

~GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE~

*GOD AND ORDINARY SUFFERING
THE NECESSITY OF THEIR CO-EXISTENCE*

*SENNIOR RELIGION SEMINAR
~REL 399~
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION*

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MAY 7, 2002*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper could not have been possible without the help of many people. I would like to take this time to express my genuine gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Darrell Jodock. His gentle guidance and wisdom challenged my thoughts and my writing, bringing my paper to an improved level of clarity and insight. The time he gave me in the midst of his demanding schedule is greatly appreciated. His desire to listen, learn, and act on his beliefs are contagious, and having him as a professor has change my mind, my heart, and my life.

Dr. Mary Solberg deserves the same gratitude. To her I am indebted for her time and energy put forth specifically to improve the process of writing this thesis. Her encouragement, vision, and advice impacted me in a way that brought this paper into actuality. Her compassion and genuine hunger to know God has deeply affected me.

I would also like to thank my peers. This amazing group of senior religion majors has acted as a springboard, a support group, and a priceless tool in this project. It goes without saying, they have helped to make this process a whole lot more fun. I extend a special note of gratitude and admiration to Nate Mitchell, for his support and constant urging to seek and know God. Without him, my faith would not be where it is today.

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INTRODUCTION: FACING UP TO IT

For several reasons, this paper is important to me personally. Throughout my life, I have improved upon but not mastered the act of denying my own suffering. At the hint of self-pity or pain, I instantly imagine those people in my country and beyond who suffer a great deal more than I do, and the grieving process is often cut short.

Simultaneously, I have learned how basic suffering is to the Christian faith. It is logical to me, then, to question the depth of my relationship to God because of how little I suffer in comparison to other Christians. In setting out to learn more about the relationship of God and suffering, I have come to see the error in my thinking. For one, I too suffer.

Every person suffers and feels pain. It is part of the human condition. It is true that the amount of suffering one has to endure varies from person to person, and God does not want people to seek out suffering to become closer to God. For another, suffering is part of the Christian experience, but only because it is part of the human experience. It is important for me, especially for my relationship with God, to explore the relationship between God and suffering people.

I need to get to a place in my faith life where I can passionately love and believe in God without denying the suffering of the world. I have always had a compassionate heart for the suffering of others, and I have developed a fairly strong relationship with God, but I always shy away from letting the two parts of me mesh. My fear is that there is no room for both my God and suffering to interact and improve each other. Thinking that God has some role in our suffering does not automatically sit well in the heart. So this is a difficult paper to write, because there was a chance that that I will find no

acceptable conclusion. Either my God or my suffering world might have to go.

Ultimately, my God might have to go.

I am not saying that I will find the answer. The problem is not solved in the pages that follow. However, the process of exploring different aspects of God's nature has helped me move closer to a place where I am not paralyzed. I want to act on God's side. I can embrace God and suffering. In fact, one needs the other. I have gotten to a place where I can believe in God and suffering in my heart and head with emotional and intellectual integrity.

It is nearly impossible to address the relationship between God and suffering without including the Holocaust, African slavery in the United States, or the genocide happening all over the world today. My paper will include "extreme suffering"¹ such as this. I will also focus, however, on what I will call "ordinary suffering"²: suffering that is more familiar to the average person in the United States. Because ordinary suffering is more basic to my personal experience as well as my audience's experience, I will strive to address this type of suffering more.

I am writing specifically to a Jewish and Christian, academic audience who see truth revealed about God in the Bible. When I refer to the Bible, I am using it as a source of truth that sheds light on the character of God. Using the Bible in this way should not imply that people outside the Jewish and Christian academic community have nothing to take from this paper. However, someone who believes in the God of the Bible will be able to relate to questions surrounding God's role in suffering much more personally. I will look at the grieving process that necessarily accompanies daily pain and suffering to

¹ Will be clarified more in Part I.

² Will be clarified more in Part I.

see when and how the goodness, power, and even the existence of God are questioned. I will explain what I mean by pain, grieving, extreme suffering, and ordinary suffering. I will then explore the omnipotence and goodness of God through the following series of questions: How can a good and all-powerful God permit suffering? Is God all-powerful? Can God prevent pain? Does God love us or delight in our hurt? Does God feel any pain? Does God suffer with us? I have chosen to address the omnipotence and goodness of God because they are two characteristics of God that are questioned often and intensely when we suffer.

Suffering is a universal experience. Suffering is something that we often fear and repress because it is not easy or fun. Our relationships with God and each other can suffer if we are not brave enough to challenge God in the face of suffering. It is easy to blame God for our suffering because we believe that God can and should be in control of our hurt. Since suffering is part of the human condition, God's power and goodness are often in question.

As individuals and as a world, we will be healthier and happier if we learn to face and deal with suffering. By understanding God's relationship to suffering and to us when we suffer, we can be more active at relieving the suffering of our neighbors as well as our own. I will argue that God is not apathetic, cruel, or emotionally removed. God is limited through God's love for us, so God cannot always eliminate our suffering. If we value God's goodness and deny human ideas of power, we will be free to take more responsibility as humans to alleviate the hurt in the world. God can then work through us actively and join in our suffering more directly. It is liberating and comforting to know that a good and powerful God is suffering with us, for us, and because of us. God aches

to give us hope, comfort, and redemption. Taking a serious look at God's relationship to our suffering by addressing God's power and goodness will empower us to work to alleviate suffering not out of fear, but out of joy in God.

GOD, REPRESSION, AND DOUBT—IT'S IN THERE

Every person suffers, grieves, and feels pain at some point in their life. Some suffer greatly; others seek it out to deepen their relationship with God. Many associate suffering only with death, persecution, and violence, but there is daily suffering in our lives that need to be addressed as well. Suffering leads to grieving, so I will present stages of the grieving process, one of which is the questioning of a good God. I will present a problem that the other sections will begin to reconcile: Why does a good and powerful God let us suffer?

WHAT SUFFERING IS NOT

Analyzing God's relationship to suffering requires a conversation about what is meant by suffering. One good way to begin is to define what it is not. Suffering is different from pain. Pain can be physical or emotional. It is also fairly temporary and intense. Pain can come from a broken bone or the death of a friend. It requires immediate attention to the point where daily life must come to a halt to some degree. Pain is a cause of suffering.

Suffering is different from grieving. Grieving is the healing process that is necessary as a result of suffering. It is a prolonged cathartic process that enables a person to deal with suffering. Although grieving is not easy or always pleasant, it is necessary to return to a healthy and happy state. Thus, it has the possibility of being productive and positive. Grieving can be charged with emotion and is usually accompanied with a

tangible reaction. It can manifest itself physically, such as when people cannot sleep or when they cry.

Grieving is a process over which we have some control. We cannot choose when, whether, or why we suffer or feel pain, but we can choose how to grieve. Often, people choose not to grieve at all. It is easy to write off hurtful circumstances without allowing for ample grieving time. With all the violence and death in the world, people struggle to encounter daily pain and suffering, thinking it is self-centered or pitiful to mourn while others suffer greater and more permanent loss. Granger E. Westberg addresses grief of varying severities in his book, *Good Grief*: "If we include our 'little griefs' along with our 'large griefs,' we can say that grief is as natural to every person as breathing. It is inevitable! You cannot live without experiencing it in a thousand different ways."³

Grief accompanies all kinds of pain and suffering. Our culture is saturated with pain and suffering that is not extreme or life threatening. Divorce requires grieving for the two hearts involved. It also affects children, family, and mutual friends. Losing a job or being relocated requires grieving and affects everyone close to the employee involved. Families are uprooted due to divorce and relocation of employment every day. Changing communities is a difficult process that causes pain that can be repressed and neglected. Dogs die, wives get sick, and fathers lose their hearing. Children leave the house empty and quiet as they attend college or get married. There is daily pain and suffering that needs time and attention.

It is difficult to compare the pain, suffering, and grieving process of a man saying goodbye to his job as he retires to the pain, suffering, and grieving process of a Jewish

³ Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief: A Constructive Approach to the Problem of Loss* (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Press, 1962), p. 3.

woman who is being tortured daily in a concentration camp after losing her whole family to the Nazis. However, pain is still pain. Suffering is a daily occurrence and a huge component of the human experience. Relentlessly, pain and suffering follow us and must be dealt with. At some point in every human's life, the heart will grieve. It is important to note that different degrees of suffering and pain exist so that people realize that ordinary suffering also requires grieving.

WHAT SUFFERING IS

Suffering is the dreaded, yet necessary, step between pain and grieving. Meanwhile, it is intimately connected to present in both. Suffering is so interconnected to pain and grieving that it cannot be discussed without the other two. Suffering, however, is the most problematic for humans because it is the most prolonged and constant state of hurt. Although it is real and can be very intense, suffering does not require immediate attention, so repression is possible. Even if repression occurs, we still have no control over our pain, so we have no control over the consequences that come from that pain. Humans like to be in control. Suffering is relentless, spontaneous, and out of our control. While pain and grieving are important and will be addressed, suffering will be focused on more heavily in this paper.

Suffering is common to all humans. It can bind us in a universal state of existence. It goes along with being alive. Although it is common to all humans, everyone's experience with suffering is unique. The degree to which one suffers, the circumstance that cause the suffering, and the way that the suffering is dealt with will vary from person to person.

