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Emmanuel "God With Us" in Suffering

E. Douglas William Jr.

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

EMMANUEL: "GOD WITH US" IN SUFFERING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
E. DOUGLAS WILLIAMS JR.

GRESHAM, OREGON

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ABSTRACT

Title: EMMANUEL: "GOD WITH US" IN SUFFERING

Author: E. Douglas Williams Jr.

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This paper proposes a response the following question: What is the best approach for ministers to use in ministry to the suffering? The paper examines the question in light of culture in the United States in the twenty-first century. Many people face a crisis in their faith due to a misconception that God allows suffering to happen to good people. Three covenantal theories: limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation, appear throughout the Old and New Testaments and in the history of the Church. This paper proposes theocentric consolation as the proper paradigm for ministry to those who suffer.

Chapter 1 deals with the responses to suffering in the Old Testament including scrutiny of the three covenantal theories and the proposition that theocentric consolation offers the most appropriate approach to ministry for those who suffer. Chapter 2 highlights the responses to suffering found in the stories of Jesus, the writings of Paul, and in the book of James. Each covenantal theory of suffering is also found in the New Testament.

Chapter 3 describes the covenantal theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation as they have been espoused and taught

throughout church history. The chapter specifically examines the doctrines of Calvinist, Wesleyan, and Catholic theologies in regards to suffering because they constitute the majority of believers in the United States.

Chapter 4 presents a theology of suffering. Its narrative of the theme of covenants in Scripture demonstrates theocentric consolation as the proper foundation for a ministry to the suffering. A simple theodicy is proposed at the end of the chapter. Chapter 5 relates some common inadequate approaches to suffering in the United States, and it concludes with the claim that theocentric consolation offers the best approach to ministry to those who suffer and some practical ways to use it.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation addresses an issue that Christians of every generation must face: the problem of why good people suffer. “Suffering” in this context is intended to encompass catastrophic events that precipitate a faith crisis. A “catastrophic event” refers to such experiences as accidental or youthful death, the onset or discovery of a terminal illness, accidents that result in loss of limb or mental faculties, or any other sudden reversal of what is “normal”. The term “normal” is assessed in terms of the cultural standards of Christians living in the United States. Often the individuals in this culture have a vastly different expectation of God from what Scripture teaches. Yancey gives credence to this, saying:

I found that for many people there is a large gap between what they expect from their Christian faith and what they actually experience. From a steady diet of books, sermons, and personal testimonies, all promising triumph and success, they learn to expect dramatic evidence of God working in their lives.¹

Clapp and Wright offer further evidence saying:

Bruce Wilkinson’s *The Prayer of Jabez* rode the top of Publisher’s Weekly and the New York Times bestseller lists for many months after its 2000 publication. This little book, easily read within an hour, centers on two short and obscure verses in 1 Chronicles. . . . We are told in the preface that this is a “daring prayer that God always answers” and “the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God.”²

¹ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 1.

² Rodney Clapp and John Wright, “God as Santa.” *Christian Century* (23 October - 9 December 2002): 29.

The prayer of Jabez is as follows: “Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil.”³

Schmidt gives further evidence of the American (United States) view of suffering:

As Americans . . . we are particularly adept at . . . denial. Advertising ploys crowd all but the youngest and strongest to the margins of our consciousness. Good looks and good fortune are promoted as an entitlement. We are inclined to talk about the lifestyle we deserve, the freedoms we have earned, and the comforts that should be ours; and we thereby weave a fabric of public discourse that suggests suffering is neither likely nor inevitable.⁴

These examples give us a glimpse of the type of culture that local ministers face.

It is a culture that personifies God as a benevolent benefactor or loving father, whose only desire is to protect them from all that is evil (which includes suffering) and who has only their prosperity at heart. As Fee states:

American Christianity is rapidly being infected by an insidious disease, the so-called wealth and health Gospel—although it has very little of the character of Gospel in it. . . . Indeed the theology of this new “gospel” seems far more to fit the American dream than it does the teaching of Him who had “nowhere to lay His head”.... Let us take, for example, the “basic Scripture text” of this movement (3 John 2, in the King James Version): “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” Of this text Copeland (John Copeland, a leading figure in the health and wealth gospel movement) says, “John writes that we should prosper and be in health” (p.14 in his book *The Laws of Prosperity*). But is this what the text actually says? Hardly! . . . [H]e simply runs roughshod over the plain meaning of the texts—because the plain meaning so clearly runs counter to his invalid interpretations of the basic texts.⁵

³Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 15.

⁴Frederick W. Schmidt Jr., *When Suffering Persists* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2001), 19.

⁵Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Reprint, 1996), 3, 6, 7.

Yancey quotes theologian Helmut Thielicke as further evidence of the attitude of Western Christians:

After an extensive tour of the United States, the well-known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he had observed as the greatest deficiency among American Christians. He replied, "They have an inadequate view of suffering."⁶

This sense of entitlement often precipitates great anger at God, creating a faith crisis in those who suffer. If Americans look to God for their well-being and prosperity, one understands why the negative reaction to suffering often prevails.

This paper assumes that suffering is an existential reality for all people. As theologian Katharine Dell says, "Each and every human being in every age has a story of suffering . . . one has to admit that suffering is an inevitable part of human existence."⁷ Hall says of this existential reality: "Suffering is real, is intense and ubiquitous, is not easily overcome, and is the lot of humanity under the conditions of existence."⁸ Suffering poses a significant challenge for the pastoral care giver. In the experience of the author of this paper, churches and pastors are frequently ill-equipped to respond to catastrophic events that lead to suffering, and faith crises. Churches and pastors need a coherent theology of suffering and a working model by which they may effectively minister to the suffering. This paper proposes that theocentric consolation provides pastoral caregivers the necessary theological perspective to offer people comfort and the strength to endure suffering.

⁶ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 8.

⁷ Katharine Dell, *Shaking A Fist At God: Insights from the Book of Job* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1995), 3.

⁸ Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg House, 1986), 26.

Pastors often find themselves in the position of Job's "comforters." Byrne says, "Job's friends could not offer needed support, and indeed, only complicated Job's experience of pain by interpreting his suffering as God's curse."⁹ Pastors who are poorly equipped may intensify the experience of suffering in the name of trying to help. God's curse, to which Byrnes refers, is described in the Old Testament as a failure to meet the obligations of the covenant. This paper first examines the Old and New Testaments, highlighting several discreet themes of suffering and many of the specific responses to suffering. Three covenantal themes are found in the Old and New Testaments including "limited retribution," "telic vindication," and "theocentric consolation." These covenantal themes will be seen throughout this paper demonstrating that God actively seeks a relationship with humanity as seen in the Hebrew word, *berit* (translated covenant), which means an "alliance of friendship between God and humanity."¹⁰

Second, the paper examines several key Christian traditions that demonstrate adherence to the themes and responses to suffering in Scripture. These prevalent responses to suffering reveal that churches and pastors often are ill-equipped to respond effectively to persons and families in the midst of suffering.

Third, the paper delineates a set of inadequate approaches typically taken by churches and pastors in their ministry to the suffering and a set of healing practices that adhere more closely to biblical themes and responses adduced from Scripture. This

⁹ Patricia Huff Byrne, "Give Sorrow Words: Lament—Contemporary Need for Job's Old Time Religion." *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 56 (Fall 2002): 3.

¹⁰ F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 136.

chapter will also deal with the problem of theodicy, which is an inevitable discussion in all works regarding the subject of suffering.

Fourth, based on this theology of suffering, this paper offers a framework or paradigm by which pastors and churches can minister to those going through the experience of suffering. The author of this paper believes that God seeks a closer relationship with His people, desiring to be their comforter, enabler, and friend throughout all of the experiences in life, especially in times of suffering. God seeks this relationship with His people through covenantal relationships. The New Covenant through Jesus Christ is a fulfillment of all previous covenants in reaching this goal. Schmidt asserts: "The passion for relationship is more basic to the nature of God than either power or goodness. . . . It defines God's activity in the world."¹¹ Attempts to blame God for allowing suffering miss the point, the important issue is the role that God plays in the suffering experience. Pastors can minister most effectively through the position of "theocentric consolation," which may be described as God sharing our sorrow. Unlike Job's "comforters," God truly suffers with us. While "theocentric consolation" does not answer all questions that will be raised, it provides pastoral caregivers the necessary theological perspective by which to create a place where people may gain comfort and the strength to endure. The question is how to develop a relationship with a God who wants to be our consolation during times of suffering. Rabbi Kushner speaks of this when he says:

¹¹ Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists*, 88.

There may be another approach (in reference to asking why every time something bad happens). Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God. The Psalmist writes, "I lift up mine eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of Heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1-2)."¹²

Scripture used in this paper will be the International Version unless otherwise noted.

¹² Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1983), 29-30.

CHAPTER 1

THEMES AND RESPONSES TO SUFFERING IN HEBREW SCRIPTURE

This chapter explores the Hebrew Scripture's themes and responses associated with suffering. The author of this paper believes the Old Testament must be examined through within the context of ancient Israel rather than through the perspective of Western Christianity. Walter Brueggemann asserts that contemporary Christian scholars often forget that the Old Testament is "resiliently Jewish."¹ He suggests the problem lies in relying on a westernized interpretation that fails to consider the contours of Jewish thought. He cites two reasons for the concern with interpretation:

First, this test is of, with, and for a particular historical community that has its own distinct life through time, a life characterized by much abuse and displacement. . . . Second, and more specifically, it is important to recognize the Jewish modes of discourse through which the test proceeds. . . . Western Christianity has been committed, from early on, to Aristotelian logic that could not countenance the existence of opposites at the same time.²

In an attempt to bring doctrinal certitude to the Old Testament, Western Christianity often ignores the use of contradictory statements in the Old Testament. The problem of suffering cannot be accurately accounted for without acknowledging the Old Testament's paradoxical statements. For example, God seemed to promise prosperity and

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 80.

² *Ibid.*, 81-82.

well-being to those who obeyed His will such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua. The book of Job, however, presents a good and faithful man suffering, which contradicts western expectations. An attempt to adduce absolute truths from the Old Testament, one can lose the spirit of its writing and its original intent. Brueggeman suggests the statements are not completely contradictory:

Our propensity is to reason things through to a settlement, to reach conclusions that then stand as certitudes to which appeal can subsequently be made (transcendental). Israel's characteristic mode of discourse, however, tends not to claim such destinations for itself, and tends not to grant them to God. . . . For Israel and Israel's God, there is no deeper joy, no more serious requirement, no more inescapable burden, than to be reengaged in the process of exchange that never arrives but is always on the way (dialectical and dialogical).³

This interpretation demonstrates an engagement between God and humanity, and this paper asserts that God wants to be in relationship with His children characterized by continual dialogue.

Limited Retribution in Old Testament Covenants

God made covenants between Himself and Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joshua, David, and Josiah, and these consistently resulted in the following theme: Blessings and prosperity are bestowed upon the faithful who follow God's commands, while calamity and misfortune come upon those who failed to obey God.⁴ This theme appears frequently in the Old Testament, and the author of this paper will refer to the

³ Ibid., 83, 84. Cf. also Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 6, 7.

⁴ Byrne, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 7-25.

theme as the “theory of limited retribution.” In this theory, suffering is divine retribution for wickedness and, therefore, befalls the wicked. The retribution is, therefore, limited. Millard Erickson observes that Scripture sometimes portrays a “virtual cause-and-effect relationship between sin and punishment, punishment that is meted out within historical time rather than in some future state.”⁵ For example, Achan is stoned for his disobedience of taking goods from Jericho (cf. Josh. 7:20-25; 1 Chron. 2:7). Lohfink refers to this cause-and-effect relationship between Israel’s actions and God’s favors, saying, “If first place is given to serving YHWH, everything else will be given as well.”⁶

God’s covenant with Adam is the first example of a cause-and-effect relationship between God and humanity, and Pink suggests that understanding this relationship is crucial to understanding the covenant of Christ in the New Testament.⁷ God gives Adam a cause-and-effect pattern observed in later covenants throughout the Old Testament when He says, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen. 2:16-17).

The story of Noah and his family in Genesis 9:4-13 repeats this cause-and-effect pattern. Although this covenant is between God, Noah, and Noah’s future generations, it is an everlasting covenant because it extends to “every living creature on earth” (Gen.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986), 607-611. Cf. also Nels Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper and Brother, 1951), 228; Charles Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Sin and of the Ways of God with Sinners* (London: Epworth, 1953), 43.

⁶ Norbert Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 73.

⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *The Divine Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1973), 7-10.

9:10). This covenant varies from other covenants because God bestows it upon humanity and all creation. This covenant is an example of limited retribution because God may still evoke punishment of earthly destruction, other than flooding with water, if humans do not obey the conditions of the covenant.

God also demonstrates His desire for relationship with Israel through his call of Abram:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:1-3)

This call to Abram was later formalized as a covenant (cf. Gen. 15:18-21). God required a demonstration of man's promise of covenant through circumcision in the Abrahamic Covenant:

As for me, this is my covenant with you: I will establish my covenant . . . for an everlasting covenant . . . which you shall keep. . . . Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. . . . Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (Gen. 17:4-14)

In spite of the circumcision requirement, some scholars argue the Covenant of Abraham is the only covenant without any obligatory responsibilities. For example, Jakob Jocz observes, "Most ancient covenants required obligations (presupposed reciprocal obligations) of the one offered the covenant. The Covenant of Abraham has no obligations, and being without condition, has no parallel in the ancient custom of Israel or

of the Near East.”⁸ The verses in Genesis 12:1-3, however, reveal a presupposed reciprocal obligation: Abraham had to leave his homeland and family, and relocate to a new land in order to receive the promises of the covenant. Weston names four conditions that must be met in order to receive the seven blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant:

The four conditions are Genesis 12:1-3: 1) Get out of your country; 2) get away from your kindred; 3) get away from your father’s house; and 4) go to a land that I will show you. The seven blessings are: 1) I will make of you a great nation; 2) I will bless you; 3) I will make your name great; and 4) I will make you a blessing; 5) I will bless them who bless you; 6) I will curse those who curse you, and 7) through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.⁹

These presupposed reciprocal obligations illustrate the covenantal theme of limited retribution because uncircumcised males face being cut from their community and God. Circumcision demonstrated God’s relationship to the people of Israel, and this promise given to Abram is an everlasting covenant: “I will establish my covenant between me and you . . . for an everlasting covenant” (Gen.17:7).

The Abrahamic Covenant continued through Isaac to Jacob, and Van Groningen writes:

Abraham was never given options that he could choose to accept or reject. . . .Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham was characterized by promise and law. . . . Election to covenantal privileges and responsibilities was not on the basis of merit, but according to Yahweh’s sovereign will and mercy. (Romans 9:10-18)¹⁰

⁸ Jakob Jocz, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1968), 23.

⁹ Charles Gilbert Weston, *The Seven Covenants* (Jefferson, OR: Weston Bible Ministries, 1990), 11.

¹⁰ Gerard Van Groningen, “Covenant,” in *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 127.

While Abraham's position with God was secure, it depended upon whether or not he abided by the covenant. The Old Testament indicates that while the covenantal relationship was open to all, keeping the covenant with God was a prerequisite for God's blessing and favor. This condition explains why Jacob feared for his life upon meeting his brother Esau, years after cheating him out of his birthright (Gen. 32:1-21).

God shows His desire for a relationship with His people when He states, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all peoples . . . a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5, 6). Paul Tillich writes, "The relation of the God of Israel to his nation is based on a covenant. The covenant demands justice, namely, the keeping of the Commandments, and it threatens the violation of justice with rejection and destruction."¹¹ The covenant relationship between Israel and God in the Sinaitic Covenant repeats the theme of limited retribution.

God gave the Decalogue and miscellaneous laws to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 20-23). The Decalogue's authoritative language requires obedience to certain regulations in order to receive favors. Mehl observes, "His Ten Commandments . . . reveal His (God's) heart! All the way through the scriptures, you see it . . . the Lord's care for us. He always seems to be there. . . . The Ten Commandments are, more than anything else, a full-hearted love letter from God to his people."¹² Stuart makes a similar assertion about the Decalogue: "God's laws are gifts which are intended for our benefit, not arbitrary

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 227.

¹² Ron Mehl, *The Tender Commandments* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998), 246.

rules designed to make life hard.”¹³ God explains to Moses that the words of the covenant are to be given to the people, requiring the stipulations to be kept in order to receive the blessings of prosperity (cf. Exod. 24:3-8, 13). This demonstrates God’s care and concern for the well-being and comfort of His creation.

George Eldon Ladd views the Old Testament as a fragmentary revelation that does not give a clear picture of God’s character. Hebrews 7:12 alludes to a change in the law when there is a change in the priesthood, and through Christ, the new High Priest, the revelation of God becomes much clearer. The writer of Hebrews also suggests the Old Covenant had proven ineffective in creating a faithful people, but the New Covenant, written on the heart itself, brings a new motivation to experience God personally.¹⁴

Moses broke the first tablets when he discovered his people worshipping a golden calf in violation of their covenant. God then had Moses bring Him two stones in order to inscribe upon them His covenant with Israel.

So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones . . . the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed . . . a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger . . . abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty. . . . “I hereby make a covenant . . . for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.” (Exod. 34:4-10)

The covenantal (Sinaitic Covenant) promise was conferred upon and renewed with Joshua after the death of Moses: “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the

¹³ Douglas Stuart, *Favorite Old Testament Passages* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 35.

¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (1974; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 628-630.

LORD spoke to Joshua . . . saying, ‘My servant Moses is dead. . . . Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses’” (Exod. 34:4-10).

Joshua commanded his people to prepare to take the land that God promised (Josh 1:10-11). The people followed God’s instructions and defeated the city of Jericho, but after Achan, took some of the prohibited, they were defeated in battle. Joshua questioned God as to the reason for their defeat, and He replied: “Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed . . . they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully” (Josh. 7:6, 7, 11).

After this humiliating defeat at Ai, God instructed Israel to overcome this breach of covenant because He desired to maintain a relationship with his people in spite of their failings:

Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow . . . says the LORD, the God of Israel . . . you will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you. . . . Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you . . . I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city, and his land. (Josh. 7:13, 8:1)

Anderson writes:

A look at the Davidic Covenant reveals a conditional blessing promised to David, his sons, and their succeeding generations. Covenant language is seen in the promise to David that his throne would be preserved as long as the covenant is upheld. Limited Retribution is shown here in a different way--the loss of royal position. In those days, any surviving member of a previous ruling family was considered a threat and put to death by the new king. Because of a covenant with Jonathan, Saul’s son whom David loved, David would not put to death Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth, but had others in line with the throne destroyed. (2 Sam 21:7-9)¹⁵

¹⁵ A. A. Anderson, “II Samuel,” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 11, eds. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. W. Watts (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 251-252.

The Davidic Covenant appears first in the words that God spoke through Nathan to David:

I will make for you a great name. . . . I will give you rest from all your enemies. . . . I will raise up your offspring after you . . . establish the throne of his kingdom forever. . . . I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. (2 Sam. 7:8-17)

Neither the report of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6), nor Nathan's prophecy (2 Sam. 7:1-17) use the word "covenant" (*berit*). However, Psalm 132 brings the two together and includes the word for covenant:¹⁶ "The LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back . . . 'the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne'" (Psa. 132:11-12). The covenant with David is clearly conditional, and also appears in Psalm 89:3-4: "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendent forever, and build your throne for all generations."

Later, the Sinaitic Covenant brought the same promise of prosperity. God protected Josiah during his reign and promised him to be buried in peace because of his humility and return to the ways of Yahweh (cf. 2 Kings 22:15-20). Kings in Jerusalem oversaw the Temple.¹⁷ The discovery (cf. 2 Kings 22:8) of the "Book of the Covenant"¹⁸ led Josiah to destroy "those signs and symbols that violate exclusive loyalty to Yahweh

¹⁶ Stephen Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History* (Philadelphia: Geneva, 1968), 80-81.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 676.

¹⁸ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), 76.

(cf. 2 Kings 18:4-5).”¹⁹ Retribution for Israel’s sins occurred a few years after Josiah’s death when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Judah and made Jehoikam, son of Josiah, his vassal, and ultimately destroyed Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kings 23-25).

Suffering and Limited Retribution

Naomi

Limited retribution as a covenantal theme also appears in Naomi’s story in the Book of Ruth. The text describes Naomi’s journey through suffering, from anger with God at His injustice to peace.²⁰ The narrative reveals a journey in four parts: Death and emptiness (Ruth 1:1-22); Ruth meets Boaz (Ruth 2:1-23); (3) Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz on the threshing floor (Ruth 3:1-18); and life and fullness (Ruth 4:1-22).²¹

The narrative begins with Naomi’s lament over her loss and anger with God for the injustice of her situation. Naomi’s anger at God for a lack of protection shows she believes God is responsible for the death of her husband and sons. Naomi is bitter over her loss and believes God had turned against her:

Call me no longer Naomi (meaning, “sweet”); call me Mara (meaning, “bitter”); for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? (Ruth 1:20-21)

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 676.

²⁰ Stuart, *Favorite Old Testament Passages*, 46.

²¹ Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, vol.9 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. Watts (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), 56.

In the first part of the story, Naomi's anger is consistent with a belief in limited retribution. Naomi uses a synonym for God, *Shaddai*,²² which is used in passages involving blessing and cursing (Gen. 17:1; 28:3 and 35:11), and in contexts of expressed judgment (Job 5:17 and Isa.13:6).²³ Her use of the synonym implies her belief in limited retribution because it was commonly used to refer to God at the height of covenant "cause and effect" (blessing and cursing according to lifestyle).²⁴

Job

The Book of Job offers another example of suffering with widespread theological implications. Byrne writes, "From antiquity until now, the Book of Job remains a foundational text for Jews, Moslems, and Christians as they wrestle with the issues of theodicy."²⁵ Job's adamant declaration of his innocence and his "comforters" attempts to persuade Job of his sin indicate a belief in limited retribution.

The writer of Job presents Job as righteousness before God.²⁶ Job's friends, on the other hand, do not believe Job is blameless. Job's friends demonstrate their belief in limited retribution when they defend God's fairness (cf. Job 4:7; 5:17; 8:2, 3; 11:6 and 22:3) and express the belief that Job must have sinned in order to suffer as he was

²² R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 276-278.

²³ J. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965), 22.

²⁴ E. F. Campbell, *Ruth* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 76-77.

²⁵ Patricia Huff Byrne, "'Give Sorrow Words'", 255.

²⁶ Jasper Abraham Huffman, *Job: A World Example* (Winona Lake, IN: Standard Press, 1955), 30, 33, 51, 66, 133-138.

suffering.²⁷ Eliphaz, the first to speak, brings indictment against Job: “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed” (Job 4:7-9). Bildad also defends God’s justness:

How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression. If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore you to your rightful place. See, God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers. (Job 8:2-4, 20)

Zophar accuses Job of making vain talk about his innocence:

Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and should one full of talk be vindicated? For you say, “My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God’s sight.” But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves. (Job 11:2, 4-6)

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar attempt to persuade Job to confess his sin, so that God can end Job’s suffering. Another comforter, Elihu, became angry at Job because he justified himself (cf. 32:2) and with the other comforters because they failed to persuade Job to confess his sins (cf. 32:3). Each of Job’s comforters attempted to convince Job of his guilt, believing God would not have allowed such calamitous misfortune to befall an innocent individual.²⁸ Their persuasions demonstrate a belief in limited retribution because they refused to accept that a sinless Job would suffer.

²⁷ Stuart, *Favorite Old Testament Passages*, 81.

²⁸ Huffman, *Job: A World Example*, 91-121.

Job also believed in limited retribution. He states, “For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me (Job 6:4).” Job saw God as an all-powerful sovereign ruler, and accused God of unjust treatment. Job indicates his belief in limited retribution: “Here is the fate that God allots to the wicked, the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty” (Job 27:13). Job indicates that his treatment from God is one a sinful man suffers.

Limited retribution and the covenantal agreements present in the Old Testament indicate God’s desire to stay in relationship with Israel in spite of Israel’s many failures to uphold the covenants. Stephen Szikszai writes:

The covenant of God with his people is not a legal agreement; it is a bond of love. Therefore the Old Testament writers speak about the covenant relationship between God and his people by applying the images of father and child (cf. Exodus 4:5; Hosea 11:1; Isaiah 1:2), or those of husband and wife. (cf. Hosea 2:19; Jeremiah 2:2)²⁹

Pink suggests the covenants between God and His people identify God with His creation to make him a part of it.³⁰

Telic Vindication

The theory of telic vindication suggests that when good people suffer, something better will come from the suffering. Carson writes:

Even morally evil things may not only have a good result, but may be good in God’s intent even if evil in human intent . . . one of the clearest examples is the treatment of Joseph (Genesis 37-50). He was sold into slavery out of the malice of his brothers; their intent was wholly evil, and for years Joseph’s experience was appalling. Yet he came to see that his

²⁹ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 23.

³⁰ Pink, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny*, 234.

brother's intent was not the only one operating: you intended to do harm to me, he told them, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.³¹

God allowed the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. Later, however, Joseph is in a position to help his family. God directed Joseph's suffering for a greater good consistent, and this is consistent with the telic vindication theme.

Telic Vindication in Ruth

Telic vindication appears in the Book of Ruth. The narrative discourse indicates that this story's theme has elements of telic vindication and limited retribution. The Book of Ruth is a multivalent narrative with primary and secondary meanings in the text's structure, content, and mood. The primary and secondary meanings can be ascertained through the prominence given to the features of the text.³²

Naomi lost everything through the death of her husband and sons; however, her future was restored through Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law. Although Naomi felt abandoned by God, a greater good came through her suffering:

Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife . . . she bore a son . . . the woman said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel . . . a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age . . . your daughter-in-law who loves you . . . is more to you than seven sons." Then Naomi took the child . . . the women of the neighborhood gave him a name . . . Obed . . . the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:13-22)

³¹ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 45.

³² J. Beekman, J. Callow, and M. Kopesec, *The Semantic Structure of Written Communication* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Summer Linguistics, 1981), 2.3.1.c.

Naomi's life was restored and fulfilled, and all Israel benefited through the birth of Obed. "Obed became the grandfather of the great King David and, as the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew (1:5, 6) notes, the distant ancestor of David's greater Son."³³ The narrative demonstrates God's providence, His care in the life of one family, and His concern for the entire nation. Naomi's story illustrates how God preserves His relationship with humanity on a variety of levels.

Telic Vindication in Job

The conclusion of the story of Job alludes to telic vindication. Prior to Job's suffering, he had a good life: "There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east" (Job 1:2-3). Job was a healthy, wealthy man with a large family and a position of influence in the community; however, his suffering destroyed all aspects of his life. Job lost everything from his material possessions, to his family, and network of support. Kreeft observes, "The test is only secondarily the loss of all Job's earthly goods. The test is fundamentally Job's apparent loss of God."³⁴

The end of Job's story implies that God brings about a better end to those who suffer:

And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. . . . The

³³ Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 268.

³⁴ Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 78.

LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. . . . After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days. (Job 42:10-17)

God ultimately rewarded Job for his suffering. Huffman writes, "No trial reaches the saint without bringing its corresponding blessing. The stronger the trial, the greater the reward."³⁵ Job's ultimate rewards support the idea of telic vindication.

