

Suffering, Love, and Eternal Life

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Introduction

Suffering can be a tremendous opportunity – if we view it within the context of love and eternal life. I did not appreciate this in my earlier years, but have come to realize that it is the highpoint of wisdom – if we have faith in a loving God. I have struggled with my eyesight since I was thirty years old, and can now understand the incredible value and opportunity of that struggle in my journey to come closer to God in love. For many years, when my eyes took another turn for the worse, I would go through yet another bout of frustration and anxiety—frustration, because I made the fatal error of comparing my diminished abilities with what I was once able to do—and anxiety, because I was not certain whether the new level of disability would end my productivity or people’s respect for my capacity to “deliver.” Looking back on it, I can honestly say that those frustrations were nothing more than an exercise in futility and that the anxieties—in every case—were completely unwarranted.

Let me say for the moment, that this initial negative reaction to suffering was really about *perspective*—how I viewed suffering and challenge—not so much the suffering or the challenge itself. I was not able to help myself. When the next level of disability came, I looked at it from a self-centric point of view. It seemed that the shocking development of “one more dreaded decrease in eyesight” caused me, despite my faith, to turn into myself. I suppose that this was just human nature, but I have learned one thing—the sooner I get over it by putting myself into the hands of God—looking for the *opportunity* in suffering that will come through His guidance—the better off I am.

If I did not have faith in a loving God, and hope in eternal life with him, I don’t think I would have a positive outlook on suffering – and I certainly would not be able to view it as an opportunity. I am not a stoic – so I wouldn’t have been able to see suffering as a way of cultivating strength, courage, self-discipline, self-sufficiency, invulnerability, and autonomy. Some of these supposed benefits of suffering – such as self-sufficiency, invulnerability, and autonomy run contrary to my empathetic and interpersonal nature and so I view them as negatives – not benefits. The other stoic characteristics – strength, self-discipline and courage can be positive, but they are not ends in themselves – they are only *means* to greater ends – such as contribution to others and the common good – to the objectives of love.

I can see positive benefits of suffering through the lens of *love* which may be initially defined as a “recognition of the unique goodness of individuals inducing a sense of empathy and unity with them, making it just as easy, if not easier, to do the good for them as to do the good for myself.” Inasmuch as suffering can lead to greater humility, empathy for the needy, and compassion, it can free us to contribute to others, common cause, and the common good without counting the cost – advancing the purpose of love. For me, this is a much higher purpose in life than the stoic characteristics mentioned above.

Yet for me, love by itself is not sufficient to make *complete* sense out of suffering. If suffering is to make *complete* sense, it would have to lead to a permanent more enduring contribution – not only a contribution to others and the common good, but also to the kingdom of God. It would have to lead not just to a *temporary* freedom to love, but to an enduring and eternal freedom to love. If suffering could lead to a *permanent* freedom from egocentricity, domination, self-absorption, and self-idolatry, and through this, to a *permanent* appreciation and communion with other people and a Supreme Being, then suffering would be far more intelligible, but not completely intelligible.

In order for suffering to make *perfect* sense, it would have to be combined with grace to help us use the suffering to achieve the objective of perfect love. Suffering provides a remarkably powerful inducement to move toward greater empathy, humility, compassion, and purpose in life – but I have always found that I need even more help – inspiration and guidance to peel back the layers of inauthenticity, egocentricity, and autonomy that impede my freedom to use suffering to move toward authentic love. This is what I mean by “grace.” Thus, if suffering is to make *perfect* sense, it would have to be situated within the context of perfect love, eternal life, and a perfectly loving Supreme Being to provide the grace and mercy to help me use suffering to ultimately achieve perfect freedom to love.

As a young man, when I looked upon these three conditions for “perfectly intelligible suffering,” I came face to face with the revelation of Jesus Christ. I realized that this is precisely what Jesus promised – it was the core of his message for all of us – (1) God (His *Abba*), is unconditional love – the father of the Prodigal Son, (2) The Father’s and Jesus’ objective is to bring all of us to eternal life in an unconditionally loving community with them, and (3) Jesus’ revelation and gift of the Holy Spirit is intended to provide the grace, inspiration, and guidance to attain greater freedom to love. If Jesus’ revelation is true, then suffering can be – and is – *perfectly* intelligible.

This implication of Jesus’ teaching led me on a search to confirm the existence of God, the soul, and the historical Jesus. I was able to discover enough evidence of these things when I was younger to incite my desire for transcendent happiness and to make recourse to Jesus’ revelation and the inspiration of the Spirit to find the opportunities in suffering. The rest, as they say, is history.

There is a strong correlation between the three components of my search and two volumes of my quartet on *Happiness, Suffering, and Transcendence*. Volume II – *The Soul’s Upward Yearning: Clues to Our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (Ignatius Press – coming in Fall of 2015), concerns the existence of God and the soul,¹ and Volume III – *God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus* (Ignatius Press – coming early 2016), concerns the reality of Jesus.² I wrote these two volumes to set out the contemporary evidence for the truth of these three transcendent realities – so that the “leap of faith” would not have to be “across the Grand Canyon.” If readers are in any way

¹ For free resources on this website concerning the existence of God and our transcendent soul, go to the last page of this document, and follow the directions to the articles on this website.

