



The Cross and the Crosses, Pastor as Partner in Tribulation

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Not-So-Great Expectations

The Bible teaches us to expect suffering. We don't.

While almost every ancient worldview had a mechanism to integrate suffering into the bigger picture of life and the universe, our modern materialism (as a form of Epicureanism) sees no greater purpose in life than maximizing pleasure. This makes suffering, by necessity, incompatible with the good life, an interruption, or a cause for revolt against God or the world, or, at last, a reason to reject a belief in God altogether.¹

This blanket rejection of suffering finds its way into theology, where God's ultimate purpose is our happiness, understood in mostly materialistic terms. Joel Osteen is the easiest example, who teaches that by the power of our faith we bend the universe and God into serving us.² In this theology suffering is the result of our lack of faith, or our lack of giving money to the right TV preacher.

The Scriptures, on the other hand, teach us to expect suffering. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you," (1 Peter 4:12). "In the world you will have tribulation," (John 16:33b). We could fill a book with passages like these. In fact, when Martin Luther invented a game to teach the children how to distinguish different passages of the Scriptures he suggested using four pouches, one for texts that teach about sin, a second for texts that teach forgiveness in Christ, a third for texts that teach us to love our neighbor, and a fourth for texts about Christian suffering.³ Imagine it, a fourth of the

¹ See Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (Penguin, 2013), 20-27.

² See Hank Hanegraaff, *The Osteification of American Christianity* (Christian Research Institute).

³ "What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ his Son? Answer: It means to believe with the heart that we would all be eternally lost if Christ had not died for us, etc. Likewise in the Ten Commandments, one must ask: What is meant by the First, the Second, the Third, and the other commandments? One may take these questions from our Betbüchlein where the three parts are briefly explained, or make others, until the heart may grasp the whole sum of Christian truth under two headings or, as it were, in two pouches, namely, faith and love. Faith's pouch may have two pockets. Into one pocket we put the part [of faith] that believes that through the sin of Adam we are all corrupt, sinners, and under condemnation, Romans 5 [:12], Psalm 51 [:5]. Into the other we put the part [of faith that trusts] that through Jesus Christ we all are redeemed from this corruption, sin, and condemnation, Romans 5 [:15-21], John 3 [:16-18]. Love's pouch may also have two pockets. Into the one put this piece, that we should serve

Scriptures are given to us by the Holy Spirit to teach us how to suffer! Luther identifies the “sacred cross” as a mark of the church.⁴

Far from a worldview that is incompatible with suffering and from a life that is structured to avoid suffering at all costs, the Bible teaches us to expect suffering, even to rejoice in suffering, and more, to put our trust and our hope in a God who Himself suffers for us and with us.

This essay will consider the Biblical teaching of suffering and the pastor’s role as a partner with people who are suffering.

The *Crux Humanum* and the Problem of Suffering

The problem of suffering is the *Crux Humanum*, that is, the philosophical question that has no rational answer, and it is analogous to the *Crux Theologorum*, the theological question that has no rational answer. The *Crux Theologorum* is: “Why are some saved and not others?”⁵ The problem, in brief, is thus:

and do good to everyone, even as Christ has done for us, Romans 13. Into the other put this piece, that we should gladly endure and suffer all kinds of evil.” Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, v 53: *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 66.

⁴ Take a look at this: “Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5 [:11], ‘Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account.’ They must be pious, quiet, obedient, and prepared to serve the government and everybody with life and goods, doing no one any harm. No people on earth have to endure such bitter hate; they must be accounted worse than Jews, heathen, and Turks. In summary, they must be called heretics, knaves, and devils, the most pernicious people on earth, to the point where those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish, and plague them to death are rendering God a service. No one has compassion on them; they are given myrrh and gall to drink when they thirst. And all of this is done not because they are adulterers, murderers, thieves, or rogues, but because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God. Wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there, as Christ says in Matthew 5 [:11–12], ‘Blessed are you when men revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.’ This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies his people, but also blesses them.” Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 41: *Church and Ministry III*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 164–165. Also, from Luther’s Explanation to the Ninety-Five Theses: “The theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God), teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed, not alone by the touch of his most holy flesh but also by the embrace of his exceedingly holy and divine will, and he has left these relics here to be kissed, sought after, and embraced. Indeed fortunate and blessed is he who is considered by God to be so worthy that these treasures of the relics of Christ should be given to him; rather, who understands that they are given to him. For to whom are they not offered? As St. James says, ‘Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials’ [Jas. 1:2]. For not all have this grace and glory to receive these treasures, but only the most elect of the children of God.” Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31: *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 225–226.

⁵ The *crux theologorum* is a favorite topic of Lutheran theologians, including Francis Pieper, who gives the following insight: “Therefore, in view of the equal grace of God and in view of the equal total depravity of man, we must desist from attempting to find an answer to the question: *cur alii, alii non?* which is satisfactory to reason.” Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics II* (Concordia, 1950), p. 176.

1. Humanity is totally depraved and can, in no way, aid in their salvation. By God's grace alone is a person saved. (Grace Alone, *Sola Gratia*)
2. God desires all people to be saved. So much so that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for the sins of the entire world. (Universal Grace, *Gratia Universalis*)
3. Not everyone is saved. (Hell)

Reason cannot sort it out. You can make two of the three fit together, but in the end you deny one of the Biblical truths.⁶ It is not only that our minds *will not* be satisfied with an answer; it *cannot* be (see Romans 9-11, and especially 11:33-36). Significantly, any answer that would settle our mind and reason would *unsettle* our conscience, pushing us toward pride (we've saved ourselves) or despair (we have no certainty). On the other hand, the Biblical truth does not satisfy our reason, but it does give comfort to our conscience.⁷ The teaching of Grace Alone destroys our pride. The teaching of Universal Grace gives us comfort and hope.