Suffering can be weighted. It is helpful to distinguish between “ordinary” and “extreme” suffering. Extreme suffering is a consequence of extreme pain. Such pain includes not having that which is essential to humans: food, shelter, water, sleep, safety, and love. Extreme suffering can be the result of hate, violence, persecution, war, fear, or death. Some people can go a lifetime without facing extreme pain and suffering. Some people deal with it daily.

It is possible to go through life never worrying about hunger or homelessness. Some people live without being personally affected by war or violence. That does not mean that these people will live without suffering. There is also ordinary suffering. It can be subtle, but it is just as real. This type of suffering is universal to the human spirit.⁴ Everyone who lives must deal with the pain of living and dying. Every conscious person knows mortality. In addition to dealing with the pain of loss and death, there is also suffering that accompanies living. One of the most universal forms of suffering is loneliness.⁵ Humans are born alone and die alone. As social creatures, some of the most intense times of ordinary suffering are accompanied by the feeling of being utterly and radically alone. That is one of the reasons that the death of a loved one is so hard.

Another common form of ordinary suffering is estrangement.⁶ Humans can feel disconnected from the world, other people, and God. We see problems in the world, yet we feel as if we can do so little to fix them. We are smart enough to understand many things like hatred and prejudice without being able to conquer them. We are prone to disbelief and must constantly deal with that doubt. And we cannot help but wonder,

⁴ Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p.56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

"Why did God make us this way?" We could be less conscious or more capable, but part of being human is dealing with this ordinary suffering that is inherent in being human.

Ordinary suffering also comes from the pain that was addressed previously: divorce, being fired, or changing homes. Basically, ordinary suffering encompasses all that is not extreme, so the spectrum is quite large. Life can be tough even without extreme pain. There are stressful life decisions about relationships and work. There is a constant struggle with time and mortality both of which cause suffering in our lives.

Suffering is living out the consequences of pain. Suffering requires a grieving process to move to a healthier state. It can be extremely prolonged. Suffering is hard because of the change, hurt, and heaviness that it entails. It is a state of being that most humans work very hard to avoid.

REPRESSION

Repression of pain, ordinary or extreme, is common in our culture mainly because suffering is not attractive to us. Many people, including many Christians, believe that ignoring pain and being stoic will make the hurt go away. It is as if pain and suffering can be overcome by pretending it is not there. When suffering is avoided through repression, the grieving process cannot take place and the suffering may get worse. How many people feel comfortable weeping in church? How many Americans would walk up to a crying person in public and ask if there was anything he or she could do? When asked, "How are you?" how many people would dare say, "I am really hurting today. Let me tell you why"? How many people feel comfortable going to a counselor or

psychiatrist to seek advice or work through suffering and hurt? People who are suffering and grieving are often avoided in our culture.

Americans have grown up in a culture that will not allow men to cry and accuses women of being overly emotional and irrational if they express their suffering through emotions. It is considered a sign of weakness to grieve openly or to ask for help. These notions, however, lead to the repression of that suffering until these people actually cannot suffer. If one cannot suffer, it becomes difficult to relate to other people's pain. Thinking pain should be tucked away and overcome by positive thinking creates scared and uncompassionate communities who do not honestly, hopefully, and healthily approach pain:

But when repressive instinct becomes a whole way of life, and there are vast areas of experience upon which we dare not reflect consciously even for a moment, then the instinct has gone awry and, instead of being a protective device enabling our survival "in spite of" self-knowledge, it becomes the greatest threat both to our sanity and to our survival.⁷

As difficult as it is, two things must be simultaneously remembered about suffering. First, suffering is real and needs to be seen as part of the Christian experience as well as the human experience. Second, suffering is not the last word about the human condition.⁸ People suffering daily persecution need to focus on the latter, while many American Christians need to focus on the former:

The great temptation amongst us as we try to articulate a gospel that speaks to the human condition is that we shall indulge once again, as Christendom has so often done, in the sin of reductionism; i.e., that we shall minimize or even trivialize the actuality of human suffering, including our own subtle and repressed suffering, and so end with religious "answers" that are premature and shallow.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

By accepting and recognizing both extreme and ordinary suffering, we can become more compassionate with others who are suffering even more than we are. Pain is not tied to weakness of spirit. Suffering is a significant part of becoming who we are and a necessary aspect of the body of Christ.¹⁰ Suffering is where God and humans meet. Pain is part of the human experience, and people need to let go of the naïve need to act superhuman.

MY EXPERIENCE

I can speak of pain, suffering, and grieving honestly and most intelligently from personal experience. A lot of the pain, suffering, and grieving in my life has been a result of doing gymnastics for seventeen years. When I fell, I would feel extreme physical pain. When I realized that this meant not being able to be active and contribute to the team, I suffered. To reach a place where I could be happy with my new physical state, I would grieve by crying, writing, questioning why, and finding new hope. I consider this a form or ordinary suffering.

When I was in the eighth grade, I was very competitive in gymnastics. I was also reaching the age when I started truly to fear pain. I had not experienced much of it in my life. I was training for a national meet in Michigan when I learned a new tumbling pass. The day before we left for the meet, I fell and hurt my left elbow very badly. It broke, dislocated, and cut off blood to my hand. Immediately and intensely, I felt physical pain. I even passed out because of the pain, so I knew that was as much physical pain as I

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

would ever have to deal with before my body shut down. Becoming conscious, emotional pain was added to my physical pain as I realized that my gymnastics career could be over. The physical and emotional pain stayed with me for a while, but the intensity weakened. This is where the suffering began. I suffered in the months of rehabilitation as I watched teammates improve, struggled with my severe physical limitations, and began to accept that I would never be a nationally competitive gymnast again. The consequences of my pain were my suffering.

To deal with my suffering so it would subside, I grieved. Grieving took on many forms. The process lasted years of redefining myself not primarily as a gymnast. Physical therapy was part of the process so that I could physically get back to my full potential. Crying, praying, journaling, and continuing to cheer for my teammates helped me to emotionally deal with my suffering. A very helpful event in my grieving process was when, in the emergency room, my doctor told me that they were going to amputate my arm, but luckily did not have to. Realizing that I was lucky to have both my arms relieved a good deal of my suffering over not being able to compete as competitively as I had wished.

GOD'S RELATION TO SUFFERING

People who believe in God and Jesus do not have a special claim on suffering. Suffering is only a part of faith because it is a part of being human. Many Christian people try to justify suffering with religion, but that is not productive to our faith or respectful of non-believers who suffer. It is not acceptable to accept suffering in life because we are promised something better in heaven. For Christians, however, there is a

relationship between God and suffering. There is a relationship between God and pain. And there is a relationship between God and grieving. There is a connection because people look to God to be in control of the world. We cannot understand why a God in control would have the world as it is-- full of pain, suffering, and grieving. Also, we have a relationship with God, and turn to God in times of pain, suffering, and grieving for comfort. We want God to take control and ease our pain.

Another reason we relate God to suffering is because many Christians have been taught by the Church or other Christians that there is a direct connection between sin and suffering.¹¹ If someone weeps in church, there is sure to be another person thinking that he or she deserves that pain for the sin in his or her life. The Church often tries to move toward comfort without addressing pain instead of embracing those brave enough to face and work through their pain. It is true that there can be a connection between sin and suffering. God sets guidelines because God knows what is best for us, and certain pain comes from straying from what is best for us. Pain can occur when people want their own power and try to take control without trusting God.¹² For example, God says not to steal because God knows that a life of theft will not bring us happiness. When we do not trust God to provide what we need, we may turn to stealing. The suffering that comes from the dishonesty and the consequences of breaking the law is our own. However, we are not static individuals. We are born into a history of sin, and we are surrounded by sin in the world. The person caught in a cycle of stealing needs compassion from the world that imposed materialism and consumerism on him or her to heal.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

There is suffering that is not in connection with sin. Jesus was a human without sin who experienced loneliness, persecution, temptation, and limitation.¹³ There are signs, then, that there is pain that has no connection to sin. God sees this pain as helpful and life giving. For example, without loneliness, one would never be able truly to celebrate friendship. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had a similar experience in Eden with loneliness, temptation, and dependency, which were not punishments for sin. Although some pain can be avoided, it is very hurtful and dangerous to associate all pain with a punishment of sin from God. That is simply not God's intention. "What I am contending is that there are, in fact, forms of suffering which belong, in God's intention, to the human condition."¹⁴

FAMOUS CHRISTIAN SUFFERERS

Many Christians think that suffering is where God and humans meet. Some religious people repress their ordinary suffering and create extreme suffering thinking it will deepen their relationship with God. They use their religion to justify their suffering. Catherine Benincasa of Sienna, who was born in 1347, joined a convent at a young age and was eventually named a saint.¹⁵ She had a reputation for holiness because of her intense humility and fasting. She believed she had a deep relationship with Christ because of her suffering. She truly believed she had conquered her body, but like those who repress their ordinary suffering, she was flirting with immortality instead of trusting God. At the height of her life she flagellated three times a day, slept thirty minutes every two days, and ate only hosts.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54- 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 24.

