



Credible Catholic

CREDIBLE CATHOLIC

Big Book - Volume 19

**TRANSFORMING SUFFERING
THROUGH FAITH**



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Credible Catholic Big Book Volume Nineteen

Transforming Suffering through Faith and Prayer

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As dictated to Joan Jacoby

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Editor's Note: Much of the material presented in this chapter was originally published by Ignatius Press in *The Light Shines in the Darkness: Transforming Suffering through Faith*. It is reprinted with permission. To read more, you can find the book at the following link:

<https://www.ignatius.com/Products/SGL-P/the-light-shines-on-in-the-darkness.aspx>.

**This Volume supports The Catechism of the Catholic Church,
Part Four, Christian Prayer**

NOTE: All teachings in the **Credible Catholic** materials conform to the **Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)** and help to explain the information found therein. **Father Spitzer** has also included materials intended to counter the viral secular myths that are leading religious people of all faiths, especially millennials, to infer that God is no longer a credible belief. You will find credible documented evidence for God, our soul, the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the Catholic Church, as well as spiritual and moral conversion.

Part One from the CCC is titled, ***THE PROFESSION OF FAITH***. The first 5 Volumes in the *Credible Catholic Big Book* and *Credible Catholic Little Book* fall into Part One. **Part Two** of the CCC is titled, ***THE CELEBRATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY***. This is covered in Volumes 6 through 12. **Part Three** of the CCC is ***LIFE IN CHRIST*** and information related to this topic will be found in Volumes 13 through 17. Credible Catholic Big and Little Book Volumes 18 through 20 will cover **Part Four** of the CCC, **Christian Prayer**.

The Big Book can also be divided into two major movements – the rational justification for God, the soul, Jesus, and the Catholic Church (Volumes 1 through 6), and life in Christ through the Catholic Church (Volumes 9 through 20). If you would like a preview of this dynamic, please go to Volume 6 (Chapter 7) at the following link – [Chapter 7 – Where Have We Come From and Where are We Going?](#)

We all need to be Credible Catholics. St. Augustine said in his work, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*,

"Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens and other elements... Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; ...If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven..."

If we don't respond to these secular myths, who will?

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Transforming Suffering through Faith and Prayer

Contending with suffering is an integral part of Christian spiritual life, because as Jesus made clear, it offers great opportunities for advancement in love and salvation, as well as the opportunity for self-offering. The Catholic Church offers one of the richest theologies and spiritualities of suffering within the annals of human faith and wisdom. I endeavored to articulate the various dimensions of this theology and spirituality in my book, *The Light Shines on in the Darkness: Transforming Suffering through Faith*. The following treatment is a brief snippet of the contents of that book which we will treat in five chapters:

1. Three theological underpinnings of the Christian View of Suffering (Chapter One).
2. Why would an all-loving God allow Suffering? (Chapter Two)
3. What to do when Suffering Comes (Chapter Three)
4. The Opportunities of Suffering (Chapter Four).
5. Suffering as Self-offering in Imitation of Jesus (Chapter Five).

Chapter One

Three Theological Underpinnings of the Christian View of Suffering

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The following three theological considerations are integral to the Christian view of suffering. If they are not properly understood, then all of the other spiritual considerations will likely be confused and rendered less effective. Of course, grace can break through even the greatest misunderstandings, but our appropriation of that grace can be slowed and even blocked by these misunderstandings. Hence, I urge all readers to study the following considerations, for they will not only make suffering more profitable, but life considerably easier. We will consider each theological underpinning in turn:

1. The Centrality of the Resurrection (Section I).
2. Who God is and is Not: A Review (Section II).
3. Four Common Errors about God's Action in Suffering (Section III).

I.

The Centrality of the Resurrection

We will discuss three parts of this significant area here:

1. Evidence of the Resurrection (Section I.A).
2. Hope in Our Resurrection (Section I.B).
3. Some Christian Insights into Suffering and the Resurrection (Section I.C).

Readers interested in the many other topics concerned with suffering and the resurrection in *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, may want to consult the book (Chapter 1).

I.A Evidence of the Resurrection

Since the resurrection is the context through which Christians should view suffering, we will want to be as convinced as possible about its veracity. As we shall see, the more confident we are in our resurrection, the more positive our suffering will become. Though there is a tremendous amount of corroborative evidence for our resurrection (see below), it will never lead to faith unless we are open to God and His will for us. Without this openness, no amount of corroborating evidence will ever convince us – for we will look for every possible way of extricating ourselves from it. The truly great part about God’s gift of freedom is that we can never be forced to believe in something we don’t *want* (choose) to believe in. If people want to believe in a flat earth, they can still find “convincing” reasons to do so – even if they are rejected by the entire scientific community.

How can we achieve reasonable and responsible belief in the resurrection? After all, it happened about 2,000 years ago. The basic answer is belief in the apostolic testimony – because the apostles were eyewitnesses to it – and are worthy of our trust. Yet for those who cannot “cross the threshold of belief” on this basis alone, there are four other kinds of evidence *directly* accessible to us *today*. We have discussed all of that in previous Volumes, but their importance for our consideration of suffering makes a review of them imperative. They are:

1. The application of criteria of historicity (see Volume 3, Chapter Five and Six)
2. Scientific evidence from the Shroud of Turin (Volume 3, Chapter Eight)
3. Corroboration by medical studies of near death experiences (Volume 2, Chapter One)
4. Contemporary miracles done in the name of Jesus – or through the intercession of His Mother (Volume 3, Chapter Nine)

Before discussing these four contemporary kinds of evidence, we will want to consider the most basic one – trust in the apostolic testimony.

Those who have read the New Testament with care will probably have discovered the worthiness of its authors. I recall my first careful reading of the New Testament in college when it struck me that the authors of the Gospels could have embellished the accounts of miracles and the resurrection beyond their rather prosaic form. Indeed, they seemed to underplay these “deeds of power” so much that the actual event appeared somewhat anticlimactic. What really amazed me was that all three major accounts of Jesus’ risen appearances to the apostles in Matthew, Luke, and John reported *doubts*! Though these doubts were not absolute (for the apostles clearly witnessed the appearance of a powerful divine reality which they later discovered to be the risen Jesus), it made no sense to me that the authors would be honest enough to plant the seed of “doubt” in a text attempting to elicit belief. Why would they have done this if they had not intended to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Furthermore, when I compared the exorcism stories (which were dramatic) to the miracle stories (which were quite subdued), I got the feeling that an editor went through the miracle

stories to take out the exciting parts. Why would an author conclude these stories with “Go now and don’t tell anybody about this”? When I later studied the gnostic gospels,¹ I was struck not only by the hyperbole in them, but also by their departure from the canonical teaching of Jesus. In stark contrast to this, the four canonical evangelists were unbelievably sober, respectful of the oral tradition they received, and faithful to Jesus’ teaching about truth, goodness, and love. The writing of the texts corresponded splendidly with their content – which made them – at least on the surface – believable.

I also marveled at the *humility* of the authors and the people about whom they wrote. The inclusion of insults leveled at Jesus by the religious authorities (e.g. “he casts out demons by the prince of demons”), the failings and weaknesses of the apostles (e.g. Peter, Thomas, and Matthew), and the accusation that the apostles stole Jesus’ body from the tomb, etc. showed the interest the evangelists had in putting the truth before the reputation of Christianity’s foundational leaders. If those leaders had not had the humility to tell the whole truth, I wondered, wouldn’t they have asked the evangelists to use their editorial pens a little more assiduously? Humility speaks convincingly about the reliability of witnesses and authors.

Most importantly for me, the *tone* of the Gospel texts seemed “just right.” The Gospels manifested an interest in *my salvation, my soul, and my virtue*. The texts were not written in a soft and flattering way to gain my approval, but rather in a challenging – almost “off-putting” way to help me toward salvation – to call me out of self-delusion and darkness into the light of Christ’s love. “Tough love” can dissuade more converts than it persuades. If the evangelists had been more interested in “winning converts” instead of “helping souls,” the Gospels would have been written quite differently – avoiding the “tough love.”

There was something about the collective ethos of the New Testament writers that attracted me – despite its challenging tone, and I wanted to be part of it. Though I knew I was far from the ideal they set, I wanted to be like them, on the same mission as they were, with the same trust and love of the One about whom they were writing. The more I read the New Testament, the more I was confirmed in this truth of the heart – the foundation of my faith.

Though the truth of the *heart* is the foundation of faith, there may be some who need extra confirmation of the *mind* to become convinced of the reality of the risen glory to which they are called by Jesus. If you, the reader, are one of these individuals, I would ask that you review the volumes and chapters listed below for a fuller explanation of the four areas of contemporary evidence of the resurrection.

¹ The gnostic gospels are a set of apocryphal works attributed falsely to Jesus’ disciples and friends. They were written several decades after the four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) during the second half of the second century to the fourth century. Their authors are not accepted authorities within the apostolic Church (as the four canonical gospels), but rather spiritual writers who were heavily influenced by gnostic philosophy (which attempts to achieve spiritual freedom through special knowledge or enlightenment). The so-called “Christian Gnostics” who wrote these texts departed from apostolic Christianity by advocating salvation not only through Jesus Christ, but through enlightenment proposed by its spiritual leaders. As can be seen from their miracle stories, their view of salvation and miracles was considerably different from that of Jesus, and in some cases, are ridiculous and fantastic.

The **first area of evidence** concerns criteria of historicity that can be evaluated just as well today as 2,000 years ago. In Volume 3 (Chapter Five) we explained four kinds of evidence for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection:

1. St. Paul's list of witnesses to the resurrection who were still alive at the time of Paul's writing – and could be asked for verification. Paul makes clear that they had everything to lose and nothing to gain by testifying to Jesus' resurrection (Sections III.A and III.B).
2. N.T. Wright's exploration of the failure of First Century messianic movements – and Christianity's starkly contrasting success. Can this be explained without the resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit? (Section IV.A).
3. N.T. Wright's examination of the Christian mutations to Second Temple Judaism's Doctrine of Resurrection. How can these be explained without the disciples witnessing the risen Christ in the way reported by the Gospel narratives? (Section IV.B).
4. The likelihood that Jesus' tomb was empty and that the religious authorities knew this to be true. Given the unlikelihood that Jesus' disciples would have stolen His body – or that anyone else would have done so, then the question arises – how did His body disappear? (Section V).

The **second area of evidence** concerns the Shroud of Turin – the purported burial cloth of Jesus. This evidence is assessed in detail in Volume 3 (Chapter Eight). Some readers may think that the cloth was debunked by the 1988 carbon testing, but the subsequent work of Dr. Raymond Rogers and others show that the sample used for the tests was clearly not from the original Shroud, and that the procedure to obtain the sample was seriously flawed.² Moreover, recent dating procedures by Dr. Raymond Rogers and Dr. Giulio Fanti (and his teams) indicate a dating very close to the time of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. In four separate dating procedures, these scientists and engineers show that the cloth very probably originated around the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Fanti averaged his three tests (Fourier transformed infrared spectroscopy, Raman laser spectroscopy, and mechanical tension compressibility tests) and obtained a mean of **33 B.C.** -- plus or minus 250 years – with 95% confidence (see Section II.B).

There are three other circumstantial dating methods which show almost conclusively that the Shroud could not have originated in 13th or 14th Century France (as the 1988 carbon testing supposedly showed):

- Max Frei's pollen samples (see Section II.C.1),
- Alan Whanger's digital photography of Roman coins on the eyes of the man in the Shroud (see Section II.C.2), and
- Remarkable similarities (120 blood imprints) between the Shroud of Turin and the facecloth of Jesus – the Sudarium of Oviedo (see Section II.C.3)

² See Volume 3 (Chapter Eight) for a list of the inexplicable flaws in the procedure to gather the sample for the 1988 carbon testing. The problems are so flagrant that Dr. Rogers published in the peer-reviewed *Journal Thermochimica Acta* the following: "The combined evidence from chemical kinetics, analytical chemistry, cotton content, and pyrolysis-mass-spectrometry *proves* that the material from the radiocarbon area of the shroud is significantly different from that of the main cloth. The radiocarbon sample was thus not part of the original cloth and is invalid for determining the age of the shroud" – Raymond Rogers 2005 "Studies on the Radiocarbon Sample from the Shroud of Turin," *Thermochimica Acta*, Vol. 425, Issue 1-2, January 20, 2005, pp. 189-194.

These three kinds of evidence show an origin of the cloth in *Judea* (near Jerusalem) *before* 600 A.D. – and very probably near the time of Jesus (the Roman coins on the man's eyes were minted by Pontius Pilate in Judea in 29 A.D.). The combined evidence – plus the unique features of Jesus' crucifixion on the Shroud indicate that it is very probably his burial cloth.

In addition to the above, there is considerable evidence of a transphysical light phenomenon (suggestive of Jesus' transphysical resurrection) on the cloth. This is explained in detail in **Volume 3 (Chapter Eight), Section III**. The Cloth has five enigmas that are very difficult to explain by any known physical process:

1. The fact that the image is limited to the uppermost surface of the fibrils and does not penetrate to the medulla of the fibers. This implies that the image was not produced by chemicals or vapors of any kind.
2. The fact that the image is not a scorch (but rather discoloration coming from dehydration). This implies that the image could not have been produced by slowly dissipating radiation (which would have scorched it).
3. The image is a perfect photographic negative in which the image intensity is related to the distance of the cloth from the body. Thus, the image was present regardless of whether the cloth touched the body. This implies that radiation – and not chemicals or vapors – was the source of image formation.
4. There is a double image on the frontal part of the cloth (a more intense image on the front surface – nearest the body – and a less intense image on the back surface – furthest from the body – without any effects between the two surfaces). This implies that the radiation was surrounding both surfaces of the cloth – implying that the cloth collapsed into a mechanically transparent body.
5. Parts of the frontal image – particularly the hands – show an image which is resolvable into three dimensions, in which the inside skeletal parts of the hand are proportionately related to the surrounding exterior flesh on the hand. This again implies that the cloth collapsed into *and through* a mechanically transparent body.

How can these enigmas be explained by a single event? In 2010, six physicists from three research centers (Frascati Research Center, The University of Padua, and Casaccia Research Center) were able to do so under experimental conditions by creating a burst of ultraviolet radiation through an excimer laser. According to Paolo DiLazzaro, director of the six-member team:

We have irradiated a linen fabric having the same absolute spectral reflectance of the Turin Shroud...with pulsed deep-UV radiation emitted by an ArF excimer laser. We have shown that 12 ns, 193 nm laser pulses are able to color a very thin layer on the linen yarn...The colorless inner part of a few fibers...suggests that we have locally achieved a coloration of the outermost part of the fibers. To the

best of our knowledge, this is the *first* coloration of a linen material resembling the very shallow depth of coloration...observed in the Turin Shroud fibers.³

The only way to produce the particular shallow coloration on the Shroud -- without chemicals, vapors, or scorching -- is by means of an incredibly short burst of vacuum ultraviolet radiation -- which requires an excimer laser. It would take 14,000 excimer lasers across the length and width of the body to do this. According to DiLazzaro:

[The ultraviolet light necessary to form the image] exceeds the maximum power released by all ultraviolet light sources available today. It would require “pulses having durations shorter than one forty-billionth of a second, and intensities on the order of several billion watts.”⁴

Furthermore, this incredibly special light would have to have been emitted by every 3-dimensional point of the body simultaneously in a fashion that would surround both sides of the cloth. This is the only known way to explain the fourth and fifth enigmas given above. In view of the fact that no known physical process can explain how a decaying corpse could produce such an intense, short burst, and all-encompassing light form, we must as Dr. John Jackson notes, make recourse to a transphysical cause:

...in the case of the Shroud image, the cloth did collapse *into* and *through* the underlying body structure. As a physicist, I admit to having my own difficulties with this concept, but I also know that scientists must be ready to overturn even their most hallowed principles if observation warrants.

In conclusion, the Shroud of Turin is very probably the burial cloth of Jesus -- and it has imprinted on it what appears to be a relic of His resurrection -- a relic of one-forty-billionth of a second of intense light (with a magnitude of several billion watts) emitted from every 3-dimensional point within a mechanically transparent body. It corroborates the Gospel and Pauline accounts of Jesus' changed body -- prefigured by the Transfiguration.

The **third area of evidence** concerns recent medical studies of near death experiences. It is explained in **Volume 2 (Chapter One)**. There are several important longitudinal studies of near death experiences worthy of consideration. Principal among these are the studies of Dr. Samuel Parnia et al. at Southampton University (2014),⁵ Dr. Pim van Lommel et al. (reported in the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet*),⁶ Dr. Kenneth Ring's study of near-death

³ Paolo Di Lazzaro, D. Murra, A. Santoni, G. Fanti, E. Nichelatti, and G. Baldacchini. “Deep Ultraviolet Radiation Simulates the Turin Shroud Image,” *Journal of Imaging Science and Technology*, July-August 2010, p 6.

⁴ Frank Viviano 2015 “Why Shroud of Turin’s Secrets Continue to Elude Science” *National Geographic* April 17, 2015.

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150417-shroud-turin-relics-jesus-catholic-church-religion-science/>

⁵ Sam Parnia, K Spearpoint, G de VO, P Fenwick, D Goldberg, J Yang, J Zhu, et al. 2014 “AWARE – Awareness during Resuscitation – A Prospective Study” *Journal of Resuscitation* (October 6, 2014).

[http://www.resuscitationjournal.com/article/S0300-9572\(14\)00739-4/abstract](http://www.resuscitationjournal.com/article/S0300-9572(14)00739-4/abstract)

⁶ Pim van Lommel, R van Wees, V Meyers, and I Elfferich.. 2001. “Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands.” In *The Lancet*. Vol. 358, Issue 9298, pp. 2039-2045.

experiences of the blind,⁷ and Dr. Janice Holden's analysis of veridical evidence in NDE's from thirty-nine independent studies.⁸ There are additional careful longitudinal studies⁹ as well as many studies reported in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* published by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (peer-reviewed).¹⁰

The above studies detail three major ways of verifying the survival of human consciousness after bodily death:

1. Veridical reported data (all major longitudinal studies).¹¹
2. Visual perception of the blind (primarily Ring and van Lommel).
3. Personal information about deceased individuals (primarily Greyson 2010, van Lommel 2010, Moody 1993, Cook et. al. 1998, and Kelly et. al. 2000).

Each of these kinds of evidence can be verified by independent researchers after the fact, and all of them are exceedingly difficult (if not impossible) to explain by merely physical or physiological theories (such as hallucinations, anoxia, narcotics, stimulation of the temporal lobe, etc. -- see Volume 2 (Chapter One, Section IV). A brief explanation of each kind of evidence will help to clarify this. For a more detailed explanation, see Volume 2 (Chapter One, Section III).

⁷ Kenneth Ring; Cooper, Sharon; and Tart, Charles. 1999. *Mindsight: Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind*. (Palo Alto, CA: William James Center for Consciousness Studies at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology).

Kenneth Ring, and Lawrence, M. (1993). Further evidence for veridical perception during near-death experiences. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 11, 223–229.

⁸ See Janice Holden 2009. *Handbook of Near Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*. (Connecticut: Praeger Press).

⁹ There are ten major studies worth examining:

T. K. Basford, 1990. *Near-death experiences: An annotated bibliography*. (New York: Garland).

P. Fenwick & E. Fenwick 1995, *The Truth in the Light: An investigation of over 300 near-death experiences*. (New York: Berkley Books).

Bruce Greyson & C. P. Flynn 1984. *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas).

G. Roberts & J. Owen (1988), "The Near-Death Experience." In *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 153, 607-617.

M.B. Sabom 1982, *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row).

C. Zaleski 1987, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Raymond Moody 1988, *The Light Beyond*. (New York: Bantam Books).

Bruce Greyson 2010, "Seeing Dead People Not Known to Have Died: 'Peak in Darien' Experiences." *American Anthropological Association*. November 21, 2010.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1548-1409.2010.01064.x/abstract>

E.W. Cook et al 1998, "Do any near-death experiences provide evidence for the survival of human personality after death? Relevant features and illustrative case reports" In *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol.12, pp. 377-406.

Emily Kelly et al 2000, "Can experiences near death furnish evidence of life after death?" In *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, Vol. 40, pp. 39-45.

¹⁰ See the website www.iands.org for a complete index of 135 topics concerned with research and longitudinal studies of NDEs.

¹¹ Explored in all 15 studies mentioned above – that is: Sam Parnia et al (2014), Pim van Lommel et al (2001), Kenneth Ring et al (2006), and Janice Holden (2007), Basford (1990), Fenwick & Fenwick (1995), Greyson & Flynn (1984), Roberts & Owen (1988), Sabom (1982), Zaleski (1987), Moody (1988), Greyson (2010), Cook et al (1998), Kelly et al (2000).

Reported Veridical Data. Frequently, during near death experiences, the transphysical component leaves the body, but does not go immediately to an other-worldly domain. Instead, it remains in the resuscitation room or in close or remote proximity to the body. This transphysical component is self-conscious and can see, hear, and remember. Its memories can be recalled after patients return to their bodies. Some of these reports have highly unusual or unique characteristics which are not part of ordinary resuscitation or hospital procedures. Many of these reports can be verified by independent researchers after patients return to their bodies. When all of these conditions have been met and the unusual accounts have been verified to be 100% accurate, they are termed “veridical.” Virtually every peer-reviewed study reports multiple instances of such veridical data. For some remarkable examples of this data, see Volume 2 (Chapter One, Section III.A).

Visual Perception of the Blind during Clinical Death. Ring, Cooper, and Tart (1999), and van Lommel (2001) did focused studies on the near death experiences of the blind. These patients (most whom were blind from birth) were able to see (most for the first time) during their near death experience. These accounts show that patients who do not have the capacity to see through their *physical* bodies, report visual data accurately about their experiences during clinical death. Some of this data is veridical (highly unusual and therefore difficult – if not impossible to guess).¹² Ring et. al. found that 80% of blind people had visual perception during clinical death, and that these perceptions were clear and accurate. For examples of these, see Volume 2, (Chapter One, Section III.B). This data is virtually impossible to explain through any current *physical* hypothesis such as hallucination, anoxia, temporal lobe stimulation, or narcotics -- see Volume 2 (Chapter One, Section IV).

Meeting Deceased Persons in a Transphysical Domain. Many patients undergoing clinical death are moved from the physical world to an other-worldly or heavenly domain. Some of them see themselves crossing a border into a beautiful paradise in which many are greeted by deceased relatives or friends, Jesus, or a loving white light. Some patients may experience two or more of these phenomena. Some patients who are greeted by deceased relatives do not recognize them because they died before the patient was born. These individuals often introduce themselves and reveal hitherto unknown facts about themselves that the patients’ relatives or friends are subsequently able to verify. For specific examples of this, see Volume 2 (Chapter One Section III.C).

Given the large number of verified cases of consciousness surviving bodily death (thousands) and the above three kinds of evidence which cannot be explained by current physicalist hypotheses, it is highly probable that human consciousness can and does survive physical death. This evidence corroborates the reality of post physical existence, but it goes even further – corroborating some of Jesus’ claims about life after physical death. Three points are relevant here:

¹² See Ring, Cooper, and Tart 1999, and Ring and Valarino 2006, pp. 80-82.

1. The transphysical state of patients is not conditioned by physical laws (they can pass through walls, they are unaffected by gravity, etc.). The risen Jesus manifested these same qualities (e.g., Jn. 20:19).
2. The bodies of patients are transformed and spirit-like – resembling some of the features attributed to Jesus’ risen body in the Gospel resurrection narratives (e.g., Lk. 24:37). Furthermore, when patients pass over to the other side and see deceased friends and relatives, they report that these individuals are transformed, spirit-like, and beautiful. There is one important difference between these reports and Jesus’ risen appearance. Jesus’ body is transformed in *power* and *glory* – having the appearance of divinity. This is not reported of patients having a near death experience.
3. About 99% of patients who have and recall a near death experience unreservedly indicate that it is filled with love. Those who see the white light report that it is overwhelmingly loving, and they also report that their friends and relatives are filled with love. Children frequently report that they encounter Jesus, who is loving and caring. This correlates with Jesus’ teaching about the unconditional love of God and the unconditional love and joy of eternal life (a major theme in the Gospel of John).

These similarities corroborate both the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ risen appearance and Jesus’ preaching about the nature of eternal life. Jesus’ teaching goes beyond the evidence of near death experiences, indicating that transphysical life is *eternal* (which NDE’s intimate, but do not directly corroborate) and that love in His kingdom will be unconditional and perfect joy (which again NDE’s intimate, but cannot directly corroborate).

The evidence of NDE’s alone is sufficient to reasonably affirm the high probability of life after physical death. When it is seen in the context of the Christian witness to Jesus’ resurrection (and His teaching about the resurrection), it also corroborates and complements Christian revelation.

The fourth area of evidence concerns the miracles done in the name of the risen Jesus and through the intercession of the mother of Jesus. This evidence is examined in **Volume 3 (Chapter Nine)**. Recall from that Volume, that the meteoric rise of Christianity, in the face of the public humiliation and execution of its messiah, required a sufficient historical cause – because it was so radically different from every other messianic movement whose messiah was killed. N.T. Wright, Raymond Brown, and John P. Meier show that this sufficient cause is both the resurrection of Jesus and the apostles’ power to perform healings and miracles in a similar fashion to Jesus (with the important exception that Jesus performed miracles by His own authority while the apostles performed them in *His name*). John P. Meier notes in this regard:

...[T]here was a notable difference between the long-term impact of the Baptist and that of Jesus. After the Baptist’s death, his followers did not continue to grow into a religious movement that in due time swept the Greco-Roman world. Followers remained, revering the Baptist’s memory and practices. But by the early 2d century A.D. any cohesive group that could have claimed an organic connection with the historical Baptist seems to have passed from the scene. In contrast, the movement that had begun to sprout up around the historical Jesus continued to grow – amid many sea changes – throughout the 1st century and beyond. Not entirely by coincidence, *the post-Easter “Jesus movement” claimed*

the same sort of ability to work miracles that Jesus had claimed for himself during his lifetime. This continued claim to work miracles may help to explain the continued growth, instead of a tapering off, of the group that emerged from Jesus' ministry.¹³

The name of Jesus was extraordinarily powerful, galvanizing the Holy Spirit within the apostles and disciples of the early Church, and enabling them to perform the same miraculous cures as Jesus. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, and if He had not preached the truth about His Father and the resurrection, then how could His name have such remarkable power in the apostolic church *until this very day*? Why would this name bestow transphysical power on the disciples if God did not intend to validate the resurrection and teaching of Jesus? These same miraculous powers in the name of Jesus persist to this day. One does not have to look far to see the millions of testimonies to the power of Jesus' name used to evoke the charismatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit. A simple internet search shows millions of results devoted to the Holy Spirit, healings, miracles, prophecy, and tongues which resemble those recounted by Luke and Paul almost 2,000 years ago.¹⁴ Scholars such as Craig Keener have chronicled hundreds of modern, medically documented miracles occurring through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name.¹⁵ There is certainly no shortage of evidence for the risen power of Jesus in the current age.

Additionally, there is excellent medical assessment of miracles done through the intercession of Mary the Mother of Jesus. A truly excellent source of these documented miracles is the International Medical Committee of Lourdes. Its selection criteria are so rigorous that of the thousands of miracles that have occurred at Lourdes, it has only definitively approved of 69 (as of 2015). However, those 69 miracles are incredibly well-documented, and deserve the readers' scrutiny. See their website <http://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/the-international-medical-committee>. We have summarized three of these miracles in Volume 3 (Chapter Nine, Section I.B.). We also examined the scientifically validated miracles concerned with our Lady of Guadalupe (Section I.A.), Our Lady of Fatima (Section I.C.), three contemporary saints (Section II), and a contemporary Eucharistic miracle overseen by Pope Francis (Section III).

In Conclusion, the veracity of the apostolic testimony to the resurrection of Jesus can be corroborated with a high degree of probability by the historical analysis of the resurrection narratives, the evidence of the resurrection from the Shroud of Turin, the high probability of human consciousness surviving bodily death – which correlates with Christian accounts of the resurrection - and the miracles done in the name of Jesus from the time of the apostolic Church until today.

¹³ John P. Meier 1994. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. (New York: Doubleday). p. 623.

¹⁴ A simple Google search on the internet for “Holy Spirit healing” currently yields 11,200,000 results; for “Holy Spirit Miracles” there are 7,220,000 results; for “Holy Spirit prophecy” there are 5,480,000 results; and for “Holy Spirit tongues” there are 3,490,000 results.

¹⁵ See Craig Keener 2011, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing).

As previously noted, the apostolic testimony and the above four areas of evidence will not be convincing to those who are not open to the salvation and message of Jesus. However, if we are open to the salvation and message of Jesus, the combined evidence for life after bodily death and Jesus' resurrection will likely form a reasonable and responsible basis for belief in our resurrection. This is precisely what is required to enter into the Christian view of suffering. If you, the reader, continue to be in doubt about the resurrection (eternal life in unconditional love), I would strongly advise reviewing the volumes and sections mentioned above – and if doubts continue, then review the scientific and medical sources referenced in those volumes.

I.B Hope in Our Resurrection

Before discussing the nature of our risen life, it is important to note that if we seek God with a sincere heart, and try in our actions to do His will according to the dictates of our conscience, we will be led into His risen life.¹⁶ None of us will be able to follow the teachings of Jesus *perfectly* during our lifetime, and so the word “*try*” in the previous sentence is important. Jesus makes clear that if we fail multiple times – even as egregiously as the Prodigal Son – His Father will accept us into His heavenly kingdom if we contritely ask for forgiveness – just as the father of the Prodigal Son was moved to accept his son into the household unconditionally when he expressed his contrition. Thus, we should not fall prey to doubts that undermine our hope. If we try in our actions to do God's will as Jesus has taught, and if we turn back to God for forgiveness when we have failed, we should have confidence that the unconditional love of Jesus and His Father will bring us to the promised resurrection.

We should not doubt that the Lord will forgive us as many times as we have failed, for if He asks Peter to forgive his brother 70 times 7 times – a virtually endless number of times – we can be sure that the Lord will do precisely the same for us – so long as we ask sincerely. Jesus makes this point powerfully in the Parable of the Tax Collector and Pharisee who go up to the Temple to pray. The tax collector – considered to be a very serious egregious sinner in First Century Israel – simply stands at a distance and prays contritely, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus declares emphatically, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified [ready for salvation] before God” (Luke 18: 14).

St. Paul understood how important this confidence in the unconditional love of God is – not only for the sake of warding off discouragement and despair, but also for interpreting the cross (suffering) in our lives. In Romans 8, Paul presents an argument for Christian hope grounded in the teaching and self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross:

¹⁶ The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) indicates that “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.” *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II (Section 16), Flannery 1975, p. 376. We can infer a doctrine of salvation *for Christians* from this. For Christians, “the will of God” is defined by the teachings of Jesus. Hence, Christians will attain eternal salvation if they seek God and *try* to do His will by following the teachings of Jesus. If we fail at times to do God's will, we can confidently rely on the unconditional forgiving love of His Father.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Romans 8: 31-34).

Paul's argument is probative, for if God allowed His Son to sacrifice Himself completely for us, then there is *nothing* that He would not do to save us and bring us to eternal life – that is, He would do anything and everything to bring us into His eternal kingdom.

This news is already beyond belief, but Paul goes further – if God would do anything and everything to bring us to eternal life, then no person or group of persons – no spirit or group of spirits -- can successfully block us from God's salvific intention. Therefore, if we try to do God's will as Jesus taught us, and ask sincerely for forgiveness when we have failed to do so, then God's salvific intention will lead us to His kingdom. We should have confidence in this – particularly during times of suffering.

In the letter to the Ephesians, we are given a prayer and declaration about how to have this powerful confidence in the salvific will of God:

...may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to *him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think*, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3: 17-21 – *italics mine*).

St. Paul prays that we will know the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love, which is the fullness of God; for if we gain a mere glimmer of this love – which is beyond all knowledge – we will know with confidence that God will do *far more to bring us to His eternal salvation than “we can possibly ask or think.”* Therefore, if we ask God for eternal salvation, believing in His unconditional love, He will grant us far more than anything we could have hoped for.

When we are suffering acutely, we will want to make recourse to this radical hope in the salvific intention of the unconditionally loving God. Anything less could cause us to falter at the very moment we must believe in our risen glory with Him.

I.C

Three Christian Insights into the Resurrection and Suffering

First Christian Insight: Suffering is Completely Redeemed in the Resurrection

By now it will be evident that the first and most foundational Christian insight concerns the redemption of suffering in the eternal life of unconditional love. It may be characterized as follows: our life is eternal, and intended by Jesus to be unconditional love and joy. Therefore, our life in the physical universe is but a mere blip on the landscape of eternity. Though this life has definitive significance, it will be changed at the moment of death—and so its temporal and physical features should not be absolutized.

As noted in the previous section, the Christian Church teaches that all people “who seek God with a sincere heart, and *try* in their actions to do His will according to the dictates of their conscience,” will be led into the resurrection of unconditional love.¹⁷ For Christians, the “dictates of conscience” are based on the teachings of Jesus. Recall that the requirement for salvation is not the achievement of perfection in doing God’s will, but *trying* in our actions to do God’s will. God knows that precious few of us will be able to achieve perfection in doing His will before we die, and so He accepts sincere repentance for shortcomings and our good faith *efforts*.

According to Jesus, this choice to “seek God with a sincere heart and to try to do His will” can be made even at the last moment.¹⁸ When the choice is made – and when Christians put their faith in Jesus – this life can no longer be ultimately tragic. Jesus promised that all suffering would be transformed into perfect love and joy in His Kingdom, meaning that even the worst of disasters will be perfectly redeemed for all eternity. Hence St. Paul can say with great confidence:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; we always carry in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor. 4: 8-10).

Second Christian Insight: The Purpose of Suffering

For Christians, the redemption of suffering in an eternal life of unconditional love is not *the whole* story. Suffering has a significant purpose *in this life* — it *helps* us move toward that eternal salvation. In the perspective of Christian faith, suffering purifies love—it does not undermine it. Without faith, this perspective is difficult to see, but *with* faith in the unconditionally loving God, this central insight becomes quite powerful – not only leading us to our salvation, but enabling us to lead others to their salvation.

As will be discussed in the Chapter Four below, suffering provides the impetus for six major opportunities:

¹⁷ See the full citation from *Lumen Gentium* in Section IV above.

¹⁸ See for example Mt. 20:1-16, (Parable of the Late Laborers), and Lk. 15:11-32 (Parable of the Prodigal Son). Jesus reflects this attitude in his ministry with sinners – eating with and calling even the worst of sinners –e.g. tax collectors and prostitutes—to the Kingdom of Heaven through their choice and faith in Him.

1. It can shock us out of a superficial Level 1-2 purpose and identity, and point the way to a Level 3–4 purpose and identity.
2. It provides the impetus to grow in our faith and deepen our trust in God – which leads to our salvation, and frequently to the salvation of others.
3. It provides the conditions for need and interdependence, which in turn incites the call to serve and contribute to others and to make the world a better place.
4. It provides the impetus to grow in natural virtues – endurance, courage, fortitude, prudence, rationality, and temperance.
5. It provides the impetus to purify and deepen our love (*agapē*) -- particularly in the areas of empathy, humility, forgiveness, compassion, and the “acceptance of compassion.”
6. It provides the conditions for serving, strengthening, and building the Kingdom of God on earth – and to bring hope and the Good News of salvation to the world.

