

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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. . . AND SUFFERED (Part 1)

In 1983 Rabbi Harold S. Kushner wrote an immensely popular book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.¹ Written in simple language, the author took human suffering very seriously and, to his credit, refused to offer glib or simplistic answers. Indeed, he was, as he painfully relates, driven to write this book because of the excruciating suffering he personally endured during the lingering illness and final death of his young son. As much as I may sympathize with Kushner in his desire to help people cope with suffering, the book is terribly flawed theologically. “God,” says Kushner “is **not** *all* powerful.” In fact, Kushner believes God to be quite limited.² Bad things happen simply because God cannot prevent them from happening. Kushner likewise does not take sin seriously. He assumes that since people are *good*, they are innocent and do not *deserve* hardship or suffering. *The Apostles’ Creed* stresses the fact that Jesus, the only Begotten Son of God, our Lord (note the emphasis on His Lordship) *suffered* under Pontius Pilate. The New Testament over and over again declares that suffering was something Jesus had to endure. Luke 9:22 tells us plainly that He *must*³ suffer many things. We later learn that this was decreed⁴ (Luke 22:22). In other words, it was His vocation that He should suffer. It is important to note that our Lord did not view His suffering as coming from the arbitrary hand of fate or as attributed to pure chance. On the contrary, Jesus saw the hand of His Father in every aspect of life (cf. Matthew 16:21; Matthew 17:12, 22, 23; Mark 8:31, 4:12; Luke 17:25).

Calvin highlights the significance of the way Christ died. “For since by Christ’s death sins had to be wiped away and the condemnation which they deserved removed, it would not have been enough for him to suffer a different kind of death. To duly fulfill every part of our redemption, it was necessary to choose death in a form which allowed him to take upon himself our condemnation and the payment owed to God’s wrath, and to deliver us from both. To begin with, he suffered under the governor of the province, having been condemned by judicial sentence so as to free us from condemnation before the judgment seat of the sovereign Judge. If thieves had cut his throat, if he had been murdered in an affray by the hands of individuals, there would have been no semblance of satisfaction in such a death. But in that he was brought as an accused before a court of law, was denounced by witnesses and condemned by the mouth of the judge, we recognize that he appeared as a criminal. Two things should be considered here which had been foretold by the prophets, and which are particularly comforting to our faith. When we read that Christ was taken from the court to this death and hung between two thieves, there we find fulfilled the prophecy quoted by the Evangelist: *He was counted among the transgressors* (Mark 15:28; Isa. 53:12). Why was this so? It was to pay the penalty incurred by sinners and to take their place, since he clearly suffered death not for justice but for sin. On the other hand, when we read that he was absolved by the very lips which condemned him – for Pilate was forced a number of times publicly to attest his innocence – we should recall the words of another prophet: *He repaid what he did not steal* (Psa. 69:4).”⁵

The Apostle Paul instructs us that in the preaching of the Gospel we must set forth Christ as crucified (Galatians 3:1). The Lord’s table not only presents us with the bread and wine as symbols of Christ’s Body and Blood, but serves as well to proclaim the Lord’s death (1 Corinthians 11:26). What is the point? How are we to understand the New Testament when it speaks of Christ being crucified and dying for sinners?

The creed tells us He “suffered . . . was crucified, dead and buried.” Why? What did God do at the cross? What did Christ do? What did He suffer? “The Greek verb *paschō*, I suffer, occurs forty-two times; the noun *pathēma*, suffering, sixteen times, and other forms make up our total to sixty-two. The word is used for physical human suffering, e.g. in Mt. 17:15 and Mk. 5:26. But of course its primary use in the New Testament is in connection with the sufferings of Christ (twenty-eight times). We know how hard it was to make a Jew believe that the Messiah must, or even could, suffer. He was to be a glorious deliverer, above anything degrading of that sort. Hence Jesus’ strong emphasis (Mk. 8:31; Mt. 16:21; Lk. 9:22) on the necessity for His suffering: *The Son of man must suffer*. Paul describes this to Agrippa in Acts 26:23 as one of the main themes of his preaching. It had been hard even for a close disciple like Peter to accept the idea at first (see Mk. 8:32), but it was not very long before he himself was speaking of Christ’s suffering as the way by which He brought men to God (1 Pet. 3:18). How this works has never been fully explained, but the fact is that it does. Peter himself hints that simply looking at Christ’s sufferings has something to do with it (1 Pet. 5:1). Hebrews (5:8, 9) connects obedience with suffering. Christ Himself learnt obedience through suffering, and so He could offer salvation to all who obey Him. 1 Pet. 2:21 goes on to speak of Christ’s suffering as an example for us to copy in dying to self. The New Testament does not go further than this with the word *suffering*. It is in connection with Christ’s *death*, not simply with His suffering, that Paul, for example, has his deepest things to say. He uses the noun only twice, and the verb never, in speaking of Christ.”⁵

I. ***HE SUFFERED AND DIED UNDER THE JUSTICE OF GOD.*** All that the righteousness of God demanded for the broken Law, Christ satisfied. All that the Law demanded from you and me, the Lord Jesus fulfills, not only in His perfect obedience, but also in His enduring the penalty of the broken Law.

