

SUFFERING AND THE SILENCE OF GOD

*How can a good God be all-powerful and allow suffering?
How do we deal with unanswered prayer? Where is God when we hurt?*

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Silence, disappointment, doubt, and suffering are not things that are foreign to Christians - they are common to us all. When we are at our end, desperate, alone, surrounded by darkness, and it seems like God is not there, that he is hiding his face; the feeling of abandonment can be devastating. It can feel worse than the trouble itself to feel alone in our pain. When we set our hopes on something, our trust, our heart, and it shatters at our feet, this can hurt more than to have never hoped at all. They say it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all, but the pain and loss are very real. Silence hurts.

In [The Doorway Papers](#), now published on-line, Arthur Custance writes,

At such times thoughtful men do not become atheists because they find it irrational to believe in a spiritual world which is above and beyond demonstration by ordinary means, but because of emotional insult, the feeling that if God is really such a Being as we His children claim Him to be, He could not possibly remain silent, He would have to act manifestly, mercifully savingly, publicly.

Theodicy, the issue of how a loving God can allow suffering, is a perennial atheist question, and a legitimate and honest one. But I think it is first and foremost a question for believers. It is of vital importance to us, precisely because we do believe in a good and sovereign God, that we resolve this issue with ourselves and with God. It is crucial to our development and a healthy growing trust with God that we face these questions and our pain head on. That is what this paper is about.

But first I would like to talk about what this paper will *not* be about.

I find it profoundly lame when Christians search to justify injustice as if it was a good thing: "*it's freewill,*" "*it's cause of Adam.*" In a misguided attempt to defend God they take a biblical concept that could offer profound insight into our situation and trivialize it into a trite intellectual justification for suffering. I find it equally naïve and dumb when atheists coolly condemn God as cruel and impotent as if they could objectively sit above it all, detached, untouched, as if these issues didn't effect them just as much as they do every other human being on Earth.

This is not an abstract concept, these are issues that touch us at the core of our being. We can justify suffering or say that God is unjust, but either way we pull the rug out from under our feet when we do. It is symptomatic of both sides to search for a detached intellectual answer rather than to really face the problem and ourselves. We need to all stop kidding ourselves. We are not above the problem so that we can push it off on God, in a denial of our human need, or say "well praise the Lord" and stick our head in the sand.

Theodicy is not a cold theological question. It is one of passion. *“I cry to you God but you do not answer. I stand before you, and you don't even bother to look”* screams Job in desperation. Clever intellectual answers won't cut it here. The answer we seek in our pain is not so much one of explanation but of relief. When we cry *“Why!”* what we mean is *“Make it stop.”*

Before we can really approach an answer to the problem we need to stop for a moment and realize just how close this question is intertwined with our very being. We cannot approach this from a distance. This is not neutral for us. It deals with our lives in the most intimate and central way imaginable. So long as we, or our theories, stay on an intellectual level and do not touch us where we live, they will remain merely academic. We will have to approach these questions from a different angle, a personal angle, if we want an answer that will touch us and heal us rather than a superficial and theoretical explanation. Whether atheist or believer, these are our questions and no amount of mental gymnastics will make the questions, or our need go away.

GOD'S QUESTIONS IN US

CS Lewis said we live in a universe that contains much that is bad and apparently meaningless, but at the same time containing creatures like ourselves who somehow know that it is bad and meaningless. God has created us as creatures that cry, as creatures that recognize the injustice and emptiness and long for something more. He didn't have to. He could have made us like fish just swimming around and not noticing much of anything. But he didn't. This outrage at injustice, this cry for reconciliation, this need for love that sits at the fundament of who we are, has been put there by God.

The only reason you recognize injustice at all, is that you have been made with an God-inherited need for justice, just like God has given all of us an inborn need for love and meaning. These are primarily God's questions inside of you. You have these questions because God has placed them in your heart. God *wants* you to ask. When you stop asking you stop being truly human.