Theocentric Consolation

Theocentric consolation occurs when good people suffer and experience the presence of God in solidarity with them in the midst of their suffering. In Job's experience, he felt deserted by God, however, "the LORD answered Job" (Job 38:2). Job responded:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me." I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:2-6)

Job's response to God indicates that the most painful experience in his suffering was his need for God to talk with him and to know God's presence.

Elijah also experienced the pain of a perceived absence of God after his victory over the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18) and the events that occurred after he fled to the wilderness (1 Kings 19:1-4, 11, 12). While circumstances of Elijah and Job were

³⁵ Huffman, *Job: A World Example*, 138.

different, their feeling of God's absence was similar. They each felt alone and deserted by God, however, they responded differently. Elijah remained quiet, and God pursued him to the wilderness. Job, on the other hand, cried out to God for answers to his predicament. Byrne writes, "Job is left with only one thing, his lament. This unedited cry of a broken heart, crushed by undeserved suffering . . . reaching full crescendo on our Lord's lips at Calvary."³⁶ Job endures a long pause before God responds to his cries. Kreeft writes, "He (Job) stakes his whole life on righteousness, obedience, fidelity, piety—and what is his reward? Loss. . . . worst of all is God's abandonment, Job's 'my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"³⁷ Job actively sought the companionship of God or theocentric consolation, the presence of God in solidarity with him.

Theocentric consolation is the presence of God in solidarity with the sufferer.

Several Old Testament examples of God's presence include: Jonah's professed belief in a creator God, although he fled from God (Jon. 1:9) and the psalmist's prayers to a God who has forsaken him (Psa. 22:1).³⁸

God's Presence

People in early Israel had an understanding that God's presence supports all forms of presence in the created order.³⁹ The author of this paper believes this structural

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, 77.

³⁸ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 60-61.

³⁹ Ibid.

presence allows specific forms of God's presence to individual members of the community of faith, because it places God within creation from the beginning. Within this continuum of presence, God's appearance is part of the natural order. While God is believed to be continuously present, He will be especially present at certain times.

Fretheim refers to this form of presence as "intensification of presence,"⁴⁰ and it relates to the specific needs and experiences of people in particular times and places. Ultimately, while God is always present, specific human experience and needs affect the awareness and intensity of His presence.⁴¹

God desires an intense relationship of presence with His people, and His people desire a relationship with Him. In providing vehicles for the divine presence, God acts for the sake of the people, the sake of God's name (Exod. 20:24; Lev. 21:6; 22:2), and His glory (Lev. 10:3), and this allows God to be intimately and effectively present to humanity. God demonstrates this effective presence through accompanying people in all of their journeys, having a tabernacling presence, and in glory (1 Kings 8:11; Ezek. 9:3; Exod. 24:15-17).⁴²

God's Absence

Divine absence is best understood within the context of varying intensifications of presence. Although God is never structurally absent, a loss of intensification in presence, as in Job's case, can be considered a form of absence. The Old Testament language of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 61-62.

⁴² Ibid., 62-64.

absence includes terms such as “hide,” “withdraw,” “forsake,” and these words imply presence at a diminished level of intensification.⁴³

A human experience such as sin affects the intensity of the divine presence. When the people “have made their deeds evil,” God “will hide his face from them at that time” (Micah 3:4; cf. Deut. 32:19, 20). Scripture also states, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isa. 59:2; cf. 54:6-8; 57:17). Job’s friends equated the presence of God with Job’s prosperity and blessing; therefore, loss of prosperity and blessing meant loss of God’s presence.

Second Chronicles 15:2 indicates that the loss of divine presence reflects humans forsaking God or breaking their covenant or relationship with God. Ezekiel 8:6 states that God was “driven” far from the sanctuary by Israel’s abominations. God’s presence is not forced, humans can push God back along the continuum of presence so that His presence becomes less intense, less felt, and less effective.

God desires to be as effectively present as possible: “For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation” (Psa. 132:13-14); “This is my resting place for ever; here I dwell, for I have desired it” (1 Sam. 6:10-12). Though God wishes to be close to humanity, His seeming elusiveness or inaccessibility may be because of and ultimately for the sake of the people. God’s desire for accessibility and closeness relates to humans through promises, and three of the intensifications of presence are associated with promises:

⁴³ Ibid., 65.

1. Accompanying: “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (Gen 28:15; cf. Josh 1:1-9)
2. Tabernacling: “And I will dwell among the people of Israel, and will be their God” (Exod. 29:45)
3. Theophany: “In every place where I may cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you” (Exod. 20:24).⁴⁴

These promises conflict with Job’s suffering. Job believed God had deserted him based on a belief in limited retribution. Ultimately, Job experienced God’s intense presence as God spoke (Job 38:1), and Job saw God (Job 42:5) and repented. Job’s lament demonstrates that Job, unlike his friends, was in true relationship with God. God is everything or nothing.⁴⁵ God commands, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5).

Summary

This chapter examined the Old Testament covenants between God and His people, responses to suffering, and three main covenantal themes: limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation. This paper assumes God close relationship with all of His creation and demonstrates this desire through covenants and His continual dialogue with Old Testament individuals. While all people suffer, the three covenantal themes address human suffering. This paper asserts that theocentric consolation best

⁴⁴ Ibid., 68-69.

⁴⁵ Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, 89.

fulfills a person's need during the experience of suffering, illustrated by Job's example, who said that "seeing" God (Job 42:5) was his greatest comfort.

Chapter 2 explores the three covenantal themes in the New Testament. The New Covenant through Jesus Christ is God's greatest demonstration of His desire for close relationship with His people. The New Covenant through Jesus Christ takes the theme of theocentric consolation to a new level and makes it the preferred paradigm for pastors to use in ministry to the suffering.

CHAPTER 2

THEMES AND RESPONSES TO SUFFERING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

This chapter examines themes and responses to suffering in the New Testament.

Chapter 1 defines suffering as catastrophic events that precipitate a faith crisis; however, the majority of suffering references in the New Testament refer to the persecution of the church such as Peter's experiences. Ladd writes:

The sufferings of which Peter speaks are not those of physical afflictions, natural evils, or accidents, or the sort of ordinary tragedy that besets all human beings. It is the sufferings people are called upon to endure because they are Christians.¹

While Jesus Christ's persecution is one of the central events in the New Testament, this chapter focuses on other instances of suffering and explores the issues of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation found in the Old Testament. Chapter 2 also explores the covenant (*berit*) and its effect on responses in the New Testament, introduces the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, and includes analysis of some stories in the life of Jesus, Pauline passages, and the Scriptural passage in James often used as the basis for biblical healing.

¹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 644.

The Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ

The Gospel accounts include many examples of suffering and healing throughout

Jesus' life and ministry. Allen Verhey writes:

Christianity has been interested in healing from its very beginnings. In memory of Jesus, it could hardly have been otherwise. Jesus was, after all, a healer. His healing miracles were tokens of the good future of God that He promised, the future that he called "the kingdom of God."²

Jesus' ministry of healing in the Gospels has had a significant impact upon believers in the United States. One can readily observe on television that the majority of religious programming is given to those who promote promise of physical healing. While physical ailment does not represent the sum total of suffering, many individuals face the challenges of illness and injury. The following four stories concern Jesus' response to those suffering from physical ailments (Matt. 20:20-22; Mark 2:1-12; John 5:1-15; and John 9:1-12).

The Hemorrhaging Woman

Matthew's Gospel tells the story of a woman who "had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, probably with menorrhea, a condition that rendered her both physically weak and psychologically depressed because her malady made her perpetually unclean according to the ceremonial laws of her people and had probably long since been the

² Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

cause for divorce as ‘unfit for collaboration.’”³ The woman suffered greatly, but had immense faith:

A woman . . . subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.” Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed from that moment. (Matt. 9:20-22)

The words, “If I may but touch His garment, I shall be made whole (KJV),” have brought faith and hope to many in the church in the United States.⁴ The woman demonstrated a great will to defy the conventions of her culture and make her way through the crowd to touch His garment in the hope of being healed. She did not need a word; she needed a touch.⁵ Her faith led to a miracle of healing.

The fact that the woman touched the hem of Jesus’ garment is a significant detail to this story. The word used for tassel that the woman touched is *kraspedon* in Greek,⁶ translated from the Hebrew word *tzitzit* in the Septuagint and is referred to as the fringe or woolen tassel hanging from the edge of his cloak.⁷ When the bleeding woman touched this tassel on Jesus’ garment, she was operating under the Hebraic tradition of respect for God and His Word.⁸

³ John D. Garr, *The Hem of His Garment: Touching the Power in God’s Word*, Living Emblem Series (Atlanta, GA: Restoration Foundation, 2000), 18.

⁴ Ibid., 20, 100-101.

⁵ Ibid., 18-19.

⁶ Fritz Reinecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 27.

⁷ Garr, *The Hem of His Garment*, 22.

⁸ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1949), 115-116.

In that day, it was not unusual to receive healing by touching a holy person's garment (cf. Matt. 14:36; Mark 6:56; Acts 19:12). The *tallit*, or the outer four-cornered garment to which the tassel was appended, was used as a means to separate oneself totally to facilitate communion with God.⁹ When men wrapped themselves in their *tallit*, they excluded everything external so that their souls were consumed in thought about and in reverence to God.¹⁰ Jesus said, "But when you pray, go into your room (closet), close the door and pray to your Father, who sees what is done in secret" (Matt. 6:6). The Greek word for closet is *tameion*, which means "innermost, or secret room."¹¹ Wrapping oneself in a *tallit* was a symbolic method of intense and intentional communion with God.¹²

When the hemorrhaging woman touched Jesus' garment, she demonstrated an awareness that this method may lead to healing. She recognized Jesus as a rabbi, and as a man in close communion with God. It was common practice in Jesus' day for individuals to seek a rabbi or priest to intervene between themselves and God.¹³

Some Jewish *Siddurim* (prayer books) include meditations to be said after a Jewish man puts on the *tallit*, when it fully covers the head and eyes.¹⁴ Psalm 36:7 suggests the significance of covering oneself with the *tallit*: "How precious is thy loving-

⁹ Garr, *The Hem of His Garment*, 81-83.

¹⁰ Ibid., 81-82.

¹¹ Sakae Kubo, *A Reader's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1975), 6.

¹² Garr, *The Hem of His Garment*, 82.

¹³ Ibid., 21-24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

kindness, O God! And under the shadow of thy wings do the children of men take shelter (Ps. 36:7).” This passage implies that as an observant Jewish man covers himself with his *tallit*, he has a physical and symbolic awareness that he is secure in God’s presence. As one holds the corners of the *tallit*, the individual takes on the appearance of being winged. This would have evoked the image of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings to an ancient agrarian people.¹⁵ God protects and comforts His people in a similar manner.

The Paralyzed Man

In Mark, Jesus heals a paralyzed man:

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum . . . men came, bringing to him a paralytic . . . they made an opening in the roof above Jesus . . . lowered the mat the paralytic man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some teachers of the law . . . were thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Immediately Jesus . . . said to them . . . “which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Get up, take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:1-12)

The unusual manner by which Jesus healed the paralytic raises a key question in light of Jewish belief that suffering comes as the result of sin. This belief is an example of limited retribution and develops from a Hebrew interpretation of the Covenant given by God to His people. William Barclay writes, “It was their (Sanhedrin) own firm belief that sin and sickness were indissolubly linked together. A sick man was a man who had

¹⁵ Ibid., 63-66.

sinned.”¹⁶ Jesus raises this very question when he asks the elders, “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’”

Scholars debate Jesus’ intended meaning in this story. One argument supports the notion that Jesus’ words correspond to many of the covenantal promises God made to the Jews in the Old Testament. Morton Kelsey writes, “Dueteronomic Judaism affirmed that all sickness was the result of sin.”¹⁷ This interpretation suggests that the belief of limited retribution was common and that the ancient Jews arrived at this belief through the various covenants of the Old Testament. William Barclay, in reference to this question of Jesus, writes:

It may seem an odd way to begin a cure . . . in Palestine, in the time of Jesus, it was natural and inevitable. The Jews integrally connected sin and suffering. They argued that if a man was suffering he must have sinned. That is in fact the argument that Job’s friends produced. “Who,” demanded Eliphaz the Temanite, “that was innocent ever perished?” (Job 4:7). The rabbis had a saying, “There is no sick man healed of his sickness until all his sins have been forgiven him.”¹⁸

Lamar Williamson argues, “It would be a mistake to extrapolate from this case the general principle that all illness (or even all paralysis) is the result of sin, for sin is nowhere mentioned in connection with any of the other dozen healings and exorcisms of Mark.”¹⁹

¹⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 50.

¹⁷ Morton T. Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity in Ancient Thought and Modern Times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 94.

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1973), 63-64.

The Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda

In John, Jesus heals another paralytic at the pool of Bethesda:

Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” . . . The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. Later, Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:2-8, 13-14)

Jesus’ words to the man at the pool relate the issue of sin with sickness. As in the paralytic’s story in Mark, Jesus seems to verify the covenantal message of limited retribution. A. T. Robertson compares Jesus’ words, “Stop sinning,” with the command He gave to the woman caught in adultery: “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). “*Hamartane* (sin) is a present active imperative with *meketi* (no more), a clear implication that disease was due to personal sin as is so often the case. . . . All sickness is not due to personal sin (9:3), but much is and nature is a hard paymaster.”²⁰

The Blind Man

In John, Jesus encounters a blind man:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of

²⁰ A. T. Robertson, *The Fourth Gospel: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 5 of *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1932), 82.

him who sent me. . . . Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man." "How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded. He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see." "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said. (John 9:1-12)

When the disciples ask: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" they indicate a belief in limited retribution. The belief that the sins of the parents could be "visited" on their children has precedence in the Old Testament.²¹

Another example is Achan who took the forbidden Babylonian garment, some silver, and gold from the battle to destroy Jericho, for which his whole family was put to death (Josh. 22:20).

Verhey refers to the theory of limited retribution in relation to Jesus: "Jesus was the healer. Little wonder, then that Christians called Jesus 'the great physician.' And Christians regarded sickness and death as evils, as features of the disorder introduced by human sin, the disorder that God in Jesus did and will put right."²²

Trench writes:

Perplexed at this more than ordinary calamity, they (the disciples) ask their Master to explain to them its cause: *Who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind?* But what they had in their minds when they suggested the former alternative, namely that a man for his own sins should have been born blind, has naturally enough been often demanded.²³

²¹ Exodus 34:7, "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

²² Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine*, 6.

²³ Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord*, 181-182.

Henry Sigerist suggests that Semitic civilizations believe “that the sick man is by no means an innocent victim but is rather one who through pain is making atonement for his sins. Disease then becomes a punishment for sin.”²⁴ Owsei Temkin supports this notion and writes, “God . . . conceived by the Jews around the time of Jesus . . . was the source of all healing: ‘I kill, and I make alive; I smite, and I heal: neither is any that can deliver out of my hand’ (Deuteronomy 32:39).”²⁵ While many scholars support the notion that personal sin brings calamity, Trench blames the sin upon a larger condition:

While [the disciples] . . . discerned the intimate connection in which the world’s sin and the world’s suffering stand to one another . . . did not realize how it must have been the sin and suffering, not of this individual man, but of him as making part of a great whole.”²⁶

Trench suggests that the human race’s overall sin causes human suffering, not personal sin:

[Jesus does not deny that] sicknesses are oftentimes the punishment of sins (cf. Deuteronomy 28:22; Leviticus 26:16; 1 Corinthians 11:30; James 5:15), or that the sins of the parents are often visited on their children (cf. Exodus 20:5). All that the Lord does is to check in his disciples that most harmful practice of diving down into the secrets of other men’s lives, and like the friends of Job, ascribing to them great transgressions in explanation of their unusual sufferings (cf. Job 4:7; 8:6).²⁷

When Jesus responds to the disciples’ question, He suggests the man’s blindness opened the way for the works of God to be made manifest. Jesus’ response aligns with

²⁴ Henry E. Sigerist, *Civilization and Disease* (1943; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 68.

²⁵ Owsei Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 86.

²⁶ Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord*, 182.

²⁷ Ibid.

the theory of telic vindication, which says that to every bit of suffering a greater good will result. Temkin writes, “Besides being a punishment for sin, disease could also have religious significance as the trial inflicted on a righteous person (e.g. Job 2:5-7) or the chastisement of one whom God loved (Prov. 3:12).”²⁸

While some may interpret the passage to mean that God brought blindness upon this man, Jesus does not make that statement. Kushner comments:

My religious commitment to the supreme value of an individual life makes it hard for me to accept an answer that is not scandalized by an innocent person’s pain that condones human pain because it supposedly contributes to an overall work of esthetic value. If a human artist or employer made children suffer so that something immensely impressive or valuable could come to pass, we would put him in prison. Why then should we excuse God for causing such undeserved pain, no matter how wonderful the ultimate result may be?”²⁹

Günther Bornkamm speaks to this question of the disciples and to the church, which often uses “texts” as formulas for beliefs. He writes:

It is he (Jesus) who does God’s works, and the works of the Father have basically one meaning: to show and to glorify him as Revealer and Bringer of salvation. It would therefore be a mistake to make out of the saying of Jesus a general truth, an all-too-cheap pastoral “recipe,” which as a timeless theory always tastes like the theology of Job’s friends.³⁰

Kelsey writes of another dimension of limited retribution:

While it is easy to see how men arrive at the idea that sickness can be caused by sin, this is no reason . . . to enter upon a one-way street in the matter. But men hate to have incomplete knowledge, and their partial, incomplete statements often

²⁸ Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians*, 87.

²⁹ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 24-28.

³⁰ Günther Bornkamm, *Die Heilung des Blindgeborenen (John 9)*, vol. 2 of *Geschichte und Glauben* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 65-72.

become transformed into final questioning conclusions. Jesus did not fall into this error. He specifically rejected the theory that all that ails man is caused by sin.³¹

The story of the blind man also implies belief in theocentric consolation. Jesus states that this man was born blind that the works of God might be manifest (*phanero'o*) in him. Robertson comments on the historical context of the man's condition: "Blindness is common in the Orient and Jesus healed many cases (cf. Mark 8:23; 10:46) and mentions this fact as one of the marks of the Messiah in the message to the Baptist."³²

George R. Beasley-Murray writes:

The continuity of thought in the two chapters (8 and 9) is given in 9:5; the healing of the blind man and its consequences form a concrete example and exposition of 8:12: Jesus is Light for the world, revealing God to man and exposing the darkness of the heart that rejects the revelation.³³

This interpretation seems to indicate that Jesus brings light to the darkness of suffering.

An exploration of the symbolic concepts of light and darkness offers a variety of interpretations:

To the ancient Hebrew, surrounded by sun worshippers, light was a holy thing, the natural symbol of deity. In the Old Testament God is pictured as creating light (Genesis 1:3) and being clothed with light (Psalm 104:2), and the term is used in conjunction with life to express that ultimate blessedness which God gives to men (Psa. 36:9).³⁴

³¹ Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity*, 94.

³² Robertson, *The Fourth Gospel*, 160.

³³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., vol. 36 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 148.

³⁴ D. H. Tongue, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), 642.

Wilkins writes:

[Darkness] evokes everything that is anti-God: The wicked (Proverbs 2:13), judgment (Exodus 10:21), death (Psalm 88:12). . . . While light is not itself divine, it is often used metaphorically for life (Psalm 56:13), salvation (Isaiah 9:2), the commandments (Proverbs 6:23), and the divine presence of God (Exodus 10:23). In the first creative act, "God saw that the light was good." (Genesis 1:3)³⁵

Within the context of the gospel, this account was given to John in prison as proof that Jesus was the Messiah.

When John heard in prison, what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Matt. 11:2-5)

Thomas Oden uses this story as an example for pastoral visitation, showing the healing occurred accompanied by a significant life change on the part of the one healed. He writes, "Through him (Jesus) it was later said that God himself had in person 'visited and redeemed his people' (Luke 1:68)."³⁶ This demonstrates God's desire to be in relationship with humanity, and be actively involved in all aspects of human life, including suffering. The theory of theocentric consolation is expressed in the idea of God being with us at all times.

Suffering in Paul's Writings

Paul's writings provide many examples of suffering and a consequent hope for the sufferer. J. Christiaan Beker writes:

³⁵ Michael J. Wilkins, *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 486.

The extent and plurality of Pauline material dominate the New Testament . . . the letters of Paul not only give us easy access to his thought but also show us the depth of his reflections on our topic. . . . Paul is especially interesting for our predicament because . . . he draws distinctions between various kinds of suffering . . . a clear distinction between creative or redemptive suffering and tragic or meaningless suffering. This distinction is quite important . . . because all too often these two forms of suffering are fused in Christian thought.”³⁷

Paul demonstrates the wrath of God and its effect upon humankind in Romans 1:18-32, which also serves as the antithesis to the theme of the Gospel in Romans 1:16, 17. He writes: “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ (Habakkuk 2:4).”³⁸ Romans 1:18-32 can be divided into two sections: the nature of God’s wrath and its warrant and the consequences of God’s wrath:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen. Being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. (Rom. 18-21)

Paul implies that “God’s wrath is not irrational or capricious like the unpredictable anger of the gods of the Roman and Greek Olympus.”³⁹ Paul pinpoints

³⁶ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), 172-173.

³⁷ J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 76-77.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 78.

idolatry as the source of human disorientation and confusion, bringing God's wrath upon those who substitute someone or thing in God's place. Paul Tillich describes idolatry as "the human desire to confuse the finite and the infinite or rather to donate to the finite infinite status."⁴⁰ Humanity's confidence in its ability without God's help brings about the consequences found in the second part of Paul's passage:

Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened . . . they claimed to be wise . . . became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie. . . . Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts . . . and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. . . . God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done . . . filled with every kind of wickedness. . . . Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Rom. 1:22-32)

God's manner of punishment does not produce repentance, but His wrath permits people to be what they desire to be in accordance with their idolatrous intent.⁴¹ God allows the idolatry to run a full course, and increases the evil of His rebellious world rather than ending it.⁴² Trench and Hall assert that sin is involved with human suffering; however, one's suffering may not relate to one's own sin.⁴³

Paul responds to tragic suffering in Romans 8. In verses 1-16, he introduces the new domain of the Christian church with its new realities of the Spirit, life, and peace,

⁴⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:130.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 24-41.

⁴² Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 80.

⁴³ See Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord*, 181-187; and Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 75-76.

which oppose the old order of sin and the flesh.⁴⁴ In these verses, Paul describes the hope brought by the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. Jürgen Moltmann writes, “Paul rediscovers the promise to Abraham in the gospel of Christ and therefore recalls along with the gospel of Christ the promise to Abraham as well.”⁴⁵ To Paul,

The continuity of the promise or covenant to Abraham exists only where it is eschatologically validated. . . . Because his gospel proclaims the promise as validated in the event of Christ, it starts the traditional promise of Abraham off on a new history. The promise finds in the gospel its eschatological future, while the law finds its end.⁴⁶

Romans 8:18-30 is the climax to the previous chapters of Romans, and it demonstrates a hope for humanity: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul shows that hope is possible through the death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ. Beker writes, “This triumph will seal the final defeat of the mysterious and evil power of death in God’s world.”⁴⁷

Paul describes his own personal experience with suffering:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 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.” (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

⁴⁴ Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 98-99.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 152.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 103.

In this passage, Paul was given this “thorn in the flesh” to keep him from becoming conceited. Paul asked God three times to remove this painful “thorn.” This story parallels the story of Job in that Satan is the messenger of torment. Beker speaks of this blame given to Satan:

Paul draws here a causal connection between suffering and sin. This derivation of suffering from sin has brought about immense damage in Christian history, especially because it heaps the frightful suffering of guilt (limited retribution) on top of mental and physical suffering. . . . The enduring popularity of this causal relation between suffering and sin which Paul shares with the Old Testament and with Christian history and Western culture in general calls for some comment. All of us resent inexplicable mystery, especially when we feel helpless and numb in the face of meaningless suffering . . . and . . . employs all our rational capacities to find intelligible causes for the inexplicable. In this manner Judaism, Paul, and the early Christian tradition, along with the fathers of the church, pushed the explanation of suffering back to its mythical origin, to the figure of the serpent in Paradise who caused the “fall” of Adam and Eve and all of creation. Our secular culture employs a similar method: it believes that the search for the originating agent of suffering explains or at least diminishes the suffering of the victims of the originating event.⁴⁸

Ladd interprets these words differently:

He (Satan) is the tempter who seeks through affliction to turn believers away from the gospel . . . who is ever seeking to overwhelm God’s people (Ephesians 6:11, 12, 16) and who is able to bring his attacks in the form of bodily afflictions to God’s choicest servants (2 Corinthians 12:7). Satan’s main objective is to frustrate the redemptive purposes of God.⁴⁹

Paul’s explanation for his “thorn” is an example of telic vindication and theocentric consolation. In relation to telic vindication, Paul states that this thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him from being conceited at having experienced such great revelations from God. Hughes writes, “[The thorn] is another one of those questions,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 440.

which on the evidence available, must remain unanswered.”⁵⁰ Although one may not come to a particular conclusion about the thorn, scholars can make some general interpretations about Paul’s situation to understand the basis for God’s strength in Paul’s weakness.

Ladd analyzes the use of *sarx* (flesh) by Paul to interpret this passage:

The most difficult and complicated aspect of the Pauline psychology is his doctrine of *sarx*. The difficulty arises both because of the complexity of Paul’s use of the word, and because of one usage that is characteristic of Paul but that is rarely found elsewhere. . . . *Sarx* is frequently used to describe the tissues that constitute the body and is thus contrasted with bones and blood. There are different kinds of flesh, of human beings, of animals, of birds, of fish (1 Corinthians 15:39). Pain and suffering may be experienced in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7); circumcision was wrought in the flesh (Romans 2:28). . . . Following the Old Testament usage, *sarx* is used to refer not merely to the material of the body or to the body itself, but concretely to humanity that is constituted of flesh. In this usage the word may refer particularly to a person’s human relationships, one’s physical origin, and the natural ties that bind her or him to other human beings.⁵¹

Ladd’s description of the usage of *sarx* implies that Paul might not be self sufficient, but rather dependent upon God, or in close relationship with Him. This provides a dual theme: while the “thorn” was given to keep him from being conceited, the passage places importance on the relationship between Paul and God, not the removal of the thorn. The thorn is seen by Paul as a way to stay in good relationship with God.

The theory of theocentric consolation is the main focus of the “thorn” passage.

Ralph Martin explores Paul’s use of *iva* (in order that):

⁵⁰ P. E. Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 442.

⁵¹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 509.

[It] alerts us to three purpose clauses in close symmetry. First, there was a reason for the giving of the thorn . . . that Paul should not become proud. Second, the satanic messenger came in order to batter him. Third, this encounter was (again) to prevent his conceit. The word for exalting oneself (becoming conceited, *uperairomai*) is found only one other place in the New Testament (2 Thessalonians 2:4) where Paul describes the man of lawlessness as exalting himself against God. If Paul felt inclined to . . . be independent of God as an act of *ubris*, pride, the thorn was sent to prevent that from happening.”⁵²

Paul’s word choice describes one becoming “independent” from God or out of relationship with God. This echoes Romans 1, when Paul describes people that have sought to be independent of God and were “given over” and unable to make right decisions. Though this is given as the reason, the ultimate goal appears to be that of continuing a dependent relationship with God.

