

The Problem of Suffering.

THE problem of suffering is one of the most difficult which the human mind can face, and it is doubtful if there is any adequate theoretical solution. The heart of the problem is really here. How can we reconcile the world as we know it, containing as it does such a vast amount of pain, with a God who is good and almighty? The challenge to theism is direct and must be met. Epicurus expressed it centuries ago and men still feel it. "If God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, then He is not omnipotent; if He could but will not, He is malevolent, if He has both the power and the will, whence then is evil?" Unless we come to terms with this problem and arrive at some conclusion which really helps us we shall not be able to hold our faith with assurance, or be of service to others. If we can come to no adequate theoretical solution we must at least come to a partial and working one, which equips us to deal with the untoward facts of life with courage and conviction of ultimate victory.

The problem is age-long and many are the attempted solutions. The Hebrew answer was sin. The tide of the world's misery was due to disobedience to the law of Yahweh, and since the unit in the sight of Yahweh was the community, the innocent suffered alike with the guilty. Thinking in terms of "corporate personality" to a degree which the modern mind often fails to appreciate, the innocent were regarded as not only legally responsible for the guilt of one of their number, but actually contaminated by it. The story of Achan is a good example.¹ The clan shares in the guilt of the head. With the development of the conception of individual personality, with its own moral responsibility and rights in the sight of God and men, such as is expressed in prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the belief in "corporate personality" was of necessity modified and the problem of the suffering of the innocent presented itself acutely. The Book of Job is one long debate on the reason and justice of it. It is a book full of the interrogation mark, and Job never has an answer given him, save that his sufferings must be accepted as a mystery on the basis of faith. The scene beyond the veil of the prologue is hidden from his eyes. He must be content that God is well pleased with him.

The greatest contribution in the Old Testament to the problem of suffering is that given in the Songs of the Suffering Servant by Deutero-Isaiah. Without discussing the vexed question as to who the sufferer is in the writer's mind, we see

¹ Joshua vii. 24-26.

one afflicted not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. His sufferings are not fruitless. They evoke astonishment, penitence, and confession on the part of the beholders. They have redemptive value and bring the penitent unto allegiance and service of Yahweh. "He was wounded for our transgressions," they cry. "He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."² There is justification in the suffering because it served God's redemptive purpose.

The New Testament directly carries on the higher teaching of the Old with regard to suffering which is not due to personal sin. In the figure of the Christ we have One who is sinless yet afflicted. He loves men with a love which is utterly self-giving. He identifies Himself with the world just as it is. In this loving identification He bears the full force of the world's sin on Himself that He may break its power, reveal God and mediate His forgiveness, and reconcile the penitent unto the Father. He becomes to Paul the pledge of God's final victory over sin, sorrow, and death in all His creation, since in Christ it has once been realised. Though creation may "groan and travail in pain together until now" it shall be liberated. It looks forward with eager longing to the manifestation of the sons of God in whom God's victory is completely achieved, and through whom the time of blessing shall come for all life, even that of the beast. The last word in the story of redemption is, "Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more: the first things are passed away."³ The scope of redemption is cosmic.

To the Hebrew mind the crux of the problem is sin. It is somehow involved in this travail of creation. I do not think we can doubt this is the point of view, even in the New Testament. Certainly it was Paul's. "Man, 'the roof and crown of things,' broke away from God, and his rebellion sent a dislocation through the whole system of Nature; so that Nature, while retaining through much of its Divine origin, is, in its decay and suffering, a great mirror in which man may see the image of his own evil."⁴ This view would not commend itself to all Christians to-day; yet, despite its real difficulties, it contains an immense truth. For if we could abstract from the world's life all the suffering which has its origin in the sin of the past and the present, how much less the world's suffering would be! A residuum would remain, perhaps a considerable one, but it would be insignificant in comparison with what now exists. There are

² Isaiah liii. 5.

³ Rev. xxi. 4.

⁴ Dr. I. S. Carroll, *Motherhood of God*, p. 10.

factors in our world-view which did not pertain in Paul's day. They have their bearing on the problem of suffering and must be reckoned with in any treatment of it. They arise from our living in an era of scientific enquiry and achievement. Reference will be made to them later.

