

Where Is God in Suffering? A Lenten Reflection

By RICHARD J. HAUSER

SEVERAL YEARS AGO six Creighton students were killed in auto accidents within two months. In the first accident a drunken driver plowed his car through a group of 40 students on a remote rural road. Two were killed; several were maimed; several were knocked unconscious. Help was some time in coming. In the interim, fellow students attempted to restore life to the dying with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and to give emergency first aid to the maimed and unconscious. Later that night many arrived in my dorm room stunned and spattered with blood.

In the second accident a drunk driver swerved from his lane into a van carrying seven students. The van, forced off the interstate highway, rolled down a steep embankment. Five students were thrown from the van. Four died within 24 hours. Our university community was traumatized. We had not recovered from the first accident—and now this.

How could God do this to us? The question became even more poignant because each of the students was known as a good person and a good Christian. Our responses seemed to fall into two categories; each presumed that God was the direct cause of our suffering. First and most common was: "Everything happens for a reason. God's plan is perfect, but God's ways are not our ways. While on earth we may not understand the mysterious ways of God's providence, in heaven we will understand."

The second response was: "God is punishing us for our wrong-doing. We must examine our lives to see what we have done to deserve this." The first response I

RICHARD J. HAUSER, S.J., is professor of theology and director of the master's programs in theology, ministry and spirituality at Creighton University, Omaha, Neb. He has just published *Finding God in Troubled Times: The Holy Spirit and Suffering* (Paulist Press, 1994).

observed in public attempts to provide consolation; the second was confided to me by individuals who feared that God was punishing them for their sins.

I became increasingly uncomfortable with two fundamental assumptions underlying these responses. First, each shared an assumption about God's relationship to this world. They assumed that God is the direct cause of all that happens in the world and, therefore, that God had directly caused the automobile accidents resulting in the deaths of our students. Were we to conclude that God had used the drivers of the automobiles to carry out God's providence? I wondered how these unfortunate individuals and their families and friends felt about being used by God in this way.

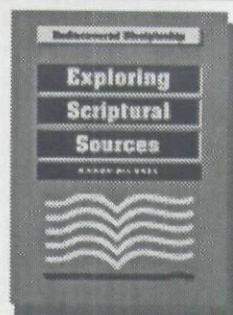
All shared a second assumption about the human relationship to God that was just as troubling to me as the first: that human freedom and responsibility are limited by God's plan. They implied that to some degree we humans are passive instruments in the hands of a God who controls our lives through an intractable providence. Are we really just puppets in the hands of the Almighty?

I knew several of the deceased well; one was a neighbor on my dorm floor. In the weeks after the accidents students came streaming in to see me day and night. I was exhausted from the emotional strain and from the lack of sleep. But I was even more exhausted by my efforts to say something that would help process our grief. I realized then that I had not adequately thought through my own beliefs about God's relationship to suffering.

Going to God in Suffering: Two Approaches.

When religiously oriented people use faith to deal with suffering, we seem to do so in two ways that relate directly to our assumptions about God's relationship to the world and consequently to how we expect God to help us in our suffering. I call these two ways the *meaning-context approach* and the *support-context approach*. In my experience we all use both ways, but we

NEW • NEW • NEW • NEW

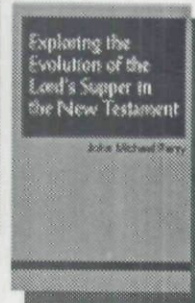
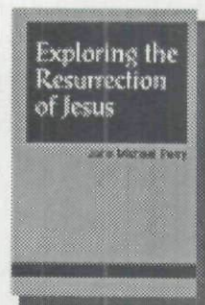


Exploring Scriptural Sources Rediscovered Discipleship

by Aaron Milavec

"Inquiry-based" case study approach to Scripture study for the college and seminary classroom, adult education in the parish, and small-group faith communities.

1-55612-706-5, 224 pp, pb, \$19.95



"Exploring Scripture" series

by John Michael Perry

Exploring the Evolution of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament

1-55612-721-9, 160 pp, pb, \$9.95

Exploring the Resurrection of Jesus

1-55612-670-0, 160 pp, pb, \$9.95

Exploring the Transfiguration Story

1-55612-574-7, 64 pp, pb, \$5.95

Exploring the Genesis Creation and Fall Stories

1-55612-553-4, 64 pp, pb, \$5.95

Sheed & Ward

115 E. Armour Blvd • Box 419492

• Kansas City MO 64141 •

800-333-7373

tend to focus more energy on one or the other approach.