Thus from the age of sixteen or so she subsisted on bread, water, and raw vegetables. She wore only rough wool and exchanged her hairshirt, the dirtiness of which offended her, for an iron chain bound so tightly against her hips that it enflamed her skin. For three years she observed a self-imposed vow of total silence except for confession, and this she maintained even though she lived at home.¹⁶

When she did eat, she would vomit as penance for her sins.¹⁷ She believed her holiness would save her mom from hell and her dad from purgatory.¹⁸ She gave up water on her deathbed and starved to death at a young age.¹⁹

Martin Luther was another Christian who created extreme suffering in order to prove his worth to God. Prior to his discovery of God's grace and the gospel message, Martin Luther was a perfect example of a religious person who sought out suffering to assuage his religious guilt caused by his sinful nature. By following the law of the Bible and living a disciplined life, he tirelessly worked to become worthy of God's love. He always fell short. He tortured himself with a rigorous lifestyle of fasting and prayer. "Luther entered the monastery in an effort to achieve salvation through perfection."²⁰ It was as if he could not suffer enough. "He did more than what the rules required of him. Often for periods of up to three days he did not take a drop of water or a piece of bread."²¹ He was driven by guilt to cause himself more suffering so he could be worthy of God's love. Martin Luther did not believe he was successful at becoming closer to God through suffering. Catherine of Sienna died convinced that she had done so. Luther came to realize that he had God's love without seeking out suffering. "At the heart of the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁰ Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

gospel is God's amazing love for sinners."²² Forcing suffering was boastful good works that did not affect his salvation in the least. He moved to do good because he was saved, not in order to be saved. He also reformed the Church so that people like Catherine would not take the salvation of others upon herself and her actions. Luther learned that suffering was part of the human condition; it did not need to be sought after.

CONFLICT AND DOUBT

Many Christians believe in a good and all-powerful God. These aspects of God come into question when we suffer because we assume that all-powerful means that God has the power to control our suffering and good means that God would not want us to suffer. Suffering is not fun or desirable. So it makes more sense to people that God would not want us to suffer and has the power to do something about it. Our suffering does not make sense to us, so we blame God who should be in control of the level of happiness in our lives. Why did God make us like this?

Christians are taught to believe in and trust God. This naturally becomes more difficult when we struggle with suffering. Guilt can accompany doubt in God because we believe it shows a weakness in faith. People of deep faith who have an awesome relationship with God feel that they should be above grieving and doubting. This is not true. Doubting God is a natural stage in the grieving process. Dealing with this doubt and grief in a mature way, however, is what points to the strength of one's faith.

"Through the centuries people who have been able to face grief in the knowledge that

²² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

God still cares about them have said that grief can be counted among the great deepening experiences of life."²³

Westberg relates ten stages that normally occur in the process of grieving. Grieving never happens in ten neatly packaged stages, and he does not try to say that. His book is helpful to see trends and to react to both ours and others' grief more productively. He presents helpful ways to deal with each stage as the sufferer and as the friend of the sufferer. Once shock and emotional stages pass, one begins to doubt God. "It is as if God is no longer in His heaven, as if God does not care. It is during these days we are sure that no one else has ever grieved as we are grieving."²⁴ In this stage, we feel completely out of touch with God and other people. We honestly feel that God must not care about us, or we may be convinced that there is no God at all. Westberg points out that Jesus went through this very same isolation on the cross. He cried out and felt forsaken himself as he searched for his God and found nothing.²⁵

The seventh stage Westberg presents also includes questioning of God. In attempting to understand our pain, many people need someone to blame, and God is a likely suspect. Coming out of the depression stages, it is healthy to express a controlled amount of hostility and resentment. After being upset with all the people involved in the painful situation, eventually the anger and blame begin to rest on the God who is to be trusted. "'Why did God do this to me?' or 'How can He be a God of love if He treats people like this?' With Carlyle we cynically say, 'God sits in His heaven and does nothing.'"²⁶

²³ Westberg, p. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

CHRISTIAN DOUBTERS

These difficult questions are part of the grieving process that all humans must go through. The following are some wonderfully vivid examples of people who normally believe in God but face the doubt Westberg anticipates because of great suffering in their lives.

In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis gives a raw and emotionally charged account of his thoughts and emotions after his lover, referred to simply as H., dies of cancer. Even remembering that the same loneliness happened to Christ does not seem to help him understand his pain. In fact, he sees the cross as a cruel practical joke on God's part in which even Christ is caught alone misinterpreting the nature of his own Father.²⁷ "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like.'"²⁸ He doubts life, goodness, love, and most of all God. His pain transcends all answers our society attempts to use to ease the pain of those who have lost loved ones. He is honest and intelligent enough that his doubt is a challenge to every Christian who believes in a good and loving creator God.

Lewis begins to wonder why people believe in God: "What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'?"²⁹ He continues his logic:

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), p. 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.9-a10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't. Either way, we're for it.³⁰

Lewis admits that his faith was as unstable as a house of cards, and it took the loss of H. to realize it. What is striking is that his words lend themselves to the possibility that he has a genuine and beautiful relationship with God. His pain and feeling of betrayal, then, are tough to witness. He in no way masks his feelings of doubt. Both Lewis's heart and head are used to accuse God of very serious offenses. His doubt is so real that it cannot be ignored, especially when Christians admit that similar pain must come their way at some point as a result of being human.

Dave Johnson, pastor at the Open Door Church in Crystal, Minnesota, articulates a very similar experience when he encountered death during the funeral of his father. He was told that a close friend had lost a long battle with brain cancer. The two losses were overwhelming. Even though his family was highly religious and continually turns to Scripture for guidance, doubt does not escape him in his time of suffering and pain. Johnson addresses how one can look to God, as the Bible says, for healing, comfort, and hope during times of great pain. However, it is still not that neat and easy. He was disturbed by his doubt of God. He did not expect fear to be an emotion felt by a man of deep faith. At the moment of his father's death, death seemed more real than life. "As we gathered around his lifeless body, I struggled wondering if he was really with you. In my gut, it felt like death had won."³¹

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³¹ David Johnson, *When the Answer is No: James 5:14-16* (Crystal, Minnesota: Growing In Grace Tape Ministry, Series # J45 Item # To2579).

Johnson, like C. S. Lewis, doubted the power and goodness of God when he felt he needed God the most. He was alone and afraid. In his talk to his congregation, he points out that he told his story mainly because such an experience is universal. "I was entering into a very profound human experience common to man at the critical moment."³² We will all suffer, and that suffering naturally lends itself to question the goodness of God, who Christians have been taught to trust.

Johnson and Lewis articulate well the fear and doubt that accompany the grieving process. As Johnson says, it is a universal experience that needs to be addressed. Whether we are hurting from death, illness, or a life change, grieving must occur to continue living successfully. For Christians, God seems far away when God is most needed for comfort, healing, and hope. Jesus did not even find comfort, healing and hope on the cross. He, too, doubted God. How can we believe in a God who allows us to hurt so badly? Is it that God is not as powerful as we think? Can God intercede? Is God good? It is essential to grapple with the nature of God if we are to worship God, and I intend to do just that.

SO NOW WHAT?

There are many ways of dealing with the conflict between God and suffering. We can stop believing in God. For those of us who do not feel comfortable with that option, it is an option that is worth taking a serious look at. Either God is not all-powerful and good, or we need to reassess God's goodness and power. I prefer to do the latter.

³² *Ibid.*

In this section, I have argued that ordinary suffering, pain, and grieving are universal and real. Many humans have known intense pain from violence, persecution, and hatred in the world. For numerous Americans, however, the struggle is more admitting to and recognizing the small, daily pain and suffering that also need attention and patience to heal. Such suffering should neither be ignored nor always connected with sin in our lives. Pain and suffering should not be pursued in order to come closer to God. As a result of God's connection to suffering, doubting God is often part of the grieving process, because we cannot reconcile how a good and powerful God can coexist with suffering. Since suffering is universal, it is important to begin the reconciliation. So without the emotional connection that Lewis and Johnson bring to the conversation, let us begin to ask the tough questions. Is it possible for God to be all-powerful and good in a world that suffers so much? What are power and goodness? Does God suffer with us? Is God worthy of worship?

EMPOWERING POWER

Suffering is real. It is something we all have to deal with at some point in our lives. The pain we feel often conflicts with the immediate assumptions we have about God. Christians often portray God as all-powerful and good. When we are in pain, however, it is difficult to reconcile these characteristics of God because we assume that a good and all-powerful God would not allow our pain. Thus, a good God would and an all-powerful God could do something to relieve our pain. God does not usually intercede directly to stop suffering most of the time, so inconsistencies in our thoughts on God exist.

This section will consider the omnipotence of God. In order to relate God's power to our suffering, it is important to explore the extent and nature of this power. One possibility is that God is powerful enough to wipe out suffering, but chooses not to. A second possibility is that God's power is limited and God cannot take away suffering. A third possibility is that God has limited God's power. No matter what, we must address the term power. We must pursue the relationship that exists between God's power, love, and our freedom in order to come closer to understanding our suffering in the presence of a good God. It is important to challenge the view of God as all-powerful. Does being all-powerful mean that God controls everything? Or does genuine power leave room for freedom and vulnerability?

POWER IN THE WORLD

Humans encounter power in the world constantly. In our society, every person has a spot in the power struggle. As a society at large, we admire people with power and aspire to be like them. Many humans believe that the goal with power is always to have more. Physical power is linked to more muscles, speed, and size. Economic power is having more money. Intellectual power is more formal education and intelligence. The more we have, the more powerful we are. Having more money, knowledge, friends, or any number of things entitles people to have more control. In our society, people closely associate power with control. A boss who has more money, experience, and schooling has control over his or her own work hours and job description, and gets to tell his or her employees when to work and what to do.