At last, the *Crux Theologorum* is the question that demands that we put down our reason and take up the Scriptures; that we let the Lord's Word be the last word.

What the *Crux Theologorum* is to the theologian, the problem of suffering is to all humanity; it is the *Crux Humanum*. Consider the problem:

1. God is all powerful.
2. God is all good, that is, merciful.
3. There is suffering and misery.

Our reason cannot fit them together, so one or more of these truths is thrown out. Dualism and paganism deny that God is all powerful. Theism denies that God is good (or bad, for that matter, and bringing goodness into the world is our job. Most Americans, I suspect, fall into this category). Buddhism and its cousin Stoicism deny that there is suffering. Atheism denies that there is God.⁸ Every worldview is an attempt to settle in the mind the problem of suffering.⁹

⁶ Calvinists deny universal grace, the Arminians deny grace alone, and the Universalists deny hell.

⁷ See The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI.12-14.

⁸ "Of course, people of all faiths regularly assure one another that God is not responsible for human suffering. But how else can we understand the claim that God is both omniscient and omnipotent? This is the age-old problem of theodicy, of course, and we should consider it solved. If God exists, either He can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities, or He does not care to. God, therefore, is either impotent or evil. ... There is another possibility, of course, and it is both the most reasonable and least odious: the biblical God is a fiction." Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 55.

⁹ It seems like the problem of suffering becomes more and more of a problem as theology shifts from understanding God less as a person and more as an idea. The materialist sees the universe running according to formula, even (perhaps especially) God, and thinks that every effect could be calculated if we could measure all the causes. God, then, ought to act like a machine (preferably of the vending sort). The result is that anything unpredictable is cause for doubt. The Biblical picture is the opposite. God never does anything the same way twice, and there is not a single page of the Scripture without a surprise from the Lord.

These are the reactions of pride, but the most reasonable response to the problem of suffering is a response of despair: God is mad at us. Suffering is our fault, a punishment for our wrongs, karma, what was going around is now coming around. Suffering is God's justice being brought to us. (I suppose this could also be understood as a denial of the goodness and mercy of God, #3.) While the Scriptures teach that God is all powerful and merciful, and that there is evil, they explicitly refuse to connect human suffering to God's justice (i.e. the entire book of Job, and, in the end, the suffering of Jesus Himself).

Like the *Crux Theologorum*, any answer to the problem of suffering that would settle our mind would *unsettle* our conscience, either toward pride or despair. The Scriptures, though, are interested in delivering comfort to our conscience, and in doing so they teach us that there is not an answer that is satisfactory to our reason.

Consider Job. God's response to Job teaches us that there is no answer to the question of suffering. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:4). "Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it," (Job 40:2). While we can meditate on suffering, pain, loss, death, the evil in this world, we should know that there will not be, for our mind and our human reason, a satisfying answer to the problem of suffering.¹⁰ The Scriptures settle our conscience. God's response to human suffering is not answers but promises.¹¹ Here, then, is the crux: before we will be justified by God, we must repent of our own attempts to justify the ways of God to men.

When God Fights Against His Promises

"We walk by faith," says St. Paul, "and not by sight," (2 Corinthians 5:7), and this is because we cannot see what God promises, but this is only the beginning. It seems like the Lord arranges things so that what we see plainly contradicts what He has promised. This is God fighting against His own promises.

The chief example is God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac is the child of the promise, the seed by which all the world would be blessed, through whom Abraham's descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky and the

¹⁰ Keller surveys the various theodicies that attempt an answer (Keller, 85-107), and concludes "We do not know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, or why it is so random..." Keller, 121.

¹¹ "God does not give us explanations that will satisfy our nagging questions, but He does give us sure and certain promises of unflinching mercy and unfailing faithfulness in His Son handed over to death and raised again for our justification." John T. Pless, *The Earthquake in Haiti, Again the "Why" Question* (<https://blogs.lcms.org/2010/the-earthquake-in-haiti-again-the-why-question-1-2010>)

sand on the seashore. In Isaac the promise God made to the devil, that Eve's Seed would crush his head (Genesis 3:15), has been kept. And now, before Isaac had any children of his own, the Lord commands Isaac's sacrifice. Here is God fighting against His own promise.

This is the constant tension of the prophets. The Lord has promised blessing to Jerusalem. How, then, could He destroy His people? But He does.

All of God's promises find their end in Christ, the Savior of the world. But this Savior who would sit eternally on the throne is, instead, driven to the cross.

In all of these things God fights against His promises, or, as Luther was fond of saying, God hides Himself, and this is also true in our suffering. God promises us His goodness and mercy, but we have trouble and pain. He hides Himself. He hides His life in death. He hides His joy in sorrow. He hides His blessings in suffering. All of this is the occasion for faith.

When God promises life He will often show us death. When He promises joy He will often show us suffering. When He promises us blessing He will often show us loss, and in this we are to believe that the One who afflicts us is the One who loves us; the One who hands us over to suffering is the One who suffers all for us. This is the end of suffering: repentance and faith, hope and love.

More on this later, first, we will make a few distinctions regarding suffering.

A Catalogue of Suffering, and the Target of Pastoral Care

There are, in this life, four types of suffering: loss, pain, shame, and despair. This is pain moving from the outside in, from outside our body, to our body, to our heart, and at last to our conscience.