² For free resources on this website concerning the reality of Jesus, go to the last page of this document, and follow the directions to the articles on this website

skeptical about the above three conditions for transforming suffering into the freedom to love (i.e. the existence of God, the soul, or Jesus), then I would ask them to read these two books – and the sources referenced in them. Readers may also obtain **free resources from this website** by going to the last page of this document, and following the instructions. The more we aware of the reality of God, Jesus, and our transcendent soul, the better will be our pursuit of transcendent happiness and our conversion of suffering into the freedom to love.

It should not be thought that evidence alone can lead to faith. There is an indispensable component of intention, decision and choice involving the heart that must accompany whatever evidence we might use. God gives us room to freely decide to come to Him. In the words of Dostoyevsky, “He will not enslave us to a miracle.” Thus, we can never be completely compelled by the evidence – even overwhelming probative evidence – to believe in, seek, and attach ourselves to God. There will always be room to decide – to choose God as the objective of our *heart's* desire. If we are to attach ourselves to God, we will have to *want* this – indeed, we will have to want *Him* -- and the life of unconditional love He promises. This means we will have to renounce attitudes and ways of life contrary to love – egocentricity, domination, pride, envy, greed, and other vices. Renouncing these vices does not mean perfect detachment from them in our lives – that would be virtually impossible – but rather *intending* to detach ourselves from them with the help of God over the course of time. If the desire for God and an eternal life of love is present, then the evidence will be sufficient to move us to faith -- in both mind and heart.³

Let us return to the contention with which we started -- if I did not have faith in a loving God, and hope in eternal life with him, I would not have a positive outlook on suffering – and I certainly would not be able to view it as an opportunity. Faith in a loving God – particularly the loving God made manifest by and in Jesus Christ -- is so important to the interpretation of suffering that readers should do everything they can to increase and develop it throughout their lives. As noted above, there are many books to redress intellectual challenges to faith and God and Jesus, as well as books on prayer, Christian community, and the Christian view of suffering (including Volume IV of the quartet – *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*). It can make the difference between an essentially embittered and negative life and a positive life – a life in decline and a life toward transcendence, a nihilistic outlook and a sense of transcendent and loving purpose. Since Christian faith can so positively transform suffering, I will focus primarily on it throughout this article.

Even if we bring a deep and strong Christian faith to our lives, suffering can still surprise us, and in its initial phases, hit us hard. So we must be patient with our human nature even as we are focusing on bringing our faith to bear on our suffering. It is difficult to fight our human nature. Sometimes, when suffering comes out of the blue, I experience many of the same reactions as someone who just received news about having a terminal illness -- undergoing most

³ In Volume II, the evidence for God and our transcendent soul includes: (1) Lonergan's Proof of God, (2) medical studies of near death experiences, (3) evidence of a creation from contemporary physics, (4) our five transcendental desires, and (5) the interior evidence of religious experience.

In Volume III, the evidence for Jesus includes: (1) a synopsis of N.T. Wright's historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection, (2) the evidence for the Shroud of Turin, (3) John P. Meier's Study of Jesus' Miracles, (4) the evidence for Jesus outside of the Gospel and Christian works, and (5) the charismatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit in early Christian and modern times.

of the five stages of death and dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance).⁴ I think all of us have natural negative and defensive reactions to suffering which depend in part on our personalities and the kind of suffering we are undergoing.

If you have a personality like mine, you probably would not go through a stage of denial, but move immediately to a stage of frustration (anger and resentment) and anxiety about the future. You would then experience a bargaining stage—where you make promises to be a much better person if God would simply minimize your suffering. You might even get creative – and promise major increases in productivity in God’s service, if He would give you a “little” miracle. If God does not redress the suffering, you will probably reach an impasse – a decision point – where you will face two options – either give into depression, frustration, apathy, and despair, or turn in faith to God, and pray not so much for an alleviation of your suffering, but that this new challenge bring humility, empathy, compassion, faith, new opportunities to serve others, and to serve the kingdom. Another form of this prayer is, “Thy loving will be done” (See, “[Getting Started on Prayer](#)”).

Other personalities will have different “natural reactions” to suffering. A melancholic personality may be more inclined to phases of depression; a choleric personality might have an extended phase of anger, and a phlegmatic personality might have an earlier sense of resignation. Whatever the case, if we have dealt with suffering on several occasions, we will notice certain natural proclivities that characterize our initial reaction before we turn to the Lord in faith.

The intensity with which we go through our “natural negative reaction” to suffering also depends on the kind of suffering we are enduring. Grief over the passing of a loved one—parent, child, or close friend—generally produces the most intense reaction. Since we are not able to bring our relative or friend back to life, we might skip the bargaining process—and find ourselves in a state of intense loneliness and emptiness. Though these feelings are almost inevitable at first, we cannot afford to protract them, because they can set us on a self-destructive path. At this juncture we will want to use some spontaneous prayers (See, “[Getting Started on Prayer](#)”) to connect us with the loving God and the Holy Spirit. This would enable us to gain perspective through faith, prayer, and the Lord’s grace.

