

# **The Meaning of Suffering**

## or Reflections on the Great War

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Does war cast doubt upon God's government and goodness? Are we, because of it, to question either His existence or His character? To answer these questions in the affirmative would be unreasonable and unjustifiable. The world is full of tragedy — and therefore current wars, from that standpoint, are nothing new. To the greatest of them — sin, suffering, and death — we have, in various ways, become so accustomed, that we treat their existence as a matter of course. Are we, because the tragedy which is ever present takes on some new guise and appears in an accentuated form, to make this a reason for challenging God's existence or His overruling providence? A current great war, appalling in every way as it is (and no words can adequately set forth its horrors), is not the first calamity the world has had to face. If it were, we might reasonably raise questions which it is nothing short of folly to raise now. Ever since sin entered the world — that one unique, outstanding and immeasurable calamity — catastrophes one after another have followed in its train. They are of various kinds — nature "red in tooth and claw," and "man's inhumanity to man." When all this confronts us and are elements in the very system of which we ourselves are part, how can we be so irrational as to attempt to draw a line between things which do not differ essentially, but only in degree, and say that does not shake my faith in God, but this does. Rather, would it not be better to ask, Is there any explanation of this great mystery of suffering?

## **The Explanation of Suffering**

In the light of certain facts, that is: the presence of sin and death, the explanation of suffering seems to be, that in no other way can there be brought home to us the enormity of sin, with all its fearful and illimitable consequences, except by that constant appeal which calamity and suffering make. How arresting would be the thought, could it be constantly kept in mind, that every calamity, every disaster, every outbreak of disease, every infliction which causes pain and which it is the lot of humanity to bear, is a reminder that something is wrong with the world! All these untoward occurrences are warnings and appeals — so many lessons, if only we would learn them.

This is at once the explanation and the justification of a process which, looked at apart, might seem barbaric and inhuman. If sin were not in the world, there would be no need for suffering, and there would be none. If man were in a perfect state, in complete accord with his Maker, calamities would be unknown. As things are, they have a purpose to serve, and they are intended for blessing. The whole course of things proclaims with strident tones that something is terribly amiss. Is such a warning, however much it may grate sometimes on our sensibilities, cruel? or is it, after all, kind?

You see a big man beating a small boy. Your first impulse is to say, What a brute! But you venture to enquire the reason. You discover that the man is the boy's father; and the boy has been guilty of some serious misdemeanor, and you learn that the object of the beating is not that the father wishes to hurt his son, but to save him from becoming the slave of some evil habit. This fact changes your whole conception of the act. It is the same with all those fearful events which involve the destruction of human life and happiness. We are inclined to consider them unnecessary, and they seem to cast a doubt upon the goodness and wisdom of the

Creator. Were they simply a matter of caprice, without aim or object, they would certainly be the methods of a tyrant, but when we discover that at the back of all, there is a gracious design and a necessity, they become the acts of a Supreme Being as infinite in mercy and tenderness as He is in power.

Taking this world as it is, and reminding ourselves of sin and all its consequences, would it be a better world if there were no calamities? Would one perpetual calm, with uninterrupted repose and pleasure without clouds and storms, and with no disasters, bring the world back to God or even nearer to God? Would the world be less corrupt than it is under such conditions? Far otherwise! All history and all human experience declare that men and nations have always been at their best when there was most to bear, and when the struggle has been the severest. Is God unkind then, to be continually reminding us that everything is not right and that this life is not all there is?

An aunt had two nieces staying with her. She taught them to thank God every night for some particular mercy received through the day. During their visit they had become unwell. On a certain occasion this was the prayer offered by one of them: "O God, I thank thee for sending me a kind auntie who gives me nasty medicine to make me well." The whole philosophy of the universe is found in that child's prayer. Calamities are the nasty medicine to make us well. The difficulty is not in them, but in ourselves. We don't realize that we are sick, and therefore we object to the medicine.