Ultimately, until *“every tear is wiped away”* we will carry these questions in our hearts. As soon as we stop asking why, as soon as we stop yearning for justice, yearning for God to step in and heal and restore, as soon as we accept the darkness, as soon as we justify suffering and Hell, there will be something very wrong with us. We cannot ever stop asking these questions on this side of eternity. It is fundamental to who we are and how God has made us. What we need to know is how to live healthily with these questions. How to live in the tension of being in a fallen world, full of pain and injustice, but having hope and trust in a good God. These questions - because they are so deeply ingrained in our being, so crucial to us - have the potential to pull us into despair and away from God, or, if we have the guts to face them, can tell us a great deal about ourselves, about what life is about, and who God is. The real question is, *what does God want to tell us by making us ask?*

THE FACE OF GOD

The question of Theodicy - *“how can a loving and all-powerful God allow suffering?”* is a question of God's character - of who God is. Therefore understanding this won't be accomplished with a theoretical explanation, but by encountering God in a deep, profound, and personal way. We need to look God directly in the face and see his character first hand if we really want to understand it.

This is what Job longed for. When he was assaulted with suffering and tragedy and underwent the silence of God, he was not helped a bit by the theories of his friends. He wanted God. But how can you see God and live? How can you commune with one who is invisible? Job asks: *“Can you by searching find God? Can you know the Almighty to perfection? It is high as Heaven; what can you do? Deeper than Hell; what can you know?”* But Job longed to see God's face just the same. In the end he did, and it changed him. He had expected to find a cold uncaring face. Or even a sadistic one. But when he encountered God, Job was completely turned around as God opened his heart up to him. Job's bitter and cynical words turned to praise.

What did he see? What did that face look like?

Christianity offers a simple yet astounding answer. God's face looks like Jesus, because Jesus is God among us. Immanuel. The Word made flesh. In Jesus we see the face of God. It is a profound and amazing statement that the invisible unknowable unsearchable God is made known to us in the face and person of Jesus Christ. And that statement deserves some explanation. All too often it has meant that we take Christ and squeeze him into the narrow mold of a triumphalistic authoritarian judgmental God in heaven. But Jesus jumps out of this box just like he jumps out of every box we try to contain him in and challenges us to radically alter our concept about who God is.

Albert Nolan in [Jesus before Christianity](#) writes,

If we accept Jesus as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, he wants to serve us; he doesn't want to be given the highest possible status in our society; he wants to take the lowest place, without any status; he does not want to be feared; he wants to be recognized in the sufferings of the poor; he is not supremely indifferent and detached, he is irrevocably committed to the liberation of humanity, for he has chosen to identify himself with all the people in a spirit of solidarity and compassion. If this is not a true picture of God, then Jesus is not divine. If this is a true picture of God, then God is more truly human, more thoroughly humane, than any human being. He is a supremely 'human God'

And this is precisely what Jesus said, *“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the father does the Son also does.”* Everything he did, everything he said, was demonstrating the priorities and character of the Father. *“Have I been with you so long and you still don't know who I am? If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”* God did not become human so that he could finally relate to us, we were made in His image and that image is perfectly reflected in Jesus. Jesus is the heart of God, everything that really matters about who God is we encounter in Jesus because Jesus reveals and embodies God at his core. The New Testament says *“He is the image of the invisible God. The exact representation of his being”*

Now how can we get a hold of that? Really we can't. But it can get a hold of us. This is what Christians mean by “knowing.” They don't mean that they have somehow proven by rational means something that is beyond human knowledge, but that they have been encountered, been loved, been known and their hearts reaction is to cry out “I know you! I trust you!” This goes way beyond rational proof. It is a deeply profound and liberating revelation that reveals the core of what life is about, of what reality is, not in a reflection of our own superior reasoning and ability, but an expression of devotion and love to the Other who has come and *known* us, touched us intimately, like a sword piercing the heart.

