

All Creation Groans

I want to talk about a particular kind of suffering that I have experienced and observed. When we are in painful circumstances we are often further anguished by wondering why we should bear such grief. As Job said, “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of soul?” (Job 3:20 NKJV) A poor answer to such a cry can be more of a taunt than a comfort, as Job found from his friends. Sometimes when we hear this question asked it is not the right time to answer. When we find the question asked with a true yearning to know, I believe we should answer with Christ—not just his crucifixion, but his whole work from creation to new creation.

When I first heard that this year’s conference theme was about “Serving Christ in a Hurting World,” I thought of a website of a man who challenges Christians to explain how the goodness of God is compatible with suffering. He writes in one place,

“It seems to me that the Christian claim that ‘God is good’ is vacuous [...]. It is consistent with every possible state of affairs. Nothing counts as evidence against it. God is good, but the world is an abattoir [that is, a slaughterhouse]. God is good, but in the afterlife He runs a torture chamber.

“What would it mean if God were not good? How would the world be different?”

<http://carnalreason.org/2005/07/01/116/>

I will refer to the author as “Carnal Reason,” after the title of his web domain. In another place he retells a story to give an illustration of this problem—here he’s quoting Gregory Boyd who is retelling Philip Friedman:

“Historian Philip Friedman provides the following eyewitness account of what happened to a young Jewish girl living in the Warsaw ghetto during the Nazi occupation.

Zosia was a little girl ... the daughter of a physician. During an “action” one of the Germans became aware of her beautiful diamond-like eyes.

“I could make two rings out of them,” he said, “one for myself and one for my wife.”

His colleague is holding the girl.

“Let’s see whether they are really so beautiful. And better yet, let’s examine them in our hands.”

Among the buddies exuberant gaiety breaks out. One of the wittiest proposes to take the eyes out. A shrill screaming and the noisy laughter of the soldier pack. The screaming penetrates our brains, pierces our hearts, the laughter hurts like the edge of

a knife into our body. The screaming and the laughter are growing, mingling and soaring to heaven.

O God, whom will you hear first?

What happens next is that the fainting child is lying on the floor. Instead of eyes two bloody wounds are staring. The mother, driven mad, is held by the other women.

This time they left Zosia to her mother....

At one of the next "actions" little Zosia was taken away. It was, of course, necessary to annihilate the blind child.'

Gregory Boyd, [God at War](#) p 33-34

Boyd tells this story as part of an argument against the idea that God exercises meticulous control over all events, as per Augustine and Calvin. I want to [ask again](#) whether Christian exclusivism holds. Is it true that only Christians are saved, and the rest of us are damned? Did God send the little Jewish girl Zosia to hell? Does God continue forever the torture the Nazis could only begin?

Christians give different answers when pressed. Some argue that there is an age of reason or accountability, and that children who die prior to that age are spared hell. So far as I know, there is not a shred of biblical support for this view.

Others, out of sentimentality or lack of doctrinal understanding, refuse to believe that God could do such a thing. Some get angry that anyone could ask such tactless a question. A minority take annihilationist or universalist views.

The well-informed traditional believers, typically Calvinists or evangelicals, will staunchly affirm that **all** are corrupted by sin, even children, and consign Zosia to hell. They will also maintain that God is good. [God's goodness](#), unlike man's, encompasses the torture of children.

<http://carnalreason.org/2005/05/24/christian-exclusivism-continued/>

I've quoted at length here, but Carnal Reason is bringing up a very old philosophical dilemma, the "problem of evil," and I don't want us to think of it as some far-off abstract mind game played by deceitful philosophers. Carnal Reason has a daughter with cerebral palsy. His family escaped from Cuba. What he is saying is not so different from what is written in Ecclesiastes: "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve." (Ecc. 9:14 NIV)

I think that Gregory Boyd and others who say that God does not exercise meticulous control over all events have missed the point of Carnal Reason's question. If God has any kind of supernatural power

and any kind of supernatural awareness and any kind of goodness, how can he sit back and watch this? If you were a man who could have stopped this and you watched instead, would we call you good?

We could just assert that God's goodness is beyond question and beyond our understanding. God has said through the prophet Isaiah,

"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."
(Is. 55:9 NIV)

A man, a creature whose moral sensibility is corrupted by sin, has neither the right nor the ability to review God's work and decide whether it is good or not. In particular God made it very clear to Job that he did not have the ability to even comprehend what God had created, much less decide whether it had been well done. "'Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!'" (Job 40:2 NIV)

But God did not only rebuke Job; he also showed him creation. "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." (Rom. 1:20) To us God has shown much more of the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is all one revelation. Consider that Job himself, while he was still arguing with his friends, said "'I know that my Redeemer lives!'" (Job 19:25 NKJV) How marvelous that he could say this, having never heard of Jesus Christ! I cannot imagine having that confidence in Job's place. But scripture teaches that there are two things evident to any person living at any time in any place, whether they have heard of Jesus or not:

1. The world we live in was created.
2. There is something wrong with this creation.

From these two points people choose different conclusions. Some turn around and say that there is nothing wrong because there is no purpose and there is no creator. Some say that there is something wrong with the creator; either that he abandoned creation, or created it poorly, or he is hampered by an enemy. And some say that since the creator is good and the creation is not good in its present state, then it can only follow that the creator will make it good. Here we find Redemption, the work of Christ, the answer to all suffering.

