

## The Problem of Human Affliction: Towards a Theology of Suffering

Kelsey B. Hamilton

*Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*

**Abstract:** Intellectual discussions on the problem of evil and human suffering abound. Counselors, however, do not minister in the realm of the abstract, but with embodied image bearers who experience affliction. This article surveys human suffering which does not clearly emanate from active, volitional sin, incorporating the biblical narrative of Job as an illustration. As a result, exclusively cognitive attempts to construct a theodicy or rationalize away suffering often fail in counseling and practical ministry contexts. Rather, ministers of the gospel do well to humbly listen, withhold their own explanations for suffering, and assist the afflicted as they integrate their felt experience with their embedded theology.

**Key Words:** counseling, finitude, Job, lament, pain, practical theology, suffering, theodicy.

Suffering poses a universal problem to the human race and, by extension, to those who minister and counsel inside and outside the church. Theologians often agree that a discussion on suffering demands attention due to its relevance for ministry as well as apologetics.<sup>1</sup> Theologian Os Guinness writes, “Suffering is the most acute trial that faith can face, and the questions it raises are the sharpest, the most insistent, and the most damaging that faith will meet.”<sup>2</sup> Professor and pastoral counselor Phillip Zylla argues that “The biblical depiction of suffering is not a philosophical category but a confluence of situations and realities to be confronted in compassionate protest.”<sup>3</sup> A robust theology of suffering will necessarily intersect with numerous fields of study due to the inherent connection of pastors and counselors with the afflicted.

<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008); Os Guinness, *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996); Phillip Charles Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 178.

<sup>3</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 132.

Towards developing a theology of suffering, this article will summarize definitions, origins, and responses to human suffering, weaving a case study from the life of Job throughout.<sup>4</sup> Fyall’s work in biblical theology summarizes the narrative succinctly:

The book opens (chs. 1 and 2) with a patriarchal figure named Job who is a wealthy landowner in “the land of Uz.” As well as being wealthy, he is notably pious and a man of integrity. Yet in the prologue to the book, in a series of hammer blows he is deprived in quick succession of his possessions, his family, his health and almost his sanity. As if this were not bad enough, we learn that these events on earth are orchestrated in the heavenly court and in that court there is an adversary who is anxious to destroy Job. Three friends of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, come to commiserate with him, but before a word is spoken, the group sit in silence for seven days and nights.<sup>5</sup>

The narrative closes: “[Job’s] prosperity is restored, indeed increased. Thus, God publicly replies to Job’s pleas and to his suffering, and the Judge of all the earth is seen to have done right.”<sup>6</sup> Job’s story follows a path of affliction, lament, discouragement, and a powerful response from God before he exonerates Job and blesses him once again. Job’s story introduces the reader to suffering, its origins, and how we—and God—respond, serving as an illustration and tutor for our benefit.

### Defining Suffering: A Myriad of Views

Prior to addressing suffering’s origins and our responses, one must establish a definition of suffering itself. Jay Adams, a founding father of the biblical counseling movement, highlights this common experience, stating, “Suffering is universal because the fall and its effects are universal. . . . Had Adam, our representative, not sinned, there would be no suffering.”<sup>7</sup> Within an evangelical biblical framework, the singular origin of

<sup>4</sup> There are other applicable biblical texts and characters with significance for a discussion of suffering. In an effort to honor the scope of the article, Job has been selected because this narrative highlights suffering of an unknown cause [from Job’s perspective] and because it is often the most-referenced biblical book on this topic.

<sup>5</sup> Robert S. Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You: Images of Creation and Evil in the Book of Job*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 31–32.

<sup>6</sup> Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption*, *The Jay Adams Library* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resource Library, 1986), 271.

suffering came from the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Thus, all sources of suffering trace their roots back to this act. Regardless of the endless examples of human sin, all of creation still groans beneath the weight of original Adamic sin (Rom 8:26–27).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the relevant literature takes two primary approaches to define the inherent nature of suffering either as good—or neutral with good potential—or as bad by its very nature.<sup>9</sup> These trite descriptions simply assist the development of a theology of suffering in establishing the inherent ontological quality of suffering.

