

# The *SBJT* Forum: Biblical Perspectives on Suffering

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Ajith Fernando, Duane Garrett, C. Ben Mitchell, Mark Dever, and Timothy George have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

## **SBJT: Is Western Ministry Training neglecting the cross?**<sup>1</sup>

**Ajith Fernando:** I believe that western theological education is not preparing Christians adequately for suffering, and that this is having negative influences upon the church in the non-western world. My biblical reflections on this matter inevitably intersect with my own experience. Hence, the autobiographical character of what follows.

### **The Biblical Basis *Commitment to Joy and to the Cross***

I suppose you could call me a "Christian hedonist." I do not like this phrase (popularized by John Piper), but it correctly describes my desire. I am a pleasure seeker, seeking the joy of the Lord in my life. I resonate with George Müller who said that the first and primary business to which he ought to attend to everyday was to have his soul happy in the Lord.

However, I want to have this joy coming out of a lifestyle of taking up the cross. Jesus said that he wants us to have his joy so that our joy may be complete (John 15:11). But soon after that, he commanded us to love each other as he has loved us, that is, to die for each other (vv. 12, 13).

Jesus said that unlike the hired hand he would die for the sheep (John 10:11-15). If we are sent into the world as the Father has sent Jesus (John 20:21), then we too must die for the sheep. So I want to pursue joy on the one hand and pursue death for the sake of the people to whom I am called to minister on the other. Over the past few years I have been attempting to grapple with this paradox. How can you have joy while you are dying for a cause?

Paul's life and ministry have influenced me greatly in this process. In Philippians he states that the joy of the Lord is an imperative for Christians (Phil 4:4). But he wrote this while suffering in a Roman prison. In fact, when he urged the Philippians to complete his joy by restoring unity there, he implied that he had lost his joy over their lack of unity (Phil 2:2; cf. 4:2). He allowed himself to be hurt by and to lose a certain earthly joy over the sins of others, while he preserved his joy in the Lord. He tells the wayward Galatians that he goes through the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in them (Gal 4:19). He says that he faces "the daily pressure of his concern for all the churches. Who is weak," he says, "and I do not feel weak? Who is led to sin and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor 11:28-29).

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He said, “death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. . . . Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:12, 16). How alien to modern aspirations in ministry these verses are! How much more we study about how to avoid stress than about how to take on the type of stress that Paul speaks of here.

I am convinced that we should do everything required for a balanced life—get adequate sleep, observe the Sabbath principle, have times set apart for the family, for study, exercise, and fun. Most importantly, we must spend unhurried times with the Lord in prayer and Bible study. But while we do all this we must die for those we serve. Because we are called to die, there will be struggles and strains, burdens and persecutions. Several years ago, in a Youth for Christ training session, I shared how I struggle with a huge burden over the weaknesses and sins of the staff workers I lead. The teachers, who were from the west, were alarmed by this and prayed that I would be liberated from these burdens. I have thought much about that incident, especially because those teachers were fine Christians. I have come to the conclusion that it is right for me to be burdened in this way. This stress coming from concern is a part of my dying for my people. Didn't Jeremiah, Daniel and Nehemiah suffer depression over the problems of their people and weep over their sin?

Each time I return home from a preaching assignment abroad, I experience an acute sense of frustration. I have come to recognize that this is the frustration of making the transition from being a speaker to being a leader. As a speaker I am treated like a big shot. Much is done to make me comfortable, especially when

I travel to the west. But as a biblical leader my lifestyle should be that of a servant (Mark 10:42-45). I am a servant of my family and of those I lead in Youth for Christ. Unfortunately, their needs do not wait for my convenience and sometimes crop up at the most “inappropriate” times.

This was what Jesus experienced as well. Mark 6:31 says that “so many people were coming and going that [Jesus and the apostles] did not even have a chance to eat.” This is where Jesus' famous statement, “Come with me to a quiet place by yourselves and get some rest,” appears. When we quote this statement we often overlook the fact that Jesus and his apostles did not get the rest they desired on this occasion. In fact, Jesus went straight into teaching the crowds who had followed him there. He taught the 5000 and then fed them. But he persevered with seeking solitude and found it by sending his disciples on a boat ride while “he went up on a mountainside to pray” (Mark 6:45-46). Jesus demonstrates the balanced life of a servant. He served the people even when it was inconvenient, but he persevered until he found time for the other essential disciplines of life, like the discipline of solitude.