Redemption is more than repair. It is not enough merely to say that God will make a perfect world later or that He will fix what is broken in this world. If God will fix the brokenness in this world like a flat tire on a car, why not fix it now? If God will throw this whole creation out and create anew, why not start now? Because in Christ God is doing more than fixing a creation that embarrassingly broke down. Christ is building a deliberate history to manifest the work of God in contrast to the work of man. The history of our suffering is part of the formation of the character of the Bride of Christ (cf. Ezek. 16:6-8).

“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.” (Rom. 8:20-22 NKJV)

Through Christ all things were created (John 1:3). It is Christ who “fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23 NKJV), who is “upholding all things by the word of his power.” (Heb. 1:3 NKJV) It is Christ who has subjected this world in hope, having said so long ago, “My spirit shall not strive with man forever.” (Gen. 6:6 NKJV) The striving of God is the labor of the creator to sustain his creation which has been corrupted, when he might have cursed and annihilated the whole thing, and to sustain it by giving it his own life that it might yet bear fruit.

Isaiah the prophet wrote of Christ that,

“Surely he has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon him,
And by his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”
(Is. 53:4-6 NKJV)

We think of this as fulfilled in his crucifixion; and certainly that is its preeminent fulfillment. But there is a further sense in which Christ, as the creator and sustainer of all creation, has been bearing our affliction as long as creation has been burdened with sin. If Christ is the alpha and omega of this creation, we might say that suffering is every letter in between. But the suffering that Christ has borne has never been a helpless suffering. On the eve of his crucifixion Jesus prayed, “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” (John 17:4-5 NKJV) Suffering is the work that God chose, and even planned from before creation, to reveal his glory.

The glorification of God is the purpose of all creation and all suffering in creation. John relates one example:

“As [Jesus] 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.’” (John 9:2-3 NIV)

Now it is not just when God heals suffering that he is glorified. Suffering first reveals the corruption of sin in that what was made to be good is no longer good. In seeing the vileness of creation turned away from God’s purpose we understand the justice of his wrath against sin; in suffering we also begin to understand what it means for God’s wrath to be poured out against sin. Finally, that creation is allowed to continue in spite of its perversion and corruption is the evidence of God’s mercy and longsuffering in continuing for so long to call us from sin. Suffering is the reference point for sin, wrath, and mercy. Paul works from this understanding when he asks, rhetorically,

“What if God, wanting to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that he might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory?” (Rom. 9:12-23 NKJV)

If we ask why God did not make us perfect from the start, and not permit any sin or suffering, we find that without sin there is no just revelation of wrath; and without God himself in Christ bearing the just penalty of sin there is no revelation of mercy. If we still ask why God did not just endow us with a knowledge of his wrath and his mercy, we can only answer by saying that through this suffering life we grow into a richer appreciation of God than the angels now have; this is the mystery

“which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Eph. 3:9-11)

Going back to the story of Zosia, we can see how the wickedness of the German soldiers justly deserves the wrath of God; and, considering that the same nature of wickedness is in every man (though that nature might not be revealed in the same deeds), we see the mercy of God in that he forebears to punish all this wickedness at once, so that sinners such those Nazis may come to repentance. Carnal Reason asked why Zosia would go to hell; he might also have asked why one of those Nazis could go to heaven, for it is the very nature of the gospel message that even the Nazi holding Zosia’s eyes in his hands can be forgiven by the grace of Christ’s sacrifice.

So, to bring the story to its sharpest point, let us say that one of those Nazis is redeemed by Christ into eternal life in the new creation while Zosia is cast aside to destruction and the death which is final separation from God. When we compare between the two we must ask, how is that fair?

In struggling to reconcile this apparent injustice many Christians have corrupted the Biblical doctrine and invented ways in which the Nazi would be punished for his evil or Zosia would be compensated for her innocence; ideas such as purgatory or levels of hell and heaven or earned rewards are all schemes

meant to balance scales of justice that we feel are gravely askew. But nowhere does God promise us karma. Instead, Paul responds to the objection that God is not just,

“But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (Rom. 9:20-21 NKJV)

The perception that it is unjust for Zosia to be destroyed and the Nazi saved depends upon considering them based upon their actions toward other people. In like manner we might also consider the death of infants, who have done nothing to anyone, and also be outraged. But a thing which is made is considered for how well it fulfills its intended purpose. When first created man was intended to reveal the character of God in perfect goodness and holiness—to be his “image.” Both Zosia and the Nazi have fallen short of this (Rom. 3:23), so each is worthless and justly condemned to destruction. Whether God saves one or another is as much up to him as it is whom he creates in the first place. God does not have to reckon to each one how their individual life on this earth compared to every other individual’s, but reckons to each one his purpose in all creation of revealing his own nature to the glorification of his son.