### Suffering as Good or Neutral<sup>10</sup>

Authors differ in their description of suffering as inherently good, neutral, or bad. Many seem to articulate a form of utilitarianism when it comes to the potential good that can come from suffering. The argument often works backward from a positive result emerging out of suffering, thus deducing that the suffering itself has some inherent good—or at the very least neutral—quality to it. Carson provides an example saying, “Illness, bereavement, and suffering actually shape us; they temper us; they mold us. We may not enjoy the process; but they transform us.”<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on the transformative results of suffering dominates popular level works by Christian authors. It seems many of these perspectives functionally equate the nature of suffering with the good or godly outcomes which it can produce ask they seek to define suffering.<sup>12</sup>

### Suffering as Inherently Bad

In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis states, “Talk to me about the truth of

<sup>8</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 142. A full discussion of this concept falls outside the scope of this project.

<sup>9</sup> Such as D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991); James G. Emerson, *Suffering: Its Meaning and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986); Gerald W. Peterman and Andrew J. Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace: A Biblical Theology of Suffering* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, Theology in Community, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008); Elisabeth Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2019); among others mentioned below.

<sup>10</sup> Here, the views on suffering as good and neutral fall in more alignment with one another than the opposing view of suffering as bad. Because of this, these views will be juxtaposed closely in this section because of their similarities in contrast to the latter.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> A full critique of this view will follow in the section which discusses the problematic uses of theodicies.

religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.”<sup>13</sup> Morgan and Peterson base their understanding of suffering in Genesis: “First, we discover that suffering is not something created or authored by God. . . . Second, we learn that there was a time when there was no suffering. Suffering is not original; it has not always existed.”<sup>14</sup> We cannot divorce the existence of suffering from an understanding of the original, good creation and the sin-ridden world in which we minister. Zylla articulates, “Suffering is not a problem to be solved or a riddle to be explained, but rather it is a reality to be confronted in cooperation with God’s own expressed intentions in the world.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Guinness concludes, “Outrage is an appropriate response to genuine wrong, tears in response to grief, shock in response to unexpected disaster. We mustn’t force ourselves to thank God for these things or we will be harder on ourselves and softer on evil than God is.”<sup>16</sup> This statement directly contradicts many popular level works,<sup>17</sup> such as those by Elliot,<sup>18</sup> Tripp,<sup>19</sup> and Keller.<sup>20</sup> While the believer can glorify God regardless of and even through seasons of suffering, this cannot equate to celebrating the suffering itself. Considering these contributions, this article will assume that suffering is inherently antithetical

<sup>13</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan and Peterson, *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 121.

<sup>15</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 194.

<sup>17</sup> The popular level books critiqued in this article were selected in the literature survey based on their relevance for the topic, level of engagement within the scope of this work, and relative popularity within mainstream American evangelical circles.

<sup>18</sup> Elliot states, “The response of a Christian [to suffering] should be gratitude. Thank you, Lord. I’ll take this” (*Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, 60).

<sup>19</sup> Tripp comments, “God gives us everything we need so that we will live with realistic expectations and so that moments of difficulty will not be full of shock, fear, and panic, but experienced with faith, calm, and confident choices” (*Suffering*, 30).

<sup>20</sup> Keller says, “we are called not to waste our sorrows but to grow through them into grace and glory,” even though he later critiques this view, saying how “some books on suffering take the direct approach, telling you to ‘make use’ of your sorrow, to learn from it” (Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* [New York: Dutton, 2013], 188, 306).

to God's intentions for this world at its creation, regardless of its transformative potential or impact.<sup>21</sup> As argued previously, "the Bible never confuses evil with good, nor does it attempt to bleach pain from the fabric of suffering."<sup>22</sup> Neither should we.