### *Unbiblical Stress*

I am not saying that all the stress we face is biblical. In fact I have found much help from what some western authors, especially Dr. Archibald Hart, have written about stress. I believe there are two common types of unbiblical stress experienced by Christians. The first is the stress that comes from earthly ambitions for success. We want our church or organization to grow, or our book to be the best in its field. This often leads to a workoholism arising from the fact that we find our pri-

mary fulfillment in striving for earthly goals. This produces stress, and failure becomes a huge burden.

The other type of unbiblical stress comes from an unwillingness to delegate, as Moses father-in-law pointed out to him (Exodus 18). All Christians have gifts, and it is the leader's responsibility to enable others to exercise their gifts. So we will be always delegating responsibilities to others. If we do not do this we will end up bearing unnecessary burdens. We will go to see sick people that others could see. We will speak at meetings at which others should speak. This comes from a messiah-complex that causes us to think that we are the ones who must do all the important things in our ministries. We will end up running ourselves into the ground. We must severely discipline ourselves to refuse many opportunities for ministries that are outside our primary call.

### **The Ground Situation**

#### *The "Benefactor's" Lifestyle*

I have become burdened about suffering because of certain problems the church in Sri Lanka faces. She is growing numerically at a wonderful rate. This growth is primarily through the ministries of unsung heroes who have gone to the unreached and are paying a huge price to proclaim the gospel. But another sad thing is happening. Sri Lankan Christian leaders who return after training abroad or who have foreign contacts are finding it very difficult to fit into the lifestyle that is necessary to identify with the poor, who form the large majority of our population. They have developed a lifestyle that makes them more of a benefactor than a peer to their colleagues. Owing to contacts abroad they are able to enjoy a higher standard of living than their colleagues.

And they often help these colleagues, thus becoming benefactors. Some send their children to international schools where the monthly fee for a student is more than the monthly salary of an average Christian worker. This is "inevitable" for some because the early education of these children was in the west, making it impossible for them now to join the vernacular stream of the "local" schools. Some of these leaders return to the west after a few years of service in Sri Lanka, sometimes feeling that they are not being used adequately in Sri Lanka or sometimes because the educational needs of their children necessitate this move.

A similar problem exists with the missionary movement today. Many modern missionaries are told that they do not need to struggle like earlier missionaries. We are seeing that they do not really make an effort to identify fully with our people. Many come for only a short term, so that they feel little need to identify with the people. They live like westerners in Sri Lanka—quite removed from the people. Locals attach themselves to missionaries with the hope that some of the missionary's riches will trickle down to them. The missionary then also becomes primarily a benefactor. Some sensitive nationals stay away from them lest they be open to the charge of being motivated by mercenary considerations. Consequently, missionaries have bad experiences. People join them, hoping "to take them for a ride." They end up saying, "You cannot trust the Sri Lankans." The non-Christians, on the other hand, are saying that a new colonial era has dawned. Earlier the Christians came with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. Now they come with the Bible in one hand and dollars in the other.

I believe that one of the biggest problems in missions today is the “softness” of the missionaries coming from affluent countries. They are finding it difficult to endure frustration and strain. After some time in the field, they either modify their goals so as to be involved in programs that do not entail much suffering, or they return home disillusioned over the suffering and frustration that they had not been adequately prepared for. The upbeat advertising aimed at winning more recruits may lead some missionaries to think that they have been deceived about the nature of their calling as missionaries.

### *Suffering with the People*

When leaders suffer with the people, the people develop a sense of ownership in the movement. They begin to contribute financially and in other ways to the movement. Unless they contribute they will never sense ownership, and thus never really develop into leaders themselves. But why give when the leaders live such affluent lives? My dream (partially fulfilled, I hope) is to see the poor giving to our work and therefore sensing that they have ownership in Youth for Christ, so much so that they can protest when something happens that violates their principles. If they are only helpless recipients of aid, then they would not have the courage or the freedom to protest when they are angry about something that is happening.

Most of the Sri Lankans who return home after some years abroad (I myself included) struggle with the sense of frustration that they are not being used “properly.” We feel that the people have not recognized our gifts and that we are not “fulfilled in ministry.” The problem is that our countries are so poor that they can-

not afford specialists. So if we are to use our gifts, it will have to be while we do many other things. The result of course is integration that avoids the unhealthy specialization that we are seeing in the west. I believe that such integration is one of the biggest contributions that we in poorer nations have to make to the rest of the world. But there is a big price to pay if we are to use our primary gifts while doing so many other things. That price may be the severe tiredness we must constantly endure.