Each of these six opportunities has a “self-definitional” quality. The more we follow the opportunities of suffering, the more deeply we define our hearts and ourselves as “living for the kingdom, others, and the human and divine community.” Were it not for suffering, we would not have the same impetus to move beyond a self-centric nature – beyond self-sufficiency, autonomy, domination, and self-worship; we would not have the same opportunity to leave a legacy of contribution, compassion, and good for the kingdom and the human community; we would be left without the challenges that call us to courage, effort, commitment, and love—left to a kind of infancy of “being taken care of” instead of taking care of others; and we would be deprived of the opportunity to make sacrifices for others, the kingdom, and other noble causes—left to a non-sublime innocence.¹⁹

Though suffering causes pain, loss, grief, and other negative emotional states, Jesus did not view it as *essentially* negative because in the context of faith it can lead toward our and others’ salvation. St. Paul develops this theology of “positive suffering” in two major passages. The first passage, from the letter to the Romans, concerns the role of suffering in developing natural virtue:

... we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5: 3-5).

St. Paul’s perspective is that suffering plus faith will lead to virtue and love – and ultimately salvation. He spells out some of these virtues in the above passage – endurance, character, and hope, all of which open us to the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This love of God leads to an increase in trust and a deepening of our capacity for love.

Another passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians is central to the Christian interpretation of suffering:

¹⁹ These points will be taken up extensively in Volume 7.

And to keep me from being too proud [hyperōmai—self-exalted, proud, conceited] by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, an angel of Satan, to torment me. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Paul’s thorn in the flesh is very probably a *physical* infirmity, and many exegetes believe that he had significant problems with his vision,²⁰ but he remained intentionally vague about this to allow others with different kinds of suffering the greatest latitude to identify with him and his interpretation of redemptive suffering. So, what is Paul’s interpretation of the “opportunity of suffering?” He names two specific benefits:

- It prevents him from becoming conceited (proud).
- His weaknesses are the means through which Jesus’ power is perfected within him.

For St. Paul, there are far worse things than suffering—namely, the darkness of pride and conceit. Pride and conceit gave him the false impression that he was more important than others and his life more valuable than others. This bloated sense of self-importance could have led him away from the Lord into a self-idolatrous darkness—which he feared. So, he felt incredibly blessed by the Lord to be given his thorn in the flesh—which caused him to stumble, be embarrassed, and be dependent on others. He probably found this very difficult to accept at first—as manifest by his pleading with God to take it away three times (over and over and over again—many times). His reticence to accept the thorn is probably attributable to the dignity and pride he felt due to his education, intelligence, his ability to speak and write, and his obvious charisma and leadership ability.

If Paul really did have problems with his vision, and took pride in his independence and leadership, he may have felt dependent and weak when he required assistance to travel and write. Furthermore, embarrassing incidents, such as not recognizing a high priest in full regalia (Acts 23:3-5)—would have been humiliating. Yet when it became apparent that the Lord would not take away “his thorn in the flesh,” he saw the light—he had been rescued from real darkness – the darkness of egocentricity and self-idolatry. Moreover, his thorn opened him to the strength and grace of Christ – helping him toward his salvation while making him a light to others’ salvation. When this light became apparent, and he saw His thorn as one of the greatest gifts ever given to him—more precious than his charisma and his ability to speak, write, and lead—he

²⁰ There are several indications of Paul’s difficulties with vision. He seems to have dictated most of his letters to scribes (e.g., Tertius who transcribed the letter to the Romans). What he does write for himself, he pens with large print (Gal 6:11), indicating possible difficulties with seeing. Furthermore, in Galatians 4:15, Paul tells the Galatians that “For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.” What would have been the purpose of that, if Paul did not need their eyes? In Acts 23:3-5, Paul, who was a former Pharisee, claims that he did not recognize the high priest standing in full regalia in front of him—referring to him as a “white washed wall.” This passage makes little sense if Paul had clear vision.

proclaimed that He would boast first in his weakness instead of his strength—for when he was weak, it was then that he was truly strong.

Third Christian Insight: Unconditional Love and the Absence of Suffering in the Resurrection.

In the Book of Revelation, the prophetic author, citing a loud voice from the heavenly throne, states:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away... Behold, I make all things new (Rev. 21: 4-5).

This verse summarizes the totality of teaching in the Gospels and Epistles – and interestingly is validated in thousands of accounts of near death experiences. Those who have “crossed over to the other side” in near death experiences report almost universally that “overwhelming love” is the primary characteristic of their experience. Frequently, these individuals are taken up into a loving white light in which they not only experience overwhelming love, but learn to love themselves and others in the same way. Others have experienced the love of family and friends, and still others, the love of Jesus.²¹ One person describes this universal experience as follows:

I became very weak, and I fell down. I began to feel a sort of drifting, a movement of my real being in and out of my body, and to hear beautiful music. I floated on down the hall and out the door onto the screened-in porch. There, it almost seemed that clouds, a pink mist really, began to gather around me, and then I floated right straight on through the screen, just as though it weren't there, and up into this pure crystal clear light, an illuminating white light. It was beautiful and so bright, so radiant, but it didn't hurt my eyes. It's not any kind of light you can describe on earth. I didn't actually see a person in this light, and yet it has a special identity, it definitely does. It is a light of perfect understanding and perfect love.... And all during this time, I felt as though I was surrounded by an overwhelming love and compassion.²²

This view of heaven contextualizes the suffering we endure on this earth. It shows that we will be brought to fulfillment in our souls and bodies, in our consciousness and love, with family and friends, and in the splendor of God.

²¹ The experience of overwhelming love is so central to near death experiences, that a simple internet search for “Love, near death experiences” yields 9,310,000 results. Many of these experiences are also published in books and journals.

²² Raymond Moody 1975. *Life After Life*. (New York: Harper Collins) pp 53-54.

There are many other testimonies to the intense love of the white light and Jesus accessible through an internet search of “love in Near Death Experiences.” See for example the experience of Dannion Brinkley at: <http://www.dannion.com/dannion-brinkley-near-death-experience/>

Thus, we do not want to forget the promise of Jesus – “Blessed are the sorrowing, for they shall be consoled” (Mt. 5: 4) and “Come to me all you who are toiling and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). These promises are absolute, indicating Jesus’ intention to remove and redeem all suffering in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The removal and redemption of pain and suffering in the afterlife is explicitly mentioned in the accounts of many near death experiences. The clinical death of Linda Stewart gives a detailed account of this phenomenon. She was wracked not only with great physical pain from a debilitating disease, but also with severe depression, and the spiritual pain of being taught that God was angry, wrathful, and punishing. As her disease progressed, and her pain grew worse, Linda let go of her physical body, and described the following experience:

When I finally gave up my will to live, relinquishing my life unto death was sublimely easy after my long illness and loss of everything that had made life worthwhile for me. The decision to leave this world hung suspended in an extended moment of absolute quiet. Passionless, I watched my spirit leave my body as a feeling of ‘otherness’ engulfed me. I felt a strange detachment from my physical body and the life I had created. I was no longer connected to a pitiful, suffering mass of flesh. I was not that body and yet, I still existed but in a new state of being. Gone was the wrenching pain that had accompanied my every waking moment. The strain of expanding my lungs to gasp for air had disappeared. Fatigue, which had weighted my life for years, had lifted. Depression no longer drained my mind of hope. Sight and sounds did not sear my head with pain, leaving me emotionally bereft. And yet, I still existed. I felt weightless and calm...

Although I knew I was not in the lifeless body lying on my bed, and that the eyes and brain I had previously identified as mine, were in that inanimate object with which I no longer identified, I was still aware of sight and thoughts and sensations. I observed my new reality with tranquility.... I became aware of a deep sense of peace and warmth that permeated my senses... I was suddenly buffeted by a powerful, energetic force that swooped beneath and lifted me, carrying me upward... Barely conscious, my only awareness was a sensation of rising. I seemed to be traveling upward at an unimaginable speed. A clean sensation of wind rushed over my face and body with tremendous force and yet there was no discomfort. Vast distances seemed to fly by me and the higher I rose, the more my head cleared. I became aware of a deep sense of peace and warmth that permeated my senses... Confused, because the energy that had enveloped me had a definite presence, I tried to see what was happening and who was carrying me; who or what cared so deeply for me? I felt peaceful and loved immeasurably. I knew I was in the arms of a being who cherished me with perfect love and carried me from the dark void into a new reality... With the eyes of my soul body, I looked to see what held me in such love and I beheld a radiant, Spirit being, so magnificent and full of love that I knew I would never again feel the sense of loss. I have no way of explaining how, but I knew the Spirit was Christ. It was not a belief, perception or understanding, but my recognition of Christ came from my

new perspective of spirit... I did not see the Spirit as I had seen Jesus of Nazareth depicted in paintings, but the innate knowing of my heart remembered and acknowledged Christ. The radiant Spirit was Christ, the manifestation and expression of pure love... ²³

Linda experienced precisely what is promised by Jesus and expressed in the Book of Revelation. Her physical pain and debilitation was transformed into peace and warmth which permeated her senses; her depression and malaise was transformed by a sense of being unconditionally loved, and her spiritual pain which came from a misconception about God was replaced by the overwhelming awareness that God is perfect love and that He is one with Jesus Christ. Linda's experience typifies that of thousands of others who have crossed over from this world to the next – an experience where every tear is wiped away and replaced by the consolation of the loving God promised by Jesus.

Belief in Jesus' promise to remove and redeem all suffering – and bring us into a domain of perfect love and joy is essential to the Christian experience of “suffering well.” When we affirm this truth, suffering can no longer be ultimately tragic. Yes – it can produce terrible pain, grief, loneliness, emptiness, fear and frustration – but these negative states are only *temporary* if we believe in the resurrection, and put the redemption of our suffering into the hands of the loving God.

If the evidence for our resurrection detailed in Section I.A above (historical criteria, near death experiences, the Shroud of Turin, and miracles in the name of Jesus) has *any* validity, then we can be reasonably certain that God *will* wipe away all of our pain and replace it with unconditional warmth, peace, love and joy. He will make use of every bit of our suffering to lead us and others into the Kingdom of his unconditional love.

The above consideration of the resurrection is paramount in the Christian view of suffering. Without it, everything else is rendered meaningless and impotent. As St. Paul states

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (1 Cor. 15: 12-17).

Paul makes the point succinctly – the resurrection of Jesus has been attested by hundreds of trustworthy witnesses, and in view of this our resurrection is secure (if we try to follow the Lord's will and rely upon His unconditional mercy). In view of this, suffering not only makes

²³ Kevin Williams 2002 *Nothing Better than Death* (Bloomington, Ind: Xlibris Corp). The testimony of Linda Stewart can also be found on the internet. See: <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/notable/linda-stewart.html>.

sense, it is also salutary. For when suffering is interpreted through faith and prayer, it can lead to the purification of our love and faith, and ultimately to our and others' salvation.

Two other perspectives are also important in the interpretation of suffering, leading to its salutary and salvific effects:

1. Who God is and is Not (Section II).
2. Four theological misinterpretations of suffering we must avoid (Section III).

Editor's Note: For the full presentation of the Resurrection perspective, you may want to consult the book (Chapter 1).

II. Who God Is and Is Not – A Review [Back to top](#)

In Volume 4 (Chapter Three), we gave a synopsis of Jesus' proclamation of the unconditional love of God by examining His address to God His Father – “*Abba*” -- His proclamation of love as the highest commandment and love as the encapsulation of the law and the prophets. We also noted the importance of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in which the Father becomes Jesus' primary analogy for God the Father (His *Abba*). If the reader does not have an explicit memory of this material, I would recommend that you review it before proceeding with the rest of this volume, for a misinterpretation of the heart and person of God the Father will almost certainly undermine faith in Him, and thereby the efficacy of suffering toward authentic love and salvation.

In Volume 4 (Chapter Six) we examine six false notions of God that are inconsistent with the preaching of Jesus and His image of the father of the Prodigal Son. The six “non-Christian” false notions of God are:

1. The angry God.
2. The payback God.
3. The domineering God.
4. The disgusted God.
5. The terrifying God.
6. The stoic or indifferent God.

Some of these ideas of God are found in the Old Testament – particularly in its older strands of thought (from the Mosaic Period through the Judges to the establishment of the kingdom). However, it must be remembered that God developed His revelation throughout the Old Testament and brought it to fulfillment in His Son. Hence it should not be surprising that Jesus supersedes much of the doctrine of the Old Testament when bringing it to fulfillment. Thus, we must look at the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, but we cannot do the reverse lest we put new wine into old wine skins – the new revelation into the more restrictive categories of the old revelation.

There are some passages in the New Testament that have caused Christians to believe that God is angry and retributive (contrary to Jesus' preaching about forgiveness and refraining from anger). If you the reader are troubled by these passages, you will want to review the explanation of them in Volume 4 (Chapter Six) as well as the deeper explanation of them in my book *The Light Shines on in the Darkness: Transforming Suffering through Faith* (Chapter 2).

Editor's Note: For a much fuller presentation of Who God is and Is Not, consult Chapter 2 of *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*.

III.

Four Theological Misinterpretations of God's Action in Suffering

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The Light Shines on in the Darkness: Transforming Suffering through Faith (Chapter 3) gives a full explanation the following four theological misinterpretations of God's action and suffering as well as other misinterpretations of suffering, natural causation, and Old Testament exegesis. Readers seeking a deeper explanation of these ambiguities in interpreting suffering will want to read Chapter 3 before proceeding to the rest of this volume. The four theological misinterpretations are as follows:

1. Suffering is God's punishment for our or our parents' sins.
2. Suffering is the result of original sin – nothing more.
3. God directly wills the events that cause suffering (irrespective of natural causation or individual human choices).
4. God is not present in our suffering – if He were, we would see what He is doing to alleviate it.

III.A

First Misinterpretation: Suffering is God's Punishment for Sin

Job 3:1–25 represents a view of suffering widely held in Israel before the time of Jesus – namely that suffering is the result of God's punishment for our sins. In this passage, Job who is ostensibly a just man, is bewildered by the deprivation and suffering inflicted upon him, but his friends tell him that if he looks deeply enough, he will see some fault in himself that has brought affliction upon him. In this view, if a person *seems* blameless for suffering, then either he does not know how sinful he really is (as Job's friend suggests²⁴) or the suffering came from the sin of previous generations. In the latter view, God can punish the sinfulness of people down to the fourth generation (Ex. 34:6-7; Deut. 5:8-10; Lev 26:39). Thus, suffering could be the fault of the father, grandfather, or great grandfather. In this sense, God is not to blame for the suffering of

²⁴ Job's friends ostensibly come to console him, but are convinced that God is retributive, and so they believe that Job must have sinned in some way that either he is not admitting to them or to himself. They come with Psalms of penance, but Job responds with Psalms of innocence. Thus, he is forced to defend both his righteousness and God's love for him – which his friends will not accept. This leads Job to consider them enemies. See Ibid p. 467.

the innocent – he is only the administrator of strict justice. The blame for the suffering of the innocent is placed squarely on the shoulders of the guilty party -- his parents, grandparents, or great grandparents who committed the sin.

Jesus supersedes this Old Testament view of suffering as God’s punishment for sin. He does so because it is incompatible with three more fundamental theological viewpoints: (1) His view of God (the Father) as unconditional love, (2) His view that the highest interior virtue is compassion (care for sinners as well as the needy), and (3) His view of the perfection of love—*agapē* – as “love of enemies.” In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus encourages His disciples to love their enemies (instead of seeking retribution and punishment). He says that this is precisely what His Heavenly Father does, and for this reason, “[H]e makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5:45).

Jesus’ view of God and virtue requires that He reject the view that suffering is punishment for sin. As noted in Section II above, Jesus identifies God with the father of the Prodigal Son – who loves the worst of sinners, is overjoyed by their return, and restores them to the fullness of life when they turn back to him (Lk.15:11-32). This is completely consistent with Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus identifies the Father’s perfection with love of enemies (Mt. 5:48). This love of enemies and evildoers is incompatible with a God who punishes sinners down to the fourth generation and reserves His love for the righteous alone. How can the same God forgive His enemies (relinquishing punishment and penalty) while punishing them down to the fourth generation? In order for Jesus to be consistent with His insistence that we imitate the Father’s compassion for enemies by forgiving them 70 x 7 times (a virtually endless number of times – Mt. 18:22), He formally abandons the idea of suffering as punishment for sin and says that God causes rain (something negative) to fall on *both* the righteous and sinners, and that God causes His sun to shine (something positive) on *both* sinners and the righteous. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus states outright, “love your enemies...then you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Lk. 6:35). If Jesus had not abandoned the idea of suffering as God’s retribution for sin, it would have contradicted His view of God, love, and virtue. Jesus has made a radical turn from the Old Testament view of suffering.

III.B

Second Misinterpretation: Suffering is the Result of Original Sin – Nothing More

When we or others ask why God has allowed suffering to happen in our lives, the *whole* answer is not contained in the simple response, “It was the sin of Adam” (see Gen 2:17; 3:16, 19). Indeed, the Gospels and the Book of Job never make an appeal to the sin of Adam or the fall to explain suffering. Instead, the Book of Job appeals to the testing of people by Satan, the punishment of sinful people by God, the medicinal and pedagogical benefits of suffering, and the mystery and incomprehensibility of suffering. Jesus supersedes the first two reasons, and comprehensively enhances the other two. Jesus and the Christian Church teach three major benefits of suffering:

1. Suffering helps us to reach for higher meaning, deeper love, and eternal salvation (see below Chapter Four).

2. Our choices in the midst of suffering and death help us to define our eternal identity (see below Chapter Four).
3. Suffering can be turned into self-sacrificial love for the redemption of the world in imitation of Jesus (see below Chapter Five).

Though St. Paul appeals to the sin of Adam to explain both death and our concupiscence (Rom 5:12, 19), he does not specifically tie suffering (beyond that of death and concupiscence) to it. His purpose for doing this is to show that death and concupiscence come through one man (Adam) and are redeemed through the love and grace of one man (Jesus Christ).

Yet, the question remains – “Why didn’t Jesus and the Book of Job appeal to the sin of Adam to explain suffering? Why did they give so many other alternative explanations?” Apparently, the sin of Adam is not the *whole* reason for human suffering. The sin of Adam causes the fall of human nature—which in its original state was in harmony with God, other humans (i.e., Eve), and nature. Once the sin of Adam occurred, all three of these harmonies were disrupted and undermined, leading to a state of *hardship* in our relationships with God, others, and nature. This state of hardship is not definitive—in the sense of our being condemned to experience *only* hardship in our relationship with God, others, and nature. God provides a way to mitigate these hardships, and to make our lives better—the discipline of the law (which mitigates the adversity in our relationship with Him and others) and the discipline of hard work and prudence which enables us to cultivate and “civilize” nature. In this way, human beings can be reasonably happy—experiencing moments of peace amidst conflict and war, and moments of surplus amidst times of drought and severe weather.

This is precisely the condition in which Job finds himself before Satan convinced God to test the genuineness of his faith. Job was a just man—a practitioner of virtue, the law, and hard work—and as a result, he had a good family, many lands and possessions, and many friends. Thus, the central question of the book of Job is not, “Why is there hardship in the world—friction between us, God, nature, and one another?” -- That question could have been answered by appealing to the sin of Adam in the Book of Genesis. Again, the question is not, “How did Job mitigate the hardships that came through the sin of Adam so that he could have a reasonably happy life?” This question could have been answered by appealing to the promises of Moses concerning the efficacy of the law and hard work in mitigating suffering and receiving God’s promise of favor and prosperity. The above two questions and their answers are *assumed* by the book of Job. So, what is the central question of the Book of Job? Why did the just man Job—who was prosperous and happy because he followed the law, worked hard, and therefore enjoyed the favor of God and the fruits of his labors—find himself in terrible suffering and destitution? This is precisely the question that the vast majority of us who are trying to be good and faithful people ask when deep suffering afflicts us. To answer this question with the perfunctory comment— “You’re suffering because of the sin of Adam” doesn’t answer the question. It only serves to frustrate people who are trying to reconcile their attempts to follow virtue, the law, and the Lord with seemingly undeserved and unexpected suffering. If we want to answer *this third* question, then we will have to consider Jesus’ comprehensive enhancement of the book of the later strands of the Old Testament – particularly the book of Job. This will be taken up in detail below in the Fourth and Chapter Fives.

III.C

Third Misinterpretation: God Wills the Events that Cause Suffering

This misinterpretation of suffering also has its origins in the earlier strands of the Old Testament in which it is presumed that God is *directly* responsible for everything that happens in the world. If we assume this without making an accommodation for the relative independence of individual free will and the forces of nature, then it would seem that God directly wills all the events that cause suffering. Jesus and the Christian tradition make several enhancements in the view of human free will and God's equitableness in causing nature to bring benefit and suffering to both good and evil people.

As noted in Section II above, Matthew 5: 45 indicates that Jesus believed that God causes natural events, such as the rain to fall and the sun to shine. However, he departs from Old Testament tradition when he states that God does this *equitably* to both the just and the unjust – the good as well as the evil. This suggests that God does not change the normal course of natural events very often to reward the good and punish the unjust – perhaps not at all, and this is precisely what allowed St. Thomas Aquinas to insert Aristotle's view of causation into the Christian view of God's initial creation and continual sustaining of nature. He formulated this into His view of secondary causation, which gave rise to the view of natural forces in modern science.

According to the contemporary scientific worldview, God does not *directly* cause the sun to rise and the rain to fall. He could do these things, but prefers instead that they be generated by a series of *secondary causes* which operate through the natural laws and constants He designed and infused in the universe at its creation.

The idea of “secondary causation” is commensurate with Christian thought– and originated from it. St. Thomas Aquinas discovered this idea by reconciling Aristotle's four causes with the requirements for human freedom and the existence of chance events. Aquinas argued that God could not be the direct cause of every action in the world – otherwise, chance and human freedom would be impossible.²⁵ Furthermore, Aristotle's teleological view of causation allowed natural objects to be oriented toward their proper ends without having to be directly guided by the first cause. Even though the first cause is necessary to ground the existence and motion of all subsequent causes, those subsequent causes –after being brought into existence and action-- can be oriented toward their proper end without the direct causal intervention of God (precisely as He created it to do).²⁶

After synthesizing these concepts, Aquinas concluded that God (the First Cause) created the natural world so that various objects could be oriented toward their proper ends without His

²⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 22, Art. 2

²⁶ See St. Thomas Aquinas 1963 *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* Trans. by Richard J. Blackwell, Richard Spath & Edmund Thirlkel -- Books I –II. (New Haven: Yale University Press)
<http://www.dhspriority.org/thomas/Physics.htm>

direct causal intervention. This central idea provided the intellectual framework for the emergence of natural science.²⁷

Aquinas' idea of secondary causation is intrinsic to contemporary physics-- and is an integral part of Big Bang cosmology.²⁸ According to this view, the parameters of all causation and natural objects were infused in the universe at the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago. As the universe unfolded in its first second of existence, all four universal forces with their intrinsic qualities, magnitudes and parameters, expressed themselves independently—the gravitational force, then the strong nuclear force, then the weak force, and then the electromagnetic force. These forces interacted in universal space-time as the universe expanded which eventually gave rise to the natural objects and forces we know today. Though the whole universe must be brought into being and sustained in being by God (the First Cause), the forces in the universe *can* act toward their proper ends without His direct causal intervention. God did not have to create the universe in this way, but we surmise that He did—given the remarkable consistency of our physical laws throughout the history of the whole universe.

Of course, God could interrupt, interfere with, or supersede these natural laws—by causing a miracle; however, we must assume that He does this only sparingly, because if He performed miracles regularly, we would not know what to expect, and if we did not know what to expect, we would not be able to be rational about future plans—in which case we would not be truly *free*. God is always concerned to protect our freedom—for this is the only way that our love can be our own, allowing us to remain creatures made in the image and likeness of Him.

Is this distinction really important? I believe it is, because if we do not expect that God is going to allow natural laws and natural events to take their natural courses—and we believe that He is going to perform a miracle every few minutes (interrupting the laws of nature), then we will have a *false* expectation of both God and nature, and this false expectation will lead to a belief that God *directly* causes pain, deprivation, and calamities which *in fact*, He does not. Rather, God allows nature to follow its natural course so that we will know what to expect, and thereby be able to deal with the natural world rationally and intelligently—allowing us to be free.

Yes—God *does* perform miracles, but He does so within the framework of six objectives: (1) The promotion of our salvation, (2) the promotion of others' salvation, (3) the preservation of our freedom, (4) the preservation of others' freedom, (5) the proper alleviation of our suffering, and (6) the proper alleviation of others' suffering. A miracle (leading to instant relief) could undermine one or more of these six objectives.

For example, inasmuch as miracles can interrupt the possibility of rational expectations and therefore the process of rational decision making intrinsic to freedom, God will not perform it in order to protect our freedom. Furthermore, challenges and weaknesses are not necessarily bad. Such challenges can shock us out of superficiality; move us off the road to self-destruction,

²⁷ See Stanley L. Jaki 1979 *The Origin of Science* (Glasgow: Scottish Academic Press) Jaki makes the case that secondary causation led to the methodology of natural science.

²⁸ See Vol. II, Appendix I of the Quartet for a detailed explanation of Big Bang cosmology.

deepen our faith, deepen our love, help keep us on the road to salvation, and help others on the road to salvation. In short, if God were to give us a miracle every time we wanted one, we would lose all the salutary and salvific benefits coming from weakness and challenge as well as our need for one another.

Therefore, it is probably unwise to ask -- “Why did you take my eyesight away?” or “Why didn’t you prevent my tire from blowing out so I could have avoided an accident?” or “Why didn’t you prevent the earthquake that killed so many people?” These questions ignore the world of natural causes and the six objectives of God in alleviating suffering. Recall, that God did not *cause* these sufferings—He *allowed* them to occur through the natural forces and laws He created in our universe and he did not prevent them because it would have interfered in some way with the salvation and freedom of the people affected.

There are some things far worse than suffering and an imperfect world—such as a “perfect” world which offers no challenges to superficial definitions of happiness and purpose, no challenges to self-sufficiency, egocentricity, self-indulgence, and narcissism, and no challenges that require us and others to make a positive difference for the common good and the building of God’s Kingdom. Such a “perfect world” would be filled with incredibly superficial people, and would not elicit humility, compassion for the weak and needy, self-sacrifice for noble endeavors, and legacies left for the betterment of the world and God’s Kingdom. As many theologians (beginning with St. Paul) have reasoned—the world of suffering is a far better place than this “perfect world”—and a much better path to our eternal salvation (See 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

So, what is a wise way to approach suffering caused by natural forces? First, assume that this suffering occurred not because God directly caused it, but because it came from the natural course of natural forces and laws. Secondly, assume that a miracle is not essential (or could interfere with) our or others’ salvation—and so God decides instead to maintain the natural order for the sake of our freedom and salvation. Thirdly, ask the Lord to alleviate your suffering *within the framework of His other five objectives*—our and others’ salvation, the preservation of our and others’ freedom, and the alleviation of others’ suffering. This will enable us to keep focused on how the Holy Spirit is working through our suffering—instead of being preoccupied by the false suppositions that God intentionally caused our suffering or intentionally did not give us a deserved or needed miracle.

If we keep ourselves focused on the way the Holy Spirit *really* works, we will begin to see the clues to what might be called the “conspiracy of Divine Providence” -- gradually manifesting itself in new opportunities to change our life’s path and enhance our effectiveness and ability to serve the Kingdom. We will also discover a deepened awareness about happiness, purpose in life, freedom, love, authenticity, and virtue. At the same time, we will discover that our and others’ suffering is being alleviated in the most unexpected, broadened, and deepened ways. If we keep ourselves focused on the way the Holy Spirit *really* works, we will be surprised—not by natural forces taking their natural course—but by supernatural grace bringing its immense scope of salvation and freedom into *our* life. This will no doubt be an adventure – leading toward the “breadth and length and height and depth, of the love of Christ” (Eph. 3:18) – an adventure opening upon the fullness of eternal joy with the unconditionally loving God.

At the beginning of this subsection, we noted that *most* of the time God does not *directly* cause suffering. Rather, it comes from our choices, others' choices, and an imperfect natural world. Does God *sometimes directly* cause suffering? He can—particularly when someone is on the path to self-destruction or the destruction of others. However, we must remember that if God does this, it would have to lead to salvation and would not interfere with our salvation or freedom. Thus, instances of God directly causing suffering are quite rare. In the case of St. Paul, Jesus caused him to be temporarily blinded. We must assume that this did not interfere with Paul's freedom to come into the Christian Church. Jesus must have been aware that Paul needed a “wake up call,” to incite him to think and pray about the One he had been persecuting—which in turn led him, after three years in the desert, to a *free* choice to join and lead the Christian Church.

Examples like that of St. Paul are difficult to find because the vast majority of suffering that happens to saints and ordinary Christians comes from the usual three non-divine causes—our choices, others' choices, and nature. For example, the emptiness that led St. Augustine to find God came from *his* choice to stay away from Jesus, the commandments, and the Church; the cannonball that hit the leg of St. Ignatius of Loyola—though remarkably aimed—came from *his* choice to stand on the highest point of the fortress as well as the natural forces of propulsion and gravity working on cannonballs; the physical suffering endured by St. Thérèse of Lisieux at the end of her life was due to the ordinary progression of tuberculosis; and the cosmic emptiness, loneliness, and alienation which incites many people to search for God is not caused directly by God but rather by their choice to ignore the transcendental part of their nature. In sum, the instances of God directly causing suffering are rare, because doing so generally undermines freedom—and sometimes the path to salvation.

III.D

Fourth Misinterpretation: If God were Present in our Suffering, we could see His Efficacious Actions

There is one truth we must believe in – and never abandon no matter what our feelings indicate – when one door closes due to suffering, weakness, or grief, the Holy Spirit is opening other doors that will lead to our interior purification of faith and love, to our salvation, and to our ability to minister to others – particularly their salvation. This is the promise of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and I have found it to be perfectly true in my own life and challenges. If we open ourselves to the opportunities of suffering (see below Chapter Four) and the offering of our suffering to God for the good of others and the kingdom (see below Chapter Five), then we will become gradually aware of the Holy Spirit's presence to us in our suffering. We will see Him giving us clues through others, the media, the Church, and the circumstances of our lives, and if we follow those clues we can be sure that we will be purified in faith and love, brought closer to salvation, and able to help others in their need and toward their salvation.

The only problem is that the Holy Spirit understands the vast array of possibilities in the present and the future, the depths of our and others' minds and hearts, and the needs of the kingdom of God and the common good, but *we do not*. As St. Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor. 13:12). This means that we have to trust in the Lord's

promise to be with us and lead us through our suffering, keep ourselves open to the opportunities in suffering, and follow the lead of the Spirit when those opportunities begin to emerge – no matter what our feelings may otherwise suggest. This requires faith and humility.

As we have noted above, we cannot possibly know how God is operating through our and others' suffering, because we do not understand perfectly our and others' past, present and future, the path to our and others' salvation, the preservation of our and others' freedom, and the alleviation of our and others' suffering. Furthermore, we have cloudy minds and hearts—which give rise to cloudy judgments, making it virtually impossible to understand God's perfect justice and compassion in the light of the perfect eternal love and joy He desires to give us. If we are *not* humble about following the Holy Spirit without full or even partial understanding, then we are likely to be far from the truth about God, ourselves, and our neighbor—we would be living in the context of inauthenticity and falsity—which is likely to undermine everything we are, do, and seek.

In addition to being humble, Jesus encourages us to trust. When a synagogue leader came to Jesus asking him to heal his daughter, the report came that she had already died. Jesus responds by telling the synagogue leader--“Fear is useless—what is needed is trust” (Mark 5:36, Luke 8:50). The Greek word translated as “trust” in Mark 5:36 is *pisteue* (from *pisteuo*)—which means “belief” in the special New Testament sense. According to the *NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon* this special sense denotes “the conviction and trust to which a man is impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative and law of soul.”²⁹

When Jesus used this term, He did so, not only in the sense of “trusting in the wisdom and power of God,” but also “trusting in the loving *heart* and providence of His Father.” This trust in both the power and loving intent of God can dispel not only fear, but also the feelings of abandonment, isolation, anger, and resentment. It is a trust grounded in love—an awareness of God's and Jesus' loving intent.

Notice that humility originates from within ourselves. When we recognize the infinite wisdom, intelligence and power of God, we accept our inability to understand fully who He is, how He thinks, and how He works. It is like praying “I will defer to your judgment Lord, because I do *not* understand your unsurpassable mind and power.” This is complemented by the trust to which Jesus calls us – a trust that is validated by His love, miracles, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit.

Jesus invites us into the *heart* of God by revealing his name (his essence) to be *Abba* (Daddy)--the father of the prodigal son. He goes even further when he implies that we can know the heart of the Father enough to trust that He would not do anything contrary to perfect love, and our salvation. This trust—working with the grace of God—can reduce, and sometimes dispel, fear, grief, abandonment, isolation, anger and resentment. It is trust not built on *our* thought and will alone but rather on a *relationship* with the loving God—a relationship grounded in the revelation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus—all of which combine to show not only

²⁹ “Greek Lexicon entry for *Pisteuo*” in “The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon” 1999 (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/pisteuo.html>) Strong #4100.

the truth of his preaching, but also his divine power and status, and through these, the efficacy of his and the Father's perfect love.

When we open ourselves to Jesus' word and build a relationship with him and his Father, our trust grows. It can grow so profoundly that we not only believe in God's presence and grace in our suffering--we *know* it—we become aware of His peace, sensing that everything is going to be okay—everything is going to be brought into the love and consolation of God's eternal salvation—brought about in his own way, in his own time—assuredly brought about if we but trust in Him.

Editor's Note: For a much fuller presentation of the misinterpretations of suffering, see Chapter 3 of *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*.

Chapter Two

Why Would an All-loving God Allow Suffering?

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In view of what has been said about the unconditional love of God (Volumes 3&4), one might ask the question, "Why would God have allowed suffering to occur in the first place?" We might rephrase the question as follows -- "If God intends to redeem every aspect of suffering in His unconditional love, why didn't He simply eliminate the possibility of suffering altogether so that we could avoid pain and He wouldn't have to redeem it?"

There are several reasons why God allows suffering to occur in the world, but all of them, according to the Christian view, are linked to the advancement and free appropriation of love (and with it, the advancement of our salvation). As Saint Paul says, God allows suffering to make *all* things work for the *good* of those who love Him. Thus, when God allows human beings to cause suffering to one another, He does so for reasons of advancing the free appropriation of love and our salvation. Similarly, the reason God creates us in a world with natural laws that *indirectly* cause suffering is to advance the same purpose.³⁰

There are three major sources of suffering – none of them directly caused by God:³¹

³⁰ Some Judeo-Christian believers may be wondering how this contention squares with the "enmity between nature and human beings" caused by the sin of Adam – "Adam, because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life" (Gen. 3:17). This is explained in the context of other Old Testament and New Testament passages in Volume 3 (Section II.D).

³¹ In Volume 3 (Section III.E), we give an explanation of why God does not *directly* cause suffering arising out of the forces of nature. The reason lies in the concept of secondary causation which stands at the forefront of the scientific revolution. According to this view – which arose out of Christian theology in the Middle Ages -- God

1. Suffering caused by our decisions about happiness, purpose, and identity.
2. Suffering caused by other people or groups (e.g., Joe causes suffering to Mary, or a political regime persecuting minorities).
3. Suffering caused by natural forces (e.g., tsunamis, earthquakes, drought, disease, and old age).

