

# I'm a Christian because...

## Of suffering

An Open Letter to Those Who Suffer

Dear sufferer,

In so far as you experience the misery, pain and woe of this life (such as the ache of hunger, scars from violence, injustice from oppression, misery, war, cruelty, despair, death, etc.) and you experience it alone, it is a failure of the Church to witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Fundamentally, if the Christian Scriptures teach us anything, it is that God entered into the chaos of existence to experience life's wretchedness with us. Those who would aspire to follow Jesus Christ are called to "go and do likewise" as his witnesses in the world. Any failure of the Church to do so is evidence that it has tragically missed the point.

Many people, believers and non-believers alike, argue about the so-called "problem of evil," that is, the probability of the existence of God given the quantity and magnitude of evil and suffering in the world that we observe around us. So be it. The existence of evil and suffering is not up for dispute. Both Christians and Non-Christians confront evil, but the difference between them is that the Christian has no choice about what to do next. For the Christian can do nothing but fight injustice, suffer alongside those who suffer, and strive to alleviate the misery of this world. Any failure to do so can only be confessed as a rebellion against that which Jesus Christ both demonstrated and instructed his followers to do.

The God of the Christian tradition does not explain to us why there is suffering. Part of suffering's horror is its very unintelligibility. Our attempts to give it reasonableness often end up looking trite, simplistic, or chillingly insensitive. Instead, God responds to our human situation through a mystery that Christians call the Incarnation, where a divine God becomes human in Jesus Christ, taking on the very same flesh and vulnerability that we experience. The person of Jesus Christ is the heart of Christianity's response to suffering. Jesus did not explain to us why we suffer in words, but rather entered into our suffering in the flesh. The hope in Christianity therein lies: that we may be comforted in our situation by a God who suffers with us, who shares in our agonies and who has become like us for our sake. Because of this fact, we can go further and dismiss the familiar explanations for suffering, namely, that we can "learn from it", or that we can use what we learn from the treatment of our suffering to eventually overcome its cause or to protest oppression.

In suffering, our only hope lies in our ability to place alongside the alternative narratives of pointless suffering a story of suffering that teaches us that we are not abandoned by God.<sup>1</sup> To me, the biblical account of Jesus is just that story. According to the testimony of Scripture, God became human in Jesus Christ and his life, ministry, teaching and death to communicate everything that God has to say to us. If that is true, and I think it is, then Jesus' compassion for the poor, socially outcast, and downtrodden are actually God's expression of solidarity and love to suffering people. His identification with suffering does not stop there, however. His entrance into the human condition climaxes in his crucifixion. Here, in his prayer of desperation, as he cries out from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me," God in Jesus Christ identifies fully with every desperate cry that has ever been prayed. Sufferer, you are not alone.

In his teachings, culminating in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his followers to lead lives that embody his own solidarity with those who suffer. He calls for a human community to respond and meet their tangible needs. This is the calling of the Church, to reflect the presence of Christ in history, and be a body of people who like Him, share in the suffering of the world. Christians testify to the truth of the mysterious Incarnation by being there for others and carrying their burdens, thus fulfilling the duty laid on them by Christ himself. In Saint Paul's letter to the Christian church in Galatia he instructs the believers there to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian and pastor, offers that the Church is not a group of people who are merely worshipers of Christ, but rather the church is Christ himself taking form in a community that lives for others, caring for neighbors, both individually and corporately, who suffer and face the reality of death.

I leave the practice of approaching the problem of evil and pain in our world as an intellectual or theological question to philosophers and theologians. Talking about pain as an abstraction misses what I believe to be the Christian witness—a message of humility where we are not given the answers, but the person of Jesus Christ. Christians are called not to stand outside of suffering and hypothesize about its origins or justifications, but to embrace sufferers as Jesus did with personal love and compassion.

You who are hungry, weary, sick, grieved, troubled by afflictions and overwhelmed by the hardships of life, though veiled in mystery, God has met you in your suffering. If you go through these trials in isolation, it is not God's fault but my fault—mine and other Christians' failure to faithfully witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

With hope,

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<sup>1</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley. *God, Medicine and Suffering*, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 6:2