### *Christian Fulfillment versus Western Job Satisfaction*

Unfortunately, many who have returned to Sri Lanka after studies abroad derive their understanding of fulfillment in ministry from the west, where it is often drawn from secular ideas of job satisfaction rather than from the biblical theology of the cross. I have had to think of this often because I have had four foreign “job offers” this year. I never gave any of them serious thought. Two of them were very attractive because they claimed to give me a platform for a wider influence for my writings and also freedom from some activities, like fund raising, that keep me from concentrating on my first love, the ministry of the Word. Sometimes the thought would come to me, “How nice to be able to write without the severe exhaustion that comes from trying to write and do active ministry among a people who do not have a western approach to time and efficiency.” But my call is to Sri Lanka. Sadly, many of our sharpest minds have left the country. Many Asian Christians who are writing are writing from abroad.

What should we say about those who benefit from the generosity of a leader

with foreign contacts? Many wait until they too can get a foreign sponsor. The moment they do so they liberate themselves from their benefactor and become benefactors themselves. They praise God for the provision of funds to have a more effective ministry. Unfortunately, such foreign contact sometimes precipitates a downward slide in their ministry. They lose touch with their people. They are comfortable and prosperous but ineffective.

Many Christian workers all over the world regard their early ministry as their best period of ministry. Along the way they took a step that impeded their growth. At the time, however, it seemed to be a wonderful opportunity for career advancement. Some took jobs that would put them higher in the ecclesiastical status-ladder. (How often ministers think that promotion in status is the rightful and necessary reward for service!) Some left places of political instability and danger. They felt that they had served there long enough, and that it was time to come to a place where they and their children could have better educational and cultural opportunities. Some found their spouses unwilling to share in the difficulties of their call, and thus they were forced to relocate. Some decided to go for higher studies. But what these moves did was to take them away from the way of the cross, and thus from effectiveness.

### *Accepting Suffering*

I want to encourage as many Sri Lankans as I can to stay on the “straight and narrow” path. To accomplish this, I will need to suffer as they do. Unlike Paul (Col. 1:24), I do not always embrace this suffering joyfully. In fact, I often give in to self-pity and start grumbling. So I have to spend time grappling and theologizing

so that I can learn to be joyful in the midst of suffering. Joy is commanded of us in the Scriptures, so is the cross. We are missing God’s best both when we are not joyful and also when we are not suffering for the sake of the gospel.

If we believe that suffering is an indispensable requirement for discipleship and fruitfulness, then the cross will be less painful. I fear that when Christians do not regard suffering in this way they will feel more pain because of their misguided expectations. We may try to avoid suffering and thus forsake God’s call. I want to appeal to leaders of western churches, organizations, and theological schools to give prominence to the topic of suffering in their training curriculum.

### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> This article appeared previously as “Is Western Christian Training Neglecting the Cross” in *Trinity World Forum* of the School of World Mission and Evangelism/Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Fall 1998, pp. 1-5.

### **SBJT: Why do bad things happen to good people?**

**Duane Garrett:** For many people, this is the basic question to raise against the idea that a good and fair God rules all things. After all, if God is both good and compassionate, he should not allow horrible calamities to fall upon people who are basically decent and kind. The response some evangelicals might give to this question is that no one is good but all are sinners; therefore, bad things do not happen to good people. There is some truth in this answer, but it is uncomfortably similar to the response that Job’s three friends gave during his crisis. Both Scripture and our own hearts tell us that this answer is not

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enough.

A second issue raised regarding suffering and the sovereignty of God is that if suffering is foreordained, then there is nothing we can do about it; even being careful in ordinary life is pointless. God has preordained everything, after all. The caricature of the Calvinist who bangs his head and says, "I'm glad that's over with," trivializes the problem and is an impious affront to our doctrine of God. Our view of God's sovereignty is askew if we ascribe all of our suffering to divine decrees. This view is analogous to fatalism or to unchristian concepts such as karma.