There are two things to be learned from these initial reactions to suffering. First, initially reacting to suffering in a negative (and even self-centered) way is psychologically and physiologically human. It is not a lack or crisis of faith, but only a *natural* reaction. The Lord understands this reaction, because He created us and knows us through and through. Even when we feel bitter resentment, he is not “turned off” to us, but rather tries to break through to us, help us, and guide us to the eternal opportunities in our suffering.

Secondly, the more quickly we turn to the Lord for help—using the perspective of eternal life and divine assistance to see the divine opportunity within suffering—the better off we will be. When we turn to the Lord in our suffering—through prayer, openness to the Holy Spirit, seeking the Lord’s perspective on the opportunities within our suffering—we will likely feel a sense of deep peace -- beyond *our* capacity to produce. This peace is frequently the beginning of a new journey or adventure with the Lord who uses our suffering to guide and lead us to new

⁴ See Kübler -Ross 2003.

perspectives on happiness and success, to deeper forms of courage and love, and to new opportunities to serve others and the kingdom. The initial feeling of “supernatural peace” introduces consolation and light into our initial desolation and darkness—interrupting the process of dwelling on frustration, anxiety, loneliness, emptiness, and the pain intrinsic to it all. This light not only interrupts the darkness, it illuminates the way out of it. When we feel this peace and sense this light, our job is to put our trust in the Lord, to remember that He is leading us ultimately to our *transcendent and eternal destiny* with Him, and to follow the light as best we can.

Following the light is not as easy as it might seem. Sometimes when we are trying to follow the light, we can be drawn back into the darkness because we dwell too much upon it or the events that led up to it. This has the peculiar effect of taking our focus off the supernatural sense of peace, the light, and the Holy Spirit who is guiding us. Like Peter leaving the boat to come to Jesus, we take our eyes off of Him because we are concerned about the power of the waves beneath us, and we begin to sink. Yet this too is very typical. When I do it, I react very much like Peter, saying “Lord, save me!” and Jesus reaches out, restores my sense of peace, and reintroduces me to His light – until I lapse again.

Unfortunately, my reaction is not as quick as Peter’s. When I falter, I generally go through another bout of frustration or resentment, followed by another bout of anxiety about the future, followed by another bout of darkness. Sometimes I talk myself out of asking the Lord for help by thinking to myself, “I must be making all this up—this is not God’s light, but only the Spitzerian light of ultimate rationalization.” Some cynical strand within me fastens onto this negative thought and gives itself over to Murphy’s law—“whatever can go wrong, will go wrong,” and so if I am sensing God’s light in the darkness, it must be me—and not God—because, “God’s help is too good to be true.” I can laugh at this logic when I am not overcome by it, but when I am overcome by it, it really puts a damper on my ability to see and follow God’s light—which is *really there*.

What I’m trying to say here is that “seeing God’s light in the darkness” is not a *simple*, one-off event—“Oh, now I see God’s light in the darkness—I’ll just follow it, and I will soon be out of the darkness.” would that it were that simple! Unfortunately the complexity of our psychological mindset, emotions, histories, and capacities forces us to do a “re-take” of “finding and following the light” several times—at least if you are anything like me. However, there is one important note of consolation in all these “re-takes”—every time we do a “re-take,” we do it a little better, because *the Lord* is really leading us out of the darkness, and when we refocus on His light, He inspires us to see it more clearly and brightly, making it harder to repeat our fall into “Murphy’s Law” to the same degree and extent. We don’t fall nearly as hard or as long the second, third, and fourth times along the path. Thus, “seeing God’s light in the darkness” is a bumpy journey—with some pretty good pitfalls along the way—but it is filled with God’s inspiration, guidance, and providential care—filled with trust, courage, resoluteness, and hope—amidst all the bumps. Make no mistake about it—the light is always pointing toward our eternal salvation with the Lord as well as to our ability to help others move to that salvation as well. If we follow that light—no matter how many bumps we encounter and times we “re-take”—it will lead to His Kingdom, and help us to lead others to it as well.

I. A Brief Summary of Jesus' and St. Paul's View of Suffering

As noted above, I do not think an adequate treatment of suffering (and its opportunities) can be done without considering the full range of human potential and the full span of reality. As explained in other articles, we have a desire for perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty, and home – revealing that we cannot be truly fulfilled without them (see the [free video and article](#) on the “*Four Levels of Happiness*”⁵). In those same articles, we showed that God (the one unrestricted act of thinking, which is the Creator of everything else) alone is perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty, and home.⁶

We also showed in the same resources that God is conscious, personal, and interpersonal – and that He desires to be in a relationship with us, and calls us to a relationship with Him that will lead to our ultimate happiness. As we probe this deeply, we are confronted with questions that reason and experience alone cannot answer – what kind of a relationship is God seeking? What is truly important to Him? How does He perceive our ultimate fulfillment and happiness? What must we do to grow in our relationship with Him? Does God help us, inspire us, and guide us – does He answer our prayers? Since the answers to these questions are beyond the power of reason and experience alone, we must infer that God will reveal Himself to us – that He will answer these questions through the mediation of a prophet or a priest – or perhaps be the mediator *Himself* – coming into our midst to show us in word and action how we might best grow in our relationship with Him, follow Him, and help others to do likewise. If God truly is *perfect* love and goodness, then perhaps He would do this *Himself* – for this would be the height of love.