Job is a picture of this escalating suffering. In the devil's first assault Job loses his livelihood and his children (Job 1). In the second wave he loses his health (Job 2). In the third wave he loses his friends, his good name, and any comfort or kind conversation. All along he is tempted to lose his faith in God and the Lord's promise of righteousness.¹²

¹² The entirety of Job should be seen as an attack on the declared righteousness of Job. God declared that Job was "blameless and upright," (Job 1:1, 8). And Job knew that he was declared righteous through the sacrifice (Job 1:5) where the heavenly council was made known on the earth. Job's friends, the demonic council, fight against the Lord's declared righteousness, trying to convince Job that he was not in God's favor. In truth, then, the book of Job is about justification by grace through faith, and it exposes suffering as the devil's attack on the Gospel. Job is to trust the external word of righteousness, brought to him through

We see the different types of suffering when we consider the death of Jesus on the cross.¹³ He suffered the physical pain of whip and thorn and nail. He suffered the shame of spit and mockery and nakedness and blasphemy. And He suffered the abandonment and forsakenness of God. This last suffering, the forsakenness of God and the delivery of His wrath, is the worst suffering of all.

When we think of suffering we mostly think of loss, pain, and death, and not the internal sufferings of doubt and despair.¹⁴ I suspect we have grown too sensitive to the external sufferings of this world, and too callous to the internal sufferings of the heart and conscience. We pray in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer to "give us this day our daily bread," and in this we pray for help and relief with the sufferings of the body. This petition covers every godly vocation in the world from the farmer to the politician, the bus driver and the doctor. Every person works, in one way or another, to give the gifts of daily bread. There is one exception: the pastor. The vocation of pastor is covered in the fifth petition, "Forgive us our trespasses," and here we pray for help with the suffering of the conscience, the suffering of doubt and despair. So while almost every vocation is instituted by God to serve this body and life, the pastor is given over to the care of the soul, and uniquely to help with the suffering that is found there.

We also remember, though, that Satan afflicted Job outwardly for the very purpose of getting to his conscience and destroying his faith and righteous state before God. So while the pastor is concerned for the suffering soul, he is keenly aware that the troubles of this life are bound up together with the troubles of the heart, and that the Lord has bound up our body and soul together in creation, redemption (the incarnation), and sanctification (the means of grace).

Another Distinction: First and Third Article Suffering

the means of the sacrifice, in spite of everything he sees in his life and hears from his friends. God be praised that, in the end, the devil loses his counselors as Job's friends are brought into the heavenly council through the sacrifice and intercession of Job (42:8). Many thanks to Pastor Warren Graff for this insight on reading Job.

¹³ Martin Luther describes the three-fold suffering of Jesus on the cross in his introduction to Psalm 22, translated by Mark Taylor, and found here: <http://www.hope-aurora.org/docs/Psalm22LutherIntro.pdf>.

¹⁴ Phillip Melancthon speaks of Christians considering doubt as worse than death. "How many do you suppose there are, not only in Germany, but also in England, in Spain, in France, in Italy, and finally even in the city of Rome, who, since they see that controversies have arisen concerning subjects of the greatest importance, are beginning here and there to doubt, and to be silently indignant that you refuse to investigate and judge aright subjects of such weight as these; that you do not deliver wavering consciences; that you only bid us be overthrown and annihilated by arms? *There are many good men to whom this doubt is more bitter than death.* You do not consider sufficiently how great a subject religion is, if you think that good men are in anguish for a slight cause whenever they begin to doubt concerning any dogma," (Apology to the Augsburg Confession, VI.27-31, italics added).

We can add to this catalogue another distinction. We suffer because we are in this fallen world, and we suffer because we are not of the world.

First, we suffer because we are in this world. When Adam and Eve sinned they plunged the entire cosmos into death. Cancer and fire ants and pulled hamstrings and exploding stars are all the result of that original sin. The threat “you shall surely die” hangs over all of our heads, and this suffering in a fallen world is the Lord dishing out this death in different doses. Sickness, death, accidents, natural disasters, terrorists, acts of “natural evil” and “moral evil” are all the results of this first sin.

We suffer, then, because of sin. We live in a fallen world, and we groan along with this world (Romans 8:22).

Some of our sins have consequences. The suffering of being in jail can probably be directly linked to a sin or two. But generally we cannot equate a certain sin with certain suffering. Job’s friends tried that. The disciples tried it with Jesus (Luke 13:1-5). Try as we might (or as the devil might), we can’t connect the dots, and this is because the line between our sin and our suffering goes through Jesus. He, on the cross, suffered God’s wrath over our sin. This means that no matter what we suffer, we are not suffering the wrath of God.

Second, we suffer because we are not of this world, that is, we suffer not because of sin but because of righteousness. We suffer because we believe in Christ and follow Him. This is Christian persecution. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you,” (Matthew 5:10-12). “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,” (1 Peter 3:12).

There is a significant shift in the persecution of the church in our day, especially in the West.¹⁵ In the early church persecution came from confessing Christ as Lord, for standing on the Second Article of the Creed. Today the persecution comes from confessing the First Article, that the Lord is the maker of heaven and earth.

Evolutionism stands against our confession that the Lord peacefully created the world with His Word. Environmentalism stands against the church and our confession that

¹⁵ The exception is the bloody border of Islam, where Christians are brutally treated and murdered for their Christian confession. We are reminded to pray for the persecuted Church, and to teach about martyrdom, so that, if this evil ever comes to us or our families, we are ready to confess our faith and meet our death.

the world was created for us and not us for the world. There is growing pressure on the church because we confess that marriage is good and should bring forth children, that there is a difference between a man and a woman, that babies in the womb are people that should be cared for, that there is an order in the world. In fact, the severest trouble for the church today comes from the purveyors of tolerance who stand against the church's conviction that there is a good. The first-century martyrs were killed because they claimed to be Christian; twenty-first century martyrs will be killed because they claim to be humans. In the first century the martyrs were killed for refusing to burn incense to Caesar. In the twenty-first century the martyrs will be killed because they don't stop burning fossil fuels.