To think biblically, we must tie the suffering of the righteous to the redemptive work of God. Isaiah, in his great liturgy of the afflictions of Christ, declared, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief" (Isa 53:10). Here, the suffering of the servant of God is explicitly and emphatically the will of God. God was "pleased" (translating the verb ḥāpēš literally) to make him suffer. The delight of God in the suffering of his servant does not come from any sadistic streak in God. Rather, God was delighted because the suffering brought about our redemption. As v. 5 says, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." Paul, in Colossians 1:24, writes, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body (which is the church)." Paul does not mean that he suffers vicariously and makes atonement for sin as Christ did. Still, Paul does understand that his sufferings have a redemptive purpose. In some respects, the redemptive quality of suffering is fairly

easy to grasp. When the early Christians saw how profoundly Paul suffered to carry the gospel around the world, they were no doubt impressed that his faith was real and that he did not preach the gospel for personal gain. He was an example of patience and perseverance. Suffering also forces one to depend on the power of God and not on one's own intelligence or charm. Paul himself alluded to this when he spoke of how his "thorn in the flesh" impelled him to rely upon grace (2 Cor 12:7). Suffering also allows one to empathize with others and so teaches us to love. In all of these situations, we can readily see how suffering is an essential part of Christian service.

At another level, however, there is something of mystery in the power of suffering. In a way that I do not fully understand, God confronts and conquers evil through our suffering for Christ. It was in the cross that Jesus overcame the world, and he tells us that we too must each take up the cross. The suffering of the elect breaks down the strongholds of darkness. The blood of the martyr is the seed of the church. The troubles that befall God's people, should they accept their sorrows with faith, somehow empty evil of its power and expose the lies of this world. The suffering of the saints moves the world to repentance and faith.

We were all mortified by the massacre at Columbine High School. Yet, in the middle of our grief we were deeply touched by the story of Cassie Bernall, the young woman who was said to have confessed her faith in God before being murdered. The story of her life, *She Said Yes*, has given witness to millions about the transforming grace of God. Students have read it, youth ministers have given it away in high schools, and parents have

found in it hope for dealing with troubled teens. God has used the violent murder of a beautiful Christian girl and the suffering of her family to do a redemptive work across America.

Does God, in his sovereignty, allow his saints to suffer? He not only allows it, but he demands it as well. C. S. Lewis once wrote a wonderful little volume called *The Problem of Pain* in which, in his typical common-sense fashion, he wrestled with many aspects of suffering. Still, I wonder if we miss something fundamental in the Christian message when we look at suffering as a theological problem. It is rather part of our calling and identity in Christ. We live as disciples of Jesus in a world full of evil. Like the sons of Zebedee, we tend to respond to evil with a desire to call down fire on the world. But this is not a Christ-like response. We have grasped the meaning of the gospel when we see our lives as living sacrifices laid out for God to purge the evil around us. We do this not with a “martyr-complex,” but with assurance that comes from faith that a sovereign God directs our lives, and that even suffering that we do not understand has a redemptive purpose that will be revealed in due season. “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Cor 1:5).

**SBJT: From what perspective should Christians view suffering?**

**C. Ben Mitchell:** On my bookshelf is a favorite two-frame cartoon strip. In the first frame a little man is shown standing in a torrential downpour, eyes lifted toward heaven, wailing, “Why me?” In the last frame, the voice of God calls down from the dark sky, “Why not?” I saved that cartoon strip because it reminds me of a

profound biblical principle about suffering. The classical theodicy problem begins with the question, “Why is there suffering in the world?” Yet, this little cartoon evokes what I take to be an even more profound question, “Why shouldn’t there be suffering in the world?” Given that we live in a universe that has been compromised by the effects of human sinfulness, is this not a more appropriate question? The question may be focused even more pointedly, “Why shouldn’t Christians suffer?”

Doubtless many Christians have and will suffer intensely. Whether from the ravages of disease, persecution, or disaster, Christians are not exempt from the pangs of living in a fallen world. A Christian wife of unflagging devotion to her husband learns that he is cheating on her and plans to move in with his adulterous partner. Faithful Christians are laid off in corporate downsizing, despite their hard work and loyalty. A godly nurse who has given her life in service to the weak and ill finds herself the victim of Lou Gehrig’s disease. A spiritually mature couple pray to have a baby for 10 years and invest more than one hundred thousand dollars in infertility treatments, all with no results. Christians in other countries find themselves tortured, raped, and murdered for their faith. When tragedy strikes, the almost knee-jerk reaction seems to be, “Why me?” Instead, it seems to me, Christians ought always to ask when they learn of the suffering of others, “Why not me?” Why shouldn’t Christians suffer?