We gave an extended discussion of the first kind of suffering (caused by our decisions about happiness, purpose, and identity) in Volume 13 (Third and Chapter Fives). We explained there the unhappiness—the suffering-- that can come from dominant Level 2 happiness – emptiness and the comparison game. We also explained the unhappiness that can come from rejecting transcendent purpose (Level 4) – cosmic emptiness, loneliness, alienation, and guilt. Throughout these discussions, we showed that this pain could be quite positive – because it could lead us – like St. Augustine – to our highest fulfillment, dignity, and destiny – transcendent happiness with the unconditionally loving God. If we open ourselves to a “little leap of faith,” we will find a path out of the pain caused by lower level identity decisions, and discover a new kind of spirit, purpose, and happiness leading toward eternal love and joy. For the moment, suffice it to say that the pain associated with dominant Level 2 identity and the rejection of transcendent purpose are quite positive for the appropriation of love and the advancement of our salvation. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine how we could overcome superficiality and make progress in love and transcendent purpose without these kinds of suffering – painful as they might be. In view of this we can answer the question of why God would allow this kind of suffering – because it is truly good for our appropriation of love and the advancement of our salvation. Since this cause of suffering has been thoroughly discussed, we will limit ourselves in this volume to the other two causes of suffering—suffering caused by other human beings and suffering caused by natural forces.

Recall the fundamental revelation of Jesus -- that God does not *passively* look upon our suffering. Like the father of the prodigal son, He empathizes with our pain, involves Himself in our interior and exterior lives (if we allow Him to) and guides us through that pain to His Kingdom of unconditional love. God may be compared to unconditionally loving parents who would rather rush out in front of their children to “take the hit” for them instead of allowing them to take the hit themselves. There is only one problem with this strategy for both God and parents—if they don’t allow their children to “take the hit” they will never allow them the opportunity to react to and learn from pain, deprivation and grief—to develop courage, self-discipline, humility, empathy, compassion, contribution to the world, and contribution to the Kingdom. Parents who try to prevent their children from suffering leave them on the shallowest of levels—in a sort of “womb”—a sort of “pleasure bubble” that leaves them at Level 1 identity—undeveloped in efficacy, virtue, contribution and love. The result of being an over-protective parent is at best, the creation of a perpetually superficial child, and at worst, the creation of a non-contributory, unvirtuous, unloving monster-- and most parents know it. They know that wisdom requires them to step back, allow their children to experience the hard world

creates laws of nature at the very creation of the universe itself – and then allows these natural causes to give rise to human beings who interact with them. Thus, He does not *directly* cause suffering through nature – He only *indirectly allows* suffering to occur through these natural laws in their independent interaction with human beings. God can miraculously intervene in this system of secondary natural causes, but He does not do this with great frequency because it would interfere with freedom of choice (see also Volume 3, Section III.A).

that will develop them in virtue, contribution and love. The best they can do is help them, guide them, and love them as they move through the difficult stages on life's way.

According to Jesus, God suffers with everyone who suffers, and He intends to redeem all suffering in His providence for all eternity.³² Indeed, God the Father sent His only begotten Son into the world to suffer with us and for us – so that He could be a companion with us in our suffering and bring us to our eternal salvation. God *allows* suffering to occur in the world (for the reasons mentioned below), but His intention is to transform it into love. If He does not do this now, He could do it later in this world, and if He does not do that, He will do it in the eternal world to come. The key idea to remember is that God has an eternal perspective and that He will transform all suffering in this world into love for all eternity – if we let Him.

Thus, there can be only one kind of suffering that is *completely* tragic -- the suffering occurring in the self-exclusion from God and the blessed – the pain arising out of the rejection of love for the sake of egocentricity, domination, and self-worship – the pain of hell.

Outside of this one possibility — which ironically comes from free choice and preference – tragedy is only temporary and limited. It may exist for a while, but in the hands of God, it will eventually be turned into love, and that love will last for all eternity. Even incredible tragedies, like the death of a child, are not *ultimately and completely* tragic, they are only *partially and temporarily* so, because the temporary loss and grief that parents feel in such circumstances is already compensated in the *life of the child* by God bestowing unconditional love upon him or her in His heavenly kingdom. God feels the grief of the loving parents, who miss their beloved, and He will feel that grief for as long as the parents experience it; but God simultaneously bestows unconditional and eternal love and fulfillment on the child whose loss is the cause of that grief.

Therefore, in the Christian view, suffering is complex. It includes the genuine experience of deep grief, loss, and pain – as well as the experience – arising out of faith -- of God redeeming that suffering completely and eternally. It also includes an experience of peace and consolation – if we choose it, a myriad of opportunities to grow in faith, love, and service – if we focus on them, and the inspiration, protection and guidance of the Holy Spirit – if we are attentive to Him.

This complexity of thoughts and emotions can be quite confusing and trying -- even for a person of faith, but at the end of the day, that same faith allows us to give the upper hand to the eternity that awaits us, the opportunities available to us, and the inspiration, protection, and guidance of the Holy Spirit who is present to us. If we do this, we will *never* give up – and love will be victorious over darkness and despair. Thus, Christians are capable of experiencing grief – profound loss – hope in unconditional love – hope in eternal reuniting and “peace beyond all understanding.” This can be incredibly difficult, but our faith will lead inevitably to the transformation of suffering into love and through this to the eternal kingdom of joy.

³² See the passages from Jesus in the Gospels promising God's complete redemption of suffering discussed in the Introduction to this book (Section II) – Mt. 5:4, Mt. 11:28, Jn. 5:24, Jn. 8:12, and Jn. 16:20. See also the same promise interpreted by St. Paul (in Chapter 1, Sections IV-VI) – Rom. 5:3-5, Rom. 8:17-18, Rom. 8:26-28, Phil. 3:8-14, 12:7-10, and Col. 1:24.

Saint Paul expresses this hope in the redemption of suffering not only for us, but also for the whole of creation, in a remarkable passage from the Letter to the Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:18-27).

I present the above overriding principle because I am concerned that the reader might think that the forthcoming presentation about why God allows suffering is too philosophical, too cold, and too detached from the real emotion and sadness of suffering. I do not intend this at all. I do not want to distract the reader from the pathos intrinsic to suffering or present a detached philosophical view of it. I only want to give a sense of the rationale for why God would allow suffering caused by human agents and an imperfect world. I beg the reader's indulgence to grant me the above overriding principle as I do so.

With this in mind, we may now proceed to the two major extrinsic causes of suffering, and why God would allow them to occur:

1. Why God allows humans to cause suffering (Section I).
2. Why God allows nature to cause suffering (Section II).

I.

Why Does God Allow Humans to Cause Suffering?

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Why would an unconditionally loving God allow human beings to cause suffering to one another? Because love requires the *freedom* to be *unloving*, and “unlove” frequently causes suffering. In other words, without the capacity to cause suffering (through choices of unlove), we would not be able to choose love—and if we could not choose love, our love would not originate from within us—it would not be our own. If we do not have the freedom to choose *unloving* behaviors, then our *loving* behaviors are not really chosen – they are merely programmed (like impulses, desires, or instincts). Beings which have no real alternatives are not the true *initiators*

of their actions; they are merely responding to stimuli in the *only* way they can. Thus, without the possibility to intentionally cause suffering by choices of unlove, we are reduced to mere robots or programmed machines—falling far short of “beings created in the image and likeness of God.”

This insight may be deepened by examining what would happen if God made us incapable of unloving behaviors. Let us suppose that I did not have the capacity to choose unloving behaviors. It would seem that the world would be a better place. After all, I would not have to worry about acting on a greedy impulse that could cause harm to another person; I would not have to worry about insulting my friend out of a sense of fear or pride; I wouldn’t even have to worry about any of the Ten Commandments or the Seven Deadly sins. I would be *incapable* of lying, stealing, coveting, egocentricity, arrogance, anger, jealousy, contempt, and all of the other attitudes or dispositions which could cause me to do harm to another human being.

Yet there is one little problem with this seemingly perfect scenario. If we do not have the choice to do something contrary to love, then we also do not have the choice to do something commensurate with love. The unfortunate part about choice is that we must have both options—to do or not to do; to love or not to love—choice is not choice if we can *only* do one of two possible options. Thus, if we do not have the possibility to cause suffering to others through unloving choices, we do not have the capacity to initiate an act of love—we are mere robots.

Now we can see that the Creator is caught in a fundamental dilemma—either He can create beings without the capacity to do harm (which would mean creating them with a program to perform or emulate prescribed loving behaviors, but without the capacity to initiate love)—or He can create beings with the capacity to initiate love (which would mean creating them with the choice to love or *not* to love—allowing them the possibility to do harm). He cannot do both in the same being.

One might think that such a dilemma reveals a limitation to God’s power, but in fact it does not. God has the power to create *both* kinds of beings, but He cannot create their opposed qualities in the same being at the same time -- He cannot create a contradiction – a being which can and cannot initiate love in the same respect at the same time.

Contradictions arise out of finitude or restrictions. For example, a spatial restriction – like a square -- cannot also have the restriction of a circle or a trapezoid in the same respect at the same place and time. Thus, once God creates finitude or restriction, He also creates the possibility of contradictory states, and in so doing He allows one restriction to exclude the possibility of another restriction in the same place and time. By creating finitude, God creates exclusions intrinsic to that finitude which he cannot overcome – they are built into the nature of *finitude* itself. Hence when God creates the restrictions of a square, He creates the impossibility of a square-circle of the same area at the same place and time – He creates a condition which He cannot overcome because it is “built” into His creation.

If I am 6’ tall, I cannot be 6’1’, 6’2”, etc. at the same time. If I weigh 200 pounds, I cannot weigh 201, 202, etc. pounds at the same time—and God cannot make this happen—not because He lacks power, but because He creates me with an intrinsic restriction which disallows

other incompatible restrictions at the same time. Incidentally, since God has no restrictions, He is compatible with everything. As we saw in the Thomistic metaphysical proof of God (posted on this website), there can only be one unrestricted reality—therefore there can only be one purely inclusive reality. All of us are subject to the exclusions caused by our restrictions.

Now let us return to the question of God’s dilemma—a perfectly loving programmed being (incapable of initiating love)—or an imperfectly loving being capable of choosing and initiating love (as well as choosing and initiating “unlove”). Since the first condition *excludes* the second condition (and vice versa), God can only choose one of them—because He is limited by the exclusive nature of the conditions He Himself freely created. Evidently, God was not interested in creating a perfectly loving robot, marionette, or stimulus-response machine, and so He chose to create beings capable of choosing and initiating love—beings that could love one another, receive and appreciate love from one another, love Him, and receive and appreciate love from Him. God wanted to create beings in His own image and likeness – beings who could be in a freely loving relationship with Him and others throughout eternity.

In order for God to create beings capable of initiating love, He had to give them the capacity for free choice, which requires giving them self-consciousness (to be aware of themselves over against others) and the power of empathy (to connect naturally with others). He also had to create beings that are intelligent—beings capable of analysis, symbolic representation, language, and narrative (as explained in Volume 2, Chapters Five and Seven). He also had to create them with the power of conscience to feel and understand the distinction between good and evil (see Volume 2, Chapter Three). Finally, to create beings capable of entering into relationship with Him, he had to create them with transcendental awareness—a tacit awareness of perfect truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home, and above all, the tacit awareness of Him—His personal intersubjective self-consciousness (see Volume 2, Chapter Two). This is why Karl Rahner insisted:

God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is. This is the first and the last of his real plans and hence of his real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of infinite Love. And so, God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates man. He creates him in such a way that he *can* receive this Love which is God himself, and that he can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift.³³

Beautiful and loving as God’s objective is, it presents an incredible risk, for He has given us immense power in our self-consciousness, intelligence, free will, and transcendental awareness to do tremendous evil. He has given us the power not only for egocentric, narcissistic, domineering, and destructive attitudes and actions, but also the power to “call ourselves god,” and even to make ourselves a false god before others. Hence, His creation of self-conscious, intelligent, and transcendental beings can go “both ways”—toward empathy, conscience, and relationship with Him—or toward egocentricity (away from empathy and love), evil (away from

³³ Karl Rahner 1982, *Foundations of Christian Faith : An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* Trans. by William V. Dych (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company), pp. 123-124.

the good), and radical separation from Him. He has to give us both of these options if he wants our love and goodness to originate from within us.

Thus, the precious gift of free will (entailing self-consciousness, intelligence, empathy, conscience, and transcendental awareness) can give rise to St. Francis of Assisi or Adolf Hitler, to Mother Theresa or Joseph Stalin. God must not only create us with the capacity to use our freedom justly and lovingly, He must also create us with the freedom to use it unjustly and unlovingly. He cannot selectively lobotomize people who are going to misuse their freedom—such as Hitler or Stalin—because doing so would violate their freedom. He really can't make exceptions to this rule, and eliminate the freedom of *only* those who will do *considerable* harm. Besides, if He did this none of us would know who would be next—or where the dividing line is between those who will be lobotomized or struck down by God versus those who won't. God has to maintain the freedom of everyone in order to be certain that everyone is free to choose love and goodness without external compulsion.

When God decided to create restricted yet transcendental human beings—distinct from Him, yet made in His own image—He took a risk—knowing that only some of us—with the help of His redeeming love and grace-- would ultimately produce more good than evil—more love than unlove. Though He intended to forgive even the most grievous of sinners (if they asked Him), He could not prevent the damage that these sins would produce to others, culture, and society. Though He intended to redeem the suffering brought about by human evil, He could not prevent it without destroying the freedom necessary for love. This is why Jesus tells the parable of the weeds growing up next to the wheat:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest (Mt 13:24-30).

Note that God does not create the *actuality* of suffering in the world, but only the *possibility* of suffering, by creating agents who have the real choice, the real power to act contrary to love. As noted above, God *must* create this possibility; otherwise, He could not create a free agent, and therefore, could not create a loving being – a beloved with the freedom to love others with self-initiated love. God's purpose in creating "little beloveds who are loving" would be frustrated.

In sum, if God is to create a being *incapable* of unlove, He would also have to create a being *incapable* of love. Thus, if He does not create beings capable of jealousy, egocentricity, or hatred, He cannot create beings that are capable of the opposite. To create a being incapable of jealousy is to create a being incapable of magnanimity; to create a being incapable of egocentricity is to create a being incapable of altruism; and to create a being incapable of hatred

is to create a being incapable of forgiveness and compassion. Since God wanted to create beings in His own image and likeness, He had to create them capable of unloving choices and behaviors – with self-consciousness, creative thought and imagination, and free will. Since He wanted to create beings in His own image and likeness, He had to create them with a power for evil – meaning that He had to create the *possibility* – but not the actuality – of evil. The possibility of unlove is the price of creating the possibility of self-initiated love – and God paid the price – not only in creating human freedom, but also in the redemption He would actualize through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of His Beloved Son.

II.

Why Does God Allow Nature to Cause Suffering?

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It is somewhat easier to understand why God would allow suffering to occur through human agents than through nature. After all, it would seem that if God creates the natural order, He could have created it perfectly – so perfectly that there would be no possibility of human suffering.³⁴ Why couldn't He have created each human being in a perfectly self-sufficient way so we would have no need? Need entails weakness, effort, inconvenience and pain – the possibility of suffering – but it seems that God could have eliminated the possibility of such suffering at the outset by creating completely self-sufficient beings in a world of perfectly abundant resources. So why did God create an imperfect natural order? Why did He create a natural order that would allow for scarcity, a natural order that would give rise to earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis, a natural order that would permit vulnerabilities within the human genome causing blindness, deafness, or muscular degeneration, a natural order that would permit debilitating diseases?

The brief answer lies in the fact that a perfect natural order would leave no room for need, weakness, and vulnerability; yet these kinds of suffering (coming from seeming defects of nature) frequently open the way to many positive human characteristics -- perhaps the most important characteristics -- such as (1) identity transformation, (2) natural virtues, (3) compassionate love (*Agapē*), (4) interdependence and human community, (5) the possibility of contributing to others and the common good, and (6) the possibility of contributing to the kingdom of God. We give a detailed explanation of each of these characteristics below in the Chapter Four. Recall that these characteristics represent the most noble of human qualities and endeavors – that strive for greater justice, love, civility, culture, and civilization; they also give glimpses of a Perfection which is unconditional and eternal by its very nature. Though need, weakness, and vulnerability cause suffering – and in many cases seem to undermine human potential, they very frequently detach us from what is base and superficial so that we might

³⁴ The question about enmity between us and nature coming through the sin of Adam and Eve is discussed in Volume 3 (Section II.D). As explained there, the story of Adam and Eve is only a *partial* answer to the question of why God created an imperfect world. It does not explain why God allows just people (like Job) to be affected by such a world—or why the enmity between us and nature was not immediately remediated by the perfect self-sacrificial act of His Son. To answer these questions we must probe more deeply into Christian revelation as well as the opportunities for love and redemption that come through suffering – the purpose of this volume and Volume 7.

freely see and move toward what is truly worthy of ourselves, what has truly lasting effects, and what leads us to our true destiny – eternal and unconditional love.

Let us turn again to Saint Paul’s insight in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10:

Therefore, I was given a thorn in my flesh, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from getting proud. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, it is then I am strong.

As noted earlier, Paul probably had a physical malady (possibly progressive blindness), which caused him to experience a loss of natural power and autonomy, yet he felt that his power had increased. The power about which he is speaking here is love – a love which moved him to make significant changes in his life and identity, and which drew him toward greater virtue and compassion – toward others, and above all, the loving God manifest in Jesus Christ. His most noble power was truly perfected by weakness – a decline in natural power. His experience provides a significant clue as to why God would create a natural order with intrinsic imperfections that could cause genuine suffering.

So, what is the problem with a perfect world? It seems quite attractive – and perhaps the solution to all our problems. As Paul implies, the perfect world might leave us content with pure autonomy and superficiality, which would deprive us of the help we might need to deepen our virtue, relationships, community, compassion, and noble striving for the common good and the kingdom of God. The “perfect world” might deprive us of the impetus toward *real* perfection, the perfection of love, the perfection which is destined to last forever.

Some readers might object that the above observations may well be true for Christianity—particularly its view of eternal life, the unconditionally loving triune God, God’s desire to bring us to perfect joy with Him and one another, and the immensity of our freedom. Yet does suffering caused by nature help people of other religions and cultural perspectives? Do imperfections in our own abilities and characteristics help *non*-Christians—does an imperfect world with earthquakes and disease help people who have no real acquaintance with Jesus? Was the imperfect world and human condition helpful for the pre-Christian world? Did God intend suffering to help everybody? I believe that this was His plan from all eternity—a plan that began with the creation of the first human being with self-consciousness, abstract intelligence, freewill, empathy, conscience, and transcendental awareness. We will discuss this plan in the next section (II.A) — three *universal* messages and choices intrinsic to an imperfect world—and then discuss (in Section II.B) God’s more nuanced plan according to the Christian view.

II.A

Three Universal Messages Intrinsic to an Imperfect World

There are many universal messages and choices presented by an imperfect world. I will focus on three that are pertinent to the formation of our character, purpose, and identity. As noted in Volumes 13-15, the formation of our identity is the main purpose of life—for it will determine the kind of person we will become and the kind of eternity we will pursue. We form our character, purpose, and identity with and through others—our families, friends, colleagues, communities, societies, and churches; yet at the end of the day the most important factor is our *free choice*. I would contend that God placed *every* person--belonging to every religion and culture--within an imperfect world to present three messages necessary for shaping our identity and eternity:

1. We are not God—or gods (Section II.A.1).
2. We must develop our natural abilities and virtues (Section II.A.2).
3. We are a small part of a larger interdependent community (Section II.A.3).

Irrespective of our religion or culture, the above three messages of an imperfect world will set the *parameters* for choosing our identity and eternity. An imperfect world—with its vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and needs, will also elicit choices on how we will relate to those who are relatively weaker or stronger. Whatever our religion or culture, the choices we make will begin to define who we are and the kind of eternity we would prefer.

Some readers may be thinking that it is presumptuous to assume that people of all times, cultures, and religions define their identities for eternity, because some religions do not subscribe to the Christian view of eternal unconditional love as the true fulfillment of our transcendental nature. Though there are religions that do not subscribe to this view, I would contend that if God is unconditionally loving (as Jesus has proclaimed), then He would want to bestow His eternal unconditional love to all people who pursue Him and act according to their conscience—whether they believe in an unconditionally loving God or not. As noted earlier, the Catholic Church, summarizing Jesus' revelation of the universal salvific intention of His unconditionally loving Father, gave this doctrinal pronouncement:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.³⁵

If this is God's plan, then He would have to create all people in a world that provides the messages and fundamental options needed to shape our identity and eternity toward justice or injustice, service or exploitation, compassion or heartlessness, respect or disdain, collaboration or domination, and worship or self-idolatry. We will now briefly discuss each of these messages and choices of an imperfect world.

³⁵ Flannery 1975, p. 376; *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II (section 16).

II.A.1

We are Not God (or gods)

Our imperfect human condition and world makes one thing perfectly clear in virtually every religion—we are not gods. Virtually every religion makes a distinction between us—who are mortal, and comparatively weak—and God (or the gods) who are eternal and comparatively stronger. Though the ancient Greeks, for example, believed that the gods could mate with human beings (producing a demigod like Hercules); such demigods were still not considered “gods.” Their humanity has pulled them from a purely divine status to a partial one—and their human mortality and weakness continues to affect them. Thus, our imperfect world gives us an essential clue to who we are—something less than divine.

Most religions hold that we have a spark of the divine within us—that God or the gods has shared *something*—but not all—of His (their) nature with us—and many ancient and contemporary religions believe that we have a transphysical nature that will survive bodily death—*eternally*. In so doing, these religions are careful to teach that we are not *fully* divine.

The comprehensive historian and philosopher of religion, Mircea Eliade, held that in virtually every religion, the imperfect world—as imperfect—is seen as profane—distinct from the sacred. The Divine (the Sacred) breaks into the world to make it sacred.³⁶ Recall from Volume 2 (Chapter Three), that prior to the 19th century, virtually every person (and culture) was religious, and even today 84% are religious.³⁷ Eliade believes that this is attributable to the universal interior experience of the numinous (Rudolf Otto³⁸) and a fundamental religious intuition about the Sacred breaking into the profane, imperfect, physical world.³⁹ The vast majority of people throughout ancient and modern culture combine their experience of the numinous and the sacred with their experience of the imperfect physical world—and conclude that we are immersed in a profane environment which needs to be sacralized—made holy—by the Divine. They also conclude that the Divine does break through into the profane world, makes it sacred, and creates a sacred time and place to which we can draw close to share in its holiness.⁴⁰ In Eliade’s words:

...Religious man assumes a particular and characteristic mode of existence in the world and, despite the great number of historico-religious forms, this characteristic mode is always recognizable. Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. He further believes that life has a sacred

³⁶ Mircea Eliade 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), pp 11, 45, 58, and 64-67.

³⁷ See Pew Research Center 2012. Pew Global Religious Landscape Study (December 2012). <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec>

³⁸ See Rudolf Otto 1958. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (New York: Oxford University Press).

³⁹ See Mircea Eliade 1987, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich). pp 64-67, and 202 – 206.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

origin and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious – that is, participates in reality. The gods created man and the world, the culture heroes completed Creation, and the history of all these divine and semidivine works is preserved in the myths. By reactualizing sacred history, by imitating the divine behavior, man puts and keeps himself close to the gods – that is, in the real and significant.⁴¹

Thus, the imperfect world presents us with a key parameter about who we are and how we relate to the Divine—we are not the Divine, but we need to draw close to the Divine to share in its holiness and to fulfill our transcendent nature. When combined with the numinous experience and religious intuition, the imperfect world (and the imperfect human condition) instills in us a fundamental *humility*—what Otto calls “*creature consciousness*” before the sacred and mysterious wholly Other.⁴² Though we recognize the spark of divinity within us, we also recognize our creatureliness, humility, and our desire and need for the Divine. Our religious practice fascinates and fulfills us in ways that no profane reality can, and it inspires us to seek the wisdom and goodness of the Divine—which is beyond the profane, imperfect, physical world.⁴³ If for this reason alone, God created us in an imperfect world (and in an imperfect human condition), it would have been completely justifiable—for we learn at once that we are not fully divine (God or gods), that we need the Divine, and that the Divine holds out wisdom and goodness that the profane world cannot give.

Eliade also indicated that some modern people mistakenly believe that scientific and social scientific method can give a *complete* explanation of human nature, and in so doing have unjustifiably excluded from reality everything that these two methods cannot explain. Beyond the intellectual problem of committing a glaring unjustifiable error of omission, this viewpoint has alienated its subscribers from their transcendental and religious nature,⁴⁴ and in so doing, has proscribed the highest fulfillment of their nature from themselves—giving themselves, as it were, an unnecessary transcendental lobotomy. The result of this decline in religion is becoming ever more apparent—increased suicide rates, substance abuse, feelings of meaningless and despondency, impulse, aggressivity and familial tension.⁴⁵

There is another consequence of the eclipsing of our transcendental and religious nature. To the extent that we do not recognize our religious nature, we will also be unable to understand suffering, and the imperfect physical world causing suffering. Religious people do not see the imperfect physical world as “all there is,” but rather as a profane place into which the sacred has entered to call us toward itself—and in most cases to a reality beyond this life and the physical world. Thus, for religious people, the imperfect physical world is not a stumbling block producing *unintelligible* suffering, but rather a starting point, stepping stone, and testing ground, for life and reality with the Divine—beyond the profane world.

⁴¹ Eliade 1987, p. 202.

⁴² Rudolph Otto 1958 *The Idea of the Holy* pp 6-26.

⁴³ See Eliade 1987 *The Sacred and the Profane* pp 64-67, and Rudolph Otto 1958 *The Idea of the Holy* pp 6-16.

⁴⁴ Mircea Eliade *The Sacred and the Profane* p. 202-206.

⁴⁵ See for example Kanita Dervic, M. Oquendo, M. Grunebaum, S. Ellis, A. Burke, JJ. Mann, 2004, “Religious Affiliation and Suicide Attempt,” in *American Journal of Psychiatry* (Vol. 161, No. 12). pp 2303-2308. <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/article.aspx?articleid=177228>.

In contrast, modern *non-religious* people do not view the imperfect physical world within the context of the Divine horizon—yet many persist in asking the question, “Why would an all-loving God create an imperfect world producing suffering?” They will likely find this question vexing because they do not subscribe to a transcendent reality. Therefore, the term “God” in their question is merely hypothetical. It is not infused with the prospect of eternal life, perfect truth, love, goodness, and beauty, and an interpersonal relationship with a loving God. Since “God” is merely hypothetical, they are not aware of His intention to bestow on us an eternal life of unconditional goodness or love—and consequently are unaware of the conditions necessary to freely choose this eternal life of love. As a result, they do not see the value of detaching themselves from egocentricity, domination, and self-idolatry --the profane-- and replacing them with the sacred—reverence, humility, justice, and love.⁴⁶ As such, they see a radical dichotomy between suffering and love, concluding that an unconditionally loving God would not allow suffering—when in fact the opposite is true. Ironically, the only way we can see the opportunities suffering provides to the pursuit of love is to *embark* on a journey toward the Sacred – God – and to find our ultimate fulfillment through Him.

In my case, faith was an essential step for embarking on the journey toward love, because I would not have discovered the truth, goodness, joy, and fulfillment of love (understood as *agapē*) without the teaching, example, and grace of Jesus. In view of this, I would ask anyone who has not yet embarked on the journey toward love (*agapē*) not to ask the question of why an all-loving God would allow suffering before trying to enter into religious belief. By doing the latter before the former, we will better understand God’s intention to bring us to eternal love, which will in turn, clarify the meaning of “love” (*agapē*) and the relationship between suffering, love, and eternal life with the Divine. This will help to answer coherently the question of why an unconditionally loving God would allow suffering.

We may now return to the significance of an imperfect world (and the suffering it produces) in the shaping of our eternal identity and destiny. For both Christian and non-Christian religious believers, the imperfect human condition and world alerts people to the falsity of self-idolatry while encouraging both humility and piety (respect for the sacred mysterious wholly Other). As we shall see below (Section II.A.3), this humility and piety lie not only at the

⁴⁶ According to Friedrich Heiler, the vast majority of world religions have seven belief/values in common: (1) The transcendent, the holy, the divine Other is real, (2) The transcendent reality is immanent in human awareness, (3) This transcendent reality is the highest truth, highest good, and highest beauty, (4) This transcendent reality is loving and compassionate – and seeks to reveal its love to human beings, (5) The way to God requires prayer, ethical self-discipline, purgation of self-centeredness, asceticism, and redressing of offenses, (6) The way to God also includes service and responsibility to others and, (7) The highest way to eternal bliss in the transcendent reality is through love.

See Friedrich Heiler 1959. “The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions” in *The History of Religions*. Ed. by Mircea Eliade and J. Kitagawa (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press). pp 142-153.

foundation of justice, but also social authority, the law, and civil society—for they encourage adherence to the law and integration within society. Without an imperfect human condition and world, individual egos would likely go unchecked—with each person vying for the highest level of self-deification—an anarchy of Nietzschean superegos—the opposite of a just and ordered community to which we are called by the sacred and mysterious Divine Reality.

The imperfect world is even more significant in the Christian viewpoint, because it reveals who we truly are (called to eternal unconditional love by God) which gives us the opportunity to choose our identity for eternity. Therefore, the imperfections of this world are opportunities to call us out of superficiality, egocentricity, and domination--and provide a conduit to humility, empathy, compassion, contribution, and faith (see below Chapter Four). Hence, suffering—and the imperfect world producing it—have immense value, for they help to release us from the bondage of superficiality, egocentricity, injustice, domination, and self-idolatry, and help to usher us into an identity and eternity of unconditional love.

Whatever our religion—Christian or non-Christian—the imperfect world—and the suffering coming from it—is an essential help to moving us to our true, good, and loving transcendental nature.

II.A.2

The Call to Develop our Natural Abilities and Virtues

The imperfect human condition and world provides a second essential message to people of all cultures and religions—it tells us that life is not going to be easy, and that we—and the human spirit—will have to rise to the occasion and deal with the challenges confronting us with strength, hard work, resilience, courage, and prudence (the natural virtues). Without an imperfect human condition and world, there would be no challenges and hardships to be overcome—and therefore no need for the human spirit to move itself from passivity to self-possession, self-expression, self-communication, engagement in the world, transformation of the world, and engagement with others for the common good. Without the hardships and challenges of the world around us, we would likely have an indolent spirit content to absorb and enjoy the pleasures of the moment. We would be left in a child-like state without *self-efficacy*—actualizing a mere fraction of our potential—without self-possession, self-expression, self-communication, engagement in the world, etc. This presents us with yet another irony—we need hardship, suffering, and challenge to actualize the full potential of our human spirit. We need a partially “unfriendly” world to be *over against us* so that we will make recourse to *interior* resources to meet these hardships and challenges. Our imperfect condition and world incite us to find *from within ourselves* the spirit and energy to meet, fight, and overcome challenges—to *exert* ourselves and even to put ourselves at risk so that we will not be overcome by them.

Of course, we cannot live in a *purely* unfriendly or hostile world, for we would find no joy in life and would ultimately be overcome by hardship. The ideal kind of world for the human spirit to discover and actualize itself is a *partially* unfriendly world—a world that is essentially benevolent and beautiful, but not perfectly so—so that the human spirit can come alive, find its inner resilience in the midst of challenges, and actualize itself in overcoming them. Additionally, the partially unfriendly world need only be *temporary*, because once the human

spirit has discovered and actualized its resilience and efficacy, it can continue in this vein without having to interminably re-discover and re-actualize it. Once the human spirit has been lifted out of dormancy into the light of self-possession, self-expression, etc., it will not lose these qualities—even throughout eternity.

Why is it that some people seem to have more than their fair share of hardships and challenges—and some less? The answer seems to lie in *natural* causes and forces—such as climate conditions, geological conditions, environmental conditions, and genetic conditions—and to some extent *human* causes, such as family conditions, migration patterns, human effects on climate, and human failure to respond to crises (disease, famine, natural disasters, etc.). In God’s eternal plan, such inequities in the imperfect world are only temporary conditions of darkness within an infinitely extending perfect light. As will be discussed below (Section II.B.4), those who receive proportionately more challenge and suffering during this life are not necessarily worse off in the progression toward eternal joy than those who have received less. Indeed, most of the time, those who have received proportionately more challenges and suffering have greater opportunities to detach themselves from superficial and destructive purpose and identity, and grow in humility, empathy, and compassion, leading toward eternal unconditional love and joy.

In the Christian view, there is an additional purpose for the imperfect world—particularly the inequities of imperfection within it—namely the call to loving service. When we see that one person has more than their fair share of burdens, hardships, and challenges, it is incumbent upon us to help alleviate them to the extent that we can—by giving of our time, advice, resources, love, and prayers—or to find other avenues of relief where possible. At the very least, if we cannot substantially alleviate these burdens, we can, like Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, provide love and hope to those who are suffering and even dying. Our mode of service should be commensurate with our gifts—teachers might tutor or educate, carpenters might provide shelter, business people might provide organization and resources, people of faith might share it, and so forth. The more we individually and collectively respond in love to “the cry of the poor,” the more the inequities of the imperfect world can be redressed. For Christians, all such inequities of burdens and challenges will be *ultimately* and *completely* redressed in the Kingdom of God in accordance with Jesus’ proclamation, “Blessed are the sorrowing (mourning), for they shall be consoled” (Mt 5:4).

The imperfect world not only calls us to discover and actualize the above components of our human spirit (self-possession, self-expression, etc.), it also calls forth four essential *natural* virtues in all religions and cultures—diligent work, fortitude, courage, and prudence. It does not take much imagination to see that the virtue of diligence (diligent work) will help to overcome the hardships and challenges of an imperfect world—and that it will foster and enhance the above qualities of the human spirit—self-possession, self-expression, etc. slothfulness and indolence—at least in more basic societies—are almost immediately penalized by the very hardships and challenges diligence would have overcome. Moreover, slothfulness leaves much of the human spirit undiscovered and unactualized—leading to only *partial* self-possession, self-expression, self-communication, engagement in the world, etc. In more advanced societies, additional wealth may often prevent the immediate penalization of slothfulness with hardship,

but it cannot alleviate the merely partial discovery and actualization of the human spirit which lies wasted and fallow.

The imperfect human condition and world also calls forth the virtue of fortitude—“stick-to-it-ness”—the inner resolve to keep going and pushing in the midst of obstacles and resistance—the refusal to give up or abandon a worthy or noble pursuit—to resolve to be undaunted by opposing circumstances, forces, and people. We see here again how this virtue enhances and develops the human spirit – giving us the inner resources to overcome persistent, long-term hardships and challenges. Without persistent obstacles and challenges—this virtue would likely not come to the fore (because it would be unnecessary)—and so without the imperfect world, our human spirit would only be *partially* discovered and actualized.