### Origins of Suffering

Numerous sources of suffering cause great distress for God's image bearers, such as the result of individual sin or being sinned against by others. Due to the established scope of indirect origins of suffering, however, the primary focus will be the impact of sin upon human bodies and the fallen state of the world at large.<sup>23</sup>

### The Impact of Sin Upon the Body

When considering the ways that sin impacts the human body, one must recognize the deviance from God's original intentions for his image bearers. Lambert articulates, "God created human beings to live forever in health. Sin ruined that ideal, creating physical weakness and, ultimately, death."<sup>24</sup> As a result, seemingly infinite ailments interrupt our physiological processes and injure our human bodies, demanding that we attend to our embodied existence. Kopic argues, "The way to live amid our physical pain and struggles is not to minimize our body's importance but to discover how God views our bodies."<sup>25</sup> Peterman and Schmutzer echo this: "A theology of suffering must work with the entire embodied experience of personhood.... Suffering marks our bodies, so healing must also work with the physical realities of our bodies, with the dignity and design that creation gives it."<sup>26</sup> We cannot deny that pain is inherently "a tremendous

<sup>21</sup> An extensive discussion on the intersection of suffering and lament—as well as the role of gratitude within lament—falls beyond the scope of this article but deserves acknowledgement here.

<sup>22</sup> Heather Daveidiuk Gingrich, ed., *Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling*, Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 49.

<sup>23</sup> These particular origins have been selected because they emphasize suffering which does not directly emerge from active, volitional sin committed either by the sufferer or at the hands of another person. Such origins of suffering merit further discussion, although they tend to receive more attention in the literature than the origins enumerated in this article.

<sup>24</sup> Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 223.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly M. Kopic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 45.

<sup>26</sup> Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 45.

source of anguish as persons struggle through the physical trauma of injury, illness, sickness, and pain."<sup>27</sup> Such empathetic considerations cannot be overlooked when considering a theology of suffering and physical brokenness. Otherwise, we could resort to celebrating the existence of pain because it also yields pleasure and protection, thus potentially missing the sufferer's legitimate grief and sorrow.<sup>28</sup>

### The Fallen Nature of the World

Additionally, we must address the general fallen nature of the world. Langberg explains, "Sin has tainted every aspect of our world, our lives, and our very beings. The basis of life in our fallen world is tragic. It is irrational.... Things are not just or fair in this world. Sin is at large, and all the created world is captive to it."<sup>29</sup> The believer's current residence in such a fallen world inherently implies they will not be spared from all instances of suffering in this life. Furthermore, Jones, Kellen, and Green argue this inherently challenges our attempts to live faithfully. They state, "It is our fallen, groaning, cursed creation that brings on natural disasters and physiological problems. While these do not cause us to sin, they can make having faith and living in obedience more difficult."<sup>30</sup> Yancey addresses a common retort: this seems unfair. He comments, "Any discussion of the unfairness of suffering must begin with the fact that God is not pleased with the condition of the planet either."<sup>31</sup> Such is the context of a world existing contradictory to its created purpose and in a state of brokenness.

Briefly, it is worth noting that several authors mention an inherent desire for meaning in suffering. Carson argues, "For in a fallen world, pain

<sup>27</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> In this discussion, one must consider the way God created human beings and the role of physiological pain in embodiment. Philip Yancey provides, by far, the most extensive explanation of the utility and protective nature of pain through a theological perspective. In the same way that our skin responds to touch that is gentle and comforting, it also responds to pressure that is so forceful to be painful; we cannot have one without the other. In this way, Yancey connects God's intentions for sensory pain to our awareness of a need for him in this broken world (*Where Is God When It Hurts?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 34, 77).

<sup>29</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 54.

<sup>30</sup> Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2021), 73.

<sup>31</sup> Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, 67.

and suffering can be God's megaphone, to an individual or to a nation, distracting our attention from the selfishness of a life that functionally disowns God, no matter what we say in our creeds."<sup>32</sup> This perspective aligns with a sort of transformational telos, as suffering has implications for the world at large. However, it still emphasizes that suffering yields opportunities for change, a conclusion which is not altogether incorrect or unbiblical, just underdeveloped within the scope of counseling ministry. In contrast, Yancey says, "Maybe God *isn't trying to tell us anything specific* each time we hurt. Pain and suffering are part and parcel of our planet, and Christians are not exempt."<sup>33</sup> Yancey's point contrasts with Carson's; suffering is not *always* communicative or trying to get our attention, although it can be.