Christians are better prepared than anyone else to endure suffering. First, Christians alone understand the cause of suffering. We know that, in a deep sense, this is not the way it is supposed to be.

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That is, prior to the entrance of sin into the world there was no pain, suffering, or trouble. God's refrain over his creation was "it was good." Everything conformed to his purpose. After the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, the refrain changed to "curse," "pain," and "toil" (Genesis 3). Thorns and thistles grew where once the gracious fruit had grown. Where once abundant life thrived, the report now is, "in Adam all die . . ." (1 Cor 15:22). Where once the creation rejoiced in God's goodness, it now "waits in eager anticipation for the sons of God to be revealed" when "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-23). Much of the suffering and many of the trials we experience are endemic to life in a fallen world. Christians acknowledge God's justice in responding to sin in this way. We understand that God's own holy character demands that the rebellion of Adam and Eve be rewarded with punishment. Christians, of all people, should understand why we suffer.

Second, Christians alone know the Father's love and purpose in suffering. We know that our gracious heavenly Father never does anything to harm us. Just as it is his character to punish sin, it is his nature to love his children. Since he is the sovereign God, nothing can happen to us that he does not superintend or control for his good purpose. What is that purpose? It is at least twofold: to glorify himself and to make his children more like Jesus. Through Christ, the Father's heart is turned toward us in love, not anger. When we ask for bread he does not give us a stone. When we ask for fish he does not give us a serpent. Or as the hymn-writer put it: "the flames shall not harm you, I

only design, thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." Since the Father is animated by love toward his children, Christians should endure suffering knowing that God's purpose is good and that he will not place more upon us than he will equip us to handle.

Third, Christians alone have been granted faith to trust God and believe his loving purposes will prevail. Suffering evokes either doubt of God's goodness or trust in God's goodness. Some respond to suffering by rejecting God himself or by repudiating his goodness. Not Christians! With eyes of faith we can see (dimly sometimes, more clearly at other times) that while we may not understand the suffering now, we will see God's goodness in it in the future.

The apostle Peter reminds believers who were suffering intensely that the events which resulted in their suffering "have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:7). By faith we see through the suffering to the shining face of our gracious Father. Perseverance in the face of suffering is made possible through faith (cf. Hebrews 11, especially vv. 32-39).

Finally, Christians have hope; hope that enables them to see through the suffering to the goal of suffering. Why shouldn't they suffer, seeing that they have an inheritance that far surpasses what this world has to offer? Twice in a passage filled with pathos, the apostle Paul remarks that "we do not lose heart" during these "light and momentary troubles" (2 Cor 4:1-5:21). Note the images of suffering in this passage. "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;



perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (4:8-10). “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (4:16). “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling” (5:2). “For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened . . .” (5:4). These are powerful exclamations of the suffering Paul and his brother and sisters were experiencing. At the same time, he (and they) can be “always confident” (5:6), living by faith, not by sight (5:7), longing to be at home with the Lord (5:8).

Or consider the apostle Peter’s encouragement to suffering Christians when he sets before them the hope of their inheritance “that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet 1:4-5). Even though “now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Pet 1:6). Their palpable experience of suffering was to be kept in perspective by viewing it in light of the hope of eternal life yet to come.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is, of course, “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Most contemporary Christians emphasize the assertion that precedes the conjunction—viz., to glorify God. The hope held out for us in the gospel of Christ is that those who have embraced Jesus by faith will benefit through the assertion following the conjunction—viz., enjoying him forever. Why shouldn’t Christians suffer, since they have laid up

for them such a blessed hope?

One of the most mysterious passages of the Bible for contemporary Western Christians is the book of Philippians. The fellowship of sharing Christ’s sufferings (Phil 3:10) is a fellowship no one wants. Nevertheless, Paul’s exhortation to the church in Philippi was that “it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him . . .” (Phil 1:29).

**SBJT: In what way is our suffering an opportunity to display the goodness of God?**

**Mark Dever:** In the fall of 1984, I was preaching through the book of Job in the evening services of a Congregational Church in New England. I was in seminary, and my wife and I were committed to minister in the town we lived in. After having been involved in the church a couple of years, what I and others thought was particularly needed was expositional preaching. So we began an evening service, and every Sunday night for months I preached from Jude, 1 Peter, Genesis, and Job.