The same holds true for courage -- the ability to face fear in a detached and rational fashion. As with the other virtues, courage would be unnecessary without fear and fear would not occur without the possibility of threats to our life, health, well-being, and the life, health, and well-being of our family and friends. Though such threats can come from other human beings, they frequently come from an imperfect world. We have to learn how to resist panic to summon rationality and to act decisively in our own defense—and when we do, we discover and actualize our human spirit in deeper and greater ways. When we display courage, and overcome very dangerous and desperate situations, we often look back on it as one of the most significant and self-defining moments in our lives. We see in these situations something about ourselves that shows our most honorable character that would never have emerged without human enemies and an imperfect world. Strange as it may sound, some of our most profound and noble moments are the most traumatic ones.

The imperfect world also calls forth prudence—practical know-how arising out of training, education, and ingenuity. We have all heard the expression that necessity is the mother of invention, and such necessity frequently arises out of the challenges of an imperfect world. This is true not only for individuals—who apply their learning and ingenuity to overcome personal hardships and challenges, but also to groups, communities, and societies who apply collective learning and ingenuity to overcome the problems of disease, food shortages, natural disasters, and every other form of natural challenge. When we look at the history of technology and the incredible progress we have made in agriculture, medicine, electrical, mechanical, civil, and environmental engineering, running water, electrical transmission, communication, prediction and response to natural disasters, and literally hundreds of other areas of technological progress, we frequently see the imperfect human condition and world as their major impetus. Once again, we see that some of the achievements of the collective human spirit come from the hardships, challenges, and even cruelties of an imperfect world.

It must be asked whether it is fair for some people to suffer in order for others to ingeniously, courageously, and undauntingly overcome the causes of that suffering. The answer would be “no” if there was no life beyond this world. However, if an unconditionally loving God truly exists and is calling us into eternal life with Him, then these inequitable sufferings will not ultimately be unfair—for they will be transformed into unconditional life, love, and joy, if we

“seek God with a sincere heart...and try in [our] actions to do his will as [we] know it through the dictates of [our] conscience.”⁴⁷ Moreover, inequities in challenge and suffering can lead more quickly and profoundly to eternal life, love, and joy with God (see below Section II.B.4). Ultimately, such inequitable suffering will simply melt away—as proclaimed in the book of Revelation:

Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev 21:3-4).

There is one major problem with discovering and actualizing the human spirit—and appropriating the natural virtues that enhance it (diligent work, fortitude, courage, and prudence). If we make the enhancement of the *human* spirit -- and the *natural* virtues – the sole meaning of our lives and the sole measure of our success—they can undermine and destroy us, the people around us, and even the fabric of society. History is replete with examples of exceedingly hard working, committed, courageous, and ingenious tyrants—people who have used their discovery and actualization of the human spirit to willfully exploit and dominate others—particularly the less gifted and vulnerable. Unfortunately, the above four natural virtues are not self-regulating—they only help to release interior *strength*, but they do not show us how best to use that strength exteriorly—in our relationships with others and the Divine. Thus, if they are not complemented by other virtues, such as piety, justice, and love (i.e., humility, empathy, and compassion), they can actually encourage extreme egocentricity and even ruthlessness. Little wonder, then, that some of history’s most callous persecutions were carried out by individuals who attained the highest levels of the above four virtues—causing them to believe in their intrinsic superiority and “divine status.”⁴⁸

The radically incomplete nature of the above four virtues (diligent work, fortitude, courage, and ingenuity) reveal the need to balance them with the other two messages of the imperfect world— “we are not God or gods” (see above Section II.A.1) and “we are parts of an interdependent community” (see below Section II.A.3). The former message *tempers* the actualized human spirit with the reality that it is immersed within a cosmos which it does not control—a cosmos that can effortlessly crush it. Moreover, the awareness of this more powerful cosmos is accompanied by the numinous experience and religious intuition that suggest there is a creative force of the cosmos which is even more powerful and mysterious—a force which is intelligent and in some ways benevolent—as the order and beauty of nature suggest. For this reason, the Psalmist declares universally— “[only] the fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God’” (Ps 14:1).

⁴⁷ See Flannery 1975, p. 376; *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II (section 16).

⁴⁸ For example, Adolf Hitler was very diligent, hard-working, courageous, persistent and ingenious, but he lacked any real sense of justice, humility, and love. The natural virtues alone (without justice, humility and love) gave him the ability to initiate and maintain the world’s worst persecutions – and convinced him of his own divine status. See William L. Shirer and Ron Rosenbaum 2011 *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster) pp xxii-xxiv.

This tacit awareness of a powerful, intelligent, creative force—which pervades every culture and the vast majority of individuals—confronts the actualized human spirit and declares the need for humility, respect, and reverence—echoing the refrain that “you are not me—the master of the cosmos, but a mere part of the cosmos created by me.”

One can of course revolt against this interior awareness and declare in an overriding will to power, as Nietzsche did, that “you—God—are dead—and I am supreme.” But this generally results in tragedy—Nietzsche became insane according to his own self-prophecy:

[A]ll superior men who were irresistibly drawn to throw off the yoke of any kind of morality and to frame new laws had, if they were not actually mad, no alternative but to make themselves or pretend to be mad.⁴⁹

Madness frequently besets self-proclaimed “superior men” in their dreams, delusions, and pretensions, because they have falsely claimed themselves to be masters of a reality they cannot control—a truth that comes back to haunt them with the prospect of their delusions being fully exposed.

The actualization of the human spirit must also be tempered by the third message of an imperfect world—that we are parts of an interdependent community. As will be discussed below, this message arises out of the fact that we need one another. No matter how blessed we might be in intelligence, strength, self-actualization, skills, dexterity, beauty, etc., we are not complete—we remain *imperfect*. The imperfection of our condition requires us to seek community with others—not simply to obtain sustenance, shelter, and protection, but also to obtain knowledge, wisdom, companionship, and friendship. From the moment we are born, our imperfect human condition and imperfect world necessitate dependence on others who take care of the needs which are beyond us. We are inescapably part of an interdependent network which never fully disappears—no matter how self-sufficient and independent we try to become.

When we are true to ourselves, and recognize that we are not completely autonomous and independent, we acknowledge that we are beholding to this greater social reality—we *owe* something to it. This gives rise to a sense of being responsible to the larger community. We cannot undermine it and must in some way contribute to it and help it to flourish. As will be seen below, this helps to reinforce our belief in the law and social order. This belief, in turn, tempers the actualized human spirit by suggesting that its activities must stay within the confines of the law and the good of the community. Betrayal and destruction of the law and the community for selfish benefit and self-aggrandizement creates a sense of alienation—not only from the community but from the truth of ourselves.

⁴⁹ Frederick Nietzsche 1997, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, in *Cambridge Text in the History of Philosophy* ed. by Maudemarie Clark, Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p 14.

Of course, we can always revolt against these interior beliefs, feelings, and truths, and assert our superiority over the law and the community's good. We may even get away with this for a while, but after we have undermined the social network that gave and gives us life, it too will re-assert its superiority over *us* by either ostracizing or punishing us. If we get too "big for our britches," we will, as the Chinese proverb says, put ourselves in the position of a nail standing above the rest which will invite the carpenter to pound it down first. This attitude of complete disregard for the law and the community is quite distinct from the attitude of individuals who fight against *unjust* laws and government. These individuals are not putting themselves above the law and community, but only attempting to correct *unjust* laws for the sake of the community and the law itself.

In sum, the three messages of an imperfect world balance one another within our psyche—the discovery and actualization of the human spirit, culminating in self-possession, self-expression, self-communication, engagement in the world, and transformation of the world are tempered by our awareness of a divine mystery that we cannot control and an interdependent community to which we are obliged. If we assert ourselves over these greater realities and forget the truths of the imperfect world about our partiality and incompleteness, those greater realities will likely reassert themselves *over us*, producing our undoing.

II.A.3

We are a Small Part of an Interdependent Community

As noted above, the imperfect world conveys a third imperative message—that we are not an island, but part of a social reality that precedes us, goes beyond us, and succeeds us. The imperfection and incompleteness of our human condition dictate our dependence on and need for the larger community. As John Donne so eloquently explained:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ John Donne, "Meditation VII", in *The Best of John Donne* (Seattle, Wash.: Amazon Publishing- Create Space, 2012), p. 45.

This dependence and need betoken a reciprocal obligation to protect and assist the community that protects and assists us. Most individuals within ancient cultures had a strong sense of this reciprocity which manifests itself in what anthropologist Mary Douglas calls, “high group cultures.”⁵¹ In such cultures, individuals tend to subordinate their identity to that of the group, deriving their purpose and place in society from it. This produces a strong sense of loyalty to both the group and authority figures in it.

This allegiance and obligation to the community (the “group”) is further enhanced by the first message of an imperfect world—namely that we are not God or gods, and that we should be humble, respectful, and reverent toward the Sacred and Divine. Why? Inasmuch as the Divine reality controls the cosmos, and the community is part of that cosmos, most societal groups concluded that the community springs forth from the Divine reality—and as noted above, the Divine reality comes to it to make it sacred and to draw it to Itself. The sacred reality is thus thought to be not only the wellspring of the community, but also the source of the epics, customs, and laws that animate it.

Recall from above that the vast majority of religions teach that the sacred reality has broken into the profane world, and has partially sacralized it. The closer people draw to the place of the sacred reality’s entrance (“the sacred place”), the more they participate in the sacralization brought by It.⁵² Furthermore, the sacred time can be reinstated by recounting the sacred myths of the Divine realities’ entrance into the world.⁵³ Inasmuch as a community or village is proximate to the sacred place and recounts the myths of the sacred time, it too is made sacred—and its leaders and religious figures participate in its sacredness.⁵⁴ In this way, the customs, rules and rituals of the community are endowed with sacredness, and deserve the respect—and even reverence—of community members. This reinforces the natural sense of allegiance, obligation, and subordination of individuals to the community felt within “high group” communities or societies.

Customs and rules are of two kinds—those which are specifically religious (such as making sacrifices or ritual washings—ablutions⁵⁵) and those which are a blend of religious and legal prescriptions/proscriptions (such as defending the community, social place within the community, obedience to chiefs and other leaders within the community, etc.). This means that there are two kinds of Divine mandate that individuals are expected to choose (obligate themselves to): ritualistic prescriptions/proscriptions (the obligations of piety) and legal

⁵¹ See Mary Douglas 2003, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge), pp 57-71.

⁵² Mircea Eliade 1987 *The Sacred and the Profane* p. 88.

⁵³ Ibid. p 95.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp 88-97.

⁵⁵ Recall McKenzie’s observations about these religious rituals such as sacrifice—namely that they occur in virtually every culture and community without evidence of mutual borrowing. They seem to be *intrinsic* to all individuals and the various communities they constitute. It is also remarkable how similar the view of sacrifice and ritual ablution are among vastly different and separated cultures. For example, McKenzie asserts that the same five-fold meaning of sacrifice pervades virtually all cultures: “(1) The gift of man to the deity; (2) the homage of the subject to the lord; (3) the expiation of offenses; (4) communion with the deity in the sacrificial banquet; (5) life released from the victim, transmitted to the deity, and conferred upon the worshipers” (McKenzie 1965, p. 754). This strongly supports Rudolf Otto’s universal numinous experience (within individuals) and Mircea Eliade’s religious intuition (giving rise to religious community and ritual expression).

prescriptions/proscriptions (the obligations to the sacred community and its leaders). Every ancient legal code (e.g., the Levitical code of the Bible or the code of Hamarabi) springs from both kinds of proscriptions/prescriptions.

Though there is tremendous pressure for individuals to obey these prescriptions and proscriptions, they can also be evaded without being detected. Some community members may avoid doing appropriate sacrifice or ritual ablution, some may deceitfully acquire others' property or animals, still others may pursue another's spouse, etc. As will be seen below (Section II.B), these pietistic-legal obligations require a decision on the part of every community member— "Will they adhere to the rules of piety or not—and will they be law abiding or not?" The decisions that they habitually make will eventually form their identity—the way they seek God in their hearts and try to follow Him through the dictates of their conscience.⁵⁶

II.A.4

Conclusion: The Need for an Imperfect Human Condition and World

What do the above observations have to say about God creating an imperfect human condition and world that can cause suffering? As we have noted above, the imperfect world is an essential part of the formation of both pietistic and legal obligations—and without an imperfect world, it is quite doubtful that either set of obligations would have arisen. Pietistic obligations come not only from the numinous experience and sacred intuition within all individuals, but also from the acute awareness that we are not God or gods, which our *imperfections*—and the *imperfections* of the world—plainly reveal. Our and the worlds' imperfections are so manifest that the sacred reality must break into it to sacralize it. Without an imperfect human condition and world, we would probably view ourselves as Divine without need for sacrifice and ritual to help us commune with the Divine reality. In combination with the numinous experience and sacred intuition, the imperfect world reveals the need for various religious and legal obligations.

Furthermore, our imperfect human condition and world reveal that we are not self-sufficient, but rather must be part of a larger group that can provide protection, familial support, and efficient division of labor. In order to deal with our own weaknesses and the larger kinds of calamity that may confront us, we must integrate ourselves into community or societal units for mutual protection and benefit. This places another obligation on us—whether to adhere to the sacred customs, rules, and laws of the community or not.

What's the point? Our reactions and choices to honor or not to honor religious and social obligations will shape who we are—the kind of person we will be—and whether or not we will seek God with a sincere heart and try to follow Him through the dictates of our conscience. The decisions we make will determine the kind of eternity we desire—one that honors God and the larger community or one that dishonors them. These obligations, identity choices, and "eternity choices" are present even in the most ancient of cultures and religions—existing thousands of years before Christ. If the Divine plan of the unconditionally loving God is to bring us to an eternal life with Him *through our free choices*, then He will have to create a world in which these choices can be made—and in order to do this, He must create us with an imperfect human

⁵⁶ See *Lumen Gentium*, Sec. 25.

nature in an imperfect world. It is not enough to reveal His presence to us (through the numinous experience), He must also provide an impetus to *choose* piety, honor, respect, and reciprocal obligation – or their contraries. If the all-loving God had not subjected us to imperfections in ourselves and in the world, He would have deprived us of most of the profound opportunities to choose and appropriate the character that would define us throughout eternity.

The above analysis reveals why God would create an imperfect world for *all* people of *all* times and cultures – to help us *choose* our identity and eternity with Him. We now turn to the Revelation of Jesus which gives us a much richer explanation of the opportunities and benefits of our imperfect human condition and world—and the suffering coming from it.

II.B

The Opportunities and Benefits of an Imperfect World According to Jesus

In *God So Loved the World*, I explained the likelihood that God is unconditionally loving (Chapter 2), and Jesus' confirmation of it—in His preaching, healing ministry, love of the poor and sinners, Eucharist and self-sacrificial passion, resurrection, and gift of the Holy Spirit (Chapters 3-7). Jesus provides an incredibly deep and substantial revelation of what self-sacrificial love is—and then confirms by word and action that He and the Father are the perfect manifestation of that love. This revelation of the nature of love and its perfect manifestation in God shines a clear light not only on God's *willingness* to give us eternal life, but also the *kind* of eternal life to which He is calling us (perfect joy through perfect *agapē* with Him and the blessed). This revelation in turn presents us with a much deeper and broader array of suffering's opportunities and benefits. We discussed these opportunities and benefits in the Chapter Four below, but it might be helpful here to review them in light of our imperfect human condition and world—for they will show in a much more extensive way why an all-loving God would create us in a condition that would inevitably give rise to suffering.

There is one major underlying similarity between the pre-Christian and Christian rationale for an imperfect world—the vulnerability and weakness that opens us to our need for God and others—presenting us with four fundamental options:

- Will we respect God or only ourselves?
- Will we exploit others' needs or assist them in their needs?
- Will we exploit the community or contribute to the community?
- Will we be law abiding or will we attempt to shirk the law?

Our choices in these matters will indicate the kind of identity we are forming and the eternity we are pursuing. Yet there is so much more to the way suffering can open opportunities and benefits to us if we affirm the teaching of Jesus and recognize the eternal joy and love to which we are being called—particularly what we have called the fourth level of love (see *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Chapter 6). So, what are these additional opportunities and benefits of suffering arising out of Jesus' Revelation? In *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Chapter 7, I elucidated several of them, but I will summarize them here in five points:

1. An imperfect world can shock us out of superficial purpose in life (Section II.B.2).
2. An imperfect world can deepen our faith and transcendent purpose (Section II.B.3).

3. An imperfect world provides the conditions to make a positive difference to others (Section II.B.4).
4. An imperfect world provides the impetus for deeper love -- empathy, humility, and compassion (Section II.B.5).
5. An imperfect world provides the condition for offering our sufferings to God in imitation of Jesus (Section II.B.6).

Before elucidating these additional opportunities and benefits from the teaching of Jesus we will review three aspects of the Christian view of an imperfect world and suffering (Section II.B.1).

II.B.1

Three Aspects of the Christian View of an Imperfect World

In *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Chapter 3, I gave an extensive discussion of Jesus' view of God's involvement in our suffering – and how the Christian Church interpreted it to accommodate the idea of “secondary causation” (see Chapter One, Section III.C). We might summarize this teaching under three points:

1. The physical world is essentially good -- though there are imperfections in it that can give rise to suffering.
2. God does not directly cause suffering to punish the unjust, but allows suffering to occur in the lives of both the just and the unjust.
3. God does not directly cause every instance of suffering in the physical world, but creates a network of secondary causes that can do so without His direct causal act.

With respect to the first point, Jesus accepts the teaching of Genesis that God created the world as essentially *good* (Genesis 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Nevertheless, Jesus implies (and Saint Paul states) that God allows nature to be partially inhospitable to human beings in order to help us freely move from an inclination toward self-centeredness toward love and faith (see 2Cor 12:7-10). Though this partial inhospitable condition may sometimes be acute (e.g. earthquakes, floods, diseases, etc.), it is not the general state of nature – which is hospitable to life – particularly human life. When human beings encounter suffering in the forces of nature, they become inclined to look for higher purpose in life and to seek the help and comfort of God. Both inclinations help to open us to Level 4 (transcendent) happiness and purpose in life – and in the Christian vision, to eternal salvation with the unconditionally loving God (see below II.B.2 – II.B.4).

With respect to the second point, Jesus supersedes the Old Testament notion that suffering is the punishment of God for sinfulness (Ex. 34: 6-7; Deut. 5:8-10; Lev 26:39), and replaces it with the view that “[H]e makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5:45). In this passage, Jesus explains this new doctrine as a dimension of God's love of enemies, while other New Testament passages indicate additional reasons for it – suffering helps us to grow in faith (see II.B.2-3), to grow in love (see II.B.4-5), and to offer ourselves for the salvation of souls in imitation of Jesus (see II.B.6). Thus, for Jesus, suffering has a *positive* value in combination with faith to lead us to salvation and enable us to help others toward their salvation. When we bring faith to bear on our suffering, we unleash a powerful momentum for growth in trust, hope, and love (*agapē*), which opens upon our salvation

– and helps us to encourage others toward their salvation. Recall that God’s highest purpose for creating us *in this world* is to enable us to *freely choose* a self-identity and eternity of unconditional love with Him. Every other objective – including the alleviation of our and other’s suffering -- is secondary to this. Hence, when we are suffering, we will want to interpret it and utilize it *through our Christian faith* – which will in turn strengthen our trust, hope, and love toward our and other’s salvation.

We now proceed to the third point – the Christian Church’s teaching on “independent secondary causation.” At first glance, Jesus’ teaching that God *causes* His sun to shine and His rain to fall on both the just and unjust may seem to contradict physical laws and scientific explanation, because it suggests that God is *directly* causing suffering in the world. As noted in Volume 3 (Section III.E), St. Thomas Aquinas introduced the formal notion of “secondary causality” to explain and defend natural causation (as previously elucidated by Aristotle), human freedom, and chance occurrences.⁵⁷ According to this view, the physical world is endowed with its own intrinsic potentiality and is empowered to evolve without direct causal intervention by God through created natural laws. This insight enabled later thinkers to develop the idea of scientific explanation and natural physical laws. Contemporary views of natural physical laws (which include the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics) hold that natural laws are not completely deterministic, allowing for random occurrences and human freewill.

If we accept that God created the world to pursue natural ends without His direct causal intervention,⁵⁸ then God does *not directly* cause the suffering brought by natural physical events – such as earthquakes, floods, diseases, or genetic disorders. Rather, He *allows* natural physical causes to bring about such suffering without His direct causal action. God could suspend a particular physical cause (a miracle), but will only do this rarely. If miracles were common occurrences, we would never be able to predict our future with any accuracy—making freely chosen actions virtually impossible (see *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Chapter 3, Section III.E) – and so God allows the order of physical causation to be mostly fixed – to enable us to reasonably predict the future and freely accommodate our behavior to it.

In light of this, it would be inaccurate to blame God for causing an earthquake which arises out of natural physical causes and laws. It would also be inaccurate to fault Him for not performing a miracle to prevent the earthquake (because He cannot suspend natural laws continuously without removing the possibility of reasonable prediction and free choice). So, the real question is, “Why did God create the physical universe with laws and causal structures that would allow earthquakes, diseases, genetic defects, etc?” This is precisely the question we are attempting to answer in this volume. Section II.A gave a response from a *universal* religious perspective, and this section will respond from a Christian viewpoint. In both cases, the intention of God is the same – to use the imperfections of the physical world (and the sufferings coming from it) to help us freely seek Him with a sincere heart (by following the dictates of our conscience), so that He can bring us into the fullness of joy and love with Him forever. The

⁵⁷ See *Summa Theologica* Part I, Q. 22, Art. 2-4.

⁵⁸ “Quasi-independence” means that secondary causes, such as natural physical laws, can *operate* independently of the primary cause (God), but the primary cause must maintain all secondary causes in existence. Thus, secondary causes are not completely independent of the Creator (the primary cause).

Christian view advances the universal one by showing how we can use our faith in times of suffering to deepen our relationship with God, our appropriation of love (especially empathy, humility, and compassion), and through this, help others to their salvation.

Viktor Frankl implicitly grasped God's purpose in allowing suffering by pointing to the importance of our *decisions* during *negative circumstances* to form the basis of our character—which in the Christian view becomes, after purification, our *eternal identity*:

A human being is not one thing among others; things determine each other, but man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes - within the limits of endowment and environment- he has made out of himself. In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on *decisions* but not on conditions.⁵⁹

II.B.2

An Imperfect World Can Shock us out of Superficial Purpose in Life

Let us begin with a brief review of the four levels of happiness—which are also four levels of purpose in life. Recall from *Finding True Happiness* – Chapters 1-4, that Level 1 (physical-material happiness) and Level 2 (ego-comparative happiness) are like a “default drive” for children and adolescents. Yet we can get stuck in this default drive—as if it were addictive—if we are not *called* out of it. Sometimes that call consists in suffering – particularly, the negative emotions of the comparison game and/or existential emptiness. This occurs when we are not fulfilling our Level 3 desires (contribution and love arising out of empathy and conscience) and our Level 4 desires (our transcendental desires for perfect truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home—as well as our desire for a relationship with a perfect personal transcendental Being who invites us to this fulfillment). Though the pain of the comparison game and existential emptiness can be quite acute, some may choose to endure it by striving for ever greater Level 1 and 2 satisfaction—and this is where the imperfect human condition and world come to our rescue.

In our quest for ever greater creature comforts and ego satisfaction, we will get older, our abilities will decrease, our health will be more challenged, and we will have to confront our mortality. When these challenges of our imperfect human condition and world combine with the negative emotions of the comparison game and existential emptiness, they virtually compel us—unless we are utterly obstinate—to look for meaning beyond what we have been pursuing for decades. We could, of course, remain obstinate, and become resentful and bitter toward God and others—or we could look outward and ask if perhaps our lives would be more meaningful if we gave some of the fruits of our knowledge and success to an imperfect world in desperate need. Mortality and death may also be of considerable assistance to us. We could view them as a terrible and absurd end to life—generating bitterness and anger—or we might ask ourselves a serious question of whether there is life beyond the grave—whether there really is something to

⁵⁹ Viktor Frankl 1984 *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Beacon Press) p. 121. Italics mine.

the religions we have been ignoring throughout our lives. If we take these questions seriously and we seek answers to them, we will likely find ourselves pursuing Levels 3 and 4 in ways that will change our purpose in life, self-identity, and our eternal destiny. All of this positive transformation—leading to eternal love and joy—could well be missed were it not for the impetus provided by an imperfect world and an imperfect human condition. Without weakness, old age, health problems, and death, many of us might consign ourselves to the most egocentric and superficial lives—but our imperfect human condition and world can provide invaluable assistance to moving beyond this partial and incomplete life.

At this point, the revelation of Jesus becomes important, for as He repeats throughout His preaching and parables, all are welcome into the kingdom—no matter when the act of repentance (regret for the past and choice toward a future of faith and love) occurs. Workers who are hired at the end of the day will ultimately be given the same wage as those who were hired in the morning (see Mt 20:1-16). If we allow suffering to call us out of superficiality into a new pervasive, enduring and deep meaning in life—no matter when we heed the call—it will most likely lead us not only to greater meaning, love and faith, but also to our true and eternal fulfillment in the unconditionally loving God.

II.B.3

An Imperfect World Can Deepen our Faith and Transcendent Purpose

An imperfect world can lead not only to a *basic* pursuit of Level 4 (transcendent) happiness, but also to a deep interior conversion to Christian faith, hope, and love. Recall that God's first priority in helping us through suffering is *our and others' salvation*. We saw above that sickness, weakness, old age, debilitation, loss, and death can be essential for refocusing our purpose in life toward what is transcendent and eternal – and can incite us to turn to the Lord for help. These dimensions of our imperfect world can go much further – they can open us to the search for knowledge of God beyond the domain of science, logic, and reason (which can reasonably affirm a transcendent, intelligent Creator)⁶⁰– to the search for God's own self-revelation. When the imperfect world incites us to seek God's help, we become interested in the Helper. At this point, God steps in and inspires us to know Him with ever greater depth—to move from the domain of His transcendence, intelligence, and creativity (science and logic) to his *heart* (which can only be known through His self-revelation). This may cause us to find theology and spirituality fascinating and important in ways we had never previously conceived. This thirst for knowledge will likely lead to a deeper interest in the love and heart of God, which will require a form of revelation that speaks to these essential characteristics. We will not have to search long to discover that this is the center of Jesus' revelation of His Father and Himself. He

⁶⁰ Recall from Volume 1 (Chapter Two), that metaphysics can support reasonable and responsible affirmation of a unique, unrestricted, uncaused reality which is an unrestricted act of thinking and the Creator of everything else (see Vol. II, Chapter 3 and Appendix II). Recall also that contemporary science can support reasonable and responsible affirmation of a transcendent, intelligent Creator from the B-V-G Proof, the evidence of entropy, and the exceedingly high improbability of necessary anthropic conditions (see Vol. II, Appendix I). These contentions are supported by the verifiable evidence of near death experiences from peer-reviewed medical studies (see Vol. II, Chap.5).

not only defines love as empathy, humility, forgiveness, compassion, and self-sacrifice – He shows unequivocally that He and His Father are *unconditional* love.⁶¹

At this juncture, the imperfect world serves an even greater purpose, for in following Jesus, we become interested in serving others and alleviating *their* suffering. This leads to a desire to make a positive contribution to others, the common good, and the kingdom of God (see below Section II.B.4), a desire to be more like Jesus in empathy, humility, compassion, and self-sacrifice (see below Section II.B.5), and a desire to offer our sufferings to the Father for the salvation of souls in imitation of Jesus (see below Section II.B.6). Thus, suffering can open us to Level 3 purpose in life, which in turn can move us to deeper love and contribution. Though suffering can lead *without faith* to external expressions of love (contributions to family, friends, organizations, community, Church, kingdom of God, and culture), and to the interior purification of love (empathy, humility, compassion, and self-sacrifice), its effects are greatly enhanced *with* faith – particularly Christian faith.

Why? Because the revelation of Jesus teaches us how to express and purify love (*agapē*) and a relationship with Him opens us to the inspiration and grace of the Holy Spirit who moves us deeply toward the imitation of His heart and loving actions. This teaching and inspiration inflame our hearts – we want to imitate Jesus -- who has loved us – to become more like Him in our hearts, words, and actions. Though the sufferings of this world can initiate our move to Level 3 (contributive) identity, its effects are compounded tremendously when we move to Level 4 (transcendent) identity and embrace Jesus as the revelation of how to live a life of love. Since this section concerns the *Christian* viewpoint on the imperfect world, the following three subsections (II.B.4, II.B.5, and II.B.6) will be concerned with leveraging the sufferings of this world toward the more enhanced actualization of love made possible by the teaching and grace of Jesus.

II.B.4

An Imperfect World Provides the Conditions for Contributing to Others

The need, weakness, and suffering brought on by our imperfect human condition and world provide the occasion to make a significant contribution to those within our purview. If God had created the human condition and the world perfectly, there would be absolutely nothing for us to do—no positivity to offset negativity, no assistance to alleviate poverty, sickness, and suffering, no social contribution to offset deprivation, no faith to offset existential emptiness, loneliness, and alienation, and no hope to offset despair. If God had created us in a perfect world, we could not make sacrifices for something noble or loving, and we could leave no legacy worthy of our existence.

⁶¹ Recall from Volume 4 (Chapter Three) that Jesus teaches his disciples to use “*Abba*” to address His Father, that He defines love as the highest commandment, and reveals the heart of His Father through the Parable of the Prodigal Son (see Vol. III, Chap. 2). Recall also that Jesus demonstrates *His* unconditional love in His love for sinners, the poor and suffering, and especially His disciples. More importantly, He shows His *unconditional* love for the world in His self-sacrificial death (see Vol. III, Chap. 3).

Imagine a life where there is no contribution to make, no sacrifice to offer for the good of others or humanity, no way in which you could positively affect the lives and salvation of others. Such a life would not allow us to *define our identity* by our loving actions (or our egocentric ones), our courageous actions (or our cowardly ones), our self-sacrificial actions (or our refusal to sacrifice), our sharing of faith (or our rejection of it). This scenario would effectively undermine the central purpose of our short mortal life, which has as its end eternal self-definition through the decisions we make in the face of need, vulnerability, weakness, and suffering in ourselves and others.

The reader may again be thinking: “Why would a loving God allow some people to suffer in order to give other people an opportunity to help them?” This is not an accurately phrased question, because the imperfect world will invariably cause *all of us* to suffer—physically, psychologically, and existentially. Just as no one will get out of this life alive, no one will get out of it without suffering. Furthermore, it is not accurate to say that only some of us are called to help people during their time of suffering—*all of us* are called to do this. So, the proper way of asking the question is, “Why would an all-loving God allow *everyone* to suffer so that *everyone* will be called to help and serve one another?”

This question is best answered – and perhaps can only be answered – within the context of Jesus’ revelation and grace, because they provide three essential elements for actualizing God’s purpose for suffering:

1. We are not created for this worldly life alone – but for eternal life in unconditional love – with Jesus who revealed this not only in word, but through His resurrection.
2. Jesus gives us indispensable gifts to help us in times of suffering -- guidance, inspiration, and grace of the Holy Spirit -- as well as the sacraments, community, and Word of God given through the Church.
3. Jesus provides an example and call through His passion and death to synthesize our suffering and our faith by imitating Him in the pursuit of the highest level of self-sacrifice and love.

When we embrace God’s purpose for suffering – along with the gifts provided from Jesus – we can no longer view suffering as ultimately tragic, or ultimately negative. In recognizing that neither this life -- nor the sufferings in it – are ultimate, we infer that this life is only a “staging area” for us to choose and solidify our identity which will then characterize us throughout eternity. This life—with its sufferings and joys—is but a temporary moment in which to make fundamental choices—to respond to the needs of others or to ignore them; to make a contribution to others or to exploit them; to elevate people’s dignity and destiny or to tear them down; to listen to and heal others or to ignore them; to bring hope or despair, etc. Without an imperfect world—without the needs and vulnerabilities which allow us to make a positive difference to the world—without the possibility of sacrificing ourselves for a noble cause—we would not be able to freely choose who we are and who we will be throughout eternity.

The all-loving God would not allow us to remain in the inertia of indecision and indeterminateness—and so He created us in a condition and world where we would be called to make a contribution, a sacrifice, a legacy that will define and shape us throughout eternity. If we go on the path of love—even if imperfectly—He will bring us to the fullness of eternal love for

which we were created. In order to fulfill us completely and eternally, God allows us the opportunity to *choose* love through contribution, sacrifice, sympathy, and service—and this requires an imperfect human condition and world—for a brief time. Once again, we see the synergistic combination of suffering and faith providing not only the call to contribution and compassion, but also the inspiration and grace to pursue it. The aims of love – which are the aims of God – are ironically fulfilled through the synthesis of negative and positive – deprivation and transcendence – suffering and faith.

Some readers may still be thinking— “Well, that’s all very well and good, but why do some people have to suffer proportionately more than others in order to achieve the above result?” Couldn’t God have created the imperfect world so that it would lead to more equal suffering for all of us? Though this question is understandable, it betrays an unfounded and generally specious assumption—namely, that proportionately more suffering is *bad* for us. There can be no doubt that “proportionately more suffering” initially produces more stress, strain, and pain in our lives, but recall that Jesus’ view of “good” and “bad” is not so much concerned with the *initial* stress, strain and pain of suffering, as with our *salvation* at the end of this life. For Jesus, proportionately more suffering is likely to lead to deeper faith—and deeper faith to deeper love (empathy, humility and compassion) -- *if* we are open to faith and love. The poor, sick, and grieving may well have more strain, stress, and pain in this life, but if they are open to faith and love, they will likely have an easier and more efficacious path to salvation. Jesus promises this in The Sermon on the Plain:

Blessed are you who are poor
For yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
For you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
For you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you,
When they exclude you and insult you,
And reject your name as evil,
Because of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
Because great is your reward in heaven
(Luke 6:17-23).

Conversely, proportionately less suffering may give rise to less stress, pain, and strain, but this is not necessarily good for our salvation. As Jesus suggests, such benefits of this life may lead *away* from greater faith and love -- to egocentricity, arrogance, domination, exploitation, and self-worship. Evidently, this scenario could present greater challenges to choosing an eternal identity grounded in love. Jesus was concerned that “the rich” could easily invest more of themselves in their wealth, status, power, and comparative advantage than in care and compassion for others, the common good, trust in God, and building His kingdom. This need not happen if the rich are conscientious about faith and love in their lives, but the “default attraction” to Level 1 and Level 2 satisfaction – and the self-importance coming from it – could present a

strong distraction – and even a hindrance to the deeper appropriation of faith and love. That is why he says to his disciples:

Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 19:23-24).

“Rich” (plousious) is derived from the root “*ploutos*” – and refers not only to material wealth, but “*abundance*” both literally and metaphorically.⁶² Thus, “rich” here can signify abundance of material goods, power, status, popularity, talents, intellectual gifts, rhetorical gifts, beauty, athletic prowess, and other possessions and characteristics – that is, those who have proportionately *less* suffering.

