

## THE ISSUE OF SIN AND SUFFERING

By

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The purported connection between sin and suffering has been argued since time immemorial. Scholars, laymen, theologians, and philosophers alike have invested considerable time and energy delving into the subject. Sin and suffering is indeed, a theological topic that generates significant interest among those attempting to understand God, who He is, His character, and why certain things happen during the course of human events that cause people and groups to suffer. Questions abound. For example, why is there so much interest in the subject? Why do so many people query the issue? I believe the multitudes seek to discover what the Bible has already told us: there is a direct relationship between God and His creation – which includes mankind, and sin, suffering, and affliction. Scriptures address the basic questions, such as: Do we somehow cause our own suffering, or are there other factors in play? If so, what are those factors? Most perplexing, is there a purpose for our individual and collective suffering? Lastly, what or who is the genesis of that purpose?

God has built within mankind a natural curiosity, a need to know about the world around us. There are several motivations for such high interest in the relationship between sin and human suffering. One stimulus for engaging in this endeavor is to somehow pigeonhole God in a way that allows men to readily understand suffering at their own level. If that were possible, so the thinking goes, then men might be able to manipulate or influence God when suffering becomes personal and intrudes rudely into their lives. Some of us mere mortals grapple with the mystery of suffering to somehow guard against unforeseen calamity. If we can just figure out what causes suffering, then perhaps we can avoid or eliminate it – or at least minimize its affect.

The more willing may want to learn how to experience it effectively. These varied motivations can either be selfish in nature or perhaps philanthropic, or both.

The question of ‘why, God?’ always seems close to our lips when affliction strikes. When asked with a judgmental and or demanding quality, no answer will satisfy, even if the answer came from God Himself. Conversely, when asked with a ‘seeker’s attitude’ the question can launch the inquirer into a long, heart wrenching journey of soul-searching and self-evaluation which may result in a closer walk with God. Some would closely study the Scriptures and beseech God in a sincere, heartfelt search for wisdom and guidance. Having obtained such wisdom, this group would use it to assist others in understanding and accepting their lot in life with grace, dignity, and holiness.

A few questions that may arise in the seeker’s quest for truth are these: How do we reconcile the existence of a loving God and suffering? What is the correlation between sin and suffering? In fact, what is sin anyway? How does God define it? What exactly is suffering? Why should we be so mindful of sin and suffering?

In the Old Testament there are over 950 variations of the word, ‘sin’ followed by a minimum of a dozen references in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> According the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the concept of sin originates from four different ideas or roots: “sin or negligence,” “rebellious,” “guilt,” and “error.” Metaphorically, the term ‘sin’ in the Old Testament denotes a sense of ‘missing,’ as in ‘missing the way’ (Prov. 19:2) or ‘missing the mark’ (Judges 20:16).<sup>2</sup> While normally used to indicate wrong action or behavior, it typically

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie., *Basic Theology*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1986), p. 209

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromley., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*., ed., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985) p. 44, 51, 968

suggests the idea of a person going astray. In the legal sense, the word ‘sin’ implies a transgression of custom, law, treaty, or obligation and the guilt that accompanies such action (Gen. 43:9). The religious meaning of the word takes on a more sinister tone. One root is ‘to rebel’ which involves volition on the part of the actor. When a person rebels against God or lesser authority, he does so willingly, with purpose and perhaps malice. Sin is described as folly, or foolishness. A more explicit view of sin is seen in Exod. 29:5 and Deut. 5:9 where resistance to God’s commands and laws are considered hatred toward Him. It involved ungodly behaviors such as violence and deception.<sup>3</sup>