This is a very different paradigm from the predominant western one of rationalization and deduction, so it is hard to grasp for many people. The best way to understand “knowing” with God though, is how we mean it when we say that we *know* that another person loves us, or that we *know* another person. We know it through trust. We know it through relationship. Because we have seen that other person's heart and given ours to them, as we live in that relationship, we become more and more sure of the love. Out of that trust we say *I know*. It is exactly the same with God. This kind of personal relational proof is the only kind that we humans have available to us. It keeps us humble because we cannot prove it, or dissect it, or put it in a box. But once you really get a hold of it, or rather once it gets a hold of you, it is like dynamite. It completely turns your life up side down. When you give yourself to the reality of who God is, it can transform your whole life and all of who you are. It encompasses and touches you and changes you completely down to the core of your being. I do not argue this, I simply testify to its reality.

This is the only way something of this nature can be “proven” - individually. No one else can experience it for you. All I can tell you is of my subjective experience with the face of God and trust that as you open your heart to God that this same reality will be demonstrated to you personally, individually, subjectively so that it becomes yours. Truth can only be possessed, understood, owned when it is lived and experienced personally. I say Jesus is the face of God. I am absolutely convinced of it. How do I know? *Because I have seen that face*. My reaction was like Job's - it blew me away. Seeing God's face is the answer to the question of suffering embedded in our hearts. So let's look at that face.

JESUS WEPT

Since the question of Theodicy is essentially a question of the character of God, we are going to look at Jesus who is the embodiment of the very heart of God. It is my prayer that as you read this and meditate over it, that the truth of who God is as seen in Christ will go beyond mere concepts and theories and become a living reality in your heart and life. So I would ask that you would open your heart to God to encounter you, and that you would read on prayerfully.

We find in the gospel account of the resurrection of Lazarus profound insight into the nature and character of God in our lives in times of silence:

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” (John 11:1–3)

It is clear from the text that Mary knew that Jesus loved her and her brother. It tells us that she is the same Mary who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, and in the letter the sisters refer to Lazarus as “the one you love,” so the familiarity and trust between them is quite evident. But Jesus chose to remain where he was for two days. He only conveyed the message “This sickness will not end in death.”

When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.” Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. (John 11:4–7)

Jesus did not come. Her brother died. Mary was absolutely devastated.

When she has most needed God's help he was inactive, and his promise that the sickness would not end in death turned out to be, in Mary's eyes, false. She felt abandoned, alone, helpless, and without hope. Even if we know that God loves us as Mary did, silence is crushing.

Four days after Lazarus' death, Jesus came. There were people all around who had come to comfort the sisters in the loss of their brother. Mary fell at his feet in tears and said to him *“Lord if you had been here, he wouldn't have died.”*

Partially because we know the story and its outcome already we half-expect Jesus to respond by saying something like “Oh ye of little faith did you not know that this is for the glory of God?.” But he doesn't. His response is extraordinary and offers great insight into God's character.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. (John 11:33)

The Greek word translated in the English as “deeply moved” means to make the snorting noise of a horse. In other words he was so overwhelmed with the sorrow that it literally knocked the wind out of him. It was the kind of pain where you can't catch your breath. Christ's second response is to be “troubled,” the Greek word translated here conveys a feeling of outrage or anger- in his heart Jesus was instinctually insulted at the injustice of suffering. To anyone familiar with grief, these two reactions: on the one hand shock - an intellectual and spiritual numbness, and on the other hand anger at the evil of suffering - are exactly how we feel. And at the same time it mirrors God's heart as seen in throughout the Old Testament in the prophets. Jeremiah writes,

My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sickened within me, because of the plight of the daughter of my people from the length of the land to the breadth of the land ... For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded. I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me. Declares the Lord. (Jer 8:18–19, 21)

This all culminates in what Jesus does next: two powerful words:

Jesus wept.