The Church’s Role in Suffering

The next passage for consideration is James 5:13-16. These words have been at the same time, words of promise, hope, and disappointment to Christians:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

The key words that show this passage relates to the topic of this paper are the words *kakopathein* and *astheneo*. The first word is translated “to suffer misfortune or to

⁵² Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 40 of *World Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 411.

suffer trouble”⁵³ in Reinecker and Rogers. The second is the word translated “to be weak or to be sick,”⁵⁴ which many believe to refer to physical illness.⁵⁵

To suffer misfortune⁵⁶ bears the idea of a possible catastrophic event that might lead to a challenge of one’s faith.⁵⁷ The onslaught of physical illness can also challenge one’s faith.⁵⁸ James advises those in trouble is to pray (present imperative, which calls for habitual action).⁵⁹ James tells the individual in trouble pray, but refers the sick to the church for prayer. The prayer (Aorist Imperative) for the sick is “a specific act with a note of urgency.”⁶⁰ Prayer seems to be the key in both instances. Margaret Guenther speaks of prayer as conversation.⁶¹ She says:

A good conversation is like a dance. The partners are aware of each other, attuned to each other, sensitive to nuances in tempo and rhythm. A good conversation with a friend—in contrast to idle chitchat with an acquaintance—allows space for pauses. There is no need to fill every minute, for there is comfort in the intimacy of shared silence. A good conversation is generous: each partner brings the gift of willing attentiveness. Listening is as important and as dynamic as speaking.⁶²

⁵³ Reinecker and Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 741.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, vol. 48 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 206; Robertson, *The Fourth Gospel*, 64.

⁵⁶ Reinecker and Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 741.

⁵⁷ Burton Z. Cooper, *Why, God?* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 1-16.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 564.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Margaret Guenther, *The Practice of Prayer*, vol. 4 of *The New Church's Teaching Series* (Boston, MA: Cowley, 1998), 20.

⁶² Ibid.

What better method of dealing with the suffering than this type of praying? This scripture in James leads to the premise of this paper: the theory of theocentric consolation as the basis of ministering to the suffering. To pray is to come to God crying, “Abba” (Mk. 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), which is to say, “Father.”⁶³ Richard J. Foster describes the heart of God as an “open wound of love.”⁶⁴ Barclay says of Jesus that when he went to Gethsemane, there were two things he wanted: Human fellowship and God’s fellowship.⁶⁵ He goes on to say that in time of trouble we want someone with us and when Jesus cried, “Abba,” he was reaching out, not to a non-feeling God but God who was Father.⁶⁶

Other key elements in this passage, which are significant include: calling the elders (*presbuteros*) of the church (*ecclesia*) to come and pray over the sick one, the anointing of the sick with oil, and through confession of sins, the person would find forgiveness. This latter part seems to add further credibility to the widespread belief at the time that a sick person was not without sin.⁶⁷ This combination of events, coupled with a prayer of faith, promises healing.

What does it mean to call upon the elders of the church to pray for the sick person? There is some division on what it means to call upon the elders of the church.

⁶³ Reinecker and Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 365-366.

⁶⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 1.

⁶⁵ Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 343.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 343-344.

⁶⁷ Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity*, 94-96.

Robertson, a Greek scholar, views this group of elders not to be performing in a priestly function but rather like modern medical missionaries who go “with the word of life and the healing balm of modern science.”⁶⁸ Martin, however, sees these elders (*presbuteros*) acting as overseers and pastors, citing the examples of several Scriptures in Acts (11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 16:4; 20:17; 21:28), as well as in the Epistles (1 Tim. 5:17-19; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1; cf. Phil. 1:1).⁶⁹

It appears in context that Martin is probably right, referring back to the story of the hemorrhaging woman earlier in this chapter:

When the hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus’ garment, she demonstrates an awareness that this method may lead to healing. She recognizes Jesus as a Rabbi, and as a man in close communion with God. It was common practice in Jesus’ day for individuals to seek a Rabbi or priest to intervene between themselves and God.⁷⁰

She saw Jesus as a religious leader, capable of healing. Martin goes on to say,

It may very well be that the office of “elder” was taken over from the synagogue (drawn from the “elders of Israel” in Exod. 3:16; 24:1, 9; Deut. 5:23; 19:12; Ezra 10:14; Matt. 26:3; J. L. McKenzie, “The Elders,” 522-540) and given Christian character. Other terms that appear to be synonymous for elder are “overseer” (Acts 20:17, 28, RSV) and “bishop” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3). . . . If so, it is quite natural for sick members to entreat the elders to come and minister to them.

This idea of ministers (religious leaders) coming at the request of the sick for help and healing reflects the theory of theocentric consolation. The sick draw comfort from

⁶⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1959), 189-190.

⁶⁹ Martin, *James*, 207.

⁷⁰ Garr, *Hem of His Garment*, 21-24.

those who represent a physical presence of God.⁷¹ Sickness is a lonely condition that often results in rejection of the sick person by society. Sigerist says,

The attitude of society toward the sick man [*sic*] and its valuation of health and disease have changed a great deal in the course of history. At all times disease isolated its victims socially because their lives are different from those of healthy people. The sick man is thrown out of gear with life, finds himself confined in his movements, is helpless and compelled to rely on the assistance of others.⁷²

A seminary student from General Theological Seminary in New York, Jefferson

R. Hulet, undertook an assignment “to engage the world from the perspective of someone with a disability.”⁷³ He says this about his adventure,

I decided to make my commute home on the trains as one with a spinal injury, . . . which makes movement, standing, and carrying difficult. My method was to remain stooped approximately 45 degrees and to minimize the range of motion in my neck so that I needed to turn my whole body to look to one side. The train was very crowded. . . . Eight passengers were standing in the aisle at the end of my car and I took my place among them . . . in an area where all eight of the three by three seats were occupied by two people; and noted that the center seat in each row was conspicuously occupied by a briefcase, a coat, a sample case, a newspaper, or purse. I was facing the rear of the train so as to be able to monitor the reactions and the behavior of the passengers nearby. In my stooped posture, my only handhold was the back of the seat of a gentleman who took no notice of my hand two inches from his head. . . . He slumbered contentedly. I kept scanning the faces of the two dozen people immediately in front of me and noted there was no eye contact with me or acknowledgement of my presence in any way. I began noticing the avoidance behaviors of my fellow travelers. Mister Rolex focused intently on the same quarter folded portion of the sports page for the entire half hour. Missus Rolex burned a hole with her eyes in the . . . naugahide seatback in front of her. . . . Mister Peanuts and Coke struggled to find places to which to divert his eyes when he tipped his head back to gulp or to pour some peanuts into his mouth, raising his face within inches of mine each time he did so. I could go on . . . but the scene is clear . . . someone in obvious difficulty was in a crowded,

⁷¹ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 249-250.

⁷² Sigerist, *Civilization and Disease*, 66.

⁷³ Jefferson R. Hulet, “Was I Really Suffering?” *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 61 (Spring-Summer 2007): 131.

moving train, and those around him were conspicuously avoiding even the faintest acknowledgement that he was present. The presence of difficulty and suffering was affirmatively shunned.⁷⁴

Stanley Hauerwas says of this loneliness: “The world of the ill cannot but become a separate world both for the ill and/or those who care for them . . . and illness always makes us a stranger to ourselves and others.”⁷⁵

The idea of the community to bring hope of healing, or at least comfort and consolation to those who suffer⁷⁶ from the church, especially those who represent “the chosen ministers of God,”⁷⁷ is a good example of how theocentric consolation should be practiced. “Calvin thought that sickness was a time of the ‘greatest need’ for pastoral services.”⁷⁸ In the early Christian community, medicine was the faith healing brought by the pastors of the church.⁷⁹

The word for church (*ecclesia*) describes “a gathering of the citizens of a given community who had been called together to tend to city affairs.”⁸⁰ Stanley Grenz says of this people:

The early Christians . . . choice of *ecclesia* to designate who they were indicates that the NT believers viewed the church as neither an edifice nor an organization.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 131-132.

⁷⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 81.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 249-251.

⁷⁷ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 50-51.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 253.

⁷⁹ Sigerist, *Civilization and Disease*, 140.

⁸⁰ Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 208.

They were a people—a people brought together by the Holy Spirit—a people bound to each other through Christ—hence, a people-in-relationship.⁸¹

Hauerwas says of the church community in regards to this response to the sick in

James:

Thus medicine needs the church not to supply a foundation for its moral commitments, but rather as a resource of the habits necessary to sustain the care of those in pain over the long haul. For it is no easy matter to be with the ill, especially when we cannot do much for them other than simply be present.⁸²

The element of the oil in anointing is also significant to the church (James 5:14).

In the Scripture, oil refers to olive oil and at no time in Scripture does the word for oil signify a petroleum product.⁸³ Olive oil had many and varied uses, including: religious significance/use (Exod. 28:41; 1 Kings 19:16; 1 Sam. 10:1), to cleanse and purify the skin (Jer. 2:22), a gesture of graciousness by a host (Luke 7:46), food preparation (Rev. 6:6), medicinal purposes (Luke 10:34), cosmetic use (2 Chron. 28:15), and for lighting (Matt. 5:15).⁸⁴

The use of oil in James is primarily for medicinal purposes, echoing the use of oil for healing by the disciples of Jesus in Mark 6:13, “They . . . anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”⁸⁵ Robertson gives significant support to the theory of theocentric consolation in this study on James:

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 81.

⁸³ G. Christian Weiss, *Insights into Bible Times and Customs* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 49.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 49-52.

⁸⁵ Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James*, 188-189.

There is . . . no doubt as to the ancient opinion about, and use of, oil as medicine. . . . I incline to the view that we have not here a priestly function . . . but the double duty of ministry of the word and of medicine (with prayer). The nearest parallel in modern life is the medical missionary, who goes with the word of life and the healing balm of modern science. He heals the sick with the physician's skill and the prayer of faith. Today we have a more advanced medical science, which is, however, by no means final and infallible. We separate the functions of the minister and the physician. We prefer the doctor to the oil, but we still need God with the doctor. Often in the most severe illness the deciding factor is not medicine, but hope, as any doctor will say. But coming back to the use of prayer, James says, "And the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." The credit is here given to prayer and the power of God. One is not to infer that James gives no credit to medicine. The oil was good; God works through medicine and without medicine. The best that we still know on the subject is this: prayer and medicine, or God and the doctor.⁸⁶

Robertson is saying that there is need for God to be present in the community of patient and healer. This represents theocentric consolation at its best.

Another real significance of oil is its religious significance, especially its reference to the office and work of the Holy Spirit and the anointing of people to specific high offices (e.g. priests: Exod. 28:41; 29:7; prophets: 1 Kings 19:16; and kings: 1 Sam. 10:1; 16:12, 13; 1 Kings 1:39).⁸⁷ An important example is the Messiah or Christ, which means the "anointed one." The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus for his earthly, redemptive ministry.⁸⁸

The Holy Spirit, though present from the beginning (e.g. Gen. 6:3; Exod. 31:1-5; Judg. 3:10; 6:34; Ps. 104:29, 30; Isa. 32:15; Job 27:3; 34:14, 15), was responsible for the Lord's conception (Luke 1:35), the endowment of the Lord for his ministry through

⁸⁶ Ibid., 189-191.

⁸⁷ G. Christian Weiss, *Insights into Bible Times and Customs* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 52.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

baptism (John 1:33), and the power behind his resurrection (Rom. 8:11; cf. 1:4).⁸⁹ Jesus promised in his earthly ministry to his disciples that one day they would be given the full measure of the Holy Spirit to empower them for their mission and guide them into all truth, which came about at Pentecost (Acts 2).⁹⁰

Pentecost was a milestone in the history of God in relationship with his people.⁹¹ The Spirit now had a new role of empowering the Christian community, indwelling the church on the Lord's behalf.⁹² This presence of the Holy Spirit, indicated by the anointing of oil, represents God being with the sick, or theocentric consolation.

James 6:16 starts with "Therefore," indicating a conclusory statement, and it is followed by: "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." The purpose of prayer is healing, however, if one has sinned if he confesses he or she will be forgiven. To the black and white thinking of the Jewish people in the New Testament this could be a sign that sin was the cause (limited retribution) of the sickness or could be that a lesson was to be learned (telic vindication) from the experience. Though the word for adversity in James 6:13 is different from the word used for sickness (*asthenei*),⁹³ it is easy to see that some could have thought adversity was also a result of sin.

⁸⁹ Grenz, *Created for Community*, 156-158.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 158-159.

⁹³ Paul used this same Greek word in describing the weak elements: moral, mental and physical in Galatians 4:8-9.

Throughout the New Testament all three theories of suffering have been manifest. A close examination of each example reveals God's desire to be present with those who suffer as companion, sustainer, and healer. The theory of theocentric consolation, once again, comes to the forefront as the preferable foundational paradigm for pastors and chaplains who minister to those who suffer.

CHAPTER 3

THEMES AND RESPONSES TO SUFFERING IN CHURCH HISTORY

The third chapter explores themes and responses to suffering throughout church history, from the first century until the present day. The responses of early church fathers and mothers toward suffering will be examined as well as the particular teachings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Henri Nouwen. The first two chapters show evidence of the theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation in the Old and New Testaments, and the same theories are found throughout church history. The author of this paper believes theocentric consolation provides pastoral caregivers the most appropriate foundation by which they can minister to those who suffer.

Many of the early church fathers and mothers suffered in various ways. Their lives give testimony that in the midst of terrible suffering one can survive the ordeal and come through it victoriously. In this paper, victorious means surviving an ordeal with faith intact. The early church fathers and mothers of the Christian will be seen to have influenced the theology of suffering in the United States.

Secondly, this chapter focuses on some of the major voices of Calvinism, Reformed, Wesleyan, and Catholic theologies, which together constitute the

majority of church theologies in the United States.¹ Discussion of the theologies of John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Henri Nouwen will demonstrate how each promotes or denies the validity of each of the theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation.

Thirdly, an examination of hymns and gospel songs, some written during the author's own personal crisis, will show the influence of the proposed theories of suffering. The hymns of the church represent its beliefs and often give insight on how one may be victorious amid suffering. These hymns and Gospel songs lend credence to theocentric consolation as the greatest comfort to one who is suffering.

Lastly, this chapter will examine the voices of Billy Graham, Luis Palau, Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, and others and their influence on Christian culture in the United States. From biblical times to the present, the church has espoused, taught, and ministered under the influence of the theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation. Theocentric consolation is found as the best foundation for Christian pastors to use in the United States to comfort those who are suffering.

Early Church Parents

The reading of the early saints' lives in the first three centuries after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ reveals the major concern of suffering: not only as the definition used in this paper as the "catastrophic events that precipitate a faith

¹ Adherents.com, "Largest Branches of Christianity in the U.S. (Self-identification, Pew Research Council)," in Largest Religious Groups in the United States of America, Adherents.com, http://www.adherents.com/re1_USA.html#Pew_branches (accessed December 19, 2007).

crisis,” but the real threat of martyrdom.² Jews persecuted Christians in the New Testament; encouraged by their fervor for Judaism, they viewed Christianity as a heretical sect of Judaism. The Jews feared that the heresy would bring the wrath of God upon them as in the Old Testament.³ This is an example of limited retribution, that God will punish those who fail to follow the Law of Moses.

Those who faced martyrdom often welcomed it, as seen in the story of Ignatius, who was condemned to death for his faith in about A.D. 107.⁴ Although the persecution of Ignatius does not fit the criteria for this paper, the story is relevant to understanding how the early church parents thought about suffering. Ignatius, during the time of his capture learned that the Christians in Rome were making plans to free him from death.⁵ Ignatius was ready to seal his witness with his blood and did not wish for anyone to rescue him. His goal was to imitate the passion of Christ in ultimate sacrifice and thereby become a witness.⁶ He was convinced that he was doing it for the sake of the church community.⁷ Ignatius said to the church:

I fear your kindness, which may harm me. You may be able to achieve what you plan . . . if you pay no heed to my request it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God. . . . If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God, but if

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 31-41.

³ Ibid., 32.

⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gerd Thiessen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 266.

you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice.⁸

The message of Hebrews 11 speaks of those, like Ignatius, who sought a “better resurrection” and some of them said, “The world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:35-38).

The first general persecution of Christians came during the reign of Nero in A.D. 64.⁹ This persecution fueled a fierce persecution of Christianity in Rome as Christians were accused of everything that went wrong in the land.¹⁰ Christians discovered the catacombs, which had been dug to produce stone for the city,¹¹ and the tunnels became their worship center. The Christians had been driven to secrecy, and they used the catacombs to sing Psalms, talk of their trials, confess their sins, and relate answers to prayers.¹² Societal position was inconsequential among Christians for the regal born sat next to the slave as humility and submission were among the chief virtues of the Christian.¹³ Persecution could not and did not quash the ever-increasing flow of converts.¹⁴ Christians considered death the welcoming of eternal happiness. Many who

⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, “Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans,” 1.2-2.1, quoted in Mark Galli, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: B and H Publishing Group, 2000), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/special/131christians/ignatiusantioch.html> (accessed January 3, 2008).

⁹ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Christian Martyrs of the World* (Chicago: Moody, 1960), 26-54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38, 41.

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁴ Ibid., 42.

observed the execution of Christians failed to understand their joy and lack of fear at death; onlookers questioned this religion that robbed death of its terror.¹⁵

Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World implies the strength of God's presence and the anticipation of living in eternal presence with God brought joy in the midst of horrible suffering and death. Theocentric consolation was the preferred paradigm for the martyrs, for during their persecution early martyrs exhibited a strength that God's presence with them enabled them to endure their suffering.¹⁶

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was a prolific Christian writer of Christianity, and his *Confessions* are well-known. The *Confessions* describe in detail his search for the truth about God, the strength to live according to God's will, and the ability to live free of the shackles of self and sensuality.¹⁷ Augustine describes some of his thoughts on suffering, which he equates with punishment:

And I strained to perceive what I now heard, that free-will was the cause of our doing ill, and Thy just judgment of our suffering ill. But I was not able clearly to discern it. So then endeavoring to draw my soul's vision out of that deep pit, I was again plunged therein, and endeavoring often, I was plunged back as often. But this raised me a little into Thy light, that I knew as well that I had a will, as that I lived: when then I did will or nil any thing, I was most sure that no other than myself did will and nil: and I all but saw that there was the cause of my sin. But what I did against my will, I saw that I suffered rather than did, and I judged not to be my fault, but my punishment; whereby, however, holding Thee to be just, I speedily confessed myself to be not unjustly punished.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

¹⁶ Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* trans. C. F. Cruse, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 148-157.

¹⁷ Louis Dupre and James A. Wiseman, eds., *Light from Light* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 59.

¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996).

Augustine says humans sin of their own free will and suffer for it, an example of limited retribution. In the following passage, Augustine speaks of being victorious no matter what happens because Christ strengthens him when needed:

I heard another voice of Thine, Go not after thy lusts, and from thy pleasure turn away. Yea by Thy favor have I heard that which I have much loved; neither if we eat, shall we abound; neither if we eat not, shall we lack; which is to say, neither shall the one make me plenteous, nor the other miserable. I heard also another, for I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content; I know how to abound, and how to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me.¹⁹

The author of this paper concludes that over the years that the church has given different signals as to the best way to approach suffering. Many believe God directly punishes humans for wrong doing, and that God strengthens them through Christ. God's punishment and strength through Christ are not mutually exclusive as will be seen in the next chapter on theology of suffering; the church often approaches those who suffer in one way to the exclusion of the other.

Throughout church history, many saints considered all forms of suffering as "suffering with Christ."²⁰ Gregory the Great (540-604) noted that when humans are sick, they face discomforts, humiliations, and dangers similar to Christ's struggle. Christ experienced each of these discomforts; he participated in human existence with its dangers and pain. Oden paraphrases Gregory's use of the example of human illness to recall what Christ endured:

When we are being washed helplessly by a nurse, we may recall our radical dependence upon God, and the cleansing of baptism. When we have to spend

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 41-48.

many hours in isolated silence, we are in a position like that of Jesus who endured suffering silently. When we feel the buffeting of thorns . . . God's own son wore a crown of thorns. When we are thirsty, we recall Christ's thirst upon the cross. And even as we meet death, we may recall how Christ himself prepared for his impending death by prayer, commending his spirit to the Father. If Christ endured so great an evil as a result of his own good deeds, Gregory asked, why should not the believer be willing to endure passing temporal discomforts for which to some degree he may have been responsible?²¹

Gregory intimates that sufferers bear some responsibility (limited retribution) and that humans learn through illness the discomforts Christ endured (telic vindication). Gregory speaks of human "dependence upon God,"²² which implies the companionship of God that makes humans "victorious," which refers to theocentric consolation.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the most influential man in the first half of the twelfth century, equated love with essence of spiritual life.²³ "Both Protestants and Catholics still appreciate Bernard for his hymns, his exemplary life, and his mystical piety. Others have adopted his motto throughout the ages: To Know Jesus and Jesus Crucified."²⁴ Bernard's motto emphasizes the relationship of love between the Creator and the created, and it illustrates belief in theocentric consolation.

As a young abbot and throughout his life, Bernard lived in delicate health.²⁵ Bernard's delicate health and the love his fellow monks had for his preaching led them to urge him to cease the manual labors of their order and spend his time in study and the

²¹ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 254.

²² Ibid.

²³ Dupre and Wiseman, *Light from Light*, 117.

²⁴ J. D. Douglas, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Donald Mitchell, *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992).

²⁵ Leon Cristiani, *St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)*, trans. M. Angeline Bouchard (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1983), 29, 35.

preaching of the Word. He agreed, saying, "I am willing to pray, to read, write, and meditate, on condition that it shall cause you no harm."²⁶

Bernard's writings reveal his theology of theocentric consolation. His series "On Loving God" speaks of his belief that the flesh and its weakness are to be overcome through an increasing love for God:

I said before that God is the cause of loving God. . . . He himself provides the occasion. He himself creates the longing. He himself fulfils the desire. . . . But because nature has become rather frail and weak, man is driven by necessity to serve nature first. This results in bodily love, by which man loves himself for his own sake. . . . "First came what is animal, then what is spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). This love is not imposed by rule but is innate in nature. For who hates his own flesh? (Eph. 5:29). But if that same love begins to get out of proportion . . . the overflow can be stopped at once by the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39). But to love one's neighbor with perfect justice it is necessary to be prompted by God. How can you love your neighbor with purity if you do not love him in God? But he who does not love God cannot love in God. You must first love God, so that in him you can love your neighbor too (Mk. 12:30, 1).

God therefore brings about your love for him. . . . This is how he does it: He who made nature also protects it. For it was so created that it needs its creator as its protector, so that what could not have come into existence without him cannot continue in existence without him. So that no rational creature might . . . claim for himself the gifts of the Creator, that same Creator willed by a high and saving counsel that man should endure tribulation; then when man fails and God comes to his aid and sets him free, man will honor God as he deserves. For this is what he says, "Call upon me in the day of tribulation. I will deliver you, and you shall honor me" (Ps. 49:15). And so . . . man . . . begins to love God for his own benefit, because he learns . . . that without him (God) he can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).

Man therefore loves God, but as yet he loves him for his own sake, not God's. . . . If a man has a great many tribulations and as a result he frequently turns to God and frequently experiences God's liberation . . . must he not soften towards the generosity of the redeemer and love God not only for his own benefit, but for himself?

Man's frequent needs make it necessary for him to call upon God often, and to taste by frequent contact, and to discover by tasting how sweet the Lord is (Ps. 33:9). . . . The Samaritans set us an example when they said to the woman who told them the Lord was there, now we believe, not because of your words,

²⁶ Ibid., 46.

but because we have heard him for ourselves and we know that truly he is the Saviour of the world” (Jn 4:42). In the same way, I urge, let us follow their example and rightly say to our flesh, “Now we love God not because he meets your needs; but we have tasted and we know how sweet the Lord is” (Ps. 33:9).

Happy is he who has been found worthy to attain to the fourth degree, where man loves himself only for God’s sake. . . . To love in this way is to become like God. As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a quantity of wine, taking the wine’s flavor and color . . . it is necessary for human affection to dissolve in some ineffable way, and be poured into the will of God. How will God be all in all (1 Cor. 15:26), if anything of man remains in man?

It is not to be obtained by human effort. That, I say, is when a man will easily reach the fourth degree: when no entanglements of the flesh hold him back and no troubles disturb him, as he hurries with great speed and eagerness to the joy of the Lord (Mt. 25:21, 23).

The holy martyrs received this grace while they were still in their victorious bodies . . . so moved within by the great force of their love that they were able to expose their bodies to outward torments and think nothing of them. The sensation of outward pain could no more than whisper across the surface of their tranquility; it could not disturb it.²⁷

Bernard implies that humans can become so enamored in their relationships with God that they can be victorious no matter the circumstances of life, and he uses the illustration of the martyrs who were able to endure the tortuous assault on their physical bodies with tranquility. This describes theocentric consolation at its highest level. Later in his sermon 83, on “The Song of Songs,” Bernard speaks of the union of love between Creator and the created:

What is more delightful than this union? What is more desirable than this charity that unites the soul to the Word and makes it so free that it dares express all its desires to Him? Indeed, it is in this that the bond of holy marriage consists: in the intimacy, the fusion, a fusion in which two spirits become as one.²⁸

²⁷ Dupre and Wiseman, *Light from Light*, 122-126; *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1987).

²⁸ Cristiani, *St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, 54.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) radically changed at age six when she received a vision of Christ who smiled and blessed her. Later, at the age of seven, she promised her chastity to Christ. Catherine became active in society and politics, worked among those who suffered, and became a peacemaker between the city-state of Florence and the papacy. She is best known for her works entitled *Dialogue* of which more than 400 remain, and those works record her views of suffering. The following excerpt from her *Dialogue* indicates her belief in the limited retribution of God towards those who fail to live according to God's law:

For I wish you to know that all the sufferings which rational creatures endure depend on their will, because if their will were in accordance with mine they would endure no suffering, not that they would have no labors on that account, but because labors cause no suffering to a will which gladly endures them, seeing that they are ordained by My will.²⁹

Another excerpt deals with Catherine's propensity to what Dorothy Soelle would call Christian masochism:³⁰

In self-knowledge, then, you will humble yourself, seeing that, in yourself, you do not even exist; for your very being, as you will learn, is derived from Me, since I have loved both you and others before you were in existence; and that, through the ineffable love which I had for you, wishing to re-create you to Grace, I have washed you, and re-created you in the Blood of My only-begotten Son, spilt with so great a fire of love. This Blood teaches the truth to him, who, by self-knowledge, dissipates the cloud of self-love, and in no other way can he learn. Then the soul will inflame herself in this knowledge of Me with an ineffable love, through which love she continues in constant pain; not, however, a pain which afflicts or dries up the soul, but one which rather fattens her; for since she has known My truth, and her own faults, and the ingratitude of men, she endures intolerable suffering grieving because she loves Me; for, if she did not love Me, she would not be obliged to do so; whence it follows immediately, that it is right

²⁹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin Catherine of Siena*, trans. by Algar Thorold (London: Kegan Paul, Trubner, 1907), <http://www.cfpeople.org/Books/Dialog/DIALOGp2.htm> (accessed January 3, 2008).

