

Faith in the Face of Intractable Suffering

Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!

Genesis 28:16

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Psalms 30:5

Lately I find myself in a state of despair. We have passed the 20th century, one of the bloodiest in history. The 21st is promising to be no better. In the last century Hitler amassed the full weight of an industrialized nation to attack a civilian population. Now Putin is doing the same thing. And Putin has many enablers. “Never again” is little more than a hollow memory.

The specter of so many people, especially including children, experiencing extreme suffering is intolerable. Yet at this writing there appears to be a very good chance this country will elect as President someone who will abandon them and enable their aggressor. We need to examine what has happened to this country’s soul.

And we should not stop at Ukraine. China’s treatment of the Uyghurs is just as horrendous as Russia’s actions toward the Ukrainians; it is just not getting the same publicity. There is also the persecution of Rohingya civilians in Myanmar. There are so many examples that any attempt to contemplate them is mind-numbing.

How can such a world be reconciled with any kind of faith in God? Any satisfactory response will be difficult to grasp. It would be unseemly, to say the least, for me to offer one from my comfortable life in the United States. I have no right to make any comment on these tragedies from a theological perspective.

Yet at the same time, if faith is to make sense at all, it must have a way of taking into itself this level of suffering. Our prayer life cannot just be business as usual. This applies especially to our petitionary prayers. What meaning can prayers for improvements in our individual lives have when there is so much extreme suffering on a massive scale? A sincere prayer life must at least include a confrontation with this question.

So while we cannot have a definitive answer to the riddle of extreme suffering this side of eternity, we need at least a clue as to how a good God can coexist with such severe and widespread pain. It will not do to continue praying in the usual way, for this, that, or the other thing, as if nothing else were happening. Why should God care about my new job, or my new house, when a virtual Holocaust is going on?

First of all, religious people need to understand that atheism is a reasonable response to the suffering of this world. The atheist who protests a God who appears indifferent to the misery of the innocent comes from a deeper spiritual and moral place than the religious person whose prayers continue undisturbed. Instead of condemning these atheists, religious people need to learn from them.

But is atheism the only response? Can we find at least a clue that might make faith in God reasonable in the midst of such a world as this?

We may find this clue we are looking for in the Bible, *if* we read it carefully. That is no easy “if.” We need to read the Bible not in the usual way, not according to theologies we may have learned, but closer to what scripture actually says. In this essay I will not try to answer the question of why a good God permits extreme atrocities. The question at hand is more modest: How can we continue to have faith while living in such a world? I would like to consider this question from the viewpoint of Jewish-Christian spirituality and a close reading of scripture. And it may be that if we can make some progress with this question, we might shed just a little light on the much larger and harder one, the question of theodicy.

Even people very familiar with the Gospels may not realize they comprise four very different views of Jesus’s life, ministry, and death, with significant differences. We tend to read them as if they were one super-Gospel, with everything in all four happening in spite of the contradictions. We speak of the “Seven Last Words” of Christ on the cross, passages drawn from all four accounts as if they were one. These kinds of readings result in a new and different Gospel, not true to any of those we actually have.

Perhaps the most jarring example is Christ’s death. If we go by the “Seven Last Words” we may get the impression that Jesus died not only in faith (“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,” Luke 23:46) but in triumph (“It is finished!” John 19:30). But this is not the earliest view of how Jesus

died. Mark, the earliest Gospel and perhaps the most historically reliable in this case, has a completely different view:

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. (Mark 15:33-37)

According to Mark, Jesus did not die in a state of faith. He died in agony and fear.

But, one may object, what about Luke? What about John? When Mark was active those Gospels had not yet been written. Mark knew nothing about them and certainly could not have had them in mind. If Mark intended his Gospel to end differently, he would have written it differently.

But, some say, Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, which ends on a note of triumph. True enough, but Jesus did not quote the end of the psalm; he quoted its beginning with its cry of abandonment. If he meant to utter a sure statement of faith, there are many suitable passages he could have chosen. He didn't. He chose the one about God forsaking him. To try in this manner to explain away his clear expression of despair shows a failure of courage and does no honor either to the text or to Jesus.

