

Love and Suffering Isaiah 62:1-5; Romans 8:18-27

For Christians, suffering has always been a spiritual and theological problem. We cannot deny the objective reality that the world is full of suffering. At the same time, our faith, our belief, our theology, and our hearts tell us that God is love. We have a problem of irreconcilable truths. The world is full of suffering. God is love.

This spiritual struggle grows if we are under the misconception that the biblical promise is one of protection from life's traumas. We often feel entitled to God's protection, comfort, and blessing, and instead life sometimes batters us.

There are no fully adequate ways to make peace with this problem, but some things can help us understand it and have a more mature, more spiritually sound and realistic way of believing in a loving God in a suffering world. We begin by acknowledging that there are different categories of suffering.

The first category is suffering caused by human beings and human societies. Many suffer because people lie, steal, cheat, and are violent. If this isn't bad enough, sometimes we unintentionally cause suffering. How many people die in auto accidents each year?

Rarely are those deaths intended, but almost always they are caused by errors made by people. We cause an enormous amount of suffering.

How do we reconcile the God of love with the suffering that we cause? Remember God has chosen to make us free. We are not puppets. We are not on strings, and so we hurt each other. It is impossible to conceive that God could make us both free and perfect. I'm sorry friends, I would like to be both free and perfect, but even more I would like you to be free and perfect!

Unfortunately, human freedom and human perfection are irreconcilable. They cannot both exist simultaneously. They're like solid objects that cannot occupy the same space. If we are free, we will hurt each other. God does not prevent us from doing so, because the only way God can prevent us from hurting each other is to make us puppets. That's the trade-off. God loves us enough to set us free, even at the terrible price of suffering that accompanies that freedom.

We want desperately for God to protect us from our own or someone else's foolishness. I wish God would protect me from some people. That would be very nice. You probably wish God would protect you from someone, too. But when I expect God to protect me from everyone, I am not thinking rightly, I'm thinking magically. Magic would allow you to be both free and nice, but we are not in the magic business.

Our freedom is not incompatible with a God of love; in fact, it is God's love that sets us free. Mature Christians know free and fallible human beings will hurt us.

There is another category of suffering that is harder to understand. That is the suffering caused by the failures of creation itself. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, terminal illnesses—all of these are part of nature. Sometimes, nature wounds us deeply.

I think we make a tragic spiritual mistake when we read the first creation story in Genesis. It says God created for six days and rested on the seventh day. We sometimes see that seventh day as forever. Did you ever think that on Monday God went back to work again? The Bible doesn't say that creation is complete.

In fact, the New Testament suggests that creation is still unfinished and that God is still at work. Now we may argue with God about being slow, but the passage from Romans says, "*All creation groans as a woman in labor.*" Creation groans and so do we.

Creation groans when earthquakes take lives. Creation groans in hurricanes like Katrina. Creation groans as if it is in labor for something not yet born. God is not done with creation. We live in the time of unfinished creation, and sometimes it will hurt us terribly. We may quarrel with God because God doesn't hurry up, but it is not up to us to impose schedules on God.

So if God is love, what's the deal? We must get over this notion that God is some kind of seatbelt or a protective cage that will protect us from all harm and sorrow. We are mature enough to know that if we climb on the roof and jump, God will not suspend gravity just to protect us. Yet we expect God to protect us from all other hurts and troubles. It's childish, really. We need to grow up.

God is not in the protection business. God is in the accompanying business. God is in the business of presence, not protection. God is in the business of walking with us through the pain and hurt of our lives. God stands beside us when the world seems to turn against us and creation itself seems to fall down upon us. God promises we will not be alone.

Look at the biblical record. Early in the Bible, the Israelites are made slaves in Egypt.

That was hardly protection. When they are finally released from slavery and come to their land of promise, they discover it's not all they hoped it would be. They are surrounded by hostile people.

They have droughts and famines and storms and all kinds of problems in the land of promise, and after being there for six hundred years or so, and then the Babylonians come and take them away into exile.

Protection? The Bible is not about protection. Christ is tortured and executed. The apostles all suffer and die. God is not about protection. God is about accompaniment.

Suffering is part of our lives, and a God of love does not coddle us and protect us from it. The God of love walks with us through it, 1 and provides for us what the hymn writer called "*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*" ("Great Is Thy Faithfulness").

Not protection, but presence and hope-that is the gift of God's love when we suffer.
Amen.