³⁰ Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. by Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 22.

for you, and My other servants who have learnt My truth in this way, to sustain, even unto death, many tribulations and injuries and insults in word and deed, for the glory and praise of My Name; thus will you endure and suffer pains.³¹

Catherine's propensity to self-inflicted suffering ("Christian masochism"), well-documented in church history, is described in the *New York Times Magazine*, a surprising source:

Catherine, later to become St. Catherine of Siena, kept her vision of Christ a secret, and her piety sharpened after that encounter; in imitation of the public flagellants who had been roaming Europe since the outbreak of bubonic plague some years before, Catherine and several playmates flagellated themselves in secret. An appetite for self-mortification would prove one of the saint's most enduring traits, and would lead to her death from starvation at age thirty-three.

Catherine's behavior foreshadowed that of women for whom power and suffering—often self-inflicted—are curiously intertwined. For example, anorexics, bulimics and self-injurers experience an illusion of control through disciplining or mutilating their bodies, echoing the pious self-punishments of Catherine's time.

At about age seventeen, Catherine became a tertiary, or lay member, of a Dominican order in Siena whose adherents she had watched and admired as a child. These were chaste widows who ministered to the sick and the urban poor (a growing presence as Europe's agricultural economy yielded to commerce and city life); as a young virgin, Catherine made an incongruous addition. She continued to live at home, spending most of her time praying alone in a tiny cell beneath a flight of stairs, where she was plagued by demonic visions and temptations. To combat these, she amplified her acts of penance, not speaking for three years except at confession, eating nothing but bread, water and raw vegetables, sleeping on a wooden board and flagellating herself three times daily until she drew blood.³²

John Bunyan (1628-1688), author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, exemplifies some of the theology of seventeenth century era when he writes in the sixth and seventh stage:

Here, also, they called again to mind what they had heard from their faithful friend Evangelist, and were the more confirmed in their way and sufferings by what he told them would happen to them. They also now comforted each other,

³¹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*.

³² Jennifer Egan, "Power Suffering," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 16, 1999.

that whose lot it was to suffer, even he should have the best of it: therefore, each man secretly wished that he might have that preferment. But committing themselves to the all-wise disposal of Him that ruleth all things, with much content they abode in the condition in which they were, until they should be otherwise disposed of.³³

Well, the time grew on that the pilgrims must go on their way; wherefore they prepared for their journey. They sent for their friends; they conferred with them; they had some time set apart therein to commit each other to the protection of their Prince. There were again that brought them of such things as they had, that were fit for the weak and the strong, for the women and the men, and so laded them with such things as were necessary. Acts 28:10. Then they set forward on their way; and their friends accompanying them so far as was convenient, they again committed each other to the protection of their King, and parted.

They therefore that were of the pilgrims' company went on, and Mr. Great-Heart went before them. Now, the women and children being weakly, they were forced to go as they could bear; by which means Mr. Ready-to-halt and Mr. Feeble-mind, had more to sympathize with their condition.

When they were gone from the townsmen, and when their friends had bid them farewell, they quickly came to the place where Faithful was put to death. Therefore they made a stand, and thanked him that had enabled him to bear his cross so well; and the rather, because they now found that they had a benefit by such a manly suffering as his was.³⁴

The story of the capture of the pilgrims by the enemy and their consequent trial illustrates two theological positions. The early portion describes the pilgrims' thoughts that God's sovereign will determined who would suffer (Calvinism), and they later give credence to theocentric consolation in their belief that God was present and enabled them to go through their trials even unto death.

Like Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) is the only other female "doctor of the church." Teresa, an extraordinary child at age seven, once left home with her brother to go to the land of the Moors in order to be decapitated and find the shortest

³³ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come, Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream, Wherein Is Discovered the Manner of His Setting Out, His Dangerous Journey, and Safe Arrival at the Desired Country* (1678; repr., New York: Grosset and Dunlap, n.d.).

³⁴ Ibid.

path to heaven.³⁵ Teresa's story shows her belief that holiness derives from suffering, a belief prevalent in the sixteenth century. Teresa showed little patience with those who complained about their suffering to others. In chapter eleven of her *Way of Perfection* she deals with the infirmities of those in her religious order:

These continual moanings which we make about trifling ailments, my sisters, seem to me a sign of imperfection: if you can bear a thing, say nothing about it. When the ailment is serious, it proclaims itself; that is quite another kind of moaning, which draws attention to itself immediately. . . . On the other hand, if one of you is really ill, she should say so and take the necessary remedies; and, if you have got rid of your self-love, you will so much regret having to indulge yourselves in any way that there will be no fear of your doing so unnecessarily or of your making a moan without proper cause.³⁶ . . . Learn to suffer a little for the love of God without telling everyone about it. When a woman has made an unhappy marriage she does not talk about it or complain of it...she has to endure a great deal of misery and yet has no one to whom she may relieve her mind. Cannot we, then, keep secret between God and ourselves some of the ailments, which He sends us because of our sins? Let us remember our holy Fathers of past days, the hermits whose lives we attempt to imitate. What sufferings they bore, what solitude, cold, [thirst] and hunger, what burning sun and heat! And yet they had no one to complain to except God. Do you suppose they were made of iron? No: they were as frail as we are. Believe me, daughters, once we begin to subdue these miserable bodies of ours, they give us much less trouble.³⁷

Teresa expresses her belief in limited retribution when she refers to "(ailments) which he (God) sends us because of our sins." This belief continues in the United States in the twenty-first century regardless of the age of the believer. As chaplain, I walked into

³⁵ Dupre and Wiseman, *Light from Light*, 271.

³⁶ On a personal note: As a chaplain in a United States hospital it is interesting to me the emphasis of Teresa on keeping our bodies subdued. Daily I listen to patients complaining of pain (real or imagined), and various other incidentals for which our early saints would have rebuked them. We, often greet the situation many find themselves in, hospitalized, though not serious and life threatening, with complaint and the questioning of God in allowing it to happen.

³⁷ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. and ed E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1964), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/way.txt> (accessed January 3, 2008).

the room of a teenage patient and asked him how he was, to which he replied, “I must have done something wrong. I’m here aren’t I?”

Again, Teresa speaks of human suffering as compared to Christ. Teresa intimates that human suffering pales in comparison to that of Jesus:

If you are suffering trials, or are sad, look upon Him on His way to the garden. What sore distress He must have borne in His soul, to describe His own suffering as He did and to complain of it! Or look upon Him bound to the Column, full of pain, His flesh all torn to pieces by His great love for you. How much He suffered, persecuted by some, spat upon by others, denied by His friends, and even deserted by them, with none to take His part, frozen with the cold and left so completely alone that you may well comfort each other!³⁸

Teresa’s writings challenge believers to draw closer to God by accepting the suffering and not giving in to it, which she says will consume them. Scripture says, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:17 NIV). Catherine and Teresa took this Scripture literally. Teresa considered it to be about discipline.

John of the Cross (1542-1591), a contemporary of Teresa of Avila, is well known for his *Dark Night of the Soul*. John wrote this poem during his imprisonment at Toledo by the traditional Carmelites who had outlawed the discalced sect that John had founded. His imprisonment was harsh; he was allowed only bread and water once a day and was whipped daily for his obstinacy in refusing to recant.³⁹ John’s poem provides a window into this saint’s view on suffering. What more difficult trial could one experience than

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), V, VI.

being imprisoned by your own church brothers and pressured to recant all that you believed in your heart was from God?

“On a dark night, kindled in love with yearnings—oh, happy chance! I went forth without being observed, my house being now at rest.”⁴⁰ John describes suffering in the night:

And it is clear that this dark contemplation is in these its beginnings painful . . . to the soul. . . . In the first place . . . the light and wisdom of this contemplation is most bright and pure, and the soul which it assails is dark and impure, it follows that the soul suffers great pain. . . . just as, when the eyes are dimmed by humours, and become impure and weak, the assault made upon them by a bright light causes them pain. And when the soul suffers the direct assault of this Divine light, its pain, which results from its impurity, is immense . . . the soul feels itself to be so impure and miserable that it believes God to be against it, and . . . it now believes that God has cast it away: this was one of the greatest trials which Job felt when God sent him this experience, and he said: ‘Why hast Thou set me contrary to Thee, so that I am grievous and burdensome to myself? (Job 7:20) . . . by means of this pure light, the soul now sees its impurity clearly (although darkly), and . . . that it is unworthy of God or of any creature.’⁴¹

John goes further in his exposition on the poem that the suffering one endures in the darkness is for purgation and spiritual resurrection:

The third kind of suffering and pain that the soul endures in this state results from the fact that two other extremes meet here in one, namely, the Divine and the human. The Divine is this purgative contemplation, and the human is the subject—that is, the soul. The Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine; and, stripping it of the habitual affections and attachments of the old man, to which it is very closely united, knit together and conformed, destroys and consumes its spiritual substance, and absorbs it in deep and profound darkness. . . . The soul feels itself to be perishing . . . in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death, even as if it had been swallowed by a beast and felt itself being devoured in the darkness of its belly, suffering such anguish as was endured by Jonas in the belly of that beast of the sea (Jonah 2:1). For in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1st stanza.

⁴¹ Ibid., 47-49.

this sepulchre of dark death it must needs abide until the spiritual resurrection, which it hopes for.⁴²

This suffering in the night is for our future benefit, a better end, or telic vindication:

There is another reason why the soul has walked securely in this darkness, and this is because it has been suffering; for the road of suffering is more secure and even more profitable than that of fruition and action: first, because in suffering the strength of God is added to that of man, while in action and fruition the soul is practising its own weaknesses and imperfections; and second, because in suffering the soul continues to practise and acquire the virtues and become purer, wiser and more cautious.

To these saints suffering brings about the desired result of being one with Christ, or as they would say, a spiritual marriage.⁴³ One can see in all of these the three theories of suffering: limited retribution (one is punished for his sins); telic vindication (the end result of suffering is to bring us closer to God); and theocentric consolation (that God is the one sought after and desired).

Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Nouwen: Theologies of Suffering

Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Nouwen articulate theologies that represent the largest share of Christian believers in the United States. The theology of suffering described in the picture of saints' views was largely Catholic and devout believers sought suffering to share in the sufferings of Christ; however, Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* initiated a change in the attitude toward sin and suffering. Calvin proposed that God allowed believers to suffer as a form of exercise to make them better Christians.

⁴² Ibid., 50-52.

⁴³ Dupre and Wiseman, *Light from Light*, 275.

Wesley implies suffering in this life is allowed by a just God to enable people (telic vindication) to come to know God and themselves that they might be entrusted with true life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴

Luther

Catholic teaching concerning penance evolved in the early church and the Middle Ages. Penance was one of seven sacraments of the church required of Christians, and it involved several elements including: contrition (sorrow for sin), confession to a priest, absolution (priests declared penitents forgiven), and satisfaction (the means for the penitent to discharge the penalty for the sin). Satisfaction did not itself bring forgiveness, but was necessary to make temporal amends and strengthen penitents against further temptation.⁴⁵ Catherine, Teresa, and John saw suffering as a type of satisfaction for their sins committed daily and/or the participation of the suffering of Christ.

Around the eleventh or twelfth centuries the church sold indulgences as a means to remit or discharge the satisfaction portion of penance. The validity of indulgences was based upon the belief that Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints had established a treasury of merit that consisted of good deeds and goodness above the requirement for salvation. The church could use the treasury of merit as remittance for the earthly penalty for sins.⁴⁶ Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* in reaction to indulgences granted in 1510 by Pope Julius II and in 1513 by Pope Leo X for building Saint Peter's Basilica in

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mark A. Knoll, ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991), 25-26.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 26.

Rome. A Dominican monk, Johann Tetzel, received the responsibility to sell these indulgences. In his zeal, Tetzel blurred the distinction between the indulgence as a temporal satisfaction required by the church and eternal forgiveness by God. Ordinary people took Tetzel's statement to mean that purchasing these indulgences meant the forgiveness of their sin, or if done on behalf of the dead, could release souls from purgatory. Luther attacked this distortion in his *Ninety-Five Theses*:⁴⁷

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ . . . willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.

2. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.

21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved;

26. The pope does well when he grants remission to souls [in purgatory], not by the power of the keys (which he does not possess), but by way of intercession.

27. They preach man who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out [of purgatory].

28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the Church is in the power of God alone.

29. Who knows whether all the souls in purgatory wish to be bought out of it, as in the legend of Sts. Severinus and Paschal.

30. No one is sure that his own contrition is sincere; much less that he has attained full remission.

31. Rare as is the man that is truly penitent, so rare is also the man who truly buys indulgences, i.e., such men are most rare.

32. They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.

Luther does not deal specifically with the matter of suffering in *The Schmalkald Articles* (SA), the only ones that Luther penned himself. Scholars suggest the SA writings

⁴⁷ Ibid., 26-27.

reflect a mature thinker who stated that he would defend them to the uttermost.⁴⁸ Perhaps the ill health Luther suffered during his writings of the SA helped him focus on what was most important to him.⁴⁹ One would think that the diverse and multiple ailments that Luther suffered would have caused him to complain to God as Job did (Job 10:1-6), but such complaints are not recorded. In fact, a friend wrote to Luther during one of his bouts of illness: “Recently it has been reported to us how you have been gripped by a physical ailment from our Lord God. While you suffered this illness, we suffered as Christians with you.”⁵⁰ Luther wrote concerning another illness: “We dealt with them a few days, because of my weakness which befell me on account of Satan,” and during another illness writing in the SA: “I have held fast to this confession until now and, by God’s grace, I will continue to hold to it. What should I say? Why should I complain? I am still alive.”⁵¹ Luther says Satan gave him the weakness not God in contrast to his friend’s statement. Luther never wrote a treatise on the authority of the Bible, but in the SA he wrote: “God’s word should establish articles of faith and no one else.”⁵²

⁴⁸ William R. Russell, *Luther’s Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-35, 116.

⁵⁰ D. Weimer, *Martin Luthers Werke. Briefwechsel*, 1930, vol. 7, 416, quoted in Russell, *Luther’s Theological Testament*, 26.

⁵¹ Martin Luther, quoted in Russell, *Luther’s Theological Testament*, Preface, 3-5.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Throughout the writing of the SA, Luther, as well as his friends, expected this to be Luther's last days on earth.⁵³ Death was not the enemy that Western Christianity sees today. H. G. Haile describes it in this way:

Dying was a familiar and important part of Renaissance life. Family and friends gathered at one's bedside and the scene often possessed a rare dignity. The dying endeavored to display exemplary composure and to instill into survivors proper faith in the life of the soul. One's last moments and sayings were noted well and long-remembered.⁵⁴

Dying unexpectedly, or at an age deemed early by family and friends, classifies a crisis in this paper. Many would consider Luther's death at sixty-two as dying too early. Luther never complained that his life was too short and often referred to his impending death. He said nothing to support the notion of limited retribution, rather he indicated only Jesus could bring forgiveness. He never spoke of his sicknesses as having any significant learning for him, and he rejoiced whenever he was healed of an infirmity.⁵⁵ To him, the goal was to know God and live according to his word, or, theocentric consolation.

Catherine, Teresa, and John saw suffering as a type of satisfaction for their sins committed daily and/or the participation of the suffering of Christ. It is easy to jump from believing in the need for temporal amends to believing that God punishes, causes to suffer, those who fail to follow in his law. Although Catholic theology says the grace of

⁵³ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁴ H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 216.

⁵⁵ Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, 27.

God forgives sin, some seem to believe God punishes or causes suffering as limited retribution. Martin Luther began to change the way the church looked at suffering.

Calvin

John Calvin (1509- 1564) was the careful thinker who bound Protestant doctrines into a cohesive whole, while Luther was the daring trailblazer for the Reformation.⁵⁶ Calvin never sought to become a leader of the Reformation, but felt called to studying God's Word and writing about his faith. His main project was to write a short summary of the Christian faith from a Protestant viewpoint entitled the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁵⁷

Calvin's theology influenced the Protestant view of suffering. A brief synopsis of his four core points of faith including Scripture, God, Man, and the Church follows:

1. Scripture: *sola Scriptura* was his guideline for faith practice. He considered Scripture to be the Word of God and was therefore the authority for Christian belief and action. He did not believe in the doctrine of dictation and believed the Bible to be authoritative in all matters it deals with.
2. God: He accepted the historic doctrine of the trinity of God and laid great stress on his sovereignty. This God is the source of all that exists because he created it all. Further he believes that God is the sustainer of all creation, ruling it and guiding it to accomplish all He purposes for it for the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*).
3. Man: Human beings are created in the image of God, but in the fall in the Garden of Eden, man came under the judgment of God. This resulted in God's condemnation of man but not the whole human race. Since God is sovereign and his purposes always carried out, a certain number of these fallen creatures were chosen to be saved. These are sent the Holy Spirit to enlighten and enable them to accept God's forgiveness. Those "called" are to then live lives which, while never perfectly holy, should always seek to magnify God in thought word and deed.

⁵⁶ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2 (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 61.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

4. The Church: The ones God chose to be reconciled to him are now God's covenant people. This covenant is made with parents and their children as it was with Abraham and his descendents. Generations are baptized into this visible body of Christ. The Lord's Supper is the continuing sacrament practised by the "called", and only as they receive and partake of the elements by faith can the Holy Spirit bless them, making them spiritual participants in the body and blood of the Lord.⁵⁸

Calvin also speaks much of suffering persecution, as in the following excerpt from the *Institutes*:

For though that Son was dear to him above others, the Son in whom he was "well pleased," yet we see, that far from being treated gently and indulgently, we may say, that not only was he subjected to a perpetual cross while he dwelt on earth, but his whole life was nothing else than a kind of perpetual cross. The Apostle assigns the reason, "Though he was a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered," (Heb. 5:8). Why then should we exempt ourselves from that condition to which Christ our Head behooved to submit; especially since he submitted on our account, that he might in his own person exhibit a model of patience?⁵⁹

Although Calvin writes this under a heading that indicates the suffering of persecution, he seems to say that Christ learned obedience from his suffering and so should his followers (telic vindication). He says:

It affords us great consolation in hard and difficult circumstances, which men deem evil and adverse, to think that we are holding fellowship with the sufferings of Christ; that as he passed to celestial glory through a labyrinth of many woes, so we too are conducted thither through various tribulations.⁶⁰

Calvin encourages all to see their sufferings in fellowship with the sufferings of Christ. He indicates that all life involves suffering. Although Calvin did not teach the

⁵⁸ W. S. Reid, "Calvinism," in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 186-187.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, eds., Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), Book I:8.1.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

theory of limited retribution, he taught suffering is to be expected and advantageous to salvation (telic vindication). He says:

Paul himself thus speaks, “we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God,” (Acts 14:22); and again, “that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death,” (Rom 8:29). How powerfully should it soften the bitterness of the cross, to think that the more we are afflicted with adversity, the surer we are made of our fellowship with Christ; by communion with whom our sufferings are not only blessed to us, but tend greatly to the furtherance of our salvation.⁶¹

The word for adversity could stand for other severities of life, and the next

excerpt shows how Calvin would look at abundance and how to observe lean times:

Those in narrow and slender circumstances should learn to bear their wants patiently, that they may not become immoderately desirous of things. . . . For in addition to the many other vices which accompany a longing for earthly good . . . he who is ashamed of a sordid garment will be vain-glorious of a splendid one . . . he who has a difficulty, and is dissatisfied in submitting to a private and humble condition, will be unable to refrain from pride if he attain to honour. Let it be the aim of all who have any unfeigned desire for piety to learn, after the example of the Apostle, “both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Phil. 4:12).⁶²

The next part of Calvin’s doctrine explains a perverse sense of acceptance of what

Rabbi Kushner calls “when bad things happen to good people,”⁶³

As the Lord by the efficacy of his calling accomplishes towards his elect the salvation to which he had by his eternal counsel destined them, so he has judgments against the reprobate, by which he executes his counsel concerning them. Those, therefore, whom he has created for dishonor during life and destruction at death, that they may be vessels of wrath and examples of severity, in bringing to their doom, he at one time deprives of the means of hearing his word, at another by the preaching of it blinds and stupefies them the more. . . . For while we maintain that none perish without deserving it, and that it is owing to the free goodness of God that some are delivered, enough has been said for the display of his glory; there is not the least occasion for our caviling. The supreme

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., Book II:10.2.

⁶³ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, xiv.

Disposer then makes way for his own predestination, when depriving those whom he has reprobated of the communication of his light, he leaves them in blindness.⁶⁴

The two previous excerpts show Calvin's theology of predestination; however, his theology in the next excerpt explains further why bad things happen to good people:

With regard to the strife and war . . . Satan cannot possibly do anything against the will and consent of God. . . . Satan appears in the presence of God to receive his commands, and dares not proceed to execute any enterprise until he is authorized. . . . [He] is under the power of God, and is so ruled by his authority, that he must yield obedience. . . . Satan resists God, and does works at variance with His works . . . contrariety and opposition depend on the permission of God . . . and thus, however unwilling, [Satan] obeys his Creator, being forced, whenever he is required, to do Him service. . . . God thus turning the unclean spirits hither and thither at his pleasure, employs them in exercising believers by warring against them, assailing them with wiles, urging them with solicitations, pressing close upon them, disturbing, alarming, and occasionally wounding, but never conquering or oppressing them. . . . Paul acknowledges that he was not exempt from this species of contest when he says, that for the purpose of subduing his pride, a messenger of Satan was sent to buffet him (2 Cor. 12:7).⁶⁵

Calvin states that saints suffer as a form of exercise, which can mean nothing less than telic vindication, to make them better Christians. Calvin uses Paul as an example and says Paul received his thorn in the flesh to subdue his pride. The danger in this theology is that everything comes from God. It proposes that God wills all things that happen and people should be content and joyful that he has allowed it for their benefit.

Wesley

John Wesley (1703-1791) founded Methodism, and many believe he founded the holiness movement. Wesley became the victim of suffering when the rectory in which he lived as a child burned to the ground. Wesley often referred to himself after that event as

⁶⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III:24.12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Book IV:14.17, 18.

a “brand plucked from the burning.”⁶⁶ This early salvatory escape impressed upon Wesley and his mother that surely God had special future plans for his life.⁶⁷

John Wesley believed that salvation is based on the establishment of God’s will in people’s lives.⁶⁸ He stressed that the primary will of God for people is to love God with all of their hearts and their neighbors as themselves (Mark 12:30).⁶⁹ Wesley, in his sermon “On Charity,” emphasized that in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul spoke of love as the greatest Christian virtue. Wesley goes on to say, “And this love sweetly constrains him to love every child of man [*sic*] with a love that is here spoken of . . . a love of benevolence, of tender good will to all the souls that God has made.”⁷⁰ He writes that acts of mercy ought to flow from love; otherwise, even though the acts benefit others, they will not benefit the soul of the giver.⁷¹

Wesley held that God’s will was established in our lives through the renewal of our will. He used will as referring to motivating emotions such as love, anger, and desire.⁷² He then used the term sanctification to describe the inward and outward process of establishing right emotions in a person’s life; which in turn established God’s will in a person’s life. God sanctifies us. However, Wesley said that we

⁶⁶ Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley, A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 6-7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸ Randy L. Maddox, *John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 66ff.

⁶⁹ Paul Shrier and Cahleen Shrier, “Suffering with Others: A Neuroscience Perspective on Wesley’s Acts of Mercy”, *In Focus*, Azusa Pacific University, Feb. 2007.

⁷⁰ John Wesley, “On Charity,” Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbglm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/91/> (accessed December 20, 2007).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3.8.

⁷² Maddox, *John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 69; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 395.

participate in God's actions through a means of grace; that is, actions that Christians do participate in God's sanctification process.⁷³

Wesley contended that Christians receive grace through acts of piety and mercy. Pious acts are defined as prayer, Bible reading, and holy communion, and acts of mercy are visiting the sick and prisoners, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless. All of these works increase love for God and neighbor.⁷⁴ Wesley wrote that acts of mercy are a priority over acts of piety, even though both are essential.⁷⁵

In his message "On Visiting the Sick," Wesley says visitors must first inquire of the physical condition of the sick and do for them what can be done so that the visitors might later inquire about sick persons' relationships with God.⁷⁶ Wesley never suggests their sickness is a result of sin and seems not to teach limited retribution; however, in a sermon he attributes "The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes" to moral sin:

I am to show you that earthquakes are the works of the Lord, and He only bringeth this destruction upon the earth. Now, that God is himself the Author, and sin the *moral* cause, of earthquakes (whatever the natural cause may be), cannot be denied by any who believe the Scriptures; for these are they which testify of Him, that is of God "which removeth the mountains, and overturneth them in his anger; which shaketh the earth out of her place, and the pillars thereof tremble" (Job 14:5, 6).⁷⁷

⁷³ Shrier and Shrier, "Suffering with Others."

⁷³ Wesley, "On Charity."

⁷⁴ Maddox, *John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 215.

⁷⁵ John Wesley, "On Zeal," Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/92/> (accessed December 20, 2007).

⁷⁶ John Wesley, "On Visiting the Sick," Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/98/> (accessed December 20, 2007).

⁷⁷ John Wesley, "'The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes': A Sermon by John Wesley First Published in 1730," *The American View*, <http://www.theamericanview.com/index.php?id=501> (accessed December 20, 2007).

God waits to see what effect his warnings will have upon you. He pauses on the point of executing judgment, and cries, "How shall I give thee up?" (Hos. 11:8) He hath no pleasure in the death of him that dieth. He would not bring to pass his strange act, unless your obstinate impenitence compel him.⁷⁸

In this excerpt, Wesley seems to claim that these destructive crises occur as warnings to "save" people, which implies a belief in telic vindication; alternatively, it might imply limited retribution. Some, who seek simple recipes to explain suffering, could use Wesley's argument to say that God punishes sin by causing suffering. Such statements were made about New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina caused so much damage.⁷⁹

In his message "The Trouble and Rest of Good Men," Wesley appears to bolster his belief in telic vindication:

The whole world is, indeed, in its present state, only one great infirmary. All that are therein are sick of sin; and their business is to be healed. And for this very end, the great Physician of souls is continually present with them; marking all the diseases of every soul, and giving medicines to heal its sickness. These medicines are often painful too: Not that God willingly afflicts his creatures, but he allots them just as much pain as is necessary to their health; and for that reason, because it is so.⁸⁰

In this message he seems to lead in two directions: the one of telic vindication, in helping people to health from the sickness of sin; and secondly, theocentric consolation, in the companionship of God through suffering to bring people to victory.

In a sermon on the sins of a nation and the miseries it brings, he said:

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ MediaMatters for America, "Religious Conservatives Claim Katrina Was God's Punishment for the United States," MediaMatters for America, September 13, 2005, <http://mediamatters.org/items/200509130004> (accessed December 19, 2007).

⁸⁰ John Wesley, "The Trouble and Rest of Good Men," Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbpm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/127/> (accessed December 20, 2007).