Even though he knows that in a few minutes Lazarus will rise from the dead, the next thing he does is to weep. Not some pious controlled socially appropriate tears, but hot honest choking tears. He is deeply and intimately involved with us in our pain. God suffers with us, feels every anguish, knows every doubt. Being infinite does not mean merely infinitely large, but infinitely small as well, so that he understands and experiences our silence, our pain with us, not just in a theoretical way, but deeply and completely. Sometimes in our suffering, in the midst of silence we have the wind knocked out of us, and there is nothing left to pray with. God knows this, and you can be sure that he is at that moment praying for you.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man,

“by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” (John 11:38–44)

Mary knew that Jesus could have healed her brother, but she did not know that he was even stronger than death. Paul writes that *“nothing can separate us from the love of Christ”* Nothing. Now Mary knew this first hand. She learned that she could trust in God, no matter what the situation looked like. Not based on her understanding of promises or principles, or the strength of her faith, or *her* at all, but based on the very character and person of God revealed in Christ. Jesus did not say “I will resurrect” but “*I am the resurrection and the life.*” The difference is immense.

Though this was a crucial lesson for Mary to learn, it did not make the death of Lazarus a good thing. Jesus felt this, and suffered it with Mary. God suffers with us and always has. God is not sitting comfortably in Heaven in our times of silence observing us from a far. God knows and experiences our pain vitally and intimately. This is not some celestial game of Chess for Him. God did not become human in order to finally understand and relate to our suffering, but to demonstrate to us that he always has understood it, felt every tear, known every doubt more than we know ourselves. *God came down to us, not expecting us to rise above our suffering, or to deny it, but knelt beside the empty faces, and cried with us.*

THE CROSS

But the story does not end with Jesus just crying. Like Job, we are most afraid of hearing God say in response to our cry of suffering either: “shut up!” or “sorry.” We expect to hear (to borrow a phrase from our parents) *“Because I said so that's why! Now quit balling or I'll really give you something to cry about!”* or else we fear to encounter a sad eyed emaciated Christ who would like to help, but just can't, so sorry. Both of these images of God are extremely limiting, and shortsighted. God is way bigger than that. And these two responses we fear the most, and half expect to hear from God, are blown out of the water by this account with Lazarus. We see in the story of the resurrection of Lazarus that this is patently not the way that God is.

We see that God is love, that God identifies with us in our pain, so much so that it is shocking. We see Jesus grieving and this revolutionizes our picture of who God is, and we see in the same picture that God is able to help us beyond anything we would have dared ask or expect. We see a God who is able to completely relate to us in the deepest way imaginable, and who is at the same time unimaginably powerful. Seeing the human aspects of God as revealed in Jesus does not limit God, it bursts the seams of our limited definitions. In seeing God small, our understanding of God becomes enormously big.

Jesus came to show us God's character, who God was, how God responded to suffering, to need. The culmination of this was on the cross, God's ultimate response to suffering. The answer to the question “where is God when I hurt?” is quite clear: He is on the cross giving everything to restore us, to bring an end to suffering once and for all. The cross demonstrates just how hard and grave the problem of suffering is. The same God that snapped his fingers and made the world had to sacrifice everything,

dying on a cross to solve this. We see not only that love takes on all the sin of the world - that God takes on every hurt, every injustice, every rape, but that God takes on the blackness and the lostness as well, not just taking on the rape, but the blackness in the heart of the rapist as well - being both the rapist and raped. The image is staggering. The cross shows us that God is willing to break every rule, to sacrifice absolutely everything to solve the problem. It hurts him. He hates it. It shows us that he is deeply intimately involved in our suffering. And it gives us reason to hope.

