

Jesus doesn't explain suffering

He faces it.

by [Frank G. Honeycutt](#) in the [March 11, 2020](#) issue



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People seek out pastors for a variety of reasons: marital troubles, concerns about congregational direction, absolution for sin, guidance for an important decision, and a search for a deeper spiritual life, to mention a few.

After more than 30 years of listening, prayer, and conversation, my vote for one of the top circumstances for contacting someone like me is meaningless suffering—an automobile accident, an unexpected terminal disease, a natural disaster. No one to blame; no specific sin at the root. No real cause or purpose to examine; a completely pointless event, seemingly empty of meaning.

It's easier to handle suffering, I suspect, when there seems to be a reason for it—when one can point to something concrete and reflect upon cause and consequence. When no reason is found, even those normally inclined to distance themselves from church often think of God. *What sort of God is this?* When confronted with meaningless suffering, at least one of the points of the “omni

triangle” (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence) is often called into question.

“We want to love God with the heart,” writes Tom Long, “but we also want to love God with our mind, too. We want to do more than lament and shout and raise the fist; we also want to understand.”

Several years ago, I received a letter from a good friend:

Dear Frank . . . Answer these questions. Answer everything in here, dammit. What do you mean by God? What is your God? How does your God interact with you? What makes your God important to you? Define God. Christians see God’s work in the world selectively and see God in the Bible selectively. What I always think is that God, if anywhere, is everywhere, good and harsh, and if harsh, then we must make God accountable. If God is revealed in a sunset, or anywhere in the Bible, then is God revealed in a bald-headed man I recently met? This man was born without one single hair. He was a bald-headed two-year-old and 13-year-old. That is a tough thing to do to a little boy. Does that reveal anything to you about your God, or is your God only in sunsets and curly-headed babies? God must be more consistent. If he chooses not to share himself with us, and not to explain himself, I choose not to respect him. I will not be rude. God knows where to find me. But if he wants me for a constant companion, he must stop being cruel or tell me why.

The letter went on. For 14 pages it went on and then: “I will end. I will not sign this letter, and then perhaps you will not know from whom it came.”

Of course, I knew. It was from the same person who once asked why in the world the pope dressed like an angel; who promised me that if he ever met God on the road one fine day, he’d chase the deity down with a pitchfork; who vowed that if there is a hell and he ends up being a resident, he sure hopes I know about it.

The biblical response to this friend’s questions can be rather baffling: God reacts to the suffering of the centuries by *sending a sufferer*. God does not pretend to wipe out suffering this side of Revelation 21 but instead voluntarily enters it.

Jesus doesn’t really attempt to explain the origin of suffering or why it exists. Instead, he walks right at it: “And what should I say,” the church overhears in Lent,

“Father, save me from this hour?” No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (John 12:27).

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is quite clear about his destiny and identity. He walks straight toward suffering, chooses to carry his own cross (19:17), and says that “whoever serves me must follow me” (19:26). Toward suffering, that is. It’s an odd invitation for people who want suffering explained—we who are angry and put out with God for allowing it.

Jesus apparently didn’t warm up to this idea all at once. He “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him. . . . Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:7-8). This passage is immensely strange but also oddly comforting. Jesus was not preprogrammed. Instead, his wisdom was shaped in the school of suffering.

I resist matriculation in this school. It’s a lot easier to talk about why suffering exists than to look suffering straight in the eye and voluntarily enter somebody else’s.

In his 1993 book *I Want to Remember*, David Dodson Gray writes about his mother’s Alzheimer’s disease and his daily visits with her. He learned to “listen to garble” and “speak to garble.” He fed her, read to her, told her the latest family stories, and sang lullabies. Gray writes: “There is much I regret about the disease and what a wasting it was of her in those years, but I am grateful of the use we made of that time, salvaging so much even while we both were losing so much.”

I recall a conversation with a thoughtful parishioner who said, “I’m not sure the powerful and important emotion of human compassion is even possible on this earth without some level of suffering among us.” I needed that to sink in a bit, but she’s right.

Life without suffering is indeed appealing. (I write these words as my younger brother, age 60, is living his last days of almost three agonizing years with brain cancer, glioblastoma, in Washington State.) But a world without compassion is something fundamentally different than life as we now know it. Compassion—*splanchnon* in the Greek of Colossians 3:12 and elsewhere, relating to the viscera or guts—cannot exist in our lives without the presence of suffering.

I do not believe that God sends suffering as a test or an undercover exercise leading to spiritual maturity. But I do believe God uses our suffering. Entering the darkness

of this world shapes and forms the church in profound ways we're not able to fully articulate.

Following Jesus, the church walks straight toward the darkness, directly at that which we curse. In learning such lifelong obedience, we discover the one who leads us slowly toward veiled light.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What kind of God is this?"