At first glance this passage seems to suggest that those who have “comparatively less suffering” (an abundance of possessions, abilities, power, and status) have almost no chance of entering the kingdom of God. However, this conclusion is mitigated by two important considerations. First, this figure of speech (a camel passing through the eye of a needle) is a colorful *exaggerated* image used to capture the attention and imagination of Jesus’ listeners.⁶³ Such exaggerated metaphors are quite common in Semitic culture – and Jesus’ audience would have been aware of the intent of His exaggeration. Secondly, Jesus’ audience knew that every image must be set within the context of the *whole* passage. The end of this passage is critically important for its interpretation – “For man it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”

So, in the above context, what does the passage mean? In brief, hope is not lost for those who have proportionately more gifts and proportionately less suffering in their lives. They must be saved in the same way as everyone else – through the grace and mercy of the unconditionally loving God. If they turn to God in faith for His mercy – and try to remain faithful – they will be saved. However, it will be harder for the rich to do this than it will be for the poor (those who have proportionately more suffering) because the rich can easily become attached to, distracted by, and reliant upon the abundance they have in this world. Oftentimes, suffering comes into the lives of the fortunate – and this shocks them out of their attachment to and reliance upon Level 1 and Level 2 “riches” – which helps them to focus on God, salvation, contribution, and love.

Thus, for Jesus, those who have proportionately more suffering in this life may well be more fortunate than those who have proportionately less suffering – for those who suffer will have far fewer impediments to Level 3 (contributive) and Level 4 (transcendent) purpose in life. We may conclude from this that the combination of suffering and faith provides a powerful and almost irresistible impetus toward deeper levels of love and eternal salvation.

As noted in previous volumes, I am very thankful for my progressive blindness – which some view as “proportionately more suffering than the average person.” Though this disability has given rise to more *initial* stress, strain, and pain than might occur in the lives of those with

⁶² Strong’s Concordance “plousious” – No. 4145, <http://lexiconcordance.com/greek/4145.html>.

⁶³ See Benedict Vivano “The Gospel According to Matthew” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 663.

normal eyesight, I, like St. Paul, count myself very fortunate to have it, because it has lessened my focus on self-aggrandizement and helped me to focus on empathy, humility, care, compassion, trust in God, and building the kingdom. It has even helped me be comfortable with obvious weakness and comparative disadvantage which I used to disdain and fear. The effects of this disability are so powerful and positive that they really have changed my identity and purpose in life – which has opened me to the Lord’s invitation to His kingdom of love. I am absolutely certain that when I get to the kingdom of heaven, I will look back on my life and say, “Whew! Thank you so very very much Lord for my progressive blindness. It was what I really needed to help me out of intransigent self-aggrandizement and comparative advantage into a life commensurate with the love that leads to true joy – the humble and compassionate love of your Son. I am sorry I fought you so many times, and I am thankful you did not listen to my folly, but allowed your wisdom to prevail so that I would choose you, your love, and the love of neighbors – instead of the darkness of self-obsession. I can see how hard it would have been to choose life without progressive blindness. It was the perfect cross for me. Thank you for the suffering.”

II.B.5

An Imperfect World Provides the Impetus for Deeper Love (Empathy, Humility, and Compassion)

Some people are naturally empathetic—they see the vulnerability and needs of others and respond to it without hesitation—even from the time they are children (like Saint Teresa of Calcutta—see *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Chapter 6, Section IV.D). However, I suspect that most of us are like me—like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Ignatius of Loyola. We need motivation to draw us out of our concern for self toward concern for others. Though empathy and conscience provide us with a desire to connect with and respect others, concern for ourselves can be so strong that we ignore their call. Breaking through the barrier of self-concern frequently requires an *external* cause, which then will allow empathy and conscience to enter our consciousness. Most of the time, this external cause is provided by our own pain, weakness, and vulnerability—like the cannon ball hitting the leg of St. Ignatius Loyola.

As I explained in *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Chapter 7, I was resistant to the call of empathy and compassion for others, and was happy to live amidst good intelligent friends and the security of my family’s love and wealth—with an intellectual life embracing philosophy, science, literature, and history. It was a terrific little “bubble,” but unfortunately it permitted me to ignore the needs of people around me. The Lord used my intellectual interests to first fascinate me with ultimate causation and meaning through metaphysics, physics, and ultimately philosophical theology. As I began to see His presence at the inception and culmination not only of the universe, but of reality itself, I turned toward Him and to the Church in which I had discovered Him. Though I had found God and was discovering Jesus, I had not yet let Jesus’ teaching on love affect me. This was a gradual process which gained considerable momentum during my novitiate, and then again during my theological studies in Rome.

As noted above, I was given another grace in my final year of study in Rome – when I was most acutely aware of the teaching of Jesus, and most desirous to follow His example – progressive blindness. This challenge shook me out of my pride, self-sufficiency, and impatience—introducing me wholesale to my need for God and others. This showed me love

(*agapē*) in a way I had never known before. Even though it was painful to accept humility and compassion, I discovered their beauty—and I wanted to imitate their lead—not only because they were beautiful and helped the people around me, but also because the Lord whom I loved and wanted to imitate possessed them. It has been a long and difficult road of conversion, but my imperfect human condition in the imperfect world has been indispensable for directing me toward the road to humility and compassion.

At this juncture, we might pause to consider the reflections of Viktor Frankl about his experience in the darkness of a Nazi concentration camp. Through all the deprivation, pain, hatred, cruelty, and death, he discovered with great clarity the central meaning of life – which he never forgot – making it the foundation of his marriage, psychotherapeutic school, and future service to humanity:

For the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth - that Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.⁶⁴

This corresponds with the experience of St. Paul, who likely had a physical malady – probably gradual blindness – which he saw as “a thorn in the flesh” and “an angel of Satan to beat him.” As he testified, he was grateful for it because it had given him two essential gifts necessary for his salvation and service to the Church – (1) humility (his physical malady prevented him from being proud), and (2) a reliance on Christ’s strength rather than his own (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). St. Paul’s experience corresponds to that of many other saints. In *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, Volume 6 (Section IV), I explain how the synergy between suffering and faith led to these saints’ attainment of the highest levels of *agapē* – particularly St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

There are literally millions of unheralded “saints” whose lives demonstrate how the combination of suffering and faith lead to the deepest levels of love – and ultimately to salvation. Recall the poignant case study (given in Volume 6) from Sheldon Vanauken’s *A Severe Mercy*, showing how sickness and death – combined with faith -- led to the highest levels of compassion and self-sacrifice. In this autobiographical work, he tells of how he and his wife, Davy were transformed in love by their experiences at Oxford. When they arrived there, they had already created a “shining barrier” around themselves, separating them from others. The barrier signified the *complete* sufficiency of each for the fulfillment of the other. This idyllic “little bubble” was first penetrated when they met C.S. Lewis, and discovered that they could not satisfy one another’s desire for perfect truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home, and so they would have to make room for a being which could do this—a God who would come to be with us—Jesus. Though Davy (Sheldon’s wife) began to take seriously a life of self-sacrifice and service to God and others, Sheldon remained somewhat resentful of the penetration and breakdown of the “shining barrier.” Davy worried about this, and made a complete offering of herself for the sake of Sheldon. When she revealed this to him, he was shocked:

⁶⁴ Viktor Frankl 1984 *Mans Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Beacon Press) p. 35.

It was the year when Davy, a month or so before its end, offered up her life in holy exchange and utter love for me. Tonight, after Bourges and the ‘Requiem Mass,’ she told me, to my horror and dread.⁶⁵

Davy soon contracted an irreversible deadly illness brought on by a rare virus which led to her death, but this seemingly tragic result of the blind forces of an imperfect world had a remarkable effect on him. Instead of withdrawing in bitterness and anger, he rose to the heights to which Davy had called him—and found himself embracing the complete self-sacrificial love she had given to him—and that Jesus had given to the world. Once again, the imperfect world had shown itself to be indispensable in providing the opportunity for greater conversion to love as Jesus revealed it.

A recurrent paradoxical truth in the Christian view of an imperfect world has manifested itself once again – that suffering plus faith leads to Level 4 love. This love not only leads to our eternal salvation with Jesus, but allows us to serve His people and kingdom in remarkable ways. The greater our faith, the more suffering will lead to higher forms of Level 4 love. At these levels of love, our service and prayers for others and the kingdom are highly effective – and we can become like Davy or even St. Francis or St. Ignatius.

II.B.6

An Imperfect World Provides the Condition for Offering our Suffering to God in Imitation of Jesus

There is yet another way in which “suffering plus faith leads to the highest levels of love” – the offering of our suffering to God as self-sacrificial love in imitation of Jesus. In the previous subsection, we saw how this formula works to transform our hearts and lives *visibly* – leading to the *visible* service of others and the kingdom. Yet this effect is not limited to the visible domain – it also occurs in the *invisible* domain of our hearts, the lives of others, the Church (the mystical body of Christ), and the Kingdom. As we noted in Volume 8, one of Jesus’ main reasons for coming to be with us was to reveal the efficacy of offering our sufferings to His Father as self-sacrificial love. Though He fully revealed and clarified this kind of Level 4 love in His words and actions, He showed how His Father revealed it initially to the Psalmists (Psalm 22) and to Isaiah (in the Fourth Suffering Servant Song). Beginning with His Eucharistic words and actions, and concluding with His self-sacrificial death on the cross, He revealed that this invisible form of Level 4 love was just as efficacious – if not more so – than the *visible* forms of Level 4 love. St. Paul had a profound recognition of this, and declared:

Now 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 (Col. 1:24).

Throughout history, this *invisible* form of Level 4 love has been central in the lives of many saints – from the sufferings of the martyrs (who frequently offered their lives for the

⁶⁵ Vanauken 1980 *A Severe Mercy* p. 149.

salvation of their persecutors as well as the Church) to the lives of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who offered their sufferings as self-sacrificial love for the salvation of those in most need of God's mercy.

Evidently, this kind of self-sacrifice is not limited to suffering from the imperfect world (e.g. Davy and St. Thérèse of Lisieux), but can also come from the unjustified acts of human beings (e.g. Jesus and the martyrs). In both cases, we will want to follow the example of Jesus. Instead of resenting the seeming unfairness of our misfortune or the injustice of others, we can, like Jesus, offer it to the Father as self-sacrificial love. This does not mean we have to be passive in our response to suffering. If we have a disease, we will want to find doctors and other means of alleviating it. If we are lonely and depressed, we will want to seek out friends who can help us. If we are fearful, we will want to follow the advice in Volume 5 – using prayer, rationality, and natural virtue to mitigate damage and formulate backup plans. Above all, we will want to follow Jesus in praying the prayer of Gethsemane: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will” (Mark 14:36). If suffering persists after we have taken the above steps, then we must believe – as Jesus did – that there are *invisible* opportunities of “self-sacrificial offering” in that suffering – beyond the visible opportunities (addressed in Volume 7). The best way to make this prayer is with the same kind of trust Jesus exemplified toward His Father on the cross as He recited Psalm 22 (see Volume 8, Section I).

As we make our self-sacrificial offering of suffering for the salvation of the world, it may be helpful to recall the example of St. Thérèse of Lisieux who united her sufferings with those of her beloved Jesus, knowing that He would assure its efficacy for the salvation of souls -- especially those who are alienated from Him. We will not know the true effects of our loving offering until we understand it through the eyes and heart of God in His kingdom. Yet if we trust in Him, we will be confident that each little bit of suffering will – like the mustard seed – be turned into an abundance of grace available to those who need it most – grace that will strengthen the Church – and through it – the culture. For those with faith, this may be the most important and efficacious benefit of suffering.

We now turn to another dimension of the Christian view of the efficacy of suffering – extending beyond the personal domain -- to that of culture, society, and world history.

Editor's Note: The presentation on the effects of suffering in the culture, society, and history is not given here. It contains material on why God would allow the Bubonic Plague, the Nazi Concentration camps, and other calamities. To find it, see Chapter 10 (Section III) of *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*.

III. Conclusion [Back to top](#)

So why does the all-loving God allow suffering? The answer may be found in the interrelationship among four ideas – freedom, love, eternal salvation, and personal identity. In Section I, we considered God’s dilemma in creating beings truly capable of love, noting that God had to create us with the potential to cause suffering – for if He did not, we would not have the capacity to choose evil, injustice, and unloving behaviors – in which case we would have had *no choice* but to do good, just, and loving behaviors. If we had no choice, then we would have been compelled or programmed to do these positive behaviors. They would not have originated from within us, but from a preset program, and hence we would not be loving creatures, but only robots programmed to perform loving behaviors. If God wanted to create genuinely loving beings, He had to create the potential for evil and suffering caused by those beings.

In Section II, we considered why God would have created us in an imperfect world – so that the blind forces of nature could cause famine, disease, genetic defects, floods, and other natural disasters – producing all manner of pain, suffering, and deprivation. It was here that the idea of “personal identity” became important – for when we are confronted by the forces of the imperfect world – we have to make *choices* that will determine not only who we are, but the kind of eternity that we would prefer. The impending reality of death in the imperfect world incites us to *choose* the way in which we are going to live in the short time we have in the physical world – are we going to accumulate things for *ourselves*, aggrandize *ourselves*, gain ego-comparative advantage for *ourselves*, dominate others for the sake of *our* personal benefit, and worship *ourselves* – or will we use our gifts and resources to help *others*, edify *others*, contribute to *others*, respect *others*, show compassion to *others*, and worship the true God? Without death, these fundamental choices and identity decisions could be interminably delayed, allowing us to avoid the critical decisions constituting our personal and eternal identity.

In Section II.A, we noted how the imperfect world helps people of all cultures and religions to grow in natural virtue and interdependence. Let us first consider natural virtue. Without an imperfect world there would be no practical need to use our rational faculties – because everything would be perfectly obvious and accessible. Furthermore, there would be no need for courage to face our fears, because the perfect world would present no fear; there would be no need to sacrifice ourselves to make the world a better place, because the world would already be a perfect place; there would be no need to exert effort and restrain the pursuit of pleasure, because everything would be effortless and there would be no worthier pursuit than the mere pursuit of pleasure. Without an imperfect world, life would be pleasant, painless and simple, but we would have no opportunity to make a contribution -- a positive difference – to anybody or anything. There would be no impetus from the natural world to sacrifice ourselves, use our wits, face our fears, exert effort, and to restrain ourselves. We would remain at the level of little children – completely unfamiliar with the challenges, self-efficacy, self-knowledge, virtue, self-sacrifice, self-transcendence, and *choices* of the adult world. Though life would be more pleasant, we would not be able to reach most of our potential – and therefore, most of our personal identity.

In Section II.B, we saw other important benefits from the imperfect world brought to light by the revelation of Jesus. We saw how personal and bodily weakness and limitations can lead to humility, empathy, and compassion – and how the needs of others can call us to make contributions, show compassion, and build systems, structures, and cultures for the common good. We also saw how the imperfect world can shock us out of superficial Level 1 and 2 purpose in life, calling us to look for something more – something contributive, loving, and transcendent, and we also saw how the imperfect world tells us that we are *not* God, and helps us to acknowledge our need *for* God. Additionally, we saw how the sufferings of the imperfect world provide the conditions for making a self-sacrificial offering to God for the salvation of souls. All these dimensions of suffering lead to a deepening of love within our consciousness and personal identity -- thereby opening the way to eternal salvation with the unconditionally loving God.

In Section III -- which was not presented here, we saw that suffering also provides the impetus to build cultures of justice, compassion, and unity – cultures that will inspire creativity, service, intrinsic dignity, mutual respect, individual and economic rights, hope, vision, and transcendence. We indicated that such cultures could inspire individuals to work with others – in spirit and common cause -- to overcome suffering, to lead individuals to their highest personal and interpersonal identity – and through this to lives of great fulfillment and even to eternal salvation. We noted that cultural decline (from Levels 3 and 4 to Levels 1 and 2) could have the opposite effect – giving rise to decreased empathy, contribution, ethics, and sense of transcendence – resulting in increased depression, malaise, meaninglessness, despondency, substance abuse, familial tensions, antisocial and criminal behavior, and suicides.

Great cultures can produce the phoenix phenomenon – transforming collective adversity and suffering into the highest levels of achievement in the areas of science, law, ethics, engineering, medicine, humanities, art, and architecture. However, base cultures can have the opposite effect – exacerbating the negative effects of suffering, undermining the family and social structures, and lowering the levels of intrinsic dignity, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. We concluded from this that suffering provides an impetus to all of us to be alert to opportunities to promote and defend Level 3 and 4 values, principles, and ideals – and to summon the courage to say something when those opportunities present themselves. Though this may be difficult – and earn us the disdain of others – though it may require great self-sacrifice, it usually results in some of the greatest contributions of our lives – contributions to society, the common good, and the kingdom of God. When we speak the truth about Level 3 and 4 values, principles, and ideals – amidst palpable resistance – we can produce tremendous good to galvanize the “silent majority,” and to interrupt a momentum of decline.

When we examine the lives of history’s greatest cultural heroes – whether they be religious, philosophical, literary, historical, legal – and especially ordinary men and women who rise to the occasion – we see a common thread – the desire to make the imperfect world a better place – to improve the lot of humanity, and to inspire our collective spirit to rise above the din toward a future even better than the one undermined by calamity and collective adversity. Suffering not only contains the call for us to respond to *individual* needs, but also to *collective* needs – not just collective *material* needs, but to collective *cultural* needs – to dare to lift up the spirit of humanity. The imperfect world – and human evil – can and do incite us to the highest

levels of individual spirit, collective spirit, and human endeavor – and this can make an important contribution not only to our salvation, but also to the salvation of others – sometimes dozens and hundreds of others.

We may **close** with a consideration of the role of suffering in the highest levels of love. Let us return to the formula we have seen throughout this book -- *suffering plus faith equals extraordinary love*. In the context of Christian faith, we saw how personal suffering could lead to freedom from self-centeredness, and how the sufferings of others could call us to sacrifice ourselves for them. Suffering can call us to greater trust in God, and when He responds -- to a greater awareness of His love for us. The more we are aware of His love, the more we love Him in return – desiring to serve Him in the needy, the suffering, the physically deprived, the spiritually deprived, the Church, and the culture.

In Christianity, this process can reach particularly great heights because of the example and sacrifice of Jesus – and the grace provided us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Christian saints became more aware of how God works through our suffering to call us to salvation – and to help us call others to their salvation. These saints connected deeply with the teaching, life, and self-sacrificial death of Jesus – and the love they initially felt for Him intensified so greatly that they wanted to serve not only the poor, but *Him* in the poor. They not only wanted to imitate His humility, empathy, and compassion, but also to emulate His complete self-sacrifice for the salvation of souls. For these extraordinary individuals, the formula of “suffering plus faith equals love” came to its highest synergistic actualization through their faith in *Jesus*.

As these saints considered the life of Jesus, they became increasingly aware of the sacrifices He made for them (and the world) to love and redeem them. Moved with great gratitude, they responded spontaneously with love for Him. They were so moved with love that they wanted to imitate the One who had loved them and had provided the path to their eternal salvation. As they considered the needs of the world – bodily needs, spiritual needs, and cultural needs, they wanted to do as much as they could to help -- in the way that Jesus taught – with empathy, humility, respect, and compassion; and so they gave their whole heart to Him -- to His way of love, and to those in need.

As we examine the prayers that each wrote, they contain the four terms that lie at the heart of suffering’s opportunities and benefits – freedom, love, eternal salvation, and personal identity. These prayers reflect the highest levels of spiritual *freedom*, the highest levels of compassion and self-sacrificial love, and the highest levels of trust in God and hope in eternal salvation. As St. Ignatius Loyola expressed it:

Take Lord receive all my liberty,
my memory, understanding, and my entire will.
Whatsoever I have or hold, you have given to me.
I give it all back to you – dispose of it entirely according to your will.
Give me only your love and your grace – that’s enough for me, and I ask for
nothing more.

Chapter Three

What to Do when Suffering Comes

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There are two steps we can take to mitigate the negative effects of suffering upon its arrival:

1. Engage immediately in spontaneous prayers.
2. Mitigate the effects of fear and anxiety through natural virtue.

We have already discussed the fifteen spontaneous prayers that can be used in times of suffering in Volume 18 (Chapter Three). If readers want a fuller explanation of these prayers, see Chapter 4 of *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*.

In addition to spontaneous prayers, we may also make recourse to several techniques from *natural virtue* to help control the fear and anxiety arising out of our initial confrontation with suffering. Though these techniques originate from our natural powers and practical discipline, they complement the grace and peace coming from spontaneous prayers while the grace and peace of prayer works through and enhances the effects of our natural virtues.

We might begin with the general observation that Jesus viewed the fear and anxiety arising out of suffering to be quite negative, admonishing us again and again to refrain from fear and trust in God as we set our sights on the resurrection into unconditional love and joy. In *The Light Shines on in the Darkness* (Chapter 5), we examine four passages from the gospels concerned with the avoidance of fear through trust in God – Mk. 5:35-43, Mt. 6:25-34, Mt. 10: 26-31, and Jn. 14:27. We then examine four additional passages from the epistles encouraging believers to do the same – Phil. 4:4-7, 1 Jn. 4:18, 1 Pt. 3: 13-14, 1 Pt. 5:6-7. We may now proceed to our examination of the natural virtues and their importance in complementing prayer and grace during times of suffering.

There is a fundamental principle in the theology of grace— “grace builds on nature.” This principle does not mean that grace *needs* to build on nature or that grace is not sufficient without nature—but rather, that grace does not negate or undermine nature—it complements nature and brings it to fulfillment. God made natural powers and virtues so that we could operate within the natural world through our natural powers. Though grace brings our natural powers and virtues to fulfillment, we can still perform natural functions in the natural world without making recourse to God’s *supernatural* power. Of course, all natural powers—and the natural world itself—are created and maintained in existence by God, but He does this in a way that allows human beings to have control over what might be called “secondary causes” in the natural order (see Volume 3, Section III.E).

Since grace complements and fulfills nature, God expects us to develop our natural powers and virtues to enable grace to work optimally through them. For example, people educated in philosophy can be more effective in their understanding and interpretation of revealed truth; people who have developed the natural virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance are better able to practice supernatural love, and people who have cultivated practical

wisdom and “know how” can be more effective leaders in the building of God’s kingdom on earth—e.g., starting churches, schools, hospitals, etc. Furthermore, people with developed natural powers and virtues can also be more successful in communicating and promoting a dialogue between church and state, faith and reason, the City of God and City of man, etc. In view of this, we might expect that God wants us to develop the natural powers and virtues that will complement His grace during times of suffering.

What *natural* powers and virtues are most important in dealing with suffering? I would maintain that they are our powers of reason and empathy and the virtues of prudence and courage. Of course, other powers such as conscience, or virtues such as justice and temperance, are also important but not as much as reason, empathy, prudence, and courage. Since I have already discussed the powers of reason and empathy in Volume 2, I will restrict myself to a brief discussion of the virtues of prudence and courage below.

The classical definition of “virtue” is a good habit—that is a habit that orients our natural powers toward a good end—or away from a bad end. Socrates (as well as other classical philosophers) identified four natural virtues as most important—affecting the whole range of human conduct—prudence, justice, fortitude (courage), and temperance. As noted above, prudence and courage are most relevant in the area of suffering.

“Prudence” refers to the habit of mind that focuses our power of reason toward the ends of wisdom and practical effectiveness. “Wisdom” means “knowing what is most important for an optimally meaningful and fulfilled life”—for example, the Four Levels of Happiness addressed in Volume 13. “Practical effectiveness” refers to the “know how” to get things done, to work well with people, to be organized and effective in our use of time, and the ways of procuring needed resources to achieve our plans.

In order to develop these two aspects of prudence, we must first acquire knowledge of them. For Wisdom, we might want to begin with studying the Four Levels of Happiness and why the third and fourth levels lead to an optimally meaningful and fulfilling life—and why the first two levels alone lead to a less meaningful life, as well as emptiness and the negative emotions of the comparison game. This will give us enough wisdom to begin orienting our actions and plans toward the higher levels of meaning and fulfillment. In order to obtain knowledge of practical effectiveness, we might want to consult some good practical guides on how to work well with people, formulate effective goals and plans, and organize our time in an effective and balanced way toward those goals.

Once the knowledge is acquired, we have completed the first part of the process. The second part of the process requires more diligence—we have to *use* the knowledge we have acquired *repeatedly* in our daily actions so that they become reinforced habits in our lives. Once these habits are formed, our actions will be focused on optimal meaning, fulfillment, and practical effectiveness—and after a while, we won’t even have to think about it. They will flow naturally from us.

“Courage” is part of the virtue of “fortitude,” which refers to the effective use of our *will* power. Our “will” is the power or drive to transform ideas into reality through embodied action.

Strong willed people get things done—while weak willed people remain on the level of ideas and dreams. In the broadest sense, “fortitude” is that habit of the will to keep moving forward in the midst of obstacles and challenges. It is a habit of resolving to stay the course—to contend courageously with challenges—and not to grow weary amidst the many obstacles that might potentially block our goals and plans.

Since fortitude and courage are habits of the will, they need to be complemented by prudence—a habit of the mind. A strong will without prudence can be both foolish and vicious. Conversely, prudence needs to be complemented by fortitude, for what does it benefit a person to have wisdom and practical knowledge without the will to put them into practice? We all know people who are intelligent and gifted who remain solely on the level of ideas and dreams. It is an incredible waste of talent and life.

The following four *natural* tactics for dealing with fear and anxiety synthesize the powers of reason and empathy and the virtues of prudence and courage. They complement the graces that come through prayer, and with those graces, help us manage and grow through the fear and anxiety intrinsic to suffering:

1. Using Reason and Prudence to Confront Fear and Anxiety (Section I).
2. Seeking the Help of Other People (Section II).
3. Reshaping Our Expectations of Happiness (Section III).
4. Avoid Negative Comparisons (Section IV).

I.

First Tactic: Using Reason and Prudence to Confront Fear and Anxiety

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Some people have a naturally calm temperament—even in times of great danger. Their composure under pressure incites great admiration—and so they are frequently promoted to leadership positions. Many of us are not so naturally gifted, but that does not mean that we cannot *gain* composure by using our power of reason and the virtue of prudence. When danger approaches or we anticipate problematic or debilitating events, many of us become charged with fear or paralyzed with terror. Whether we are flush with panic or ice cold with terror, our emotions are undermining effective mitigating plans and actions. If we do not have natural composure, how can we avoid succumbing to these emotions? The simple answer is—*think*! Though panic and terror can cloud our minds, we can “turn on” the thinking process by simply asking ourselves *practical* questions. The five most important practical questions are:

- “Can any part of this problem be averted or mitigated right away?”
- “If everything goes wrong, what are some backup plans I can live with?”
- “Who can help me with advice or needed action?”
- “How can I lessen the impact of all or part of this problem?”
- “What factors need to be mitigated now and which ones can wait until later?”

Surprisingly, when we focus on one or more of these practical questions, the engagement of our reasoning process distracts and even inhibits the emotional onslaught of panic or terror—it

is almost as if our rational concentration on answering these questions pushes the flood of emotions to the periphery of our consciousness. It is important to commit the above five questions to memory because *these specific* questions are what “turn on” the rational reflection process in times of fear, panic, terror, and anxiety. If we do not have these questions ready at hand, we will effectively start the thinking process in the midst of panic and terror. However, if we remember them, and latch on to one or more of them, our concentration on them pushes the negative emotions aside, and as we begin to create potential solutions—or even potential scenarios that could lead to solutions—we can actually diminish the fear and anxiety, because we can begin to see a way out of the problem causing them. The more we think and create potential solutions, the more we mitigate fear and anxiety. Eventually, we can mitigate some parts of the problem, recruit some people to help and advise us, and create some backup plans we can live with. Though our backup plans may not be ideal and the advice and help we receive less than perfect, they will generally enable us to manage our situation sufficiently to avert crisis.

Can rationality and prudence be combined with faith and spirituality? Absolutely! Sometimes spontaneous prayers or common prayers like the “Hail Mary” can bring grace and consolation before we engage the five practical questions given above. The combination of supernatural peace and rational reflection is usually complementary and synergistic—that is, their combined effect can be greater than the sum of their parts. The peace and consolation of prayer can make the reasoning process more effective. Recall that prayer and grace can enhance our imagination and creativity, enabling us to discover additional potential solutions (see above Section II). Furthermore, the action and grace of God can give us enhanced confidence in the efficacy of our mitigation efforts, planning efforts, and requests for help.

God’s peace and inspiration are not meant to replace reason and prudence—they supplement them. Many children have learned the hard way that their prayers for help to pass an exam must be accompanied by the prudential requirement to study for it. When prayer and prudence are combined, they complement each other in mitigating fear, clarifying ideas, and achieving our best effort.

II.

Second Tactic: Seeking the Help of Other People

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Along with prayer and natural virtue (reason, prudence, and courage), the help of family members, friends, colleagues, and associates can also significantly mitigate fear and anxiety. Sometimes friends and families are not able to do something constructive or give helpful advice, but their presence to us during challenging times can mitigate anxiety—particularly the anxiety that comes from feeling alone and abandoned. Much has been written about how suffering leads not only to feelings of anxiety, but feelings of isolation which can heighten anxiety significantly—even to a breaking point. Evidently prayer—a relationship with the Lord—can also help mitigate these feelings of isolation, but the degree to which prayer is effective in doing this is dependent on our awareness of God’s presence in our daily lives. This awareness of God’s presence grows as we practice our faith—participate in a church, pray, and follow the guidance

and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶ If someone is relatively new to the practice of faith, then friends will be a crucial source of support to alleviate feelings of isolation and to mitigate anxiety during times of suffering.

Friends can be helpful in two major ways. First, they can bring comfort and psychological support through their love which can alleviate feelings of isolation and restore a sense of peace and composure. Secondly, they can offer significant help to alleviate the problems connected with our suffering. We might call the first kind of friend “a supportive friend” and the second kind “a practical friend.” Frequently, different friends have to fulfill these two roles, because a person’s closeness to us maybe unrelated to their ability to help us in some practical way. It is advisable to seek the help of *both* kinds of friends. We sometimes forget to do this because when we turn to a *loving friend* for comfort, we don’t ask ourselves whether they have the practical ability to help us—and vice versa. Thus, if we first turn to a *loving friend*, we will want to make sure they have the practical ability to help us, and if they don’t, to find another friend or associate who can fill that role. Conversely, if we turn first to a *practical friend*, we will want to make sure that they have the ability to give us the attention, comfort, and psychological support we need to alleviate our feelings of isolation, emptiness, and darkness. If not, then we should find another *loving friend* to fill that role.

What constitutes a good *loving friend*? If we have a choice, it would be a friend or friends with whom we share history, trust, principles, faith, and commitment. We must be able to be vulnerable and open with them, and we must believe that their love for us is genuine. Intimacy is not required, but it can be helpful and synergized with the other previously mentioned characteristics. Spouses are frequently ideal loving friends; so also our parents and siblings to whom we are tightly bonded. Friends outside of our family can also fill this role—particularly if they have the aforementioned qualities of loving friendship.

What constitutes a *practical friend*? You might want to ask yourself some of the following questions to determine a friend’s capacity to offer practical help and advice:

- Is my friend committed to Levels 3 and 4 happiness and purpose in life—does he or she have a developed sense of love and faith?
- Does my friend have strengths and skills that I do not possess?
- Does my friend or family member possess the above natural virtues of reason, prudence, and courage?
- Can my family member or friend do something to help me concretely—or connect me with someone who could do so?
- Do I have enough respect for this family member or friend to allow him or her to help me with practical advice?

⁶⁶ For a complete explanation of these practices—see Spitzer 2015—*Finding True Happiness*—Chapter 6 (Participation in a Church), Chapter 7 (Contemplative Prayer), Chapter 8 (Following the Inspiration and Guidance of the Holy Spirit), and Chapter 9 (Prayer of Transformation Through the Consciousness Examen).

An ideal *practical* friend would be able to do something in all of the above areas—however, ideal practical friends can be hard to find—so we are generally constrained to find more than one practical friend who can help us in *some* of the above areas.

Extroverts prefer to talk through problems with a trusted friend while introverts prefer to think things through on their own, and then ask for help in implementation. I would recommend that extroverts take the list of the five rational questions given in the previous subsection, sit down with their practical friend, and try to “talk through the answers” together. As noted previously, once we engage in reason and prudence, anxiety and fear diminish because we are developing a concrete plan to mitigate our problems. It really doesn’t matter whether we engage in reason and prudence with a friend or by ourselves, so long as we engage in it.

Once we develop a plan—with or without a friend—we must get to the second dimension of practical friendship—asking for help. Again, diverse personalities will approach this differently. Those who have a very strong sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency will be more reticent to ask for help than people who are more “relational”—who view themselves in a more interpersonal way. Those with a greater sense of autonomy should exercise extreme prudence in this regard, because it is all too easy to run from asking for help when help is truly needed. This reticence frequently leads to disasters that could have been avoided with one or two simple questions. Many people have their self-image wrapped up in an extreme idea of self-possession and self-sufficiency. Though being strong, self-possessed, and self-sufficient is important for many of life’s challenges, it is not all-important. Indeed, an extreme view of this can be very unhealthy because it can undermine the prerequisite for all friendship, intimacy, and love—namely self-communication.

How can we make a quick determination of whether we are grounding our self-image in an *unhealthy* view of self-possession and autonomy? If our need to be self-possessed is hindering or undermining our development in self-communication, then it is unhealthy. Readers who fall into this category may want to reduce the degree to which self-possession controls their self-image—and then work on ways to better communicate themselves to others. If you have difficulty communicating feelings, communicate ideas—and try to put some of your “affective thoughts” into your communication. Failure to develop the capacity for self-communication generally leads to mistakes and missed opportunities—because it presumes that we have all the needed perspectives, knowledge, skills, and access to opportunities within our own limited being. Anyone who subscribes to this is probably suffering—at least slightly—from self-delusion—destructive self-delusion. Having suffered from this self-delusion myself, I would suggest following the advice of Shakespeare— “to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”⁶⁷

In sum, during times of suffering we will want to keep an eye out for both loving and practical friends—and in the selection of practical friends, to keep focused on those who can complement and add to our knowledge, skills, perspective, opportunities, and helpful associates. Extroverts will want to take the list of five practical questions (given in the previous subsection) to practical friends and talk through those questions with them. Those who have shaped their

⁶⁷ Hamlet – Polonius’ last speech to his son, Laertes.

self-image around self-possession and self-sufficiency will want to let go of that extreme view to allow for practical self-communication. This will allow them to ask for help when the need really arises.

III.

Third Tactic: Reshaping Our Expectations of Happiness

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There is an adage about happiness— “much of our happiness depends on what we *think* will make us happy.” Another way of saying this is that happiness comes from psychology -- what we *think* we must have in order to be happy – which is often more influential than the *real* circumstances of our life. Frequently, we cannot change the latter, but we can certainly change the former. When we *think* that we cannot be happy without X, Y, or Z, and we lose X, Y, or Z because of some unforeseen circumstance, we will very likely be unhappy. Many kinds of suffering are connected with *loss* – and if we combine this loss with the thought that we cannot be happy, we can transform the pain of loss into full-blown depression—and even despair. For example, if I explicitly think—or implicitly believe—that I cannot be happy without normal vision, and I begin to experience a loss of vision, then my expectation of unhappiness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—and I exacerbate the pain of losing my vision with anticipation of an unhappy life. This thought or belief can become so prevalent in my psyche that I lose all hope for happiness and fulfillment—and then the joy of life is replaced by a pervasive sadness—and depression begins to take hold.

We have all known friends—or perhaps parents—who lose a spouse and suffer tremendous pain of loss. You may have heard that person say, “I love my spouse so much and he was so central to my life that I simply cannot be happy without him—for me, life is over.” Needless to say, allowing this belief to become “our reality” has led many to an early death—prior to which life had become a profound emptiness and darkness. No doubt the pain of losing a beloved produces tremendous loneliness, emptiness, and darkness, but when we add to it the belief that we “cannot be happy without him,” the loss can easily move to despair and even to self-destructive thoughts.