I hope you noticed that I said that *God* died on the cross for us. Christ is the image of God, the heart of God, not the victim of God. As [J.B. Phillips](#) put it, “the man on the cross was no demigod, no puppet-godling, no fragmented piece of Godhead, but God himself. Once people begin to realize that, there is bound to be an explosion in their thinking.” God was not sitting comfortably in Heaven, pouring out his wrath on a separate third party. God was in Christ on that cross, suffering, taking on the sin and pain of the world and securing hope and liberation for a lost world that he loved. This is an incalculable mystery that goes so beyond our ordinary ideas of God that it is difficult to comprehend. But this is absolutely crucial: *God died for you.*

This image of God that we see so vividly reflected in the character and life of Jesus and that culminates on the cross and resurrection needs to inform how we approach the question of Theodicy. The cross is about passion. God demonstrated how passionately he cares about us on the cross in wanting to break the silence, to end the suffering. *God does not care how much it costs, who's fault it is, or what the rules are. God cares about you.*

Through Christ, God put to death the worst of agonies - our fear of abandonment. God is with us. Imanuel. No matter how dark it gets or how bad it hurts, you are *never* alone. But pain hurts. Silence hurts. Knowing that God is there in the darkness is hard. When Jesus was in Gethsemane he clung to God, but he was in agony. He said “*My heart is overwhelmed to the point of death*” and asked his friends to stay with him for the night. On the cross he cried out to God “*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*” and heard nothing. And in this silence, holding onto a lifetime of trust and knowing who God is, he said into the darkness “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*” When that same Jesus says to us “*my peace I leave with you*” we know immediately he doesn't mean some feeling, but a profound trust and a hope that was strong enough to carry him to Hell and back. It is the face of a God like that which allows me to pray even when it hurts. When it hurts too much, I need you to pray for me.

ANSWERS

So we have our answer, not in the form of an explanation, but in the form of Christ. Suffering exists, and Theodicy concludes that therefore God must either not be sovereign or not be loving. Jesus grabs our face in his hands and says to this “*look at me! look in my face. I am love. I am in control. And it will be hard. Very hard. But trust me*” Jesus calls us to see in that face a radical vision of a God who is one with us in our suffering, who is close to the broken hearted. In him we meet a God who identifies with us in our pain, and calls us to participate with him in healing it. Jesus does not come giving explanations, he comes giving himself.

You may wonder why there has to be suffering here, or why God couldn't have made the world different. Why is it possible for us to hurt each other so much? Why is God so hard to see? Some

people say it is because we need freedom to develop character. This is not a bad concept, and it is certainly true in our world. But it begs the question: why couldn't God have made a different world with different rules?

Ultimately the question we are really asking is “God what are you doing?” and the answer we have is that God is intimately involved in answering *us*, in meeting us and providing a solution, and end to suffering. Our question at its heart is one of trust, and this is exactly what Jesus speaks to. God entered our world of suffering and showed us his heart. On the cross he showed us that he is willing to confront suffering head on and sacrifice everything to end it. And with the resurrection that redemption has begun here in us.

Throughout the Bible we are steered away from asking for an explanation and steered toward how we are to respond to suffering and to God. Honestly I don't think we'll ever find an adequate explanation for why there is suffering. If we were try to comprehend how God wants to establish justice it would blow up our heads. God tells Job if he can't make a sunset or and ostrige which is easy for God, then how does he expect to understand something as mind boggling as how God governs the universe? It isn't our job to understand this, but what we can do is participate with God in solving it. We can see on the cross a foretaste of the solution, a flash of what justice looks like. We can see how God wants us to respond to the question of suffering in us, by responding to God, by participating with God in a relationship of developed experiential trust, through real hope, and through participating in loving God and loving others. In the next section we will look at how we can do this.

AN OPIATE FOR THE MASSES?

God is working to end suffering and calls us to work with him, to participate in his heart. Suffering will not be a permanent part of human existence. The New Testament talks about a future world where it will be different; where there will be complete justice and restoration and healing. Biblical justice is not about vengeance but about restoration - doing justice by helping the oppressed, the poor, the lost. Heaven is the epitome of this kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. Heaven should be a model that shows us how we should live here on earth, seeking justice and healing and liberation. *Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.* But all too often Christianity has presented a picture of heaven that goes more in the direction of unhealthy escapism and detachment from reality.