A. ***What Did God Do?*** He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16). God *set Him forth* to be a propitiation (Romans 3:25). God *spared Him not* (Romans 8:32). What the holiness and righteousness of God required against sinners, the Lord Jesus paid to the fullest. He redeemed (paid the price) us from the curse of the broken Law being made a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). The misguided notion that God forgives sin simply because He is magnanimous is contrary to Scripture. The great Reformed theologian Francis Turretin summed it up this way: “First, sin, which renders us guilty and hated of God and binds us over as debtors to punishment, may be viewed under a threefold relation (*schesei*) either as a debt, which we are bound to pay to divine justice, in which sense the law is called *a handwriting* (Col. 2:14); or as an enmity, whereby not only are we haters of God (*theostygeis*), but God himself looks upon us with hatred and indignation; or as a crime by which, before God, the supreme Ruler and Judge of the world, we become worthy of everlasting death and malediction. Hence, sinners are sometimes called *debtors* (Mt. 6:12), then *enemies [echthrois] of God* (both actively and passively, Col. 1:21), and again *guilty before God (hypodikoi to theo, Rom. 3:19)*. Hence we infer that three things were required for our redemption – the payment of the debt contracted by sin, the appeasing of divine hatred and wrath and the expiation of guilt.”⁷

II. ***HE SUFFERED AND DIED FOR SINS.*** Our passage tells us that “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” The New Testament uniformly teaches that Jesus died for sinners who need forgiveness. According to data gathered by the likes of Gallup, Barna and Harris, most people today, however, do not sense any need for forgiveness. What they want is not forgiveness but acceptance. One prominent Evangelical theologian has accented this therapeutic approach to the Gospel by attempting to recast the gospel along lines that are in harmony with modern self-esteem psychology. “If our sin is viewed as causing the death of Jesus on the cross, then we ourselves become victims of a *psychological battering* produced by the cross. When I am led to feel that the pain and torment of Jesus’ death on the cross is due to my sin, I inflict upon myself spiritual and psychological torment.”⁸ A much better assessment

is that of W. G. T. Shedd, who writes: "The penal and atoning sufferings of Christ were twofold: ordinary and extraordinary. The first came upon him by virtue of his human nature. He hungered, thirsted, was weary in body, was sad and grieved in mind, by the operation of the natural laws of matter and mind. All that Christ endured by virtue of his being born of a woman, being made under the law, living a human life, and dying a violent death belongs to this class. The extraordinary sufferings in Christ's experience came upon him by virtue of a positive act and infliction on the part of God. To these belong, also, all those temptations by Satan which exceeded in their force the common temptations incident to ordinary human life. Through these Christ was caused to suffer more severely than any of his disciples have. And that this was an intentional and preconceived infliction on the part of God, for the purpose of causing the sinner's substitute to endure a judicial suffering, is proved by the statement that *Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil* (Matt. 4:1). These severe temptations from Satan occurred more than once: *The devil departed from him for a season* (Luke 4:13). But still more extraordinary was that suffering which was caused in the soul of Christ by the immediate agency of God in the garden and on the cross. That agony which forced the blood through the pores of the skin and wrung from the patient and mighty heart of the God-man the cry, *My God, why have you forsaken me!* Cannot be explained by the operation of natural laws. There was positive desertion and infliction on the part of God. The human nature was forsaken, as the words of Christ imply. That support and comfort which the humanity had enjoyed, in greater or less degree, during the life of the God-man upon earth was now withdrawn utterly and entirely. One consequence of this was that the physical suffering involved in the crucifixion was unmitigated. Christ had no such support as his confessors have always had in the hour of martyrdom. But this was the least severe part of Christ's extraordinary suffering. The pain from the death of crucifixion was physical only. There was over and above this a mental distress that was far greater. This is indicated in the terms employed to describe the spiritual condition of Christ's soul, in the so-called agony in the garden: *He began to be sore amazed and to be very heavy and says unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death* (Mark 14:33-34). The words *ekthambeisthai* and *adēmonein* imply a species of mental distress that stuns and bewilders. This mental suffering cannot be explained upon ordinary psychological principles, but must be referred to a positive act of God. Christ was sinless and perfect. His inward distress did not result from the workings of a guilty conscience. The agony in the garden and on the cross was not that of remorse; though it was equal to it. Neither was it the agony of despair; though it was equal to it. The positive agency of God, in causing a particular kind of suffering to befall the mediator which could not have befallen him by the operation of natural causes, is spoken of in Isa. 53:5-6, 10: *He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. It pleases the Lord to bruise him.* And again in Zech. 13:7: *Awake, O sword, against my shepherd and against the man that is my fellow, says the Lord of hosts; smite the shepherd.* This language teaches that the incarnate second person of the Trinity received upon himself a stroke inflicted by the positive act of another divine person. The Son of God was bruised, wounded, and smitten by God the Father, as the officer and agent of divine justice; and the effects of it appear in that extraordinary mental distress which the mediator exhibited, particularly during the last hours of his earthly life: *While he was buffeted, scourged, and nailed to the cross, we hear nothing from him; but like a lamb before the shearers, he was mute. But when God reached forth his hand and darted his immediate rebukes into his very soul and spirit, then he cries out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!* The nature of this suffering is inexplicable, because it has no parallel in human consciousness. The other forms of Christ's suffering are intelligible, because they were like those of men. Thirst, hunger, weariness, grief at the death of a friend, were the same in Christ that they are in us. But that strange and unique experience which uttered itself in the cry *My God, why have you forsaken me?* belongs to the consciousness of the God-man. Only he who occupied the actual position of the sinner's substitute can experience such a judicial stroke from eternal justice, and only he can know the peculiarity of