Whilst the Hebrew feels the problem is sin, and began there, the Eastern mind, as represented in Buddhism, puts its finger on suffering. "The fact that life as we know it," says Mrs. Rhys Davids, "is largely made up of painful and sorrowful experiences is the foundation from which Buddhism as religion, ethics, philosophy, takes its start. It claims as the supreme merit in the Dhamma, that it has recognised this fact, understood it causally, and surmounted its effects."⁵ Existence to the Buddhist is suffering and, though it is denied by Mrs. Davids, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Buddhism is pessimistic in its judgement on life. Its salvation is in the provision of a discipline and a way from the intolerable burden of earth-life into the selfless bliss of Nirvana. So long as "thirst," or desire, persists there will be a succession of re-incarnations, therefore he who faithfully follows the way will be freed at long last from all desire and the burden of existence. Fundamentally Buddhism denies a permanent self or soul, there is but a succession of states of consciousness. The standpoint is that of Hume, whose philosophy has been criticised and discarded. We have not only states of consciousness, but also the consciousness of succession. We are bound to posit a permanent self, an ego, to experience them. The Buddhist psychology is out of date and untenable. Though it holds its sway over millions still, it has no future. The point for us just now is its judgement that life is misery because of its suffering. This is partly due to the vast amount of misery, largely remediable, which exists in the East, and because man is at heart a hedonist to a far greater extent than he realises. But the world was not framed for pleasure as its highest good.

The Buddhist would find a way from the burden of life, the Stoic would stand up to it as a soldier. In its day Stoicism attracted some of the finest souls of the ancient world, and none can resist responding to many of the lofty and manly utterances of Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations*. Stoicism was a philosophy of life and an attitude towards it. But, philosophy apart, its great weakness was that it ministered to a too cold self-sufficiency. Pain is real and might be acute, nevertheless it is one of the indifferent things which the wise and strong man must bear unmoved. "As for pain, if it is intolerable it will

⁵ *Buddhism*, by Mrs. Rhys Davids, p. 92.

quickly dispatch you. If it stays long it is bearable. Your mind in the meantime preserves herself calm by the strength of the opining faculty, and suffers nothing. And for your limbs that are hurt by the pain, if they can complain, let them do it."⁶ One must stand up nobly and be unmoved by the hard facts of existence. Even to sorrow over the loss of a beloved wife or child is unworthy. Some of the injunctions found in Epictetus are almost inhuman. The gentler and affectionate elements of personality are to be crushed and denied. The attitude of the Stoic is really that of defiance, and required a measure of self-sufficiency which proved impossible, and ministered to spiritual pride. In spite of the brotherhood the system enjoined, the loftiness of many of its counsels, and the real nobility of many of its disciples, Stoicism failed to maintain its hold; for it did not relate its good to the manifold experiences of life, of which suffering is one of the most common, obvious, and perplexing. Its emphasis on courage and manliness must find their counterpart in any creed that is worthy and equips men for the stern battle of life, but it would leave man unfeeling. It strives to win its victory by robbing personality of some of its chiefest charms, and the sensitiveness which is essential for fulness of life and true brotherhood.

Of the modern attempts at solution of the problem Meliorism and Christian Science are certainly to be regarded as among the outstanding. The Great War, which so immensely increased the world's suffering, thrust the old problem of pain and moral evil acutely into the foreground. Hence the doctrine of the limited God of Meliorism, the theme of Mr. H. G. Wells' *God the Invisible King* and Mr. Britling sees it through, which G. K. Chesterton so wittily described as "Mr. Britling sees it half through." Evil was not to be explained, but fought. Suffering abounds and is to be met by love, sympathy, and service of all kinds. God is the Commander-in-Chief of the army of good men in the battle. He is a finite being, with a future before him which he has to make good. He is even described as "young" in the *Invisible King*. He needs men to help him, the issue is uncertain, but every victory gives ground for hope. The God of Meliorism is not the God of orthodox theism, and one cannot read *God the Invisible King* without feeling that the real God is not the Finite Being of the foreground, but the Veiled Being in the background. "The error of both Stoicism and Meliorism lies in trying to turn what is partial into an absolute. Because a man is summoned to oppose the evil that is in the world with all his might, it is supposed that he can 'carry on' till the