The true meaning of sin throughout the Old Testament slowly developed with legal and religious implication, both of which complimented each other. In his book, *Systematic Theology*, Augustus Strong implies that humanity, because of sin, exists in a general state of apostasy (p. 533-556). His thesis is, in simple terms, that God’s law is an expression of His divine will. He is the lawgiver. His law determines what is right and what is not. It provides moral guidance. The law itself, however, is neither moral nor immoral. People receiving the law are moral or immoral beings based on their adherence to the law. In truth, no person except Christ alone has ever been able to obey God’s divine law. Humanity is under the curse of sin and its consequence. We not only commit sin, but also sin envelopes our very existence. Due to the fall of man, every fiber of our reality is engulfed in a universal ‘state’ of sin. This constant state of being began with the fall of Adam and has been perpetuated by every sinful, living person ever since. The fall ushered sin into the world, indeed the universe. Everything has been affected. A perfect creation, to include mankind, has been made imperfect. Everything that was once good

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromley., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985)

by God's standard is now corrupt. Apart from the grace of God, there is no hope for anything worthwhile to come out of the human experience, to include our suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Strong also discusses elemental law regarding the physical universe. The universal structure of cause and effect, which can be seen in nature, has the purpose of supporting moral order. According to Sire, God created the cosmos in a uniformity of cause and effect.<sup>5</sup> It too, is affected by the fall of man. The law of God is not arbitrary, and neither is the result of sin or the curse thereof, i.e., suffering, whether corporate or individual.

The spiritually blind or misinformed do not always recognize the overwhelming effect of sin's curse. Nature is wrought with examples. <sup>6</sup>"Destructive forces are often released in earthquakes, cyclones, tornados, volcanic eruptions, and floods, which bring untold misery on mankind. Now there are many, especially in our day, who do not see the hand of God in all this, and do not regard these calamities as part of the penalty of sin. And yet that is exactly what they are in a general sense. However, it will not be safe to particularize, and to interpret them as special punishments for some grievous sins committed by those who live in the stricken areas".

Berkhof is quick to point out that natural disasters and the suffering they cause should not be used to place blame upon those anguished by such an event. Individually, they are faultless; catastrophes are not cause by personal moral failures, but as an overall result of the fall of man. Individual sin does cause suffering, but not normally on such a grand scale as to influence the

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<sup>4</sup> Augustus Strong., *Systematic Theology*. (Philadelphia, PA: The Judson Press, 1950), p 533-556

<sup>5</sup> James Sire., *The Universe Next Door*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 29

<sup>6</sup> Berkhof, Louis., *Systematic Theology*, p. 260 (1941)

acts of nature. In sum, the curse of sin has been with us since the fall and will continue to cause universal and individual suffering.

Although Berkhof's quote is over 60 years old, the truth he communicates is still valid. All truth is God's truth. Since God Himself is immutable, His truth is also. Neither He nor his truth will change. The immutability of God is fundamental. All creation revolves around this doctrine. The theological work of Wayne Grudem illustrates this idea more poignantly. He invites the reader of his book, *Bible Doctrine*, to ponder the unthinkable. "Stop for a moment to imagine what it would be like if God *could* change."<sup>7</sup> At best, He would be undependable. His character could fluctuate between good and evil. He could (be) love today and hateful another day. Hence, He would be untrustworthy. If the universe existed at all, it would be in complete disorder and chaos. No aspects of the universe would be held in its place. If God were mutable, everything that centers on Him would be at risk. As pertaining to sin and suffering, both would be out of control. Sin would likely be ramped with no limits. The resulting suffering would be excruciating with no end or purpose in sight. A changeable god would be useless, to himself and to his creation.

There are some, Modernists to name one group, who have a different view of sin and its universal affects. It is difficult however, to determine precisely what the Modernists believe concerning sin and suffering. Since theology is the systematic (learning) knowledge of God via the Bible, anything short of that is nothing more than a systematic, scientific approach to the religious aspects of anthropology.<sup>8</sup> Modernism fits that definition as it consists of relative ideas and preferred practices of man and not on the revelation of an almighty God. In fact, Modernism

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<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith.*, ed., Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999) p. 75

