

# O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?

*A Meditation on Suffering*

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## The Glory of God

FOR A FEW WEEKS AS A NOVICE I was a chaplain in a gray jail for kids. I think of it as gray because the boys wore gray sweats and the walls were cinderblock and the air was dead and the quiet unnatural and I did not want to be there. I wanted the boys to not be there, too. I prayed with them, insisted on the learning of lessons. Three-point plans, step by little step, sure-fire methods—biblical and secular—for staying out of trouble and away from the Minneapolis JDC.

Over the weeks, one of the guards, Paul, had been watching me. Finally, he told me something that stopped me cold. “Every one of these kids,” he said, “will be back. Every one.” These kids will be in and out of jail, and back in again. Some for the rest of their lives.

This guard was not trying to be gloomy. He was just stating what is. He had worked at this place for twenty

years. He was telling me what he knows. All these inmates, nearly all of them black children, will get out of here and live their lives and go back to the streets and then end up, again, back in juvy; eventually, many of them will end up in state or county or federal prison for months or years, maybe for life. There is no hope for those kids. Their souls? Sure. Lives as free men? No. End of story. Thirteen-year-old boys headed to life in a cage.

Why were they born? For this? Is anyone born for prison? Evidently some are. And others are born for, who knows, endless soccer camps that parley a half-hearted midfielder onto first-team All-Metro. Neither party asked for their state in life. It just happened. Two were grinding at the mill, one was taken away, the other left to breathe the fresh clean air.

Is there a God? A ridiculous question. We all know the answer to that. Just look around. Behold: we are so far past the Beginning and yet the earth is still a formless wasteland, darkness covers the abyss of us, a ferocious wind sweeps over foul waters and these children are going away forever.

No matter what we do, no matter the counseling, the stern but loving discipline, the schooling, the life-training—Do they even receive such things?—they will all be back.

The guard wore a black sport shirt. He came across like a reasonable-minded school counselor, one who might lean forward in a leather chair and quietly nod his head every so often as a kid tells him about his mom's

charming, violent boyfriend. His black hair was not feathered, but it may have been several years back. The boys were segmented into groups, lived in pods, tucked into cells with heavy doors and thick glass. He said it calmly. They will return. All of them.

Is there a God? An even worse answer: There is a God and every one of those kids is coming back.

Who or what can we blame for this? Society? The breakdown of the family? The obliteration of father figures? A lack of jobs, the pervasiveness of drugs, crowded schools, harsh drug laws, the proliferation of guns, the profit-seeking prison industry, brutal cops, institutional racism, corrupted civil will, a deflation of things spiritual in the general culture? Religious novices and their ignorance of the absurd rates of black incarceration? Simply the twelve-year-olds themselves?

Why doesn't God, who has lovingly given us free will, take it back for a few minutes? Take it back and airlift these children into a life of excellent schools, churches that bring the gospel to the streets, cities abundant with jobs, and just make things better? It is too discouraging. The bad has been so lodged into, so caked over the world, evil become so stuck, with old growth and tree rings and roots reaching way down, so much sadness that it will take ages to chip it away.

Oh, maybe if we all just believe in Jesus Christ enough he will blast through and save us. Like children at a *Peter Pan* matinee reviving Tinkerbell, if we keep

clapping and clapping and clapping our hands, Christ will appear and briskly lift us out of these tragedies. Is that how it is? Is it? An act of will can upend the whole rotten thing? Heresy, you say? Trying to force God onto the scene? Are we simply to wait? Wait to make sense of sadness, of evil? Then, as we wait, don't we begin to feel a little stupid?

“I'm waiting, it's coming. Just hang on. It'll all get better.”

“Good for you! How adorable. He's waiting, the dear. He really thinks it will all get better.”

“God is good!” some religious person says, as if she is saying, “Panama is an isthmus.” Who says such things so matter-of-factly? God is good? Where do you live? God is good! Said by the same people who think they are going to win Powerball every time they buy a ticket. God is good?

These days are an exciting time for New Atheists, and I wonder, who is not a new atheist? Who does not pass into the cold? We all wish for something as clear and convincing as science to bind up all wounds, heal every ill, patch up all rents in the existential fabric. So that nothing ever goes down again.

I STOOD ON MY ROOF on the Lower East Side and watched the second tower fall. Its crumbling and falling felt like the most unreal and the most solidly real thing I had ever seen. It was as if the falling were a kind of creation. A col-

lapsing of concrete and mass and purpose and will so resolute and final that it seemed in its very nature to be a new thing. It went down in a cascade of gray and black powder, and I expected some kind of mystical spirit shadow to remain there, because how could nothing be there? But there was no such consolation for a distant viewer.

Instantly, it seemed, the names and faces of the missing appeared taped to lampposts, street signs, bus stops and subway walls. Their faces stared out as their families asked, "Have you seen this person? Where is this man, this woman? Call this number if you have seen her."

It was also as if the dead were staring out and asking us, the living, *Where are you? Who are you? This is not a joke. We really are missing. Why are you still walking around while we have vanished into vapor? What gives you the right? The right to be on the living side of this smudged, torn, and godforsaken flyer while we languish among the disappeared?*

And far, far away, as all the numbers click in the right slots, God is good!