As many readers know, this is precisely the claim of Jesus Christ and the Christian Church – that He is “Emmanuel” – “the perfectly loving God with us.” There are many free resources on this website that investigate the veracity of this claim – particularly on the fourth landing page -- [The Reality of Jesus](#) (see the list of free resources on the historical Jesus at the end of this article).

If Jesus truly is “the perfectly loving God with us,” and there is sufficient evidence to reasonably and responsibly believe this claim, then the question, “Why must we suffer?” can be answered in light of an unconditionally loving God who calls us to eternal life with Him. If Jesus really is the “perfectly loving God with us,” then He holds the key to our ultimate purpose, dignity, destiny, and happiness, for He not only affirms that His Father is unconditional love, but also steps into the reality of our suffering to point the way to the efficacy of that suffering through love. If Jesus truly is “the perfectly loving God with us,” then we would be remiss in answering the question, “Why must we suffer?” if we did not consider His words and actions. Thus, the following response reflects both His teachings and actions – which point the way not

⁵ For an explanation of our Five Transcendental Desires for perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty, and home, go to, “From Nothing to Cosmos -- [Complete Study Guide, Review Questions and Answers \(Chapter Eight\)](#),” – “Evidence for a Transphysical Soul from the Five Transcendental Desires.”

Also see, “[Free Encyclopedia on God, the Soul, and Transcendence, Unit C](#)”.

⁶ For a proof of God (the one unrestricted act of thinking which is the Creator of everything else), see, “[From Nothing to Cosmos – Complete Study Guide Chapter Six – Review questions, #64.](#)”

only to the opportunity of suffering, but its path to ultimate redemption and fulfillment. As He said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn. 12:24).

In other books and articles, I have given extensive treatment to Jesus’ view of suffering and the opportunities He saw in it.⁷ This section gives a very brief summary of that extensive treatment to provide a Christian context for seeing the opportunities in suffering—and the Lord’s light working through it.

Jesus changed the prevailing Old Testament view of suffering as “punishment for our sins (or our parents’ sins).” As He says, His Father causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust—the righteous and the unrighteous—the good and the evil alike (see Mt.5:45). Suffering is not God’s retribution or punishment; rather it occasions four opportunities:

- It helps us detach from “living for this world” and helps us invest ourselves in God’s kingdom and will.
- It helps us detach from egocentricity and our need to dominate by revealing our need for others and others’ need for us.
- It helps us detach from self-sufficiency and autonomy by focusing us on the interdependence arising out of our weakness, vulnerability, and pain.
- It enables us to offer our suffering to God as an act of self-sacrifice (love) to be used for the salvation of the world in imitation of Jesus.

Each of these four opportunities helps us to define ourselves. 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 this world, our self-sufficiency/autonomy, and our egocentric/dominating desires. We would not have the same opportunity to leave a legacy of contribution, compassion, and the 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. We would be deprived of the opportunity to make sacrifices for others, the kingdom, and other noble causes—left to a non-sublime innocence. These points are explained more extensively in the free encyclopedia in “Free Encyclopedia on God, the Soul, and Transcendence.”⁸

Jesus endured suffering—willingly entering into complete self-sacrifice in order to show us that suffering is **not** the undermining of our dignity and destiny, but rather the fulfillment of our true transcendent one. No doubt, suffering can lead to a decrease in what we have called Level One and Level Two dignity and destiny, but when it does so, it leads to an increase in Level Three and Level Four (see, “[The Four Levels of Happiness](#)”).

Self-offering for the sake of humanity is central to Jesus’ view of love (*agapē*) and suffering. In the free encyclopedia on the Historical Jesus, we showed that Jesus interpreted His

⁷ See the [free Jesus Wiki](#), [Unit II-L](#) and [Unit II-M](#). For a more explicit treatment, see *God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus* (Ignatius Press coming early 2016) – Chapter 3.

⁸ See, “[Free Encyclopedia on God, the Soul, and Transcendence](#).” Once inside, go to [Units K and L \(on suffering\)](#)”.

impending passion and death as an act of complete self-sacrifice—a complete gift of self—which is His definition of love.⁹ Inspired by the Fourth Suffering Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) and Psalm 22 (His dying words), Jesus proceeds toward Jerusalem and His impending death confident that His self-offering to the Father on behalf of all humanity will be the act of love that will dispel the darkness of Satan and human hearts. He knows that His Father is *Abba* (like the father of the Prodigal Son)—and that He will accept Jesus’ gift of self in love to redeem all who are open to it. His Eucharistic words, echoing Isaiah 53:12, point to the meaning of His passion as self-sacrificial love—taking the place of a sin offering and the paschal lamb to provide the blood of the new covenant leading to freedom from darkness and evil into His and the Father’s eternal light and love (see Free Encyclopedia on The Historical Jesus¹⁰).

The early Church understood that the self-sacrificial meaning of suffering was not limited to Jesus’ suffering and death alone. All of us have the same opportunity to imitate Jesus by offering our suffering to the Father as an act of self-sacrifice (love) for the life of the world. We notice that St. Paul was keenly aware of this when he declared:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church (Col 1:24).

Paul is not saying here that he *has* to make up for an intrinsic deficiency in Jesus’ suffering, but rather that Jesus has given us the opportunity to join Him in His self-sacrificial act for the sake of His body, the Church—and for all who are in need.