As Christianity became a religion of kings and power institutions, Jesus' revolutionary message of the kingdom of God among us - of a God who was near and identified with the poor, who proclaimed freedom for the oppressed, and loving your enemies - was kept from the populace because it was too subversive. They were told just to follow the authority and one day they could get to heaven if they were good and obedient. And so the whole point of the Christian message of the hope of heaven was lost. Instead of it being a model that showed us how we are to act here, the epitome of the “kingdom of God among you” that Jesus proclaimed to the captives and the outcasts, that he ushered in to the sick and the untouchables, it became something distant used as a carrot on a stick to promote compliance and passivity to the status quo. In the face of injustice, what was intended to start an inner revolution, to spur us on to fight to end suffering here, instead became an opiate to justify it.

Most people today still think of heaven in this passive way. And so, as we have moved away from monarchy towards individualism we have thrown this idea of heaven overboard as childish. We live for

now and want to make heaven here. But because we have become so individualistic, heaven here does not mean working for social justice and loving each other, it means retreating to our little nest egg, to escape from the world into the safety of our Christian community, to fill our time looking to God above in Bible studies, quiet times, praise meetings, devotionals, seminars, and on and on in our safe tidy blessed enclave where we can “concentrate on the Lord.”

This escapist fragmentation of life into the sacred vs. the secular leads to an unhealthy schizophrenic view of life. It produces a subconscious guilt at honestly enjoying anything ordinary, anything “not spiritual,” rather than seeing the sanctity of the ordinary: seeing all things as sacred, the whole of life as sacred, and letting that sight inform everything we do with meaning. This separation leads to us being distanced from our own suffering and the suffering of others so that we deny our own needs and are callous to others. And so we become just like those old kings. We may kid ourselves into thinking that now it is different, that now there are no peasants outside the gate. But we only need to watch the nightly news to see that this is a lie, or take a good look in our own hearts to see that consumerism and individualism, even when we have wrapped them in spiritualized labels, have left us empty inside, alone with an inner poverty.

DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD

We are not fulfilled, but we keep thinking: all I need is to get more involved, or pray more, or be more disciplined, or have that revival come, or find that perfect partner, or that church, or be slain in the spirit, or get that spiritual insight. Then I will be fulfilled. Always just out of reach, one significant experience away, the same carrot on the stick as before. And so our life becomes a desperate never-ending introverted search to find that elusive *something* that will finally fulfill us.

Our hearts long for freedom, to an end to suffering. This is a good desire, but when this healthy and fundamental desire becomes an addiction of always looking for that “blessing” fix, or wanting to have our problems taken away so that we will not have to face them, it ultimately leads to either a denial and disconnectedness with ourselves and others, or to an extreme disillusionment and disappointment with God and with life. In other words, if we want to justify our carrot on the stick world, we must deny the cries of others and the cries of our own unfulfilled heart in order to maintain our picture of safety, subconsciously saying: “Yes you can reach that carrot - that ultimate fulfillment. We're almost there, you just need more faith. Don't question. Don't tell me people are hurting here. I can't handle seeing that.” Instead of these dreams inspiring us to vigorously pursue them, and to have an inner revolution that confronts our problems honestly, we are told to submit and be obedient and wait, and one day revival will come and all our problems will be miraculously lifted away.

Once we have seen through this, and can finally admit that we are unfulfilled, we become severely disappointed and feel empty and lied to. This destructive culture of escapism is very widespread throughout western society and especially within western Christianity. It can get so intertwined with our Christian experience that we can hardly tell anymore where one begins and the other ends. So it wounds us at the very core of life. It makes us question the very reality of our faith.