Even though we may temporarily believe that we cannot be happy without a particular person, without a particular job, without the full use of our faculties, without a particular home, or without being able to live in a particular region, it is very probably *not true*. Such beliefs are common when the pain of loss first strikes because we have probably had an extensive history of being happy with that particular person or job or use of faculties, etc. Nevertheless, when we ask people who have used their imaginations to reconceive the future after their loss, we see that after a certain period of time, they have learned how to be happy once again. They may still mourn or regret their loss, but they do not say, “I cannot be happy without him or her or it, etc.” Sometimes these new paths lead to whole new kinds of happiness that were previously unimagined. This frequently happens with individuals who were formerly living on Levels 1 or 2, and became motivated to move to Levels 3 or 4 because of the pain of their loss.

So how can we reinvent our view of happiness? How can we get beyond the entrenched viewpoint formed by years of happiness before loss? How can we get on with our lives after our

previous view of happiness is no longer possible? Two tactics are of paramount importance. First, we must stop repeating the refrain in our *conscious mind* that “I cannot be happy without X, Y, Z.” By doing this, we not only make ourselves more unhappy in the present moment, we also program our unconscious mind to generate feelings of despondency and hopelessness in the future. It is not enough to stop repeating the familiar refrain— “I can’t be happy without X, Y, Z”—we must repeat the opposite unfamiliar refrain— “I *can* be happy without X, Y, Z—I just don’t know how that is going to look.”

People of faith know that this unfamiliar refrain is not mere wishful thinking—to trick the conscious and unconscious psyche out of hopeless and despondent thoughts or beliefs. The Holy Spirit inspires and guides us through His “providential conspiracy” to a new view of ourselves, our lives, and even our happiness—and while He does this, he opens paths of opportunity that will enable this new self to be happy and fulfilled in hitherto unimagined ways. All we need do is be open to His inspiration and guidance -- see Volume 15 (Chapter One, Section III) and the new levels of happiness to which He is calling us -- see Volume 13 (Third, Fourth, and Chapter Fives).

Once we have disentangled ourselves from our previous view of happiness, we must replace the old view with a new one—and so our second tactic for dealing with false expectations is to use our imagination to reinvent our view of happiness and ourselves. As noted above, extroverts will want to engage in this activity with a practical friend or friends while introverts will probably prefer to do so on their own. People of faith will want to open themselves to the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit by using the guideposts and rules of discernment given in Volume 9. All three of the previously mentioned aids to alleviating fear and anxiety—God, reason, and friends—can be helpful to our imagination in its process of reinventing our view of happiness. If we do not fail to use our imagination with the help of God, reason, and friends, we will very likely find a new way of life which may well make us even happier than before.

Once we move beyond the false belief that we cannot be happy without X, Y, Z, we will likely finish the project of reinventing our happiness, because we will probably be unwilling to victimize ourselves through a failure of imagination.

IV.

Fourth Tactic: Avoid Negative Comparisons

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There is one sure way to add anxiety to our moments of suffering—make negative comparisons. As noted above, much of suffering is connected with loss. So, if we compare ourselves after the loss to what we were like before the loss, we will not be able to avoid frustration and resentment. I am a veritable expert at this because my vision loss has been gradual, and so there is an opportunity every few months to make another comparison to the past, which reveals yet another frustrating loss. I can’t help myself – when I notice a new decrease in vision, the frustration and resentment well up within me. Frustration at new losses is difficult to control, precisely because it is new, and it forces itself upon me – I cannot ignore it. I know I am

going to have to get adjusted to these new circumstances because I won't be able to function as quickly as before – I'll have to be more careful, and use more techniques to prevent mishaps.

Creative adaptation to new losses is essential. As my vision has declined over the years, I have learned one thing – it will probably continue to decline unless I receive a new medical treatment or God grants me a miracle. Thus, I know that if new treatments and miracles have not been a part of my life, I should *expect* another loss in the near future, and when it predictably comes, to take two deep breaths and *resign* myself to the inevitable. Suffering from expected losses is so much easier to take when I don't get myself worked up into a lather – but instead resign myself to my new condition, put myself in God's hands, and get about the business of creatively adapting to the additional loss.

This is not stoic resignation, but Christian resignation, because the source of my detachment from loss does not come from within me – personal strength and courage – but rather from trusting in the loving God who always seems to take care of me, and to use my suffering as a lever for interior and exterior transformation (see Volume 7). This kind of Christian resignation enables me to transfer my focus from my loss and myself to the new interior opportunities coming through that loss. Making this “trusting resignation” a discipline not only leads to sanity and peace, but new opportunities in life. I imagine that everyone who feels the pain of aging goes through something similar.

When we can no longer deny or hide these losses from ourselves, we are left with only three options (1) persisting in resentment, anxiety, and bitterness (with incidental desires to end it all), (2) stoic resignation (which puts the focus on our strength, courage, and resolve), or (3) Christian resignation – in which we place ourselves in the hands of God's loving providence, and creatively adapt to our new circumstances with the certainty that opportunity and transformation will be close at hand. The first option gradually leads to despair, the second option puts the focus on ourselves instead of the opportunity and transformation in the future, and the third presents a peaceful and creative pathway to eternal salvation in the loving God.

I also have a habit of reliving past long term losses – for example, when I am being driven down the highway, and everything is blurry, I will think to myself, “I used to be able to see the beauty of the mountains and the sky, and the ocean...” at which point my frustration, anxiety, and resentment level begin to rise. It's a form of self-torture which is completely unnecessary, because I can still be happy, productive, faith-filled, and contributive without being able to see the beauty of the mountains and the sky, etc. Moreover, the brain has an interesting way of adapting to its new circumstances—I have become much more sensitive to auditory beauty—the beauty of so many different kinds of bird songs and even the symphony of bird songs at dawn and dusk; the beauty of the wind blowing through the chimes and the feel of the wind as I walk down the outside corridor of the House of Prayer (where I live); the beauty of people's voices and their various tones of affection and trust and goodness; and so much more.

My proclivity to compare myself today with a time prior to my loss comes up in many ways. When I have to ask someone for a ride, I can slip into the thought, “Boy I remember the times when I could just get into a car and drive;” or when I have to ask people for help in reading, I think to myself, “I wish I could just pick up a book again and read whatever I want

whenever I want.” As always, this leads to an increase in anxiety, frustration, and resentment which is completely unnecessary self-torment. Why? Because I have already adapted to these circumstances without a loss of productivity or contribution. Indeed, the experience of loss has deepened me immeasurably, made me more sensitive to the weaknesses of others, and opened me to the Lord in unexpectedly profound ways. Though I have lost autonomy in driving and reading, I experience new kinds of companionship with those who help me in these areas.

The point I am making is that comparisons of ourselves after a loss to a previous state before the loss, is unproductive, anxiety producing, and inhibits our creative imagination to adapt to our new life circumstances. Our power to adapt, and the creativity of imagination that we can bring to this process are truly remarkable, but the sure way of undermining them is to compare ourselves with what we once had or what we once were able to do.

So how do we begin the process of Christian resignation? By using three important tools discussed above: “fiat,” “spontaneous prayer,” and “rationality.” The first tool in stopping negative comparisons is to make an authoritative act of will – which is sometimes called “fiat.” My favorite way of doing it is to tell myself, “Stop it!” or “Stop it – this is going to destroy you.” Use whatever words you like, but make sure they focus your willpower on bringing an immediate end to the negative comparison. The more you let the negative comparison captivate your imagination, the harder it will be to begin the process of prayer and rationality.

After fiat, I proceed to prayer by using some of the spontaneous prayers given in the previous volume: “Lord do not waste one scintilla of this suffering – make some good come out of it for me, others, or your mystical body,” or “I give up – you take care of it,” or “Father, if it be your will, let this cup pass from me, but if not, then thy loving will be done.” Sometimes frustration can well up right in the middle of saying these prayers. When it does, I simply tell the Lord what I am thinking and feeling – and then I pray the above prayers.

Once I am able to attain a sense of calm with the Lord, I begin the process of practical thought – how can I adapt to this new loss? Do I need additional assistance? Are there any aids or technology that will help me? When I am relatively calm, I am genuinely surprised by how creative and flexible I can be. As I am thinking, I am careful not to slip back into the comparison – “I recall how much easier it was just a week ago....” If this begins to occur, I go right back to fiat – “Stop it!”

Sometimes, particularly during my travels in airports, people will express frustration because I ask a question which is obvious or I am slow in getting through a line, etc., and sometimes I can hear people chuckling at some awkward move I might have made. I feel embarrassed and humiliated when these things first occur, but I don’t want to take those humiliations home with me – and replay the tapes again and again before I go to bed. So, I use the same three-fold technique above. First, I tell myself, “Stop it!” I sometimes have to repeat it several times. I then use my favorite Examen Prayer⁶⁸ – “Lord Jesus, help me to be humble-hearted – especially in times of humiliation – with you who are perfectly humble-hearted.”

⁶⁸ See Volume 20 (Chapter Three) for an explanation of the Examen Prayer.

Jesus endured the greatest of humiliations when people were taunting and laughing at Him. Instead of using His divine authority and power to protect Himself or show Himself to be the true Messiah, he simply endured the humiliation in order to offer it up as self-sacrifice – unconditional love – for the life of the world (see Volume 8). This helps me immensely, because I know that following the example of Jesus will lead not only to *my* sanctification, but also the sanctification of the people I touch, and even the people I do not know or see. Moreover, I truly love the Lord, and so I truly delight in following Him. This prayer (and my desire to follow the Lord) enables me to turn these little trials into humble-heartedness and gentle-heartedness *with Jesus* – which is a great gift – not only for me but for the many others who have to live with me.

I live in a community that hosts guest priests from all over the United States and Canada. Some of the guests will tell my community members, “It’s really edifying to see how happy Bob seems to be despite the vision loss he has experienced in the last few years.” My community members tell them that this is not phony because I don’t have any regrets, and I don’t make any negative comparisons -- I am happy with the pathway toward salvation and service to the kingdom laid out for me by the Lord – “For when I am weak, it is then, that I am strong” (2Cor 12:10).

Perspective is incredibly important. If we can make the future’s opportunities and grace-filled adventure more significant than the lost capabilities of the past, we will not only avoid self-inflicted pain, but be open to the opportunities the Holy Spirit will surely bring. This will enable the Lord to lead us into His eternal Kingdom of Love.

Editor’s Note: If you are interested in other topics, such as choosing consolation in times of suffering, see Chapter 5 of *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*.

Chapter Four

The Opportunities of Suffering

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Introduction

The forthcoming explanation of the opportunities in suffering will be divided into two parts:

1. The *interior* opportunities of suffering (Section I), and
2. The *external* opportunities of suffering (Section II).

I.

The Interior Opportunities of Suffering

By “interior” I mean pertaining to the self – to principles, ideals, character, purpose, and identity, which shape *who* we are and *who* we will become. Philosophers throughout the ages

have followed the lead of Plato and Aristotle in suggesting that our personal identity is governed by the *end* or objective we habitually or continuously pursue as our main reason for living as well as the means we habitually use to pursue that end or objective. The idea of habit is very important here, because the more habituated we become to particular ends and means, the more they become engrained in our character and identity. Habits become “second *nature*” to us – and after a while, they become almost permanent – constituting our identity.

There are both good habits and bad habits. Good habits are those that pursue the highest and most noble ends and means within our reach – they make the best use of our powers of intellect, creativity, emotions, and will. Bad habits are precisely the opposite – they orient us in a direction that will either underutilize our powers or focus them on negative and destructive ends. Virtues are good habits – and they are indispensable not only for living our present lives, but for constituting our eternal identity. We are taught that there are three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love, and four cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. As we saw in Volume 13 (Chapter One), the virtue of love (*agapē*) is vast in its implications and reach. It includes humility, gentleness, forgiveness, compassion, the ability to accept compassion, the desire to serve the common good, and the desire to serve the eternal kingdom of God.

Since the time of Jesus, Christians have advocated that *suffering is an indispensable path to virtue* – and therefore, an indispensable means for solidifying and establishing our eternal character and identity.⁶⁹ Christians have not made this suggestion cavalierly or stoically – and they certainly do not advocate expressions such as, “Shut up and take it – it will make you tougher and more self-reliant!” Rather, Christians have spent themselves trying to *alleviate* suffering, and encouraging trust and hope in God -- helping those who “find life burdensome” to seize the opportunity within it – opportunities for faith, hope, prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, humility, forgiveness, compassion, acceptance of compassion, and the desire to build the common good and the kingdom of God.

The question now arises why does suffering present such a remarkable opportunity for solidifying and establishing our eternal character and identity – and how do we take advantage of those opportunities so that suffering will lead to optimal growth in virtue, character, identity, and ultimately, to salvation? In this section devoted to *interior* opportunities in suffering, I will examine how suffering helps us choose and develop:

- *Prudence*—the first natural virtue (Section I.A).
- *The natural virtues of fortitude and temperance* (Section I.B).
- *Agapē* – compassionate, forgiving, self-sacrificial love for the good of the *other* – including specific treatment of humility, vulnerability, forgiveness, compassion, and the acceptance of compassion (Section I.C).

⁶⁹ See *God So Loved the World*, Chapter 3 (Section I).

I.A

First Interior Opportunity – Prudence and Identity Transformation

In the previous chapter, we noted that the natural virtue of prudence is first and foremost the awareness of what is truly important and meaningful in life. Thus, prudence is grounded in the awareness of knowing our most proper *end* or objective in life – what will bring greatest meaning, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny. However, prudence does not stop there. It includes awareness of the essential *means* to get to those ends – the principles and virtues (good habits) that will support achievement of this ultimate end. In so doing, it also considers the vices and behaviors that undermine this end. Finally, prudence goes beyond being *aware* of these good ends, principles, and virtues – it appreciates their beauty and “lovability” both in themselves and as a source of the good life. As such, prudence *desires* them – and in this desire, moves us naturally towards them, which ultimately habituates them. This is why prudence is the first of the natural virtues, and why it must be our first consideration in the opportunities of suffering.

We dedicated the whole of Volume 13 to the subject of prudence. That is, to knowing our highest and most noble end. We considered it under the rubric of “Four Levels of Happiness.” Recall that we have four kinds of desire based on nine powers or capacities within us:

1. Bodily desires – connected with bodily powers.
2. Ego-comparative desires – connected with the power of self-consciousness.
3. Contributive and loving desires – connected with the powers of empathy and conscience.
4. Transcendental desires – connected with our desires for perfect and unconditional truth, love, justice/goodness, beauty, and home.

We then noted that “happiness” comes from the fulfillment of a desire – and that conversely “unhappiness” comes from the non-fulfillment of a desire. Inasmuch as there are four kinds of desire, then there must also be four kinds of happiness.

We then showed – along with Plato, Aristotle, and many contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and theologians -- that these four kinds of happiness could be ranked according to how pervasive, enduring, and deep they are. “Pervasive” indicates the extent to which their effects go beyond the self; “endurance” refers to how long these effects are likely to last; and “depth” refers to the *quality* of effect. With respect to depth, do they come from the highest use of our powers – intelligence, creativity, love, moral reasoning, spiritual awareness, intuition, and will? Using these three criteria, it is clear that the first kind of happiness – physical-material happiness is the least pervasive, enduring, and deep. The second kind of happiness – ego-comparative – is more pervasive, enduring, and deep, but not optimally so. The third kind of happiness – contributive and loving happiness – is more pervasive, enduring, and deep, but still not optimally so. Finally, the fourth kind of happiness – transcendental happiness – is the most pervasive, enduring, and deep – because it promises perfect, unconditional, universal and eternal truth, love, justice/goodness, beauty, and home in a loving Being who can support and ground these perfections – God.

At this point we began to see clearly where prudence was pointing – towards the highest levels of happiness. We noted that all levels of happiness are good – and fulfill important aspects of life’s purpose and dignity – but that the higher ones have to direct the lower ones – lest the

lower ones undermine the higher ones. We might say then that the wise or prudent person will seek first the transcendental desires – and then the contributive and loving desires in light of them – and then ego-comparative desires in light of the higher two kinds – and then bodily desires in light of the higher three kinds. The prudent person will also see the beauty and lovability of this ordering – desire it – and move naturally towards it – which will eventually make it habitual.

In the process of explaining this, we noted that one of these levels of desire or happiness will have to be dominant – it will have to be our first priority (either implicitly or explicitly), because we cannot have two first priorities if a conflict of desires should arise. We noted also that the above ordering was not intuitively obvious, because children tend to stress Level 1, and adolescents (who have a modicum of opportunity) stress Level 2. There is no guarantee that adults will move to Levels 3 or 4. They can habituate themselves to Levels 1 and 2 – even if these lower levels are destroying them. Why?

The lower levels of happiness/identity are more surface apparent, immediately gratifying, and intense. They tend to more easily attract us and hold our attention (instead of requiring discipline and effort), so we more easily gravitate toward them. If we do not educate ourselves, search for something more, and discipline ourselves to attain the higher levels, we could easily drift into a hedonistic inertia. This would mean living for what is most surface apparent and immediately gratifying, while neglecting what is most pervasive, enduring, and deep—which expresses our highest, most noble, eternal, and unconditional purpose, dignity, and fulfillment. If we want to move toward what is most pervasive, enduring, and deep, we will have to allow Levels 1 and 2 to become recessive -- we will have to let go of them (enticing as they are) -- and this is where suffering frequently comes in.

It cannot be said that human beings *require* suffering in order to move from the more superficial levels of happiness/identity to the higher (more pervasive, enduring, and deep) ones, for human beings can see the intrinsic goodness and beauty of making an optimal positive difference to family, friends, community, organization, culture, and even the kingdom of God. They can be attracted to this noble, beautiful, and even transcendent identity as a fulfillment of their higher selves, or even their transcendent eternal selves. However, this more positive impetus to move toward the more pervasive, enduring, and deep identity can be greatly *assisted* by emptiness, weakness, vulnerability, and the negative emotions of the comparison game – see Volume 13 (Chapter Three). It is precisely these negative conditions which can break the spell of the lower levels of happiness/identity.

Physical pleasures (Level 1) can be so riveting that they can produce addiction. The same holds true for status, esteem, control, and power. In my life, I have seen how powerful (and even addictive) these lower levels of identity can be. Yet, I truly desired (and saw the beauty and nobility of) the higher levels of happiness/identity. Though this vision was quite powerful in me, I found myself transfixed by the lower levels – almost unable to move myself beyond them. This is where the “power” of suffering -- emptiness, weakness, and vulnerability came into my life. Experiences of my limitations (including progressive blindness) broke the spell of pursuing ego, status, and power. I had a genuine Pauline experience of having to look at life anew – to look for more pervasive purpose in the face of a loss of power – to reexamine what I was living for in

light of a loss of control. I had to become more dependent on God, to trust in His ways, and to trust more radically in His logic of love. Thank God for suffering; thank God for the imperfect natural order which gave rise to weaknesses and limitations. Without them, I would have been locked into the spell of ego, status, and power – even though I saw the beauty and nobility of optimal contribution and love. My appreciation of the noble was not strong enough to break the spell of superficiality. Without suffering, I would have been trapped in its powerful inertia. Ironically, weakness and suffering gave me the freedom to overcome the far greater suffering of living beneath myself, of shunning noble purpose, and of consciously wasting my life. Physical and psychological weakness helped me overcome the underliving of my life, the underestimation of my dignity, and the emptiness intrinsic to them.

There are probably some who do not need suffering to make a move from Level 2 to Level 3 and 4. I was not one of them. Suffering was my liberation, my vehicle, my pathway to what was most worthy of my life, and what was most noble and perduring in me. I suspect that there are others like me (and Saint Paul) who need suffering, weakness, and vulnerability to call them to their most noble, perduring, and true selves. For these individuals, the imperfect world is indispensable.

Speaking for myself, if I had been born in a *perfect* world, I would not have been called out of Level 1 and 2 meaning in life – and very likely would never have discovered contribution, humility, compassion, love, faith, service to the common good, and service to the kingdom. I would likely have been content to simply enjoy life – instead of struggling to define my character, and make a difference to the world and the kingdom of God. Life might have been more enjoyable, but not nearly as meaningful, dignified, fulfilling, or noble.

This liberating power of suffering is not restricted to physical or psychological weakness. It applies most poignantly to the anticipation of death. I once had a student ask, “Why do we need to die? If God is perfect and He intended to give us eternal life, why does He make us die in order to get there? Why not just allow us to continue living without all the mystery about the beyond?” I initially responded that eternal life is not merely a continuation of this current earthly life – it is a *transition* from this life to a completely new kind of life. She responded, “Well, why isn’t the ‘new’ life a continuation of this one? Why wouldn’t God create us immediately in the ‘new’ life?” I indicated to her that the goodness, joy, and beauty of the “new” life consists in perfect love that will exist between God and us, and between all of us in God. I further indicated that this “love” would consist in a perfect act of empathy with another whereby doing the good for the other would be just as easy, if not easier, than doing the good for oneself – where empathy would take over the desire for ego-satisfaction and bring us to our completion through others and God.

The student almost intuitively agreed that this would be perfect joy, which led her to re-ask the question, “Well, why didn’t God just create us in a situation of perfect love?” At this point, the reader will probably recognize my answer to her question from the foregoing volumes -- that love is our *free* choice. God cannot create us into a “world of perfect love;” we have to create the condition of love for ourselves and others by our free decisions. As noted immediately above, our decision to love (to live for a contributive identity) can be assisted considerably by

weakness and vulnerability; but even more importantly, it can be assisted by the anticipation of death.

As many philosophers have noted (both those coming from a transcendental perspective - such as Karl Rahner⁷⁰ and Edith Stein⁷¹ -- and a purely naturalist perspective (such as Martin Heidegger⁷² and Jean-Paul Sartre⁷³), death produces a psychological finality which compels us to make a decision about what truly matters to us, what truly defines our lives, sooner rather than later. It really does not matter whether we have a strong belief in an afterlife or not, the finality of death incites us to make a statement about the “pre-death” meaning of our lives. Most of us view an ongoing deferral of fundamental options (such as to live for love or not, to live for integrity or not, to live for truth or not, etc.) to be unacceptable because death calls us to give authentic definition to our lives – the finality of death says to our innermost being that we must express our true selves prior to the termination of the life we know.

Death may well be one of the best gifts we have been given because it calls us to our deepest life-definition and self-definition, and in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, to the creation of our essence.⁷⁴ If we believe in an afterlife, we take this authentic self-definition (say, love) with us into our eternity. But even if we do not believe in an afterlife, death still constitutes an indispensable gift of life, for it prevents us from interminably delaying the creation of our essence. It calls us to proclaim who we truly are and what we really stand for – sooner rather than later. We cannot interminably waste our lives in indecision.

In light of death, the choice of one’s fundamental essence (say, love) becomes transformative and “life-giving.” Death gives life – an authentic, reflective, and free life through a more pervasive, enduring, and deep purpose.

Ironic as it may seem, our need to *freely* move to higher levels of happiness, purpose, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny makes emptiness, weakness, vulnerability, the negative emotions of the comparison game, and death indispensable. Without them, most of us would be left in the inertia of superficiality, underrated dignity, and underestimated destiny. Left in unhindered hedonism and ego-comparative identity, many of us, if not most of us, would fail to choose, develop, and make habitual, the prudence, virtue, and love, leading to our eternal transcendental fulfillment.

I.B

Second Interior Opportunity -- Growth in Natural Virtues

⁷⁰ See Karl Rahner 1961 *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder).

⁷¹ See Edith Stein 2002 *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publishing).

⁷² See his extensive treatment of “Being Toward Death” in Martin Heidegger 2008 *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics) pp 237-299.

⁷³ See the role of death in Jean-Paul Sartre 1993 *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press) pp 65-66, 76, 165-166.

⁷⁴ See Jean-Paul Sartre 1993 *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press). pp 15, 60, 129, and 724.

Weakness and vulnerability are the conditions necessary for two of the cardinal virtues – courage and self-discipline. Notice that these virtues define our character precisely because they are chosen in the midst of adversity. They define our ability to “pay a price” for our principles and ideals. This “price” gives existential weight to our principles and ideals, for we cannot hold them cheaply.

This is particularly evident with respect to courage. The principles of love, truth, and justice are good in themselves, and they are honorable in action, but when we have to choose them in the midst of the possibility of injury, embarrassment, mortification, or death, we not only admire them for their intrinsic goodness, we claim them as our own. The greater the price we must pay to live the principles and ideals we admire and honor, the more they become part of us, the more they define our identity. If we admire an honorable ideal because it is honorable, it speaks only partially to who we are; but if we choose an honorable ideal not only because we honor it, but because we want to live it even at the cost of injury, sacrifice, embarrassment, or death, then it truly defines us. Ironically, an imperfect natural order (which gives rise to the real possibility of injury or death) not only gives rise to the possibility of courage, but also to that courage lending existential weight (and therefore dignity) to our choice of the honorable ideal.

Is it worth it? Is it worth sacrifice, injury, and death to choose the noble thing in the midst of adversity? Only the reader can answer for him or herself. Would you rather have a very safe world where you can only be a bystander -- or would you rather have an unsafe world where you can enter into the fray and see who you truly are – how you truly embrace the honorable – even at the cost of injury or death? What would you want for your children – a safe world without the dignity and self-definition of challenge and self-sacrifice -- or an unsafe world, holding out the possibility and actuality of that ultimate dignity? The answer to these questions may depend on whether we believe in eternal life – though not necessarily. If we do believe in eternal life, then the answer will very probably be, “I would rather have challenge, the possibility of courage, and the possibility of self-sacrifice for a noble cause – for then I will know who I truly am – and I will have defined myself in the face of adversity for all eternity.” If we do not believe in eternal life, the answer is more ambiguous – though some naturalistic and atheistic thinkers, such as Heidegger⁷⁵ and Sarte,⁷⁶ acknowledge even a temporary benefit of knowing and defining our true selves.

I am presuming that most readers are open to at least the possibility of eternal life with an unconditionally loving God, otherwise you would not have made it this far in the *Quartet*, and would not be considering why an unconditionally loving God would allow suffering and evil. If I am correct, then the suffering you endure for the sake of the noble, love, and the kingdom of God will define your being – not just in this life – but throughout eternity – where suffering, according to Jesus, is replaced completely by the joy of unconditional love. We will not need to suffer for an eternity to give ourselves eternal self-definition – the suffering we endure in this short life will be sufficient to leave an indelible mark on who we are forever.

⁷⁵ See Martin Heidegger’s “Being Toward Death” in *Being and Time* pp.272- 274.

⁷⁶ See Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* pp. 140-143, 177, 465-467.

Now use the lens of eternal love to ask yourself the above questions once again -- would you rather have a very safe world where you can only be a bystander -- or would you rather have an unsafe world where you can enter into the fray and see who you truly are and will be throughout eternity? What would you want for your children – a safe world without the possibility of challenge or self-sacrifice -- or an unsafe world, holding out the possibility of establishing a meaningful identity throughout eternity? If you chose the “unsafe world” for the sake of eternally meaningful self-definition, then the rest of this volume will be beneficial, however if you choose the “safe world,” then this volume may prove quite challenging.

We now move to the second natural virtue -- self-control or self-discipline. While courage is the pursuit of virtue over against the possibility of pain, self-control is the pursuit of virtue through the avoidance of destructive indulgence in pleasure and passion. Many philosophers have recognized that an unmitigated pursuit of pleasure can interfere with, or even undermine the pursuit of what is most noble, most pervasive, and most enduring. It can even lead to the destruction of ourselves and others. Yet these pleasures are not intrinsically evil. Food is obviously good for human beings, but an unmitigated pursuit of food (to the point of gluttony) will likely undermine (or at least slow down) the pursuit of the noble. A glass of wine may be good during a convivial meal, but excessive indulgence in it could lead to alcoholism and the undermining of family, job, and friends. Sexuality is a powerful binding force within marriage and family, but excessive indulgence in it can lead to broken relationships, a sense of betrayal, breakdown in commitments, and crimes of passion.

Similarly, ego-satisfactions can also play a beneficial part in life. Success in a speech might encourage one to do more speaking. Achievement in studies might encourage one to pursue a Ph.D. Praise from others could build up self-esteem, but an unmitigated pursuit of success, achievement, and praise (as ends in themselves) will produce egocentricity, narcissism, and the negative emotions of the comparison game -- jealousy, fear of failure, ego-sensitivity, blame, rage, contempt, inferiority, superiority, self-pity, and emptiness -- see Volume 13 (Chapter Three).

Both sensorial and ego pleasures are a mixed blessing – in their proper place they can bring happiness, conviviality, and encouragement toward certain forms of achievement; but pursued uncontrollably as ends in themselves, they will very likely interfere with, and even undermine the pursuit of what is noble, pervasive, and enduring -- what is most meaningful and purposeful in life.

This gives rise to the question of why God didn’t create a more perfect human being in a more perfect world. Why didn’t God just give us an “internal regulator” which would *not allow* us to eat too much, drink too much, desire too much? Why didn’t God put us in a world with just enough resources to satisfy our sensorial and ego appetites just enough for health but not enough to undermine our deepest purpose in life? We return to the same words we have seen time and time again – “choice” and “freedom.”

Choosing to limit pleasure can be just as difficult as enduring pain for the sake of the good or noble. Thus, the limiting of pleasure can be just as self-definitional as enduring pain. There is a real sacrifice involved in limiting pleasure -- sometimes it entails saying “no” amidst

an irresistible urge; sometimes it means dealing with an addiction; sometimes it causes a profound restriction to freedom because we deny ourselves what we could have otherwise pursued; and sometimes it can make us look prudish in the midst of friends who do not share our view of happiness/identity.

So, why didn't God just create us with a behavioral governor inside our brains? Why didn't God create a better human in a better world without the possibility of unmitigated desire for pleasure and ego satisfaction? Because God wants *us* to define ourselves in terms of ordinary, non-heroic choices – by choosing noble aspirations above the world of material pleasures. In the day-to-day, ordinary, non-heroic choices we make, an essence (self-definition) begins to form, etched in our character beyond mere thought and aspiration, through the constant pursuit of the little things that enable nobility to emerge from our souls.

We might fail in this pursuit countless times, but our perseverance in the midst of struggles and failures can be extraordinarily effective in etching self-definition into our eternal souls. In God's logic of unconditional love (which includes unconditional forgiveness and healing), our struggles to control pleasure and passion, our hope in forgiveness, our perseverance amidst failures, and our humble endurance of criticism are all “part of the cost” of virtue, which makes that virtue more than a mere thought or aspiration—it etches that virtue into our eternal souls.

For this reason, God has created us with the freedom to pursue the seven “deadly sins”—gluttony, lust, sloth, greed, anger, envy, and pride—and a capacity to desire more than we need even to the point of undermining a good and noble life. God has done this to give us the privilege and freedom to choose the noble over against the possibility of the ignoble so that our virtue—or at least our struggle in pursuit of the virtuous—might be our own; so that it might be chosen and etched into our eternal souls; so that it might be part of our self-definition for all eternity.

Up to this point, we have discussed why God would create us in an imperfect world giving rise to pain, weakness, vulnerability, death, and grief – so that we might *freely* choose the higher levels of purpose and identity as well as the virtues of courage and self-discipline for the sake of the noble. If this is part of the reason why an all-loving God allows suffering, then we would waste our suffering if we fail to seek these opportunities in it. As we have discussed in previous volumes, particularly Volume 5, it is very difficult to concentrate on seeking opportunities in suffering when we are besieged by fear, anxiety, loneliness, anger, bitterness, and grief. This is precisely why I did not present the opportunities of suffering until this late point in the book. The first step in dealing with suffering is to bring fear, anxiety, and other negative emotions into perspective with prayer, rationality, prudence, and friends. Once we have a modicum of peace and stability – workable backup plans, a sense of God's presence and help, and support from our friends – then we can begin to mine our suffering for the riches of higher purpose and identity, courage, and self-discipline – not to mention the forthcoming virtues of *agapē*, contribution, faith and building the kingdom of God.

How do we begin the process of mining our suffering for these virtues? *Ask questions* directed at these virtues. In the case of the above virtues, we might ask, “How can I use my suffering to pursue a higher level of meaning and identity? Can I use my suffering to enter more

deeply into Level 3 contributive purpose and identity? Can I use my suffering to enter more deeply into Level 4 transcendent identity? Can I use my suffering to enhance my faith and my relationship with the loving God? Can I use my suffering to be more deliberate about pursuing the noble – even at the cost of self-sacrifice? Can I use my suffering to be more temperate and disciplined for the sake of the noble?” These questions are not meant to be answered immediately. They are meant to stimulate both conscious and unconscious reflection – and when we repeat them in the midst of our suffering – they direct our conscious and subconscious mind to *look for* answers within ourselves, our dreams, our conversations, and every other aspect of our lives. We become like Archimedes – with open-ended anticipation of an answer to our questions – and eventually when we see the water rising in the baths of Syracuse, we get the clue and shout – “Eureka, I have found it!”

I think it would be just like an unconditionally loving God not only to give us the free choice to appropriate higher levels of purpose and identity as well as the virtues of courage and self-discipline, but also to give us the opportunity and creativity to discover, pursue, and develop our own particular way to do this. Though suffering is painful and negative, it provides this opportunity for growth, creativity, and self-definition.

I.C

Third Interior Opportunity -- Growth in *Agapē*

Editor’s Note: In *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, we present a very important chapter on the four levels of love (Chapter 6), which is not presented in *Credible Catholic*. The insights there provide a basis for a much deeper understanding of the following material on how suffering plus faith can greatly enhance love (*agapē*).

We now move from the natural virtues of Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers to the religious virtue of *agapē*. Though most religions acknowledge the importance of love, philosophers have not given it its due – leaving it on the periphery of philosophical reflection.⁷⁷ Among religions, Christianity alone has made love central, taking great care to define it in detail.⁷⁸ The reason for this is obvious. Jesus made love the highest commandment, defined love (*agapē*) through His preaching and parables, asserted the unconditional love of His Father, and demonstrated His unconditional love through His relationship with sinners and His self-sacrificial actions.⁷⁹ I will again make the assumption that most readers are at least open to Christianity; otherwise you probably would not be asking “Why an *all-loving* God (distinctive and central to Christianity) would allow suffering?” If this is the case, this section will be of paramount importance – for inasmuch as love is the highest virtue for Jesus (which all other natural virtues must be consistent with and serve), it must be at the heart of Jesus’ explanation for why His Father would allow suffering.

⁷⁷ The notable exceptions to this are Christian philosophers such as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and contemporary Christian philosophers such as Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, and Gabriel Marcel.

⁷⁸ See Volume 4 (Chapter One and Two).

⁷⁹ See Volume 4 (Chapters Three through Five).

Volume 16 (Chapter One, Section I) was dedicated to defining Jesus' distinctive view of love – for which early Christians used the term “*agapē*.” This will be briefly summarized in Section I.C.1, after which six specific characteristics of *agapē* will be considered in their relationship to suffering – empathy (Section I.C.2), love's vulnerability (Section I.C.3), humility (Section I.C.4), forgiveness (Section I.C.5), compassion (Section I.C.6), and acceptance of compassion (Section I.C.7).