<sup>8</sup> Louis Berkhof., *Recent Trends in Theology.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing) 1946

denies any form of doctrine, which enables them to avoid being judged as promoting false teaching. Modernists don't stand for anything concrete. Instead, its proponents claim Modernism is merely a 'form (or method)' of teaching the Bible that can be modified or updated as needed. In other words, when the breeze of changing doctrine blows in a different direction, they too can put up their sails and surf along with it. Modernists believe that truth radiates from their own life's experience in relationship *with* the Bible and not on the *authority of* the Bible. In their view, the Bible is not absolute, and its 'truth' is always changing. Knowing the false ideas of Modernism is essential if one is to avoid such heresy and understand the true concept of man's origin, his fall from grace through sin, and the consequential suffering. There is a general cause and effect correlation between the fall of man and suffering, that Modernists tend to ignore or deny. Their misguided concepts will ultimately lead the seeking heart to blatantly wrong conclusions concerning sin and its relationship to suffering. Overall, Modernism at its core is flawed. When its concepts are applied to the interpretation of Scripture, the Word of God becomes unrecognizably distorted.

In the book, *God Under Fire*, R. Douglas Geivett, Ph.D, delves into the subject of sin (evil) and theological practice with vigor and logic. He explicates three views that purport to explain how God can be a good and loving God yet allow pain and suffering to plague mankind.<sup>9</sup> Like the ideas found in Modernism, these explanations leave much to be desired.

The first view is known as liberation theology. This mindset has its roots in Marxism and goes something like this: There are poor people among us who suffer in poverty. If God were a loving God, there would be no poverty. Since we know that God is benevolent, it must be the Christian's duty then, to rise the economic status of the unfortunate. Karl Marx, the founder of

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Huffman and Eric Johnson., *God Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan) 2002

Marxism, believed in the idea of economic equality of the masses. To achieve such equality, he advocated systematic wealth redistribution. Likewise, liberation theologians believe that the redistribution of wealth would ‘liberate’ the people (from their money) and allow them to devote themselves to the Almighty.

The second theory Geivett presents is known as progressive theology. The basic premise is that there is unnecessary, pointless evil in the world, which causes suffering that a moral god should be able to stop or prevent should He have reason to. The problem is this: Does God have reason to supernaturally intervene in the commission of evil? Since that question seems nearly unanswerable, the progressives take the easy way out – they deny that God has the power to intervene even if He wanted to. In effect, they deny God’s omnipotence.

The third, equally hollow proposal is open theism. In short, open theism is ‘open-ended’ because God does not know how His creation (man) will act in the future. Because of man’s unpredictable free choice, God is unable to plan His own future interactions with them because He lacks prior knowledge of tomorrow. Open theism clearly denies God’s *full* omniscience. He is omniscient, sort of - in all areas except for knowing the future! In essence, He cannot stop or control evil (and the suffering) because he can’t see it coming. Additionally, open theism states that, because of God’s lack of foreknowledge, he cannot have a true, personal relationship with us, His creation.<sup>10</sup> If that is indeed the case, then we have no hope of salvation since God would be unable to determine if the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was ‘successful.’ In fact, God would have been unable to foresee our need of a savior, let alone make provisions for one.

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Demarest., “Process Trinitarianism,” *Perspectives of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1979) p. 29

None of these approaches above, to include Modernism, adequately answer the basic questions. A discussion of classical, or traditional theology, in sin and its general consequences, is warranted.

Having already defined sin, let us now move to characterize ‘suffering’. Of the many overtones and types of suffering, the terms ‘afflict’ and ‘affliction’, seem to be very common. Referring once again to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ‘afflict’, and ‘affliction’ in the secular Greek, mean “to press”, “hem in”, “to be narrow” and “pressure”. Theologically, the meaning is more figurative. They mean, “to distress” or “to treat with hostility”, “oppression, tribulation, etc.”.<sup>11</sup> In both the Old and New Testaments the words are used to describe testing and trials which the Hebrews and early church Christians, beginning with Christ Himself had undergone. Except for Jesus, the ‘afflictions’ were designed to strengthen and mature the believer.