Matthew not only follows Mark, he makes it more emphatic:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. (Matthew 27:45-50)

At the very end of his gospel Mark says: “Jesus gave a loud cry.” The Greek word is φωνή, *phonē*. The word just means a sound or a noise, though it can certainly be a loud one. But Matthew says “Jesus cried again with a loud voice.” The “cried” in Matthew is not the same as the “cry” in Mark. In Matthew the word is κράξας, *kraxas*, screaming or shrieking. This was not someone at peace with his current fate.

This apparently was too strong for Luke, who softened it by taking out the Psalm 22 verse about abandonment (which for Luke clearly was not a cry of victory) and replacing it with a verse from Psalm 31, “into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Then Luke says “he breathed his last.” Not cried, not screamed, but ἐξέπνευσεν, *exepneusen*, “breathed out,” took his last breath. A completely different picture. (As for the Gospel of John, its focus is much more theological than historical.)

This is quite a shock. According to the two earliest Gospels, Jesus did not overcome his fears before he died.

Mark and Matthew almost certainly preserve a more authentic tradition than either Luke or John. The idea of Jesus lacking faith and confidence when it counted most must have seemed unpalatable to many, especially with the passage of time. And so the latter Gospels suppressed that image. But it is highly important that we preserve it, because of what it means for us. *It means that God is still present with us even when we do not know it, even when we are overwhelmed by intractable pain and all-consuming fear.* The mystery that immediately follows is the evangelists’ attempt to capture this.

The next chapter in the story is the resurrection. Here we encounter only more anomalies. The earliest account of the resurrection that we have comes from Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the

apostles. In Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

“Appeared,” ὤφθη, *ophthē*, from ὁράω, to see (from which, by the way, we get “ophthalmology”). Paul apparently had some kind of vision. There is no evidence that he encountered a physical body. He mentions neither a body nor an empty tomb. Presumably, by the time of Paul’s vision, Jesus had already ascended. And yet Paul claims that his encounter, or vision, was exactly the same as that experienced by the original disciples.

When we turn to the Gospels we find four very different and inconsistent accounts of what happened at the resurrection. It is well known that these accounts cannot be reconciled with each other. Even the author of Luke/Acts seems at odds with himself: in the Gospel of Luke Jesus ascends on the day of resurrection; in Acts he ascends forty days later. Clearly the evangelists were not reporting history. They were describing a spiritual event. They were writing twenty to forty or more years after Paul. They were recording legends that had arisen to capture the experience of those original disciples. The term “legend” should not be understood pejoratively. There is a Hebrew term that encompasses legend but suggests far more: *midrash*. The evangelists were writing midrash.

“Midrash” means that while the story may not be literally true, it is spiritually significant. The only thing about the resurrection stories that we can say with confidence is that Jesus’s disciples, including Paul, felt a sense of his presence after he died. What they felt can be called *spiritual presence*.

The real resurrection is not a physical body walking out of a tomb. People described it that way because that was the language they knew, the language of apocalypticism. The actual experience must have been something else, since trying to take the different resurrection accounts literally makes no sense. How can we possibly understand this?

When I worked as a hospice music therapist, I was often close to people as they were dying. In almost every case I could feel a transcendent peace surrounding the person, a deeper peace than any I have known in any other circumstance. Something was present that suggested a reality greater than what we know in this physical world. And it was good. Above

all, it was a sense that the dying person was not alone. *It was a visitation and persistence of spiritual presence.*

There is a term for this, when the experience of a person who is actually dying can be felt by others who are near. It is called a *shared-death experience* (not a “near-death experience,” which is something else entirely and does not pertain to actual death). I believe that what the disciples and Paul experienced as the resurrection was a *shared-death experience*, Jesus’s fulfillment in eternal life somehow communicated to witnesses. I think this the only way to harmonize the different resurrection accounts in the Gospels and Paul, which just cannot fit together when taken literally. And I think it explains the persistence of the disciples’ faith after witnessing the most horrible kind of death imaginable at that time, as well as the redemptive significance of the resurrection event.