There is a seeming irony in this "First Article Persecution," that the church, which is a kingdom "not of this world," would, in fact, be persecuted for being too bound up to creation, but considering that every heresy is enthusiasm¹⁶, it is no surprise that the confession "you are created" is understood as a declaration of war against materialism. The Enthusiast (or Gnostic) sees this world as a prison to escape, created-ness as something to transcend and control, and the Christian's confession of God the Creator and we the created must be suppressed at all costs.¹⁷ It turns out that the problem with the worldly is that they are not worldly enough! Pastors would do well to warn the church about this mounting aggression against the creative and instituting Word of God.

Suffering with Christ

Regarding the above distinction, we might be tempted to think that it is when we are persecuted that we are suffering with Christ, but when we suffer the troubles of this world we are on our own. This is not true. When the Christian suffers any sort of suffering, they are suffering with Christ, or better, Christ suffers with us.

Luther is uniquely helpful, comparing the suffering of Christ with His Church to the sensitivity of the face when the body is hurt.

"The cross of Christ" does not mean, of course, the wood that Christ carried on His shoulders and to which He then was nailed. No, it refers in general to all the afflictions of all the faithful, whose sufferings are the sufferings of Christ. 2 Cor.

¹⁶ See Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles III.VIII*.

¹⁷ "Philosophy springs from the love of being; it is man's loving endeavor to perceive the order of being and attune himself to it. Gnosis desires dominion over being; in order to seize control of being the gnostic constructs his system. The buildings of systems is a gnostic form of reasoning, not a philosophical one." Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics & Gnosticism* (ISI Books, 1968), 32. "The aim of parousiastic Gnosticism is to destroy the order of being, which is experienced as defective and unjust, and through man's creative power to replace it with a perfect and just order." Voegelin, 39.

1:5: “We share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings”; and Col. 1:24: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church.” Therefore “the cross of Christ” refers in general to all the afflictions which the church suffers on Christ’s account, as Christ Himself testifies when He says in Acts 9:4: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?” Saul had not done any violence to Christ, but only to His church. But whoever touches this, touches the apple of His eye (Zech. 2:8). The head is more sensitive and responsive in its feeling than the other parts of the body, as experience teaches. When the small toe or some other tiny part of the body is hurt, the face immediately shows that it feels this; the nose contracts, the eyes flash, etc. In the same way Christ, our Head, makes our afflictions His own, so that when we, who are His body, suffer, He is affected as though the evils were His own.

It is helpful to know this, so that we are not overly sad or even completely desperate when we see our enemies persecuting, excommunicating, and murdering us, or when we see the heretics hating us so bitterly. Then we should think that, following the example of Paul, we ought to glory greatly in the cross which we have received because of Christ, not because of our own sins. When we consider the sufferings we receive only so far as we ourselves are involved in them, they become not only troubling but intolerable. But when the second person pronoun “Thy” is added to them, so that we can say (2 Cor. 1:5): “We share abundantly in Thy sufferings, O Christ,” and, as the psalm says (44:22), “For Thy sake we are slain all day long,” then our sufferings become not only easy but actually sweet, in accordance with the saying (Matt. 11:30): “My burden is light, and My yoke is easy.”

Now it is evident that the only reason we must endure the hate and persecution of our opponents today is that we preach Christ purely.¹⁸

The world and the devil hate us because they hate Christ¹⁹, and in this there is comfort. Suffering does not alienate us from Christ. The Scriptures comfort us with the promise that Jesus is not far from us when we suffer, but that He is near, close at hand, never to leave or forsake us.

The type of suffering does not matter—loss, sickness, pain, death, turmoil—in all of these things we are bound up to Jesus.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 134–135.

¹⁹ See John 15:18, 1 John

Why and Why Not? As Far as We Can Go

While we cannot offer a satisfactory answer to the “Why?” of suffering, we can glean from the Scriptures some of the Lord’s purposes in suffering, or at least the intended results of trouble. But first, and more importantly, the “Why not?” of suffering. It was said above and should be said again that we *do not* suffer God’s wrath or anger. That was spent on Christ.

A God Who Bleeds

Just as we expect a life of peace and happiness and success, we expect a God of power and strength. But both of these expectations are wrong. When God comes to save us He comes in weakness.

I’ve often heard people wonder about God and suffering, and they ask, “Why doesn’t God do something?” He has done something, only not what we expect. The Lord’s solution to our suffering is not to bring it to an end, but to join us in it. He does not fight suffering with an act of power, but with an act of weakness. The Lord’s answer to the problem of suffering is the cross.

We, then, have a God who bleeds (Acts 20:28), a God who knows suffering and sorrow (Hebrews 4:12-13). Jesus, in fact, gives Himself the title “Man of Sorrows.” “He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief,” (Isaiah 53:3).

Our reflection on human suffering, on our suffering, becomes fruitful only if we also reflect on the suffering of God. God promised death to Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 2:16-17), but as soon as they ate the fruit the Lord turned around and promised the death of Himself (Genesis 3:15). “If you eat of it, you will surely die” becomes, in the Lord’s mercy, “Because you ate of it *I* will surely die.”

The “Why?” question finds its completeness in the cry of dereliction, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”²⁰ This is not a rhetorical question. Jesus does not simply cry, “My God, you *are* forsaking Me.” Jesus knows that God is forsaking Him, He knows that God’s wrath is being poured over Him, but He does not know why, and He can’t know why. If Jesus knew that He was winning the salvation of humanity then

²⁰ Psalm 22:1, and Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 where the evangelists highlight this prayer by recording it as the only word Jesus speaks from the cross, and including the Hebrew (Matthew) and Aramaic (Mark).

