

Scriptural and Theological Issues

Suffering

The experience of physical or psychological pain or deprivation can generally be referred to as "suffering." When a person experiences suffering, often the first question is, "Why am I suffering?" This is really two questions: "Why is there suffering?" and "Why me?" These are classical theological questions to which there are no totally satisfactory answers.

Sometimes a person will answer these questions in terms of very specific cause-and-effect relationships:

"I am being abused by my husband as punishment from God for the fact that twenty years ago, when I was seventeen years old, I had sexual relations with a guy I wasn't married to."

In this case, the victim of abuse sees her suffering as just punishment for an event that happened long ago and for which she has since felt guilty. This explanation has an almost superstitious quality. It reflects an effort on the part of the woman to make sense out of her experience of abuse by her husband. Her explanation takes the "effect" (the abuse), looks for a probable "cause" (her teenage "sin"), and directly connects the two. This conclusion is based on a set of theological assumptions that support her view: God is a stern judge who seeks retribution for her sins, and God causes suffering to be inflicted on her as punishment.

Unfortunately, the woman's explanation does not focus on the real nature of her suffering (the abuse by her husband) nor does it place responsibility for her suffering where it lies: on her abusive husband.

Sometimes people try to explain suffering by saying that it is "God's will," or "part of God's plan for my life" or "God's way of teaching me a lesson." These explanations assume God to be stern, harsh, and even cruel and arbitrary. This image of God runs counter to a biblical image of a kind, merciful, and loving God. The God of this biblical teaching does not single out anyone to suffer for the sake of suffering, because suffering is not pleasing to God.

A distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering is useful at this point. Someone may choose to suffer abuse or indignity in order to accomplish a greater good. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., suffered greatly in order to change what he believed to be unjust racist laws. Although the abuse he experienced was not justifiable, he chose voluntary suffering as a means to an end.

Involuntary suffering, which occurs when a person is beaten, raped, or abused, especially in a family relationship, also cannot be justified, but it is never chosen. It may, on occasion, *be endured* by a victim for a number of reasons, including a belief that such endurance will eventually "change" the person who is being abusive. However, this belief is unrealistic and generally only reinforces the abuse.

Christian tradition teaches that suffering happens to people because there is evil and sinfulness in the world. Unfortunately, when someone behaves in a hurtful way, someone else usually bears the brunt of that act and suffers as a result. Striving to live a righteous life does not guarantee that one will be protected from the sinfulness of another. A person may suffer from having made a poor decision (for example, as a result of marrying a spouse who is abusive). But this in no way means that the person either wants to suffer or deserves abuse from the spouse.

In Christian teaching, at no point does God promise that we will not suffer in this life. In scripture, God *does* promise to be present to us when we suffer. This is especially evident in the Psalms, which give vivid testimony to people's experience of God's faithfulness in the midst of suffering (see Psalms 22 and 55).

One's fear of abandonment by God is often strong when one is experiencing suffering and abuse. This fear is usually experienced by victims of abuse, who often feel they have been abandoned by almost everyone: friends, other family members, clergy, doctors, police, lawyers, counselors. Perhaps none of these people believed the victims or were able to help. It is therefore very easy for victims to conclude that God has also abandoned them. For Christians, the promise to victims from God is that even though all others abandon them, God will be faithful. This is the message found in Romans:

Psalm 22

The Prayer of an Innocent Person

*My God, my god, why have you
abandoned me?*

*Why so far from my call for help,
from my cries of anguish?*

*My God, I call by day, but you do not
answer:*

by night, but I have no relief.

*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the glory of Israel.*

*In you our ancestors trusted; they
trusted and you rescued them.*

*To you they cried and they escaped; in
you they trusted and were not
disappointed.*

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
-Romans 8:38-39

Often this reassurance is very helpful to victims of violence or to those who abuse them.