We may all know transcendent moments like these, when a greater, unambiguous reality breaks into our earthly existence and gives us a sense of something more. These moments will be different for each one of us. They are occasions when the boundary separating time from eternity seems to crack. Have you noticed such moments, when that barrier dissolves and something else is there, something beyond the pain? Perhaps in a time of deep meditation or prayer? Or contemplating an exceptionally beautiful natural scene? Or when giving yourself in a love that does not ask for any return? Christian spirituality has a term for these occasions: “thin places,” when the eternal is especially close to us, when heaven and earth seem to meet. We may also call it *spiritual presence*.

On the first Easter, what the disciples experienced was *spiritual presence*. Paul also, as he describes it:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. (2 Corinthians 12:2-5)

Paul is ironically speaking of himself in the third person (this becomes clear in the subsequent verses), and may possibly be referring to his conversion experience. He was “caught up into Paradise”; he had a brief point of contact with the eternal. He knew the spiritual presence.

And so was the resurrection: it was *spiritual presence*. For many who followed him, Jesus embodied this presence. He manifested God’s love so openly that people who were touched by him felt themselves in the presence of God: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). This verse is very frequently misunderstood. Jesus is not saying that he *is* God the Father. Rather, the writer of this Gospel is indicating that those who had contact with Jesus could discern in his presence the qualities of God; specifically, pure non-self-interested love. *After Jesus’s death, this divine presence that Jesus seemed to carry with him lingered, was felt by his disciples, and interpreted as resurrection.* It was there all along; it was his ultimate fulfillment, and we have a hope it will be ours as well.

Resurrection was understood differently at different times. In Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37), where perhaps it all began, it was a metaphor for the revival and reconstitution of a defeated and exiled people. Later it was taken literally and became a core tenet of apocalyptic theology, signifying the expected revival of the dead at the time of the final judgment. Many of Jesus’s later followers continued to understand it literally, and when the general resurrection failed to materialize, they understood the resurrection as a singular event applying to him alone. *But whether Jesus’s immediate disciples, including Paul, understood it so literally is doubtful.*

This question remains unsettled in biblical scholarship. A key text is 1 Corinthians 15. It is as close as we can come to a definitive statement by Paul on the subject. But Paul’s language is ambiguous.

First, he argues against those who would deny a coming general resurrection:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:12-14)

But then he tackles the question, if indeed the dead are raised, then what kind of form do they take? His answer includes these key points:

Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. (1 Corinthians 15:39-40)

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:47-49)

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1 Corinthians 15:30)

No biblical passages have been debated more vigorously than these. There is no definitive consensus. What is important to me, however, is that we try to understand them in their own context, apart from church theology. As I see it, Paul could not be clearer in drawing a distinction between the body in this present life (“earthly,” “physical,” “perishable”) and the body at resurrection (“heavenly,” “spiritual,” “imperishable”). Thus whatever the body is at resurrection, it is totally unlike the physical body subject to disease and decay. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”: I don’t see how to interpret this other than that the resurrection body, *including that of Jesus*, is not of flesh and blood. Therefore it is not a physical body, just as Paul said.

Now it has been objected that the “spiritual body” is still a body, and that a truly spiritual heaven is a Greek, not a Hebraic idea (the Greeks did not believe in resurrection but in the immortality of the soul, as, ironically, do perhaps most Christians today). That may be true, but Paul was a Jew

influenced by Greek culture, and his responses seem to contain elements of both. This is not the traditional Jewish apocalyptic vision of a physical resurrection. That seems abundantly clear. We have here both the survival of the “body” in terms of resurrection, plus the assertion that it is not the same body, is not flesh and blood, but is “spiritual” (πνευματικός). Finally, just because an idea is Greek does not mean it must be wrong. While Jewish apocalyptic theology expressed the hopes of a certain people at a certain time, and imagined those hopes in terms of the physical resurrection, it has proved untenable; the emergence of physical bodies from physical graves is not a reasonable expectation. Perhaps Paul was already looking beyond that. We find in his vision both Greek and Hebrew elements. And maybe Paul was right.