We strive for more so we can have power and control over our lives. Thus, power is also closely related to freedom in the sense of being free from others having control over our lives. Power also entails being able to tell others who they are. A powerful person can define oneself and have a say in others' identities. For example, Hitler told the Jews that they were subhuman. He told the Aryans that they were the superior race. And he told himself that he was doing the right thing by ridding the world of all non-Aryans. Hitler was a powerful man partly because he took control of words and telling other people their identity.

EXPECTING A KING

It makes sense that people expect God to have even more power and control than humans. If we idealize a person for having more control, a God worthy of worship must be in complete control. It is an understandable, yet extremely dangerous, connection to make. The people of Jesus' time did the same thing. Waiting for the Messiah, they were looking for a great king on a white horse to come save them. Instead, they got a servant hanging from a tree. We can use this image now to remind us that God's power does not look like human power. God's power is not the same as control. God's power is relational. It nourishes our freedom. It leaves room for intimacy so that we can work together to define who we are in God.

POWER OR CONTROL?

I personally struggled with what God's power looks like. It makes sense and is often comforting to think of God's power as manifesting itself through complete control over the world. God's control is comforting because it can be frightening to think that I have control over my life and must take responsibility for my actions. An all-controlling God, however, is not the kind of God I wish to worship. If an all-controlling God allows suffering in the world, God is made out to be an abusive parent figure. If God is in control of everything that happens in our lives, then free will is not a characteristic of being human. Although at times I want God to be in complete control, it just does not make sense when I look at the suffering world.

One problem is that people think of God as all-powerful, and they equate that with being all-controlling. This connection is not necessary if we see that God's power

does not need to look like human power. God's power goes beyond being all-controlling. God's power is wiser and better than that. It is relational, patient, and kind. God's power nourishes freedom. Most importantly, God's power is relational. I am an active participant in my relation to God. I get to help God define who I am.

That God does not have complete control of the world does not detract from the awesomeness of God's power. In fact, it adds to it. Sharing control with humans does not make God weak or bad. Looking in Genesis, we see that God is powerful enough to create the world. God is powerful enough to destroy the world as well. But because humans are in relation to God and have freedom, God cannot control our lives completely. If this is true, we are no longer the victims and God is no longer to blame. We are not waiting for life after death for good things to happen, and God is not abusing us.

HELPFUL MINDS

In dealing with God's relation to suffering, it is helpful to qualify God's power. If God does not directly intercede at times to end suffering, it is possible that God cannot intercede all the time. God may be limited somehow in God's power to end suffering. In exploring these thoughts further, three theologians prove to be helpful in gaining insight concerning to God's power in relation to suffering. Douglas John Hall helps articulate God's connection to freedom and the role of suffering in the human condition. He advises his readers to focus on God's love before God's power, suggesting that because of love and freedom, God chooses not to end suffering. Terence E. Fretheim patiently walks through the Old Testament to give the evidence that I need to say how God limits

God's control. He makes it obvious that God's limited power is far from a bad thing. He ties in the relational aspect of power while using the Bible as a primary source. Howard R. Burkle proposes that we must believe in a limited God. He believes that perfect power is limited. He helps us think outside society's standards and urges humans to take responsibility in the face of suffering. Each man brings something worthwhile to the conversation, giving us a great deal to wrestle with.

DOUGLAS JOHN HALL

Hall proposes an alternative picture of God who is very powerful while not in control of the suffering in the world. He helps steer people away from thinking of God's power in the same way as we think of human power. In *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, Hall draws connections between love, freedom, and suffering. "Love is *always* harder to explain than power."³³ He believes that we must take a different approach to the power of God to understand fully how God loves us:

If God is *loving* and at the same time *all-powerful*, then why is there so much suffering in the world? The assumption is that the deity *could*, if the deity *would*, simply eliminate suffering. Why then does not God do so, if God is truly loving? When the question is put in this way there is, I think, no satisfactory way of addressing it.³⁴

Hall believes that suffering will always be present in a world that has freedom and love. God is not unchanging, but is in relation to humans and history. Humans are not God's puppets, but have an affect on the future. "History is not fixed. It does not move *inevitably* towards either perfection or destruction, paradise or oblivion, the fulfillment of

³³ Hall, p. 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

dreams or their ultimate frustration.”³⁵ God is not all-controlling. Because of this, we are responsible for a fair share of our own suffering, as well as relieving the suffering of others. Suffering that God intends also strengthens us and makes us rejoice in the opposite of pain. Hall clearly accepts suffering as being in tension with and a possible result of love and freedom. If we truly want God to eliminate our suffering, our freedom must be eliminated as well. And since freedom is at the root of who we are, eliminating suffering would ultimately eliminate our humanity.³⁶

God loves us enough to give us free will. This means that God does not predetermine everything that happens in our lives. God loves us enough, essentially, to let us make mistakes. Because we are sinful beings, we abuse our freedom and do things that ultimately cause us pain. For example, a parent who truly loves a child will not make every decision for the child. The parent will give the child room to become his or her own person. With that freedom, the child will make decisions that will hurt. Although the parent might know at the time what is better for the child, it is important for the child to have control over his or her own identity and life. God, knowing what is best for us better than we do, could take control over our lives and alleviate a lot of the suffering, but that would also be taking away our power to define ourselves.

Inspired by Martin Luther’s theology of the cross, Hall defines perfect power not as consuming and victorious, but as weak and compromising. God is powerful, but not as the world typically understands the term power. “The only power that can address suffering humanity is the power of love, and that is a power ‘made perfect in weakness’”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

(2 Corinthians. 12:9, NRSV).³⁷ Connecting God first with power when facing human suffering is hurtful and confusing. Instead, we should primarily link God with love, which is more complex and sacrificial in comparison to power. Love leaves room for suffering, freedom, and interaction. God loves us instead of dominating us.

For Hall, God has bound Godself in love by choosing to be in relation to us in a non-dominating situation. Hall believes that God has the power to eliminate suffering in our lives, but cannot and must not because of the consequences connected with the loss of love and freedom for the people with whom God is in relationship:

What I mean, to put it in the most childish way, is that God's problem is not that God is *not able* to do certain things. God's problem is that God loves! Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every life. ...It involves an approach which is not only complex but costly; for it means that God's *power* has ultimately to articulate itself in divine solidarity with the sufferer, that is, in the "weakness" of suffering love.³⁸

Love is difficult because it requires putting others before us and caring enough to share joy and pain with other people. Compromise and humility are essential in a loving relationship. If God did not love us, God would not have to suffer with us. God would not have to humble Godself through compromise and relation with us. We often assume that love is never hurtful or hard, but love is far from kindness. When we are hurting, we ache for what is easy and feels good, but it is often a selfish and superficial desire. In moments when we are not paralyzed by pain, it becomes apparent that a God of love is more desirable than a God of kindness. A God of kindness would make things easier by alleviating our suffering while a God of love will suffer with us and help us grow from the pain.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Defining God in terms of love rather than in terms of power takes us deeper into the relationship between God and suffering. We see that God can love while we suffer. A loving God is more enticing than an all-controlling God. Freedom and love are blessings that enrich our relationship with God, who suffers beside us. We are told that God is love, but we are also told that love is kind. Hall makes a distinction between the two.

Hall is helpful in beginning the conversation by adding the dimension of love to attempt to understand how love, freedom, and suffering can be connected. He challenges us to imagine what the world would look like without freedom and suffering while reminding us that God is in relation to us intimately when we are free and suffering. His argument, however, must be read carefully. He makes a distinction between good and bad suffering. Thinking of any suffering as good can be difficult in times of emotional pain and stress. It is not as if God is putting us through suffering to toughen us up or build character. By making connections between love, freedom, and suffering, we must be careful not to think that the amount of suffering we feel is in correlation to the love we have from God. We do not need to accept suffering as a positive aspect of our lives. If we do not carefully decipher what Hall means by good suffering, we can walk away from his argument thinking that all suffering is good and that we are God's victims. That is an extremely detrimental thing to say to someone who is suffering. "What does not kill you will make you stronger."³⁹ Whether this is true or not, it should not be connected to God and God's intentions for us.

Very few people have the presence of mind to be grateful for freedom and love in the midst of intense suffering. A God who refuses to stop suffering in the name of love

³⁹ Common phrase.

and freedom is still difficult for the suffering human to comprehend, relate to, or trust. Hall redefines God's power and prioritizes it under the love of God, but the suffering person still has room to question the goodness of a God who can relieve suffering, but chooses not to. Read critically, Hall adds to the discussion, but does not supply a comprehensive answer, so we continue to grapple with the issues of God's power.

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

In *The Suffering God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Terrence E. Fretheim walks through the Hebrew Scriptures to point out glimpses of God's nature in relation to power. He differs from Hall and Burkle in that he puts forth an interpretation of the Bible. He is not asserting his own ideas, but finding his authority in the Old Testament. His statements come from passages and patterns he finds in the Old Testament that point to God's character and relation to the people. For example, Fretheim uses Jeremiah 7:5, which reads, "If you truly amend your ways...then I will let you dwell in this place," to show that God allows humans to have a say in their future. Giving this power to humans limits God's control.⁴⁰

Fretheim believes that God chooses to limit Godself in order to be in relation to God's people throughout history. This is necessary because an all-controlling God cannot nourish healthy relationships with people who cannot be an active part of the relationship as they are being controlled. God must limit Godself in order to connect with and interact with humans. In choosing to be in a dynamic relationship like that with

⁴⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p 47.

humans, sacrifices and compromises need to be made so that both God and humans can benefit from the mutual love that they share.