Sometimes people who regard suffering as God's will for them believe that God is teaching them a lesson or that hardship builds character. Experiences of suffering can, in fact, be occasions for growth. People who suffer may realize in retrospect that they learned a great deal from the experience and grew more mature as a result. This often is the case, but only if the person who is suffering also receives support and affirmation throughout the experience. With the support of family, friends, and helpers, people who are confronted with violence in their families can end the abuse, possibly leave the situation, make major changes in their lives, and grow as mature adults. They will probably learn some difficult lessons: increased self-reliance; how to express anger; that they may survive better outside than inside abusive relationships; that someone can be a whole person without being married; that they can exercise control over their actions with others; that family relationships need not be abusive and violent.

However, this awareness of suffering as the occasion for growth *must come from those who are suffering* and at a time when they are well on their way to renewal. It is hardly appropriate when someone is feeling great pain to point out that things really are not so bad and that someday the sufferer will be glad that all of this happened. These words of "comfort and reassurance" are usually for the benefit of the priest, rabbi, or counselor, not the parishioner, congregant, or client. At a later time, it may be useful to point out the new growth that has taken place and very simply to affirm the reality that this person *has survived* an extremely difficult situation. Suffering may present an occasion for growth: whether this potential is actualized depends on how the experience of suffering is managed.

Nature of the Marriage Relationship: A Christian Perspective

Christian teaching about the model of the marriage relationship has traditionally focused heavily on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians, and Colossians. Misplaced emphasis on or misinterpretations of these texts create substantial problems for many married couples. Most commonly, directives on marriage based on scripture are given to women, and not to men, and state that wives must "submit" to their husbands. This often is interpreted to mean that the husband and father is the absolute head of the household and that the wife and children must obey him without question. Unfortunately, this idea has also been interpreted to mean that wives and children must submit to abuse from husbands and fathers. This rationalization is used by those who abuse, as well as by counselors, clergy, and the victims of the abuse themselves.

The rights and expectations between husband and wife in regard to sexual matters are explicitly equal and parallel and include the right to refuse sexual contact. The expectation of equality of conjugal rights and sexual access and the need for mutual consideration in sexual activity is clear. The suggestion that both wife and husband have authority over the other's body and not their own refers to the need for joint, mutual decisions about sexual activity rather than arbitrary, independent decisions. A husband does not have the right to act out of his own sexual needs without agreement from the wife; this applies to the wife also. This particular passage directly challenges the incidents of sexual abuse (rape) in marriage that are frequently reported by physically abused wives.

The Marriage Covenant and Divorce

A strong belief in the permanency of the marriage vows may prevent an abused spouse from considering separation or divorce as options for dealing with family violence. For the Christian, the promise of faithfulness "for better or for worse . . . until death do us part" is commonly taken to mean "stay in the marriage no matter what," even though death of one or more family members is a real possibility in abusive families. Jews view marriage as permanent, but "until death do us part" is not part of the ceremony. The Jewish attitude embodies a very delicate balance. Marriage is taken very seriously. It is a primary religious obligation and should not be entered into or discarded flippantly. Nevertheless, since the days of Deuteronomy, Jewish tradition has recognized the unfortunate reality that some couples are hopelessly incompatible and divorce may be a necessary option.

For some Christians, their denomination's strong doctrinal position against divorce may inhibit them from exercising this means of dealing with violence in the family. For others, a position against divorce is a personal belief, often supported by their family and church. In either case, there is a common assumption that any marriage is better than no marriage at all and, therefore, that a marriage should be maintained at any cost. This assumption arises from a superficial view of marriage, a view concerned only with appearances and not with substances. In other words, as long as marriage and family relationships maintain a facade of normalcy, there is a refusal by church and community to look any closer for fear of seeing abuse or violence in the home. The covenant of Christian marriage is a lifelong, sacred commitment made between two persons and witnessed by other persons and by God. Jews also regard marriage as sacred and intend that it be permanent.