⁶ *Meditations*, Book VII., 33.

victory is his. Suppose, however, that this rough dualism between the good man and the wicked world does not represent the real situation. Suppose that the real source of evil is not without, but within, and that the conflict that is being waged in the world is the image and the outcome of a more devouring strife that rages in man's own soul. Then the result will be, as happened in the history of Stoicism, that the self must give up its self-sufficiency and must seek the true and the good, not by self-assertion, but by self-surrender, and see in its attainment of virtue and knowledge the disclosure and communication of One who includes the universe in His consciousness and His control."⁷ The fighter can "carry on," then, without anxiety, because the victory has been won by a Power which is also working in him. The end is gained through co-operation and sacrificial ministry.

Christian Science meets the problem of pain by denying its reality. Pain exists in the mind, but only there. Heal the mind and it ceases to be. But if pain be illusion, why not pleasure? And if evil is illusion because finite, so may good also be. We are asked to rise to the height of the Absolute, which is impossible for man. The philosophy which treats the material world as unreal—however difficult it may be to define matter—will never be able to hold the field indefinitely, for it does not do justice to the facts of experience. We would not deny that some of the cures claimed by Christian Science have really happened, but present-day psychological research and treatment have shown that much disease is not physical but psychical in its nature, and without the denial of the material world it can be dissipated. "It has been left to Mrs. Eddy to deduce the unreality of matter and all evil as a necessary consequence from the premiss that God is infinite, and God is Spirit,"⁸ says Christian Science. But this has been the language of pantheism all down the ages, and we do not get over the reality of anything by refusing to acknowledge it. Within our finite existence, life as we know it in this world, pain is certainly a reality.

Without dealing any more with various attempts to meet the problem of pain, let us look at the world as it is and then ask how Christian theism endeavours to meet it.

First we see that we live in a world where physical calamity may overwhelm us at any time. Earthquake, flood, and storm smite down alike the evil and the good. In the days of the Hebrew prophets these would be looked upon as the direct

⁷ Article on "Suffering," E.R.E., p. 3b.

⁸ Article, *Christian Science*, E.R.E., p. 577b.

judgements of God. We to-day know them to be due to the operation of natural law, which has no regard for man. "An earthquake in India," says Stanley Jones, "shook down a mission building and left a brothel standing nearby."⁹ Terrible as may be the things that happen, we realise that it is better to live in a universe of law than caprice. The same world which brings upon us the earthquake also enables us to sow seed and reap a harvest. We are able to plan and fashion, and to some extent predict the future, just because we live in a universe of law. There is a problem for theism raised which we have to face. But I am prepared to believe that the world in which we have to live is best designed to fulfil the purposes of its Creator, and that in its fashioning it must needs pass through the physical changes we know. Those purposes include far more than the comfort and security of man. We cannot read all the dark riddle which Nature offers us, and it is well for us to confess it. Again, in the development of our personality in all its wide significance and our adaptation to environment, with all which that includes, it seems inevitable and inescapable we should pass through some measure of suffering. And although we may greatly exaggerate the amount and consciousness of pain in the animal creation, one cannot but conclude it is there. "From the point where, in the evolutionary process, a brain is developed, upward through all ranks of being, suffering is an unvarying element in experience." It seems to belong to the very weft and warp of terrestrial existence. Up to a point we see it has beneficial ministry. It has played its part in the education and preservation of the race. On the physical level it warns us that something is wrong with the body and must, if possible, be removed. The biological approach to the problem of pain does help to justify its place to a real extent. But for us men it is always something more than a biological problem. It afflicts mind and spirit, and can reach even to such a degree as to dethrone reason itself.

What has Christianity to say? It cannot be said that it has a solution which is intellectually satisfying and complete or attempts it. What it does do is to give us a revelation of God in Jesus Christ and make possible an experience of fellowship wherein pain is made endurable, or surmounted, and used for the highest spiritual good, which is Christlike character.