For Fretheim, the actual being of God is not limited. That would make it seem like the people are detracting from God. God is limiting God's control over the people so that people might reach their full potential with God. Some ways that God limits God's control are making promises to people, God giving God's name, God's insertion into history, and God's use of the words "if" and "perhaps," which leave the future unknown and vulnerable to change. He points out that envisioning God as all-controlling actually limits God more than believing in a God with qualified power:

God would not be able to make free, spontaneous decisions in the light of the spontaneities of human action. God would also be deprived of the experience or of novelty or of the joy of discovery. God's activity in the world would become a kind of production, a mere drawing out of what God has always determined. If it is not too flip, God thereby would become an already programmed computer. The truly personal dimension of the divine life would be sharply diminished.⁴¹

More than God being a programmed computer, I see an all-controlling God turning us into already programmed computers. God could still have spontaneity, but we would not. This would in turn take away from God's relations with us. Maybe God enjoys being in relation to spontaneous beings as opposed to programmed computers.

Christians strive to be in relation with God, yet Fretheim argues that the relationship cannot be real if God is truly omnipotent. There needs to be vulnerability and the surrender of power. If one person is completely omnipotent and controlling, there will be no room for growth, sharing, or love. Any relationship that has integrity and goodness must leave room for freedom and the sharing of power. This is true of God's relations to God's people as well:

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 44.

As in any relationship of integrity, God will have to give up some things for the sake of the relationship. Thus, God will have to give up some freedom. Any commitment or promise within a relationship entails a limitation of freedom. By such actions, God has decisively limited the options God has for speaking and acting. God has exercised divine freedom in the making of such promises in the first place. But, in having freely made such promises, thereafter God's freedom is truly limited by those promises. God will do what God says God will do; God will be faithful to God's own promises, and that is a limitation of freedom. God's freedom is now most supremely a freedom *for* the world, not a freedom *from* the world.⁴²

God relinquishes some freedom and options to strengthen God's relationship with us.

God inserts Godself into the history of the people is through time. Although God is eternal, God does not have complete control over the future. This limits God's power while giving the people freedom. "God's actions are not predetermined. Thus, Israel's response will contribute in a genuine way to the shaping not only of its own future, but to the future of God."⁴³ God's use of "perhaps" shows that the future is not set in stone. This leaves room for spontaneity and gives people the power to assist in forming the future. This word used in divine speech is an example of God limiting Godself.

God also uses the word "if" in divine speech. Like "perhaps," this word limits the power of God by allowing for alternatives in the future. It is important to look at words such as these as clues that God is moving with us toward a future that is somewhat unknown. It is a future over which we have some control. It is a future with possibilities. Fretheim quotes Jeremiah. 22:4-5: "If you will obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David...but if you will not heed these words...this house shall become a desolation."⁴⁴

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Another demonstration of God's limited knowledge of the future is the questions and consultations that shape the future in the Old Testament. The questions God asks the Israelites before acting demonstrates certain vulnerability and trust put in humans to determine their own future. God consults Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, who contribute to the future actions of God.⁴⁵ As a result of these questions and consultations, humans are a contributing factor in history.

God also makes promises. As in any relationship, this shows trust and purposely limits the power and options of the one promising. For example, God promises never to send another flood after the flood sent in Genesis 8-9. By promising this, God is limiting God's own power in the future.⁴⁶ When promises are made, God shows a sharing of power and an openness to humans that makes God more vulnerable. The God of the Old Testament is not a cruel, removed, or controlling God. God limits Godself by leaving the future somewhat open-ended in order to come into deeper and more real relations with humans.

Another important point Fretheim brings to the conversation about God's self-limitation is that God names Godself:

Naming entails life. Names are given to those who are living, and the importance of the perpetuation of the name in one's descendants is understood to be related to some continuing form of life. Naming entails distinctiveness, setting one off from others who have names.⁴⁷

Giving God's name to the people also meant concreteness, intimacy, availability, communication, and vulnerability.⁴⁸ Just as humans know the names of the people they

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 50, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

are closely tied to, God names Godself for these reasons as well. People may argue this point when if they think of YHWH as a puzzle and mystery. It is not as if God told Moses simply, "Call me God." The people of God would not even speak YHWH aloud in order to maintain the holiness of God. Whether we agree with Fretheim on this point or not, it is helpful to take note that God did make Godself known to Moses in a tangible way. The people came closer to God because God took the risk to become more known to the people.

Fretheim sees all of these things in the Old Testament as glimpses of the power of God. He sees that God has chosen to limit Godself. This creates a relationship between God and people where communication is possible. Prayer can make a difference. Power values the freedom of both parties in the relationship. There is an intimate bond that does not stifle or control. God can change, and humans are partially responsible for what happens in the future. By choosing to participate mutually in the history of the people, God becomes truly present and vulnerable so that a deep love and relationship is possible. God keeps God's promises and hopes that we will respond responsibly to the freedom we have been given.

This limited God has given some freedom to humans. Humans cannot simply blame God for all the suffering in the world. It is not as though all suffering is specifically part of the divine plan. God is not an abusive parent who enjoys our suffering. Rather:

It is necessary for God to enter into compromising situations, and work with whatever potential there is, in order to move toward God's salvific goals. But God, too, will suffer violence in such situations. God will not only absorb the effects of the human misuse of power, but will "look bad" in the eyes of all those who think that God's possibilities should not be so limited (see 1 Corinthians. 1:26-31). Implicit to what has been said, the sharing of powers opens the God-

world relationship up to the possibility of clash of powers... While God always works to overcome the effects of such wrongful use of power, God has given up absolute power to this end so as not to violate the integrity of the established relationship.⁴⁹

It is fair to question, however, how much God chooses to limit Godself. People in the midst of great pain and suffering will naturally disagree with the choice of God to limit God's power to the point where the Holocaust can occur with only indirect action on God's part. Rather than interceding to stop the Holocaust, God can comfort those in pain and give hope to resisters.

A person facing personal pain may also question the extent to which God has limited Godself. A self-limited God certainly makes a healthier and deeper relationship possible through the sharing of power and vulnerability, but why did God choose to limit Godself to the degree in which terrible suffering occurs? Can a self-limited God still be good when taking into account the possibility of genocide, torture, or the pain of losing a child or sibling? Fretheim takes the conversation in the right direction, but his explanation does not adequately reconcile a good God with the suffering we must endure. It is helpful to know that God is limited because God wants us to have freedom, but it is not enough to ease the pain of someone who knows suffering intimately. It is time to see what Burkle can bring to the conversation.

HOWARD R. BURKLE

Burkle is a helpful addition to the conversation at this point because he articulates how God is a necessary part of suffering, while shifting some responsibility for our

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 76.

suffering to humans. He helps me understand how qualified power can be more awesome than pure control. In *God, Suffering and Belief*, Burkle is in conversation with Alasdair MacIntyre about his views of God after the Holocaust. MacIntyre notes five possible conclusions people could come to about God and evil after the Holocaust. He thinks that all five are inadequate conclusions to explain God's intention for allowing evil in the world: "(1) evil is punishment, (2) evil is discipline, (3) evil is education, (4) evil is a consequence of free will, and (5) evil is mystery."⁵⁰

This is a relevant challenge to my argument because suffering could easily be interchanged for evil and continue to make sense. Many people think that suffering is one or a combination of these things. MacIntyre poses a challenge that Burkle sets out to rebuff. Burkle presents a sixth possible way to look at God's relation to suffering and evil; namely, humans are created with the ability to make responsible moral choices.

Humans are capable of good and evil:

Thus, God wills that the world be a place where both good and evil are possible, and although he does not desire evil, he does in a sense will it. 'For God wills that men should do what they will, even if it is not what God would wish them to do.'⁵¹

Burkle affirms that humans suffer, sometimes in extreme ways for no explainable reason. Knowing that, however, should not hinder humans from believing in God.

"Believing is neither an intellectual disgrace nor, on the other hand, proof of sanctity; it is a legitimate, honorable, and exceedingly difficult project."⁵² In fact, believing in God is more important than ever in light of how secular, technological, scientific, and violent our world is becoming.

⁵⁰ Howard R. Burkle, *God, Suffering, and Belief* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1977), p. 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

While Burkle spends a good deal of time addressing suffering that comes from the evil of racism, sexism, and religious hatred, he also explores daily, ordinary pain. He makes the distinction between pain and punishment: "God does not, like an irate parent, direct specific acts of punishment against specific acts of wrongdoing. There is more of randomness, looseness, and generality in the world than this."⁵³ Pain and suffering do not destroy the worth of life. Burkle believes that God cannot prevent suffering, and God should not be blamed. Suffering-- and ultimately death-- are unavoidable, but that does not prevent humans from loving life:

All persons share a common destiny, and sooner or later all die. However, combined with this sad awareness is a more basic joy. Life is prior to death. Life is granted to each person by one who is Life itself, and it is ours for a brief period to be used and enjoyed. No matter how brief one's time may be, it is a supreme value."⁵⁴

It is difficult to believe in the innate goodness of people and the world when we hurt, but that does not mean God did not create it that way. Humans have the ability to strive for that basic goodness. It is possible to accept suffering, while simultaneously feeling joy. It is possible to know death and celebrate life.