A marriage covenant can be violated by one or both partners. It is common thinking in both Jewish and Christian traditions that adultery violates the marriage covenant and results in brokenness in the relationship. Likewise, violence or abuse in a marriage violates the covenant and fractures a relationship. In both cases, the trust that was assumed between partners is shattered. Neither partner should be expected to remain in an abusive situation. Often one marriage partner feels a heavy obligation to remain in the relationship and do everything possible to make it work. This is most often true for women. A covenant relationship only works if both partners are able and willing to work on it. In both Christian and Jewish traditions, it is clear that God does not expect anyone to stay in a situation that is abusive (that is, to become a doormat). In the Christian tradition, just as Jesus did not expect his disciples to remain in a village that did not respect and care for them (Luke 9:1-6), neither does he expect persons to remain in a family relationship where they are abused and violated. In Jewish literature, the expectation is also clear:

If a man was found to be a wife-beater, he had to pay damages and provide her with separate maintenance. Failing that, the wife had valid grounds for compelling a divorce.⁶

If there is a genuine effort to change on the part of the one who is abusive, it is possible to renew the marriage covenant, including in it a clear commitment to nonviolence in

Marriage Covenant

A covenant between marriage partners has the following elements:

It is made in full knowledge of the relationship.

It involves a mutual giving of self to the other.

It is assumed to be lasting.

It values mutuality, respect, and equality between persons.

A closer look at the actual scriptural references reveals a different picture. For example:

Be subject to *one another* out of reverence for Christ.
-Ephesians 5:21, emphasis added

This is the first and most important verse in the Ephesians passage on marriage and also the one most often overlooked. It clearly indicates that all Christians - husbands and wives - are to be *mutually subject to one another*. The word that is translated "be subject to" can more appropriately be translated "defer to" or "accommodate to" so that v. 22 might read:

Wives *accommodate* to your husbands as to the Lord.

This teaching implies sensitivity, flexibility, and responsiveness to the husband. In no way can this verse be taken to mean that a wife must submit to abuse from her husband.

For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.
-Ephesians 5:23-24

The model suggested here of husband-wife relationship is based on the Christ-church relationship. It is clear from Jesus teaching and ministry that his relationship to his followers was not one of dominance or authoritarianism, but rather one of servanthood. For example, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples in an act of serving. He taught them that those who would be first must, in fact, be last. Therefore, a good husband will not dominate or control his wife but will serve and care for her, according to Ephesians.

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church.
-Ephesians 5:28-29

This instruction to husbands is very clear and concrete. A husband is to nourish and cherish his own body *and* that of his wife. Physical battering that occurs between spouses is probably the most blatant violation of this teaching and a clear reflection of the self-hatred in the one who is abusive.

It is interesting that the passages quoted above from Ephesians (5:21-29), which are commonly used as instruction for marriage, are instructions primarily for husbands. Nine of the verses (5:25-33) are directed toward the husband's responsibilities in marriage; only three of the verses (5:22-24) refer to wives' responsibilities, and one verse (5:21) refers to both. Yet contemporary interpretation often focuses only on the wives and often misuses those passages to justify the abuse of the wives by their husbands. While spouse abuse may be a common pattern in marriage, it certainly cannot be legitimated by scripture.

In terms of sexuality in marriage, again this passage from Ephesians (see also Colossians 3:18-21) has been used to establish a relationship in which the husband has conjugal rights and the wife has conjugal duties. In fact, other scriptural passages are explicit on this issue:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

-1 Corinthians 7:3-4

the relationship. With treatment for the family members, it may be possible to salvage the relationship. If the one who is being abusive is not willing or able to change in the relationship, then the question of divorce arises. At this point in the marriage, divorce is really a matter of public statement: "Shall we make public the fact that our relationship has been broken by abuse?" The other option, of course, is to continue to *pretend* that the marriage is intact. (A woman reported that she divorced only a month ago but that her marriage ended ten years ago when the abuse began.)

In violent homes, divorce is not breaking up families. Violence and abuse are breaking up families. Divorce is often the painful, public acknowledgment of an already accomplished fact. While divorce is never easy, it is, in the case of family violence, the lesser evil. In many cases, divorce may be a necessary intervention to generate healing and new life from a devastating and deadly situation.

Parents and Children

"Honor your father and your mother" is one of the Ten Commandments taught to all Jewish and Christian children. Unfortunately, some parents misuse this teaching in order to demand unquestioning obedience from their children. In a hierarchical, authoritarian household, a father may misuse his parental authority to coerce a child into abusive sexual activity (incest). Parents may use this commandment to rationalize their physical abuse of a child in retaliation for a child's lack of obedience.

