

# Theology of suffering assignment

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Theology of Suffering: A Contrast To suffer means to submit or be forced to endure (something unpleasant); to endure death, pain, or distress. It is known to happen to everyone, that it is a part of this world that we live in and essentially, there is no escaping it. Looking at it through a scientific lens, the second law of thermodynamics helps with the definition. That the whole world is in a slow downward spiral into death and that is inescapable. Just the thought of this for some people brings them to an emotional pain but the actual effect of it, death, causes a majority of the suffering that is experienced.

Pain and suffering are not partial to a specific person or people group, it is the same across the board. People have different ways coping with the inevitability of it though. Some people choose superficial means or even tangible objects to cope while others turn to a more philosophical source and look at religion and the metaphysical to help understand or even find a reason for the suffering. When looking at religion, or lack thereof, it can be difficult to prescribe an overarching answer to suffering because most religions are very different, especially when it comes to this specific theology. Are they all right? No.

One of the laws of truth, the law of noncontradiction, shows that two opposing subjects cannot both be deemed correct. So in this paper, a contrast will be made between these responses to the labyrinth of suffering that humanity is currently dwelling in. The most common means of managing the pain that this world brings would be that of a superficial means. People will forsake all knowledge, or pursuit of thereof, to find a menial escape from their pain. Consumers find it in their possessions, lovers  
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in their love, people persons In their friends and family, musicians In their music, everyone In their opiates and vices, and so on and so on.

It is the easiest form of mental escape, temporary ignorance. Levi The Poet puts it this way, " I would rather know pain than be numb, but then again, we asked for the opiates to numb the pain for us. " People will seek after something, anything, to dull the pain that they receive from the world around them. These tangible things give no answer to the pain but only provide a way to relieve a portion of it but also adding so much more in the end. All these things are physical which means that they can come and go like the rising of the tides. And when people lose their only means of escape, there is where more pain is found.

It is a false sense of safety, or goodness, that these means provide. They do not give an answer, a reason, or a purpose. Another, more philosophical or knowledgeable, response to the suffering is that of an atheistic worldview. It is difficult, though, to generalize this religion because the only doctrine is that there is no God, or gods. The rest of the ideology is on a person to person basis. The reason why they are interjected, in this paper, with a group of theistic religions is because most atheists believe that if there were a God, or gods, he would destroy evil.

Epicurus said " Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? that is proof enough that there is no God, or gods. So what do they do with suffering? They just believe that it is a part of life. They do not find any

supernatural value, or lack thereof, in it. They accept it, and if they can, better themselves by it. Obviously, they try to avoid it as much as they can. Self-preservation is natural human process, but no other actions are taken.

They respond to suffering by seeing that it is just a natural process of life. Buddhism has a very similar approach to answer suffering as the Atheists do, but a very different means of responding. They believe in the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that life is suffering. That the two coincide and intertwine. Life cannot be if it is lacking suffering and visa versa. The second truth is that the cause of suffering is desire. Opposite of the views of the simpleton, who put desire into inanimate objects to escape sorrow, the Buddhists believe that this is how pain is increased.

The third truth is that it can be cured by enlightenment. Enlightenment is the attainment of spiritual knowledge or insight, that which frees a person from the cycle of rebirth, or reincarnation. So they believe that they can reach a point in their spiritual journeys where they escape the cycle of rebirth, in which can be seen as a cycle of suffering because rebirth is a new life and life is suffering. Therefore, we are back to the third noble truth that suffering ceases at this point and enlightenment begins. The fourth truth is the path in which cessation of suffering is achieved, the way in which you reach enlightenment.

It is called the Eightfold Path, which is: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This belief is in consecutive order and you must perfectly complete and integrate one "right" in your life in order to move to

the next one. This is why it is considered to be a spiritual Journey. The Buddhists believe that the path to enlightenment is completely resting upon their own shoulders. That if they are suffering, then it is their fault for not completing all of the aspects of the Eightfold Path.