And now let my counsel be acceptable to you, to every one of you present before God. Break off thy sins by repentance, and thy iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, if it be a lengthening of tranquility, of what degree of it still remains among us. Show mercy more especially to the poor widows, to the helpless orphans, of your countrymen who are now numbered among the dead, who fell among the slain in a distant land. Who knoweth but the Lord will yet be entreated, will calm the madness of the people, will quench the flames of contention, and breathe into all the spirit of love, unity, and concord? Then brother shall not lift up sword against brother, neither shall they know war anymore. Then shall plenty and peace flourish in our land, and all the inhabitants of it be thankful for the innumerable blessings which they enjoy, and shall fear God and honour the king.⁸¹

This last message seems reminiscent of the Old Testament covenant God gave Israel: “Walk in the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess (Deut. 5:33).” The message appears to favor limited retribution in the sense that if people repent God will restore peace and prosperity to the nation.

In his message “The Holy Spirit,” Wesley affirms people consider reconciliation unto righteousness and the cure of a fallen spirit insufficient, but they desire the baptism of which John spoke⁸² that restores them to the first estate as Adam in the Garden of Eden.⁸³ Wesley says: “Christ is not only God above us; which may keep us in awe, but cannot save; but he is Immanuel, God with us, and in us”.⁸⁴ Wesley refers to the New Covenant that God promised upon the resurrection of His son Jesus, through whom God

⁸¹ John Wesley, “National Sins and Miseries,” Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/130/> (accessed December 20, 2007).

⁸² John 1:33, “The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.’”

⁸³ John Wesley, “On the Holy Spirit,” Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/141/> (accessed December 20, 2007).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

promised a Comforter who would follow and indwell His people (John 16:5-16). Wesley, in the latter portion of this message, writes that the Holy Spirit enables believers to know themselves and have a lively hope, seeing far into the ways of Providence and the Holy Scriptures.⁸⁵ He speaks of this indwelling Spirit as a preparation for a future, eternal life with God because “the gift of the Holy Spirit looks full to the resurrection; for then is the life of God completed in us.”⁸⁶ Wesley seems to express theocentric consolation as the key to victorious living in the here and now, as well as the ultimate goal of eternity.

John Wesley, in this message does not lay the blame for suffering at the feet of Satan as Paul does. Wesley attributes suffering in this life: the penalties of sin (referring to limited retribution), the drudgery and vanity of human life, the painful reflections of an awakened mind, the infirmities and dissolution of the body, and all other sufferings as allowed by a just God. He states these sufferings enable people (telic vindication) to come to know God and themselves that they might be entrusted with true life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁷

Later in the same message, Wesley refers to suffering as a “way to rescue ourselves . . . from the ill consequences of our captivity; and our Saviour taught us that way.”⁸⁸ He describes suffering as enabling people to get above their present corruption and overcome the temptation of the comforts of this world. Most of Wesley’s argument

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

seems to point to telic vindication; however, he concludes with the comfort of the Spirit of God:

I will conclude all with that excellent Collect of our Church: O God, who in all ages hast taught the hearts of they faithful people, by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour; who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

Nouwen

Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996), a twentieth century Catholic, had great influence in the United States especially after his death.⁸⁹ “Contemplation was at the heart of everything for Henri Nouwen. It was a discipline of dwelling in the presence of God.”⁹⁰

Nouwen’s life and ministry make a great case for theocentric consolation. Throughout his life, Nouwen struggled with loneliness, and often after an energetic time of teaching to thousands, he would return to his hotel and experience dark depression. He frequently mourned the absence of close companionship, often felt that God was absent, and suffered sleeplessness brought by terrors of night. On such occasions he made frantic phone calls to people at all hours to counsel or receive counseling. Nouwen, the preacher who held large audiences spellbound for hours, needed to be embraced by someone himself. His biographer speculates the disconnect between him and his writings was that

⁸⁹ Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 209.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

he wrote ahead of himself, he wrote what he had not yet learned to live himself.⁹¹

Carolyn Whitney-Brown, formerly of the L'Arche Daybreak community, explained:

“When I think of Henri, I think of two ‘books’: one is the book that Henri wrote [forty] times, yet couldn’t quite live; the other is the book that Henri lived for almost [sixty-five] years, yet couldn’t write.”⁹²

In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen describes loneliness as perhaps the biggest threat of suffering:

We live in a society in which loneliness has become one of the most painful wounds. The growing competition and rivalry, which pervade our lives from birth, have created in us an acute awareness of our isolation. This awareness has in turn left many with a heightened anxiety and an intense search for the experience of unity and community. It has also led people to ask anew how love, friendship, brotherhood and sisterhood can free them from isolation and offer them a sense of intimacy and belonging.

Nouwen emphasizes ministers should minister as wounded healers who suffer from the same issues as the society around them. He states ministers hurt more because they experience the same isolation and the diminishment of their professional impact on others. Rather than being a part of the decisions, ministers find themselves admitted only reluctantly to decision making tables.⁹³ Nouwen cites the example of hospitals “where many utter their first cry as well as their last words, [and where] ministers are often more tolerated than required.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., xi-xv.

⁹² Carolyn Whitney-Brown, “Introduction to the memorial edition,” in Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), xii.

⁹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 82- 86.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 85.

Nouwen urges Christian leaders to reclaim the mystery of God, so that every word they speak and move will reveal hearts that know God intimately.⁹⁵ Calvin and others who teach *sola scriptura* to the detriment of experience and reason as Wesleyan doctrine teaches, find themselves giving a cheap recipe for life that fails to meet the spiritual longing of people in the midst of suffering. Nouwen's approach is an alternative response to the postmodern society that finds it uncomfortable to live with the absolutes and certitudes often expressed by the church.⁹⁶

Nouwen met the Flying Rodleighs, a trapeze troupe from South Africa, and considered them tutors in theology rather than trainers in acrobatics. In the study of the Flying Rodleighs, Nouwen became aware that the star of the group was not the flyer who soars through the air, but the catcher, the one the flyer trusts. Nouwen came to see that to experience God was to be caught like the flying trapeze artist.⁹⁷ He said,

I can only fly freely when I know there is a catcher to catch me. If we are to take risks, to be free, in the air, in life, we have to know there's a catcher. We have to know that when we come down from it all, we're going to be caught, we're going to be safe. The great hero is the least visible. Trust the catcher.⁹⁸

Nouwen offers a great example of theocentric consolation. He writes about it best in *The Wounded Healer* when he describes the dilemma of the "nuclear man [*sic*]."⁹⁹ He describes this modern person in three ways. First, the nuclear person has historical

⁹⁵ Ford, *Wounded Prophet*, 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Angels Over the Net*, videocassette, produced by Isabelle Steyaert and directed by Bart Gavigan (New York: Spark Productions, 1995).

⁹⁹ Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 5-15.

dislocation, sees value only in the here and now, and lacks continuity with past history because the tomorrow he faces may never come.¹⁰⁰ Second, the nuclear person has fragmented ideology and no longer believes anything is always and everywhere true and valid. Such persons look for experiences that give a sense of value to their life.¹⁰¹ Third, nuclear persons search for a new immortality or hope. They do not know what they seek and nothing seems urgent or even important enough to warrant their involvement.¹⁰²

Nouwen goes on to say of the nuclear person:

This means that the desire to live on [through] his [*sic*] children is extinguished in the face of the possible end of history. And why should he want to live on in the works of his hands when one atomic blitz may reduce them to ashes in a second? Could perhaps an animistic immortality make it possible for man to live on in nature? And how can belief in a hereafter be an answer to the search for immortality when there is hardly any belief in the here? A life after death can only be thought of in terms of life before it, and nobody can dream of a new earth when there is no old earth to hold any promises.¹⁰³

Nouwen suggests that the mystical way of learning to connect with “the reality of the unseen” or the “source of being” may liberate the nuclear person from this lack of hope. Nouwen knew “the reality of the unseen” or the “source of being” to be God through Jesus Christ. God became flesh in John 1 to become human and show us the way of hope. This is the essence of theocentric consolation.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 9-12.

¹⁰² Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 13-14.

Hymns and Gospel Songs Born Out of Suffering

Many best-loved hymns were born in the crucible of sorrow and suffering,¹⁰⁴ as the stories to follow will show. As Henry Gariepy says:

Ultimately, a “night season” will come . . . nights of doubt, of trial, of broken relationships, of loneliness, of anxiety, of misunderstanding, of bewilderment, of loss often will be a time of testing and trial. It is easy to sing in the sunshine when life flows along like a song. . . . But the night has its songs as well. The song of the nightingale is sweeter because it comes in the stillness of the night. . . . God is the great Composer of the night songs. . . . The Psalmist testified, “At night his song is with me” (42:8), and “I remembered my songs in the night” (77:6). . . . Out of the tragic story of Job’s trials comes the radiant truth that “God . . . gives songs in the night” (Job 35:10).¹⁰⁵

Keith Schwanz says of the Bible’s hymnbook:

We often find the psalmist David writing from his experiences. . . . David wrote Ps. 3 after he fled from his son, Absalom. . . . Ps. 30 was written for the dedication of the Temple. . . . David praised the Lord for answered prayer in Ps. 34. . . . While David was in the desert of Judah, he wrote of his desire for God in Ps. 63, “My soul thirsts for you” (v. 1b).¹⁰⁶

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow substantiates the role of hymns in “The Singers,” a hymn that deals with suffering:

God sent his Singers upon earth
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men,
And bring them back to heaven again.

The first, a youth, with soul of fire,
Held in his hand a golden lyre;
Through groves he wandered, and by streams,
Playing the music of our dreams.

¹⁰⁴ Henry Gariepy, *Songs in the Night* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 18.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁶ Keith Schwanz, *The Birth of a Hymn* (Kansas City, MO: Lillenas, 1997), 15.

The second, with a bearded face,
 Stood singing in the market-place,
 And stirred with accents deep and loud
 The hearts of all the listening crowd.

A gray old man, the third and last,
 Sang in cathedrals dim and vast,
 While the majestic organ rolled
 Contrition from its mouths of gold.

And those who heard the Singers three
 Disputed which the best might be;
 For still their music seemed to start
 Discordant echoes in each heart,

But the great Master said, "I see
 No best in kind, but in degree;
 I gave a various gift to each,
 To charm, to strengthen, and to teach.

"These are the three great chords of might,
 And he whose ear is tuned aright
 Will hear no discord in the three,
 But the most perfect harmony."¹⁰⁷

The thoughts in Longfellow's poem imply that God gives music as an elixir for people in various situations. God gives music as one would to friends to encourage them. Examples of hymns born out of suffering or used for comfort follow.

St. Francis of Assisi, a beloved saint, though born into luxury forsook luxury to live for Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁸ He lived simply, gave away everything that was not absolutely necessary, and identified with the poor.¹⁰⁹ His life culminated at the age of 64, after a year

¹⁰⁷ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1901), 137-138.

¹⁰⁸ Brother Ramon, *The Wisdom of St. Francis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 6-10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-10.

of illness, pain, and near blindness. During his last year, Francis wrote his *Canticle of the Sun*.¹¹⁰ The canticle begins with the words that became known as its title: “All Creatures of our God and King.” The hymn of praise uses the word “Alleluia” in every stanza. One verse describes his theology of suffering:

And all ye men of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take your part,
O sing ye alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and on him cast your care.¹¹¹

The verse expresses a prescription of theocentric consolation. When pain and sorrow afflict people, they should come to God with praise and actively cast their care upon God. By inference, the verse says God will assume the suffering and lighten the load for the supplicant.

Joseph Scriven (1819-1896) wrote “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” as comfort for his mother who was going through a distressful time (some say a serious illness).¹¹² The author wrote the words in private; however, they became a source of comfort for people across the world.¹¹³ Scriven wrote the words to comfort his mother when he was unable to be with her; however, he had suffered troubles of his own. Irish by birth he looked forward to marrying, but tragedy struck the evening before his wedding when his wife-to-be accidentally drowned. He migrated to Canada, and he asked another woman to be his wife, who also died after a brief but fatal illness. His subsequent loneliness,

¹¹⁰ Christopher Idle, *The Lion Book of Famous Hymns* (Oxford, UK: Lion, 1991), 24.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Idle, *Famous Hymns*, 68; Gariepy, *Songs in the Night*, 9-10.

¹¹³ Ibid.

poverty, and precarious health drove him to a lifetime of helping the handicapped and underprivileged, often sharing his food and his own clothes with them. Except for this hymn, no one would have heard of Joseph Scrivener. He wrote the poem to remind his mother of her never-failing friend, Jesus. The theme of this song is to carry trouble, sin, grief, sorrow, and care to Jesus for solace and comfort. What greater belief in theocentric consolation than this?

“Jesus Loves Me” first appeared in the novel,¹¹⁴ *Say and Seal*, written by Susan Warner. Anna Warner, Susan sister, and David McGuire actually wrote the words.¹¹⁵ The words of this hymn, spoken in the context of a boy who appears to be dying, demonstrates again how theocentric consolation shows great comfort knowing God is with him in the words: “Jesus loves me! He will stay close beside me all the way.”

Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;
they are weak but He is strong.

Refrain:
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
The Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me! Loves me still,
'tho I'm very weak and ill,
that I might from sin be free,
bled and died upon the tree.

¹¹⁴ This novel was about Johnny Fax, a young boy who suffered from a lingering disease. Cf. Garipey, *Songs in the Night*, 118.

¹¹⁵ Susan Warner and David Rutherford McGuire, “Jesus Loves Me,” in *The Cyber Hymnal*, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/j/e/jesuslme.htm> (accessed December 19, 2007).

Jesus loves me! He who died
 heaven's gate to open wide;
 He will wash away my sin,
 let His little child come in.

Jesus loves me! He will stay
 close beside me all the way.
 Thou hast bled and died for me,
 I will henceforth live for Thee.

"Jesus Loves Me," sung by more children than any other hymn, is considered the best-known hymn in the world and has been translated into many languages.¹¹⁶ In 1949, Chairman Mao Tse Tung declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China and required all western Christians to leave the country. This song was used in 1972 to send the news to those outside of China about how the church was doing in China under persecution. The message that baffled Chinese authorities: "The this I know people are well."¹¹⁷

The words in the hymn "No One Ever Cared for Me Like Jesus" brought healing in the face of a broken marriage. Itinerant evangelist, Charles Weigle (1871-1966), came home from a preaching mission only to discover that his wife had left him. She left a note explaining that she had left for a more glamorous life in the city and had taken their little daughter. Some years later, as she lay dying, she requested that her daughter reach her father and have him pray for her. The message reached him after she died; and he contemplated suicide in his despair. Weigle later claimed that God's grace saw him through this difficult time, and that he wrote the song while he sat at the piano and

¹¹⁶ Garipey, *Songs in the Night*, 118-119.

¹¹⁷ Idle, *Famous Hymns*, 44.

pondered God's love and care for him.¹¹⁸ The words, "No one ever cared for me like Jesus; there's no other friend so kind as he," testify to the need of God's presence and comfort to endure the most devastating sorrows.

Holiday hymns were born out of suffering as were hymns used on a weekly basis in church. Two such hymns are "Angels, from the Realms of Glory" and "Silent Night."

Garipey writes:

James Montgomery (1771-1854) struggled with depression throughout his life due to a great personal loss in his early years. At the age of twelve, his parents went as Moravian missionaries to the West Indies, leaving him at a seminary school in the United States. He never saw them again, as both parents died while bringing the Gospel to poverty-stricken people. . . . Inspired by his parents' dedication . . . he championed the cause against slavery . . . issues that appeared in his paper landed him in prison twice.

During one Advent season, he was lifted from his depression while contemplating the marvel of the Incarnation. He was led to pen the words of . . . "Angels, from the Realms of Glory." This pictorial hymn first addresses the herald angels, telling them . . . to spread the good news to all of the world. The shepherds are next invited to worship the Babe who is "God with man . . . now residing," fulfilling the glowing meaning of his name, Immanuel—"God with us."¹¹⁹

Montgomery's story reminds Christians of the true source and means of comfort in their sorrows: the presence of God through all of life.

A more familiar hymn story, born from adversity is that of "Silent Night." Father Joseph Mohr (1792-1848), assistant parish priest at the Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, and Franz Gruber (1787-1863), church organist for the same parish, faced a dilemma at the Christmas Eve service of 1818. The church organ would not play and could not be repaired in time for the service. Both, in their own way, worked through the

¹¹⁸ Garipey, *Songs in the Night*, 124-125.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

stress of the day. Mohr, bundled himself up in his warmest coat and made several pastoral visits, while Gruber examined the organ again to see if he could fix it in time for the service. Gruber, frustrated and in despair brought on by his inability and lack of tools to repair the organ, began pacing the floor in a vain attempt to devise a solution.¹²⁰

Mohr made his rounds of parishioners and came upon a humble, woodcutter's cottage that had just received a newborn child. On his way home, Mohr, inspired by the scene he had witnessed, contrasted and compared it with the birth of Jesus Christ in a humble stable setting. He created a poem that described the night of the birth of each child. Mohr became more excited and hurried to his shelter where the words seem to flow from his pen. The words he penned in German were later translated in the English as "Silent Night."¹²¹

Later that day, Gruber burst into Mohr's presence and threw his hands in the air in disgust. Mohr handed his friend the words of the poem, retrieved a guitar, placed it in Gruber's hands, and told him to write music for the words so they could sing it at Midnight Mass. "Silent Night," presented at Midnight Mass, was an immediate success, and some years later, it achieved worldwide acclaim.¹²² "Silent Night" speaks of the incarnation of Jesus and how he came to earth to right the relationship between people and their Creator.

¹²⁰ Ernest K. Emurian, *Stories of Christmas Carols* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1958), 105-112.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Luther Bridges, a successful evangelist, accepted an invitation in 1910 to hold revival meetings for two weeks near Horrodsburg, Kentucky, his wife's hometown. His wife and three boys stayed at her parents' home during the meeting. Toward the last of the meetings, Bridges received the tragic news that his in-laws' home had burned to the ground, and his wife and three children had died in the fire. At 26 years of age, he was bereft of his family.¹²³

Bridges, stunned and heartbroken, immediately went to the Word of God for solace and guidance. While the storm raged in his heart and life, God ministered to him through Psalm 91: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I will trust.'" His experience was much like Job's. He was tested but remained true to his faith in God. A short time later, Bridges penned the words of "There's Within My Heart a Melody" stemming from his deepened trust found in Psalm 91. Again, in the throes of a struggle with loss and crisis, someone found strength in God to remain faithful.

Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote a popular song, "Family of God," during a tragedy that occurred before Easter of 1970. Ron Garner, a man from their church, worked as a mechanic in a garage when a blast ripped the building apart, and it began to burn. Ron was burned severely and was rushed to a nearby hospital. The doctors offered little hope, but stated that if he made it through the first twenty-four hours he might survive. The Christians in the area began to pray. On Easter morning no one felt like celebrating until

¹²³ Garipey, *Songs in the Night*, 114-115.

the pastor came in and reported that Ron had passed the deadline and might survive. New life came to the people at church.¹²⁴

On the way home, Bill and Gloria Gaither talked about the church family's response to Ron's family's needs: child care, transportation to and from the hospital, blood donations, and meals. The Gaithers wrote the words and music to the now familiar song, "Family of God," as a result of the experience.¹²⁵ Their hymn offers more evidence that suffering can be ministered only through theocentric consolation: God worked through the people in the church, or family of God. "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God. . . . I'm not worthy to be here, but praise God, I belong!"¹²⁶

The words of the hymn "I Must Tell Jesus" bears the theocentric theme from title to application. Elisha Hoffman, pastor of the United Evangelical Brethren Church in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, wrote the words to this hymn. While calling on his church members, Hoffman came to a woman in great trouble. She wept and cried to her pastor about the woes in her life, and she questioned him about what she should do. His heart went out to her in compassion and offered the simple words of admonition: "You must tell Jesus." She confessed her sins and sorrow to God and asked for forgiveness and mercy, which God gladly gave.¹²⁷

When he left the house, Hoffman, felt blessed to have witnessed such an event. He went home and wrote these words:

¹²⁴ Schwanz, *The Birth of a Hymn*, 101-102.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 101. Also cf. Gariepy, *Songs in the Night*, 116-117.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 117.

¹²⁷ Wilbur Konkel, *Hymn Stories* (Salem, OH: Schmul, 1986), 16-18.

I must tell Jesus all of my trials;
 I cannot bear these burdens alone;
 In my distress He kindly will help me;
 He ever loves and cares for His own.¹²⁸

Hymns teach the doctrine of many theologies, such as “Rock of Ages” (Wesleyan); “A Mighty Fortress is our God” (Reformed); however, hymns that recount help in the midst of crisis, despite the theology of the person, often demonstrate the need for God’s presence during the crisis for the sufferer to rise victorious from the ashes of despair.

Voices in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation manifest themselves in and through the various traditions of the church. Some voices in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries influence people in the United States including Henri Nouwen, Billy Graham, and Luis Palau. Nouwen, a Catholic priest and prolific author, was reviewed as a Catholic influence. Billy Graham and Luis Palau have been great influences on the beliefs in the United States as they often speak to large crowds and are televised to audiences around the world. This author of this paper contends that erroneous teachings result from a misunderstood theology of covenants and a tendency to assign blame for causes of suffering. Americans seem to seek causes and ways to prevent suffering; they seem to seek simple, absolute answers for the how and whys of suffering.

An example of the need for answers lies within the text of *Billy Graham’s Christian Worker’s Handbook*. The book contains a section entitled, “Suffering and

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Adversity.” The section includes segments on background, reasons for human suffering, counseling strategy, and Scripture.¹²⁹ This short section shows how people can be confused about the why of suffering, blame suffering on the sins of the sufferer (limited retribution), or believe that suffering occurs because God needs to teach them something (telic vindication).

The information in this handbook comes from messages given by Graham, who says,

Nowhere does the Bible teach that Christians are exempt from the tribulations and natural disasters that come upon the world. Scripture does teach that the Christian can face tribulation, crisis, calamity, and personal suffering with a supernatural power that is not available to the person outside of Christ.¹³⁰

Graham clearly indicates that most people face suffering in their lives. He also iterates that Scripture teaches that Christians can face all suffering with the supernatural power found only in Christ. This expresses theocentric consolation: the Emmanuel, or Christ within, enabling Christians to be victorious in this life.

In this section, produced by a well-loved and revered name in American Christianity, however, conveys a contradictory and unclear message to those who suffer. In the section entitled *What Are Some of the Reasons for Human Suffering?* some answers may cause confusion. The list of reasons for suffering follows:

1. We may bring suffering upon ourselves.
2. Sometimes God takes corrective action because of sin and disobedience.
3. God may permit suffering so we learn to respond to problems in a biblical way.

¹²⁹ Billy Graham, *Billy Graham's Christian Worker's Handbook* (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1993), 223-226.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

4. Sometimes God permits us to suffer to teach us that pain is a part of life.
5. God may permit suffering for our well-being.
6. Sometimes God permits suffering to speak through our life and testimony to comfort others.¹³¹

These six reasons clearly show the influence of limited retribution (1, 2) and telic vindication (3-6). The first reason may elicit emotions that a sin was committed and suffering is payment for the sin. Earlier Graham states that Christians may overcome suffering through the power of Christ. His statement does not negate the possibility of these six reasons; however, Christians might have problems with a God who is perceived as the perpetrator of the suffering.

Graham acknowledges the promise of God to be with Christians and enable them to be victorious through suffering; however, the book clearly leans toward limited retribution and telic vindication and makes only a nod to theocentric consolation. In the *Counseling Strategy* section, Graham suggests the following when counseling non-Christians:

Be sympathetic. . . . Offer encouragement and hope. . . . Ask him [*sic*] if he has ever received Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord. Sometimes God permits affliction. . . . Pray with him for salvation and deliverance. . . . Encourage him to read and study the Word of God. . . . Encourage him to find a bible-teaching church.¹³²

One wonders whether non-Christians would be encouraged to give their hearts to a God who has brought suffering in their lives. In this same section, he states the following for counseling Christians:

¹³¹ Ibid., 224.

¹³² Ibid., 225.

Sympathize with him [*sic*]. Encourage him by offering God's comfort. . . . Apply those (reasons for suffering), which seem suitable. If restoration and rededication seem indicated, share page 11 (*seeking Forgiveness and Restoration*). Encourage him to search god's Word and to pray . . . God will reveal His motives in the suffering. What is God trying to say to me? What is He trying to teach me? What steps should I take as a result? Encourage him to get into a Bible-teaching church. Encourage him to communicate with Christian friends. . . . Pray with him personally, asking for deliverance.¹³³

Many might search their hearts for sins that led to their suffering. The Scriptures cited for ministering to the suffering exclude messages of God being with them or comforting them, instead they focus on Scriptures that offer reasons for their suffering (Rom. 8:28, 29, 35, 37; James 1:2, 3, 12; John 14:1; 1 Pet. 4:12, 13, 16, and 19).

A problem results from naming God as responsible for suffering. The last chapter of this paper will examine the problem when it addresses the quality of responses used by those who minister to those who suffer. The stories of Job and Paul credit Satan with causing their suffering; however, Job's story says God gave permission, or "allowed," the suffering. John Calvin, John Wesley, and others credit God as causing or permitting suffering, and demonstrate the problem of people in the United States, who have a need to know who or what is to blame.¹³⁴ Americans seems to find comfort in blaming someone or something for the evils they face.

Luis Palau takes a different approach in his book, *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* The subtitle of the book, "Finding Solace in times of Trouble," suggests that Palau's book is about theocentric consolation in the face of suffering. In the introduction

¹³³ Ibid., 225-226.

¹³⁴ Karen Nodalo, "Who Is To Blame?" *ContentMart* (January 20, 2005), <http://www.contentmart.com/articles/23051/1/Who-is-to-blame/Page1.html> (accessed January 3, 2008).

to the book, Palau speaks of a couple whose baby was born severely deformed, a student who opened fire on others at school, a woman who was raped repeatedly as a twelve-year-old, thousands lost in a killer earthquake, one who lost a job for no reason, and a spouse who left for someone else. All ask, “Why?” to which Palau replies:

I’m much more concerned with helping people than I am in trying to provide a philosophical explanation for the problem of evil. I’m not a philosopher; I long to introduce people to the Great Physician, not to the *Complete Works of Plato*. I often ask people, “What brought you to Jesus Christ?” . . . In so many cases, it was a crisis: divorce, illness, unemployment, an accident, death. I have written *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* To help individuals like yourself (those that have faced crises in their life) come to grips with the crushing adversities of life by pointing to the limitless resources found in God alone.”¹³⁵

Palau intends this book for unbelievers that they may be drawn God.¹³⁶ His subtitle and reference to “the limitless resources found in God”¹³⁷ appear to espouse theocentric consolation; however, this evangelist expresses also a belief in telic vindication. He describes the death of his father when he was a young man and says it affected him as follows:

I am convinced that if it hadn’t been for my dad’s early death, I probably wouldn’t be involved in full-time ministry to others. . . . I believe Christian suffering can be a part of God’s redemptive purpose in some unusual way. That is, God can take our pain and use it for amazing purposes; He does not waste our tears.¹³⁸

I believe some may be confused when they hear mixed messages from those in the Church. The question arises, “Who knows when God is redirecting, punishing,

¹³⁵ Luis Palau, *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 2-3.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 13.

teaching, or allowing?” Palau, throughout the book, brings people to God, encourages them to have a hope for the future, and uses whatever happens to move them forward with their lives.¹³⁹

A local pastor, recently deceased, Ron Mehl, fought a daily battle with leukemia. He wrote several books including *Meeting God at a Dead End*. Mehl tells the story of some young men who, involved in an accident on a mountain, thought they were going to die because of their bleak circumstances. He refers to this as a “dead end,”¹⁴⁰ another term for what this paper calls a crisis in someone’s life. Mehl says these young men came to a dead end with no one to turn to but God, and found that God was enough. The same happened to Job, even after questioning and challenging of God (Job 42:1-6). Mehl contends that sometimes God “allows” or “brings me to” these dead ends in life, but that ultimately people need to find God to satisfy the longing of their hearts. Mehl would be the first to say people need God to get them through dead ends; however, Mehl teaches telic vindication; teaching that God “allows” these things to show, teach, or lead people to God.¹⁴¹

Mel Lawrenz, senior pastor at Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin, in his book, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*, says of crisis:

Crisis strips us down to the soul; it forms us by reducing us. . . . An opportunity for spiritual growth . . . the church is to be a haven for healing. People who have gone through crisis need a refuge, a sanctuary, a soft place—a community that

¹³⁹ Ibid., 1-4, 211.

