

SUFFERING

GOD'S PURPOSE IN OUR PAIN



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Written by Rev. Fr. Dr. Abraham M. Malkhasyan

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“Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. As a result, those who suffer in accord with God’s will hand their souls over to a faithful creator as they do good.” (1 Peter 4:12-13, 19).

The New Testament makes it very clear that Christians will suffer. St. Paul the Apostle tells new believers in Asia Minor, *“It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22). He was preparing them for their coming lives as Christians as well as explaining their present circumstances. Hence, since they have been told that Christians will suffer, they should be prepared to accept this as God’s Will. Peter makes this very plain in 1 Peter 2:19, *“Because this is a grace of God, if one bears unjust suffering in good conscience.”* Also, *“For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the Will of God, than for doing*

evil.” (1 Peter 3:17). Then he sums up, “As a result, those who suffer in accord with God’s Will hand their souls over to a faithful creator as they do good” (1 Peter 4:19). St. Paul shows us an example of this when he prays three times for the removal of his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Once he saw that it was God’s Will for him, he accepted it. Many Christians are not sure if it is God’s Will when they are suffering persecution or injustice. However, our great God “works for good for those who love him” (Romans 8:28). In a uniquely wondrous way, God turns evil into a good. No believer needs to suffer alone and in doubt. By a simple act of our will, we can commit it all to the Lord (Prov. 16.3).

St. Peter explains, “Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). The judgment of God which comes upon believers is to test and purify their faith and not to condemn them. Therefore, it is an expression of His love, not His rage. 1 Peter 1:6-7 tells his readers that they may have to “suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of [their] faith...may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

WHAT IS SUFFERING?

This is a question raised by almost everyone whether they have experienced serious suffering themselves or not. It is a question raised throughout human history. One of the most undesirable occurrences is that of suffering. And yet, the world is filled with many examples of it. The last century has seen record-breaking technological and medical advances, but it has also witnessed pain, suffering, and despair on a scale even greater than ever before. Humanity still experiences disease and sickness, earthquakes and other natural disasters, war and genocide, poverty, and death. Some people struggle to feed and shelter their families, others to understand the loss of a loved one, to find the strength to remain standing beneath the weight of a terrible illness, to lift their eyes to heaven and demand an answer to the “everlasting” question: “Why, God, and for what..?” Suffering is also a very personal question for the Armenian people collectively, who experienced one of the worst types of suffering – the Genocide, which occurred from 1915-1923, and more recently, the horrible war in Artsakh.

According to The New Dictionary of Theology, “suffering is the disruption of inner human harmony caused by physical, mental, spiritual, and

emotional forces experienced as isolating and threatening our very existence.” Suffering and evil have become inseparable equivalents as a result of the lack of human goodness. As known in Christian teachings, suffering and evil are not from God (the Author of all good; Gen. 1); still, they are in the existence of our reality as a result of our misuse of free will which is the moral evil of sin.

Armenian moral theology gives special importance to suffering, portraying it as the noblest way to become worthy of approaching the Divine Goodness, Grace, and everlasting Life; the way paved by Jesus Christ on Calvary. Our Heavenly Father had the power to prevent His Son’s suffering, but He knew that Jesus had to experience this pain for us. Thus, as we go through our own trials and anguish, God allows them to prune us, so we may produce better fruit, or bring a welcome difference to better someone else’s life. In other words, we do not suffer alone, which is the promise of God, because we are “... heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:17-18). Also, “For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5; Hebrews 2:10).

If we can understand that suffering is experienced as a consequence of natural disaster or something else outside of our control, how then do we explain the “silence” of God? Where is He in our suffering?

WHERE IS GOD?

As expected, this question does not have a clear answer. It is a mystery which all societies wrestle with. It is also an unavoidable and very sensitive question for the Armenian people, who suffered abandonment during the genocide. Almost every single Armenian, believer or non-believer, asks the same questions: “Why did the Genocide happen?” “Why did God allow this to happen?” This is the most troubling question that needs a reasonable and theological answer for the descendants of the victims of the Armenian Genocide.

The answer is in the Word of God! The Church teaches that the best way to our Lord is the Way of the Cross. As He said, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”* (Luke 9:23-24). In accordance

with these words, our forefathers died as martyrs, a sacrifice to God for being a Christian nation. This is the authentic nature of Christians - to understand the deep meaning of suffering and even death as a worthy way to Jesus Christ our Savior, who preceded us in suffering and who died for us. Indeed, *"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (...) We love, because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:10, 19). Our Lord Jesus assumed our humanity to bring it to its fulfillment. He had to assume our fallenness that He might heal its brokenness. The healing and fulfillment of our humanity is the Resurrection. The Son of God suffered and died to show us how to endure suffering, and to give meaning to our own suffering and death. He accepted the Cross, so that we might be able to bear our crosses. He fulfilled the Law and was obedient to the Father to the point of suffering and death, showing what obedience is. Jesus revealed to us that God is our loving Father who suffers all things for the sake of our salvation.

