

ANSWERING TOUGH QUESTIONS

Suffering Can Be Good*When we let the cross shape our theology.*

Philippians 2:5–8

It is remarkable that there were so few attempts to solve the “problem of evil” prior to the 18th century. Certainly there was no shortage of suffering and disaster. Life was nasty, brutish, and short. In Martin Luther’s day the Black Death had decimated the population of Europe and still threatened. Villages and towns lived in constant dread of fires and natural disasters.

Is it not curious that only when life seems to be easier do thinkers set out to “justify God”? Perhaps it is as Hannah Arendt remarks, “When man could no longer *praise*, they turned their greatest conceptual efforts to *justifying* God.” But the problem of suffering should not just be rolled up with the problem of evil. Only false speaking lures us into doing that.

Good Suffering

Evil does cause suffering—but not always. Love can cause suffering. Beauty can be the occasion for suffering. Children with their demands and impetuous cries can cause suffering. Just the toil and trouble and stress of daily life can cause suffering. Yet surely these are not to be termed evil. Humans have an unfortunate tendency to try to prove that God has nothing to do with suffering and evil. Meanwhile, suffering goes on.

Martin Luther suffered spiritually and physically. But he saw God’s hand in the suffering and wrote: “He kills our will that his may be established in us. He subdues the flesh and its lusts that the spirit and its desires may come to life.” Beyond his own experience—based, in fact, on the cross—he asserted that whoever does not know God hidden in suffering does not know God at all. If God has nothing to do with suffering, what is he involved with?

Salvation Through Suffering

Suffering, the Bible proves, can be redemptive. This must be the case because it is only through suffering and the cross that sinners can see and come to know God. The cross is suffering. But it is suffering from God and it is good. That is the deepest reason why we call the Friday of the crucifixion good.

Rather than knowing God in a way that would be convenient for us, the only way to know God is through suffering, the suffering of the one who saves us. Luther called this a theology of the cross—a theology that calls a spade a spade, and suffering, when it is redemptive, good.

—GERHARD O. FORDE, Adapted from *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, © 1997 by Wm. B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI. Used with permission; all rights reserved. To order this book on demand title, contact the publisher at 800.253.7521 or visit www.eerdmans.com.

Reflect

1. What are some attitudes and actions leaders can take to live out the truth that suffering is not always evil?
2. What are the important points in the teaching above that we would like to pass on to our congregation?
What are some occasions we could use to teach this?
3. How must we change our teaching about suffering to make room for God’s redemption in its midst?