He would have some comfort. If He knew He would be raised in three days He would have some relief. But every bit of comfort and peace is taken from Jesus; for the three hours of darkness on the cross He is drinking the cup of God's wrath to the dregs, and all of this echoes in His cry, "Why?"²¹

Jesus suffered through hell itself, the forsakenness and smiting of God, and He suffered all this without knowing why. This is our first comfort in the mystery of our own suffering. Jesus, too, knows what it is to have suffering and anguish for unknown reasons. He is our brother in suffering.²² But there is a second comfort, and that is that while Jesus does not know why God is forsaking Him, we do. We know why He writhes on the cross. We know why He bleeds and dies in darkness and shame. We know that He is there for us, that Jesus prays Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" so that we might pray Psalm 23, "Yea though I walk through the valley of death, Thou art with me." Just as the death of Jesus is our life, so the suffering of Jesus is our comfort.

We don't know why we suffer, but in the midst of the suffering we know why we are *not* suffering. We are not forsaken or abandoned. We are not left to ourselves. We are not experiencing God's wrath. Suffering is not a symptom of being far from God, and, in fact, the Lord intends the opposite, that in suffering He would draw near to us.

Our lives are full of pain and trouble, but we endure with hope, not because we lack suffering but because we don't lack Jesus.

²¹ Martin Luther, commenting on Psalm 8:5, makes the following observation: "We want to come back to Christ. There is no doubt that in the spirit David is here looking at Christ as He struggles with death in the garden and cries out on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46.) For that is His real, sublime, spiritual suffering, which no man can imagine or understand. In the garden He Himself says, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matt. 26:38). This is what He wants to say: "I have such sorrow and anguish that I could die of sorrow and anguish." He withdraws from His disciples about a stone's throw (Luke 22:41), kneels down, and prays. In the prayer He begins to struggle with death, and He prays more fervently. His sweat becomes like drops of blood that fall on the ground. David is talking here about this sublime, spiritual suffering, when Christ fought with death and felt nothing in His heart but that He was forsaken of God. And in fact He was forsaken by God. This does not mean that the deity was separated from the humanity—for in this person who is Christ, the Son of God and of Mary, deity and humanity are so united that they can never be separated or divided—but that the deity withdrew and hid so that it seemed, and anyone who saw it might say, "This is not God, but a mere man, and a troubled and desperate man at that." The humanity was left alone, the devil had free access to Christ, and the deity withdrew its power and let the humanity fight alone. St. Paul speaks of it this way in Philippians 2:6, 7: Jesus Christ, "though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant." He says that Christ emptied Himself of the divine form; that is, He did not use His divine might nor let His almighty power be seen, but withdrew it when He suffered. In this emptying and humiliation the devil tried all his hellish might. The Man and Son of Man stands there and bears the sins of the world (John 1:29), and because He does not give the appearance of having divine consolation and power, the devil set his teeth over the innocent Lamb and wanted to devour It. Thus the righteous and innocent Man must shiver and shake like a poor, condemned sinner and feel God's wrath and judgment against sin in His tender, innocent heart, taste eternal death and damnation for us—in short, He must suffer everything that a condemned sinner has deserved and must suffer eternally." (Luther's Works, vol. 12: Selected Psalms I, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House) 124. For more on this theme, see Bryan Wolfmüller, "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me? A Lenten Bible Study" published here: <http://www.hope-aurora.org/docs/Psalm22.pdf>

²² Here, especially, belong the verses that show how Jesus "learned" and was "perfected" in suffering, Hebrews 2:9-10 and 5:8.

Suffering and Sanctification²³

When we know that suffering is on the list of things that don't separate us from God (see Romans 8:35-37), then we are set free to suffer. When we acknowledge that the reason for suffering is hidden from us, we see suffering as an opportunity to trust and hope in what we do know about God. Finally, when we consider the devil's purpose in suffering we can resist him and rejoice in what God accomplishes through suffering. This is the practical stuff.

If our Lord Jesus was made perfect by suffering, should we expect something different? The only Scripture text that tells us to follow the example of Jesus gives us the example of suffering:

For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because *Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps*. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, (1 Peter 2:20-24).

Before the disciple follows Jesus they are to "pick up their cross" (Luke 9:23, 14:27). Following Jesus means suffering. In fact, almost every passage of Scripture that speaks of our sanctification speaks of our suffering.

While faith passively receives gifts from God, the Christian also patiently receives torture from the devil, torment from our flesh, and trouble from the world. While our love for the neighbor is the active part of our Christian life, suffering is the passive part, the place where we are called to patience, endurance, and especially hope.

Suffering is being under the will of another, for good or for evil. This loss of autonomy is what makes suffering of any kind the greatest evil of our day, but we understand that our will is weak, dying, and bound. We are not only actors, we are the acted upon, and especially we are acted upon by our enemies. But we also suffer at the hand of the Lord who loves us, because He treats us in ways different than our own will desires.

²³ For more on this theme see Bryan Wolfmüller, "Sanctification and Suffering" *Around the Word Journal*, Spring 2013.

The Bible not only teaches us to expect suffering, it also commands us to rejoice in it.

Romans 5:2-3: Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Paul, who was no stranger to suffering, was always talking this way: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong," (2 Corinthians 12:10). "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church..." (Colossians 1:24).

The other apostles echo this theme. James introduces his epistle with these words, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2-3).

Peter says:

"But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name," (1 Peter 4:13-16).

Peter values our Christian suffering with a value more than gold. "...So that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ," (1 Peter 1:7). Our suffering is, in fact, a gift. "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake," (Philippians 1:29).

All of this joy in suffering is because suffering teaches us humility, repentance, faith, love, and hope.