the suffering which it produces. Suffering is a form of consciousness, and consciousness can be known only by the possessor of it.”⁹

III. ***HE SUFFERED AND DIED TO RECONCILE US TO GOD.*** The unjust or unrighteous *need* to be reconciled. The ultimate benefit of Christ’s death is not simply conversion but reconciliation to God. Robert Leighton, the famed 17th Puritan divine, captures the essence of this when he wrote: “This the Apostle hath excellently expressed, Ephesians 2:16, *He hath reconciled us by his cross, having slain the enmity*: he killed the quarrel betwixt God and us, killed it by his death; brings the parties together, and hath laid a sure foundation of agreement in his own sufferings; appeases his Father’s wrath by them, and by the same, appeases the sinner’s conscience. All that God hath to say in point of justice, is answered there; all that the poor humbled sinner hath to say, is answered too. He hath offered up such an atonement as satisfies the Father, so that he is content that sinners should come in and be reconciled.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Obadiah Sedgwick, another of the great Puritan pastors and a member of the Westminster Divines, duly noted that unless there is a clear understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (and all that it implies, i.e., penal substitutional atonement, imputation of Christ’s righteousness), we will always be on a performance treadmill and full of doubts. We need, therefore, to grasp the great significance of Christ’s death on our behalf. He placed Himself in our stead, putting His soul in the place of our souls, His person in the place of our persons. He underwent our punishment. Why did He do this? . . . to bring us to God, to make us acceptable to God.¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ H. S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Avon, 1983).

² Kushner, p. 38.

³ The word translated “must” is the Greek word *DEI* – it refers to that which must necessarily take place, often with the implication of inevitability. B. B. Warfield refers to the “*DEI* of the Divine decree, as it has been appropriately called, by which is suggested the necessity which rules over historical sequences. It is used with a view to Jesus’ own plan of redemption (by Jesus Himself, Luke 2:49, 4:43, 9:22, 13:33, 17:25, 24:7; John 3:14, 10:16, 12:34; by the evangelist, Matthew 16:21), to the underlying plan of God (by Jesus, Matthew 24:6, Mark 8:7, 10; Luke 21:9; by the writer, Matthew 17:10, Mark 11:11, Acts 3:21, 9:16), anon to the prophetic declaration as an indication of the underlying plan (by Jesus, Matthew 26:56; Luke 22:37, 24:26, 44; by the writer, John 20:9, Acts 1:16, 17:3). This appeal, in either form, served an important apologetic purpose in the first proclamation of the gospel; but its fundamental significance is rooted, of course, in the conception of a Divine ordering of the whole course of history to the verist detail.” *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), p. 304.

⁴ *Hōrismenon* is the perfect passive participle of *horizō*, which means to limit or define, appoint, mark off. Our English word “horizon” comes from this Greek word. Listen again to the words of B. B. Warfield: “The whole Bible doctrine of the decree revolves, in a word, around the simple idea of purpose. Since God is a Person, the very mark of His being is purpose. Since He is an infinite Person, His purpose is eternal and independent, all-inclusive and effective. Since He is a moral Person, His purpose is the perfect exposition of all His infinite moral perfections. Since He is the personal creator of all that exists, His purpose can find its final cause only in Himself.” *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*. Translated from the first French edition of 1541 by Robert White (Banner of Truth, 2014), p. 246.

⁶ H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of The Concordance* (Bagster & Sons Ltd., 1977), p. 78.

⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* II (P&R, 1994), p. 418.

⁸ R. S. Anderson, *the Gospel According to Judas* (Helmer & Howard, 1991), p. 99.

⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Third Edition, Ed. A. W. Gomes (P&R, 2003), p. 717.

¹⁰ R. Leighton, *Commentary On First Peter* (rpt. Kregel, 1972), p. 348.

¹¹ Obadiah Sedgwick, *The Doubting Believer* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), pp. 109-122.