For Christians, the meaning of the Third Commandment is made very clear in Ephesians:

Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" this is the first commandment with a promise: "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up *in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*,
-Ephesians 6:1-4, emphasis added

Children's obedience to their parents is to be "in the Lord"; it is not to be blind and unquestioning. In addition to instructions to children, instructions are also given to parents to guide and instruct their children in Christian values, that is, love, mercy, compassion, and justice. Any discipline of a child must be for the child's best interest. The caution to the father not to provoke the child to anger is most appropriate. If there is anything that will certainly provoke a child to anger, it is physical or sexual abuse by a parent.

With this image of the shepherd guiding the sheep in mind, it is certainly clear that children need guidance and discipline from parents and other caring adults in order to grow to maturity. Children do not need to be physically beaten to receive guidance or discipline. Beating children as discipline teaches them very early that it is all right to hit those you love "for their own good." This kind of lesson fosters early training for persons who grow up and subsequently physically abuse their spouses and children.

Confession and Forgiveness

The need of an abusive family member to admit wrongdoing is a healthy sign that the offender is no longer denying the problem but is ready and willing to face it. The offender may seek out a priest or rabbi for the purpose of confessing.

Sometimes, however, an abusive father confesses, asks forgiveness, and promises never to sexually approach his daughter again, or a mother swears never to hit her child in anger again. The priest or rabbi is then put in a position of assuring forgiveness *and* evaluating the strength of the person's promise not to abuse again. Even an abuser who is genuinely contrite is seldom able to end the abuse without assistance and treatment.

The priest or rabbi needs to assure the person of God's forgiveness *and* must confront the person with the fact that he or she needs additional help in order to stop the abuse. For some people, a strong word from a priest or rabbi at this point is an effective deterrent: "The abuse *must* stop now." Sometimes this strong directive can provide an external framework for beginning to change the abusive behavior.

The issue of forgiveness also arises for victims of abuse. A friend or family member may pressure the victim: "You should forgive him. He said he was sorry." Or it may arise internally: "I wish I could forgive him. . . ." In either case, the victim feels guilty for not being able to forgive the abuser. In these cases, often forgiveness is interpreted to mean forgetting, or pretending that the abuse never happened. Neither is possible. The abuse will never be forgotten - it becomes a part of the victim's history. Forgiveness is a matter of victims' being able to say that they will no longer allow the experience to dominate their lives - and will let go of it and move on. This is usually possible if there is some sense of justice in the situation, either officially (through the legal system) or unofficially. Forgiveness by the victim is possible when there is repentance on the part of the abuser, and real repentance means a change in the abuser's behavior.

Another issue is timing. Too often the priest or rabbi or counselor's need for the victim to finish and resolve the abusive experience leads the helping professional to push a victim to forgive the abuser. Forgiveness in this case is seen as a means to hurry the victim's healing process along. Victims will move to forgive at their own pace and cannot be pushed by others' expectations of them. It may take years before they are ready to forgive; their timing needs to be respected. They will forgive when they are ready. Then the forgiveness becomes the final stage of letting go and enables them to move on with their lives.

Conclusion

This commentary addresses some of the common religious concerns raised by people dealing with family violence. It is an attempt to help the reader begin to see ways of converting potential roadblocks into valuable resources for those dealing with violence in their families.

Personal faith for a religious person can provide much-needed strength and courage to face a very painful situation and make changes in it. Churches and synagogues can provide a much-needed network of community support for victims, abusers, and their children.

It is clearly necessary for those involved in Jewish and Christian congregations and institutions to begin to address these concerns directly. In ignorance and oversight, we do much harm. In awareness and action, we can contribute a critical element to the efforts to respond to family violence in our communities.

Notes

1. The discussion of religious issues included here reflects a Jewish and Christian perspective owing to the background and experience of the authors and contributors. Although there are other religious traditions present in the pluralistic American culture, the focus of this discussion is limited by the authors' perspectives and experiences.