It is the great strength and merit of the Christian faith that it does not ignore the facts of life. It treats moral evil as a reality. It deals with the world as it is in the experience of men. Jesus went amongst men with eyes open to the facts of

⁹ *Christ and Human Suffering*, p. 26.

suffering and sin, and redeemed men from both wherever possible. And Christianity believes, as its fundamental truth, that in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have our highest and most spiritually satisfying revelation of God. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." The personality of Jesus, which is greater than anything He said, is for us "the Light of the world." In Him the intensest suffering made no barrier to the realisation of the highest good, and out of the heart of it comes the affirmation that God is love. The suffering that He endured was made to serve the redemptive purposes of God. It was transmuted to highest gain to Christ and all mankind.

There are considerations often not sufficiently recognised even by many Christians in dealing with the problem of suffering. They do not relate the almightiness of God to the reality of a universe of law and the fact of human freedom. It is a false conception of almightiness which is expressed in the famous dilemma of Epicurus and others on similar lines. It cannot mean the mere exercise of arbitrary will regardless of the situation. It means power to realise purpose finally despite the reality of human freedom and the constitution of the universe which God Himself has created, and wherein He has placed man. Christian thinking must recognise this and always have it in mind when speaking of God as Almighty; difficult as it may be to give a satisfactory statement of the relation of God to His world. We can never know fully the resources which are in God, but we may reverently say there are limitations of His power due to human freedom, which may thwart and delay but which will not make impossible His final victory. They will be made to serve His ends, as the permitted suffering of the Cross issued in victory, not defeat, and has drawn men unto the very Christ they rejected and slew. With this conception of omnipotence we must approach the problem of moral evil as Christians.

The God revealed in Christ is one whom we can love, for He is no spectator, coldly aloof and indifferent to the suffering of man. He is transcendent, yet immanent and implicated in our experience. If the prophet could say of Jehovah "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them,"¹⁰ still more may we say it of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This truth of the Divine presence and pity needs to be accepted by our hearts. No longer can we believe that suffering is inconsistent with the supremacy of Divine love, since we see it taken into the experience of God

¹⁰ Isaiah lxiii, 9.

Himself. An obstacle to faith is lifted when we know that God as revealed in Christ shares in the travail of creation. And this we must hold to be part of the joy of the Divine.¹¹

The Christian Gospel is one of reconciliation. It reconciles us to God and life, and in that reconciliation there is healing. The pain that might be an obstacle to faith becomes an element of experience which drives us closer to God, as did Paul's thorn in the flesh. Though we may still pray for its removal, and take all means to end it, we refuse to let it make us rebel and become bitter. We bear it with God. And all of us could tell of many a fine soul who through the open secret of fellowship with God through Jesus Christ has become ennobled, even amid a crucible of pain. And this witness has been of high value for others. In his novel, *The Castons*, Lord Lytton tells of the old colonel whose heart is almost broken over a wayward son, but when his grief is greatest he reads again the story of Robert Hall, a dissenting minister, and his Christian bearing of a load of pain, and says, "I haven't complained, have I?"

In the fellowship of Christ pain is taken as a challenge to ministry of all kinds. Man cannot be indifferent to the suffering of his fellows. The love of Christ and the compassion of Christ will move us to prayer for the sufferer, and every possible ministry of comfort and alleviation. Individually and corporately Christians must be at this work, and the record of Christianity shows the variety of ways in which Christians have been moved to service. The work of God within the soul has led to co-operation with God in the world without, and thus other men have been brought into the fellowship of Divine love, which has enabled them to transmute their ills to highest gain. All things, pain included, can be made to work together for good to them that love God. In a word, the Christian solution to the problem of suffering consists in showing us how to deal with it. There is a progressive triumph as we get deeper into the Divine fellowship. The achievements of the saints point the path along which we must go. They realised that moral good, not pleasure, was the end of life, and they wrought it out in fellowship with a God of love despite the martyrdom and pain which was often their lot. They believed the end was spiritual victory because their hope was in Christ.

