

The Problem of Suffering

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Gregory Schulz, author of "The Problem of Suffering" (Northwestern Pub.), was first speaker of a three part series sponsored by The Christian Center for Culture, Morality, and Bioethics at Concordia University Wisconsin in October. Several in attendance testified to giving much attention to his words in the days following. Greg posed three truths, all of which must be affirmed if we are to remain faithful to the Word of God. They are:

1. God is good.
2. God is omnipotent.
3. There is indeed suffering in the world.

Attempts on the part of Christians to address why there is suffering in the world tend to deny one or more of these truths. For example, there are those who say there can be no God if there is suffering in the world (the atheist). Or, there are those (Kushner) who say God exists but is impotent in dealing with suffering. And, there are those who say that what we call suffering is just happenstance (perspectivalism). But for the Christian it is clear that God is good, that he is omnipotent, and that the suffering Christians experience neither contradicts the goodness nor the omnipotence of God. The fact is that God is the giver of suffering to Christians. The Book of Job testifies to this theology.

Christians might be tempted to blame suffering on sinful human nature as the disciples did when they asked Jesus, concerning the blind man, "who sinned, this man or his parents?" And yet, Jesus answered that sin was not relevant to this situation.

Christians might make a distinction between God sending suffering and merely allowing it. But whether we say God sends or merely allows suffering makes little difference since the will of God is the same in either case.

So what are we to make of the suffering God brings on us? The answer lies in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Jesus suffered for us and for our salvation. Because we have become one with him through our baptism, our suffering has become his and his has become ours. It is as Paul says, "I rejoice in my sufferings . . . I complete what is lacking in Christ's suffering" This suffering we bear adds nothing to our salvation. We do not suffer to earn heaven. Rather, our suffering has become Christ's suffering in us as he attaches himself to us through our baptism.

It is no comfort to a suffering Christian to say that sin is the cause of his suffering. It is hopeful, however, to say that our suffering is from God for then we know to whom we must turn who is good and omnipotent and will turn our tears into joy in heaven. This is the theology of the cross.