For Jesus, St. Paul, and the early Church, no human life lacks intrinsic worth. Everyone—even those who are profoundly sick, depressed, immobile, and in all other ways lacking in autonomy and bodily power—can have the most profound effect on the salvation of humanity by imitating Jesus in His act of self-sacrifice on the cross. The more profound the suffering, the more profound the act of self-sacrificial love for the life of the world. Indeed the ironic ultimate value of our lives is that they can have their most redemptive and salvific effects when we are most profoundly debilitated and suffering—even to the point of dying and death. For Jesus and the Church, those who are suffering most profoundly have the opportunity to have the most profound effect on the redemption and salvation of humankind.

The greater our suffering, the greater our self-offering to the Father can be, and the greater our act of self-offering, the greater our act of love for the life of the world. Indeed we could make a ministry—our life’s ministry—out of offering our suffering to the Father for the life of the world—joining ourselves to the redemptive love initiated by Jesus.

St. Paul was also keenly aware of the first three opportunities of suffering (in the above list). In his Second Letter to the Corinthians he states:

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, to keep me from being too proud. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it

⁹ See, “[The Historical Jesus, Units II-L and II-M](#)”.

¹⁰ See, “[The Historical Jesus, Unit II-L](#)”.

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, it is then that I am strong (2Cor 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,¹¹ but he remains 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. 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 could have given 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 I genuinely believe 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, we can see how needing people to lead him and write for him would have been quite disconcerting. Furthermore, embarrassing incidents—not recognizing a high priest in full regalia (Acts 23:3-5)—would have been humiliating. Yet when he recognizes that the Lord is not going to take away the thorn, he sees the light—namely, that he has been rescued out of real darkness—the darkness of egocentricity and self-idolatry, and at the same time, the power of Jesus has come to perfection in him through this weakness. When the light becomes apparent, and he sees 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 proclaims that He will boast first in his weaknesses instead of his strength—for when he is weak, it is then that he is truly strong—in Christ our light.

II.

Nine Christian Foundations for Suffering Well

There are nine major Christian foundations for interpreting suffering and growing through it. Each of them is implicit in the viewpoints of Jesus and St. Paul (given above in

¹¹ 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 does so 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.

Section I). If we internalize these nine foundations, they will condition the way we encounter suffering. Instead of suffering hitting us, knocking us down, and enervating our spirit, these nine foundations can help us engage the negativity of suffering within a realistic positive Christian context. This can give us insight, inspiration, and strength while forming a conduit for God's grace to transform suffering from something negative to something profoundly positive within the framework of eternal, unconditional love.

These nine foundations enable suffering to work miracles – opening the way to humility where once there was intransigent pride and arrogance; to compassion where once there was hardness of heart; to gentleness and acceptance where once there was domination and control; to courage where once there was faintness of heart; to transcendent meaning in life where once there was a reduction of self to materialism; to community and common cause where once there was intransigent autonomy and self-sufficiency; to an awareness of grace, providence, and the power of the Holy Spirit where once there was mere self-reliance; and to the anticipation of perfect truth, love, goodness, and home, where once there was cosmic emptiness, loneliness, and alienation. Yes – suffering is negative – it causes pain, dejection, anxiety, and self-alienation, but it also has incredibly great potential to transform our meaning in life from base superficiality to wise profundity, to move us from the first two levels of happiness to the third and fourth levels of happiness, and to move us out of the profound darkness and falsity of self-idolatry, to surrender to God's transforming power and guidance. All these transformations will be vital to our life in the kingdom of heaven, for heaven awaits the transformation of our hearts – so that our hearts become more like the heart of the one who has loved us first. If suffering can help us to move along that path, then we will be much closer to our goal before we pass into the arms of the loving God.

Though there are nine Christian foundations for suffering well, only the first is presented in this article. The other eight are given in a forthcoming book – *God So Loved the World: Contending with Suffering and Evil Through Faith* (Ignatius Press – coming in mid-2016). The list of them follows:

1. Conviction about Eternal Life and the Resurrection (in this article).
2. Who God is – and is not – According to Jesus (new book -- Chapter 2).
3. God's presence in our Suffering (new book -- Chapter 3).
4. Prayer in Times of Suffering (see – "[Getting Started on Prayer](#)").
5. Dealing with Fear and Anxiety (new book -- Chapter 5).
6. Awareness of the Opportunities of Suffering (new book -- Chapter 5).
7. Imitating Jesus in our Suffering (new book -- Chapter 6).
8. Following the Inspiration and Guidance of the Holy Spirit (new book -- Chapter 6).
9. Using Suffering to Deepen Love—the Path to Holiness (new book -- Chapter 7).

III.

Foundation #1: Conviction about Eternal Life and the Resurrection

The most fundamental Christian foundation of suffering is conviction about eternal life with the unconditionally loving God. If this really is our destiny (as Jesus said) then no suffering — not even the most intense grief of losing a child is *ultimately* tragic. Yes—the pain of such loss and grief can be unbelievably intense, but it need not be overwhelming to the point of

despair, because it is not the end of the story – of the child, the parents, and everyone else affected. Death and loss are intensely negative *moments* within an ultimately loving eternity. The same holds true for every other kind of suffering – physical pain and deprivation, psychological pain and deprivation, weakness, loss of socioeconomic means, humiliation, rejection, and callous hatred – all these things are mere negative moments within an ultimately loving eternity.