A WINDOW TO HEAVEN

It is said that, “In Christ, the church carries within it the seeds of its own subversion.” It is this

revolutionary nature of God which is our only hope in this twisted scenario. Jesus wants us to question, to break the rules, to burst complacency. He said things that were shocking to get us to think, proverbially plunging our head in a bucket of ice water. Often Christians are so quick to solve problems with pat answers that they don't let this revolution take place, and that means we don't move closer to Jesus. In this section we will look at how we can we deal with these needs and longings in a healthy way together with God. How we can regain the radical and liberating hope of heaven that Jesus proclaimed: the Kingdom of God among us.

The Christian life is not one characterized by being fulfilled and complete here, it is about seeing beyond and letting that vision spur us to action. We see God here in glimpses, little ambushes that shatter our gray world and leave us gasping for more. For just a moment a window is opened up to Heaven and we can see, and our heart cries out "Abba!" We naturally long for this home, to be united with God. Our hearts were made for that. These glimpses point us to something beyond the gray.

The Message's rendition of 2nd Corinthians 5:5 puts it, "The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so we'll never settle for less." God has broken through to us in our dark and wounded world, shattered our blindness, and given us a deposit in our hearts that points us to him. If these glimpses were all there was, then that would be frustrating, that would not be enough. But they are there to let us see, to wake us up, to point us beyond, and to let that vision shape our world here.

In the on-line article [Stuck on the Road to Emmaus](#) Mark Buchanan writes,

Just at those moments when finally the scales fall from our eyes and we see that, behold, it is he, it is Jesus!--at that wondrous moment, he often up and vanishes. Our encounters with the risen Christ are mostly like that: enigmatic, fleeting, mere glimpses, little ambushes. And we're left with the question, "Didn't our hearts burn within us? Didn't they?" The portrait of the faithful is not a portrait of the fulfilled. What defines them - what defines all of us on the road to Emmaus - is hope. What defines them is a slow, burning heart. What defines them is a yearning: knowing in their bones, in spite of loss or sorrow or aloneness, that there is Something more, Something else, Something better. What defines them is a hauntedness, a shaky but unshakable conviction that the Christ they see now through a glass darkly, in little fleeting puzzling glimpses, they will see one day face-to-face. But for now, on this road, their slow hearts burn.

Sometimes our heart is opened to see and it is scorching - our hearts burn within us - at other times they are merely warmed. Sometimes the touch is phenomenal, but more often than not, it is just something simple and ordinary, like seeing how Jesus breaks the bread, and suddenly we recognize he has been with us all along. The caliber of our faith is not so much measured by the magnitude of these glimpses and epiphanies, but by how we deal with the in-between times when it is gray, where we are carried by the faith and trust we have built. These glimpses through a dark glass need to lead to a developing and growing of that trust in God that can take us through the gray, they need to produce in us a hope of heaven that does not make us escapist, but fills our life here with depth, allowing us to embrace life because we see God in it filling the ordinary with value and meaning. They need to produce a life that is not detached from the world, but has its eyes wide open seeing what life is really about. I long for heaven because I long for an end to all suffering, for every tear to be wiped away. And that vision of Heaven causes me to work now to bring the Kingdom of God here by joining God in caring for those who are hurting, liberating those who are captive, and speaking hope to those who are lost.

This is what it means to “*share in the suffering of Christ,*” to be a co-worker with Christ laboring to alleviate suffering for the sake of love. Jesus said “*As you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me*” and that implies something incredible. When you love me I am receiving God's love, and at the same time you are loving God through me. Intimacy with God is not an isolated relationship, but one that intertwines all of our lives. When you love someone you want to care for them, comfort them, protect them, nurture them, but it is hard to imagine doing these things for God. How could we comfort God? How can we minister to God's needs? Although there are many expressions of our loving God that may be shared directly, (trust, respect, affection), specifically these “parental” characteristics (comfort, protection, nurture), of our love for God find their expression in our loving the “least” - the weak, the tired, the lonely. In this very way we can love God with our whole being, with the complete expression of who we are as people.