It was in that series on Job that God taught me something new about suffering. In some ways, I feel a bit ashamed to say I know about suffering, when I consider what eyes may read these words, but I know that the Great Sufferer not only reads but knows my heart.

As I was preaching through the book of Job, I began to notice something new about Job’s sufferings, namely, God’s marvelous sovereignty in his sufferings, and even God’s pleasure in choosing Job to suffer. For Job to suffer as he did was an honor. That was an amazing thought to me. Job had many reasons to trust God—God had been good to him by giving him life and caring for him all those years. But

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Job did not have what he probably desperately wanted. He did not know the reason for his suffering. What you and I know from reading the beginning of the book remained hidden from Job.

Satan wrongly accused Job, charging that Job was only serving God for his own selfish ends. Satan said that Job was only serving God because God had made him wealthy. But when all the material trappings were taken away, Job still worshipped God.

Satan will try to find fault with us even in our obedience to God! So Satan then accused Job of only serving God because his health remained. Satan switched his tactics, suggesting that health was Job's only concern. God disagreed with Satan, but He allowed him to take away Job's health, yet preserving his life. But Satan was still wrong. Even in the midst of his ever-present physical suffering, with his own body decaying and his skin erupting into boils, Job still worshipped God.

Job's changing circumstances revealed that as wealthy as he was, he was not worshipping God because of his wealth. And Job's changing circumstances revealed that as healthy as he was, he was not worshipping God because of his health. A life of true devotion to God is not dependent on our circumstances; it is not a life devoted to God's blessings.

Job's friends suggested that he suffered because of some sin he refused to confess. But far from being right, we the readers know that Job's friends got it all wrong. Job's trials were not because of his vices at all, but because of his virtue! God had bragged on Job! The amazing divine boast comes in Job 1:8, and again in 2:3: "Have you considered my servant Job?"

Not so many months ago, I sat securely on a plane as we taxied for take-off from

the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport. With terminals, parking garages, runways and support roads, DFW covers roughly the same area as Manhattan Island. Hundreds and thousands of planes take off from there every day. As I sat securely on the plane, we taxied for take-off. Knowing the great mass of air traffic around that airport, I could have become nervous and untrusting. As we taxied away from the gate and began to prepare for departure, I suppose I could have simply stood up and said, "Stop the plane!" I could have gone to the cockpit and demanded from the captain copies of the taxiing route, the runway we would be using, and the timetable for other flights, in order to satisfy myself that we would, in fact, be safe. As I say, I *could* have done that. Regardless of the response I would likely have received, I could have tried to satisfy myself. Or, I could do what I did—more habit than virtue—and trust the controllers. I recognized the care and order with which this whole apparently chaotic, potentially disastrous operation was run. And I sat back as we accelerated and lifted off the ground.

How many times do we want to stop the plane in order to understand all the variables before we go? How much do we trust the True Controller, who makes no errors, who never sleeps nor slumbers, nor in whom is the slightest touch of evil.

I wonder if Job, in this life, ever learned that God had bragged on him. I wonder if, in this life, he ever understood his sufferings to be an opportunity from God, a strange compliment. As far as we know, Job simply had to trust the character of God, His very goodness.

When I think about the preaching I did through Job those years ago, I am reminded of how dangerous it can be for

us to try to think casually about how God may use this or that tragedy in others' or even our own lives. To a point, seeking to understand how God may be using a tragedy in our lives is a good and natural practice. It comes out of our human desire for coherence and meaning. It is cognitive breathing. But at a still deeper level, there is no doubt that in all of our lives, times will come in which we are certainly called to trust God when we cannot understand the reason for our suffering. We must all finally rely on His character and purposes, rather than thinking that we have figured out the specifics of His plans. We know His ultimate purposes are good, even if His immediate goodness is sometimes hidden to us in the darkness of His plans: "Behind a frowning providence there hides a smiling face."

Remember the story of Jesus and his disciples meeting the blind man, recorded in John 9? The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man, or his parents that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," replied Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3).

I realize that Job is someone that we would rather meet than emulate. But we may consider Job's experience and be encouraged! I remember reading some years ago about an actress, who already having a hard year, found out, on the same day, that she had lost her television show and that her husband had left her. She said, "I know the Lord won't send me more trouble than I have the strength to bear, but I do wish He didn't have quite such a good opinion of me." We may feel like that lady some days.