Using the meaning-context approach, we believers approach God in suffering with the age-old question, "Why is this happening, O God?" The question implies two specific assumptions about God's relationship to the world and therefore to our suffering: 1) God is the direct cause of suffering and 2) God causes suffering for specific reasons. Since the reasons for suffering are known by God, we ask to see our suffering through God's perspective. We assume that if we knew God's reasons for sending the suffering, acceptance of it would be easier. Most of us begin our attempts to cope with suffering in this way. Our university community did.

How do we expect God to help us in our suffering? Implicit in the meaning-context is a belief that God is in direct control of all the external events of creation and history, and therefore God should be able to control the events of our lives. Since God is the direct cause, we expect God either to take it away or to mitigate it. But if God will neither take away our suffering nor mitigate it, we pray that God will at least reveal the reasons for sending it. If we knew how it fit into God's providence, we could better accept it.

But using the support-context approach, we believers approach God in a different way. Our cry to God is not "Why, O God?" but "Help me, O God." This cry also implies two specific assumptions about God's relationship to this world and therefore to our suffering: 1) God gives strength for life and 2) God gives strength in suffering. In this approach we see God primarily as the source of strength to deal with suffering rather than as the direct cause of our suffering.

How do we expect God to help us in our suffering? Implicit in the support-context approach is the view that the primary arena for God's help in suffering is not the external events of creation and history, but the internal movements of the human heart. We believe that God will not let us face our suffering alone and that God will be with us, giving us sufficient strength to handle anything that happens to us.

In over 20 years at Creighton, I have never observed God's presence so palpably among us as during the aftermath of the accidents—drawing us to God, supporting us individually, drawing us into community, giving us strength to support one another, especially the families of the deceased. Many students commented to me that without this strength, they did not know how they could handle their suffering. Yet we

continued to ask where God was. It became clear to me that we were approaching God from within the meaning-context, and not the support-context. I began to see that our assumptions were at odds with the approach to suffering found in the New Testament. I saw also that our approach was more consistent with the dominant approach to suffering found in the Hebrew Bible, the Christians' Old Testament.

I should make clear that in both Old and New Testaments God is revealed as the God of creation and history and therefore as the ultimate meaning context of all reality—as the familiar spiritual puts it, "He's got the whole world in his hands." Further, in both Old and New Testaments God is revealed as dwelling within and relating personally to the human community and therefore as the ultimate support context for believers—God is shepherd, redeemer, father, mother, friend. Yet in dealing explicitly with God's relationship to suffering, the Old Testament prefers the meaning context approach and the New Testament the support context approach.

The Meaning-Context Approach: the Old Testament.

The question haunting our university community after the tragic automobile accidents was the question that haunts believers everywhere during suffering: "What have we done to deserve this? Is God punishing us for some reason?" Indeed, this is the same question asked by sufferers throughout the Old Testament. The dominant Old Testament tradition responds to this question affirmatively: God *does* send suffering as a punishment for sin. How does the Old Testament reach this conclusion?

On Mount Sinai, after the deliverance from Egypt and wandering through the desert, God gives Moses the stone tablets upon which are written the commandments. The Hebrews then establish a formal covenant with God, agreeing to keep the commandments. God in turn is committed both to bless and to punish the people in accordance with their fidelity to this covenant. The first of the ten commandments given to Moses is unequivocal: "I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20: 2-3, 5-6).

Sinai establishes the meaning context for interpreting God's activity toward Israel. This context for interpreting events of Jewish history—blessings as well as punishments—will dominate Hebrew Scripture, occasionally challenged but never replaced. It is presented in the opening books of the Bible—in what the New Testament refers to as "the Law."

The historical books of the Hebrew Bible, Kings through Chronicles, also reflect this covenant tradition. The so-called "deuteronomistic historian," the editor-compiler of these books, was guided by this interpretation in his presentation of Hebrew history. The Book of Deuteronomy provides the classic expression of it: "Thus, then, shall it be: if you continue to heed the voice of the Lord, your God, and are careful to observe all his commandments which I enjoin on you today, the Lord, your God will raise you high above all the nations of the earth. When you hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God, all these blessings will come upon you and overwhelm you" (Dt. 28:1-2).

The author then concretizes the way the Israelites can expect to be blessed if they are faithful to the covenant: You will be blessed in the city and in the country; you will be blessed in the fruit of your womb, the produce of your soil and in your livestock, and the Lord will beat down your enemies before you. But then the message abruptly changes and the author presents the consequences of infidelity to the covenant: "But if you do not hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God," the writer continues, "and are not careful to observe all his commandments which I enjoin on you today, all these curses shall come upon you and overwhelm you" (Dt. 28:15). Then the entire list of blessings is systematically converted to curses: You will be cursed in the city and in the country, and so on.