Jesus’ view of our short lives in the physical universe is that it is a period of choice and *self-definition* for the transphysical eternal life to come. This idea of “self-definition” is central to the Christian view of suffering. For Jesus, this life is not an end in itself, but only a brief moment—though a very significant moment -- for choices and preparation for the life to come. St. Paul summarizes this in the Second Letter to the Corinthians as follows:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Later, in the Letter to the Romans, he expresses it this way:

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom 8:17-18).

Then why is there death? Why do we have to bring this life to a close before we can proceed to eternal life? Death is significant for only one major reason—to compel us to make the fundamental decisions that will define our eternal character. Death makes us realize that we will not be able to continue this life indefinitely, which means we will have to start leaving a legacy sooner rather than later—defining who we are with respect to others—sooner rather than later—defining what matters most to us in life (Level 1, or 2, or 3, and or 4)—sooner rather than later. Death provides the incalculable blessing of inciting us to do the most important task—or perhaps mission—in our lives—to declare in intention, word, and action who we are and who we are likely to become. Will we orient our lives toward good or evil, virtue or vice, actions which build up others or tear them down, and actions which are loving or hateful. Death means that the path we choose—though it can be changed in midcourse or even at the end of life—will ultimately define who we are. Death assures that we will *not* be able to delay or change our self-definition *forever*—there will be a point at which our intentions, words, and actions will be definitive.

What about children who die unexpectedly before engaging in truly self-defining choices and actions? We have to leave these matters in God’s hands. Does God give them a chance to make such decisions after they die? Perhaps He does, but we must bear in mind that God is absolutely predisposed to the salvation of any innocent child. As Jesus teaches, “I tell you that in heaven [children’s] angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 18:10) and again “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the

kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3). It is worth noting here that according to the International Association of Near Death Studies, 85% of children undergoing clinical death have a “heavenly” near death experience.¹² It is also significant that this large percentage of children (who had an NDE) have virtually no death anxiety for the rest of their lives—which is quite different from the normal population¹³ (see the free article, “[Science, Medicine, and Near Death Experiences](#)”).

Though St. Paul sees the importance of death in calling us to faith,¹⁴ he states confidently that with resistance to sin and faith in the redemptive power and resurrection of Jesus, death has no power over us:

For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Cor 15:53-55).

For Jesus, eternal life with Him and His Father is the consolation of unconditional love with everyone in the heavenly kingdom. He likens this to a perfect and perpetual Messianic Banquet and being like angels in Heaven (Mt. 22:30). This allusion to being “like angels” is commensurate with St. Paul’s description of Jesus’ (and our) “spiritual body” in the kingdom of heaven—which will be transformed in spirit, power, and glory. This eternal consolation in love, spirit, and glory puts an end to suffering, and transforms the whole of suffering and death into complete fulfillment and joy. This is the essence of Jesus’ preaching at the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke:

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets (Lk. 6:20-22).

The same unconditional promise to transform suffering into consolation and joy is stated in the Beatitudes in Matthew: “Blessed are the sorrowing (grieving), for they shall be consoled” (Mt. 5:4).

So if Jesus’ intent is to lead us into eternal love and joy and to redeem our suffering through this love and joy, why is there a Hell? In a new book (*God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus* – Chapter 7 -- Ignatius Press – coming

¹² International Association of Near Death Studies, 2014, “Children’s Near Death Experiences” (<http://iands.org/childrens-near-death-experiences.html>).

¹³ Sutherland, Cherie, 2012, “Near Death Experiences of Children,” in *Making of Sense Near-Death Experiences: A Handbook for Clinicians*. Ed. by edited by Karuppiah Jagadheesan, Anthony Peake, Mahendra Perera (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers), p.

¹⁴ “Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again” (2 Corinthians 1:9-10). See also Romans 6:5. See also 2 Corinthians 4:11-12.

early 2016), we consider why an unconditionally loving God would allow even the possibility of Hell—a place which Jesus acknowledges to be dark, lonely, and sad.¹⁵ We indicated, in conformity with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that Hell is a state of definitive *self-exclusion* from God and the blessed in His kingdom. Why would anyone exclude themselves from God and the blessed? Apparently some people might *choose* to reject God and love. Some people might *prefer* autonomy, domination, self-indulgence, and self-idolatry to love (appreciation of others, equality with others, giving oneself to others, and surrendering in love to God). Since God has made us free to define who we are and where we will find our “happiness,” He will accommodate the choices we allow to define us – whether they be for egocentricity and dominion or love and loving self-surrender.

God does not want anyone to choose a life of self-indulgence, domination, and self-idolatry because He knows it will involve loneliness, pain, and darkness, but He allows us to choose it because He has given us the ultimate dignity of defining ourselves and choosing our “happiness.” Though He is incredibly saddened by anyone who chooses self-exclusion from love—from Him and the blessed—He will not force us to take His gift of loving salvation. If some choose “anti-love,” God cannot bring them into the Kingdom of Love for they would undermine the dynamic of love in Heaven. Thus God must keep the domain of anti-love separate from the domain of love.