They try to escape suffering by escaping life by having all aspects of their lives in the right. The only problem with this is that they are still living when they reach this point of enlightenment. If this is the case, then they are still in suffering, using their own terminology. Also, a person does not know what stage they was at in the past life when they embark on his or her new birth. This is their answer to suffering though. It makes good general points on if a person is the best that they can be and detaches themselves from the world, then this person will suffer less.

Well, they believe that a person will cease suffering. Although, as previously stated, if a person is living, then they are suffering. This is shown in the Buddhist's first noble truth. Islam's response to the suffering in the world is a bit different than that of those previously stated though. They answer it by saying that their God, Allah, is sovereign. Meaning that if he wanted to end suffering, he would; but he doesn't, so he must have a reason for it. They trust Allah and say that he is above their understanding but is fair, wise, and knowing.

They do not say that he is completely good like the Christians describe their God. This could be their way of explaining why there is evil in the world. That Allah created it. Their response to this, as well as suffering, is that Allah is above their understanding. It is difficult for any theologian to break through

will get is that Allah is sovereign, fair, and has a purpose in what he is doing. This is a simple, and unsatisfying, answer to a big question. Christianity differs from the first few world-views but closely resembles that of Islam.

The only difference is that the Christian God, God or JEHOVA, can be known by His children. He is sovereign and has a purpose for everything He does, but He is also completely good. He has also revealed Himself through revelation of His word through the Bible. There is no evil that dwells in Him as stated in the book of James in the Christian Bible which also contrasts the Islamic view of their God. Now, Christianity completely contrasts the other views that were addressed. Buddhism says that the amount a person suffers is based solely on their ability to do right.

Christianity says that there are none that are naturally righteous and that the only way to become righteous is through faith in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Christianity believes that in the beginning of creation, man sinned which cursed all of humankind to be in slavery to sin. That the human nature is imperfect and sinful and unable to be perfect or sinless on their own, but through faith in Jesus. This contrasts the view of the Buddhists because they believe that righteousness is a journey traveled by one's own ability, while Christians do not believe that they can do this on their own strength.

Christianity obviously contrasts Atheism in its only doctrine, that there is no God. Atheists prove this by the simple fact of there is evil and suffering in the world, see Epicurus' quote. Christian's combat this by their theology of free will. That God gave mankind the choice to serve Him, do good, or serve themselves, sin. That evil and sin were not created by God but by His

creation of choice. God wants his creation to love Him back but there is no choice of love if one cannot choose. So when God created the ability for His children to love Him back, evil was a byproduct.

This evil is not within God but as one could see in previous statements, that it is separate from Him. So the Atheistic view that God is not real because He does not destroy evil is invalid. Also, He is going to destroy evil as stated in revelation. That His children will spend eternity with Him in heaven and the earth will be no more. He does not destroy evil, in the present, because He has a purpose for it and has made known His purpose through His Word, which combats the Islamic worldview. Christianity believes that God did not create evil or suffering but it was a byproduct of us choosing not to love God.

They believe that until Christ's death on the cross for the forgiveness of people's sins, an atonement for them, man has been enslaved to sin. They say that Christ sets them free from the bondage of sin, but there is still suffering though, even when there is freedom from sin. Why? Because God has a purpose for it. C. S Lewis states in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, " Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. " Lewis describes pain as a means that God brings His children nearer to Him.

To awaken them to draw them close. Throughout the Bible, it makes mention to Christians to tell them how and why they are to deal with sufferings. In Romans 5: 3-5, it states "... but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and

character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, even given to us. " In this chapter, Paul is writing to the Romans promising that there will be sufferings that come upon the Christians, but they need to endure them and actually rejoice in them.

This is contrary to every other worldview that there is. That God is calling His people to rejoice when they suffer. This seems like a happy go lucky, head in the clouds cop out. But it is not. In verse 5, it speaks of rejoicing because of the hope that is God, and the rest of the chapter goes on to describe what that hope is. That Christians are now Justified, counted righteous, are reconciled with God, and have obtained grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This is why they can rejoice, because their sufferings are nothing compared to the promises that are given to them.