Some Christian circles teach that as Christians we should not have trouble and suffering as a part of our lives. But this is just not something Jesus ever promised us. To follow Christ does not mean a trouble-free existence, a life free from suffering, but a life devoted to caring for those who suffer, a life of bringing the Gospel to the broken, the neglected, and the unforgiven.

When we open our hearts to others, when we carry their pain, we hurt too, we suffer too. When you love someone you are not indifferent to their struggling, it becomes your own. We do not seek suffering, we seek to end suffering, to heal. But like Christ we take on and endure suffering for the sake of love. As we leave our insulation and open our hearts to care for one another, we suffer. We suffer the pain of those who we long to see free, and we suffer the outrage at injustice that we fight to make right, and we suffer in our own struggles just as Christ did at Gethsemane.

In doing this we encounter how God responds to suffering and injustice. We share in God's suffering and God's heart. When we love others we love God, we minister to God's wounds: “*I was naked and you clothed me, I was a stranger and you took me in*” Likewise, when we allow others to love us we become a sacrament to them - in our being “the least of these” we become a tangible means for them to encounter Christ by loving us.

SHARING IN GOD’S SUFFERING

In [The Suffering God](#) Charles Ohlrich writes,

An amazing amount of space in the Gospels is devoted to the healings of Jesus. This underscores for us that the problem of suffering is a matter for action. Because God works to fight suffering, so should we - vigorously. We should use every means at our disposal to combat suffering - prayer, medicine, social action, relief work, and so on - our attitude should be to regard it as an enemy. Have you ever felt anger welling up within you when you see someone in pain? This feeling is not wrong or unchristian. It is even proper to hate our own suffering. It is right to hate loneliness, or disease, or the death of a loved one. The image of the suffering God we see on the cross is the image of a protesting God.

These questions that God has implanted in us that cry out against suffering, that long for wholeness have been put there by God so that we can participate with him in the work of the cross, working to end suffering, tearing down the barriers that divide us. Being made in God's image, we too suffer. And this

being so, God does not so much share in our suffering as we share in God's.

I know a couple who lives and works in the inner city “projects” of Chicago with the gangs. They long to see these people break out of the destructive cycles they are trapped in, to see them find Jesus, and to see the whole oppressive structure of crime and poverty reformed there. That is a tremendous burden. It is crucial for us to realize that these burdens we have to see deep healing and change in people's lives that we love, ultimately belong to God. We can participate together with God in working for transformation, but if we carry the weight alone it will crush us. Its pressure can be debilitating. We need to participate with God in sharing his burden in a proper balance, allowing our strength and source to be rooted in God.

In [Christi-Anarchy](#) Dave Andrews writes that “We often think that service is doing things for others. But service takes on its true character when we do things *with* others.” Our service is not only a participation with God, but a participation with others - allowing them to go at their own pace, supporting their growth but not smothering. This does not necessarily only have to mean doing something dramatic, like giving all your possessions to the poor and devoting yourself to volunteer work in a far off country. There is need right next to you; in the lives of the people you already know and see every day, in the little things, in sharing the ordinary joys and troubles of life. It simply means opening your life and being real and caring for others, and allowing them to care for you, wherever you are.

Jesus calls us to follow him in caring for others, in speaking life into peoples hearts. This is not the demand of a God in the sky, but a God who has made himself a servant and beckons us to serve too, to join him down on his knees amongst the wounded. And if you are wounded God is kneeling over you. He loves you more than you can possibly imagine and places no demands on that love. But that same love urges us, calls us to follow, to participate with him, an imperative of the heart born of the Gospel of love. It's a hard journey, filled with deep joy, incomprehensible peace and rock solid hope. But also with trouble, darkness, and tears. And it's a journey that we never *ever* walk alone.