The Holy Scriptures also confront the problem of suffering elsewhere in the context of Christian perseverance. While those who trust in Christ's saving work on the cross are spared the penalty of condemnation through judgment, their path to eternal life in this world is characterized by an expectation to suffer, *"...but to the*

degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13). Persecution is both a definite prospect (2 Timothy 3:12) and a mark of God's creative work in us — trials are in fact part of the Christian's "disciplining" by their Heavenly Father and will present a future "harvest" to God's glory (Hebrews 12:11; James 1:2 and Philippians 1:29).

According to most current Armenian authors, the central "meaning" of the Armenian Genocide (and not only that but other calamities too) is that the Armenian nation should identify it as a unique and individual way of suffering, a most valuable way to Golgotha. Catholicos Karekin I in his article "Tradition: Living and Life-Giving," writes: "*Armenia passed through innumerable moments of Gethsemane and Golgotha, experiences of temptation, trial, and tribulation... The last and most deadly episode of such times of crucifixion was the genocide perpetrated against the Armenian people during the first World War.*" By alluding to St. Paul's teaching on human suffering, Catholicos Karekin I affirms that the hope which comes from suffering is like a second name for Armenian life. Writing to the Romans, St. Paul says, "*We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us*" (Rom. 5:3-4; cf. Heb. 2:10). Indeed, this hope finds its ultimate fulfillment

in the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that is why for the Church and for the Armenian people in particular, the Resurrection of Christ is the central feast in the calendar. Thus, the central meaning of the Armenians' sufferings throughout their numerous calamities is understood to be the same as our Lord's suffering and sacrifice. He concludes, "*The Armenian Christian tradition for me provides an existential illustration of the victory of faith and life over despair and death.*"

Very similar ideas were expressed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (February 11, 1984), where he meditated on the real Christian meaning of human suffering. The Roman Pontiff claims that human suffering is an intangible mystery, which "...evokes compassion; it also evokes respect, and in its own way it intimidates. For in suffering is contained the greatness of a specific mystery." He finds in Christ and His redemptive suffering and sacrifice on Calvary the answers to questions about the mystery of suffering - a thought process which mirrors the Armenian exploration of this very sensitive question. The Biblical story of Job that the Pope examines throughout his encyclical, is the best answer to those Armenians who question the "unreasonable" tragedies they have experienced throughout their long history. Job was blessed with great wealth and a happy and healthy fami-

ly. He was devout and virtuous in his private life, and charitable to all, especially the needy. Then, God allowed Satan to test Job, who then lost his entire family and property. Even though he mourned and wept, he accepted his misfortune, saying *“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised”* (Job 1:21). Without realizing God’s motives and methods of allowing suffering, for some of Job’s friends, this suffering seemed a deserved punishment for sin. God then restored Job to health, giving him twice what he had before. After all his misfortune, Job continued living a holy life and had a happy death. Pope John Paul II states that Job’s suffering is the “suffering of someone who is innocent, and it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence. The suffering has the nature of a test.” He infers that the *truth* is that all suffering is not a consequence of a fault carrying the nature of a punishment. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, we would not say that it happened because of fault alone, but moreover, as God’s permitted testing.

Thus, in accordance with this understanding, the meaning of suffering is supernatural (mysterious) and at the same time it is human. A modern theologian, John Hick, writes that as supernatural, suffering is based on “the divine mystery

of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply human, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission.”

Here is an interesting idea of the process of man’s perfection through suffering. For John Hick, suffering is a soul-making process. He says that our life has a developmental and theological meaning and claims, “Man is in process of becoming the perfected being whom God is seeking to create.” Actually, his understanding is based on the insight of Irenaeus of Lyons, the second-century Father of the Church, who says that we are in a process of taking on the form of God’s likeness from our already existing image of God.

God is all-powerful and supremely good, yet evil exists in this world; to address this perceived inconsistency, Hick proposes soul-making which considers evil as the main component human beings need to build their character through patience, courage, and compassion. It is true that one does not need evil to become perfect, nor did God “create” evil, nor did He “err” in endowing His creatures with intelligence and free will. Nevertheless, Hick thinks that without evil, there would be less of a chance of expanding upon a person’s moral virtues. Therefore, the evil in this world that we can use for our growth is a valuable evil and it is the main ingredient in any sort

of soul-making. But evil is not a mystery; it is a reality. This reality has its roots in the Lie. Those who are caught in its “reasoning” progress from one evil to the next.