### Job: Unknown Suffering or Spiritual Warfare?

While popular application of Job's narrative often addresses "unknown" suffering,<sup>34</sup> the biblical account articulates spiritual warfare as the specific origin of his suffering: attacks of Satan permitted by Yahweh. Carson emphasizes that by the end of the book, "Job still . . . knows nothing about the wager between God and Satan. He must simply trust God that something far greater was at stake than his own personal happiness."<sup>35</sup> Piper and Taylor note of all of Job's losses, "God did not do them; Satan did. But the evils that Satan did, he did only with God's permission."<sup>36</sup>

In the realm of suffering precipitated by spiritual warfare, the biblical account defies a dualistic perspective, as Keller explains, "in which there are two equal and opposite forces of good and evil. . . . The Bible shows us no such world. God is completely in charge. He has total control over Satan. Satan can go so far, and no further. God is clearly sovereign."<sup>37</sup> Considering a human perspective, Harris captures the notion aptly:

What we in our human limitations fail to understand is that God had the power and capability to stop Satan from such an attack. Yet for Job, and perhaps in other cases as well, God chose not to restrain him. . . . Again, it does not match our understanding of

<sup>32</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, 34 (italics original).

<sup>34</sup> That is, suffering whose cause is unknown or, at least, unknowable to us.

<sup>35</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 176.

<sup>36</sup> John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 64.

<sup>37</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 275.

God nor His promise to protect His own.<sup>38</sup>

These authors identify the challenging gap between biblical promises of God's protection for his beloved and the words of Christ that suffering is certain for his followers.

### Responses to Suffering

Many resources, especially at the popular level, emphasize the individual's response to their suffering, at times conflating proper response with the inherent nature of suffering. Taken together, many of these resources unintentionally burden the afflicted to suffer "correctly." For example, Elisabeth Elliot defines suffering as "having what you don't want or wanting what you don't have," as if suffering arises from unmet desires primarily, rather than the impact of sin upon our world.<sup>39</sup> Tripp's book on suffering elevates the role of the sufferer's heart as the most influential source on their suffering.<sup>40</sup> Keller articulates a similar notion, highlighting the idolatrous interpretation of suffering: "When something is taken from us . . . we are disproportionately cast down because the suffering is shaking out of our grasp something that we allowed to become more than just a good thing to us."<sup>41</sup> Zylla critiques these positions: "A theological explanation, even a weak one, often substitutes for a careful analysis of the source of suffering itself and the complexities of the suffering situation."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, this article assumes that platitudinal responses and flat definitions are contraindicated for counseling ministry to suffering people.

### Human Responses to Job's Plight

Throughout the progression of the story, Job "intuitively recognizes that nothing of the sort could have happened to him without God's sanction," the intellectual result of a man steeped in theological understanding and love of Yahweh.<sup>43</sup> Job's response defies expectations as "he did not 'make nice' with God, praying politely. He was brutally honest."<sup>44</sup> The written narrative of Job provides a significant contribution to biblical writings on the practice of lament. However, the unnamed author introduces

<sup>38</sup> Greg Harris, *The Cup and the Glory: Lessons on Suffering and the Glory of God* (Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian, 2006), 96–97.

<sup>39</sup> Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 31.

<sup>41</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 306.

<sup>42</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 242.

other speakers after calamity strikes Job. Initially, his companions sit in ashes and mourn with him for seven days; this act of grieving unfortunately then progresses into counsel which further wounds Job. Numerous authors address the shortcomings of their rhetoric. By way of example, Keller comments, “Even though Job’s friends can piece together strings of technically true statements, their pastoral mistakes stem from an inadequate grasp of the grace of God.”<sup>45</sup>

One particular companion draws exclusive attention in the literature. Fyall discusses the response of one particular friend, Elihu, saying he “is brash and angry and his words often sound too much like a Ph.D. thesis on suffering,”<sup>46</sup> and “he fails to detect any compassion in God.”<sup>47</sup> As a result, the perspective of Job’s friends further wounds him rather than encouraging him in endurance and faith. Many mainline evangelical writings, primarily at the popular level, follow the pattern of Elihu.