2. *Gates of Repentance*. (High Holy Days Prayer Book). Central Conference of American Rabbis. 1978. 67.

3. *Yad. Ishut*. XIV-2. Yale Judaica Series. 87.

4. Maimonides was a Jewish philosopher (1135-1204) whose *Mishneh Torah* became a standard work of Jewish law and a major source for all subsequent codification of Jewish law.

5. *Yad. Ishut*. XIV-8. 89.

6. Maurice Lamm. *Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*. 157.

7. *Kizzur Shulhan Arukh*

Substantial contributions were made by Judith Hertz from the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.

Adapted from: Fortune, Marie M. "A Commentary on Religious Issues in Family Violence." *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers*. The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Seattle WA. Used with permission.

The Transformation Of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective

Marie M. Fortune

“Victims of sexual or domestic violence have a strong tendency to hold God or themselves responsible for the abuse even though there is clearly a perpetrator whose actions resulted in the victim’s suffering.”

A religious person who is victimized by rape, battering, or child sexual abuse frequently faces the questions, *Why do I suffer in this way?* and, *Where is God in my suffering?* These profound theological questions cannot be answered simply with platitudes and then dismissed. The question of why there is suffering at all is one of classic theological debate; that is, the question of theodicy, to which there is no completely satisfactory answer. Human suffering in the midst of a world created by a compassionate and loving God is a dimension of human experience which is most disturbing and disquieting. The particular experience of suffering that accompanies victimization by sexual and domestic violence raises particular issues in regard to theodicy.

Why Suffering?

People struggle with two fundamental aspects of the experience of suffering when they ask, *Why do I suffer?* First is the question of cause, that is, the source of the suffering. The second aspect involves the meaning or purpose of suffering.

Why is there suffering? It suffices to say that some suffering results from arbitrary, accidental sources such as natural disasters. However, much suffering is caused by human sinfulness: sinful acts by some bring suffering to others. These acts can generally be understood as acts of injustice. God allows such sinfulness because God has given persons free will and does not intervene when they choose to engage in unrighteous, unjust acts. Other people suffer from the consequences of these acts. This explanation may be adequate for situations clearly caused by human negligence or meanness, intended or not: for example, a fatal car accident caused by a drunk driver, chronic brown lung disease in textile workers who are denied protection from occupational hazard, birth defects in families living near toxic waste dumps, or incestuous abuse inflicted by a father upon his children. Yet it is still not a wholly satisfactory explanation. Those who suffer search further for answers, or at least for someone to blame.

Victims of sexual or domestic violence have a strong tendency to hold God or themselves responsible for the abuse even though there is clearly a perpetrator whose actions resulted in the victim’s suffering. While his/her sinful acts may be understood as a consequence of his/her own brokenness and alienation (sometimes rooted in his/her own victimization), he/she is nonetheless responsible for actions that bring suffering to others. Self-blame or God blame for one’s experience of victimization simply avoids acknowledging that a particular person is responsible for the abusive acts.

Another explanation that is frequently utilized by victims is really old fashioned superstition. It seeks to explain a current experience of suffering in terms of a previous “sinful” act on the part of the victim: the current suffering is God’s punishment for the preceding “sin” which God has judged. Hence a battered woman now being abused by her husband can “explain” why this is happening by remembering that, when she was sixteen, she had sexual intercourse once with her boyfriend. She knows this was a “sin” and that God was displeased with her,

so God must now be punishing her teenage indiscretion. Or she may have been “disobedient” and not submitted to her husband. She understands the situation to reflect God’s acting to bring about her suffering for a justifiable reason; she blames herself and accepts her battering as God’s will for her. At least she can “explain” why this happened to her, unfortunately, her explanation leaves no room for questioning her suffering or for confronting her abuser with his responsibility for it. If God is to blame for the misfortune, one can direct anger at God for causing the suffering. For whatever reason, it is argued, God has singled out the victim of sexual or domestic violence to suffer. Two things result. First she/he is driven away from God by the pain and anger, second, no one is held accountable for what he/she has done to the victims. The suffering of the victim is exacerbated by the feeling that God has sent this affliction to her/him personally and has abandoned her/him in the midst of it. Harold Kushner offers a valuable reframing of this assumption.