There is a distinction between pain caused by things such as a divorce or loss of a limb and pain caused by systematic violence and persecution. While Burkle makes such a distinction, similar challenges can be applied to both ordinary and extreme suffering. The chapter that addresses the Holocaust is titled "Betrayal," because people believed that God had betrayed the Jews and left them completely:

We do not have the logical right to believe in God until we come to terms with the horrifying problem of God's complicity in evil, until we find some reason for the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

staggering truth which belief in God entails-- that in some sense God wills the death of the Six Million.⁵⁵

Burke does not believe that God specifically willed the Holocaust. However, God created humans to be able to reject God and go against God's will. God made humans capable of great evil, and works through people who are doing God's will by fighting that evil.

The Holocaust is an example of suffering that embodies the absurdity and stark reality that surrounds all suffering. It cannot be justified in any way, and it is difficult to explain. In light of the Holocaust, Burke challenges us to reject two assumptions: that we cannot understand and explain things such as the Holocaust, and that God has unqualified power. He articulates what he sees as the "logic" of the argument that God is all-powerful:

If God can do whatever it wishes, then it [God] could have prevented Auschwitz. Since it did not, it must have wished for Auschwitz to happen; and if that is so, Auschwitz must be good and God must enjoy it. But if God enjoys Auschwitz, the human value system is totally subverted. Cruelty is kindness, agony is pleasure, injustice is justice. Humanity is plunged into moral madness.⁵⁶

He sets up the same problem that the other two men saw with an all-controlling God.

Burke addresses the problem differently, however. Hall says that God can prevent suffering, but chooses not to. He thinks that pain is a fair price to pay for freedom.

Burke challenges Hall by saying a God who could have prevented the Holocaust but chose not to should be charged with crime against humanity. He is not convinced that genocide is a fair trade for freedom. Conversely:

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

If there are some things God cannot do, and if preventing the Holocaust is one of them, then God must not be charged with this atrocity against the Jewish people. Not God, but those who defied God's will are culpable."⁵⁷

Defining God as having limited power has its share of problems. Especially for Americans, a lack of power symbolizes weakness and imperfection. Exploring the possibility of a limited God, however, paints a complex and healthy view of the divine being. Having limited power can actually be more impressive and good than at first glance:

A God who exercises total control over absolutely everything that happens and exercises its will regardless of the inclinations of those affected is not supreme goodness but sheer power-- awesome but not deserving of worship. A God deserving of worship shares power with its creatures, allowing them, as far as possible, to make their own decisions, teaching them to decide wisely, controlling them by helping them control themselves. *Perfect Power* nourishes the power in others, thus bringing new and greater power into being.⁵⁸

Burkle is being intentional here when he sets up God as all-controlling. He understands the difference between power and control, but he is simply painting a picture so that we may more clearly see the flaws of a God who is not limited in control.

Burkle is very aware of the problems posed by defining God as limited. Some may say, without sounding absurd, that a limited God is too high a price to pay for freedom. Some would prefer no world to the world we have, plagued by suffering and loss. Some may wonder why God created humans rather than less destructive beings.⁵⁹ Anyone who has suffered has the right to think such thoughts. Burkle counters:

It seems to me that the inherent worthiness of human beings is so apparent to us all-- at least when we are looking upon those who are close to us, whom we can easily accept as our own-- that we cannot ultimately desire that the human race as

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

we know it did not exist. We do not in our deepest hearts believe that God erred in creating us. What we want is that the nature God gave us be perfected, that its energies be formed and directed in creative channels, that its innate inexperience, ignorance, and egocentricity be restructured. However, this is not something which can be attained in a flash by God's acting directly on human agents. It can only be achieved by human agents responding lovingly and intelligently to God's lead.⁶⁰

Burkle believes in a God who acts through people who are free to reject God and God's will but chose not to. God did not will the Holocaust. However, God does allow evil and suffering to be possible. God creates while knowing that evil is a possibility. That does not mean that God wills the evil. "The world is not evil, but it is vulnerable to evil..."⁶¹ People choose to turn some such possibilities into actuality. God cannot intervene and end suffering because God's control is qualified. That is part of believing in a limited God. God can, however, work through those who try to end suffering in the world.

Burkle, Fretheim, and Hall agree that God's power needs to be qualified in the face of a suffering world. All acknowledge the intimate relationships between the freedom humans have and the pain they feel. All recognize the continuing presence and activity of God in the world. For Burkle, however, God has not chosen to limit Godself, nor does God have the power to limit suffering, but chooses not to. God is simply limited. And a limited God can be good, loving, and worthy of worship.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

A RELATIONAL AND POWERFUL GOD

Because of the daily suffering we endure and the massive suffering our world has known, an all-controlling God does not satisfy. We cannot say that God has enough power to control the suffering in the world. It is inconceivable to imagine a God directly affecting our lives in such a harsh way. The knowledge that God is not punishing us or enjoying the pain we feel can comfort us in moments of doubt during times of suffering.

It is difficult to qualify God's power positively in a society that often values control. Thus, we need to move away from human definitions of power. In order to move toward healing, we can define God as love, not as sheer power. Hall shows us how a loving God can be more hopeful and helpful to a suffering world than an all-controlling God. We can also qualify God's power by defining it as relational. Fretheim shows us how and why God limits God's control by God's relation to and love for us. A relational and loving power may not be all-controlling, but it is empowering for us.

Burkle explores the consequences of worshiping a God with qualified power and limited control. By qualifying God's power and seeing that God does not have complete control over our lives shifts moral responsibility to humans, who were created free to do either great or horrible things. God is not opposed to us when we suffer, but rather is acting through those who work to comfort us in our hard times. It is possible to believe in a powerful God who loves us enough to give us freedom and joy, despite the pain. Believing in this God naturally calls us to do God's will and let God work with us to counter evil and suffering.

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

The goodness of God is related to, but not identical with, the power of God in relation to human suffering. God's power is limited by God's goodness. Many Christians assume that God is good, yet doubt that character trait intensely when bad things happen to good people. Christians often assume that God is emotionless and removed from suffering, so it is easy to vilify God when we hurt. I will challenge both of these assumptions by presenting a case for the goodness and the emotion of God. When we are hurting, God is with us more than ever, suffering along with us.

WHAT GOODNESS LOOKS LIKE

Like power, it is helpful to define goodness. Goodness comes from the core of a person's being. Goodness is not manifested consciously, but is the essence of a good person in action. In humans, goodness often looks like decency or integrity. There is an honesty and kindness that naturally accompanies goodness. Goodness is not selfish, hurtful, or evil. One cannot be good without love. Goodness is vulnerable, compromising, and emotionally invested love of another. Goodness shares power intimately and puts another person's happiness and welfare first. Wanting the best for someone does not mean necessarily wanting what is quickest, easiest, or least painful. Goodness is giving of oneself genuinely, freely, and from the heart.

God's goodness far surpasses the goodness in people. God's goodness comes from God giving of Godself freely, vulnerably, and genuinely. God gives Godself to us

in love that compromises, shares power, and works for what is best for us. Goodness is the process of giving some control to humans so that communion is possible. God's goodness comes through in God's constant and pursuing love for us. God wants what is best for us all the time. This is why God wills goodness on earth. What is best for us is not always easy or what we perceive as good. This is where suffering comes in. God helps us unite and grow strong through suffering, as well as identify with Jesus and learn from our mistakes. God is concerned with our welfare to the point where God is in intimate relation to us. God's goodness is also what fights against evil, that which is not good. God's essence is willing away from sin that hurts us.

God is also good in the generous gifts God gives us. We have grace, the Holy Spirit, eternal life, and talents because of God. The goodness goes passed the actual gifts to the power that God has in our lives to have a positive influence. What God can do points to the goodness of God.

WHAT GOD CAN DO

Even if we can learn to see God's limited control as being beautiful, powerful, and awesome, it is still easy to focus on what God cannot do when discussing God's power. When we are suffering, it is easy to concentrate on how God does not intercede directly to remove the hurt. Wanting to move to a place where we do not blame God but rather begin to move toward communion with God through our suffering, it proves to be helpful to look at what God can do.

God is our Creator. God created the earth and the people on the earth. God gives us life in this world. God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit. God is in relation and

communion with us. God forgives, redeems, and saves us. God gives us life in the world to come, which is everlasting. Because of all these things that God can do, we have hope, comfort, and joy in this world and the next. We have God's love without being worthy or deserving of it. God's limited control of our life does not change these things. When we keep this in mind, God's goodness abounds. Psalm 139 is one of many examples of God's goodness in the Bible. It says that there is nowhere we can go to hide from God. God is here in our joy and our suffering. God is here in this world and the next. It is refreshing to focus on what God can do after pounding away at the particulars of God's limitations. It is important to enter a conversation about God's goodness with this in mind.

HELPFUL THINKERS

Terence E. Fretheim, Jürgen Moltmann, and Howard R. Burkle all add a great deal to the conversation of God's goodness in the face of suffering. Fretheim also focuses on what God can do by revealing God's goodness through examples of God as present in history throughout the Bible, especially the Old Testament. God is not just present, but seeks our input, makes covenants with us, and suffers with, for, and over us. God's power is limited by God's goodness. Then we transition into the New Testament as Moltmann connects our suffering to the suffering of God in Jesus. Jesus' resurrection shows that God's love defeats death and suffering. Finally, Burkle issues a call to action, arguing that God truly wishes to act through us to end suffering. We must get to a point in this discussion where we are willing to let go and let God work through us. We must see ourselves as responsible moral beings.

