

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC CHAPLAINS

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“The Meaning of Suffering: Biblical Perspectives”

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PART I: Setting the scene

- I. The Problem of suffering – a nagging dilemma
 - A. Three irreconcilable assertions:
 - 1. God is All Powerful;
 - 2. God is All Loving;
 - 3. There is suffering
- II. Suffering in the bible and how it is explained
- III. Learning to cope with suffering: the Psalms of Lament
- IV. The “Why” of suffering – the classical approach (Law of retribution)

PART II: Other biblical perspectives and conclusions

- V. The mystery of the greater good: redemptive suffering
- VI. Making sense of suffering: Job and Ecclesiastes
- VII. God has the last word: the apocalyptic solution
- VIII. Suffering for the Gospel: redemptive suffering with an apocalyptic twist?
- IX. Suffering: a conclusion without a solution
 - 1. Pain and suffering come from God as a punishment for sin (the Prophets)
 - 2. Misery is created by human beings who abuse and oppress others (the Prophets)
 - 3. God works in suffering to achieve his redemptive purposes (Joseph/Jesus)
 - 4. Pain and misery come as a test from God to see if his people will remain faithful (Job)
 - 5. People cannot know why there is suffering in the world because God chooses not to reveal this kind of information to human beings (Job)
 - 6. Such knowledge is beyond the understanding of mortals (Ecclesiastes)
 - 7. God has temporarily allowed the forces of evil to dominate, thus inflicting suffering on the good and causing the evil to flourish (Daniel); a Christian variation believes that the reversal of fortune will happen in the afterlife, after each person dies (Revelation)
 - 8. Some suffering occurs for the sake of the Gospel (1 Peter)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” (Ps 22: 1)

“Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem” (Ps 137:7)

“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says the Lord...” (Amos 4:6-12; 5:21-24; 9:14-15)

“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you...only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you...” (Joshua 1:5-8)

“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals...so he gave them over to plunderers...” (Judges 2:11-15)

“Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. As many were astonished at him – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance...” (Isaiah 52:13-53:18)

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” (1 Cor 15:3)

“...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood...” (Romans 3:23-25)

“Have you considered my servant Job...he still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause.” (Job 2:3)

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...therefore I have uttered what I did not understand...” (Job 42:2-6)

“This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot.” (Eccles. 5:18-19)

“The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom...” (Dan 7:27)

“Remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here...” (Luke 16:25)

“Now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials...” (1 Pt 1:6)