GOD IS GOOD? God is just?

I met Philip and we prayed together in his room. We crouched down on the floor and looked at his candles and a rocket he had drawn and pictures of his dead brother, Aaron, the archangel Michael, Jesus, a priest named Henri. These icons sat in his prayer corner, a

cardboard box covered with a red bandana; somehow Philip had found me worthy to help him worship here.

When we prayed, Philip, who was in his fifties, talked to his brother Aaron, who himself could never talk, as if Aaron were right there. Philip said to Aaron, “You are in my heart,” and he meant it. As if Aaron were, literally, a tiny man abiding in Philip’s aorta. He also said to Aaron, every time, “You gotta help me.”

I wondered if Philip said this because his mind was ravaged by illness, because he was hunched over when he walked, and he couldn’t speak very fast, or eat very fast, or get anywhere fast. Because every single solitary morning, Philip hated waking up.

If Philip was in his room and needed someone, he put his fingers in his mouth to whistle but instead a yell came out. Or, if he fell off his bed while trying to get his clothes on, he would shout, “Somebody come and help me!” Sometimes he stumbled when he walked into a room, and with the precious bravado of a child sitcom actor he would mutter, “Some days you just can’t win.” One day he said to me, “You are in my heart.” I froze, and stopped breathing.

PHILIP LIVED outside Toronto with a cluster of people like him in homes with those who assisted them. It was called L’Arche Daybreak. I was there as one who had just finished the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. I

came cresting on a spiritual wave. Sometimes I looked around and couldn't help but feel how beautiful and spiritual it must be to live as one of these weak, vulnerable, and honest people who talk directly to the dead; who yell happily when they mean to whistle; who make loud, moaning noises in church because they have no control over their bodies and voices. How holy and blessed are these wounded people. Here at L'Arche, the flood waters were baptismal, everything anointed.

Nevertheless, even if all that happened at L'Arche was holy, it was disturbing to consider the pain of being anointed like that. Maybe those back-pew moans were not delightful. Maybe they were moans arising from the horror of being engulfed and drowned and helpless to do anything about it because you just don't have it in you. Being at the mercy of people like me who come and go for six weeks, six months, a year at a time. Being taken care of, all the time, day in and day out. Being always a burden, always suffering.

Maybe that is why Philip watched Batman movies, put on Superman t-shirts, slept in Spiderman pajamas. To clothe himself in powers alien to his body. There he was, stumbling around with that big red "S" on his chest, and it all felt like a cruel joke.

THE BITTER JOKE that we fall for every time is that God created us to be greatly depleted so that we could become



abundant in God. The Lord cast us deep into the well of mean existence so we would grasp onto the rope he throws down. We rely on God to get us through the terrible things God lets happen to us.

It's all a set-up. Like giving a child five cents when admission to the fair is twice that. The child has to come back for the extra nickel, and to get past the gate again he has to come back again, and keep coming back, and back, and back, and has to be grateful, oh so grateful, this kid, to the Keeper of the Coin!

The fix is in, and has been basically forever. God made us sick so we would reach out to the physician in him. I boast of my weakness, says Paul, for when I am weak then I am strong, for the Lord is strong in me. I boast of my obliterated face on the subway wall, my body trapped in a tiny cell. I brag that I hate getting up in the morning, that when I use the toilet, I need someone to wipe for me. God made us frail so that God could swoop in and be mighty for us, and how needy, self-involved, and completely screwed up is that?

WHY IS IT THIS WAY? It is the child's most basic question, dealing with the most bewildering thing of all. Referring to life and its diamond-sharp edges, harsh enough to throw us down at a moment's notice, all overseen by a God whose love, coiled up in the cells of our cells, firing every moment of our existence, evidently drives people into the ground on a daily basis. Why?

This question rears up again and again in our lives. Who gets the healthy genes and why? Why does one financial analyst have to jump from the seventieth floor while another walks away in a dust-covered suit? Behold any crumbling human sputtering and begging on the sidewalk: There but for the grace of God. . . .

Really? The shining thread of God's grace was held out to you and not to him? And he received from the Lord what? A sharp stick in the eye?

Sometimes the goodness of God, the order of the universe, and the joy of any given life appears to be a tightrope made of braided grass: it could disintegrate at any moment.

How come? We can look around at the created world, we who inhabit it as poorly as we do, and we can ask: Who thought any of this was a good idea? It may be, we are told, that the planet is careening toward irreversible catastrophe. Who let this happen? Is it something that can even occur? Can we really blow it, utterly and entirely, the energy of us collapsing the entire gift of creation? And if so, is it really our fault? Weren't we all just trying to drive to church?

It matters little, I think, that these eternal questions wind through the life of a Catholic religious, a Jesuit sent from this place to that, plains reservations to humming cities, El Mozote to a small, dark-lit chapel, and points between. Any soul paying the barest attention to life gasps, at least now and then, at the apparent ludicrousness of it all, no?

The glory of God, says St. Irenaeus, is the human being fully alive. And any human fully alive can get shattered by life again and again. Which leads to the question: When will God get enough glory that we can quit being so completely alive and just sit around for a few minutes?