The idea of ‘narrowness’ is brought forth referring to the comparatively small number of people who accept God’s invitation to fellowship via Jesus Christ. Mark 10:25 address the narrow and wide roads and their respective destinations. Contrary to popular culture there is only one narrow road to God, i.e., Jesus Christ. While on that road there will be challenges and afflictions not caused by sin that will test and temper the believer’s endurance. Romans 8:28-29 assure us that everything will work out for our own good; to bring us to Christlikeness. On the other hand, the wide road leads to ultimate death and destruction, that being the everlasting anguish and affliction of Hell – the ultimate correlation between our individual sin and its result.

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<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromley., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.*, ed., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985) p. 334-335, 1077, 1117-1118

Ironically, “to afflict” or “affliction” can also mean “holding together, prison”. Paul was thus afflicted while he was held captive in prison. His suffering however, had nothing to do with his individual sin. Suffering and affliction are part of the ongoing Christian calling.

Dr. M.R. De Haan, in his book, *Broken Things*, does not seek to reconcile sin’s connection to suffering. Although universal and individual sin has its dire consequences, it’s interesting to note that De Haan says nothing about our afflictions being connected to sin. He does not imply, nor does he deny that sin causes suffering. He simply discusses the topic with another purpose in mind – to show his readers that God uses affliction to teach and mold us into His likeness. He explores God’s purpose for suffering. Again, the principle behind Romans 8:28-29 is central to his approach. He began by stating that the best sermons ever preached were not spoken from the pulpit, but from the bedside of the infirmed. The bedridden Christian has the opportunity to suffer with patience and reliance on God. In doing so, God provides the faithful with a testimony that is unmatched.

De Haan offers several biblical reasons why Christians suffer. The first reason is to silence Satan. The most noteworthy example, aside from Christ, is that of Job. God gave Satan permission to afflict great suffering upon Job in order for Satan to see firsthand, that Job is (would be) faithful despite his suffering. God also used the trials to strengthen Job and to lift him up though his adversity. In his faithfulness, God was glorified, which is the second reason He allows suffering.

Thirdly, through suffering God is able to make us more like Jesus Christ, which should be the Christian’s lifelong objective. Suffering has a way of bringing us closer to God’s image. We are perfected through suffering. Christ suffered; likewise, we will suffer in the process of becoming more like Him.

Fourthly, suffering makes us more appreciative of God's benefits and increases our dependence upon Him. We tend to appreciate good health, for example, particularly when we are laid up in a hospital with a serious illness. When that's the case, and we have no control over the course of our infirmity, we turn to God in utter dependence.

Our experience with suffering also leads us to be humbly sympathetic toward others in similar situations, which enables the believer to better empathize and minister to them. Lastly, according to De Haan, suffering brings us rewards that are beyond comparison, as demonstrated in 1 Pet. 4:12-13.<sup>12</sup>

T.B. Maston, professor emeritus of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Fort Worth, Texas) from 1922 until his retirement in 1963, approaches the subject from yet another angle. His perspective is not theoretical; it's down to earth practical. He discusses human suffering by putting a name and face to it – his son, Tom Mc, who was injured at birth causing permanent disabilities. Tom Mc was unable to execute any type of gross or fine motor skills, nor could he speak. He was completely dependant upon his parents in every conceivable way. Maston not only recognized that his son was suffering debilitating disabilities, but that he and his wife suffered along with him. Born to them was a child that would require round-the-clock care for life. Yet, Maston and his wife did not characterize the experience as a burden. Instead, they saw Tom Mc as a person through whom God worked miracles and blessings in the lives of all who knew him. Was there suffering and affliction in the family? Absolutely! Was it caused by an individual's sin? No. As Dr. De Haan would agree, God intended Maston's situation to glorify Himself by bringing those involved closer to Christlikeness. Maston himself wrote "The presence of a handicapped child in the home, as well

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<sup>12</sup> M. R. De Hann. *Broken Things: The Ministry of Suffering*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan) 1948

as suffering in general, can and will be used of God to deepen and enrich our lives if we will react rightly to it.”<sup>13</sup> That was the purpose God had in mind for the Mastons.