This excursion we have taken into resurrection language has a purpose. It may help us understand better what happened after the death of Jesus. His resurrection was not the literal emergence of a body from a tomb. It was something even greater. *It was a visitation and persistence of spiritual presence*, in a way that could be felt by those close to him. It was an experience of eternal life, while still in this world. True resurrection is not the revival of a body that has died. *True resurrection is a symbol of eternal life.*

And note: this spiritual presence embraced Jesus even though, as we have seen, *he did not die in a state of faith.*

Even if we have known moments of spiritual presence, we may lose our sense of that presence in times of extreme suffering and anxiety. And yet that presence is still there, ready to receive us at the right moment. This is our hope. The sufferings of this world, no matter how intense, are not the last word. There is something beyond all of it, ready to receive us, *even if we do not know it.* “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

And this “something beyond” is not something we wait for until after we die. If that were the case, our present lives would be absurd and without meaning. Eternal life is always present, and there is always a possibility that it can be felt. It permeates our lives, even though we do not see it. And if we devote ourselves to it (“Strive first for the kingdom of God,” Matthew 6:33), it shapes our lives and gives us direction.

Jesus used the “kingdom of God” as a symbol for eternal life. For Jesus, the kingdom of God is not an apocalyptic cataclysm to materialize at the end of history. The kingdom of God *is already present, though nearly undetectable*. “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20-21). No one else spoke of the kingdom this way. When others mentioned the kingdom, they looked toward a big final battle at the end of history. For Jesus, the kingdom is unobtrusive, and it is right now, not limited to an indefinite future.

Of course this may be of limited comfort to someone suffering an overwhelming crisis. Even Jesus was without comfort at the end of his life; that may happen if our sufferings are sufficiently severe. Why this happens we cannot answer completely. But we do have a partial answer, in that, as we have seen even with Jesus, we belong to the spiritual presence even if, in a given moment, we cannot see or feel it. And then there is always the hope that the time will come when we do feel it. Even that hope alone can be a support. *The fact that Jesus died the way he did, in anxiety and despair, should give us hope that our anxieties also are not the final word.* We should never judge ourselves for having too little faith, because if we condemn ourselves for this then we condemn Jesus also.

Nobody knows exactly what waits for us when we transition out of this life. But the spiritual presence lets us know that it must be essentially good. And this presence also may meet us while still in this life, informing our lives with meaning.

What an odd way to structure our reality. Why not just begin in the spiritual presence and stay there? Why must we go through all this human hell? Because, if it were indeed possible to escape it, we would not become aware of anything. The awareness of love begins with compassion, and compassion, literally, begins with suffering, being with the suffering of others. Human suffering gives us an entrance to finding God by helping and being with one another. Without it, we would remain unconscious. This does not make suffering good; it is only in striving to eradicate suffering that we know what love is. Love, not free will, is what makes suffering necessary. This is not a final answer to the problem of suffering. It is just a clue, but one that may make faith still possible in spite of the atrocities we inflict upon each other.

So let us not wait; let us open ourselves right now to the spiritual presence. By being still, listening in the silence, we may bring ourselves closer. There are methods, based upon the practice of mindfulness originating in Eastern forms of meditation, or “centering prayer” as it is called in the West, that are designed to tune out distractions and focus our attention so that a higher wisdom, perhaps the divine presence itself, may enter. There now exist modern forms of psychotherapy based on these principles, providing a point of contact between psychology and spirituality. This can be a source of hope in a world full of tragedy.

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8)

Whether we thrive or whether we suffer, whether we see it or whether we doubt it, we belong to something greater and better than ourselves. We may have moments when we are blessed to see it. But even when we don't, even when everything good seems hidden from us, we still belong to it. We still belong to God.

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