We can maintain our own self-respect and sense of goodness without having to feel that God has judged us and condemned us. We can be angry at what has happened to us, without feeling that we are angry at God. More than that, we can recognize our anger at life’s unfairness, our instinctive compassion at seeing people suffer, as coming from God who teaches us to be angry at injustice and to feel compassion for the afflicted. Instead of feeling that we are opposed to God, we can feel that our indignation is God’s anger at unfairness working through us, that when we cry out, we are still on God’s side, and He [sic] is still on ours.¹

“God is not only *not* the cause of injustice and suffering but is instead the source of our righteous anger at the persons or circumstances that do cause suffering as well as our source of compassion for those who suffer.”

God is not only *not* the cause of injustice and suffering but is instead the source of our righteous anger at the persons or circumstances that do cause suffering as well as our source of compassion for those who suffer.

The second aspect of the experience of suffering involves the attribution of meaning or purpose. What meaning does this experience of suffering hold for the victim? People have great difficulty accepting the irrational and often arbitrary nature of sexual and domestic violence. Instead of realizing that these things happen for no good reason, they attempt to manufacture a good reason or seek a greater good; for example, suffering “builds character” or is “a test of one’s faith. The purpose of suffering is then the lesson it teaches, and the result should be a stronger faith in God. Purposefulness somehow softens the pain of the suffering. If some greater good is salvaged, then perhaps the suffering was worth it.

An understanding of the meaning of one’s suffering begins with the differentiation between voluntary and involuntary suffering. Voluntary suffering is a painful experience which a person chooses in order to accomplish a greater good. It is optional and is a part of a particular strategy toward a particular end. For example, the acts of civil disobedience by civil rights workers in the United States in the 1960’s resulted in police brutality, imprisonment, and sometimes death for those activists. These consequences were unjustifiable but not unexpected. Yet people knowingly chose to endure this suffering in order to change the circumstances of racism, which caused even greater daily suffering for many. Jesus’ crucifixion was an act of unjustifiable yet voluntary suffering, in 1 Peter it is viewed as an example:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. - 1 Peter 2:21-23

But it is an example not of simply being a sacrificial doormat but of choosing, in the face of the violence of oppressive authority which threatened him, to suffer the

consequences of his commitment. It was a witness to his love, not his suffering. Beverly Wildung Harrison further reframes Jesus' suffering on the cross:

But those who love justice, and have their passion lovingly shaped toward right relation act not because they are enamored of sacrifice. Rather, they are moved by a love strong enough to sustain their action for right relation, even unto death Jesus' paradigmatic role in the story of our salvation rests not in his willingness to sacrifice himself, but in his passionate love of right relations and his refusal to cease to embody the power-of-relation in the face of that which would thwart it. It was his refusal to desist from radical love, not a preoccupation with sacrifice, which makes his work irreplaceable.²

Jesus' crucifixion was the tragic consequence of his faithfulness and refusal to give up his commitment in the face of Roman oppression. He voluntarily accepted the consequence, just as did civil rights workers, in order to bring about a greater good.

Like voluntary suffering, involuntary suffering is unjustifiable under any circumstance. However, unlike voluntary suffering, involuntary suffering is not chosen and never serves a greater good; it is inflicted by a person(s) upon another against their will and results only in pain and destruction. Sexual and domestic violence are forms of involuntary suffering. Neither serves any useful purpose; neither is chosen by the victim; neither is ever justified. Yet both cause great suffering for large numbers of people.

Many victims of involuntary suffering respond with the question: Why did God send me this affliction? In the face of the personal crisis of violence, one's deepest need is to somehow explain this experience, to give it specific meaning in one's particular life. By doing this, victims begin to regain some control over the situation and the crisis. If one can point accurately to the cause, perhaps she/ he can avoid that circumstance in the future; if one can ascribe meaning, then she/he can give it purpose, can incorporate the experience more quickly and not feel so overwhelmed by it.