Through it all however, Maston did have two questions: Why is there suffering? What is God’s relation to suffering? In other words, is God responsible for suffering? Maston, like many of us, wanted to know. His quest for answers was revealing. He refers to his discovery as the Laws of Life and Suffering, which God put into place.

Maston’s argument is twofold and seems to agree with Strong in the general concept that each of us will likely suffer the ill consequences of our willful or incidentally violation of the Laws of Life and Suffering. This holds true in every aspect of creation. God has set general laws in place, which govern human behavior and nature (physical universe). We violate these laws at our own peril.

For example, if Mr. Joe Criminal robs a liquor store at knifepoint and the shopkeeper is packing a weapon, Mr. Criminal is liable to get shot. Alternatively, if he doesn’t get shot but gets caught later instead, he’s looking at a trial, conviction, and doing hard (prison) time. Either way, his volitional sin violated the moral law of God that requires “Thou shall not steal.’ His own disobedience (individual sin) resulted in a prison term.

Another example that may or may not involve sin, could be in the area of proper health related habits. The natural law of God states that clean, unpolluted lungs will allow us to breath normally. If a person smokes, the natural consequences could be eventual shortness of breath, increased heart rate, or cancer, among other misfortunes. The fact of the matter is that he, who continues to fill up his lungs with carcinogens, can expect health problems because a natural law of good health was broken.

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<sup>13</sup> T. B. Maston., *Suffering: A Personal Perspective*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press) 1967

Likewise, the physical creation (nature) has its own set of laws. To illustrate, suppose an Auca tribesman had rested on a high branch to observe Nate Saint and Jim Elliot on the beach. The tribesmen should be mindful of the natural hazard associated with climbing a tree. If he were to fall, gravity would force him to the ground. The contractor using a ladder to access the roof of my house has the same concern. If one of these people were to fall to the ground and die, the root cause would be simple – gravity. Did the man sin in this case? Probably not, but God's natural law of gravity was violated. Hence, someone suffered.

God was not directly involved in any of these examples, nor was He to blame. His preordained and well-known natural laws were at work, a violation of which will cause suffering and affliction. A person can fuss and fight all day long about this truth. In the end, we will reap what we sow, based on God's natural laws.

The topic of sin and suffering is very confusing to a great many people. It seemingly has an inexhaustible number of variables that must be explored to grasp the Biblical concepts involved. Sin does have a negative effect on humanity. It results in untold suffering, both universally and personally. Yet, not all suffering and affliction is related or due to sin. God, in His infinite love for us, allows affliction for a myriad of reasons – all of which are intended for our own good and for the spiritual well-being of others.

It is most important for us, particularly ministers and counselors, to fully appreciate what the scriptures teach in regards to those who suffer. As with all things Biblical, there is a balance that must be reached to humbly assist those experiencing affliction, no matter the causation.

Suffering often has multiple causes.<sup>14</sup> It is sometimes difficult, if not near impossible, to determine the cause of one's suffering. Whether sin is involved or not, counselors should not

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<sup>14</sup> McGuire, M. *Class Notes*. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. 2005

place blame on the afflicted. As Christ demonstrated (Heb 4:15), they are to be empathetic. Counselors are to be above reproach. They should have self-control, grace, and be wholly immersed in and influenced by Biblical truth. Their worldview should be Christ centered. Only then, can one hope to help another gain proper perspective of the issues at hand and how God can guide one through them. If the counselor is off base in his theology or worldview, he will ultimately misguide the client. In the end, the client will likely be worse off after counseling than he was when he started. As the scripture indicates, it would be better for a counselor (or any one of us) to be tied to a millstone and tossed into the sea than for us to lead His people astray.

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