

Colossians 1:24–2:5 (NIV)

²⁴Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

²⁸He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

²I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. ³My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Staying faithful in the midst of suffering can be so hard.

As I write this, the nation mourns the loss of the American Airlines jet and the Blackhawk helicopter over the Potomac last evening. So much death, so much suffering, so much loss. We know we come to God in prayer at times like this. We know that God is with us at times like this. We know that our hope and our future lie in the arms of Christ. But it's still hard, really hard. The loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of someone who is very dear to us. And we suffer. We all suffer. There's no escaping it. We're foolish if we think we can.

The question, as a Christian, is what are we to make of suffering? What do we do with it? In his letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of his suffering, knowing that as he suffers for Christ, all Jesus' disciples suffer, . There is no escaping it. So if God loves us and God is with us and God is good, why is there this suffering? We are called to be faithful people, but what more can we say?

The truth of suffering

We rage at the suffering and injustices that surround us. There is something profoundly wrong with a world in which a child gets cancer. Philosophies and theologies don't really get us very far. We look to God and ask why. Why don't you do something about this? Why don't you save this little girl?! Why do we suffer? That is the question we always come back to. We are like Gideon. When an angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because "The LORD is with you," Gideon replies, "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us" (Judges 6:13). We would ask the same question of that angel.

Too often, we are so desperate for answers that we concoct all sorts of reasons, many of which can be found in the explanations offered by Job's friends when the world falls in on him. Terence Fretheim lists a few of these¹:

- Suffering is the will of God.
- Suffering has been sent by God for a purpose.
- God could have prevented the suffering but chose not to.
- Suffering is specifically allowed by God, at least for a time.
- Suffering is God's judgment because of sins committed.
- Suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs.
- To suffer is to bear the cross.

Why?

The problem isn't that these explanations are *all* wrong, but neither are they *all* right. As Fretheim puts it, when we come to the Bible we have to be prepared for nuance. We might like the Bible to set things out in black and white, but the Bible simply doesn't when it comes to many of the questions we have. The bumper sticker reading "The Bible says it; I believe it" does an injustice to the full glories of the God-breathed Scriptures we have been given. There is no escape from interpreting the Bible. The only question is whether we will strive to read the Bible well or settle for reading it poorly. Fretheim again:²

Faced with the realities of suffering and evil, Christians can say something, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say. They cannot "explain" suffering or "resolve" the problem of evil or provide "answers" to these issues or develop an airtight "theodicy." . . . [However,] the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and "explanation."

Here's a few thoughts that might be helpful.

Suffering is a function of human limitations. We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. Jesus was anxious and fearful in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus grieved over Lazarus. And Jesus was without sin. Could Jesus have cut himself using his carpenter tools? Of course. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg. Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that "subduing" creation (Genesis 1:28) wasn't any easier back then than it is now. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won't say by whom, but the candidates were limited).

Suffering results from the freedom we are given. From the beginning, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply, but there is no magic spell for making babies; a man and a woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties of roses have humans created? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. The challenges of this

¹From Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010.

² *Creation Untamed*, p. 100

world are often the means of our growth. How many parents believe that the best way to raise loving, responsible, well-adjusted adults is to give them everything they want and remove every obstacle and source of potential pain? Imagine for a moment that beginning thousands of years ago, all of humanity worked together to feed, to clothe, to cure disease – rather than pouring limitless energy and wealth into making war, taking from others, and protecting ourselves from the takers. Where would we be today in our taming of disease and suffering?

Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the LORD God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans. This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, *chose* to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would no longer be thinking, loving, and free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Persecution of the Christian Church

Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about AD 250. Instead, in the first centuries of the church's life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the mid-60's were limited to Rome.

Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted and ostracized (1) for their unwillingness to worship Caesar, and/or (2) their "anti-family" philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices. Roman governors were focused on keeping the peace and because the Christians tended to stir things up, though it was not always of their own doing, they were often at odds with the authorities. Rumors and legends about the Christians' weird practices, made them easy and tempting targets. For example, stories were told of the Christians' cannibalistic practices, such as gathering to eat the body and blood of a man, a god(?), named Jesus. Think about it!

Yes, there is mystery in suffering, but it isn't all mystery. And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us. Far from any sort of remote absentee deity, the *God-Who-Is* has created a cosmos that is ever-changing and ever-challenging. We proclaim a God who not only suffered and died on the cross, but has always been deeply involved with us and with suffering.

This is the power of the cross as a focal image for reading 1 Peter – we can interpret our own suffering through the image of the cross and the suffering that Christ endured for our sake. Likewise, the image of community teaches us that we need not endure suffering alone, we have countless brothers and sisters in Christ who can help to carry our burden and ease our pain. And, of course, the image of new creation is the ever-present promise that suffering does not win, that in the fully consummated kingdom of God, suffering will be no more.

The God-Who-Suffers

Like so much else in our admittedly odd proclamation to the world, all these questions come to Jesus on that cross. We proclaim that Jesus is God incarnate, but how often do we stop to contemplate that this God whom we proclaim really and truly suffered, just as the rest of humanity suffered? Or that his mother suffered as she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her tortured son die a humiliating death? Or that his Father suffered as his only begotten son

met the worst that fallen humanity has to offer? That the one through whom, in whom, and for whom all things were created . . . yes, that One suffered and died.

We throw our accusations at God, failing to grasp that God has already received the worst from us. Jesus' own suffering shows us the incomprehensible extent of God's love for each of us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . ." There is no one for whom I would allow my own son to be crucified. I am simply not capable of loving as God loves. In contrast, even in the most terrible circumstances of our lives, it is God's concrete love expressed in Jesus' suffering that grounds our own worth.

Each of us is defined by God's love for us. It is God's love and our knowing that we are loved, that not only sustains us through suffering but enables us to put it behind us, always pressing forward to the future. Just as Jesus' crucifixion is the concrete expression of God's love for us, Jesus' resurrection is the concrete affirmation, indeed fulfillment, of our own eventual freedom from evil and suffering. Thus, we can echo Julian of Norwich who wrote:

"All shall be well,
and all shall be well
and all manner of thing shall be well."

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *The gospel of Luke*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew"

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Kings*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Continuing this week: *Heresy and Orthodoxy*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew"

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.