If I am going to be a follower of the Crucified One, I must know that when I suffer, I am being called on to display—

perhaps even exquisitely—the glory of God as I continue to serve Him in the midst of my trials. Do you think that God is speaking to Satan about you today, "Have you considered my servant?" If so, like Job, you can be confident of God's goodness, even if you do not know His immediate plans. As Christians, we may often suffer. We only sometimes understand, but we can always trust.

**SBJT: What model of developing a biblical theology of suffering in church history deserves our serious attention?**

**Timothy George:** The sovereignty of God in the suffering of his saints is one of the great themes of Holy Scripture and of faithful biblical theology through the ages. When confronted with a man born blind, Jesus refused to draw a *quid pro quo* correlation between his condition and any precipitating sin. Instead, he refers not to the cause but to the purpose of his debility—"that the works of God might be manifest in him" (John 9:1-3). In Pauline theology suffering is a mark of authentic discipleship. When he said that he had been crucified with Christ, this was not pious rhetoric for he bore in his body the "brand marks" of Jesus (Phil 1:29; Gal 2:20; 6:17).

At the dawn of the Reformation, the theme of suffering came to the fore in a famous distinction Martin Luther made in his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. He contrasted two approaches to suffering and to the Christian life, the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. The theology of glory is not a specific set of doctrines but rather a distinctive way of doing theology. The theologian of glory has no place for suffering or surrender but seeks instead to "explain" God and the world in terms of human assertiveness, natural theology, and evidentialist apolo-

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getics. By contrast, the theologian of the cross understands that all efforts to understand God and achieve a standing before him by such efforts are doomed to fail. The cross puts a question mark around all of our theodicies and requires us to confess that “it depends not upon man’s will or exertion, but upon God’s mercy” (Rom 9:16). “That person deserves to be called a theologian,” Luther says, “who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross” (*Heidelberg*, Thesis 20).

The theology of the cross became the guiding principle of Luther’s thought. His entire Reformation program was an attack on the theology of glory in epistemology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. Although Luther was thoroughly trained in the late medieval scholastic theology of the Nominalist tradition, he broke decisively with his teachers in favor of a Christ-centered biblical theology. When he spoke derisively of the philosopher Aristotle and castigated reason as a “whore,” he did not mean to reduce theology to a non-rational, mystical exercise. Instead, he intended to set the knowledge of God within the limits of divine revelation. He rejected the traditional arguments for the existence of God: the reality of God, he instead, is not deducible from creation and history. The human intellect is limited both by finitude and fallenness. The suffering of the Son of God on the cross makes no sense by the canons of human logic, but it is a window into the heart of God and the only means by which we see his eternal purpose fulfilled in history.

The theology of the cross also challenges the desire of all humans to make some contribution to their own salvation. Scholastic theologians taught that God would extend grace to those who did the

best that they could (*facere quod in se est*), literally to those who did what in them lay. Luther rejected this schema as a subtle form of works-righteousness. Those who have not despaired of their own ability are not prepared to receive the grace of Christ. This is why Luther insists that we are justified by faith “alone,” through grace “alone.” But even the faith by which we are saved is a gift, not an achievement or “work” we bring to the table, so to speak. The cross unmasks every human presumption and pretension. The cross is where all the bragging stops. Luther, like Augustine before him, found solace in the three questions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7—Who made you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

Many evangelicals are happy to claim Luther’s theology when it comes to personal salvation, but their understanding of the church has all the marks of an ecclesiology of glory—robust, self-sufficient, and proud of itself. To counter this notion, Luther insisted that suffering was a mark of the true church. In this world, the true church is not a glorious princess bedecked with jewels but a lowly maid, an ashen Cinderella before the ball. In the Reformation era, Luther’s image of the church “under the cross” was perhaps better lived out among many of the despised Anabaptists than with the later Lutherans, Calvinists, and other established Protestants. Today it is more evident perhaps among Christians who face hostility and persecution in the two-thirds world than among many of us more privileged believers who cozily practice the faith at ease in Zion.

The cross, Luther says, puts everything to the test (*crux probat omnia*). For this rea-

son true theology and recognition of God are to be found only in the crucified Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). But the crucified Christ is also the risen, reigning, and returning Christ, *Christus Victor*, the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. His victory over sin and death is the assurance of our victory, and his life with the Father in heaven is our hope of eternal life. In heaven, Jesus bears forever the marks of his passion. As the ancient Syrian liturgy reminds us, “the Lord has reigned from the tree.”