I.C.1 Definition of *Agapē*

As we saw in the previous volume, *agapē* is a gift of self, which is frequently expressed in self-sacrifice. It is grounded in empathy with the other which makes apparent the unique and *intrinsic* goodness, worthiness, and lovability of that other, which creates a unity with that other whereby doing the good for the other is just as easy, if not easier, than doing the good for oneself. As such, *agapē* arises out of a desire to give life to the intrinsically valuable and lovable other – who could be a stranger or a friend.

We must pause for a moment here to address the idea of *intrinsic* goodness or dignity. This idea must be distinguished from *extrinsic* goodness or dignity – which is grounded in personal and social utility – the ability to make a productive or economically valuable contribution to others and society. Intrinsic goodness or dignity belongs to individuals independently of their usefulness. It comes from their soul – their unique capacity for friendship and love as well as their capacity to pursue perfect truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home – and to relate to the transcendent interpersonal Being who has given us these transcendental capacities. In the moment of empathy, we recognize a unique interpersonal person who manifests these empathetic and transcendental capacities – the unique and irreplaceable *person* who emanates empathy, goodness, and transcendental mystery. We behold and appreciate the uniquely good and loving transcendental mystery before us – encountering this mystery through a benevolent glance, an amiable one of voice, a “feeling of unity” with someone of ultimate significance and preciousness. In this act of empathy, the *intrinsic* mysterious lovable good and transcendental dignity of a unique individual is beheld – which is quite distinct from capturing and objectifying the usefulness of that being. Viktor Frankl states it this way:

But today's society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy and, in particular, it adores the young. It virtually ignores the value of all those who are otherwise, and in so doing blurs the decisive difference between being valuable in the sense of dignity and being valuable in the sense of usefulness. If one is not cognizant of this difference and holds that an individual's value stems only from his present usefulness, then, believe me, one owes it only to personal inconsistency not to plead for euthanasia along the lines of Hitler's program, that is to say, ‘mercy’ killing of all those who have lost their social usefulness, be it because of old age, incurable illness, mental deterioration, or whatever handicap they may suffer. Confounding the dignity of man with mere usefulness arises from conceptual confusion that in turn may be traced back to the

contemporary nihilism transmitted on many an academic campus and many an analytical couch.⁸⁰

Furthermore, *agapē* seeks no reward – neither the reward of romantic feelings intrinsic to *eros* (romantic love), nor the reward of reciprocal commitment and care intrinsic to *philia* (friendship), nor even the feelings of love and delight intrinsic to *storgē* (affection). *Agapē* seeks only the goodness and lovability of others *in themselves*. The wellbeing of the intrinsically good, lovable, and transcendental other is a sufficient reward for the commitment of one's time, future, psychic energy, physical energy, resources, and even self-sacrifice. It is its own reward.

I.C.2 Empathy⁸¹

Agapē begins with empathy, a feeling for another, or perhaps better, a feeling *with* another, which produces “unity with,” “caring about” and “caring for” the other. This unity with the other breaks down interpersonal barriers (rising out of self-interest) so that doing the good for the other is just as easy if not easier than doing the good for oneself. Most would agree that this “feeling for and with another” is quite natural. We can meet others for a few moments and get a sense of their goodness and lovability. When we see others in need and intuit their worthiness from our empathetic connection with them, we will likely respond with sympathy, assistance or words of consolation. Mere presence, mere tone of voice, mere glance, mere feeling of connectedness can engender a recognition of unique and intrinsic goodness and lovability which causes us to care about the other, to protect the other, to attend to the other's needs, to spend time with the other, and even to sacrifice oneself for the other – even a total stranger. It is as if we have a receptor, like a radio antenna, which is attuned to the frequency of the other's unique and intrinsic goodness and lovability, and when the signal comes, whether it be from a smile, an utterance, or a look of need, we connect in a single feeling which engenders a gift of self.

Though most would agree that empathy is natural to us, we must hasten to add that our own desires for autonomy and ego-fulfillment can block our receptivity to the other's “signal.” We can become so self-absorbed or self-involved that we forget to turn on the receiver, and even if we have turned on the receiver, we have the volume turned down so low that it cannot produce adequate output in our hearts. It is at this juncture that suffering – particularly the suffering of weakness and vulnerability proves to be most helpful.

This point may be illustrated by a story my father told me when I was an adolescent. I think he meant it more as a parable about how some attitudes can lead some people to become believers and other people to become unbelievers and even malcontents. But it became for me a first glimpse into the interrelationship between suffering and compassion, love and lovability, trust and trustworthiness, co-responsibility and dignity, and the nature of God.

⁸⁰ Viktor Frankl *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Beacon Press) p. 138.

⁸¹ Perhaps the most nuanced treatment of empathy available today is Edith Stein's phenomenological *On the Problem of Empathy* (Wash. D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1989). The first chapter on the “Essence of the Act of Empathy” is particularly valuable (see pp. 6-17)

Once upon a time, God created a world at a banquet table.⁸² He had everyone sit down, and served up a sumptuous feast. Unfortunately, He did not provide any of the people at the table with wrists or elbows. As a consequence, nobody could feed themselves. All they could do was feel acute hunger while gazing at the feast.

This provoked a variety of responses. At one end of the table, a group began to conjecture that God could not possibly be all-powerful, for if He were, He would have been all-knowing, and would have realized that it would have been far more perfect to create persons with wrists and elbows so that they could eat sumptuous feasts placed before them. The refrain was frequently heard, “Any fool can see that some pivot point on the arm would be preferable to the impoverished straight ones with which we have been provided!”

A second group retorted, “If there really is a God, it would seem that He would *have* to be all-powerful and all-knowing, in which case, He would not make elementary mistakes. If God is God, He could have made a better creature (e.g., with elbows). If God exists, and in His omniscience has created us without elbows or wrists, He must have a cruel streak, perhaps even a sadistic streak. At the very minimum, He certainly cannot be all-loving.”

A third group responded by noting that the attributes of “all-powerful” and “all-loving” would seem to belong to God by nature, for love is positive, and God is purely positive, therefore, God—not being devoid of any positivity—would have to be pure love. They then concluded that God did not exist, for it was clear that the people at the table were set into a condition that was certainly less than perfect (which *seemed* to betoken an imperfectly loving God). They conjectured, “We should not ask where the banquet came from, let alone where we came from, but just accept the fact that life is inexplicable and absurd. After all, we have been created to suffer, but an all-loving God would not have done this. Our only recourse is to face, with authenticity and courage, the absence of God in the world, and to embrace the despair and absurdity of life.”⁸³

A fourth group was listening to the responses of the first three, but did not seem to be engaged by the heavily theoretical discourse. A few of them began to look across the table, and in an act of empathy and compassion, noticed that even though they could not feed themselves, they could feed the person across the table. In an act of freely choosing to feed the other first, of letting go of the resentment about not being able to do it by themselves, they began to feed one another. At once, *agapē* was discovered in freedom, while their very real need to eat was also satisfied.

This parable reveals a key insight into suffering, namely, that “empathy has reasons that negative theorizing knows not of.” The first three groups had all assumed that weakness and vulnerability were essentially negative, and because of this, they assumed that either God had

⁸² This parable is attributed to Rabbi Haim of Romshishok, who used it as an allegory to illustrate the difference between hell and heaven. In hell, everyone tries to feed themselves, and gets nothing, while in heaven people reach across the table and are fed. Apparently my father made a very creative adaptation of this parable.

⁸³ Albert Camus explicitly states this absurdist philosophy in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

made a mistake or He was defective in love. Their preoccupation with the negativity of weakness distracted them from discovering, in that same weakness, the positive, empathetic, compassionate responsiveness to the need of the other which grounds the unity and generativity of love. This lesson holds the key not only to the meaning of suffering but also to the life and joy of *agapē*. If we are to be drawn by suffering into the richness of empathy and compassion, we will have to let go of the stoic presumption that weakness and vulnerability are essentially negative, and invest ourselves in Jesus' revelation of the positivity of suffering—it's invitation to eternal love and joy.

The experience of the fourth group at the table reveals why God would allow us to suffer – because the imperfection of the human condition leads to weakness and vulnerability which in turn provide invaluable assistance in directing us toward empathy and compassion, and even to receiving the empathy and compassion of others.

Weakness and vulnerability are not *required* for empathy and compassion, because many people find empathy and compassion to be their own reward. They will see the positivity of empathy and compassion as good for both others and themselves. This was certainly not the case for me. Though I saw the intrinsic goodness and worthiness of empathy and compassion (for both myself and others), my egocentricity and desire for autonomy created such powerful blocks that I could not move myself to what I thought was intrinsically valuable and meaningful. I needed help to break through my self-imposed barrier to others—and be released from the spell of autonomy and egocentricity— I needed a “thorn in the flesh – an angel of Satan to beat me, to keep me from getting proud” (2Corinthians 12:7). As noted earlier, I was given this gift through various weaknesses, particularly the deterioration of my eyesight.

Like the fourth group in the parable, my imperfect condition gave me a moment to reconsider the entire meaning of life – what really made life worth living, and it was here that I discovered empathy, love, and compassion. The process was gradual, but the “thorn in the flesh” gave me the very real assistance I needed to open myself to love as the meaning of life.

The first step to unleashing the power of empathy is recognizing the impossibility of being self-sufficient. Looking back on it I was never self-sufficient, I was content to live under the *illusion* of it. Nevertheless, the dispelling of the illusion made me confront reality – we are interdependent and therefore, we need one another -- we need each other's friendship, support, companionship, complementarity, inspiration, and compassion.

The second step requires *accepting* help and compassion from others. In my twenties and thirties, I had a great deal of difficulty doing this because it made me feel inferior to the people who were only trying to help me. Though I recognized their good intent intellectually, I could not help myself, I felt horribly demeaned. Nevertheless, I needed their help, and I disliked my resentful feelings toward them. At this juncture, an important philosophical distinction came to the rescue-- Viktor Frankl's distinction (mentioned above) between “value in the sense of dignity” and “value in the sense of usefulness.”⁸⁴ I have characterized these qualities elsewhere as “intrinsic dignity” and “extrinsic value,” respectively. At the very moment I felt inferiority

⁸⁴ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* p. 138

and resentment for not being able to be self-sufficient, I became more detached from a merely extrinsic self-valuation. If I had not done this, I would have been reduced to a continual state of torment. As I became detached from mere extrinsic valuation, I discovered my *intrinsic* dignity. At first, I counted this kind of self-valuation as “sub-par,” secretly yearning for the old extrinsic valuation to be restored. But it wasn’t—and so I began to gradually accept my intrinsic dignity—my presence to others, my friendship, empathy, and capacity to help and care for others—as *truly* valuable. Eventually I began to see this kind of self-valuation as more important than extrinsic valuation. This led in turn to my ability to value *others* more for their intrinsic dignity than their extrinsic value which gave me the freedom to love them for who they are—instead of esteeming them for what they do. Suffering broke down the barrier of errant self-valuation, which eventually gave me the freedom to love. Upon reflection, I had been like a character in my father’s parable of the banquet table. Thank God for suffering!

I did not make this transition by myself—I was greatly helped by others who recognized some intrinsic goodness and lovability in *me*, and were trying to help me for no other reason than to respond to my need. They recognized something in me that I did not recognize in myself, because I had long since replaced my “lovable self” with a merely “esteemable self” – a “thingafied self” -- and I had to recapture the lovable self through the love that others gratuitously offered to me.

Thus, my weakness and vulnerability *freed* me to empathize with others. If I had not had weaknesses and vulnerability, I probably would not have discovered the beauty of empathy and the lovability of both others and myself. In retrospect, I can say with St. Paul, that I thank God for my weakness and suffering, because they broke the spell of Level 2 identity and the myth of autonomy – virtually compelling me to recognize my and others’ intrinsic dignity. Weakness gave me the *opportunity* to appreciate others’ gratuitous love, their lovability in that love, and my lovability as a reflection of that love. Without suffering, my life would be categorically different – caught up in superficiality and filled with the darkness, emptiness, and loneliness that merely extrinsic self-valuation inevitably brings.

I.C.3 **Love’s Vulnerability**

Love has vulnerability built into it. There is a softness to love; it opens itself to being completed by the other; it reveals weakness (the need for complementarity by the other); it is forgiving of the other in times of failure; it anticipates forgiveness by the other in one’s own failings; its empathy can elicit tears.

Some of us are able to accept and even live in this vulnerability through a simple vision of its intrinsic beauty and goodness. Others like myself (as illustrated above), need some extrinsic prodding to help break the spell of self-sufficiency and ego-centricity, which is built on the illusion that complementarity, weakness, and gentleness are negative. Some of us need to experience vulnerability in order to see its goodness in relationship to love. Some of us need the assistance of weakness to accept the love of others. Some of us need to be reduced to tears in order to experience the tears of sympathy. Some of us need to experience weakness and vulnerability in order to sympathize with others’ weakness and vulnerability.

There is a silent – if not overt – suspicion of and aversion to weakness and vulnerability in our culture. The reason for this lies in a false view of courage and self-discipline. As noted above and in Volume 5, God wants us to possess the natural virtues of rational reflection, prudence, courage, and temperance. He does not want us to be helpless and overly dependent on others for everything – the archetypal “needy person.” Instead, He wants us to be strong and self-reliant in every way that is feasible. *However*, He does not want us to be self-reliant, rational, prudent, courageous, and self-disciplined to the *exclusion* of real interdependency and need for others. God does not want us to lie to ourselves -- or others – and create a façade of being *purely* self-reliant, rational, courageous, and self-disciplined. He wants our rationality, courage, self-discipline, and self-reliance to be based on reality and truth – and therefore to acknowledge our interdependency with others as well as the areas in which we truly need their help and support.

The façade of being *purely* self-sufficient is not only dangerous to self and others – it reveals an arrogance that reduces us to complete inauthenticity. To perpetuate this arrogance, we have to make ourselves believe the most fundamental lie of all – complete autonomy -- and if we can be that false to ourselves, then it must follow as the night, the day that we will be false to every other person.

So how do we acquire love’s vulnerability – which leads to gentleness and humbleness of heart – without abandoning the natural virtues of rationality, prudence, courage and temperance? We must be truthful to ourselves – discerning where we have genuine needs – and how we can respond to other’s genuine needs – *then* cultivate the natural virtues around this truth.

Here is where the opportunity and efficacy of suffering comes into play. Our personal weakness and our inability to perfectly fulfill the needs of others compels all but the most stubborn to confront the myth of perfect autonomy—which in turn points to the truth about ourselves--our interdependency, and our ability to complement, be complemented by, serve, and be served by others.

I.C.4 **Humility**

As Jesus and virtually every saint recognized -- humility is the condition necessary for the possibility of *agapē*. Most of us recognize the necessity of humility in attaining empathy and “gift of self.” Self-absorption does not permit the “signal” of the other to be received. Moreover, it makes us so obsessed with fulfilling our ego needs that we barely notice the goodness and mystery of the other, and feel compelled to use the other as a mere instrument of self-satisfaction. These conditions undermine the very possibility of love.

Some people are able to see the goodness and beauty of humility and to move almost effortlessly toward it, but judging from the history of philosophy, most of us do not belong to this group. We have all heard the phrase from the Book of Proverbs, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18), and Jesus’ proclamation, “The greatest among you will be your servant; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and

those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23: 11-12). Jesus illustrates this further in the Gospel of Luke when he notices guests trying to pick the places of honor at table at a Pharisee’s house:

When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 14: 7-11).

It is no accident that Jesus places humble heartedness (the poor in spirit) as the First Beatitude which affects and conditions not only the rest of the Beatitudes, but the entire Sermon on the Mount – and so we should not be surprised that Jesus in one of the few references to His personal characteristics states, “For I am gentle and *humble* of heart” (Matthew 11:29).

Though Socrates recognized the need for humility in the process of inquiry and the acquisition of wisdom,⁸⁵ he did not link it specifically to love. As noted above, most non-Christian philosophers do not spend considerable time or energy on the definition or virtue of love, and so they do not recognize the importance of humility in achieving *agapē* as the highest virtue. Christian philosophers are a notable exception to this. St. Augustine said that “It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”⁸⁶ Christian philosophical tradition has followed this prioritization of humble love until the present day.⁸⁷ For Jesus and the Christian tradition, humility is the entryway to *agapē* – and *agapē* the entryway to true joy. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John:

If you keep my command [to love], you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s command [to love] and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment – “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:10-12).

⁸⁵ See Plato *Apology* (20e-23c).

⁸⁶ This is attributed to St. Augustine in a popular medieval Latin handbook used for sermons called *Manipulus Florum* (*A Handful of Flowers*), edited by Thomas Hibernicus (Thomas of Ireland) in about 1306. He was an anthologist who collected over 6,000 patristic sayings from the libraries at the Sorbonne. He bequeathed it to the Sorbonne – and it was printed in 1483 as a patristic handbook for sermons and writings.

⁸⁷ Though the contemporary Thomistic tradition acknowledges the importance of humility, Christian existentialism (beginning with Søren Kierkegaard), makes it *central*. Robert Roberts shows that humility and gratitude underlie the whole of Kierkegaard’s writings on virtue – and is integral to the whole of Christian moral psychology. See Robert Roberts (2003) *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). The centrality of humility is followed by other Christian existentialists and phenomenologists – most notably Gabriel Marcel, Carl Jaspers, Max Scheler, and Dietrich von Hildebrand. See especially Dietrich von Hildebrand 1976 *Humility: Wellspring of Virtue* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press).

The Christian philosophical tradition acknowledges that the wisdom and goodness of humility is not easy to see, appreciate, and appropriate because it is contrary to our propensity to pursue ego-gratification, comparative advantage, status, and power. I have elsewhere described this propensity as the outcome of a dominant Level 2 view of happiness – see Volume 13 (Chapter Three).

I, for one, never belonged to the group that found the wisdom and goodness of humility to be self-evident. It was difficult for me to understand, even more difficult to appreciate, and still more difficult to appropriate. I was about 20 years old when I first got an inkling about the “possible value” of humility. At that time, I was still equating my lovability with my esteemability and respectability. Yes, I was a friend to others; I could have a great time with my friends; but I wanted these friendships to be on my terms – and to be based on my friends’ *esteem* for me. Though I had a sense that my friends loved me for *who* I was, and that they appreciated my presence and personality, I really wanted them to respect my accomplishments first. Esteemability trumped lovability. I needed extrinsic prodding from deprivation and difficulty to reexamine what I considered to be friendship.

At that time, I saw intelligence, courage, achievement, and my newly burgeoning faith to be valuable. But to be honest, I didn’t even notice humility, empathy, and the vulnerability intrinsic to *agapē*, so I was in no position to consider them valuable. Once again suffering came to the rescue—and this time, it was complemented by faith and grace.

In my novitiate, (the beginning of Jesuit formation) I had a two-fold experience leading toward humility -- an experience of weakness combined with an experience of the beauty of humility in the heart of Christ. The experience of weakness came as a virtual inevitability in the area of athletics (which was never my strong suit). In college, I had always oriented my athletic endeavors around activities I could do fairly well – thus avoiding any potential embarrassments. However, in the novitiate, we had mandated sports activities – such as volleyball and basketball. On one occasion while playing volleyball, we were at “game point,” and the serve went to a man on the opposite team who was 6’6” and had a powerful serve. I thought to myself, “He is going to pound that ball right at me,” – the weak link in the chain – and sure enough – he did! I tried to get my hands perfectly positioned under the ball to knock it high in the air so another teammate could pound it back over the net. I was off by about an inch, and the ball went flying sideways, and we lost the game. I was humiliated--humiliated by the fact that everyone knew *before the shot* that I was the weak link in the chain—and further humiliated by living up to their low expectations. As I was walking off the court with my head hanging low, one of my fellow novices (with whom I am still a good friend) said to me – “Spitzer, what does this have to do with the whole order of salvation?” I thought to myself, “Not much!” At first, I applied his advice only to being the efficient cause of our team losing the game, but later it occurred to me that being weak and humiliated in athletics might have a potential value in helping me to embrace the teachings of Jesus – and this synergized well with the next experience – the love and humility of Jesus.

In my 30-day silent retreat, I experienced the *heart* of Christ. This experience, combined with my experience of athletic weakness, led to a re-examination of life’s meaning, dignity, and fulfillment. Curiously, I came to an awareness of Level 3 through my faith (Level 4). When I

experienced the profound love of Jesus and His Father for me – and began to see how important love (*agapē*) is for meaning, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny, I knew that I would have to take Jesus’ teachings on love very seriously. This led to a slow and reluctant, but nevertheless effective appreciation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Beatitudes. I began to look at these passages in light of the crucified Jesus – noting carefully what He tried to show us and give us through His suffering. I perceived a faint glimmer of the value of humility and self-sacrifice--sufficient to extricate myself from the darkness of pride and egocentricity.

I thought back to the volleyball game and reflected on the humiliation and weakness I felt in that moment – and how these painful and seemingly negative experiences led me – or should I say, “compelled me” -- to look for life’s meaning *beyond* esteemability and egocentric satisfaction. On the horizon, I could see other meanings such as contribution, love, and faith – meanings central to Jesus’ heart -- and recognized how they could be far more meaningful and fulfilling than mere comparative and egocentric satisfactions. Once I had this insight, I was not about to let it go. The example of Jesus enabled me to see the positive value of weakness and humility in the pursuit of love which, in turn, began to free me to accept them – though at the time, I could not embrace them.

A meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* called “The Three Degrees of Humility” was central to my 30-day retreat. When I encountered it, it produced great fear and anxiety, because the greater degrees of humility seemed to be beyond my reach. St. Ignatius counseled that we should not pursue this as a stoic enterprise but rather to imitate the love and goodness of Jesus – who loves us unconditionally. Even with this understanding, I found myself resisting Ignatius’ direction quite strenuously. Fortunately, he anticipated people like myself, and counseled that if we cannot desire such humility, then we should begin by trying to *desire the desire* for humility (*whewwww* – that got me through the meditation).

I made recourse to this story because it speaks to a truth of the heart – namely, that weakness and humiliation seen within the context of the love and suffering of the Son of God, opened my otherwise tightly closed heart to both humility and the efficacy of suffering. It started a journey, which lasts to this very day, and will not be completed until after I leave this world. In a word – suffering in light of the love and suffering of Christ is the pathway to humble love, patient love, compassionate love, gentle love, and self-sacrificial love – what the early Christians called *agapē*- and *agapé* is the pathway to ultimate authenticity, meaning, dignity, destiny, and above all, joy.

In sum, weakness and humiliation were essential in my life to loosen the grip of Level 2 dominance, the comparison game, and the esteemable self. As such they were integral to my freedom to love and the rediscovery of my “lovable self.” This path to humility, involved three components:

1. The encounter with weakness and vulnerability in my life – first in the novitiate and early formation, and later and much more profoundly in my progressive blindness.
2. My discovery of the heart of Jesus and His Father (particularly in the *Spiritual Exercises*) whose love I desired – and desired to imitate.

3. The interpretation of my weakness, vulnerability, and suffering through the words and actions of Jesus and St. Paul, who not only showed me the efficacy of suffering, but also the light and exaltation of humility.

I.C.5 Forgiveness

For Jesus, forgiveness is the most important facet of *agapē* – it is mentioned more often than any other prescript in the New Testament. Forgiveness enables us to start again without having to live under the burden of our past offenses. If we cannot forgive from the heart, love (*agapē*) has little chance of getting off the ground.

Forgiveness requires both humility and empathy because it entails letting go of a *just* grievance against another. If someone has unintentionally hurt us, it can be *excused*; but if someone *intentionally* insults or hurts us, forgiveness is required because we have to give up our *just* claim to retribution. Difficult as this might be, it is necessary to restore the possibility of love. The fact is-- retribution begets retribution – vengeance begets vengeance – and violence begets violence. If we are to interrupt this ever-expanding cycle of vengeance and violence, if we are to allow the parties in the cycle to begin the long process of healing, and if we are to restore equanimity to a shattered peace, we will have to *let go* of our *just* claims against the other.

How is this possible? We must see the intrinsic value and need of the unjust perpetrator -- like Bishop Myriel in *Les Misérables* who sees the goodness and need of Jean Valjean – despite the fact that Jean stole his silver after the bishop allowed him to stay at his house. He is so convinced of Jean’s potential goodness, that he gives him two additional silver pieces to protect him from being arrested – and then tells him to do some good with the money he obtains. Jean lives up to the bishop’s expectations more than the latter could have expected.

If we are to forgive, we must not only see the intrinsic goodness and redeemability of unjust perpetrators, but also see the goodness of interrupting the cycle of vengeance begetting vengeance and violence begetting violence; and we must want the good of our enemy (even though we may have to protect ourselves against him in the future). But how can we do this – particularly when we are still stinging from the injustice of a seemingly callous attack? Here is where empathy and humility become relevant. It might best be explained by extending the personal story given above.

My gradual appropriation of empathy and humility in the novitiate made me more aware of the unique goodness and lovability of the many people I encountered in college – some of whom I had judged and treated quite basely. I reflected on times when I intimated that people were not as quick or knowledgeable as I might have expected. I also let people know the privilege of my family background without regard to the hardships they may have had to endure. At the time, I was almost oblivious to the pain I was causing to others, but the enhancement of empathy and humility in the novitiate allowed me to feel the pain they must have felt at my disrespect and indifference. I not only wanted to be forgiven for my offense, I wanted the Lord to heal the injuries that I had caused. I literally begged the Lord to “make good come out of whatever harm I might have caused” (see Volume 4, Section IX), and trusted that He would work miracles in the hearts of the people I had grieved.

What did this have to do with my forgiving others? It occurred to me that if I so desperately needed to be forgiven and healed by God, others who had offended me would need the same forgiveness from me – and God. Once again, empathy and humility had given me new freedom. Empathy enabled me to feel the need others had for forgiveness by association with *my* need for it, and humility enabled me to see that others’ need to be freed from past burdens was just as great if not greater than my own. In retrospect, all this happened because weakness, vulnerability, and embarrassment – combined with the love of Jesus -- opened me to empathy, humility, and love. Once opened, it was quite easy for the Spirit to lead me to my own need for forgiveness – and by association, to others’ need to be forgiven by me.

Weakness and suffering enabled me to see the goodness and lovability of others *and* what I could have done to befriend them. Though this filled me with another kind of suffering – the guilt and regret for my indifference, callousness, and arrogance – it led me to realize that I had been forgiven much and loved much – by both God and neighbor -- and this led me to the freedom to forgive others who had unjustly offended me. I could now ask the Lord for the grace to imitate Him in His forgiveness, and pray for my persecutors by putting injustices in the hands of the perfectly just and merciful judge. This *freedom* which came through a combination of suffering and the love of God has enabled me, albeit imperfectly, to forgive from the heart.

I have a long way to go in the pursuit of humility, empathy, respect, and forgiveness, so I expect that I will need additional assistance to further purify my love. Though I know some of this assistance will entail additional experiences of weakness and vulnerability, I have come to trust that God can transform these initial negative experiences into deeper empathy, humility, and forgiveness. I have also come to realize that these dimensions of love will ultimately lead to true happiness – eternal joy with the unconditionally loving God.

I.C.6 Compassion

Compassion is yet another gift that suffering helps to appropriate. Jesus taught that compassion for strangers and enemies was the highest form of love – best manifesting His Father’s perfect love (Mt. 5:43-48). The word means literally “to suffer with,” and in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus describes it as a feeling of profound identification with the suffering of another human being that moves a person to merciful action.⁸⁸

When we *are* compassionate (not merely *showing* compassion, which feels like pity to the receiving party) we become like the Good Samaritan. We feel miserable because someone of unique intrinsic goodness and lovability *is* miserable, and this sense of “sympathetic sadness” moves us to do as much as we can to comfort the one who is suffering. Comfort sometimes takes the form of *doing* something beneficial—e.g., giving medical treatment, or providing housing.

⁸⁸ The Greek word used by Luke to translate Jesus’ Aramaic is *esplagchnisthē*. The root “*splagchnon*” has the general meaning of “the bowels, which were thought to be the seat of the deeper affections, and could refer to pity or sympathy – inward affection, tender mercy.” It signifies being deeply moved by the suffering of another. See also Jesus’ reaction to the widow of Nain who has lost her only son (Luke 7: 11-17).

But frequently enough, we cannot *do* anything but give our time, presence, and attention; we can only *be with* the other--we are capable only of using our presence, our friendship, and our love to give comfort. Yet this imparts dignity. Spending time with another proves to the other that he is valuable, because most everyone intuitively recognizes the preciousness of time.

No matter how compassion is manifested (doing something for someone, or simply being with someone), it always has the capacity to impart dignity. There is something about an act of loving sympathy with another's misery which elicits comfort and proves to another that he not only has esteemability or status, but genuine lovability (belovedness). This "loving sympathy giving rise to comfort" is the deepest and most positive gift which can be given – because the awareness of genuine belovedness is also a recognition of our profound *intrinsic* dignity.

There is only one hitch. We have to be suffering in order to receive compassion. This is one of the most paradoxical aspects of the human condition – if we are to receive the deep affirmation of our belovedness which leads to our deepest moments of dignity, freedom, self-affirmation, and joy, we must be in a state of weakness, pain, or need.

Most children experience this when they are sick and stay home from school. Instead of their mothers being revolted by their illness, or angry at the inconvenience of their illness, they probably receive loving sympathy, comfort, and a genuine affirmation of their belovedness. This gift of compassion leaves an indelible mark on children. If it recurs again and again, an intuitive belief begins to form that they are intrinsically lovable. They are beloved just in themselves, without all the accomplishments and comparative advantage that can make them *exteriorly* esteemable. This will eventually enable them to love themselves and to accept love from another, which will make all the difference between a life of love and a life of trying to win the love that they believe they do not deserve.

Suffering not only provides the condition necessary for recognizing our intrinsic dignity and our "lovable selves," it also helps us be compassionate to others. We have already seen how suffering helps us break the spell of Level 2 identity, giving us the freedom for empathy, humility, and forgiveness – so it should come as no surprise that it can also help us become compassionate – to help others in their suffering by profoundly identifying with them in their pain. It is almost a cliché to say that our suffering helps us sympathize with others in their suffering. If we know from firsthand experience what suffering is like, we will have a better idea of what others must be feeling in their suffering, which opens us to sympathetic identification with them. This reveals yet another paradox -- inasmuch as compassion is one of the highest and most positive activities of the human spirit – which according to Jesus reflects His Father's perfect love⁸⁹ – then suffering supports and leads to this highest of human activities. Though suffering can be profoundly negative, it can also be profoundly positive – in different respects at the same time.

⁸⁹ Luke explicitizes Jesus' phrase in Matthew--"be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48) as "Be compassionate (*oiktirmones*) as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36) – showing that compassion is the highest expression of the Father's perfect love.

As I noted earlier, this has truly been the case in my life – in broken relationships, athletic ineptness, and progressive blindness. Always – suffering has led to an increased awareness of others’ pain, and therefore to an increased desire to help them through it. In addition to this, my suffering has led to an increased awareness of the sufferings of Jesus – the price He paid to sacrifice Himself completely to create an unconditional act of love for the world.⁹⁰ The more I have endured suffering and weakness, the less abstract His unconditional act of love has become – and conversely, the more I have been able to *feel* the sacrifice intrinsic to His unconditional act of love. This has helped me to grow not only in faith and love of Jesus, but also to offer my suffering as an act of self-sacrifice for the redemption of the world (see Volume 8).

I might sum up by reiterating the conclusion drawn at the end of the previous volume -- that suffering, faith, and love (*agapē*) are complementary and integral to one. When seen through the eyes of Christian faith, suffering can greatly enhance love – empathy, humility, forgiveness, and compassion. This leads to my last point in this section.

Christian faith is indispensable for transforming suffering into the highest levels of love. Jesus gives ultimate meaning to suffering through His promise of eternal salvation, His Holy Spirit (Who inspires, guides, consoles, and protects us), His presence and love to alleviate fear and bring consolation, and the example of His suffering which shows us how to use our suffering as a self-offering for the salvation of the world. All of these graces help lift suffering into the heights of love, leading us to our eternal salvation with the unconditionally loving God.

I.C.7

Acceptance of Compassion

Most of us who have reached our mid-twenties no longer have the attitude of children who are capable of accepting the compassion of parents, friends, and teachers. We have learned that we are supposed to be capable of taking care of ourselves, carrying our own weight, and that our respectability depends on this. We have also learned that we should never take another person’s time for our personal needs. Even though we could not possibly live this way, we try to believe the myth so that we can content ourselves with our autonomy and self-sufficiency. If we believe the myth, we tell ourselves that we are not needy -- and as a consequence, would never admit to being needy, but we do find ways, “acceptable ways,” of getting our needs met.

How do people find the freedom to accept another’s compassion? As implied above, some people do this naturally. Others remember the acts of compassion they received as children and carry them over into adulthood. And still others, like myself, *need suffering* in order to do this.

As I noted, my gradual blindness caused me to lose my driver’s license when I was 31. Now if there is one thing in this culture that proves we are self-sufficient, it is the fact that we

⁹⁰ See Volume 4 (Chapter Five).

can get into our cars and go wherever we want whenever we want. But I found myself, at the age of 31, unable to do so. As a result, I became dependent on others for rides.

At first, I could not ask anyone for a ride because of embarrassment. I felt that the mere admission of bad eyesight and the inability to drive *myself* (not carrying my own weight), would not only trouble a prospective driver, but also cause shock and disdain. People never really reacted like this, but I *thought* that people felt this way. After two years of having my secretaries ask for rides for me, I still did not believe that people respected me as much as they would have if I had not been losing my eyesight. I thought they were disguising it incredibly well. So, as I took the rides from compassionate people, I would sit there believing that they were annoyed at the inconvenience, troubled by my inferiority, and pitying me for it. I really hated getting into those cars.

One day, when I was going from Seattle University to my parish, (St. Philomena's) a lady mentioned to me that she was really grateful that she was able to get on the list of people who wanted to give me a ride. I said, "A list? Why would there be a list?" And she said that this was something that many people thought they could do, that it was relatively easy, and it would give them some time with me. I was truly surprised. They were not annoyed at my weakness. They found it a rather pleasing and interesting idiosyncrasy in a person who seemed, at times, distant because of his use of complex sentences and concepts. They said that my eye problem made me human, and that they were able to empathize with a person that they had otherwise found to be somewhat intimidating. In fact, this lady said that it made me "un-intimidating."

After some reflection on this incident, I discovered that people liked me – just for myself, not for my intellect or my gifts of speaking. They wanted to get to know *me*, they wanted me to be un-intimidating. They enjoyed being around me -- not despite my weakness, but because of it. They really enjoyed being of service – and giving a ride was something they could do (which I obviously could not do). I had the peculiar role of *allowing* these wonderful people an opportunity to practice *agapē* through selfless service. In their attempt to make my life easier, in their loving sympathy with my weakness, in their self-sacrifice to care for me, I too was able to impart dignity back to them by merely *accepting* their compassion as compassion, by *accepting* their love as genuine love. It occurred to me that their smile was not an act, but genuine joy arising out of an authentic act of empathy, graciously accepted by someone in need.

I discovered that people were better than I had expected. The fault was my own -- *I* was not up to their level. *I* was not capable of that kind of compassion. Formerly, I believed that their compassion and joy were contrived (they were doing it because the pastor had put pressure on them, and they were making the best out of a bad situation), but I came to learn that people really *are* that good; they *are* much better than I expected; and so I felt called to be more compassionate in imitation of *them*. The more I responded to this call, the more I was able to accept the compassion of others.