Ironically, when God created us in His own image with the freedom to define ourselves and to choose our happiness, He had to allow us to definitively reject Him, others, love and His kingdom. He does not send anyone to Hell, but accommodates a state that can be chosen by an individual in which He, love, and the blessed are *absent*. In order to give us ultimate dignity, He has to accommodate ultimate separation from Himself and love. Thus, God does not cause eternal suffering to anyone—He allows us to enter into darkness and loneliness to accommodate our choice to reject Him and the joy of love.

Is the risen life of Jesus—a community of love and the transformation in spirit and glory (like the angels)—available to everyone or only to Christians? In *God So Loved the World* (Chapter 7, Section I), we showed that Jesus’ intent was to save *everyone*—Jew and Gentile—past, present, and future. We concluded with two Catholic doctrinal statements summarizing the Church’s reflection on the words of Jesus over the centuries.¹⁶ The first comes from *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church):

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.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Matthew 25:30, Matthew 13:42, and Luke 16:23-24.

¹⁶ In *God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus* (Chapter 7, Section I), we showed that these two Catholic documents reflect precisely the intention of Jesus as proclaimed in the New Testament.

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II (Section 16) in *Vatican Council II Vol. 1: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* trans. by Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company), 1975, p.376.

The second statement is from *Gaudium Et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church). It expands on the Declaration of *Lumen Gentium* by showing how the redemptive act of Jesus and the actions of the Holy Spirit are actively involved in saving *all* people of good will:

The Christian is certainly bound both by need and by duty to struggle with evil through many afflictions and to suffer death; but, as one who has been made a partner in the paschal mystery, and as one who has been configured to the death of Christ, he will go forward, strengthened by hope, to the resurrection. All this holds true not for the Christian only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since *Christ died for all*, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.¹⁸

What can we conclude from this? We may confidently believe that God so loved the world that He created human beings with the ultimate dignity to define themselves for all eternity -- and the ultimate destiny of eternal life with Him and the blessed in the community of unconditional love and joy. This dignity and destiny is the ultimate context through which suffering and death are to be interpreted. Suffering and death are not ends in themselves—they are not definitive -- and not even long-term conditions. For Jesus—and the loving God—suffering and death are punctuated realities that incite us to *choose* who we are and who we will become—necessary moments in the process of self-definition—our ultimate dignity. Since they are temporary, there can be tragedy, but no *ultimate* tragedy; grief, but no *ultimate* grief; weakness, anxiety, and pain, but no *ultimate* weakness, anxiety, and pain; and suffering which can lead to great sadness, but no *ultimate* sadness and despair. Therefore, suffering and death are transcended by love, joy, and life—the only real absolutes—in the kingdom of God. As Jesus affirms in the Gospel of John:

I have spoken these things to you, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (Jn. 15:11-12).

By now it will be clear that the resurrection lies at the heart of the Christian interpretation of suffering. It is so important that without it, life would be empty, meaningless, and ultimately tragic – just as atheistic existentialism proclaims. As St. Paul says:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied (1Cor. 15:12-18).

However, in the context of the resurrection, life is *ultimately* and *eternally* meaningful, joyful, loving, good, and beautiful. In this context, suffering and death find their place in a *temporary*

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, Chapter I (section 22) in *Vatican Council II Vol. 1: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* trans. by Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company), 1975, pp. 923-24. Italics mine.

process of self-definition, and simply disappear without trace of negativity or tragedy in the eternity of the resurrection.

Since the resurrection is so central to the Christian interpretation of suffering, we must understand the evidence for its truth and reality. On this website, we have provided evidence for God and our transphysical soul – see the free online resources at the bottom of this article.¹⁹ This includes:

- Evidence for transphysical consciousness capable of surviving bodily death from near death experiences (see, “[Science, Medicine, and Near Death Experiences](#)”).
- Evidence for the existence of a unique unrestricted act of thinking which creates everything else – God (see, “[From Nothing to Cosmos – Complete Study Guide, Review Questions and Answers for Chapter 6 – question #64](#)”).
- Evidence for the likelihood that this unique unrestricted act of thinking incites our awareness of and desire for perfect love, justice-goodness, and beauty (see, “[From Nothing to Cosmos – Complete Study Guide, Review Questions and Answers for Chapter 8](#)”).²⁰

This evidence shows the strong likelihood that we not only have a soul capable of surviving bodily death, but also that God is present to us—here and now—inciting our awareness of and desire for perfect truth, love, goodness, and beauty. This is the context through which we experience the Numen (the mysterious, overwhelming, fascinating, inviting, exciting, and wholly Other—Rudolf Otto), the intuition of the Sacred (which incites us to seek religious community, ritual, symbol, and worship—Mircea Eliade), the personal imperative of conscience (Emmanuel Kant and John Henry Newman), and the archetypal myth and symbols of the cosmic struggle between good and evil (J.R.R. Tolkien and Carl Jung).²¹ When we see the presence of God in the transcendent and transphysical soul with which He created us, it should not be surprising to find that the vast majority of near death experiences are very positive (approximately 99%), and that the experience of the white light on the “other side” is typified by the following case report of an exceedingly loving, blissful, and beautiful white light:

¹⁹ I have written two books which give further explanation of this evidence. The first one emphasizes evidence for God from physics and philosophy: Robert Spitzer 2010 *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing). The second book emphasizes evidence for our transphysical soul, transcendent nature, and life after death: Robert Spitzer *The Soul's Upward Yearning: Clues to our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press – coming in Fall 2015).