Neither superstition nor the search for a greater meaning necessarily encourages the victim of violence to deal with the actual source, that is, the abuser's behavior. Neither encourages the victim to question the abuse she/he is experiencing. Neither motivates the victim to act in seeking justice. Neither is theologically adequate for the person who is struggling to comprehend his/her experience of abuse in light of faith.

In Jesus' encounter with the man born blind (John 9:1-12), he is confronted with the question about the cause of suffering. "His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 2). Jesus answers their question in terms of the meaning rather than the cause of his suffering: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." (vv. 3-4).

Jesus proceeds to make a medicine and heal the man's blindness. He dismisses the request for a superstitious cause and restates the search for meaning. The blind man's suffering is a fact. Where is God in this suffering; what can God do in this situation; and what are we called to do? Jesus acts to relieve suffering rather than discuss its cause. He is teaching that the responsibility belongs to us to act regardless. The question for us is not who sinned (in cosmic terms) or how can God allow women to be beaten and raped, but how can we allow this to go unchallenged? In challenging this victimization, the question is, Who is accountable for this suffering and how can justice be wrought here?

What Jesus does not address in this parable is the situation in which there is clear responsibility for the suffering of another. A more current reading of this story might include the information that the man's father beat his mother during her pregnancy with him, and the child's blindness resulted. In this case, when asked the question who sinned, Jesus might have said, "The one who bear his mother is accountable for his acts. Rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. (See Luke 17: 1-4.) Here we must work the works of the one who sent me." Part of that work, which is clearly expected in the prophetic tradition of Hebrew and Christian theology, is that of calling to repentance and accountability and making justice in order to accomplish forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. These responses to experiences of suffering at the hands of another are requisite if the suffering is to be more than simply endured.

Endurance

In both the explanation of superstition and the attribution of greater meaning, God is held responsible for the suffering itself. This presupposes a belief in God as omnipotent and omniscient. If God is in control and choosing to exercise that control by bringing suffering upon the afflicted as punishment or in order to teach them something, then both cause and meaning are clearly determined to be in God's hands.

In the face of this interpretive framework, most victims accept endurance as the means of dealing with this suffering. Deciding that being battered or molested is justifiable punishment, one's lot in life, cross to bear, or God's will, sets in motion a pattern of endurance that accepts victimization and seeks ways to coexist with it. Victims are encouraged to endure when support and advocacy to get away from the violence are not provided, when they are told to go home and keep praying, and when they are expected to keep the family together even though the violence continues and they are in danger. This "doormat theology" teaches that it is God's will that people suffer and the only option is to endure it. There is no space to question or challenge the suffering that comes from this injustice, to feel anger, or to act to change one's circumstance. The result of this theology is that a victim remains powerless and victimized and her/his physical, psychological, and spiritual survival are jeopardized.

This understanding of the meaning of suffering comforts the comfortable and afflicts the afflicted but ignores the demands of a God who seeks justice and promises abundance of life. There is no virtue in enduring suffering if no greater good is at stake. Certainly, being battered or sexually abused is such a situation. There is no greater good for anyone, certainly not for the victim and children and others who witness the violence, but also not for the abuser. Endurance that merely accepts the violence ignores the abuser's sinfulness and denies him a chance for repentance and redemption which may come from holding him accountable for his acts. Endurance in order to "keep the family together" is a sham because the family is already broken apart by the abuse. There is no virtue to be gained in these situations where everyone loses; there is no virtue in encouraging a victim of abuse to accept and endure it.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." - *Romans 8:38*

Transformation

For the Christian, the theology of the cross and the resurrection provides insight into the meaning of suffering and transformation. God did not send Jesus to the cross as a test of his faith, as punishment for his sin, or to build his character. The Romans crucified Jesus and made him a victim of overt and deadly anti-Semitic violence. It was a devastating experience for Jesus' followers who watched him murdered. They were overwhelmed by fear, despair, and meaninglessness. They left the scene of the crucifixion feeling abandoned and betrayed by God. The resurrection and subsequent events were the surprising realization that in the midst of profound suffering, God is present and new life is possible.