## **The Tendencies of the Last 25 Years.**

All this applies to the present war. Do we ask why God can allow such a tragedy? The answer is really not far to seek, and we are not assuming any special revelation in suggesting it. Is it not to be found in the tendencies of the last 25 years? Were we drifting? The pursuit of pleasure was becoming more and more the supreme thing, and God and all connected with Him was becoming more and more remote from our lives. The Lord's Day was being given up to carnal satisfaction. Moral standards were assailed, and divine institutions were threatened. The teaching of the Bible was openly criticized if not altogether discarded. By the vast majority in England, the appeal of the gospel was disregarded. Such conditions made the war possible, and God allowed it to come. He saw that He could make it an avenue of blessing to men's souls. That in the midst of death they would seek life, as they had never done in the midst of pleasure and prosperity. Testimony comes from all quarters that such is the case. Whether in the camps in England or in the battleline in France, men listen to the words of eternal life as they have never listened before.

Here are just two instances — taken from the crowd, and therefore all the more telling. Testaments were being distributed amongst recruits. They were gladly received except by one young fellow. He at first objected and was even offensive, but in the end accepted the gift. What was the surprise of the donor to receive a letter from this very individual, who in the meantime had gone to the front, a few weeks later in which he thanked her for the book, and added that he never would have believed that any book could have been such a comfort to him, and it had made real to him the greatness of the personality of the Saviour. The new and strange circumstances had made him susceptible to its appeal.

Take an instance of a different kind. A soldier in the fighting line was mortally wounded. He said to the man next to him: "I am going, can you show me the way?" "I am as ignorant as you are about that," was the reply. He then appealed to another, and received a similar answer. Someone overheard. John's gospel in booklet form was handed along, with the injunction, "Read to him out of the third chapter." This was done, and the dying man said, "Thank you, that's what I want, good-bye," and he was gone. Where? Was it not as true of the dying soldier as of the dying thief: "Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise"? Yes, men are dying in hundreds and getting their promotion — "salvation with eternal glory" — not because they died for their country, but "by Christ Jesus," who died for them; and this they are discovering in their great extremity. Is the war, then, a mistake from this point of view? If it was the only way in which God could get man to listen to eternal truth, and if it was to be the means of bringing many a one to the Saviour, is He to blame for allowing it?

## **Is God Responsible for the War?**

Is God, then, responsible for the war? He is not responsible for it, though He has permitted it. The difference is material, and in the Bible the distinction is clearly recognized. The history of Joseph affords a very striking example of this. No one could justly charge God with being responsible for the evil doings of Joseph's brethren. They themselves were responsible, as they afterwards felt when they repented. But God allowed their evil designs to take effect, and this for a wise purpose. "God did send me before you," says Joseph, when he sees their contrition, "to preserve life." And later on, almost his last words to them are these: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." And the same is true with regard to one greater than Joseph. We cannot make God responsible for the death of Christ, so as to relieve man of responsibility. "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God," says the Apostle Peter, "ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."

## **The Standpoint From Which to Regard Suffering**

This leads us for a moment to consider the true standpoint from which to regard suffering. The Biblical view is: suffering is intended to drive us nearer to God, to deepen our trust and become a means of instruction, and to help us make new discoveries of His love rather than an occasion for doubting God. Moreover the effect it has upon character must not be forgotten. The furnace is intended to refine and purify. It separates the dross from the gold. Paul informs us that tribulation is a thing to triumph in, because it leads to patience, experience and hope, and to an experience of the love of God, which otherwise would be wanting. Nor does he ever doubt that love though he speaks of being killed all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter, for it is in adversity and affliction that love is sweetest (Romans 5:1-5; 8:35-39).

And we can pass on to the example and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. No one suffered more than He. Did He ever see in suffering a reason for doubting God? On the contrary, it was always an occasion for Him to find refuge in His Father's presence and in His heart. When the dark shadow of the cross fell upon His path, and all that it meant confronted Him, not merely of the physical suffering aspect, which was but an infinitesimal part, but in contemplation of the

moral and spiritual conflict it involved, His language was, "Not My will, but Thine be done." Though the cost to Christ can never be told, He never questioned the goodness, the wisdom, the love of God because love was answering to love. He not only knew God the Father perfectly and therefore loved Him, but Christ also knew Him because God loved Him. His faith triumphed, and resurrection tells us it was not misplaced. From Him we learn this lesson of trust. When we love God the shadows disappear, as the mist before the sun, though the suffering may remain. Let us believe that God is great enough and good enough for the tasks He has undertaken. He makes no mistakes, and the men who have suffered most have generally been the most full of praise and thankfulness.

