



"Suffering is actually at the heart of the Christian story."
—Tim Keller

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Life Doesn't Work on a Balance Sheet (Part One)

We hear the phrase so often that it has become a cliché: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

It is typically asked in times of catastrophe, such as when natural disasters strike or the apparently undeserving suffer violence. Atheists ask it rhetorically, and agnostics lean on it to justify their avowed indecision. The question is sometimes asked on its own, and at other times, it is preceded by the phrase, "If there is a [God](#). . . ." In each case, though, the speaker is questioning the fundamental order of the universe, and the question frequently contains an element of outrage at the seeming injustice of "[goodness](#)" being rewarded with suffering.

The subject of suffering is not pleasant to contemplate—nor is it fun to experience or even think about—yet it is a common theme in the gospels and epistles. Peter goes so far as to say that Christians are *called* to suffer ([1 Peter 2:20-21](#))! Though this aspect of our calling is far from enjoyable, we cannot deny that suffering is a part of the present order of things, and further, that our response to God's call has not removed all of our suffering. However, responding to God changes the *reason* for suffering and what can be accomplished through it.

Our carnal minds are naturally geared to our own suffering, yet the Bible shows the epitome of all suffering is what [Jesus Christ](#) experienced. Not only was His suffering supreme in terms of scope and intensity, but the [book of Hebrews](#) reveals remarkable insights into the purpose and effects of His suffering. If we want to resolve the question of suffering, the place to begin is with our Savior's example.

[Hebrews 2:9-10](#) begins to explain the suffering of the Christ:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

The author writes that, because of the purpose the Father is working out, it was *fitting*—meaning "appropriate"—for Him to employ sufferings (plural) to perfect the Author of our salvation. *Perfect* here does not mean "sinless," for He was already sinless, and sufferings could not make Him *more* sinless. Instead, *perfect* in this context means "complete," in the sense of being "finished" or "fulfilled." He committed no [sin](#), but His role could not be fulfilled until He had suffered.

We must understand this in light of Hebrews' overall theme. The passage lays the groundwork to explain Jesus Christ as the new High Priest, as well as the specifics of that role. However, for Him to fill that role, suffering was mandatory. Though He lived sinlessly, His job was not complete without sufferings.

This may stretch our concept of God, but it aligns completely with the Father's fundamental nature. God caused His Son to suffer so that His experience would be complete, and that experience would help Him fulfill the office of High Priest. The hardship and pain He suffered made Him complete. Moreover, the Father ordained it and backed it fully. That the author calls it "fitting" means that there was no incongruity in it; it was proper and necessary for the job. It was exactly what was needed.

[Hebrews 5:7-10](#) shows another aspect of Christ's suffering, focusing on what Jesus' suffering *accomplished*, rather than on whether it was justified or fair:

. . . who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of [Melchizedek](#)."

Verse 7 paints a profoundly plaintive picture. When the author writes that Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears," he is not being repetitive. His prayers and supplications were distinct requests; the words convey slightly different meanings. The "vehement cries and tears" were also discrete things.

Together, though, they describe a person completely pouring out His mind and heart to another who has the power to help. It indicates beseeching this person in every possible way, running the gamut of logic and emotion, both asking and humbly pleading. His petition was heartfelt, to a depth that none of us has experienced. Jesus underwent intense suffering in *anticipation* of His later suffering!

That our Messiah offered these things "to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear" can be understood in a couple of ways. The most natural way to understand it is that Jesus cried out to the Father, who could certainly save Him from death, and the Father heard Him—and fully understood Him—yet deemed it fitting that it take place anyway. Even though He could have, the Father did not save Jesus from dying. He cried out to the only One who could save Him, yet died anyway because His death was required.

Another way to understand this is that the Father *did* save Jesus Christ from death—in the sense that He did not *leave* Him dead. Jesus died, but the Father resurrected Him, saving Him from eternal death. He did not prevent His Son from experiencing suffering and death, but He saved Him from it

after He had gone through it. God did not leave Him in the grave, that is, in a state of death.

Next time, we will consider why our Savior needed to learn obedience, as well as the fact—startling to some—that the Father suffers too.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Hard Makes it Great](#)

by Mark Schindler

The movie 'A League of Their Own' contains the memorable line, "It's supposed to be hard; if it weren't hard everybody would be doing it; the hard makes it great." This powerful aphorism should be inculcated by everyone called-out to follow the unique, rigorous, tribulation-laden path blazed by Jesus Christ. We live in a world in which everyone is under the harsh bondage of sin. We have been given the privilege of living God's way now, making the arduous struggle against the world's depraved system a great, memorable experience, enabling us to master some things which most in the world cannot yet do. The hard things God wants us to do are preferable to the harsh bondage to sin the world is now under. The hardness makes us hardy enough to be included in the first harvest. As Satan deceived Mother Eve that to choose for ourselves is better than following God, the rest of the world continues to follow that deception. We find it most difficult to live exclusively in the way God has chosen for us. The world's ways are the easiest roads to take; carnal human nature is enmity against God. Satan has been given the power to deceive the world to this day. Those who have been called to the truth will be on a collision course with the world. But it is the hard way that makes our lives great, to be in harmony with the Father and the Son. When David heard the devastating news about the attack of the Edomite's, he nevertheless trusted that God would give his armies the ultimate victory, rallying the people around the Lord's banner. In our battles against the world, faith must conquer fear. Soldiers have died to defend the flag; we must be prepared to die to defend godly sta

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Light Affliction?](#)

by Pat Higgins

Affliction seems to be an integral part of Christianity. Our Savior Jesus Christ and His apostles suffered a great deal during their ministries, and though modern Christians' burdens cannot compare to theirs, they are still significant enough to cause great pain. Pat Higgins demonstrates the relative nature of Christian affliction, urging believers to take the Bible's long view of their suffering.

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