The Schoolhouse of Suffering

Luther learned from Psalm 119 that the Christian has three theology teachers: *Oratio*, *Meditatio*, and *Tentatio*. "Moreover, I want to point out to you a correct way of studying

theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils, even as I (in God) dare to presume and boast, without arrogance and lying, that in the matter of writing books I do not stand much behind some of the fathers. Of my life I can by no means make the same boast. This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*.”²⁴

The key verse of Psalm 119 is verse 74: “I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.” The Lord’s afflictions are not faithless. They do not come from His wrath. We receive our crosses and troubles from the God and Father who loves us, the One who did not spare His Own Son for us. “This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life,” (Psalm 119:50). Knowing the source of our trouble is the God who loves us, we now begin to see the blessing of suffering. “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes,” (Psalm 119:71).

By our suffering we learn humility. Suffering teaches us that we ourselves are not God, that there are forces greater than ourselves, that our will is bound and we are not the masters of our own destiny.

Suffering attacks our idols: our pride, our free will, and our belly. “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes,” (Psalm 119:71). The opposite is also true, “If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction,” (Psalm 119:92). “Mark you, the real mission of the Scriptures is to comfort the suffering, distressed and dying. Then he who has no experience of suffering or death cannot at all understand the comfort of the Bible.”²⁵

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 285. Luther continues: “Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom. Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God’s Word (as has been said) in all manner of ways. For as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God’s Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil’s raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. And I heartily grant them what they have won in return for making this of me, honor, victory, and triumph, for that’s the way they wanted it,” (286–287).

²⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, vol. 4*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 44.

Suffering teaches us repentance. When the disciples come to Jesus asking about the recent tragedy perpetrated by Pilate, He refuses to answer the “Why?” question, and refuses to equate the tragedy with some great sin, but says simply, “If you don’t repent the same thing will happen to you (Luke 13:1-5). Jesus then expands this truth from man-made evil (“moral evil”) to natural disaster (“natural evil”), bringing up the recent collapse of a tower. The conclusion is the same, “I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” (Luke 13:5).

Suffering is an opportunity for faith and love. We believe in God and expect good things from Him, in spite of what we see and feel. And especially when our neighbor suffers we have opportunity to love and serve them. “We should be comforted by our certainty that it is God’s punishment sent upon us not only to punish sin but also to test our faith and love—our faith in order that we may see and know what our attitude is toward God, and our love in order that we may see what our attitude is toward our neighbor.”²⁶

Finally, suffering teaches us hope. This is one of the great themes of Paul.

Paul as Pastor and the Attack on Hope

Paul’s epistles have traditionally been outlined into two parts: first, Paul talks about faith and doctrine and corrects false teaching. Second, he speaks of love and our Christian life. I would like to suggest that most of Paul’s writings would be better understood under three major categories: faith, love, and hope.

These three categories certainly make up the outline of Paul’s prayer for the church.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3: We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of **faith** and labor of **love** and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4: We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your **faith** is growing abundantly, and the **love** of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that **you are enduring**.

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Council*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Vancouver, BC, Regent College Publishing, 1955), 237.

Colossians 1:3-4: We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of the **love** that you have for all the saints, because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven.

Ephesians 1:15-18: For this reason, because I have heard of your **faith** in the Lord Jesus and your **love** toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the **hope** to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...

Paul's praying spills over into his writing and teaching. He teaches the faith, instructs love, and encourages hope and patient endurance.

Dr. John Kleinig has outlined Satan's two-fold attack on the Church. The "front-door" attack is the attack on faith where the devil tempts us to believe false doctrine or doubt our faith. The "back-door" attack is the attack on love. Someone sins against us and the devil comes along and tempts us to anger, a self-justified lovelessness against our neighbor. There is, though, a third attack, through the window, the devil's attack on our hope. This is the temptation in suffering and persecution, in tribulation and trouble, that we lose hope.²⁷

This is what Jesus warned about with the seed that fell among the rocks. It grew up for a while, but when trouble and persecution came along the plant withered and died (see Matthew 13:20-21). In the Lord's marvelous working of things, though, this attack of the devil backfires. Suffering, in fact, produces hope. "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us," (Romans 5:3-5). This passage cannot be emphasized enough. Suffering is producing hope, a longing certainty that we will one day stand before our Lord Jesus in the resurrection, with death and sin left behind. Our glory is a promised glory, a glory not yet seen but no less certain; it has been promised to us by the One who cannot lie.

²⁷ Romans 12:12: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." Romans 15:4: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal, (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Because suffering is not a visitation of God's wrath, it is, for the Christian, by faith, a gift, a preparation for the great things to come.

Pastor as Partner in Tribulation

John, writing from exile on Patmos, gives himself a tremendous title. "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus..." (Revelation 1:9). This is the pastor, a brother and partner in tribulation. What does this mean?

The pastor knows what it is to suffer in this world of sin, to be the object of the devil's wrath and the target of the world's spite. The pastor is *sumpatheo*, a "with-sufferer," with Christ and with Christ's people.

Apparently Stanley Hauerwas, in a colorful and oft quoted phrase, diagnoses the current state of pastoral care as the pastor being a "quivering mass of availability," a sort of therapist with a Bible. I would suggest, though, that the troublesome words in this description are "quivering mass" and not "availability." We are not making this better if we become quivering masses of in-availability, quivering masses of too-busy-to-be-around.

The pastor shaped by Jesus is present with His people. He knows their names, their histories, their troubles, and has the blessed opportunity to forget their sins. And the people know their pastor's voice. They have heard his instruction, his singing, his comfort and encouragement, and the absolution from his lips.

There have been many times that I've arrived at the hospital, and the nurses are gathered in the hall outside the room. They don't know what to do, and they look with relief and gladness when I've arrived. They are trained to deal with sickness, but here is a man equipped to deal with sorrow and death.