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

Fretheim addresses the goodness and emotion of God in the same book that he explores God's limited power. It is helpful to have him trace God's goodness through the Old Testament because it gives us very specific examples of God's interaction with God's people. As discussed in the second chapter, Fretheim shows how God is active in history with the people. Along with showing how this limits God's power, it also aids in showing God's goodness. God has chosen to share in the human condition. Fretheim argues that God's presence in human history, thus the intimate interaction God has with humans, was not necessary. The fact that God chose to do this proves how much God cares for God's creation. "Hence, I suggest that it would serve our purposes better if we spoke of divine presence as gift, to be possessed though not presumed upon, and as promise, reliable though not irresistible."⁶²

God seeks out human's input and allows for humans to have an impact on their own future. God makes promises and sticks to them. For example, God promises never to send another flood after Noah survives. Genesis 9:11 reads: "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." This promise limits God's ability to use another flood, yet it shows that God is thoughtful and even remorseful about the devastation the flood brought. These are not actions of an uncaring or emotionally removed deity. "God is faithful, loving, gracious, and righteous; hence, there is hope."⁶³ Everything that Fretheim uses to prove the self-limitation of God also works to argue that God is good. The same factors that make God unable to eliminate suffering are the

⁶² Fretheim, p. 70.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

factors that help us believe that God is good. A God who does not make promises and does not limit Godself would be powerful enough to eliminate suffering, but God's goodness would be in question.

Fretheim is showing how God's control is limited through God's relational power with humans. Some may challenge him by arguing that God needs to be in relation to humans to define Godself. Without being intimately connected to humans, God would not be worshiped or interacted with. God could still be Creator, but God needs to be present in history and interact with the people in order to be God the Redeemer, Savior, and Friend. God finds Godself in relation to God's creation. Because Fretheim is using God's interaction with people throughout history to God's credit, I would point out that God benefits from the interaction with us. However, God's presence can still be seen as a gift even if God uses God's relation with us to continue to define Godself. Whether God's presence in history is a gift or not, we should appreciate the goodness of God because of the extent to which God is active and alive in our lives. Also, humans could help define God without the intimacy that God offers. God could be in only a master-to-servant relationship with us. This relationship would give God control and define God, but it would also mean we would act out of fear and obligation to God. God offers us more. God tells us to pray to Our Father, Abba, or "daddy." This calls us into a deep and blessed relationship of love and goodness.

God goes farther than just being present in history. God goes farther than limiting Godself throughout history. God suffers with the people. God suffers for the people, and God suffers when the people reject God.⁶⁴ The relationship in which God has chosen to engage and interact with opens Godself up to suffering with us and because of us. God

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

suffers when we suffer because God cares about God's creation. "Such a perspective reveals a divine vulnerability, as God takes on all the risks that authentic relatedness entails. Because of what happens to that relationship with those whom God loves, God suffers."⁶⁵ God is on the inside of the suffering of the people, and God mourns with us. Such a God should not be blamed or denied in the face of pain, but rather turned to and confided in. With Israel, God becomes weary from enduring all the pain so that Israel may continue. God moves to redeem as soon as possible. In order for Israel to be redeemed, God had to immerse Godself in humiliation and pain. God takes on a servant role in the relationship so that Israel may know redemption and life. "God's suffering made Israel's life possible."⁶⁶

Vulnerable and compromised, God also suffers when we reject God. The Israelites continually reject the love of God, yet God does not leave them. God is invested in not only an intellectual relationship, but also an emotional one. God is not standoffish and unaffected by the people, but deeply involved. God is wounded by the rejection of people.⁶⁷ So, not only does God hurt when we hurt, but we hurt God. This also works to counter the vilification of God in light of our pain. The complex emotion and love of God is seen clearly in the first commandment, stated partially in Exodus 20:5: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God." Jealousy is an emotionally charged word that implies deep feelings of love. God tells the people here that God will love them better than idols, but God will not share them. A God who loves us enough to be jealous when we do not love back is hardly a disconnected and cruel punisher. "By deciding to endure a wicked world, while

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

continuing to open up the heart to that world, means that God has decided to take personal suffering upon God's own self."⁶⁸ God's wrath has transformed, according to Fretheim's argument, to injured love. God does not punish quickly, but thoughtfully and with the love of a parent. God is not apathetic, but good.

It could be argued that being emotionally involved with people does not necessarily imply God's goodness. Fretheim uses passages that clearly show the dedication, love, and commitment of God that make God emotionally involved. However, it is possible to see God as foolishly devoted to God's people. The argument could follow that one can be good without being so vulnerable that one feels jealous or suffers because of someone else. We do not need to relate to the pain we cause God because God chose to create people who are capable of rejecting God and apt to blame God. I would disagree. I think love is a requirement for goodness, and God shows God's love by being vulnerable and committed to God's creation, no matter how foolish God looks to an emotionally removed person. The unconditional and abounding love God promises is a gift, and we should be grateful that God endures the suffering we cause God. If God did not love us enough to suffer with, for, and over us, God could not be considered good. A God who creates us and detaches can be awesome and can be worshipped as the Creator. A God who stays with God's creation and loves us simply for being God's is good and can be worshipped as Creator, Redeemer, and Friend. God's persistent and pursuing love is a productive example of God's goodness.

The most important distinction Fretheim makes that applies to his whole argument is the difference between God's freedom *from* the people and God's freedom

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

for the people.⁶⁹ People often assume that God is removed emotionally from us because of God's omnipotence. Fretheim argues that God is neither removed nor omnipotent, and the two are closely intertwined. God is limited through the relationship God has to us. It is similar to any healthy relationship. God and the people both contribute to the future. Both compromise and keep promises. Both are emotionally involved and deeply hurt when rejection occurs. God gives the people freedom because God loves the people. Rejection is possible so that people might choose love. Such a God is good and worthy of praise. Such a God is not directly responsible for our pain. Such a God is with us when we suffer.

Again, it would be possible to argue this point by saying by creating humans capable of evil and giving them partial control over the future, God is at fault for suffering in the world. Instead, we can rejoice in the freedom that God gives us and take that as a challenge to use our freedom responsibly to counter evil in the world. We can praise God for being brave enough to grant us freedom and work together with God to create a better future for our world.

Fretheim has some very strong points that need serious attention as we strive to uncover pieces of God's character. We learn a great deal studying God's interaction with the people throughout history. It is encouraging knowing that God is still here loving us and suffering with us. Both are good indications of a good God.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 36.

JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

While Fretheim takes a thorough look at the Old Testament, Moltmann addresses similar issues from the life of Jesus as seen in the New Testament. He shows how God suffers with us, especially in the dying Jesus. The fact that God offers God's grace to everyone through Jesus and suffers with us suggests God's goodness and intimate relation to our pain. He refers to Jesus as the crucified God and explores Christ's crucifixion as the center of Christianity. He sees Jesus as a rebel who died for political reasons and was abandoned by God. Because of this, anyone who loves God cannot love law or power.⁷⁰

Moltmann thinks that Jesus died violently as a criminal for a specific purpose. If he had died a natural death, then people could have assumed that he was granted eternal life because of his goodness on earth. His death as a condemned criminal challenges us to associate Jesus' resurrection with God's saving grace alone. Saints and criminals alike will receive the gift of salvation if they have faith in God. It is also significant that Jesus felt abandoned by God on the cross. If Jesus had felt God's presence, then we could think that God abandons us because we are not as good as Jesus. We would strive to be perfect and without sin, missing that it is grace, not works, that saves us.

When we feel alone, it is not because we deserve to be punished. Even Jesus felt alone on the cross, and we can turn to Jesus for comfort in times when we feel abandoned. These parts of Jesus' life have significant and hopeful implications for our lives:

⁷⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), p. 69.

In Jesus he does not die the natural death of a finite being, but the violent death of the criminal on the cross, the death of complete abandonment by God. The suffering in the passion of Jesus is abandonment, rejection by God, his Father. God does not become a religion, so that man participates in him by corresponding religious thoughts and feelings. God does not become a law, so that man participates in him through obedience to a law. God does not become an ideal, so that man achieves community with him through constant striving. He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and godforsaken can experience communion with him.⁷¹

No one is beyond God's grace. Everyone can be reached by God's love. There is no suffering that we will feel that has not been felt by Jesus on the cross. We can all know God and be in communion with God just as we are--broken and hurting. These are comforting thoughts in times of pain. Because Jesus suffered and felt abandoned on the cross, we can have communion with him in our suffering and times of loneliness.

The concept of God forsaking Jesus on the cross is complicated. It can and should be argued that God cannot be on the cross, while Jesus is truly forsaken by God on the cross. The death of Jesus shows the human side of Christ. This is central to Christianity, so that humans may connect with God through Jesus, who was both human and divine. It is often more challenging to see the human side of Jesus, but it comes through clearly as he is dying as a mortal. God was there, suffering with Jesus, yet Jesus felt alone. This points to the fact that when we feel alone, it is our doing, not God's. God is there wanting to help, heal, and redeem. Everyone is welcome to share in that goodness of God.