"Affliction," said Mr. Spurgeon, "is the best bit of furniture in my house. All the grace I get out of my comfortable easy times might almost lie on a penny. The good I have received from my trials, pains and griefs is inestimable. What do I not owe to the fire and the file, the crucible and the furnace, and to the hand that thrust me into the heat?"

It is quite true that God appears often to act in a hard way. Mark Twain, who was of a skeptical turn of mind, asserted: "If there is one thing more than another that will break your heart, that is the very thing God will allow to come upon you." In which statement there is a measure of truth. But he failed to see that it is often the broken heart that brings in the greatest blessing. Let us hear the testimony of another:

*"The value of any life consists in the storms through which it has been carried. . . . Take out of your own life all these rough dealings of God with your soul, and what an insipid life it would be! All the character would be out of it. . . . Trials are the things in the hands of God's Spirit which make true men of us — fit for this world and the next, and without them men would be fit for neither."*

Here is the testimony of one who had been a missionary, and who, at a moment when his labors were unusually blessed, was stricken with leprosy. His work had to be relinquished; retirement from all active service became necessary, and a life of seclusion and "a daily dying" became his lot. He writes: "I thought sometimes that the Lord had forgotten and forsaken me, that He had hidden His face from me. But it was not so. The more sorrow I have had to bear, the easier it has become, and now I am rejoicing in my Saviour every hour. You ask how I am. I have lost my eyesight now and my voice; I have no feet or ankles; no arms; but my heart is far from dead. I still feel, and long, and sympathize . . . I have no doubts in these days, and if I had my voice I should be singing all the day long."

We have an account in the Bible of three men who entered into an argument with God about His dealings with them. (Two instances occur in the Old Testament, and one, in parabolic form, in the New). They are Job, Jonah, and the elder son in Luke 15. But in each case God had the last word. He will have the last word — always. We may dispute with Him, criticize His methods, challenge His ways, but in the end, He will not only silence us, but show us that what we considered to be evil was only goodness in disguise and that a gracious purpose ran through it all.

So is it in this great war. His design is that the sacrifice and the sorrow may call us away from

that which was proving our destruction — the almost exclusive occupation with the material and the transitory. He would call us back to Himself and to the things which really matter. He is doing this. Men and women are thinking as they have never thought before, and at the battle front, at all events, there is an atmosphere which makes it easy for millions to think of their spiritual necessities who have too long neglected them. God is again giving an open door to His gospel; His servants are finding it easy to speak His message, and it is welcomed, and this would not, and could not, have been apart from the war. (How appalling has been the relapse since the above was written. The lessons of the war are fast fading from men's minds, and they seem to have returned to the pursuit of pleasure and material betterment with added zest.)

What is the great lesson of the war? It is that man has hopelessly railed, and proved himself unfit to govern this world; civilization has broken down, and God is about to intervene to set aside the present order and establish His own kingdom. The prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven," which our Lord taught the disciples to pray, is about to be answered, according as it is written, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever." The present dispensation is to end with a crash. Then will come the day of the Son of Man, and of His universal empire, "and the Lord shall be King over all the earth; in that day shall there be one Lord, and His name one" (Zech 14:9). But "as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth." In view of this we do well to remember our Lord's words, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always."

Prayer has a double aspect. On the one hand, God permits us to tell Him everything, and pray about anything. Philippians 4:6 teaches us this lesson. "Be careful (anxious) for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." This gives us perfect liberty to unburden our hearts to God, but here nothing is said as to the answer. God does not undertake to do all we ask, but His promise is that as the result of making known our requests, His peace will be our portion. No restriction is placed upon our prayers here. Any need, any anxiety may be brought to God's notice in prayer.

But prayer has another aspect: "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing ACCORDING TO HIS WILL, He heareth us: and if we know that He HEAR US, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him" (1. John 5:14-15). Here it is more than making known our requests, it is asking according to His will, and with the sense of being heard. In one sense God hears all our prayers of whatever kind and character they may be. But there are, we know, two ways of being heard. God listens to prayers which are according to His will as He listens to no others. We rise from our knees with the sense that we have had audience with Him — not only has there been prayer but communion.

Let us keep in mind, then, these two facts relating to prayer: (1) liberty to unburden our hearts about any and every matter that concerns us or ours; (2) a higher form of prayer, asking along the line of God's purpose, and receiving what we ask.

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*Angels in White — OR — Words to the Worried. P. 98*