anguish and overwhelming suffering. Pain sometimes renders reality unintelligible to a person. When suffering, a person may be unable to perceive life as valuable and the world around him as lovable. The most spontaneous reaction to suffering is to escape from it or to eliminate it. In order to escape suffering, how many times have people done silly things and how many times have they made wrong decisions?! Suffering is definitely not welcomed by human beings. For this reason, people who accept suffering and are not scandalized by it, are always respected as 'heroes.' If such people are Christians, they may be considered 'saints.'

The reason suffering Christians are respected as saints is not only because they have so clearly manifested the virtue of perseverance in their suffering, but also because the face of the suffering Jesus is revealed through them. They suffer like Jesus Christ. Human nature injured by sin is too weak to meet the challenge of suffering. It nearly always fails. If Christians do not lose the battle against suffering, it must be that the Risen Christ, the Supreme Power, fights the battle in them, for them, and with them. That is why St. Paul said: "We are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us."(2) In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul obviously placed Jesus Christ at the centre of

human suffering. Jesus Christ not only is the source of our strength, his attitude towards suffering is also a model for Christians.

This article is an attempt to elaborate the relationship between Jesus' passion and human suffering, so that the significance of human suffering can be understood better in the light of Jesus' passion.

### 1) Jesus' Outlook on Suffering:

How does Jesus himself view suffering? Jesus considers suffering as 'temptation.' According to the episode of the agony in Gethsemani in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus told the three disciples (Peter, James, and John), to "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."(3) It is not by coincidence that all three Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) put Jesus' words at the beginning of the passion narrative. Evidently, they want to indicate the connection between 'suffering' and 'temptation.' Aware of the heartbreaking suffering of crucifixion coming near, Jesus invited the beloved disciples to keep watch and pray with him, so that they 'may not fall into temptation.' However, the three disciples fell asleep, they were not able to keep watch even for a few moments, consequently they all entered into the temptation of suffering. Suffering is a temptation which is not easy to overcome. In the face of suffering, Peter retracted his assertions and denied Jesus three times. The disciples were frightened and fled from the Cross. Judas even gave up his life in the dark shadow of the Cross. In suffering, the weakness and limitations of human nature are totally exposed. Like a dagger, suffering pierces the depths of human nature and lays bare the most secret 'self' of man. During suffering, all kinds of tragic things, such as complaint, division, going back on one's promise, betraying friends, destroying one's own life, can happen. Suffering becomes a destructive force when a person is not able to accept it. Considering the sinful nature of man, suffering cannot be understood, accepted, and especially cannot be overcome by human power alone, but only through God's assisting grace. Therefore, St. Paul said: "Such supreme power does not come from us, but from God."(4) In suffering if we have anything to boast of, we can only boast of our weakness, as St. Paul said: "So I shall be very happy to make my weakness my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, and that is why I am quite content with my weakness, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong."(5)

In a word, from the passion narrative, especially the episode of the agony in Gethsemane, and from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we understand that the power to go through and to overcome agony and suffering comes from God, not from us.

## 2) Suffering As a Gracious Gift:

When we say that suffering is a gift, we do not mean that suffering is from God. Suffering always comes from the imperfection, limitation, ignorance, and sin of man. Sometimes it also comes from the injustices of social structures and the evil or corruption of political systems. Nevertheless, for Christians, suffering is a gift because the Risen Christ is present in the midst of human suffering. He is labouring in us and with us in order to help overcome our suffering. It is God's presence in human suffering that makes it become constructive rather than destructive to human life. It is the gracious presence of God that gives us hope in all kinds of disastrous situations. Without the Cross, the mystery of human suffering cannot be penetrated. In the light of the Cross, St. Paul fully comprehends that Jesus Christ is at the centre of human suffering. He is the power, strengthening Christians in all miserable conditions. Because God is present in human suffering, suffering becomes a gift. It is a gracious gift because God's presence itself is not merited by man; we do not deserve it. On the contrary, God enters into human suffering before man can take any initiative or make petitions to him. Everything appears to be different when God's presence is apprehended by man. Life, in spite of its hardships and agonies, is worth living; pain becomes bearable. By accepting and experiencing suffering, man grows in wisdom. Going through suffering with Jesus Christ, Christians will finally discover that the Lord is very close to them and almost identifies with them in suffering.

### A. The Interpretation of Jesus' Passion in Traditional Soteriology:

Traditional soteriology points out that Jesus' suffering is a gracious gift to man by using the biblical terms 'for' man or 'on behalf of' man. According to the fourth Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, Messiah is described as "a man bearing our sufferings and carrying our sorrows." "He was pierced through for our faults and crushed for our sin." (cf. Isaiah 53: 4-5) The idea of suffering for man can also be found in the New Testament. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' suffering is portrayed as 'ransom' which is paid for our debt. (cf. the synoptic Gospels; I Cor. 15:3) However, the traditional soteriology of vicariousness leaves some questions unanswered, as C.S. Song puts it:

*Thus vicariousness has become essential in the Christian understanding and experience of God's salvation. But the fact is that we continue to sin and are victims of a sinful world. We still live in the world in which there seems to be no end to suffer-*

*ing and death. The vicarious suffering of Jesus Christ has not done away with our sufferings and death. The doctrine of Christ's vicarious suffering leaves therefore a great gap between life as it is at present with its hopes frustrated, its dreams shattered, and the fulfillment of these hopes and dreams in the future. From the standpoint of Christian faith, how are we to account for the endless suffering in the world and the inevitable death that puts an end to our earthly existence?(6)*

If Jesus' suffering does not eliminate the present suffering and death of man, what is the meaning of his passion for man? In order to answer this question, a Christology of the suffering Jesus is being developed in Asia today.