Yet when we have said all, suffering does oft remain for us a dark shadow on the face of God. We are prepared to believe this world, in Keats' fine phrase, is "a vale of soul-making" and the spiritual universe is on the side of those that

¹¹ Heb. xii. 2.

take it thus. We know it is true for ourselves, however unworthily at times we seem to live upon that truth. But we know it still better in some it has been our privilege to meet and try to serve. Out of their pain they have won a rare beauty of character which has made us humble. The secret has been in a life "hid with Christ in God." The dark shadow remains when, for reasons beyond our understanding, mind and spirit seem so overwhelmed as to be incapable of laying hold of the sources of spiritual relief. Yet as Charles Lamb was the good angel to Mary we must believe that the Divine Father must be that and more to His suffering children, who live in the realms from which we would fain lift them if we could.

"Is there another life?" asks Keats in one of his letters. "Shall I awaken and find all this a dream? There must be, we cannot be created for this sort of suffering."¹² We have often said this as we have stood by a bed of pain. Not because we have despairingly flung back on immortality as a hope to help us out of a difficulty, but because we have felt it belongs to the Christian faith. Its ground of assurance has been the Christ.

Spiritual defeat in the experience of suffering is what we must chiefly fear, and that defeat is often seen in the cynicism, bitterness, and defiance which we sometimes meet in literature and life; and men falsely think it victory.

We must play the game with a careless smile
 Tho' there's nothing in the hand;
 We must toil as if we were worth our while
 Spinning our ropes of sand;
 And laugh and cry, and live and die
 At the waft of an Unseen Hand.

It was a finer spirit that said, "Thanks be to God that giveth us the victory."

The sunshine of life is greater than its shadows. In thinking of its pain we must not forget its manifold delights, and remember that, given a nature sensitive to the beauty of the sunset, the light upon the sea and the joys of fellowship, we must also be susceptible to ugliness and ill. There is a penalty attached to every nobler gift. It carries with it the possibility of its opposite. We cannot justify all the suffering we see. Our finite mind comes up against the Veil again and again, but we can still believe in a light beyond the Veil because of our faith in a God who is known to us in Christ. And in His hands are the final issue of all things. If there be any answer to this great problem of suffering it is to be found only in His fellowship. It is to the worth of that fellowship we must witness in testimony.

¹² Lord Houghton's *Keats*, Introduction, p. xiii.

of all kinds, the chief of which being what it makes of us and what it compels us to do in loving service on behalf of the world. The victory of God over moral evil does seem to await the co-operation of our will, and as we offer it there is healing for ourselves and a ministry which in its range and effectiveness may be far greater than we dream or know. The souls of the past who have lived by the higher values and "overcome evil with good" have often inspired the victories of to-day. Their example or their writings have been used by the Spirit of God for the quickening and comfort of souls they never knew. Christians of to-day do not live by the higher values in vain, even though they do it amid the experience of untoward ills which seem most unjust. "What makes this foreign doctor tend to the sick and wounded when these very men destroyed his hospital?" His wife, who was a Christian, replied, "It is Christianity." Said General Chiang very thoughtfully, "Then I must be a Christian. This was one of the three influences that made the General (Chiang Kai Shek), then President of China, decide to become a Christian at a time when the Anti-Christian Movement was sweeping China."¹³ The Christian solution is a challenge to faith and a challenge to service in the assurance that God's purpose for ourselves and the world, which is good, is worked out to a triumphant end as Christ dwells in us and we in Him.

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¹³ *Christ and Human Suffering*, p. 109.

Baptists in Bridgwater, by H. J. Hamlin and A. J. Whitby (Kingsgate Press, 1s.).

A feature of Rev. A. W. Gummer Butt's superintendency of the Western Area has been the interest in Baptist history that he has fostered. In the late summer of 1937, he arranged a tour for Dr. Whitley, during which our Vice-President took part in several celebrations and lectured on local history. West country churches have also been encouraged to publish their records. This volume tells of "Three Centuries of Witness" in Bridgwater, and the authors, who are past Presidents of the Western Baptist Association, possess an intimate knowledge of the Churches in the West, and have thus secured a fine background for their story. This is told with pride, for they are proud of their forefathers and the notable record of their Church. The volume is one of the best of its kind, and at one shilling is remarkably cheap.