As God became a servant to the Israelites, God becomes a servant in the life and death of Jesus. God suffered with the Israelites, was in exile with them, and was

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

redeemed with them. "God himself is 'the ransom' for Israel."⁷² Moltmann also uses *Night*, a book by Elie Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust, to show how God suffers with us:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' Someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows...'⁷³

If God does not suffer at the sight of the dying youth, then God is not good nor is God God. In the face of such pain is not possible, God can be neither omnipotent nor indifferent. The same applies to the daily pain we experience. God is not indifferent or refusing to intervene. God is with us in all God's goodness. "Even Auschwitz is taken up into the grief of the Father, the surrender of the Son and the power of the Spirit."⁷⁴ The fact that God can stay with people throughout the Holocaust means that God will not leave us while we endure our pain. The fact that sorrow is in God and God is in sorrow means we have reason to hope. It means that God loves us in a way that sustains suffering and even death.

Moltmann brings God's generous goodness a step closer by showing God's relation to the suffering of Jesus. Just as God is hanging on the gallows, God is with us when we are suffering. Looking at Jesus, we know that comfort is available to us all. God's love and goodness are powerful enough to conquer death. God was good; God is good.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁷³Elie Wiesel, *Night*, co cited by Moltmann, pp. 273-274.

⁷⁴Moltmann, p. 278.

HOWARD R. BURKLE

Much of Burkle's argument for God's goodness is closely related to God's limited power. Since Burkle defines God as limited, God cannot be charged with the evil that occurs in the world. Although God created a world that has the possibility of evil and pain, God is unable to prevent it from occurring, and God certainly does not will the suffering directly. God creates knowing that suffering will occur. The fact that every event is planned and willed specifically by God is a statement that needs qualifying. God wills, but humans may disobey. Thus:

There is tragedy at the heart of God's will to create. This should not obscure the positive side of creation, however. God is compelled by nothing. It freely creates, knowing what is involved. God willingly allows the frustrations of its aims, assumes the ultimate responsibility for the evil that is done, opens itself to the suffering which comes with the world's suffering. This is the price God is prepared to pay and the measure of the high value God puts on the world.⁷⁵

God created people not as God's puppets, but as moral creatures whom, if they misuse their freedom, are capable of Auschwitz. The world would not be insufficient if the Holocaust had never happened, but it would be insufficient without the possibility of it occurring.⁷⁶ Because God is limited, God cannot act directly to end suffering. God cannot intervene. This also has heavy implications on the goodness of God, because Burkle is saying that God does not sit by and enjoy our pain. God is not willing us to suffer. God has made us capable of suffering so that joy, too, is both possible and valued. But our hurt does not necessarily coincide with God's wishes.

⁷⁵ Burkle, p. 60.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

God takes another step past not directly willing evil. God works through us to prevent and end suffering in the world. God so strongly wills goodness in the world of possible evil that God persuades humans to do God's good will. If we are open to God's will, God will work with us to stop suffering and evil.

One might ask Burkle why we cannot blame God for creating us as moral beings. Maybe God the creator of moral humans is beyond goodness. Maybe it is still God's responsibility that there is suffering. I would contend that God gives us more credit than that. We are worth more than beings who cannot create evil. Just as perfect power is not all-controlling, perfect goodness is not without flaw. God wills goodness and makes humans capable of wonderful things. God also works through humans to achieve goodness. That is why Hitler was defeated and many Jews were saved during the Holocaust. People must drop the need to be victims and dare to get in touch with the will of God, which is goodness and love. In so far as humans join God in defining the future, God's good will can prevail.

Burkle's transfer of power in the God-human relationship gives much more responsibility to humans. It is not God, but the humans disobeying, who can be charged for evil actions. Humans have moral responsibility not only to fight evil, but also to work to alleviate the daily hurt of the people around them. "God's power in the human sphere lies in the constructive projects it can induce human beings to take on voluntarily. God gives, acknowledges, and nurtures the independence and potency of the beings of the world and cooperates with them in pursuit of their mutual objectives."⁷⁷

Burkle is issuing a radical call for action. It is imperative that people spend less time blaming God for suffering. Seeing God as love rather than power empowers

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 97.

humans to move past the pain to reconciliation and healing. Deep down, people are able to believe that God can have no hand in things that destroy or degrade us. It is all right to doubt God, but it is also necessary to take moral responsibility for our lives. God is not an abusive parent. God loves us enough to give us freedom, to will goodness, and to act with us in the alleviation of pain in the world. Burkle calls humans to act so that God may be seen in the world, fighting with us for life:

I contend that if we think of God's persuasion as active participation in the world, we will have all the assurance of its potency that we need. Think of God not just as defeated and blocked by the various manifestations of absurdity, but as actively attempting to overcome them. Imagine God as positioned in the center of the world's radical evils, working from within to remove them. Push beyond images of a mere brooding Presence, and think of a fellow Sufferer who takes the world's pain into itself. See God's powerlessness not only as an inability to achieve its ends, but also as a voluntarily assumed condition intended to call forth from all rational creatures the very actions which they must take to become God's co-creators. See powerlessness as a fulcrum by which human beings can become more powerful than they otherwise would be. Visualize divine powerlessness in its paradoxically--as the potency of persuasion. In this we can find the guarantee we need--not that we *shall* overcome, but that with God's sustenance, we *can*.⁷⁸

God's goodness is shown in God's desire to assist us in the world. God's goodness is also seen in God's emotion. God suffers with us. An abusive parent, an evil God, would not suffer with us. God is real and alive at every crisis. God is ready to act in every tragedy. God can help humans change the world. With a limited God, God's goodness is not an issue. It is certain that God is with us when we suffer, even when we doubt the goodness and existence of God. It is certain that God can work to overcome suffering. With a limited God, the question returns to us. The question is not, "Why does God let us suffer?" The question becomes, "Will we join in God's struggle?" "The problem is no longer why God does not prevent suffering, but why human beings do not

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

refrain from violating each other, and why we do not more powerfully respond to all the suffering and work with God to eliminate it.”⁷⁹

Fretheim, Moltmann, and Burkle add a good deal to the discussion of God’s goodness. God continually shows God’s love to us. God is overflowing with vulnerable, sacrificial love. A God who is Love cannot be evil. A God who is good cannot be emotionally removed from God’s beloved. We can and must believe in a good God despite the pain we feel. We have comfort knowing that God is suffering with us and for us. It is important to know that God suffers because of us. There is no suffering that God cannot handle if we believe in the crucified God. When we hurt, God is there. When we act to relieve hurt, God empowers us. All we need to do is turn to our good God and ask for strength.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 121.

CONCLUSION: WE SHALL OVERCOME

Through the process of writing this paper, I have personally come to several assertions that will enhance my faith and relationship with God, especially in times of suffering. Repression of suffering is unhealthy, so is trivializing it. Even if extreme suffering never crosses our paths, we, especially in the United States, still need to recognize the ordinary suffering in our lives and begin to deal with whatever comes with that suffering. If we doubt God and it feels like death and evil have won, we need to have faith and think of God's attributes in times of strife, realizing that some suffering is beneficial to us as humans. I have learned, through the process of writing this paper, that I value suffering as part of the human experience. It does not need to be either feared or sought after. I learned that I also value a God who is powerful, but not all-controlling. I look to the Bible and see a God limited through God's goodness, through promises and covenants, being active in human history, and dying on a cross. I see a God who wants to be in my life, through the easy and the hard times. I see a God who has given me life and the chance to know eternal life.

It is easy to turn God into a monster when we hurt, but we have worked through to the other side, after allowing the monster a possibility to exist. We do not need to believe in a God who is a cruel, abusive parent. We do not need to doubt God's goodness for a second. We do not need to think that God is punishing us. Beyond denying God's cruelty, we can see that God loves us! God loves us by displaying perfect power that nurtures the power in us so that we can really know God and be in communion with God. God trusts us enough and values the world enough to make evil a possibility through freedom. It is time to value that same world enough to choose goodness and God's will.

We can, shall, and will overcome evil in this world by turning to the God who loves us passionately. And the good news is that we do not need to do it alone. God is with us when we suffer, and God is working with us and through us when we do God's good will on earth. If we are bold enough to tap into God's power and goodness, the world will become a better place.

Seeing that God is suffering with us and chooses to stay with us in our pain empowers us. That insight helps us endure the suffering and seek out others who need healing and peace. God can work through me if I let go of the fear of pain. With God by my side, I do not need to fear pain or death. Consequently, I will learn how to live truly.

When people reach a place where they feel comfortable, they can turn to God instead of turning away from God at crucial and painful moments in their lives. Being in a good place with God and suffering becomes more than a personal comfort, however. This recognition can help create communities that are not afraid of pain. This recognition can help change our society, so that suffering is faced and dealt with, surrounded by the grace of God, instead of repressed and denied.

People ache for the love and support a loving and good God brings. This is the God of salvation, the God of life, and the God of healing. The more people believe in this God, the more they can lead others there. After finding a place where we feel comfortable turning to God in times of suffering, God calls us to embrace others who need help and who need God. God wants to act and strengthen God's relationship to God's people, but God needs us to be active in that relationship as well. It is time to stop vilifying God and praise God instead. We need to dare to let God use us in this world. People who have come to a place where God and suffering coexist can be productive

agents and increasingly intimate friends with God. These people have the power to make our society hurt less by helping others join God in their pain. Because of the extensive suffering that occurs, it is crucial to be able to go to God with our pain, fear, and doubt because of suffering. There is time for mourning, and there is time for action. God is there through it all.

God wants to be let into our hearts and lives, to be a more active player—not in eliminating suffering or love or freedom, but in healing, redeeming, and granting eternal life and peace. Now that is an awesome God who is worthy of worship! That is a God who stands up to suffering and overcomes it with life and love.

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