Another mention in the Bible on suffering is James 1: 2-4, " 2Count it all Joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. " James is saying that Christians are to count it all Joy, consider it a blessing, that they get to suffer. That it is a privilege to endure suffering. Why? Because it will end up making them better people, and more like their leader, Christ. It is also promised here that Christians will suffer.

James states that Christians should count it all Joy when they fall into trials. Promising that they will. A verse like these is 1 Peter 5: 10, " And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish



you. 1 ITO him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. " This states that the suffering is temporary but will eventually be used to strengthen and establish those who endure the suffering. The main problem that people see with these verses is that they seem so easy to do.

That yes, Christians are suppose to endure sufferings and things will get better for them, but enduring suffering is not a walk in the park. Take a death of a loved one, for example. How can someone rejoice in a death, especially one who was possibly a " non-believer. " This task seems incredibly morbid and cynical. Also, it does not seem that these previous verses can apply to this kind of suffering. That someone is now dead, and for what? Their own betterment. No one will rightly choose the death of a loved one in hopes to better themselves.

This is where it seems that Christianity has a flaw, but later in the book of Romans, Paul speaks more of the promises in 8: 18, " And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 1 ITO him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. " This answers the previous question of the suffering from the death of a loved one. That this world is only temporary and a future glory will be shown to those who have and keep the faith.

This, though, does not answer the fact that your loved one may be in Hell. With this question, Jesus states in the Sermon on the Mount that people should not be the judges of their own kind's salvation. God is ultimately just, good, and nobody knows specifically who will be saved and condemned. It is

not up to people, and that is why God tells people not to Judge. They are not Him. They are not the Judge. But this verse in Romans 8, gives hope to Christian when they receive their promise of suffering, that it is nothing compared to the insurmountable goodness that is to be revealed to them.

Christians are also given a reason to suffer in 1 Peter 4: 12-16, as though something strange were happening to you. 13But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. " They can rejoice because they have a purpose in suffering.

This suffering though is a specific kind though. It is kind that is presented by another person who is attacking the Christian because of his or her faith. This is not the inevitable suffering that every human receives, nor is it a general suffering. It is specific to Christians, and the means is specific. But still, they are given a purpose in it. That they can rejoice that they get to share in the sufferings that Jesus endured throughout his ministry, all the way up to the cross. Acts 5 also makes this point when the apostles are beaten almost to death and leave the prison rejoicing.

It says this exactly, " Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. " It is striking for a non-believer to see this. That they were beaten almost to death, but

rejoice because they were counted worthy by God to endure such pain and suffering for Jesus' sake. They saw it as a privilege and ultimately, there was purpose in it. Christians view suffering as a difficult aspect of life, but they understand it differently than any other worldview though. They do not believe that God created it, but it is a byproduct of the choice they have to love Him back.

They believe that suffering is imminent but that they can rejoice because it has a purpose, and that purpose is to make them more like Christ: the one they are shaping their lives after. If this point of view on suffering does not help them endure, they just look to the promises in which they have received in Christ: Justification, reconciliation, righteousness, grace, mercy, and salvation. They can look forward to the future glory that will be given to them in heaven. They also can rejoice in the fact that they are worthy enough to share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Christians find purpose in their sufferings.

They understand that it is a part of life like the simpleton, Atheist, and Islamist, but they are the only ones that are able to give an account for why, and are they only ones to find a purpose in it. And unlike the Buddhist, they do not view it as a curse, but a blessing. They do not ignore it after they have reached a high spiritual point in their lives. On the contrary, when a Christian grows, they receive more gladness and joy from their sufferings. You can see this in Paul's ministry as he is stoned, shipwrecked, and imprisoned; also in the apostles lives when they are beaten nearly to death and come out rejoicing.

People go through their lives looking for ways to avoid pain, get past sufferings, but never seem able to do so. It is a part of the natural order of the world, and impossible to bypass. It is inevitable. So people can turn to things, to opiates, to knowledge, to acceptance, to arrogance, or to ignorance but nothing can give an answer that Christianity can. It gives a reason why, a way to respond, and a hope for it to cease like no other capable religion, or means, can; because the God of the Christians is sovereign, good, Just, omnipotent, and gives His children a means to understand the world He created.