### God’s Response to Job

Ultimately, Job receives a response from God, although the Lord never reveals the actual source of Job’s misfortunes. First, God’s orientation to Job raises questions as to why God allows time for Job’s wrestling.<sup>48</sup> One must wonder how each subsequent loss and corresponding lament from Job created an increasing sense of forsakenness as he pleaded for intercession; yet God remains silent. But then, Elliot highlights that “when God finally breaks His silence, God does not answer a single question.... God answers Job’s mystery with the mystery of Himself.”<sup>49</sup> Notably, his goodness and care for Job is evident, as Kacic expounds:

God’s response to this chaos and sin and suffering is that God takes responsibility.... God concerns himself for us in our sin and pain, neither because it was required of him nor because he had personally done anything wrong, but because he loves us and is the only one who could restore what was lost.... He alone could save us from the mess we had made of ourselves.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than leaving mankind to the consequences of original sin, the Creator stoops down, rescues, redeems, and remains with his people. The significance of this unexpected response cannot be overstated. Finally,

<sup>45</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 277.

<sup>46</sup> Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> As Kacic says, “God, it appears, is okay with giving us time to wrestle, not only with other people but even with God himself” (*Embodied Hope*, 66).

<sup>49</sup> Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Kacic, *Embodied Hope*, 74.

God’s response defies Job’s sought after explanation.<sup>51</sup> While God patiently tolerates Job’s pleas for explanation, nothing—and no one—can demand that he defend himself to man’s inquiries.

### The Problem of Theodicy

The topic of responses to the problem of evil emerges in Job’s experience, as well as almost every consulted resource on suffering, demanding an abbreviated discussion in the context of practical ministry. The reasons that God allows evil and suffering demand academic and apologetic attention. Yet such discussions typically embrace a cognitive, theological approach. By contrast, ministry demands attending to embodied image bearers with our affective faculties employed, not merely our cognitive ones. This section aims to bridge this gap, balancing orthodoxy with orthopraxy and compassion for the afflicted.

Consequently, this article argues that we can utilize theodicy in both incongruous and congruous ways in ministry. Addressing the problem of evil often prompts several motifs, as evidenced by popular works on human suffering. This section will not attempt to discredit the validity of these responses, but to illustrate how they are incongruous in a ministry or counseling setting.

### Sin, Responsibility, and Idolatry

One primary theme prioritizes the sufferer’s need to recognize sin, assume responsibility for their responses, or understand the idolatrous desires which exacerbate their suffering. This motif emerges as likely the most predominant among the surveyed literature.<sup>52</sup> For example, Tripp explains, “Physical suffering exposes the delusion of personal autonomy and self-sufficiency.... Independence is a delusion that is quickly exposed by suffering.”<sup>53</sup> In like fashion, Keller argues, “suffering puts its fingers on good things that have become too important to us.”<sup>54</sup> Both of these comments identify a strong proclivity towards addressing personal sin, potentially to the neglect of discussing legitimate grief, sorrow, and lament first.

Within this discussion, Zylla presents a refreshing perspective without

<sup>51</sup> Fyall notes that God comes, “not as plaintiff but as judge; he will ask the questions.... This leads Job to repentance, not for the many sins alleged ... but for ignorance and presumptuousness” (*Now My Eyes Have Seen You*, 53).

<sup>52</sup> This survey of literature identified mainline evangelical books on the topic of suffering, pain, and loss, at the popular and academic levels.

<sup>53</sup> Tripp, *Suffering*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 308.

imposing an idolatry motif: “At the root of sorrow is the human experience of finitude ... loss of control, loss of a preferred future, loss of ‘normal’ expectations, and, at the deepest root, the loss of hope itself.”<sup>55</sup> Notice the absence of moralizing these losses and corresponding grief. The loss of control, for example, does not necessitate an ungodly idolatry of control, although that could be the case.

### Transformative Justification

Another emerging motif justifies suffering based on a positively transformative outcome. Tripp links the Christian’s growth in suffering with the delay of Christ’s second coming.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Elliot articulates that suffering works in ways where “[God] needs to get our attention,”<sup>57</sup> citing an example of a couple whose baby died: “God was using that thing to speak to [them] in a way that He could not have spoken if He had not gotten their attention through the death of that little child.”<sup>58</sup> These examples could convey an inadequacy in God’s ability to communicate or sanctify apart from assigning suffering, even excessively equating suffering with some level of sanctification or ministerial usefulness. Kopic critiques succinctly, “A tragedy is still a tragedy; pain is still pain, even if some insight is gained in the process.”<sup>59</sup> To predominately focus on themes of “beauty from ashes,” especially for those whose fires continue to burn, often negates pain and can further isolate the afflicted in their moment of deepest need.<sup>60</sup>

### Stewarding Suffering

Popular literature frequently describes suffering as a gift or opportunity to be stewarded. Brian Morley argues, “Suffering is only an opportunity, and like all opportunities, they are only what you make of them.”<sup>61</sup> Elliot echoes this idea, “If God has given us a gift, it’s never only for

<sup>55</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 60.