This retrospective realization in no way justified the suffering; it transformed it. It presented the possibility of new life coming forth from the pain of suffering. Sometimes Jesus' crucifixion is misinterpreted as being the model for suffering: since Jesus went to the cross, persons should bear their own crosses of irrational violence (for example, rape) without complaint. But Jesus' crucifixion does not sanctify suffering. It remains a witness to the horror of violence done to another and an identification with the suffering that people experience. It is not a model of how suffering should be borne but a witness to God's desire that no one should have to suffer such violence again. The resurrection, the realization that the Christ was present to the disciples and is present to us, transformed but never justified the suffering and death experience. The people were set free from the pain of that experience to realize the newness of life among them in spite of suffering.

Personal violence presents a victim with two options: endurance and acceptance of continued suffering, or an occasion for transformation. Endurance means remaining a victim; transformation means becoming a survivor.

In order to become a survivor and transform one's suffering, persons must use their strength and all available resources within themselves and from others to move away from a situation in which violence continues unabated. God is present in this movement as a means to transform. A young woman, raped at age eighteen, reflected on her rape experience in light of her faith. As she recovered, she observed that her prayer life had shifted dramatically after the assault. Prior to the rape, she recalled that her prayers most often took the form of "Dear God, please take care of me." As she recovered from the rape, she realized that now her prayers began, "Dear God, please help me to remember what I have learned." She moved from a passive, powerless position of victim in which she expected God to protect her to a more mature and confident position of survivor in which she recognized her own strength and responsibility to care for herself with God's help. In addition, her compassion and empathy for others increased and she was empowered to act to change things that cause violence and suffering. She was able to transform her experience and mature in her faith as she recovered from the assault with the support of family and friends.

One of the most profound fears experienced by one who suffers is that God is literally abandoning her/him. The experience of suffering and the resulting righteous anger in the face of that suffering need not separate us from God. Paul gives witness to this in Romans.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38

God is not responsible for suffering, God is not pleased by people's suffering, God suffers with us and is present to us in the midst of the pain of sexual and domestic violence; God does not abandon us even though everyone else may. This is the promise

“God is not responsible for suffering, God is not pleased by people’s suffering, God suffers with us and is present to us in the midst of the pain of sexual and domestic violence; God does not abandon us even though everyone else may.”

of the Hebrew and Christian texts that God is present in the midst of suffering and that God gives us the strength and courage to resist injustice and to transform suffering.

Just as God does not will people to suffer, God does not send suffering in order that people have an occasion for transformation. It is a fact of life that people do suffer. The real question is not, Why? but, What do people do with that suffering? Transformation is the alternative to endurance and passivity. It is grounded in the conviction of hope and empowered by a passion for justice in the face of injustice. It is the faith that the way things are is not the way things have to be. It is a trust in righteous anger in the face of evil which pushes people to action. Transformation is the means by which, refusing to accept injustice and refusing to assist its victims to endure suffering any longer, people act. We celebrate small victories, we chip away at oppressive attitudes cast in concrete, we say no in unexpected places, we speak boldly of things deemed secret and unmentionable, we stand with those who are trapped in victimization to support their journeys to safety and healing, and we break the cycle of violence we may have known in our own lives. By refusing to endure evil and by seeking to transform suffering, we are about God's work of making justice and healing brokenness.

Notes

1. Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. New York: Schocken Books, 1981, 45.
2. Beverly Wildung Harrison, Making the Connections. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, 18-19.
3. "It is assumed that sin, by whomsoever committed, was the cause of the blindness. 'This was the common belief in Judaism; see e.g., Shabbath 55a: There is no death without sin (proved by Ezek. 18:20) and no punishment (i.e., sufferings) without guilt (proved by Ps. 89:33). When a man has been blind from birth, the sin must be sought either in the man's parents, or in his own ante-natal existence'" (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955], 294).
4. In light of the Holocaust some have asked, Where was God? and many Jews have reframed the question to, Where were the people who could have stopped this?

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Fortune, Marie M. "The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective." Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers. The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Seattle WA. Used with permission.