¹⁴⁰ Ron Mehl, *Meeting God at a Dead End* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 21.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 23, 33, 230-235.

does not dissect, evaluate, or manipulate their souls, but rather allows them to reside with others under God's restorative power.¹⁴²

Lawrenz speaks of crisis as formative (telic vindication), but says the church should offer a non-judgmental haven for restoration (theocentric consolation). Confusion lies in the mixed messages that many in ministry give to those who suffer. On the one hand, some refer to God as the Source for comfort, but still look for reasons to explain the suffering. They often refer to God "allowing" or "sending" suffering as a benefit (telic vindication) or chastisement (limited retribution). Palau wrote that he was not a philosopher using Plato to justify suffering; however, later in his book he offers reasons similar to those Graham offers in his handbook.¹⁴³ Part of America's problem lies in the remnants of a modernist culture, which seeks logical reasons for what happens in people's lives.

Gordon Fee refers to another group of ministers as those who promote the "so-called health and wealth Gospel," which he calls an "insidious disease."¹⁴⁴ An examination of the health and wealth Gospel movement reveals what people are being taught about suffering. Television is rife with this type of programming,

Fee mentions Kenneth Hagin¹⁴⁵, who wrote the book, *Must Christians Suffer?* Hagin differentiates between suffering and sickness: "When the Bible talks about suffering, that doesn't mean sickness. We have no business suffering sickness and

¹⁴² Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 43, 44.

¹⁴³ Palau, *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* 3, 204-211.

¹⁴⁴ Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

disease, because Jesus redeemed us from that.”¹⁴⁶ Hagin says Christians all suffer persecution and quotes 2 Timothy 3:12: “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (KJV).” He defines persecution as being talked about, reviled, trials and tests related to personal faith, and criticism deserved wealth.¹⁴⁷ Hagin says, “Some of our hardest tests are ‘God’s way of leading us into a deeper place in Him’”¹⁴⁸ (telic vindication) and Christians are sometimes led into hard places, like Christ was (Luke 4:1), for growth and maturity.¹⁴⁹ He further says, “A lot of people suffer unnecessarily because of their own wrongdoing” (limited retribution). He paints a fine line between sin and wrongdoing when he says, “I don’t necessarily mean they’ve sinned. But just to think differently from what the Bible says is wrong. To walk in doubt and unbelief is wrong.”¹⁵⁰

Hagin says those who suffer sickness and disease because their faith is insufficient to attain God’s best for them, suffer unnecessarily. He refers to God’s best as living “our full length of time out here below without sickness and without disease.” Hagin seems to refer to limited retribution because he claims those with insufficient faith will suffer from sickness and disease. Hagin’s argument recalls the Scripture: “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23 KJV).

¹⁴⁶ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Must Christians Suffer?* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library, 1982), 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 22.

Michael Youssef, the founding pastor of the Church of the Apostles, Atlanta, Georgia, is the president and host teacher of a radio ministry, *Leading the Way with Dr. Michael Youssef*, heard all around the world. He wrote a book entitled, *If God Is in Control, Why is My Life Such a Mess?* in which he deals with those going through dark places, and who question God's involvement. Youssef stresses the sovereignty of God when he says:

Before you were even born, God determined your life span—"all the days ordained" (Ps. 139: 13, 16) for you. That is a very comforting thought if you understand the sovereignty of God. As I write these words, this is day 18, 134 of my life. I do not know whether I will be here for day number 18, 135—but God does. So why should I worry about tomorrow? He already knows what, if anything, tomorrow holds for me.¹⁵¹

Youseff reassures people that "God is in absolute control of His creation."¹⁵² He does not say the future is irrevocably set, but that prayer is important and that through prayer the course of events can be changed. He cites several examples from Scripture, including Elijah raising the widow's dead son to life (1 Kings 17). He speaks of persistent prayer according to the will of God making a difference:

I do not imply that you may be able to pull off a resurrection. God's power has never diminished, and He is just as able to resurrect the dead today as He was in Elijah's day. But we simply do not see Him working in that way now; evidently it is not part of His sovereign plan for this time in history.¹⁵³

Youssef amazes readers with accounts from Scripture and his own extraordinary life, and then he disappoints readers.

¹⁵¹ Michael Youssef, *If God Is in Control, Why Is My Life Such a Mess?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 6-7.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 79.

In a chapter entitled “Clinging to the Promises of God,” Youssef says that Christians often do not know how to appropriate the promises of God. He compares to God’s promises as a check, “If you give me a check and I never deposit it or cash it, the check is useless to me; I never appropriated your gift.”¹⁵⁴ He claims God makes conditional and unconditional promises. God alone determines fulfillment of unconditional promises, but conditional promises require people to fulfill part of the bargain before an answer may be obtained.¹⁵⁵

Youssef claims unanswered prayers frustrate many people because the people fail to meet the conditions of promises they claim. Youssef explains: “Most Christians today love to claim the promises, and multitudes are following the “name it and claim it” preachers, who have centered their entire ministries on claiming promises”.¹⁵⁶ Often the lack of fulfillment of the promise is their misuse of the promise for their needs, or their failure to meet the conditions (limited retribution?). Youssef gives an example of an often misunderstood conditional promise:

Psalm 37:4-5: Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this. This is a conditional promise: If you delight yourself in the LORD and commit your way to him, then He will give you the desires of your heart. But if you want to pilot your own way and then cry out to God to bail you out when you are in trouble, you have violated the condition of the promise and therefore the fulfillment of it.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 112-113.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 118-119.

The author of this paper believes the influence of the “name and claim it” preachers has added to the problem of the misuse of covenants, which have been applied out of context. The Old Testament covenants described in the first chapter show how Americans might expect God to fulfill the desires of their hearts. Christians feel they live good lives and expect God to deliver them from any crisis. Televangelists tout that Christians may have prosperity and health if they believe. Even Youssef falls into this pattern. He says, “Do you want to be blessed financially? Examine your checkbook and see how much seed you have sown lately.”¹⁵⁸ Youssef writes and comes to some of the same conclusions espoused by other health and wealth Gospel preachers.

Other preachers boldly promise lives of health and wealth through faith (a form of limited retribution). John Osteen, father of Joel Osteen, promotes this belief and says in a sermon: “It’s God’s will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It’s God’s will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt. It’s God’s will for you to live in health and not in sickness all the days of your life”.¹⁵⁹ Joel Osteen carried on his father’s legacy and built the Lakewood church into a worship service of thousands, televised all over the nation.

In the *Los Angeles Times*, William Lobdell wrote about Paul Crouch, another “health and wealth Gospel” preacher:

Pastor Paul Crouch calls it “God’s economy of giving,” and here is how it works: People who donate to Crouch’s Trinity Broadcasting Network (hereafter referred to as TBN) will reap financial blessings from a grateful God. The more they give

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 120.

¹⁵⁹ John Osteen, “The Holy Spirit, Part I,” HS-001, quoted in Robert S. Lichow, “The Leaven of Lakewood,” <http://www.discernment.org/LeavenLakewood.htm> (accessed December 19, 2007).

TBN, the more He will give them. “He’ll give you thousands, hundreds of thousands,” Crouch told his viewers during a telethon last November. “He’ll give you millions and billions of dollars.” TBN viewers are told that if they don’t reap a windfall despite their donations, they must be doing something to “block God’s blessing—most likely, not giving enough (limited retribution).”¹⁶⁰

Kenneth Copeland, a preacher involved in the “Word-Faith Movement” that includes Paul and Jan Crouch, and Kenneth Hagin, gives the following as the faith formula: “All it takes is (1) Seeing or visualizing whatever you need, whether physical or financial; (2) Staking your claim on Scripture; and (3) Speaking it into existence.”¹⁶¹ Copeland writes on health in his book, *Healed . . . To Be or Not to Be*: “The first step to spiritual maturity is to realize your position before God. You are a child of God and a joint-heir with Jesus. Consequently, you are entitled to all the rights and privileges . . . and one of your rights is health and healing.”¹⁶² The condition required is faith. Copeland says, “All you have to do today is receive your healing by faith.”¹⁶³ Copeland implies that if you don’t get healed you don’t have enough faith (limited retribution).

Statistics reveal how widespread this teaching is and the extent of its influence in the United States. The following numbers were compiled from various academic sources and posted on the Internet on a page entitled, “Is the ‘prosperity gospel’ prospering?”¹⁶⁴ The following are some of the facts reported:

¹⁶⁰ William Lobdell, “TBN’s Promise: Send Money and See Riches,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 2004.

¹⁶¹ Gary E. Gilley, “The Word of Faith Movement,” *Think on These Things* 5, no. 4 (April 1999), http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/Articles/read_articles.asp?id=12 (accessed December 19, 2007).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Religionlink.org, “Is the ‘Prosperity Gospel’ Prospering?” *Religion/Newswriters*, Feb. 27, 2006, http://www.religionlink.org/tip_060227.php (accessed December 19, 2007).

Kenneth and Gloria Copeland's show, *Believer's Voice of Victory*, reaches at least 76 million households in the U. S. and airs on 135 international stations.

TBN, collects more than \$120 million yearly from its television broadcasts, which air throughout the world and the United States. TBN actually broadcasts many of the Word of Faith Movement telecasts.¹⁶⁵

It is no wonder that people in the United States are angry with a God who fails to perform miracles at every crisis when so many preachers proclaim these promises. Many blame themselves and their "sin of unbelief" or another "sin" as the cause of their sickness, poverty, or failed answer to their prayers.

The theories of limited retribution, telic vindication and theocentric consolation have been taught to varying degrees through the history of the Church and in modern times. The author of this paper contends that much of the teaching is contradictory and confusing, and that insufficient teaching focuses on theocentric consolation, which offers the most promise for pastoral caregivers when they work with those who suffer.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

Earlier chapters of this paper address the covenantal theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation as the responses to suffering found in the Old and New Testaments and throughout church history. Chapter 4 presents a practical theology of suffering to provide pastors, chaplains, and others in ministry a better foundation with which to minister to those who suffer.

First, a view of the particularities of the culture of the United States will be observed, as Hall says, “No human question is ever asked (and no answer given!) in a historical vacuum; it is asked in a specific time and place by specific persons.”¹ The time and place of this discussion of a practical theology of suffering deals with the United States in the twenty-first century, and the cultural context influences views of and responses to suffering.

Second, the chapter explores the New Covenant in the New Testament as the fulfillment of all other covenants, showing that God wants to be in close relationship with His people in all aspects of their lives (theocentric consolation). Jocz affirms the importance of the study of covenants when he says, “Much if not all of biblical theology is grounded upon the covenantal relationship between God and His People. In fact, the

¹ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 24.

Bible is best viewed as the history of the covenant, or covenants.”² This view affirms the premise of this paper’s author that theocentric consolation provides pastoral caregivers the necessary theological perspective to offer people comfort and the strength to endure suffering.

Third, the problem of evil and the role of God arise in every discussion of suffering; therefore, a practical theodicy will be given with the understanding that no theodicy can answer all of the questions about God and His role in suffering.

The United States Culture

One might ask why good people suffer in light of the cultural standards of the United States. Hall, gives an overview of the Christian tradition in regards to the subject of suffering. He uses the term “tradition of Jerusalem” to describe this overall tradition:

The tradition of Jerusalem stands on two basic affirmations concerning the human condition: the first is that suffering is real and is the existential lot of “fallen” humanity—“All flesh is grass . . . surely the people is grass” (Is. 40:6-8). The second is that suffering is not the last word about the human condition and therefore that it need not and must not become our preoccupation, the object of our *ultimate* concern, for “ . . . the Word of our God will stand forever (Is. 40:8).”³

Hall says that the world is divided into classifications of the “First World, the Second, the Third . . . the purpose is to attempt to do some minimal justice to the painful but real distinctions that exist.”⁴ Hall further states:

² Jocz, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny*, 31.

³ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 19-20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

The social sciences as well as certain theological movements (especially liberation theologies and feminist theology) have helped Christians to begin to comprehend that it is not the same thing to tackle a theological question—any theological question—in the Third World as in the First, in the affluent North as in the economically depressed South.⁵

Hall reveals several characteristics of the United States, a First World country:

- We belong to the have-nations, rather than to the have-nots
- We are part of the 6% of Earth's population which consumes 40% of the planet's natural resources
- While approximately \$.53 out of every tax dollar in the United States goes towards military spending. Citizens of this continent can go for years on end without ever seeing the bodies of slain or starving persons in our streets
- Those who suffer most conspicuously in our society: the aged, the dying, the poor, the socially or psychically "abnormal", are for the most part hidden from everyday view, sequestered in places which effectively insulate them from public notice; and
- The oppressed in our own midst: racial minorities, sexual minorities, the unemployed, and others—can still seem to the majority of us to be well and wisely treated?⁶

Hall says that to relate suffering to those present in the United States, one must convince others first of the reality of suffering.⁷ Hall says, "[T]he problem of suffering which has to be emphasized in our particular context [is] 'suffering is real, is intense and ubiquitous, is not easily overcome, and is the lot of humanity under the conditions of existence.'" ⁸ Hall further elaborates, "Our temptation is that we fall into superficial belieffulness [*sic*]*—credulity—*healing the wounds of the people lightly and degrading

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

the hope that belongs to the gospel of the cross. In short, our temptation is: *cheap hope*.”⁹

The author of this paper searched manuals of various churches and found none that includes a theology of suffering in its theological statements. This lack of attention to a theology of suffering lends credence to the author’s assumption that people in the United States appear oblivious to the suffering among them. Chapter 5 will deal with some inadequate responses, or cheap hope, people use in times of great suffering.

Another important part of culture in the United States is the effect of theological teaching on Christian television networks, such as TBN and CBN, which promote a gospel of health and wealth that says those with faith need be neither sick nor poor.¹⁰ Gordon Fee calls this rise of the health and wealth gospel a “disease.”¹¹ The teaching that one needs only to “name it and claim it”¹² encourages Americans to ignore and avoid the issue of suffering in the population. The health and wealth gospel teaches that people “deserve” health and wealth from God because He wills it.¹³ Larry Shelton refers to this attitude toward life: “I think many in our society have tended to develop an attitude of entitlement: *I am entitled to so and so. I deserve a Mercedes Benz because the*

⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰ Examples can be found at the TBN and CBN websites: <http://www.tbnnetworks.com> and <http://www.cbn.com>.

¹¹ Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, 3.

¹² Marcia Greenwood, “Name It and Claim It?” TGM Resources Articles. Tim Greenwood Ministries. <http://www.tgm.org> (accessed January 9, 2008).

¹³ Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, 3.

commercial says I deserve it."¹⁴ The teaching that people "deserve" health and wealth is appalling¹⁵ in light of the above facts about the United States compared to the rest of the world. Shelton claims that people in the United States feel they deserve something because an ad says so; if Shelton is correct, how much greater is this sense of entitlement to health and wealth when they are said to be God's will?

Hall illustrates another point of view that adds to the sense of entitlement in America and the inability to cope well with suffering:

[H]uman suffering can be overcome—can be, is being, and shall be! In other words, suffering is not a necessary or inevitable dimension of human existence, but represents . . . a challenge to human ingenuity and inventiveness.¹⁶

Peter Kreeft, in his book, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, says,

Around the time of the Renaissance, the Western mind began to formulate a new idea, a new answer to the question: What is the best thing in life? What is the point, purpose, meaning, goal, or good of living? What is the *summum bonum*, or greatest good?—No one has put the difference more succinctly than C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*: "For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem of human life was how to confirm the soul to objective reality, and the solution was wisdom, self-discipline, and virtue. For the modern mind, the cardinal problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of man, and the solution is technique."¹⁷

This utopian view, which gives rise to humanism, causes a condition that Hall calls "the incapacity to suffer."¹⁸ He describes this condition as, "Our programmed indifference to the world; our ability to listen without emotion to the most shattering

¹⁴ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 9.

¹⁵ Bill Bailey, "God Wants You to Prosper!" *The Spirit of Faith Newsletter*, February 1982.

¹⁶ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 38.

¹⁷ Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1986), 168.

¹⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 41.

‘data’ about genocide, mass starvation, wide-spread political torture, and violence of every kind; our frantic narcissistic pursuit of private ‘happiness.’”¹⁹

Hall gives three types of consequences seen in society to explicate the effect of this belief:

- 1) It is unusually difficult for most persons in our society to accept or articulate their own personal suffering.
- 2) The inability of so many in our society to enter imaginatively into the suffering of others.
- 3) The most alarming of all is the search for an enemy.²⁰

The first consequence is made clearer by the words of Donald Shriver Jr.:

Some suffering is meaningless, but not all suffering is so. . . . Someone has said, “Explanation is where the mind rests.” An explanation of a liver ailment that ends with “You drink too much” may be the end of patient and physician curiosity; but the deeper question, “Why do you drink too much?” camps just below the surface.²¹

Did suffering cause the drinking? Did the patient drink to avoid facing something?

Shriver’s example illustrates peoples’ inability to face their own or others’ suffering.

The difficulty of broadcasters and others to comprehend and convey what was happening during the terrorist attack on New York, September 11, 2001, illustrates the second consequence.²² Richard Rodriguez quotes Susan Faludi who says, “The intrusions

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Ibid., 42-45.

²¹ Donald W. Shriver Jr., “The Interrelationships of Religion and Medicine,” in *On Moral Medicine*, eds. Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 12.

²² Tanya Lagatella, “Professors Assess Changes in News Media Since 9/11,” *Quinnipiac Chronicle* September 16, 2006, <http://media.www.qchronicle.com/media/storage/paper294/news/2006/09/12/CampusNews/Professors.Assess.Changes.In.News.Media.Since.911-2267955.shtml> (accessed January 9, 2008); Randy Atkins, “The News Media Could Be Our Weakest Link,” *The Washington Post*,

of September 11 broke the dead bolt on our protective myth, the illusion that . . . our might makes our homeland impregnable . . . and women and children safe in the arms of their men.”²³ Faludi refers to the common belief among Americans they can “fix it,” as Hall maintains²⁴

The third consequence may also be called “the blame game.” Americans, individually and nationally, seek causes or reasons for everything they consider undeserved. They justify inhuman atrocities just so long as they get their “pound of flesh”²⁵ as my southern mother used to say. If Americans can attach blame for their condition to someone or something else, they can justify their acts of condemnation or aggression against the “enemy,” against whatever or whoever is to “blame” for the crises in their lives.

Chapter 3 contends that the people of the United States tend to believe that much of personal suffering results from personal sin, or something that “corrects” behavior. As William May states: “Officially, the West has affirmed a God who creates, nurtures, and protects. Unofficially, however, the gods that enthrall modern men and women do not

January 26, 2003; B03, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A41407-2003Jan25?language=printer> (accessed January 9, 2008).

²³ Richard Rodriguez, starred review of *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America*, by Susan Faludi, (New York: Metropolitan, 2007), *Publishers Weekly*, August 6, 2007, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6465063.html> (accessed January 9, 2008).

²⁴ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 38.

²⁵ “Something which is owed that is ruthlessly required to be paid back. This . . . derives from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, 1596.” *The Phrase Finder*, <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/284400.html>, s.v. “Pound of Flesh.”

bless but threaten them.”²⁶ The covenantal theories of limited retribution and telic vindication both are espoused most frequently. The theory of theocentric consolation may model the “official” western depiction of God described by May, but the majority of the populace does not espouse it.²⁷ The author of this paper reiterates the confusion and contradictory messages the church often gives to those who suffer. The following study of the New Covenant and a closer look at God and His role in suffering provides a foundation for ministry based on the covenantal theory of theocentric consolation.

The New Covenant

The New Covenant fulfills all other covenants and provides the basis for a theology of suffering. This theology of the New Covenant, which espouses theocentric consolation, offers a paradigm for pastors, chaplains and others who minister to those in crisis as defined in this paper. The study of biblical covenants fills volumes, but this discussion will focus on points showing how covenants affirm the theory of theocentric consolation. Some misunderstanding of covenants may result from the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought. Jocz affirms this view: “In certain scholarly circles it is recognized that there is an important difference between Greek and Hebrew thought-categories.”²⁸ Jocz cites a scholar, Dom Gregory Dix, who stresses that while “the Greek

²⁶ William F. May, *The Physician's Covenant: Images of the Healer in Medical Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 25.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 17.

is concerned with being, the Hebrew concentrates upon action.”²⁹ Brueggemann, a theologian, says:

The Old Testament in its theological articulation is characteristically dialectical and dialogical, and not transcendentalist. . . . Jewishness is characterized by dialogical-dialectical modes of discourse, whereas Western Christianity has long practiced a flight to the transcendent.³⁰

Jocz refers to the Old Testament as a theological document because it presents this “battlefield of opposing views” (dialogical-dialectical)³¹ and because “it is heavily based ideologically and on moral and religious issues it is never neutral.”³² Jocz further comments about the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought:

It is almost next to impossible to unwind the skein and to separate the Hebrew and Greek strands that make up Christian theology. All we can do is to go back to the Hebrew Scriptures and to re-emphasize certain aspects that have been toned down as a result of the synthesis.³³

Jocz urges readers “to examine the biblical aspect of covenant and to show how it forms the underlying presupposition of all aspects of Christian theology.”³⁴ Jocz also argues that the unifying principle of Scripture is the concept of the covenant, which arises out of the divine-human relationship.³⁵ Jocz’s admonition leads to the questions: What is

²⁹ Dom Gregory Dix, *Jew and Greek* (London: Dacre, 1953), 12f, 77ff, quoted in Jocz, *The Covenant*, 9.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 83.

³¹ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

the covenant? and How does the covenant show theocentric consolation as the foundational truth for ministry to the suffering?

Response to the questions depends on examination of covenants, principles that underlie covenants, and the relationship between the New Covenant and previous covenants. First, this chapter reviews the meaning of the Hebrew word *berith*, “covenant,” and its usage in the Old Testament. Second, discussion of the underlying principles and purposes of the Old Testament covenants provides the foundation for the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. Third, the chapter examines how the New Covenant fulfills all other covenants.

Meaning and Usage of *Berith*

Benjamin Davidson, gives several different definitions for *berith* in his lexicon. Goliath’s challenge to the armies of Saul was to choose (*berith*) someone to fight him (I Sam. 17:8).³⁶ He also gives the translation to be “cut” as its proper use, and from this idea of cutting comes the meanings of agreement, league, and covenant from the feminine declension.³⁷ He speaks of the *angel of the covenant* (Judg. 2:1) in comparison to the Messiah (Rom. 15:8).³⁸ In Judges 2:1, after the death of Joshua, God sends His messenger saying He would never break His covenant with the Israelites. Davidson speculates this refers to Paul’s mention of the everlasting covenant fulfilled in Jesus

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Christ: “Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs” (Rom. 15:8).

Shelton, quotes several different sources for the use of *berith* and says,

Although the etymology of *berith*, “covenant,” is somewhat unclear and its usage controversial, the frequency of its usage indicates its importance in Old Testament theology. . . . [T]he term *berith* occurs nearly 300 times in the Old Testament. . . . Etymological analysis of *berith* yields meanings as different as “bind” and “cut or cleave.” Thus a literary usage analysis of *berith* is more fruitful for our understanding. . . . [T]he concept of covenant reflects a relationship that is interpersonal rather than an objective, impersonal statement of law.³⁹

Davidson says that “cut” was the proper meaning of *berith*, which likely refers to the example of God’s covenant with Abram (Gen. 15:1-16).⁴⁰ Shelton says, “The sacrifices involved in ‘cutting a covenant’ were not a result of any applied penalty, but rather they functioned as an oath which validated the promises and guarantees that were the substance of the covenant.”⁴¹ Another example of this oath is described in Jeremiah when a covenant made with God was broken. God says,

The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. (Jer. 34:18-20)

The passage from Jeremiah demonstrates the importance and seriousness with which God views the covenant relationship. So what does “covenant” mean? Shelton gives this definition:

³⁹ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 40.

It is a formal or informal agreement between two parties that stipulates the nature and purpose of the agreement, the expectations of the arrangement, and the accountability of the parties for the consequences of failure to fulfill the terms of the agreement. . . . A covenant is more of an interpersonal agreement based on the goodwill and trust that exists between those involved in it.⁴²

Principles and Purposes of the Old Testament Covenants

Some underlying principles in the Old Testament demonstrate God's desire to be in relationship with humanity and His love that motivates offering Himself in a covenant relationship with His creation. God's desire is apparent from the beginning in Genesis, as Shelton says:

God created humanity . . . to have fellowship with the Godhead. The Garden of Eden story depicts the participatory relationship with God in the entire creation account in Genesis 1-3. It is all about interpersonal obedience, social community, and spiritual intimacy. The motivation for creation was the creative and transforming love of God. God pictured and explained this love to humanity through the concept of a covenant between God and humanity.⁴³

Michael Lodahl, a theologian, clarifies the necessity of the creation for the purpose of a covenantal relationship with God:⁴⁴

[We] seem to miss the central biblical affirmation that He is a God of relationship. The God of this Story calls into being a created order that is other than himself and intimately sustains it precisely in its otherness. The apex of this otherness in creation, as far as we can tell, is the human race. In human beings we find creatures who can both seek God and flee God . . . creatures who exercise the power of conscious choice, which is the greatest evidence of our *otherness* from God. And . . . this sense of human agency grounded in distance from Him is essential to relationship. I cannot be in true relationship to that which is not other than myself; to borrow from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, "I become

⁴² Ibid., 19-20.

⁴³ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁴ Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1994), 90.

through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become I, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”⁴⁵

God’s direction to Moses to construct the Ark of the Covenant serves as a prime example of God’s desire to be present with and in relationship to the Israelites. Though Exodus 25:10-22 describes detailed instructions for making the Ark, the real significance appears to be the purpose God gives for building it: “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Exod. 25:8). The Ark symbolizes God’s tangible, living presence among the Israelites (Num. 10:35).⁴⁶ Through the Ark, God shows He chose to live among His people and be a part of them.

This choice of God to live among and with His people raises the subject of election. Jocz states, “Election in the Bible is a basic theological concept and is inseparable from the biblical doctrine of God.”⁴⁷ He further says, “Election is only another aspect of the covenant, for it bears witness to God’s unfailing grace toward mankind.”⁴⁸ In retrospect, God had to create someone to be in relationship with Him that was other than Himself.⁴⁹ He created and chose humans. Paul verifies God’s choice in Ephesians 1: 4 and 11:

⁴⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 11, quoted in Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 90.