<sup>56</sup> “God leaves us in this broken world because what it produces in us is way better than the comfortable life we all want” (Tripp, *Suffering*, 179).

<sup>57</sup> Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Kopic, *Embodied Hope*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Zylla comments, “Explanations often impose a greater suffering on the afflicted by alienating them from the community of hope. Such alienation leads to the suffering in suffering, namely, loneliness, as was the case in the Old Testament experience of Job, which stands as the biblical epitome of suffering” (*The Roots of Sorrow*, 48).

<sup>61</sup> Brian K. Morley, *God in the Shadows: Evil in God’s World*, rev. ed. (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 180.

ourselves. It’s always to be offered back to Him and very often it has repercussions for the life of the world.”<sup>62</sup> This argument also defies the notion that suffering is not part of God’s original creation. Keller articulates, “Taken all together, the various theodicies can account for a great deal of human suffering ... but they always fall short, in the end, of explaining all suffering.”<sup>63</sup> Again, this underscores how various theodicies can be ineffective in the context of practical theology and ministering to suffering people.

### Overrealized Eschatology

The consummation of Christ provides present hope of a future reality, an already-not-yet perspective. Peterman and Schmutzer describe this concept, when wrongly applied to suffering, as an overrealized eschatology: “As if all the blessings of the new heaven and new earth—no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4)—will come to us now if we just really believe God. But they will not come; we will have glimpses of them, indeed; yet they will not be fully realized in this life.”<sup>64</sup> This overrealized eschatology can promote a form of spiritual bypassing, a cognitive denial of grief based on theological doctrines of sovereignty, providence, and eschatological hope.<sup>65</sup> Morgan and Peterson correct this: “This side of heaven, suffering will remain mysterious. Pat answers do not suffice, and indeed they often only add to the hurt.”<sup>66</sup> Eschatological hope, properly applied, anchors the believer to truth, rather than being weaponized to minimize pain.

### Conclusion

This discussion inherently raises the question: Are there any appropriate uses of theodicy in ministry to the afflicted? As a counselor or pastor, what reason do you give when someone asks, “Why did God let this happen?” One potential answer is a tearful, “I am so sorry. I don’t know,” a response indicative of “weeping with those who weep” (Rom 12:15 ESV). It is not that we have no doctrinal understanding of the problem of evil, but that we cannot know why God allotted this suffering to this person

<sup>62</sup> Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, 75.

<sup>63</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 95.

<sup>64</sup> Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 166.

<sup>65</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Evan Marbury for introducing me to the idea of “spiritual bypassing” during casual conversations on multiple occasions. Also see Krispin Mayfield, *Attached to God: A Practical Guide to Deeper Spiritual Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 73–76.

<sup>66</sup> Morgan and Peterson, *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 21.

at this precise moment in time. In this way, we exhibit humility and recognize that explanations cannot reverse circumstances or how we feel about them.<sup>67</sup> Conversely, explanations may be helpful, primarily after the fact, where someone seeks to integrate their suffering with God's sovereignty. Explanations may also provide a sense of closure or encourage themes of redemption, given time. Here, the overarching goal is that they would be able to integrate their felt experience with their embedded theology.

This article merely scratches the surface in the realm of human suffering, some of its origins, and how we respond to the problem of evil. Human affliction inherently raises questions of God's sovereignty, justice, and benevolence. As a result, the problem of suffering can be a barrier to salvation and spiritual growth for some. Rather than deepening or rehearsing answers to the problem of evil, we can recognize suffering for what it is, where it ultimately comes from, and how we can compassionately protest it as we care for the afflicted. The momentum to move toward, sit with, and, at times, embrace silence will not come from techniques or personal experiences. Rather, we do well to anchor our hope in God's redemptive promises, leading us to protest the brokenness we experience in the already-not-yet.

---

<sup>67</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 43.