I've grabbed the head of a man as he shook with the pain of his mother's death, collecting his tears in the shoulder of my clerical. I've made the sign of the cross and spoken the commendation of the dying over the still womb of a grieving mother. I've

had the privilege of singing songs of heaven as the Lord's angels came to bear the soul of the Christian to the face to Jesus. All of this pastoral care begins with being there, at the bedside, at the graveside, in the face and at the side of the suffering member.

The pastor's feet carry him to the bleating of the wandering sheep. They take him to the hospital, to the homes of members, to the pulpit. The pastor's hands bless in the Lord's name, they deliver help where needed, they shovel the snow and baptize the babies. The pastor's hands carry the Lord's body and blood to the mouths of the Lord's people on Sunday morning and through the week, to the home-bound, the sick, the dying. And the pastor's hands make the sign of the cross on the head of those confessing their sin. I have a homebound member who, after we have confessed our sins in the communion liturgy, leans into my hands when I speak the absolution, so he can feel the forgiveness. The pastor's ears hear sins. They listen to troubles. They diagnose the state of the conscience, the tenor of hope, the wrestling of faith and despair. The pastor's lips speak wisdom, preach Law and Gospel, comforting, blessing, and praying. Pastoral care is a bodily activity; it does not happen at a distance.

There is a temptation for the sufferer, as well as for the pastor and people helping, to be swept up in crisis and panic. This is exhausting for everyone involved. Crisis destroys God's good ordering of things, but the pastor comes according to his vocation, according to God's will. The pastor, then, brings an un-panicked presence. The pastor knows that affliction is normal, suffering does not come to us as a surprise, that dying is the last of a long list of good works that Jesus has us perform with our bodies. One day we wake up and Jesus has for us the good works of serving our neighbor. One day we wake up and Jesus has for us the good work of suffering with patience. One day we wake up and Jesus has for us the good work of dying.

The normalness of suffering, the "not being surprised" by suffering (1 Peter 4:12), helps level out the exhaustion of the crisis, the wear and tear of the panic, and lets the pastor go about his work of facing up to suffering and death as a normal part of his vocation. Especially because extreme suffering and dying shortens the time-table, the pastor will be responsive, but never panicked, and always very reluctant to let any situation rise to the level and demands of crisis. In fact, the pastor's demeanor in situations of suffering lets the sufferer know that we are not the first to pass by this way. Many times I've said, "The church is good at suffering, good at dying, good at mourning. We are practiced for 2,000 years." This is not our first rodeo, certainly not our first funeral.

The pastor also has the rest of working in truth. There is no lying, no sugar coating, no hoping-against-hope. There is no difference, for the pastor, between the conversations spoken inside the room and the conversations spoken outside in the hall. There have

been many times when I have spoken the thing that no one else in the room wants to say: "You are dying." The pastor faces up to death with the confidence that Jesus has overcome death, that the grave is the enemy, but our death, then, is our last victory. And the pastor treats the sufferer as a real person, not as a child or a fool.

The pastor of the Gospel comes from weakness, not strength, and so he comes not to deliver people from suffering, but to bring Christ alongside the sufferer. The pastor teaches and preaches that suffering is to be expected, and that when we suffer we are not alone (1 Corinthians 10:13), that we stand with every Christian, and with Christ Himself.

I remember a cousin talking to me about the difficulty of pastoral care, how it must be exhausting and difficult work. He pictured the pastor with his own resources, his own insight, his own power, coming into the room and making things better. This, indeed, is a frightful understanding of pastoral care, like a nurse walking into a hospital room with no medicine. I told my cousin, "I come into the room with medicine to dispense." Pastoral care is not, in fact, about the pastor. We arrive to deliver the gifts of Jesus, the Good Physician.

The chief medicine of the pastor is the Scriptures themselves. Here is the power of God for salvation. Here is the Sword of the Spirit, who is called "Comforter." The Scripture pulls back the veil to see beyond the circumstances of suffering to the reality of the Gospel, the height of God's love in the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. The Scriptures answer the question, "What does God think of me?" If we answer that question with the evidence of our circumstances we come to the fearful conclusion that God hates us, or worse, that He has forgotten us. The Bible presents the blessed and contrary truth: the love of God for us is as sure as the death and resurrection of Jesus.

"Look," we say to the sufferer with our Bibles open, "God loves you, I'm sure of it. Here is Jesus, for you." Whatever nonsense you are suffering comes to us from the hand of the God who loves us, which is a horrifying thought to the person who is not suffering, but the only glimmer of hope to the person who is.

Luther's little phrase in the Small Catechism's discussion of Absolution is definitive here. "A confessor will know additional passages with which to comfort and to strengthen the faith of those who have great burdens of conscience or are sorrowful and distressed." If this sentence is not descriptive of the pastor, he will certainly put his nose into the Scriptures and the other pastoral care companion books to find a dozen or so texts that present the hope and joy of the cross in a simple way.

The Psalms are a special source of comfort, especially because there we see that we are not suffering alone. We find in the Psalms prayers pouring forth from hearts as broken as ours. We are tempted to think that we suffer alone, but when we pray the Psalms we find ourselves in the great fellowship of sufferers, that is, the fellowship of the Church. Agony, anguish, fear, weakness, pain, doubt, disgust, anger, horror, and any and every other shape of emotion finds its way into the Psalms, and from the Psalm to our lips, and from our lips to God's ears. The Psalms lift our hearts from ourselves and our desperate circumstances to the face of God, where we stand before the Lord in mercy and humility, asking His help. The Psalms turn our suffering into worship.

The pastor also has the Lord's Supper to feed the sufferer. Here we have the Lord's own pledge of forgiveness, bound up to His body and blood. Here we have Jesus in His power coming to us in weakness, feeding us the same body that was nailed to the cross and laid into the tomb. The Sacrament is not only a fellowship of forgiveness; it is also a fellowship of suffering. The One who suffered all for you continues to abide with us in mercy.