⁴⁶ Merrill F. Unger and William White Jr., eds., *Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 12.

⁴⁷ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 40.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 90.

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Jocz asserts that “election stands for the presence of God,”⁵⁰ a point important to this paper. God appears throughout the Old Testament in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant and the practice of the covenant itself.⁵¹ This idea of God being present in covenant lends itself to theocentric consolation as most comforting and beneficial in the presence of suffering.

Another important aspect of God being present with His people in covenant is the fact of who God is. Shelton says, “God reveals himself in the Old Testament as being transcendent over the world as its Creator.”⁵² This God who chooses humans to be in relationship with Him, shows His love through condescension; a Creator offering His creation a partnership⁵³ through life. Jocz says of this condescension:

The covenantal relationship can be stated in one single sentence: *God’s condescension to man [sic]*. . . . The reason why God speaks to man can only be answered from the principle of the covenantal relationship: God chooses man as His partner.⁵⁴ Covenantal partnership is here not a pact of equals but the condescension of the Creator to His creature.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 43.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 23.

⁵³ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 91.

⁵⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 14, 30f, 202ff, quoted in Jocz, *The Covenant*, 227.

⁵⁵ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 225, 227.

Throughout biblical history, God's intentional manifestation of His desire to be in relationship with his creation also reveals His love. God describes himself in Exodus 34: 6, 7, 10:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. . . . I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world.⁵⁶

Shelton refers to the above Scripture and says,

God defines himself in "profoundly personal and intimate terms, such as *hesed* (union) and *'emeth* (faithfulness, steadfastness), [an] intimate bond of loving, faithful union between God and humans [providing] a safeguard for even the most threatening and distressing situations of life. On the basis of this love, God expresses the relationship with Israel in the form of a covenant (Ex. 19:4ff). This covenant with Israel is a token of divine love, of the communion between Yahweh and the people."⁵⁷

The covenant to Abraham in Genesis 17:1-8 demonstrates God's love:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

⁵⁶ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 23-24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

Three important aspects to this covenant show God's love and future planning: First, this covenant is a gift; second, it is eternal; and third, it is for the whole of humanity.

Rashi, a Hebrew commentator, says about the words "set my covenant" in verse 2, "'I will *give* My covenant,' refers to the aspects of the covenant which God undertakes to grant to Israel: His love and the Land of Israel. It does not refer to the obligation Israel undertakes through the covenant of circumcision."⁵⁸ Herczeg translates Rashi's word "set," in the English, as "give," which implies the covenant is a gift of God that requires no obligation on the part of the receiver. A condition-less covenant was unheard of in the ancient world, because a covenant without conditions was worthless.⁵⁹ This situation, though puzzling to Old Testament scholars, is unique and has no parallel in ancient Israel or the Near East.⁶⁰ Its uniqueness in the realm of biblical covenants suggests a theological explanation rather than a sociological one.⁶¹ This unique, condition-less gift of love will be shown as part of the New Covenant in John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son."

A second important aspect of the covenant of Abraham is that it is an everlasting covenant. God offered an eternity of commitment. Gordon Wenham says, "[The covenant

⁵⁸ Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, trans., *Bereishis/Genesis*, vol. 1 of *The Torah with Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1995), 161.

⁵⁹ Jakob Jocz, *The Covenant*, 23.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of Abraham] is to be an eternal covenant . . . without predetermined end . . . that a permanent relationship is envisaged.”⁶²

A third, very important aspect, is that “Abraham would father a multitude of nations . . . kings would be descended from him . . . [there would be a] covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants after you throughout their generations (Gen. 17:4).”⁶³ This means the covenant of God includes all generations of humanity. Lodahl, in speaking of the promise that Abraham would father many nations, says, “Jews, Christians, and Muslims all vie for the honor of being Abraham’s favorites, his true heirs. . . . They all tell, and relate to, his story in different and often contradictory ways; yet Abraham is understood by all to be their father.”⁶⁴ To this author this means that theocentric consolation is open to everyone, regardless of nationality, race, gender, or other position in the world.

The idea of “promise” also illustrates God’s love. In Ephesians 2:12, Paul called the Old Testament covenants, “covenants of promise.” Pink says they were “covenants of promise” not “covenants of stipulations.”⁶⁵ The author of this paper infers that Pink’s statement about the covenants of promise indicates theocentric consolation, and covenants of stipulations indicate the idea of limited retribution. In using a New Testament passage to point to this idea of promise, Jocz says:

⁶² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, ed. John D. W. Watts, vol. 2 of *WORD Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, TX: WORD, 1994), 29.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 99.

⁶⁵ Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, 16.

Christians . . . have to read the Old Testament backward . . . from underneath the Cross, in the light of the Resurrection, Ascension, and the giving of the Holy Ghost. Their faith cannot depend upon Old Testament exegesis, but their Old Testament exegesis depends upon their faith in Jesus Christ.⁶⁶

Hall describes a covenant that is “closer than marriage,”⁶⁷ for the salvation of all creation:

Hebraic theology manifests very little, if any, interest in the interior life of the deity. Its thrust is always towards God’s relatedness with creation and, though the prophetic tradition of Israel is keenly aware of the divine otherness, its manner of treating God’s transcendence is entirely different from the theme of transcendence pursued in the tradition of Athens. God’s discontinuity with creation is not understood by Judaism in physical (spatial or even temporal) terms but in terms of righteousness, that is ethically. It is part of the divine transcendence that Yahweh wills to be so close to creation, to be imminent, to be “your God,” in short, to love. In contrast to the human reluctance to love, and fear proximity—transcending precisely our human attempt to be alone, autonomous, self-sufficient—the God of the bible goes to unheard of lengths to achieve communion with us, even union, in a covenant closer than marriage. Not God’s distance but God’s bridging of this distance—this is God’s transcendence.⁶⁸

Stephen Szikszai says,

The Bible places the greatest emphasis not upon the conviction that God is the Creator, but upon the *fact* that God is the Savior. He showed himself as the Savior to the people of the Old Testament by delivering them out of Egypt (Deut. 5:15) . . . as Savior also to the people of the New Testament. This he did through Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 105.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 112.

⁶⁹ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 12.

Thomas Oden echoes this thought: “Humanity is God’s constant concern throughout the biblical witness. The Christian study of God cannot neglect God’s own prevailing interest, the redemption of humanity.”⁷⁰

The goal of covenant becomes the salvation of all creation,⁷¹ and involves atonement, acceptance, and obligation,⁷² which are integral to affirmation of the use of theocentric consolation as a paradigm for ministry to those who suffer. God provides for humanity to be reconciled to Him and restore their covenant relationship through atonement.⁷³ Shelton says, “It was God Himself who initiated and established the sacrificial system for the purpose of Israel’s making atonement for sin;”⁷⁴ however, the sacrifice was more than just an outward ritual.⁷⁵ The law required that persons offering a sacrifice must confess their sin from penitent hearts, laying their hands upon the heads of the blood sacrifices, which signified that they were henceforth dead to their sin.⁷⁶ These kinds of rituals were commonplace in Near Eastern culture,⁷⁷ and perhaps were the strongest form of commitment one could make: that of death, as there could be no greater

⁷⁰ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*, (1987; repr., Peabody, MA: Prince, 2001), 23.

⁷¹ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 21-25.

⁷² Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 19-26.

⁷³ Andrew H. Trotter Jr., “Atonement,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 42.

⁷⁴ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

sign of commitment than a willingness to die. Hall further explains this idea of atonement as reconciling creation to its Creator:

If anything distinguishes the Judeo-Christian tradition from many, if not all religions (including empirical Christianity!), it is the abiding insistence of biblical faith that all that God does is done vis-à-vis and for the sake of creation. God's project, the modus operandi of which is a series of "covenants" culminating (for Christians) in "the new covenant in my blood," is not to get people into heaven but to make them responsible, grateful, and joyful citizens of earth.⁷⁸

Hall's idea of responsibility shows the need to repair an ongoing relationship between God and His creation, unlike today's "popular evangelical reductionisms."⁷⁹ These reductionisms, while rooted in penal substitutionary thinking, imply that prayer of forgiveness serves the sole purpose of going to heaven upon death, rather than quality of life for the living.⁸⁰

"The biblical teaching on salvation is the restoration of covenant fellowship, not simply the removal of guilt"⁸¹ and assuring one a place as citizen in the New Jerusalem. A humorous example of this is in the hospital where the author of this paper works. Father Nick, a priest from Africa with whom I often work, asked one day: "Doug, why do people, who are not even Catholic, ask me to come?" I replied, "Fire Insurance, Father Nick." Lacking my Evangelical background, it took a minute for him to get it. When he

⁷⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 166167.

⁷⁹ Todd Hunter, foreward to *Cross and Covenant* by Shelton, xiii.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

did, he started to shake and chuckle, saying, “That’s a good one.” Todd Hunter says many people look at their relationship with God simplistically.⁸²

Salvation, as observed above, has lost much of its significance in the church today.⁸³ “It’s deeper meaning has become obscured. A good way to grasp the meaning of salvation is to see it in relation to the Old Testament idea of ‘peace.’ The two words belong together. Salvation is inconceivable without peace.”⁸⁴ The word for peace in the Old Testament is “shalom, which is the goal of the sacred Law.”⁸⁵ The basic meaning of *Torah* is not law, rather it means “instruction” or “teaching.”⁸⁶ Shelton says, “Deuteronomy, often called “the Book of the Covenant,” contains what is known as the “law code” (Deut. 12-26). But the term *law* is misleading. It is not only a collection of laws, but contains much more;”⁸⁷ Shelton says the law includes, “religious celebrations and personnel, ritual cleanness, sacrifices, issues of warfare, and rationale for certain laws.”⁸⁸

Szikszai explains,

Shalom . . . means more than the absence of strife, the ceasing of war. It means more than quiet and serenity. *Shalom* means fullness of life, health, security, undisturbed growth, the welfare of the individual and the society. The salvation of

⁸² Hunter, *Cross and Covenant* xiii.

⁸³ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 21.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 44.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

mankind should be understood in the light of *shalom*. Salvation means the fullness of mankind's life, the healing of mankind, and its undisturbed growth in love and obedience before God.⁸⁹

Szikszai also says that entering into covenant with God involves "divine commitment and human obligation."⁹⁰

Shelton says that a better term for twenty-first century culture might be "divine expectations," rather than the harsher term obligation.⁹¹ This author believes many are disenfranchised from the church because of its seemingly harsh way of operating. That is to say, they may perceive a requirement to "obey", to be a Christian. In reality, however, a covenant is an agreement between two parties for their mutual benefit.⁹² Each party has expectations of the other that will result in a harmonious relationship.⁹³ God gave clear expectations to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19-20). Lodahl speaks of this Sinaitic Covenant, which is viewed as a harsh and unbending law:⁹⁴

It is, rather, God's gift to Israel as a way to live as God's people in the world. The divine revelation to Moses is not of a harsh taskmaster, but the Lord [Yahweh] . . . compassionate and gracious . . . a God of love and mercy, whose Torah is a gift that leads to life (Deut. 30:15, 19, 20).⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 22.

⁹⁰ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 20.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 20-25.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 104.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 105.

Under the terms of the covenant, one enters into covenant (salvation) with God obliged to follow the guidelines necessary to “maintain” that relationship.⁹⁶ This *law* is not grievous. The law makes it possible to be in good relationship with God as guidelines a father gives his children: a safeguard to life.⁹⁷ Mehl, affirms this view:

His Ten Commandments—Oh, how they reveal His heart! All the way through the Scriptures, you see it . . . the Lord’s care for us—The Ten Commandments are, more than anything else, a full-hearted love letter from God to His people—why should I love His commands? Because His Word will keep me from disaster...brings deep satisfaction . . . and . . . provides a foundation for my life.⁹⁸

The Old Testament includes many covenants as described in chapter 1. “The question arises whether these covenants are to be viewed in separation as special acts on the part of God, or whether these are only manifestations of a general principle in God’s dealing with man.”⁹⁹ The author of this paper believes that all of the covenants manifest God’s desire to be in relationship with all people in all aspects of their lives, and they are fulfilled in the New Covenant. Pink supports this idea, calling the covenants a “process of gradual development,”¹⁰⁰ and Oden agrees:

Covenant is not merely an idea, but a history; it takes time—centuries in fact—gradually to manifest itself and become experientially embraced. . . . Friendships are more often experienced through a history of disclosure; we discover, through knowing and dealing with some other person, whether that person is reliable or not, is caring or not. Covenant history is something like such a gradually developing relationship. Such human relationships have to be fought for and won, defended, reworked, and tested. This is the kind of relationship that comes to exist

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Mehl, *The Tender Commandments*, 246-253.

⁹⁹ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, 16.

between God and Israel, something like a rocky marriage or an important battled friendship.¹⁰¹

How are these covenants of the Old Testament fulfilled in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ?

The Fulfillment of All Other Covenants

The Old Testament covenants are fulfilled in the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

Jocz says, “Our purpose . . . is to recognize the covenant as a fundamental principle or presupposition at the core of all Christian theology.”¹⁰² Shelton says that the word for covenant used in the New Testament, *diatheke*, is found thirty-three times, and most passages refer to the Old Testament idea of covenant.¹⁰³ Wilbur Gingrich, in his lexicon, says *diatheke* means: “Last will and testament . . . in a transferred sense, with emphasis on binding character, *covenant* only in the sense of a *declaration of (God’s) will or decree* in which God alone sets the conditions, not an agreement between equals.”¹⁰⁴ Shelton agrees with this meaning: “God initiated the covenant, established the conditions, and guaranteed the validity of the covenant relationship through his holiness, love, justice, and grace.”¹⁰⁵ Throughout the Old Testament God reminded Israel of its

¹⁰¹ Oden, *The Living God*, 244.

¹⁰² Jocz, *The Covenant*, 225.

¹⁰³ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Wilbur F. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., rev. by Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 45.

¹⁰⁵ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 43.

covenantal duties toward him.¹⁰⁶ God renewed the covenant continually because of the Israelites' failure to live up to divine expectations.¹⁰⁷ The story of the Old Testament is a repeated story of failure on Israel's part to live up to their responsibilities in covenant with God,¹⁰⁸ and it seems apparent that a new covenant was needed.

Jocz states,

To understand the New Testament meaning of the "new" covenant we must place the concept in the Old Testament cycle of ideas, especially in the prophets. We have argued elsewhere that "new" in this context is inseparable from the prophetic hope of messianic renewal.¹⁰⁹ The *locus classicus* is Jeremiah 31:31 . . . it becomes obvious that the "new" covenant refers to a change of method or procedure: the "old" covenant was written upon the tables of the law: the "new" covenant is to be written on the hearts of God's people. St. Paul alludes to this passage in II Corinthians 3:2f. That this is the case can be seen from what follows: "God has qualified us," says the Apostle, "to be ministers of the new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit" (v.6). The allusion to Jeremiah 31:31-34 is obvious.¹¹⁰

Jocz refers to the words of Jeremiah (31:31-34) as the *locus classicus*,¹¹¹ which clarifies the meaning of and fulfillment of the new covenant.

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁰⁹ Jakob Jocz, *A Theology of Election*, 114ff; quoted in Jocz, *The Covenant*, 238-239.

¹¹⁰ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 238-239.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Shelton describes the context of this passage: "Jeremiah envisioned a new covenant and the divine expectations attached to it that would guide the people in renewing their obedience to God. This message of hope in the middle of a time of despair focuses on the offspring of Israel."¹¹² Four basic points bear consideration in these verses referring to the new covenant: (1) It is open to all people, (2) it is an everlasting covenant, (3) it is unlike the old covenant, and (4) it is fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ.

First, Jeremiah says that God gives this new covenant to the houses of Israel and Judah; however, in Genesis 17:4, God tells Abraham, that he will be the "Father of many nations," saying that other nations besides those of Israel and Judah would be included.¹¹³ The loving gift of this covenant for all people is fulfilled in the New Testament in Ephesians 1: 4, 11, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world. . . . In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will."

God further tells Jeremiah (32:40), "I will make an everlasting covenant with them; I will never stop doing good to them" through this "God promises that the devastating history of the captivity will not be final."¹¹⁴ Isaiah affirms this new covenant as an "everlasting covenant" (61:8). "The covenant between Israel and YHVH is a

¹¹² Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 88.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

fundamental and an ancient concept. It goes back to the very beginning of Israelite tradition.”¹¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, God in the creation story of Genesis is a relational God, and from the beginning God had a “covenant” with his creation.¹¹⁶ Jocz says, “The New Testament *now* of salvation has something to do with God’s eternal decree, which the Bible expresses in terms of covenant. In this sense the covenant is never broken: God’s promise endures forever.”¹¹⁷ As Malachi 3:6 says, “I the LORD do not change.” “When the prophets stress the “everlasting covenant” they intend to stress the faithfulness of God.”¹¹⁸ In offering theocentric consolation to those who suffer, the idea of God always ready, always present, offers the most comfort.

Jeremiah relates a third important aspect when he says the “new” covenant will be “unlike” the old one (31-32). What does it mean to be “unlike the old one?” Shelton says,

Where the old covenant was external and required external rituals and festivals, in the new covenant, the Torah (Jesus Christ) is placed within the heart. While the covenant relationship had always been a personal one with Yahweh, Israel’s disobedience and sin had impaired that relationship significantly. The new covenant promised to communicate the intimate personal knowledge of God directly in an inward, interpersonal relationship. This relationship was to be immediate, and not mediated through priests and prophets and rituals. (Jer. 31:33)¹¹⁹

The prophet then relates what the new covenant will be like (31: 33): “I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts.” The *Torah* was God’s written word of

¹¹⁵ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 103.

¹¹⁶ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 23-24.

¹¹⁷ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 106.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 103, 240.

¹¹⁹ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 88.

obligation, but this new Messiah, was the living word (John 1:1-4) that would cause the covenant obligations to become written on people's hearts (Jer. 31:33). Oden speaks to this when he says: "In both covenants of the Bible, God is made known throughout the word. In the prophets, this word is speech. In the New Testament, this word becomes flesh in a person, and therefore is personalized as Son of the Father."¹²⁰

Hebrews 8:7 says, "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." Through Scripture, God demonstrates the first covenant was unable to produce the salvation (shalom) earlier described. Through the writer of Hebrews (10:1), God says, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves."

Absent enablement, the law failed to bring peace in the relationship between people and God. Shelton speaks of the need of the Holy Spirit in Joel 2: 28, 29: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. . . . Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."¹²¹

Thus the people of God will be brought into intimate relationship with God, without human mediation, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. So the Father promises a renewed and renewing covenant; the Branch is promised to bring justice; and the Spirit will enable access to God in radically new ways.¹²²

Another Old Testament Scripture bears this idea of Spirit enablement. "Rather than the new covenant being a new code of laws that are out of reach of fallen humanity, the Spirit

¹²⁰ Oden, *The Living God*, 220.

¹²¹ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 88.

¹²² Ibid.

will enable obedience: 'I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws'" (Ezek. 36:27).¹²³

Perhaps the most important aspect of the new covenant is this "intimate relationship with God."¹²⁴ G. Campbell Morgan calls this new relationship "a clear apprehension of the will of God by individual souls, without human mediation . . . the law of God within, written on the heart, apprehended immediately . . . received by the direct revelation of the will of God . . . the communion of the Holy Ghost."¹²⁵

Third, Jeremiah states that the new covenant is for forgiveness of sins (31:34).

Shelton says,

Ezekiel also refers to the new covenant between God and his people that will be fulfilled by the offspring of David (Ezek. 33:15) and will establish a new kind of relationship with God. This new covenant promises forgiveness of sins (Ezek. 16:63), and the Law will be placed in the heart along with a new spirit.

The forgiveness of sins was necessary because from the beginning, Israel was unable to keep God's commandments. "God saw all that He had made . . . was very good" (Gen. 1:31); however, the relationship between the Creator and His creation became unbearable to God. "And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Gen. 6:6). Lodahl says of this time,

But for all the satisfaction that God apparently derives from this created order, we now meet the opposite of profound disappointment. Sin, by which we mean the human rejection of God's sovereign love, has spread like a dreaded virus throughout humanity and all its relationships: from Eve to Adam, to their

¹²³ Ibid., 89.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹²⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *Studies in the Prophecies of Jeremiah* (1934, repr., Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1969), 176-179.

offspring Cain and Abel, down to the Tower of Babel. And the Scriptures say that God was sorry even to have created the human—the same creature He had delighted over as “very good”—and turned away in grief. What a vision of God the biblical narrative offers: a God who can grieve, a Creator who cries!¹²⁶

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, Israel’s story throughout the Old Testament is one of broken covenants and alienation from God, and it was followed by repentance, forgiveness, and restoration of a loving Father wanting to stay in relationship with His children. The giving and renewal of the covenants in the Old Testament testify to God’s desire for relationship with His children.¹²⁷ As a result, the cry recorded in Jeremiah 31, focused on a new covenant coming, one that will work. As previously cited, Szikszai says,

Salvation is inconceivable without peace. And peace is the result of God’s saving act. Salvation is a word that has lost much of its significance in the church today. . . . A good way to grasp the meaning of salvation is to see it in relation to the Old Testament idea of ‘peace.’ . . . Salvation is inconceivable without peace. And peace is the result of God’s saving act.¹²⁸

Based on the notion that salvation is peace in relation to God and humanity, it is appropriate that both Old and New Testaments herald the coming of the Messiah as bringing peace. The prophet Isaiah, speaks of Christ’s coming and calls him the *Prince of Peace* (Isa. 9:6). Isaiah says a heavenly host will herald Christ’s coming to earth saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

¹²⁶ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 86-87.

¹²⁷ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 21-116.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

Jesus Christ fulfills all covenant promises. Ladd says, "Christ is the inauguration of a new covenant."¹²⁹ So how does Christ fulfill the covenant promises, showing theocentric consolation to be the proper foundation for those ministering to the suffering? Jesus Christ fulfills all the divine covenant promises of salvation in the atonement work of his incarnation, cross, and resurrection.¹³⁰

Shelton says, "The term 'covenant,' in the New Testament expresses primarily the idea of forgiveness in connection with the work of Christ. Because of Christ, a relationship between God and humanity has become possible in a way previously impossible."¹³¹ We have shown previously that the new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31 is this better way not previously possible. Shelton introduces the idea of the Incarnation, stating: "What the Law could not do in overcoming sin, God did in the incarnation of Christ (Rom. 8:3, 4)."¹³²

Lodahl adds to the idea of the incarnation:

The critical point for our consideration, then, is that the Story we have heard so far . . . a story of divine love expressed in God's *Let there be* of the otherness of creation, of divine humility expressed in the willingness to work in covenant partnership . . . now moves to a new depth of love and humility in this One called the Christ.¹³³

God comes this time in humility, not as almighty Creator, but "in a man, a covenant partner, a faithful Son who constantly prays to the Father, 'Not what I will, but

¹²⁹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 628.

¹³⁰ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 29.

¹³¹ Ibid., 90.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 128.

what you will” (Mark 14:36).¹³⁴ The best illustration of his faithfulness to the Father is “his 40-day period of fasting and praying in the wilderness, fighting with temptation, all of which parallels Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.”¹³⁵

The Greek and Russian Orthodox churches espouse incarnation as one approach to atonement. They believe in atonement through the participation of Jesus in humanity, “with Jesus as Presence.”¹³⁶ “It is not so much the death of Christ that brings atonement but it is the reality of ‘Immanuel,’ ‘God with us,’ (Matt. 1:23), of God’s gracious “descent” into human finitude and suffering.”¹³⁷ “God, in Christ, actually takes human nature upon himself and in so doing, redeems it.”¹³⁸

The writer of Hebrews suggests this view: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (2:14, 15).¹³⁹

Matthew begins his genealogy with a “historical and theological narrative,”¹⁴⁰ which emphasizes Christ’s human connection. Matthew proclaims “Jesus

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 164.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 128.

dies so that man should live.¹⁴⁶ Shelton says, “Christ’s sacrificial act of submissive obedience to God is the supreme historical revelation of God’s self-giving love. It is the vicarious expression of obedience for all humanity who will participate in Christ’s life and death by faith.”¹⁴⁷

Christ himself related this to the idea of covenant at the last supper. Jesus said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). The significance for this study is the phrase “blood of the covenant,” a direct quote from Exodus 24: 8, that shows Jesus draws an analogy between himself and the sacrificial, covenant-making ceremony described in Exodus.¹⁴⁸

The idea of God dying for people shows the idea of theocentric consolation. God knows suffering. God, in the form of Jesus, suffered bodily pain on the cross, but greater than that, Jesus felt the loss of his relationship to the Father when he cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Salvation is the restoration of peace in relationship, an at-one-ment with God. Jesus bore all the painful dysfunction of a broken relationship with God, and as God,¹⁴⁹ he also suffered the heartache of rejection of humanity through their sin. We know how much humanity’s rejection hurt him from Genesis 6:6, when the brokenness of God’s relationship with His creation caused Him to

¹⁴⁶ Jocz, *The Covenant*, 120.

¹⁴⁷ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 91.

¹⁴⁹ Oden, *The Word of Life*, 317.

“repent” that He had created humans.¹⁵⁰ The magnitude of God’s suffering is beyond the comprehension of humans. God initiated the blood sacrifice, and He gave Himself as that sacrifice for humanity because of humanity’s inability to do it for themselves. What love is this? A God who will go to these great lengths to bring humanity back into peaceful relationship with Him and with each other is one that can truly be present in and through any human suffering.

“The letter to the Hebrews provides the most complete interpretation of the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament. Christ is viewed as high priest who transcends Levitical priesthood. Through his death sin is removed, and the approach of humanity to God made possible.”¹⁵¹ “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (Heb. 7:27).

The final part of Christ’s fulfillment of the covenants is his resurrection from the dead, depicting death to sin and arising in new life in Jesus Christ. About this new life, Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). This new life is also brought about through his resurrection:

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:8-11)

¹⁵⁰ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 107-109.

¹⁵¹ Oden, *The Way of Life*, 371.

New life in Christ is the ultimate theocentric consolation. People who participate with Christ know that he suffered all things they have, is with them, and promises eternal life without suffering. This knowledge brings peace to the circumstance of suffering.

Theodicy

Frederick Schmidt introduces the subject of theodicy well when he says:

For those who suffer and believe in God, one of the most difficult challenges we face arises out of the questions about the role of God. If God is good, why doesn't God come to my aid? And if God is powerful, why doesn't God exercise that considerable power on my behalf? Is God just not there? Or did I do something to displease God? The difficulty in answering questions of this kind can plunge us into depression, precipitate a "crisis of faith," lead us to deny the reality of our suffering, or burden us with anxiety and guilt. But what if God isn't, first and foremost, about power—or even about goodness as we understand it? What if God's passion is the establishment of relationships? At a minimum, goodness and power . . . and the priority we give to them need to be reassessed . . . It is here, then, with a God of relationships, that we must begin fashioning new God images, and with them in place, a different kind of triage theology.¹⁵²

Schmidt offers a succinct introduction to the problem in the United States of why good people suffer. An early part of this chapter describes the culture of the United States and shows that the theory of theocentric consolation is based upon the biblical theme of covenants, which this author believes offers the best understanding of God's role in the crises that people face. This paper defines the covenantal theory of theocentric consolation as occurring when good people who suffer experience the presence of God in solidarity with them in the midst of their suffering.