How then does Jesus say, “‘Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows’”? (Matt. 10:29-31 NKJV). This seems to suggest that a human life is precious in its own right once it exists, without any kind of qualification. But Christ is not speaking of any and all men. In the context, he is speaking of his close attention to his chosen people. He goes on to say “‘Therefore whoever confesses me before men, him I will also confess before my father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my father who is in heaven.’” (Matt. 10:32-33 NKJV) So here again the worth of man is related to his proclaiming Christ.

In Christ the purpose of all creation is fulfilled, that is, to be the image or revelation of God:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he may have the preeminence.” (Col. 1:15-18 NKJV)

This, then, is the offense of the gospel: that none of us are saved for our own sake. Not little Jewish girls and not white Protestant men. We are gathered up as a harvest (Matt. 10:37), and what is kept from the harvest is only that fit for its purpose. We are to be the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:32), and fit for that purpose only if we love him. And though he would be worthy of our love even if he saved none (for his righteousness would still be perfect), we know that he became like us and bore our suffering with us

(Heb. 4:15). This is also the source of our confidence that he will save us, though he is not obligated to save any: having borne the offense for every sin he has already shown his joyful willingness to save us.

But all is credited to Christ, who alone suffered while deserving better. God does not judge us according to how other men treated us, but to how we fulfilled the purpose for which he created us; and so in standing on our own rights and on what we justly deserve, all things considered, we stand to our own destruction and rejection. None of us has revealed God according to the standard of Christ, the new Adam, the man who fulfilled his purpose.

Even accepting that we deserve only destruction, we still cry out in our suffering, “Then God, why did you even give me this life?” We look for some way in which our own life, all by itself, has meaning and significance, and we cannot see it. But we were not created for our own sake, and by that measure our life may be disappointing and bitter. We were formed as part of the entire creation, which is all the revelation of God, having its perfect headship in Christ. No part of creation can have any significance considered apart from him. And the life of Christ on earth recapitulates the course of all creation in suffering before perfection: “Though he was a son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” (Heb. 5:8-9 NKJV)

Thus in our suffering we find that we are part of the whole work of Christ; not necessarily of his work in our own personal life, with the idea that we will be rewarded or compensated for our suffering, but that our suffering is part of Christ’s work in completing the revelation of God. Therefore Paul says, “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” (Col. 1:24 NKJV)

Our hope and our great joy is not that we will have the wrongs done against us personally settled by God on the day of judgment, but that we will be counted in as part of the work of Christ, and every offense against him will be fully satisfied. In Revelation we read of the “souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’” (Rev. 6:9-10 NIV) The voice of these souls is heard in heaven not merely for having suffered, but for because they suffered for the witness of Christ.

Of them it is written, “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” (Rev. 19:9 NKJV) because they are gathered in to the new creation, when Christ will fully dwell with his people, even as one flesh. This, then, is the true power of redemption—not just restored to our first state of creation, but joined to Christ, who has taken on a nature like ours to perfectly unite God and his creation. “At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.” (John 14:20)

When we think of the suffering in this world in terms of the individual people, there is nothing to justify it; it is not in accordance with how much evil a man has done relative to his fellow man, nor in accordance with how much richness he has already enjoyed. Therefore when suffering is considered among men, it is a foul and offensive thing without any good; but when we consider Christ, suffering is

the reminder of our hope in his ongoing work. “To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.” (2 Cor. 2:16 NKJV) “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” (Romans 8:6 NKJV)

All throughout the Bible in times of suffering, people have cried out to God. “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?” (Psalm 82:2 NIV) “How long will the enemy mock you, O God? Will the foe revile your name forever?” (Psalm 74:10 NIV) “My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?” (Psalm 6:3 NIV) What will be our answer? We were created for the revelation of God; only the complete revelation of God can answer our yearning. If we look for the full demonstration of God's goodness and justice and mercy in this present creation we will be disappointed, because the entire creation is corrupted by sin. For the fullness of the goodness of God we must look to Christ, “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.” (2 Cor. 1:20 NKJV) Only in him is the justice, mercy, and goodness of God revealed; only in him does the suffering of this creation find significance and hope. How long will we suffer? Until he is revealed. Then we will shout, “Behold, this is our God!” (Is. 25:9 NKJV)