²⁰ Readers may find additional evidence for transphysical consciousness in Robert Spitzer *The Soul's Upward Yearning: Clues to Our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press – coming Fall 2015). This evidence includes – the human capacity for trans-algorithmic mathematical intelligence (beyond rules and programming) from Gödel's proof; our capacity to experience ourselves experiencing (Chalmers' hard problem of consciousness), and our capacity for syntactically meaningful language (beyond higher primates according to Chomsky's test) presumably coming from an innate awareness of heuristic notions.

²¹ Robert Spitzer *The Soul's Upward Yearning: Clues to Our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press – coming Fall of 2016), Chapters 1&2 – see pp. 25-93.

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

As noted above (Section II), the evidence from experience and reason is not enough, because it does not answer many of our questions. If God is truly loving (as our transcendental desires suggest), then He would want to reveal Himself to us to answer those questions, and if He is perfectly loving, then He would be likely to mediate His presence and message to us Himself – which is precisely the claim of Jesus Christ and the Christian Church. On this website, we have provided considerable evidence to substantiate the truth of this claim, including:

- Evidence of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection (See, [“Reality of Jesus , Free Encyclopedia, The Historical Jesus”](#), [Units II-C and II-D](#)”).
- Evidence of the resurrection from the Shroud of Turin (See, [“Science and the Shroud of Turin”](#)).
- Evidence of the Holy Spirit in the early Church and today (See, [“The Historical Jesus, Unit II-E”](#)).
- Evidence of the historicity of Jesus' miracles (See, [“The Historical Jesus, Unit II-F”](#)).
- Evidence of the unconditional love of God and Jesus – in both word and action (See, [“The Historical Jesus, Units II-J through II-M”](#)).

This evidence points to Jesus' and the Father's unconditional love, and their intention to bring all who seek God with a sincere heart into their eternal kingdom of love.

The evidence of Jesus' resurrection correlates strongly with the evidence of near death experiences in which the white light, Jesus, and deceased relatives exemplify love in a heavenly domain – though Jesus' resurrection and preaching go beyond NDE's by asserting the eternity, glory, and *unconditional* love in the afterlife. The combined evidence shows the reasonableness of belief in a heavenly resurrection – as well as its likely occurrence. Though some opponents have challenged the veracity of near death experiences, the Shroud of Turin, Wright's arguments for the historicity of the resurrection, Chalmer's hard problem of consciousness, and even Gödel's Proof, each area of evidence remains quite steadfast in its probative force -- insisting as it were against a tide of hostility on the eternal, transcendental, glorious, and unconditional love awaiting us. This should be sufficient to reasonably anchor the faith of people who are suffering – so that they can securely venture into the domain of prayer and grace through that faith. The outcome will be quite remarkable – the negativity of suffering transformed into the positivity of

²² Moody, 1975, pp. 53-54.

love – the transition from egocentricity into the humble and gentle love of Christ – the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

We conclude with two passages from the New Testament reflecting faith in the resurrection during times of suffering. St. Peter advises his readers as follows:

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.
(1Peter 5:10-11).

St. Paul goes even further by saying that he counts the glories of this world as mere “refuse” in light of the glory of God that is to come in the resurrection. He does not disdain the good things of this world, but asserts that next to the glory of the resurrection (which he has witnessed in the risen Christ), all worldly goods seem to pale and even disappear:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.
(Phil. 3:8-11).

Karl Rahner summarizes these thoughts of our dignity and destiny in infinite eternal love as follows:

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.²³

²³ Rahner 1982, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Trans. by William Dych. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company). Pp. 123-124.

Free Internet Resources for Evidence of God, our Transcendent Soul, and the Historical Jesus

Resources on the Existence of God and the Soul:

1. For proof of God, see, [“Complete Study Guide, From Nothing to Cosmos, Chapter Six Review Questions and Answers”](#).
2. For evidence of God from contemporary physics, go to the same resource (Complete Study Guide, From Nothing to Cosmos), see, [“Review questions, chapters 2 through 5”](#).
3. For evidence of a transcendent soul from near death experiences and our five transcendental desires, go to the same resource (Complete Study Guide, From Nothing to Cosmos), see, [Review questions for chapters 7 and 8”](#).
4. For a full scholarly article on the evidence for a transcendent soul from near death experiences, see article entitled [“Science, Medicine, and Near Death Experiences.”](#)

Resources on the Reality of Jesus:

5. For the latest historical evidence of Jesus’ resurrection (particularly from N.T. Wright), the latest historical evidence for Jesus’ miracles (particularly from John P. Meier), and contemporary evidence for Jesus outside of the bible, see, [“The Historical Jesus – 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6”](#).
6. For a free scholarly article on the Shroud of Turin (including new dating tests after the 1988 Carbon dating, and evidence of a resurrection in light), see, [“Science and the Shroud of Turin – \(free PDF with pictures\)”](#)