¹⁵² Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists*, 93.

Schmidt's question, "What if God's passion is the establishment of relationships?"¹⁵³ is the foundation of this theodicy. The "goal of covenant [is the] salvation of all creation."¹⁵⁴ Shelton confirms this: "Covenant renewal and salvation is about restoring health, or shalom,"¹⁵⁵ and is "to restore the individual and community to wholeness in relationship to God and each other . . . That [is] the ideal state of society."¹⁵⁶ "God created humanity in the first place to have fellowship with the Godhead . . . the motivation for creation was the creative and transforming love of God."¹⁵⁷

Lodahl describes how humans were created when he says,

God created a world in which freedom and contingency play roles; unpredictability and perhaps even chance are factors with which He, too, deals. Remember: what God creates is *truly other* to Him, even while sustained by Him in every moment. . . . He does in fact profoundly limit himself simply by extending to every human being the real possibilities of choosing.

God shows His love through His desire to be in relationship with His creation.

Hall alludes to God's desire for relationship and lays the groundwork for a proper image of God.

God's transcendence is entirely different from the theme of transcendence pursued by the tradition of Athens. God's discontinuity with creation is not understood by Judaism in physical (spatial or even temporal) terms but in terms of righteousness, that is, ethically. It is part of the divine transcendence that Yahweh wills to be so close to creation, to be imminent, to be "your God," in short, to

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Szikszai, *The Covenants in Faith and History*, 21-25

¹⁵⁵ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 58.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

love. . . . The God of the bible goes to unheard of lengths to achieve communion with us, even union, in a covenant closer than marriage.¹⁵⁸

Steven McKenzie notes that through history of the covenant relationships in the Old Testament, God reveals His divine commitment to humanity that forms one side of the covenantal relationships, and He expects obedience and observance of moral and ceremonial practices from the Israelites, His covenant partners.¹⁵⁹

Schmidt claims problems with most questions of “Why?” result from the American image of God.¹⁶⁰ Lodahl states the obvious, “While belief in the one sovereign, personal Creator satisfies the religious longing for one ultimate Cause of being, it also paves the path to this most troubling problem for people of faith: how can a good and loving God allow . . . such senseless suffering?”¹⁶¹ Lodahl characterizes the American concept of God as follows:

- An *Omnipresent* God would certainly be aware of the presence of evil;
- An *Omniscient* God would certainly know how to overcome that evil;
- An *Omnipotent* God would certainly be able to enforce victory over evil; and
- A God of love presumably would desire to be rid of evil.
- Yet, evil does not disappear.¹⁶²

Commonly, American theology leads people to “expect” God to “save” them from all suffering. Schmidt says, “We (people in the United States) are compulsively

¹⁵⁸ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 112.

¹⁵⁹ Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 120, quoted in Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 83.

¹⁶⁰ Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists*, 93-94.

¹⁶¹ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 54.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

visionary about our lives, collectively and individually. We expect to transcend challenges and to create a better world. . . . When suffering persists, we don't simply find it difficult to take it all in: we didn't expect it to happen at all." ¹⁶³

Lodahl maintains Genesis 6:6 offers a new way to enlarge people's thinking about their relationship to God and its role in their suffering:

Genesis, after all, is correct. Creation has not turned out particularly well, and this pains the Creator. Such a portrait of God may trouble some people, but usually this is because they approach the story of God with their own preconceived ideas about how He should behave. I can hear it now: "If God knows everything, surely God knew before the creation of the world that human beings would sin, right?" But if we take seriously the story of Noah . . . then a legitimate reply would be, "No." At least Genesis 6 suggests that things had gotten much worse than even God had anticipated. . . . The simplest answer seems to be that, because God created a world in which freedom and contingency play roles, unpredictability and perhaps even chance are factors with which He, too, deals. . . . And He does in fact profoundly limit himself simply by extending to every human being the real possibilities of choosing. ¹⁶⁴

Genesis 6:5 says humanity had broken the covenant expectations of God: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become." Lodahl describes the omnipotence of God in His act of creating this world, and divesting Himself of it by giving humanity the power to choose what is contrary to the covenant expectations through the act of sharing His power. ¹⁶⁵

In this theodicy, human sin causes suffering, not an act of God. ¹⁶⁶ Lodahl presents this freewill defense of God: "All suffering is the direct result of human decision, or the

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 88-89.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

misuse of human freedom. . . . God, then, cannot be faulted for occasions in which one person suffers or dies at the hands of another, for it is against God's will for humans to treat one another in such ways."¹⁶⁷

The result of human wickedness in Genesis 6 was that God allowed "all the springs of the great deep [to] burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights" (Gen. 7:11, 12). Lodahl quotes Gerhard Von Rad,

Here we have the same realistic and cosmological ideas as in Gen. Ch. 1. . . . We must understand the flood, therefore, as a catastrophe involving the entire cosmos. When the heavenly ocean breaks forth upon the earth below, and the primeval sea beneath the earth, which is restrained by God, now freed from its bonds, gushes up through yawning chasms onto the earth, then there is a destruction of the entire cosmic system.¹⁶⁸

Schmidt describes the relationship between creation and its Creator as "being in tension."¹⁶⁹ "The tension between order and chaos is there from the beginning, and God's creative achievement is the assertion of order in the midst of chaos."¹⁷⁰ He explains, "This is why the Book of Genesis does not begin with the words 'in the beginning . . . there was nothing,' but begins instead with the words 'in the beginning . . . the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.'"¹⁷¹ Lodahl says, "For the ancient Hebrew people this was far more than a story about waters covering the earth; it

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 124, quoted in Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 95.

¹⁶⁹ Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists*, 94.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

RESPONSES TO SUFFERING

This final chapter sets forth several inadequate responses given to those who are suffering and presents the author's conclusion of this paper. The inadequate responses given will be based on misinterpretation of biblical covenant, various theologies, and humanity's best efforts. The conclusion will show that theocentric consolation is the best paradigm for those ministering to the suffering should use in their approach. The conclusion will give some practical aspects; in closing that will demonstrate how to use the theology of theocentric consolation.

Inadequate Responses to Suffering

The first two chapters of this paper presented the covenantal theories of limited retribution, telic vindication, and theocentric consolation. Limited retribution is defined in chapter 1 as: "Blessings and prosperity are bestowed upon the faithful who follow God's commands, while calamity and misfortune come upon those who failed to obey God." Telic vindication is defined as: "When good people suffer, something better will come from the suffering." Theocentric consolation is defined as: "When good people suffer and experience the presence of God in solidarity with them in the midst of their suffering."

In this author's experience, the four most common inadequate responses to those who suffer are: (1) You must have done something wrong, (2) You lacked the necessary faith, (3) It must have been God's will, and (4) God must have a lesson for you to learn. The first two inadequate responses come from the covenantal view of limited retribution. The last two derive from the covenantal theory of telic vindication. These inadequate responses often cause more damage than good. They add insult to the already battered faith in a traumatic situation.

You Must Have Done Something Wrong

Kushner says, "One of the ways in which people have tried to make sense of the world's suffering in every generation has been by assuming that we deserve what we get, that somehow our misfortunes come as punishment for our sins."¹ Sigerist suggests that Semitic civilizations believe, "The sick man [*sic*] is by no means an innocent victim but is rather one who through pain is making atonement for his sins. Disease then becomes a punishment for sin."² Many biblical passages seem to validate this view. Three examples include the following: "Judah got a wife for Er, his first-born, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's first-born was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death" (Gen. 38: 6, 7). "No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble" (Prov. 12:21). "Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what

¹ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 9.

² Sigerist, *Civilization and Disease*, 68.

their hands have done” (Isa. 3:10, 11). This gives people an excellent reason to live righteously and avoid sin, and it portrays God as a righteous judge who gives people exactly what they deserve.³ The problem with this view lies in the humanness of humanity.⁴ Humans are imperfect and have many reason(s) why they may be sick, be in pain, or suffer a calamity. How does this point of view offer comfort to one who has lost a child? This approach creates guilt and blames the sufferer.⁵ This approach may precipitate a faith crisis, for “It makes people hate God, even as it makes them hate themselves.”⁶ If all persons that sinned were to suffer, all people would be suffering.

Another sad side to this belief is how the church treats people when it believes a person suffers as a result of wrong-doing. Dorothee Soelle says this point of view creates a “lack of solidarity” and “alienation” between the sufferer and the church.⁷ Soelle quotes Simone Weil: “If a hen is hurt, the others rush upon it, attacking it with their beaks. This phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. It is natural for us . . . to despise the afflicted, although practically no one is conscious of it.”⁸ The author of this paper has heard an expression over the years: “The church is the only one who shoots its wounded.” The expression reflects Weil’s sentiments.

³ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dorothee Soelle, trans. Everett R. Kalin, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 12, 14.

⁸ Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 122, quoted in Soelle, *Suffering*, 14-15.

You Lacked the Necessary Faith

This belief that suffering results from lack of faith closely follows the idea of sin causing suffering. Paul says, “Everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). James advances the principle that people will receive nothing from God if they lack strong in faith: “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man [*sic*] should not think he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 6:7). Again in James, the section called, “The Prayer of Faith,”⁹ says, “Pray for each other that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:13-18). The antithesis of these scriptures implies that those who lack faith have sinned, waiver, or are unrighteous in prayer will be ineffective in getting the answer they seek.

Vernon Wilcox, in his book *God's Healing Touch*, says about the above passage in James, “The prayer of faith for healing will of course bring results, as will the prayer of faith along any line. The key words are “of faith,” without which we receive no spiritual blessing from God.”¹⁰ Wilcox refers to the words of a missionary who responded to a question about healing: “I believe it is purely a matter of faith.”¹¹ These words were spoken by a Nazarene missionary, not a health and wealth gospel preacher.

The author of this paper believes the problem stems from spectacular victory stories told in missionary meetings, revivals, and other religious celebrations to

⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *New International Version: The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 1996), 1,425.

¹⁰ Vernon L. Wilcox, *God's Healing Touch* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1968), 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

encourage people to have greater faith in God. The victory stories miss the point that God is present in all life circumstances and not only when people experience fantastic “answers to prayer.”¹² Inevitable suffering surrounds people, and they may be consumed with guilt when they perceive their prayers go unanswered. Many Christians define the answer to prayer as receiving what they sought. If these Christians believe the answer to prayer is “purely a matter of faith,” they may be devastated at the loss of a spouse to cancer. The remaining spouse may live with guilt for the lack of the necessary faith.

It Must Have Been God’s Will

Hall refers to the problem in the United States and states, “Too many Christians seem to feel that their primary calling is to provide answers. Might it not be that our better service is to give a language and a spiritual vantage point from which to explore the great questions of our age?”¹³ He further says, “The trouble with answers—including the answers that popular Christianity is ready to offer at bargain prices—is that they are usually provided by persons who have not lived long enough with the questions.”¹⁴

As shown in the chapter 4 in the discussion of theodicy, God desires a covenant relationship with his creation, and no answers satisfy the question of why good people suffer. Hall says concerning our compulsion to give an answer to everything often leads to cheap offerings, or as Hall says, “Answers at . . . bargain prices.”¹⁵ The author of this

¹² Defined in this paper as the receipt of what one seeks.

¹³ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 90.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

paper submits that the need to give an answer stems from discomfort with living long enough with the questions.

This inadequate answer to suffering is particularly troublesome because it shows God to be cruel at times. Kushner refers to Wilder's book, *The Eighth Day* to illustrate God's will as a cause for suffering:

The book tells the story of a good and decent man whose life is ruined by bad luck and hostility. He and his family suffer although they are innocent. At the end of the novel, where the reader would hope for a happy ending . . . there is none. Instead, Wilder offers us the image of a beautiful tapestry. Looked at from the right side, it is an intricately woven work of art, drawing together threads of different lengths and colors to make up and inspiring picture. But turn the tapestry over, and you will see a hodgepodge of many threads, some short and some long, some smooth and some cut and knotted, going off in different directions. Wilder offers this as his explanation of why good people have to suffer in this life. God has a pattern into which all of our lives fit, His pattern requires that some lives be twisted, knotted or cut short, while others extend to impressive lengths, not because one thread is more deserving than another, but simply because the pattern requires it.¹⁶

The passage presents God's will as an arbitrary imposition of good or bad in people's lives. In this image, people never see the work of art as represented on the right side of the tapestry. Americans cannot identify with such a God. In the United States, a person who wills that bad things happen so a wonderful result might occur would be imprisoned. In the hospital where the author works, the emergency room sees innocent children who are abused, hurt by drunk drivers, shot at random by strangers, and the list goes on. What sort of God would allow these things to happen so that His will could come to fruition? The goal of God's covenant, as we have shown, is the salvation of all

¹⁶ Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 17-18.

creation. Paul says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:22). More than humanity, creation itself longs for the day when suffering will cease (Rom. 8:23). This goal of salvation, or shalom, is that all creation might live together in peace. God has provided the ways and means for humans to live together in peace. Why would he cause suffering to achieve salvation for creation?

God Must Have a Lesson for You to Learn

The God-must-have-a-lesson-for-you response seems naturally to follow the previous response. In the desire to believe God has good reasons for suffering, people imagine what the reasons might be.¹⁷ Kushner asks, “Can suffering be educational? Can it cure us of our faults and make us better people?”¹⁸ This is the well-used covenantal theory of telic vindication.

A woman questions James Dobson, a well-known Christian psychologist, about why her prayers failed to save her husband from cancer but saved her boy with heart problems. Dobson replies, “I assure you that He is there, and that your prayers for your husband received no less attention or compassion than those for your endangered son. What you’ve experienced is evidence of the sovereignty of God. . . . He will always be the determiner of what is best for those who serve Him.”¹⁹ In the author’s opinion Dobson’s answer represents a compulsion to have answers without a clue as to why an

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James Dobson, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1993), 117.

event happened. It is easy to assign experiences to the mysterious sovereignty of God, but as in the previous section, this approach makes God look bad.

A large segment of the church holds this idea that suffering is God's will and that it has a purpose. Youssef quotes Charles Spurgeon,

It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, not sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity . . . when I rise to my God and see his hand at work, I grow calm, I have not a word of repining.²⁰

Youssef comments on Spurgeon's belief in the sovereignty of God: "He never doubted that an infinite God could make sense out of the incomprehensible, and that He would indeed "work all things . . . together for good" (Rom. 8: 28).²¹ In the author's experience over the years in the Wesleyan-Holiness movement, the notion of suffering as God's will for some good has come out of the use of this Scripture in Romans.

Other writers are even bolder about God's involvement. John Piper and Justin Taylor write, "God never does evil. Yet this is not to say that God does not create, send, permit, or even move others to do evil, for Scripture is clear that nothing arises, exists, or endures independently of God's will (Heb. 1:3)."²² They add to this idea of God sending evil our way in order to teach us or better us. A section of their book entitled, "Why God Appoints Suffering for His Servants," lists six reasons: "1) Suffering Deepens Faith and

²⁰ Darrel W. Amundsen, "The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon," *Christian History*, Issue 29 (Vol. X, No. 1), 1991, 25, quoted in Youssef, *If God Is in Control, Why Is My Life Such a Mess?* 157-158.

²¹ Youssef, *If God Is in Control, Why Is My Life Such a Mess?* 158.

²² John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 41.

Holiness; 2) Suffering Makes Your Cup Increase; 3) Suffering is the Price of Making Others Bold; 4) Suffering Fills Up what is Lacking in Christ's Afflictions; 5) Suffering Enforces the Missionary Command to Go; and 6) The Supremacy of Christ Is Manifest in Suffering."²³ Piper and Taylor's would agree with the *Theological Dictionary's* comment about suffering:

It is then man's [*sic*] duty to accept without reserve the anguishing situation, to integrate and transform it into a positive element of his own self-fulfillment (by acting while he suffers and suffering while he acts—the antithesis of passive acquiescence), so that he takes a personal decision for God. . . . In this sense suffering is 'willed by God.'²⁴

Soelle refers to this type of thinking as “Christian interpretations of suffering . . . [that] amount to a recommendation of masochism. Suffering is there to break our pride, demonstrate our powerlessness, exploit our dependency. . . . Suffering is understood to be a test, sent by God.”²⁵

Soelle says, “Ulrich Hedinger is right to criticize radically every attempt to think of God as ‘a God who justifies misery.’”²⁶ Soelle says application of this type of belief about God, “School[s] people in thought patterns that regard sadistic behavior as normal, in which one worships, honors, and loves a being whose radicality, intentionality, and greatest sharpness is that he slays.”

²³ Ibid., 91-106.

²⁴ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, “Suffering,” in *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst, trans. Richard Strachen (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 449f, quoted in Soelle, *Suffering*, 18.

²⁵ Soelle, *Suffering*, 19.

²⁶ Ulrich Hedinger, *Wider die Versöhnung Gottes mit dem Elend, Eine Kritik des Christlichen Theismus und Atheismus* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), 33, quoted in Soelle, *Suffering*, 25.

This is not the same God who created us, established a partnership with us through his covenant, and gave us the power to choose and ability to live in shalom.

An Adequate Response

Theocentric consolation offers the best paradigm for those in the United States who minister to the suffering. Two practical methods, the ministry of presence and prayer as conversation demonstrate and lead people into theocentric consolation, which is experiencing the presence of God in solidarity with them in the midst of suffering.

The Ministry of Presence

Oden says, “Care of the sick is widely regarded as a regular and important ingredient of the practice of ministry,”²⁷ and the author of this paper would add all those who suffer for whatever reason. The question is how to model in ministry the covenantal theory of theocentric consolation.

The author of this paper, while doing residency in clinical pastoral education (CPE), coined the phrase: “ministry of presence.” The phrase derived from reading for this doctoral paper and recognition that many who suffer desire clergy to be with them as a tangible representative of God. It is important for ministers to be “with sufferers,” and model the Emmanuel they represent.

Ray Anderson speaks to this modeling of Emmanuel:

Whether we realize it or not, every act of ministry reveals something of God. . . . But when we speak and act as a Christian we give others reason to conclude that we are speaking on behalf of Christ. When we speak and act out of the authority

²⁷ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 249.

of the church, we give others reason to think that God's nature and character, as well as his will for persons, is embodied in our words and actions.²⁸

One of God's greatest attributes, often forgotten by people, is that God listens. For example, God heard the people of Israel crying out from slavery in Egypt: "I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exod. 3:7).

It is a sacrifice to listen. Listening means being willing to give up something. To know people better, to understand their meaning and their perception of the world, you are voluntarily refraining from inserting your own material in the process. All of your attention—100 percent—is devoted to understanding what the other person is saying.²⁹

Gerard Egan says, "The goal of listening is understanding. . . . The art of listening has three parts: (1) listening to and understanding non-verbal behavior; (2) listening to and understanding verbal messages; and (3) listening to and understanding the person."³⁰ Egan uses the term active listening³¹ to refer to the type of listening that allows sufferers to know they are actually heard.

Soelle identifies a problem seen in ministers: "Theologians have an intolerable passion for explaining and speaking when silence would be appropriate."³² John Hicks says this about silence, "We are often too quick to speak to sufferers. We are

²⁸ Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 7.

²⁹ William R. Miller and Kathleen A. Jackson, *Practical Psychology for Pastors*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 53.

³⁰ Gerard Egan, *The Skilled Helper*, 3rd ed. (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1986), 79.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Soelle, *Suffering*, 19.

uncomfortable with silence, so we feel we must say something. ‘Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him’ (Prov. 29: 20). A lengthy silence is better than a hasty sentence.”³³ Hicks describes his own grief during the loss of his wife: “I do not remember everything everyone said at Sheila’s funeral. However, I do remember who was there.”³⁴

In the practice of “being with,” the practice of Emmanuel, all attention is on the sufferer. People who listen show they care. God says this about prayer. The writer of Psalms 65:2 says, “O you who hear prayer.” The writer of Hebrew speaks of Jesus’ ministry on earth: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard” (Heb. 5:7). God is the One who hears, and those who minister should model that patient listening by being with those who suffer.

Chapter 4 demonstrated that the goal of covenant was shalom, which Shelton calls “[a] personal relationship” and “well-being under God.”³⁵ Shelton also says shalom is “restoration of the individual and community to wholeness in relationship to God and each other . . . the ideal state of society.”³⁶

In reference to wholeness as pastors, James Miller says: “Your attentive presence to another can be useful . . . but here we’re adding the idea of *being healing* to the idea of

³³ John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 307.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 48.

³⁶ Ibid., 74.

being present.”³⁷ He also says that the word, “heal” comes from the same root word as the word “whole.”³⁸ Presence to those who suffer becomes a healing presence, and as defined in this paper, it brings the Creator and His creation into shalom or a wholeness of relationship.

As a chaplain, the author often arrives at the bedside of anxious persons who suffer, are fearful, and have questions. I let them know I am there, listen to their fears, assure them that I will stay with them as long as they need me, sometimes hold their hands or stroke their brows, and my presence often allows them to find rest. Pastors teach these attributes of God when they practice the ministry of presence. Pastors who listen and practice “being with” assure sufferers that God is with them. Staying as long as necessary helps sufferers understand God is always present, and a simple touch shows His love.

Prayer as Conversation

Ministering to those who suffer through prayer is an important part of “being with” as the representative of Emmanuel. Prayer accomplishes several aspects of ministry because it involves listening, talking, sharing, lamenting, and praise. In the context of this paper, prayer differs from those who promise that people can have a worldwide influence through prayer³⁹ and the ability to get the answers⁴⁰ sought through prevailing prayer.⁴¹

³⁷ James E. Miller with Susan C. Cutshall, *The Art of Being a Healing Presence* (Fort Wayne, IN: Willowgreen, 2001), 19.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Wesley L. Duewel, *Touch the World through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury, 1986), 11.

Although these phrases are presented out of context, they show a hyped expectation of prayer espoused by some. People often expect⁴² God to do their bidding, influenced by well-meaning pastors. One of the most audacious, Kenneth Hagin, delivers a sermon entitled, “How to Write Your Own Ticket with God,” and claims, “Say it. . . . Positive or negative, God will give to you according to the desires you express. . . . Faith is the plug, just plug it in.”⁴³

In the context of this paper, prayer is listening, talking and sharing, lamenting, and praise. Prayer is as natural as breathing, contrary to Bill Hybels assertion that, “Prayer is an unnatural activity.”⁴⁴ Margaret Guenther assures readers of the naturalness of prayer when she says, “Prayer is conversation. A good conversation is like a dance. The partners are aware of each other, attuned to each other, sensitive to nuances in tempo and rhythm. . . . There is no need to fill every minute, for there is comfort in the intimacy of shared silence.”⁴⁵ A good conversation involves listening, talking, and sharing. This view differs from the long-held notion of prayer limited to petition.

God always listens, as the psalmist says: “The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry” (Psa. 33:15). Do people listen to God in

⁴⁰ Defined in this paper as getting what you seek.

⁴¹ Wesley L. Duewel, *Mighty Prevailing Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury, 1990), 10-12.

⁴² Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 9. Shelton speaks of a feeling of “entitlement,” 9.

⁴³ Kenneth E. Hagin, *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library, 1979) 3ff, quoted in Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists*, 52.

⁴⁴ Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not To Pray*, ed. by LaVonne Neff (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 7.

⁴⁵ Guenther, *The Practice of Prayer*, 20.

return? What do they say in prayer? What do they share with God? What does God want them to hear from Him?

Sufferers have only one thing on their minds, the darkness of crisis that engulfs them. Sufferers lament during crisis and want someone to listen. “There is a moment between intending to pray and actually praying that is as dark and silent as any moment in our lives.”⁴⁶ Emilie Griffin says, “Darkness is worth describing simply because it is so unlike what we expect.”⁴⁷ It is this darkness when we can cry to no one else that we describe to God in pain and prayer. This is lament. An example is Psalm 22:1, 6: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . . I am a worm and not a man [*sic*], scorned by man and despised by the people.” Jesus used the same words when he was dying alone on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

Brueggemann says that without lament people lose “genuine covenant interaction.”⁴⁸ He asserts, “Covenant minus lament is a . . . practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense.”⁴⁹ Brueggemann says lament is important for believers:

[T]o take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego-strength that is necessary for responsible faith. But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing, and can praise or accept guilt uncritically where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is a ‘False self,’ bad faith that is based in fear and guilt and lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness.

⁴⁶ Emilie Griffin, *Clinging* (New York: McCracken, 1994), 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 102.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.⁵⁰

Laments fill the Bible, and the Bible includes a book of Lamentations. The psalms of lament (for example: 16, 22, 73, 88, 116) are cries of people in crisis. Soelle says suffering is a threat of every dimension of people's lives.⁵¹ Logan Jones quotes Kathleen Norris: "God behaves in the psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology."⁵² Jones says of the psalms: "[They] offer a different view of life that is thick, rich, and runneth over. They seek not so much to explain . . . as to offer the reality of life lived in all its messiness, both the pain and the praise."⁵³ Jones also quotes Roland Murphy:

The psalms are about honest dialogue with God. In this dialogue, nothing is held back. It is raw, down and dirty. The spoken words are evocative. They are relentless. . . . The words of the psalms speak to the very core of human experience in ways other language cannot begin to approach. In this way, the psalms teach us how to pray . . . asking and even demanding response, action, and answers."⁵⁴

Lament is a natural conversation with a Friend that includes talking, sharing, and listening. That Friend, Emmanuel, wants people to hear Him say, "I am with you, even to the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 103-104.

⁵¹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 16.

⁵² Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 91, quoted in Logan C. Jones, "The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no.1/2 (Spring-Summer 2007): 47.

⁵³ Jones, "The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow," 47.

⁵⁴ Roland Murphy, "The Faith of the Psalmist," *Interpretation* 41 (1980): 235, quoted in Jones, "The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow," 47.

Conclusion

Theocentric consolation is the foundation for all ministries to those who suffer.

Frederick Schmidt's words summarize the thesis of this paper:

Time and again I have heard people testify to the healing, reassuring character of someone who was willing to be prayerfully present with them at a time of loss. . . . Present to one another, we extend the presence of God, meeting a need that is more basic than any we might face in suffering. The ability not only to listen, but to create a gracious space where listening can take place, is a reminder of when, in the cool of the evening, God was walking in the garden. Gone is the need to minimize our fears or to conjure up a hidden blessing. Through simple presence we experience love and acceptance—the space to “be”—whoever we are, however we are.⁵⁵

In summary: to ask the question, “Why do good people suffer?” may not be the right question. Suffering is existential and perhaps a better question is, “How does one survive suffering with faith intact?”

The covenantal relationship that God has initiated from the very beginning with Adam, culminating in the new covenant in the New Testament contains the key to maintaining faith in a time of suffering. It is not a cure to end the suffering, but a way through it, because there is an end to it. The end may be either in this life or in eternity with God.

Theocentric consolation occurs when good people who suffer experience the presence of God in solidarity with them in the midst of their suffering. This is first initiated when one becomes a new creation in Christ: “gone is the old and the new has come into being” (2 Cor. 5:17). The new life in Christ is the ultimate theocentric

⁵⁵ Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists*, 122-123.

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