There are other resources that the pastor brings. The hymns of the church are a treasure trove of comfort. When you sing the hymns at a deathbed you see that almost every hymn is about death and dying, and the joy we have in Christ when that moment comes.

I remember coming to a particularly violent deathbed where a state of semi-coma was punctuated with seizures. The man's son would lie across him to hold him down, and his wife would sing hymns to him. I was there joining in the hymns. He told us, before the coma took a full hold of his consciousness, that he could hear us singing hymns when he was seizing, and that it brought him great comfort. He asked that we would keep singing, and we did.

Rev. Brian Kachelmeier, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Los Alamos, New Mexico, fell off a ladder and landed on his arm, breaking and dislocated his elbow. The pain was extreme, and the pain medication wore off as he was being transported to the hospital. He was afraid he would pass out, and not knowing what to do, he began to sing parts of the liturgy—the *Kyrie*, the *Sanctus*, the *Words of Institution*, the *Nunc Dimittis*—and knowing Bri, he probably even sang *This is the Feast*. The pain subsided.

The hymns of the Church are wonderful, and the hymns of the liturgy are especially helpful because Christians who attend the liturgy know them by heart, and can sing along. Singing is meditating on the Lord's Word with the entire body.

Years ago I put together a mini-hymnal. It includes a brief order of devotion, a few Bible passages and Psalms, and a number of hymns. I leave these behind in home and hospital visits so there are Scriptures, Psalms, and hymns to meditate on even after I've left.²⁸ Many times I've also printed a picture of Jesus on the cross on a card, and left it with people. This picture is indeed worth a thousand words, and looking at the picture is a meditation on the Lord's mercy.

The pastor prays, and helps the suffering to pray. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray," (James 5:13). The Psalms are uniquely helpful as we ask the Lord to deliver us from trouble. In the prayer "Thy will be done" we hand ourselves over to suffering, to living at a will that is not our own. The pastor comes not to answer the "Why?" question, but to preach Christ and His suffering and death. He is not interested in justifying the works of God to man, but rather in declaring the Lord's promise, which justifies sinners. "We may want theodicy, to justify the ways of God to man, but God's will is for us to suffer so that He may teach us the mystery of His love—not by justifying His ways, but by justifying us."²⁹ The pastor of the Gospel is especially careful to teach how the devil uses suffering to attack our hope, and in this context he will bring the certainty of the Gospel to comfort the afflicted. If we walk by faith and not by sight, the pastor will provide an abundance of promises for that faith to cling.

I've recently changed my way of talking. I used to say, "I don't know why the Lord has handed you over to such suffering." Recently it is, "I don't know why the Lord has entrusted you with such suffering." The pastor, then, brings the understanding of suffering as a trust, a gift.

Rev. Jared Melius, pastor of Mt. Zion Lutheran Church in Denver, Colorado, and his wife, Jan, suffered the death of their oldest son, Jonathan, when he was eight months old. It was horrible, but they received a beam of comfort in their sorrow in a note from Professor Kurt Marquart. Jared tells the story:

While at the seminary, our son Jonathan died suddenly. He was eight months old. That was almost three years ago now. So I sat down this evening and sifted through a couple hundred sympathy cards from that time looking for the one that was perhaps my favorite. I remember reading it several times over the course of a week or two. It was this short letter from Dr. Marquart: "Dear Friends, Please forgive the lateness of this card. Have been away a lot. If the good Lord has led you, like precious gold, through this Refiner's fire, you must be very

²⁸ You can download the mini-hymnal here: <http://www.hope-aurora.org/pages/minihymnal>

²⁹ Gregory Schulz, *The Problem of Suffering: A Father's Hope* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 53.

special to Him. Few have endured what you have. He who is pure Love, and who has poured that love out upon us in His Son, ever bless and cheer and strengthen you in that same Son of His love! Kurt Marquart" In those difficult months, it seems that, in very few words, he put his finger on how my wife and I were hurting. It was like a crucible. We were regularly reminded that Jonathan was precious to God and that He was in Heaven. That was a comfort. But, Dr. Marquart reminded us that God still loved us, and demonstrates that love, even, and above all, during times of trial. I am indebted dearly to Dr. Marquart, for His writing, for His instruction, and also for this personal token. The good Lord cheer and strengthen him as he now passes, like precious gold, through a Refiner's fire of a different kind.³⁰

Dr. Marquart, a true pastor, brought to these parents a way to have their suffering as a gift, a trust from God, and instead of their agony being enlisted as proof of God's anger, it now stands as proof of His love. "...you must be very special to Him."

Finally, the pastor knows that God's response to our suffering is to suffer Himself. The Lord does not flee our suffering or run from it, but plunges into it, into our flesh and blood, into our sin and wrath, into our death and grave. Jesus, our Lord and our God, suffers. He suffers for us so that He might suffer with us. The cross is the Lord's response to our suffering and death, to our sin and sadness, so the word of the cross will be the pastor's last word to the suffering world and the suffering conscience.

The temptation in suffering is to abandon hope, to "curse God and die," to become convinced that God is angry with us, or worse, that He has forgotten about us, but here stands the cross and suffering of Jesus, our Jesus, bearing the weight of our sins for our life and salvation. Here is the proof of His love. Here is the substance of His promises. Here is His life, covered in blood, hidden in death, overshadowed with suffering, all for you.

We suffer, but Jesus suffered first, and in His suffering our suffering is filled with hope. Our reason might never be satisfied, but God's wrath certainly is, and through our suffering, by faith we are miraculously made fit for an eternity without suffering at all.

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³⁰ From http://puttingoutthefire.blogspot.com/2006_09_01_archive.html (accessed April 2015)