#### B. A Christology of the Resurrected-Suffering Christ:

This newly developing Christology stresses that the Risen Christ constantly enters into human suffering in order to help man overcome suffering and death. He is labouring with man, in man, and for man. Jesus neither eliminates all human suffering immediately by his own suffering, nor does he tell mankind how to escape from it. Rather, he teaches people to accept and overcome suffering. This theology does not separate the Passion from the Incarnation. Jesus Christ incarnates into human suffering and death so deeply that the suffering and death of man is transformed into eternal joy and life. God is love and only the transforming power of love can overcome suffering and death. This transforming power of love breaks the impasse of the Cross. Therefore, what is important is the transforming love, not the suffering itself. Jesus' suffering has shown us a way to overcome suffering; that is, love for God and our neighbour. If you love, you will be able to endure suffering like Jesus Christ.

The more deeply we accept a reality, the more we can change it. Jesus accepted his suffering so deeply that he could change the whole reality of human suffering. For Christians, the power transforming suffering and death is not from us, but from God; therefore, we need to pray for it. We also need to keep watch in order that we will not fall into the 'temptation' of suffering, and that every time suffering is overcome we will not forget that it is God's power working in us, and that it is a gift! If there is anything to boast of in our suffering, it can only be to boast of the powerful presence of Jesus Christ in our suffering.

Suffering is a gift, not a 'right.' Except for Jesus Christ, nobody

should use suffering as a reason to claim compensation or prerogative. For it is by God's assisting grace that we are able to overcome suffering.

As a matter of fact, only when Jesus Christ totally incarnates in the human condition and identifies with man, can his suffering and death genuinely be 'for' man and 'on behalf of' man. The soteriology of identification does not deny the vicarious suffering of Christ. It deepens the classical soteriology of vicariousness by developing the idea that God is present in human suffering. Since the Risen Lord is suffering in us, with us, for us, and on behalf of us, with St. Paul we can say: "We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed; always, wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body."(7)

### 3) The Significance of Human Suffering:

Salvation comes to the world through Jesus' death on the cross. This salvation is concretely expressed in the reconciliation between God and man and among men themselves. Classical soteriologies formerly put their emphasis on the vertical reconciliation between God and man. For instance, one ancient theory explained that all sinners were subject to the devil and alienated from God. According to this theory, the suffering of Jesus was a 'ransom' which was paid to the devil for the liberation of man and the re-establishment of the relationship with God. Another theory considered that the obedience of Jesus on the cross deeply moved the indignant God, so that God forgave man for the sake of his beloved Son. No matter what interpretations are given to the historical event of the cross, they seek to articulate the truth that through the suffering of Jesus, man is reconciled with God.

Today's theology considers that the reconciliation of men among themselves should also be emphasized; this horizontal reconciliation is also an effect of Jesus' passion. When Jesus walked on the earth, he constantly taught his disciples to forgive. On the cross, he completely expressed his forgiving love for man. Jesus was vulnerable. With his heart wide open, he totally accepted man in spite of his pain and deep wound. Without this forgiving love and vulnerability, reconciliation cannot be achieved. The suffering of the Christian continues the suffering of Jesus on the cross (as St. Paul said). Christians are invited to participate in Jesus' work of redemption through their own suffering. If Jesus' suffering aims at the reconciliation of God and man and of men among themselves, the goal of the Christian's suffering should be the same.

Today many Christians in the Church are undergoing different kinds of suffering, especially the Christians in China (both members and non-

members of the Patriotic Association). Christians must not let their sufferings, endured with great fortitude, be fruitless and wasted. The sufferings of Christians everywhere must bring reconciliation to the Church and to the world. Our wounds are for the healing of the world. Jesus said: "From the fruit, you can tell the tree." From the consequences of our suffering, we can discern whether our suffering is a part of Jesus' suffering. If our suffering brings forth reconciliation in the Church and in the world, that is a sign that God is present in our suffering. All Christians, if they recognize the fact of suffering in their lives, should refrain from "letting their grace of suffering be wasted." If we are suffering for Christ, we must suffer for Him to the very end, that is, to actualize what Jesus desired in the Last Supper - becoming one in Him.(8)

However, reconciliation is not a compromise with sin. Instead, reconciliation demands repentance. Only when every man rejects sin and pursues truth in charity, can the reconciliation and unification at which Jesus' suffering aims, be actualized in the world.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. C.S. Song, The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1981, p. 29.
2. 2 Cor. 4:7a.
3. Mt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk. 22:40-46.
4. 2 Cor. 4:7b.
5. 2 Cor. 12:9-10.
6. C.S. Song, Third-Eye Theology, New York, Orbis Books, 1979, p. 165.
7. 2 Cor. 4:8-11.
8. Jn. 17:20-26.