Showing and accepting compassion is complementary, and gives rise to an expanding cycle -- accepting compassion can incite awareness of the genuine goodness of people, and this in turn, calls us to imitate that goodness in them, inspiring us to greater compassion. Suffering provided the impetus for this cycle, and all I had to do was notice the genuine goodness of

others, accept their compassion, and allow myself to be edified by their goodness – and imitate them.

My faith in Jesus truly helped in this expanding cycle. If I had to rely on myself alone, without the example of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, there is a very good chance I would have let the above opportunity simply pass me by. I can see myself letting the preoccupation with my weakness and embarrassment block my awareness of the beauty, goodness, and love of others who were trying to help me – and I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have been in a relationship with my Lord who allowed His feet to be washed with a woman’s tears, fed by tax collectors and sinners, and defended by a thief on a cross. He broke through my defenses reminding me of John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14:

Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp’d town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end:
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov’d fain,
But am betroth’d unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.⁹¹

Though God has allowed me to suffer – bending, breaking, blowing, burning me – He has filled me with His grace and love. Despite my attempts to return to former darkness, He ravished me and made me new.

There was another hidden benefit underlying my increased ability for compassion and the acceptance of it – the further breaking of the spell of Level 2 purpose and identity. I am not sure how my attachment to Level 2 grew so strong, because my parents never emphasized Level 2 characteristics, but rather Levels 3 and 4. I suppose it happened throughout my academic studies because I was in competition with other students in three masters programs and a doctoral program—and I wanted to win the esteem of my professors as much as my religious superiors—perhaps more (I hate to admit it). This emphasis on intelligence, research, writing, and lecturing did not undermine my faith, but it did undermine my capacity for love (*agapē*).

During my studies, I was willing to help people with their final and comprehensive exams, but they would hint that “I did not suffer fools gladly” or “Wow you were a little rough with that guy” or “Intellectual precision is not the most important thing—you know.” I would

⁹¹ John Donne “Holy Sonnet 14” in *Poetry Foundation* (www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173362).

always ask, “You really think I was that overbearing?” Most people would just say, “Figure it out for yourself.”

My eye disease changed all that -- it laid bare how much I truly valued the benefits of Level 2—to the virtual exclusion of *agapē*. As I began to accept the genuine acts of compassion from others, and to see how truly good people are—I began the long process of going back to what my parents had taught me through their loving actions. Thinking back on it, if I had not been blessed with this gift of progressive blindness – and my faith -- I might have become quite heartless—and if that occurred, I might have wandered into profound darkness. Faith showed me that I did not have to find my way out of the darkness by myself. I could answer St. Paul’s question, “Who will save me from this body of death?” with the response, “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7: 25). Supported by God’s love and salvific intention, I was free to allow suffering to move and shape me toward the love of Christ which would ultimately lead to eternal joy.

I have been going through this for thirty years now, and I have received a lot of rides – I mean a LOT of rides. I have seen the benefits of accepting and giving compassion again and again, and I feel that God called me to be a magnet of compassion--with a concomitant deepening of my own compassion. All this happened because of my need for help—which was met by my accepting the compassion of others. If I lived for the acceptance and gift of compassion alone --skip the accomplishments – it would have been more than enough.

I.C.8 Conclusion to Section I.

Is suffering really *necessary* for *agapē* (empathy, the acceptance of love’s vulnerability, humility, forgiveness, compassion, and the acceptance of compassion)? For God, it is not, for He can, in a timeless, completely transparent act, through His perfect power and love, achieve perfect empathy, perfect acceptance of love’s vulnerability, perfect humility, perfect forgiveness, and perfect compassion. As I have indicated many times above, I believe there are some people who can more easily move to this position without much assistance from suffering. However, for people like me, suffering is absolutely indispensable for removing the blocks to *agapē* arising out of my egocentric and autonomous desires – e.g., my belief in the cultural myth of self-sufficiency, my underestimation of the goodness and love of other people, and all the other limitations to my head and heart.

I have to believe that God allowed an imperfect physical nature and an imperfect world for people like me not only to actualize *agapē* freely, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to notice it. I really believe that God asks us to bear patiently with suffering and trials so that we can arrive at an insight about ourselves – that will be advanced by empathy, humility, forgiveness, and compassion.

God works through this suffering. He doesn’t waste any of it. For those who are open to seeing the horizon of love embedded in it, there is a future, nay, an eternity for each of us to manifest our own unique brand of unconditional love within the symphony of love which is

God's kingdom. Without suffering, I do not think I could have even begun to move freely toward that horizon which is my eternal destiny and joy.

II.

The External Opportunities of Suffering

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By “external opportunities of suffering,” I mean ways in which suffering can open new avenues to make a positive difference to the world around us (Section II.A) as well as the kingdom of God (Section II.B). As noted in Section I.A above, suffering provides a significant opportunity for identity transformation. When Level 1 and Level 2 happiness and purpose give rise to deep feelings of emptiness and the negative emotions of the comparison game, we are moved to ask, “Is there any more to life than what I am doing – and is there anyway of stopping the relentless emotions of inferiority, superiority, jealousy, fear of loss of esteem, narcissism, loneliness, ego-sensitivity, ego-rage and blame, and emptiness? With some help from a wise friend or mentor, we may find ourselves looking seriously at either Level 3 and/or Level 4 happiness. Some people turn first to Level 3, while others like myself, turn first to Level 4, and subsequently discover Level 3 contributive identity through their faith.

When we feel motivated to investigate either Level, we will not simply want to think about it, but also *choose* it and then *move it into action*. If we do not convert our thoughts into actions, they will not become a real part of our purpose and identity, but if we do put them into action, they etch themselves into the character and identity we take with us into God's eternity. Hence, we must be prepared to seek opportunities for action when we are impelled toward identity transformation.

Opportunities to contribute can be focused on the world around us as well as the Kingdom of God. As Jesus makes clear, *both* are important. Though Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom, and all else will be given you besides,” He did not mean seek exclusively opportunities to build the Kingdom. He showed many times in both His actions and words that it is essential to alleviate the sufferings of others – which means not only sharing our faith, but giving our time, energy, creativity, and resources to concretely alleviating suffering – where we can.

Editor's Note: There is a very extensive presentation of the external opportunities of suffering presented in *The Light Shines on in the Darkness* (Chapter 7).

III.

Conclusion

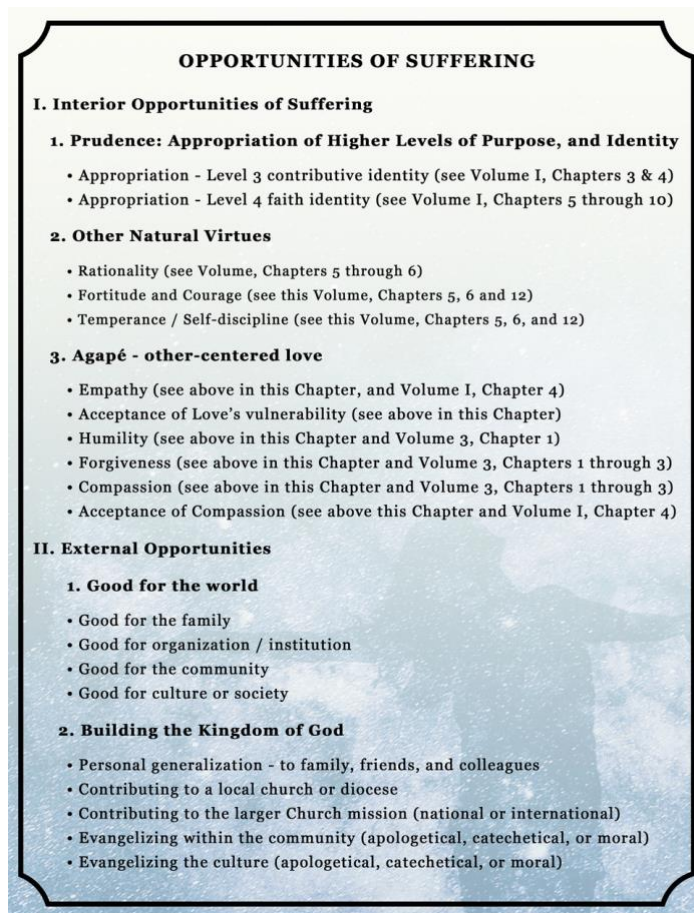
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As Louis Pasteur once said, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” We might extend this by noting – “and so does Divine Providence.” If we are aware of the opportunities that suffering can unleash – even suffering that happens by pure chance – the blind forces of nature – then we are much more likely to *seize* them and *benefit from* them. As we have noted repeatedly above,

suffering does not *automatically* lead to the above interior and exterior opportunities. We need to be *prepared* with:

- *Faith* in a perfectly loving God who desires to give us eternal life with Him.
- *Prayers* to help us ask for His protection, inspiration, redemption, and guidance during times of suffering.
- *Natural virtues* – particularly the virtue of prudence that helps us to know the levels of happiness, purpose, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny – and how to maintain Levels 3 and 4.
- *Knowing what opportunities await us* – explained in this volume.

The following list gives a helpful summary of the opportunities embedded in suffering. Readers may want to photocopy it as a guide to where the Holy Spirit may be leading – or to what He wants us to consider. If chance and providence favor the prepared mind, then it might be wise to reflect on the list give below *before* unexpected suffering occurs. It will make the negativity of suffering ultimately and eternally worthwhile not only for us, but also for the people we touch. There are other opportunities of suffering associated with imitating Jesus’ self-sacrificial action on the cross. These more spiritual or mystical opportunities will be taken up in the next volume.



Chapter Five

Self-Offering for the Kingdom in Imitation of Jesus

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Introduction

Up to this point, we have been addressing opportunities and benefits of suffering that can be *noticed* in our lives. Though the *interior* benefits of suffering may not be perceptible right away, if we are open to them and pursue them, we will assuredly notice them in the middle to long term. So, for example, if we use our suffering as a lever to move to higher levels of identity, we will eventually see ourselves becoming more and more transformed in Levels 3 and 4 purpose in life. Similarly, if we use our suffering as a lever to pursue the natural virtues of prudence, fortitude, and temperance, and the supreme virtue of *agapē* (with its seven important dimensions discussed in the previous volume), we will also see progress in our desire and capacity for these virtues.

The same holds true for the exterior opportunities of suffering. If we use our suffering as a lever to pursue a better world and the kingdom of God, we will see our lives taking a distinctively new turn toward optimizing the good for family, friends, community and organizations as well as the Church, the faith of others, and the kingdom of God. The effects may at first be gradual and even imperceptible, but eventually they will manifest themselves quite powerfully as we lever our sufferings for these purposes.

As noted in the previous volume, all these transformations help *us*—as well as others—to create the eternal identity with which we will enter into the kingdom of God—and hence, they pave the way for us to enter into eternal salvation and joy. Of course, we will not be perfect at the time of our death—and I certainly do not imagine myself as even approaching such perfection—but the direction we have set for ourselves will allow the Lord at the time of our death—and even after it—to complete the process of preparation—through our freedom—to love perfectly and unconditionally in His Kingdom. Jesus and St. Paul make provision for both pardon and purification after death, and the Catholic Church has called this post mortem purification “purgatory.”⁹²

⁹² The Catholic Church has decreed the doctrine of purgatory to explain this process of purification *after death*. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1030-1031), “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (Mt. 12:32). Jesus makes provision for purification after death when He declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven *in the age to come* (see Matthew 12:32). Therefore, by implication, Jesus believed that there is pardon and purification in the age to come. St. Paul apparently adheres to Jesus’ view as well as the Old Testament tradition of prayer for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:38-46) by praying for his deceased friend Onesiphorus (2 Timothy 1:16-18).

Suffering is quite helpful for this preparation or purification unto perfect love – whether it takes place in this life or the next. We can encourage one another to use suffering for this preparation for perfect love during this lifetime – and we can pray that the deceased will be able to reach final purification as quickly as possible – with the least possible suffering. If this were the total purpose for suffering, it would be more than enough—indeed, it would be an infinite and eternal benefit for us and others. Yet, there is more.

As noted in Volume 1, Jesus teaches us to make our suffering a loving self-sacrifice to the Father for the salvation of all people. St. Paul indicates that this self-offering will benefit the *whole* Body of Christ – including those who are alive and those who have passed to the next life. By implication then, we can make our suffering a loving self-sacrifice for the deceased who are undergoing purification unto perfect love (the “souls in purgatory”). Thus, the grace coming from making our suffering a loving self-sacrifice for others is not limited to those still alive in this world – it can benefit the deceased as well. Jesus intended this in His own self-sacrificial death – as implied in His recitation of Psalm 22 as His dying words (see below Section I).

Jesus bestowed three permanent gifts on us through His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection:

1. The gift of His *word* (enshrined in the New Testament, His Eucharistic words, His designation of Peter as “head” and the living memory of His presence and intention),
2. The gift of His *unconditional love*—a perfect gift of self—that could outshine any finite evil or darkness within us or perpetrated by us (given through His Passion and death), and
3. The gift of His *Holy Spirit*—not only as the fleeting “voice” of the prophets, but as a *permanent* gift to dwell within us individually and within the Church—collectively.

Each of these gifts plays an essential role in our conversion, salvation, and capacity to serve the kingdom. We have already addressed the word of Jesus in Volume 4. We will now concentrate on His gift of unconditional love for the salvation of the world. This gift not only creates the unconditional love underlying our forgiveness and salvation, it also provides the way to transform *our* suffering into the same redemptive love. In order to understand this, we must look into Jesus’ mindset and intention—and in grasping it (at least in part), imitate Him in this work of love and salvation.

When the Son of God became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, His intention was not only to show us the meaning of love, the purpose of suffering, and the way to salvation, but also to *give himself* to us *completely*. He intended to do this in three stages -- first by His Incarnation, in which He subjected Himself to the finitude of space, time, natural forces, and the vagaries of human power and evil; secondly, by His sacrificial actions during His ministry—from enduring the temptations of the evil spirit, the ridicule and chastisement of the religious authorities, and His continuous ministering to those in need—“from town to town and village to village;” and finally, by sacrificing Himself on the cross unto death—to bring His gift of Self—His unconditional love—to perfect and unconditional completion. In doing this, Jesus wanted not only to love us perfectly, unconditionally, and infinitely, but also to give us an *example* of how we too could love others through our suffering and self-sacrifice:

So when [Jesus] had washed their feet [and] put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, “Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you an *example* to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it (Jn. 13: 12-17).

He left us this example not as an obediential command — “you better do this, or else!” but rather to show us how to transform self-sacrifice into redemptive love. This may be perplexing to the contemporary mind which may not be able to understand directly Jesus’ teaching and its efficacy -- so we will first study how Jesus intended to use self-sacrifice as redemptive love (Section I), and then discuss how we might imitate him in our own ministry of self-sacrificial suffering (Section II).

I.

Jesus’ Use of Suffering as Self-Sacrificial Redemptive Love

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In Volume 4 (Chapter Five), we discussed three passages of Scripture that are integral to understanding Jesus’ own mission to create an unrestricted, unconditional, and perfect act of love that could redeem *all* human evil and darkness throughout the history of the world—from the creation of the first human being to the end of the human race:

1. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (The Fourth Suffering Servant Song).
2. Jesus’ Eucharistic words recounted in Mark 14:22-25 and Matthew 26:26-29.
3. Jesus’ dying words on the cross as recounted in the Gospel of Mark—the first line of Psalm 22.

We noted in Volume 9 (Chapter One) that it would be difficult for the contemporary mind to understand Jesus’ intention because He had a significantly different view of sacred time, real presence, and the efficacy of self-sacrifice than we do today. *Our* dominant view of reality is empirical and scientific—conditioned by physical theories of space, time and nature-- while Jesus’ view was what Mircea Eliade called “sacred, transtemporal, and transpatial.” Recall that Eliade’s view was based on a comprehensive study of world religions, both past and present, through which he discovered a remarkable similarity--sacred history was seen as superseding profane history (physical history), and through ritual and myth, prophets and priests could return to the sacred time of history as if profane time were not relevant.⁹³ Though this view of time and history is significantly different from our view, it is not incompatible with it—if we have faith.

⁹³ See Mircea Eliade. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), pp. 93-97.

Even if we hold to the truth of the physical-scientific view of space, time and nature—as I do—we can still believe that there is an entire realm of transtemporal, transpatial, and transphysical reality which is—for lack of a better term—superimposed on the physical world. This “supernatural superstructure” of sacred reality is not *opposed* to physical reality—it is consistent with physical reality, supersedes it, and can bring about transtemporal, transpatial and transphysical effects within physical reality. How is this possible? God’s mentative activity—God’s mind—is the cause of this sacred, supernatural, superstructure which is superimposed on physical reality. He is perfectly free to “think” His efficacious grace from one physical moment to another physical moment in the past or the future, without regard to the physical barrier that constrains *us* as *physical* beings. Thus, God can make Jesus’ view of sacred history occur within physical history whenever the Eucharistic ritual—or other rituals—are re-lived by priests or prophets. This is explained in some detail along with Jesus’ Eucharistic words in Volume 9 (Chapter One). The doctrine of transubstantiation and its relationship to Jesus’ intention is explained in Volume 9 (Chapter Three).

Editor’s Note: The exegetical analysis of the above three passages and its significance for us as well and those for whom we offer ourselves is explained in detail in *The Light Shines on in the Darkness* (Chapter 8).

II. Imitating Jesus in the Mystical Purpose of Suffering [Back to top](#)

Jesus not only atoned for our sins through His self-sacrificial suffering, He left the way open to *us* to participate in this mystery as well – to use our suffering to strengthen the Church in the work of redemption by offering it up to the Father as an act of loving self-sacrifice. This may be the *most* noble purpose and use of our suffering. This may seem difficult to imagine because there are so many important opportunities in suffering that lead to the salvation and good of ourselves and others (see Volume 7). Yet for Jesus, the mystical purpose of suffering seems to be the highest – both in His life, and by implication, for us as well. Jesus did many things to bring the kingdom of God to us – preaching the word of love, healings, miracles, raising the dead, defeating evil through His ministry of exorcism, proclaiming the Good News to sinners and the poor, and bestowing on us the gifts of the resurrection and the Holy Spirit. Yet none of these extraordinary gifts seems to be more central to His mission of redemption and salvation than His unconditional gift of self -- in letting Himself be unjustly accused, ridiculed, crucified, and put to death.

Jesus’ priority here points to the intrinsic value of suffering for *our* redemption and the redemption of others. Of course, we need faith in Jesus, and recognition of love as our highest calling, to understand this supreme value of suffering. If we do have this faith, we too can offer

See also Mircea Eliade. 1971. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

See Volume 2 (Chapter Three, Section II and III).

our suffering to the Father as self-sacrifice to help in the work of redemption. St. Paul makes this clear in the Letter to the Colossians:

Now 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 (Col. 1:24).

St. Paul is not suggesting that there is anything lacking in the sufferings of Jesus for the redemption of the world, but rather that Jesus has provided a place for him to use his suffering to help the Church – to help in the *work* of salvation. Paul is fully aware that Jesus has provided the unconditionally loving sacrifice – the infinite love – necessary for the redemption of *everyone* – which, according to Church teaching, includes:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience.⁹⁴

So, if nothing is lacking in Jesus' redemptive act, how did He leave room for us to participate in the work of salvation?

St. Paul views his loving self-sacrifice for the Colossians as having a *strengthening effect* not only in the Church of Colossae, but also for the *whole* Church. When we imitate Jesus in an act of loving self-sacrifice (by offering our suffering to God for the Church), the grace (favor) given by God for our and others' salvation⁹⁵ moves into the Church through the unifying and grace-filled spiritual body of Jesus – and strengthens it. Paul teaches that God's generosity is so great that He allows *our* suffering – offered as loving self-sacrifice -- to have a similar effect to that of His Son – though not to the same degree -- for ours is not perfect and universal. When we make our sufferings a self-offering to God, God shows favor not only to the Church as a whole but to all individuals in His mystical body – which includes those who have not heard of Christ, but try to seek God according to the dictates of their conscience.

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks about Christ's spiritual body as the unifying bond of all of us – its members.⁹⁶ He then notes that “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). The implication is clear – each individual member affects the whole body – and therefore, every member of it; so if one member suffers, the whole body suffers, and if one is honored, the whole body is honored. Yet these are not the only qualities that affect the body of Christ. We can infer from Paul's analysis that if members are strong in their love, it will positively affect the whole body, and

⁹⁴ Flannery 1975, p. 376; *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II (Section 16).

⁹⁵ Recall from Section I above that “grace” (in Hebrew “*hanan*”) means the favor showed by God *when* He finds favor with us. In contrast, Jesus offers salvation (unconditional favor) to *all* humankind through His loving self-sacrifice -- irrespective of whether He finds favor with us. His loving self-sacrifice gives salvation to contrite sinners as well as saints.

⁹⁶ St. John uses the image of “the vine and the branches” to convey the same message (Jn. 15:1-7).

conversely if members are weak in their love, it will weaken the whole body. As noted above, offering our suffering as self-sacrifice for the good of the body of Christ is an act of *love* for the Church – so when we offer our sufferings to the Lord as self-sacrifice, we strengthen the whole body – and therefore, every member of it.

Paul reinforces the importance and dignity of offering our whole selves to the Lord in the Letter to the Romans:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies [*somata*] as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper service [latreian] (Rom. 12:1).

The word for “bodies” here is “*somata*” which can mean the physical body, but can also have a more abstract meaning referring to the *whole self*. It can also refer figuratively to the mystical body of Christ which unifies many individual people. Thus, we could interpret this passage to mean that we should offer our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God, for which there can be no greater or more proper service to Him.

Paul later implies (in verse 4) that all our gifts – presumably including the offering of ourselves – build up the body, and so we do not belong to ourselves alone, but rather belong to one another in the one body:

... just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others (Rom. 12:4).

Inasmuch as we have the remarkable capacity to build up the body of Christ through the offering of ourselves – particularly our suffering – to the Father in imitation of Jesus, we cannot afford to waste our suffering as members of the body of Christ. When we suffer, we need to *remember* to make it a self-sacrificial offering so that we can unify our sufferings to that of Jesus for the good of the body. As implied by Paul, there is no more noble service to the Church and the kingdom of Christ than this.

There are several prayers we can use to offer our sufferings to the Lord for the good of the Church and the work of redemption – not the least of which is the traditional Catholic morning offering.⁹⁷ I add to this a spontaneous prayer that I can use when events come up during the day – “Lord Jesus, I want to unite my suffering with your sufferings as a self-sacrifice for the Church and the work of redemption.” Readers should make their own spontaneous prayer – try to make it easy to remember and repeat. All the essential elements have been described above:

⁹⁷ “O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, for the salvation of souls, the reparation of sins, the reunion of all Christians, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father. Amen.”

1. Uniting our sufferings with those of Jesus – so that we are with Him in the common ministry of redemption through the offering of suffering;
2. Making our suffering into self-sacrificial love by offering it to the Father in imitation of Jesus; and
3. Asking the Lord to use this offering of love to help the Church (the Body of Christ) and His work of redemption.

There is also a tradition of asking the Lord to apply the grace and love of our self-sacrifice to *specific* people and *specific* intentions. It is difficult to imagine that the Lord would not look favorably on this – so long as our petitions will help the salvation of that person according to God’s six objectives – the promotion of our and other’s salvation, the protection of our and other’s freedom, and then the alleviation of our and other’s suffering. Parents will frequently do this for their children, spouses for one another, and friends for friends. We can also offer our sufferings for a local church, a specific cause (to further the work of redemption), or a specific organization (furthering the cause of redemption or the alleviation of suffering).

People who are quite sick or debilitated will want to make a spirituality and ministry out of offering their sufferings to the Lord. This can be done by integrating prayers to “offer our suffering” into other prayers throughout the day – perhaps after each decade of a rosary – or after *Lectio Divina* -- or simply after saying the “Our Father.” Some may want to focus their prayer on Jesus’ passion – either by meditating on the Gospel narratives, the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, or a reflection on Jesus’ suffering. As they contemplate, they may want to specifically consider Jesus’ intention to bestow His love on the world through His self-sacrificial suffering – and ask for the freedom to offer themselves in love as He did through their sufferings. This has a double effect:

1. It strengthens the Church and advances the work of redemption (as described above).
2. It transforms those making the prayer – for the more we can accept suffering in faith as our highest calling and dignity (in imitation of Jesus), the more we place ourselves in His hands – trusting in His loving will.

The greater our freedom to *imitate* Jesus in offering our suffering, the more we enter into *spiritual union* with Him, which brings us closer to His loving heart – which, in turn, helps us become more like Him – in love (*agapē*).

When events conspire to make suffering a large part of our lives, we have an opportunity to imitate the greatest of saints. We can use our suffering as a foundation for a “contemplative vocation,” which puts “self-sacrificial offering” at its center. Though most people who have this opportunity have not entered a monastery or subjected themselves to a rule, they can order their lives – much like a contemplative brother or sister – toward meditating on Jesus’ passion – recognizing His love in that passion – and uniting their suffering to His. As they ask for the grace to *imitate* Him in the freedom to use suffering as a source of love and grace for redemption, they will notice all the fruits of real contemplative vocation – for they will receive the grace they ask for – to draw closer to Him and His loving heart so as to be like Him in love. These individuals may not be in a monastery, but they are bringing the monastery and its rule into their hearts by uniting their self-offering with the sufferings of Jesus as they meditate on His loving actions.

Though the paradigm for this is St. Thérèse of Lisieux (see below), who was a contemplative Carmelite, she would have been the first to advocate that non-monastic individuals join the ranks of her “little way” through this kind of contemplation and self-offering.

III.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux as Exemplar of the Mystical Purpose of Suffering

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St. Thérèse of Lisieux (born 1873) was raised in a devout Catholic family in France. As a young adolescent she felt called to religious life, but was overcome with anxiety at the loss of her mother. She overheard her father saying to her sisters “fortunately this will be the last year,” referring to the last year to keep up the childhood story of the child Jesus dropping gifts into the shoes of children at the hearth. She was greatly distressed by this seeming rejection of her and her childhood by her father, and immediately received the grace from the Lord not only to forgive the perceived insult but also to forget herself. She suddenly felt relief from the anxiety over her mother’s death—and felt herself freed from her childhood and self-centeredness. Two months later, Thérèse was sitting before the image of the crucified Christ, and was contemplating the bleeding from his hands, when she was overwhelmed by a sense of the presence of Christ saying to her “I thirst.” She described the experience as follows:

One Sunday, looking at a picture of Our Lord on the Cross, I was struck by the blood flowing from one of the divine hands. . . . I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to receive the divine dew. I understood I was then to pour it out upon souls. The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded continually in my heart: “I thirst!” These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls.⁹⁸

This experience moved Thérèse to offer her whole self—particularly her sufferings—for the redemption of the world—especially for those who were in the grip of spiritual darkness. She soon entered Carmel at the age of fifteen—where she joined her two sisters—and wrote about her “little way”—a simple spirituality based on her confidence in the unconditional love of Jesus. During this time, Thérèse was found to have an advanced case of tuberculosis which caused her to suffer immensely. She joined her sufferings to those of Jesus—offering them to the Father for the redemption of the world. Though Thérèse did not engage in active ministries, she nonetheless exemplified the highest form of love for the Lord, and the highest form of passion for the salvation of souls. She formulated a profound spirituality of suffering by responding to the Lord’s call to endure great pain – both physically and psychologically – throughout her life. Her “little way” consisted in patiently welcoming the sufferings given her, humbly enduring them, and trusting in the Lord by joining her sufferings to His as a perfect prayer of self-offering

⁹⁸ Therese of Lisieux 1996, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*. 3rd ed. Ed. and trans. by John Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies), p.99.

and love. Her spirituality and autobiography were so influential that St. Pius XI called her “the greatest saint of modern times.”

Since the time of her “little miracle” (“freedom from childhood and self”) on Christmas Eve 1886 (at the age of 13), Thérèse had in mind that she wanted to be a *victim* for the sake of love. After entering the Carmelite convent in 1888 (at the age of 15), she grew more fervent in her desire to be a perfect “little victim” so that she could be a perfect gift of love to Jesus – her beloved. She knew that the trials of this world were temporary and that her sufferings would have three effects:

1. They would purify her love – and give her ever greater freedom to lose herself in the desire to be with and serve her Lord.
2. They could be offered up to the Lord as a holocaust (self-sacrifice) as reparation and grace for those immersed in darkness.
3. They were the vehicle through which she could become ever more progressively a perfect gift of love to the one who loved her– Jesus crucified and risen.

As her tuberculosis progressed -- and the pain consumed her – she became more convinced of the efficacy of the three graces intrinsic to being a “little victim.” In 1897, she wrote:

In order that my life may be one act of *perfect* love, I offer myself as a *victim* of holocaust to Thy merciful love, imploring Thee to *consume me* unceasingly, and to allow the floods of infinite tenderness gathered up in Thee to overflow into my soul, that so I may become a very *martyr of Thy love*, Oh my God! May this martyrdom, after having prepared me to appear in Thy presence, *free me* from this life at the last, and may my soul take its flight without delay into the eternal embrace of Thy merciful love!⁹⁹

In a particularly illuminating conversation with Mother Agnes, Thérèse explained the two-fold source of her inner strength:

1. The trials God sends are *good*.
2. Since the trials are sent by the one she loves, then she accepts them in *trust and love* – knowing it will be good for her purification in love and for the body of Christ (especially those immersed in darkness).

She knew that the more she endured difficulty for the sake of the one she loved, the more perfect her love for Him would be – she would present herself as a purer gift of self. The dialogue begins with Mother Agnes:

You have had many trials today? Yes, but I love them... I love all the good God sends me! Your sufferings are terrible! No, they are not terrible: can a little victim

⁹⁹ St. Thérèse of the Little Flower of Jesus 1912. *A New and Complete Translation of “L'Histoire d'Ame”* Ed. by T.N. Taylor, (London: Hurns & Oaks).
(https://archive.org/stream/saintthaeraeseof00thaeuoft/saintthaeraeseof00thaeuoft_djvu.txt) p. 312.

of love find anything terrible that is sent by her spouse? Each moment He sends me what I am able to bear, and nothing more, and if He increases the pain, my strength is increased as well. But I could never ask for greater sufferings, I am too little a soul. They would then be of my own choice.¹⁰⁰

The assurance with which Thérèse tells Mother Agnes that God continuously gives her the strength to endure pain must have been genuine, because her face was transformed in “unearthly joy” even when she was racked in pain.¹⁰¹

Thérèse did not consider her endurance of pain as *heroic* – for that would call attention to *her* strength and virtue. She was so deeply aware of the need for *humility*, selflessness, and truth in her love that she did not dare attribute her patient endurance of pain to her own strength – the strength, as she said, is the Lord’s alone. In order to avoid the possibility of attributing heroic virtue to herself, she even refused to ask for *more* pain – because that would imply she could do more than the Lord had given her in conjunction with *His* strength. In order to make herself a perfect gift of love to the Lord she loves, she knew that she would have to be attentive to *welcoming* the pain, enduring it *patiently* and *humbly* while putting herself in the hands of her loving Lord.

In Volume 6, we discussed the higher stages of the fourth level of love. There we saw that at the highest stages of level four love, genuinely holy people (imitating Jesus in His suffering) see *no contradiction* between love and suffering – not even between love and ever increasing intense suffering. Suffering is at once purification in love and transformation of self into a perfectly loving gift for the Lord. This was the grace of St. Thérèse of the Little Flower of Jesus – and her perfect appropriation of it led to her very quick canonization 28 years after her death.

Thérèse reiterated her spirituality of suffering and love in her dying words to Mother Agnes which she recorded in an entry to her autobiography as follows:

At last dawned the eternal day. It was Thursday, September 30, 1897. In the morning, the sweet victim, her eyes fixed on Our Lady’s statue, spoke thus of her last night on earth: ‘Oh! With what fervor I have prayed to her! And yet it has been pure agony, without a ray of consolation...earth’s air is failing me: when shall I breathe the air of Heaven?’ For weeks she had been unable to raise herself in bed, but at half-past two in the afternoon, she sat up and exclaimed: ‘Dear Mother, the chalice is full to overflowing! I could never have believed that it was possible to suffer so intensely... I can only explain it by my extreme desire to save souls...’ and a little while later: ‘Yes, all that I have written about my thirst

¹⁰⁰ St. Thérèse of the Little Flower of Jesus 1912, p. 214.

¹⁰¹ “A certain Sister entertained doubts concerning the patience of Thérèse. One day, during a visit, she remarked that the invalid’s face wore an expression of unearthly joy, and she sought to know the reason. It is because the pain is so acute just now. Thérèse replied, I have always forced myself to love suffering and to give it a glad welcome.” St. Thérèse of the Little Flower of Jesus 1912, p. 214.

for suffering is really true! I do not regret having surrendered myself to love.’ She repeated these last words several times.¹⁰²

By making herself “a little victim for the sake of love,” she graced the world with her love and allowed the Lord to transform her into a perfect gift of love -- which was her true desire and joy.

Some readers are probably thinking, “God forbid that I should be reduced to such hardship and suffering in my life! – I can’t even begin to see this as an opportunity for anything – let alone an opportunity for a contemplative vocation to grow closer to Christ in love! I don’t care how great St. Thérèse of Lisieux was (or how doable her ‘little way’), I don’t want to imagine myself ever being in this kind of situation where I would be ‘condemned’ to this kind of life.” If this is going through your mind, consider that God will not call you to this kind of life unless He gives you the specific grace to live it. The vast majority of us are not called to this kind of life, but we can still learn from the little way of St. Thérèse how to use our more manageable sufferings to give strength to the Church and be transformed in love.

I take away four lessons from her “little profound way:”

1. When suffering strikes – not only debilitating suffering, but any suffering – offer it up to the Lord as a self-sacrifice for the good of the Church and those in need of help toward redemption.
2. Unite the offering of yourself with the sufferings of Christ so that both of you can be on mission together.
3. If possible, reflect on the passion of Christ as you make your offering with Him to the Father.
4. Ask Him for the healing you desire – so long as it is commensurate with His will – using Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Abba, Father, **all things are possible** to you. **Take** this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will (Mk. 14:36).

If you have a significant negative reaction to the “little way” of St. Thérèse, do *not* force yourself to affirm what she is saying or doing – nothing good will come from this. Instead simply ask the Lord for the “*desire for the desire*” to freely offer your suffering as self-sacrifice for the strength of the Church and the redemption of souls. Don’t play mind games with yourself – forcing yourself into a position of St. Thérèse which the Lord at this time has not given you the grace to bear. As Thérèse herself said, “If more strength is needed, the Lord will give it to us.” It is best to imitate her humility and to allow the Lord to help us “His way” – trusting that He will bring optimal fruit out of our suffering – for ourselves, the people we touch, and the Church. If we ask the Father to do this – while offering our suffering to Him as self-sacrifice in imitation of Jesus, He will bring unimagined goodness and salvation out of our offering -- which He will reveal to us when we inherit eternal joy with Him.

¹⁰² St. Thérèse of the Little Flower of Jesus 1912 p. 220.

Editor's Note: In Chapter 9 of *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*, we explain how to follow the Holy Spirit during times of suffering. Some of the salient features of this discernment process are given in Volume 15 (Chapter One, Section III), but the full process of discerning and following the Holy Spirit is not given there. Interested readers may want to consult Chapter 9 of the book.