This progression is in total contradiction to seeking the Truth. To prevent such abuse by man, Hick thinks the most important point to be, “...instead of looking to the past for its clue to the mystery of evil, [man] looks to the future, and indeed to that ultimate future to which only faith can look.”

Nevertheless, it is hard to justify this kind of thinking because the notion of the “soul-making” process demotes Jesus’ role from “Savior” to “moral role model.” It is important to acknowledge that because of Jesus Christ’s intervention, we have become able to realize the way of perfection, i.e. “soul-making,” in accordance with the Lord’s word: *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6). Interpreted by Paul the Apostle as, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God,”* (Ephesians 2:8), a gift of love: *“But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8)

Of course, our desire, personal efforts and the positive conditions of experiencing suffering help us for our own perfection, but when the essential and central function of our Savior Jesus

Christ is excluded from this notion it will lose its vital value and importance. This notion is defined in a better sense by the Armenian medieval theologian St. Grigor Tatevatsi (1346-1409) when he talks about the image of God in man:

The image of God in man is lost because of Adam's Fall. This resulted in the loss of the twelve gifts, the restoration of which is possible only with the return of man from his fallen state to that of the original bliss and vision of God. In this process Jesus Christ has a central role. The Son of God became man, in order to make human beings sons and daughters of God.

Repeating the understanding of the Fathers of the Church, Tatevatsi states that because of our God-given gift of free will, we had an option to choose between divine and mortal lives. Talking about creation he states:

Created last, [man] contains in himself the essences of both sensitive and intelligible natures. Hence the two possibilities offered to the first man: If he followed the divine intelligence – in whose image he was made – it would have been possible for him to be the heir of immortal life. But, he deviated and followed the sensitive realm: he became debtor to death and fell into earthly life.

Suffering is, most importantly, a means of our reconciliation with God from a fallen, suffering world. The prophet Isaiah wonderfully foretells how *“the restitution of our peace is in him, and by his wounds we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5).

Although we may have a worldly and incomplete understanding of suffering, the Bible clearly tells us that God is one who loves to heal. He offers His solution to a suffering existence to all who put their faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

Through suffering we can learn patience, self-discipline, trust, and many other virtues. When we suffer, we can experience the love, compassion, and self-denial of those who help us. When we help someone who is suffering, we find significance in our own lives as well. Sin, suffering, and death are not the destinies for which God created us. God created us to enjoy perfect, good, loving fellowship with Him for eternity. Despite our moral betrayals, He continues to offer eternal life. This is the hope that the Christian offers in the midst of suffering, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed”* (Romans 8:8). Suffering and death in this sinful world are not without remedy. The only reasonable response to the existence of suffering is confidence in God’s promises for eternal consolation and inheritance of the Ultimate

Good: *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted... Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:3-10).

Thus, only in and through the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ would we be able to understand the deep meaning of suffering, by recalling His heartening words: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me”* (John 14:1)!

WE ARE NOT ALONE!

For us, Christians, suffering has both negative and positive aspects - negative, because the action of causing suffering (natural or human-caused) is disastrous, i.e. evil; and positive, because the deeper meaning of suffering is “good.” Through suffering we gain experience, a real understanding of God’s Grace and Mercy, and the realization that it is very important to keep our life in accordance with God’s Will and Commandments.

It is said that God allows the toughest testing to those people or that person whom He loves “most” and wishes to see in spiritual perfection (cf. Rom. 5:4; James 1:12; Book of Job). Of course, God loves us all unconditionally. Je-

Jesus Christ accepted suffering so that He might accompany us in our suffering, being like us in everything but sin. He shows us how to accept suffering without despair, revealing that though we feel abandoned by God during our suffering, God has not in fact abandoned us and will raise our life from corruption. Jesus confronted the despair of death as He hung on the Cross, and cried out in the words of the Psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But if we keep reading, the Psalm continues (Psalm 22:19-24) the song of hope and praise,

*But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you
have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers
and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will
praise you...
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me
but heard when I cried to him.*

Suffering in itself is not sin or a curse, rather it is a moment of judgment or a crisis. Whatever

kind of suffering it may be, if we remain faithful to God, if we hope in Him only, we will be able to bear whatever comes. This is how we bear our cross, by surrendering ourselves completely to our Lord's providence in faith, hope, and love.

The temporary life in this world inevitably includes suffering, and has an end. Nonetheless, we are not alone, զի Աստուած ընդ մեզ է [*zee Asdvadz und mez eh*]! Our Lord Jesus Christ accompanies us in our suffering, giving us hope in the assurance that He has overcome the world, through His Resurrection. In His glorious Resurrection we find our hope, which enables us to bear all things by the Grace of Christ.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is powerfully present everywhere, at all times, and will be always with us.

Maranatha! Come, O Lord!

NOTES

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DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA (EASTERN)

630 Second Avenue, New York, New York 10016
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