This pattern of interpreting historical events is so central to Jewish tradition that it remains the focus even today for Jewish discussion of the existence of God. Secular Jews frequently ascribe their agnosticism to an inability to reconcile the events of Jewish history, such as the Holocaust, with the existence of a caring God. Religious Jews are likewise forced to grapple with this tradition. Rabbi Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981) is the best known contemporary wrestling with the problem of suffering. Rabbi Kushner admits that he himself never seriously questioned this perspective until forced to by his son's prema-

ture death from progeria (premature senility) at the age of 12: "Like most people, my wife and I had grown up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life" (p. 3).

Where is God? In the dominant Old Testament approach God is manifested primarily through the events of history and creation, working in Israel according to the covenant stipulations, rewarding fidelity with blessings and punishing infidelity with misfortunes.

The Support-Context Approach: the New Testament.

While affirming the Old Testament revelation of the presence of God in creation and history, the New Testament has a different focus. It focuses on the presence of God first in Jesus and after Jesus' death in his disciples. This presence—identified with the coming of the Holy Spirit—is manifested in all of life, but it is manifested most dramatically in suffering: God gives Jesus and his disciples strength in suffering.

During the aftermath of the accidents, while we were asking where God was, we were experiencing a presence of God among us unlike any I had ever observed at the university. We were approaching our suffering, as Jesus approached his, by relying on God's help to make it through. And God was indeed responding to our cries for help and giving us strength. Though we were experiencing the power of God, we continued to wonder where God was in our suffering. We were looking for God outside ourselves.

Unlike the Old Testament, with its explanation of suffering flowing from covenant theology, the New Testament gives no systematic treatment of why suffering occurs. The New Testament prefers the support-context approach to suffering: God gives strength for life; God gives strength especially in suffering. Paul's epistles provide the best witness to this approach.

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians is a good example. Paul's right to minister has come under attack. He hits upon an ingenious method of defending himself. He claims that his accusers "write their own references"; whereas Paul insists that his

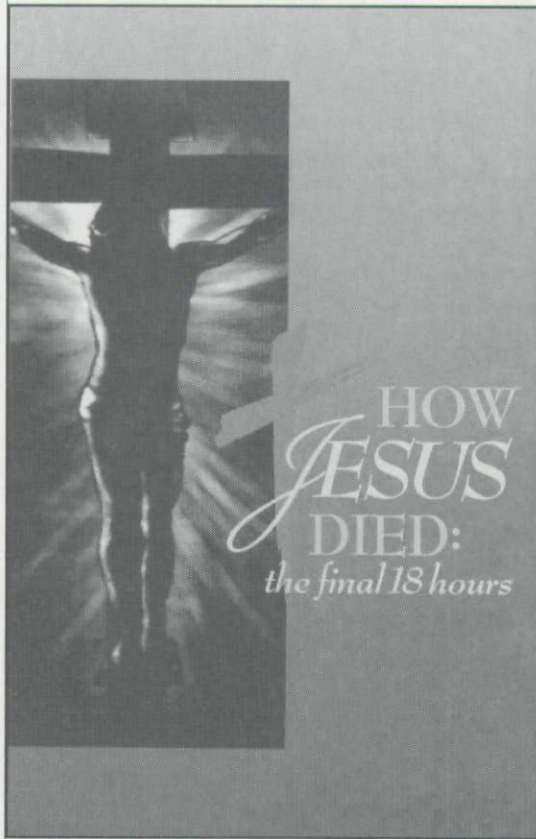
references for ministry are not from humans but from God. He then boasts how abundant are his own references from God. He claims that he has been given the authority to preach directly from Christ himself; that he has been steadfastly faithful to this commission from Christ and has been so without imposing the burden of supporting him on others. He boasts also that God has bestowed on him extraordinary visions and revelations.

Finally Paul defends his ministry by

naming the sufferings he has endured for it, boasting that he has suffered more than his accusers: "Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three time I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked.... I have been hungry and thirsty and often starving; I have been in the cold without clothes" (2 Cor. 11:25-28).

How does Paul handle all these sufferings? At the conclusion of his defense of his ministry, Paul gives us a key insight. I

The first ever full-length video feature presenting the comprehensive medical, forensic and historical details of the Passion of Jesus Christ.



HOW JESUS DIED:
The Final 18 Hours

A professionally-produced feature-length video, HOW JESUS DIED: THE FINAL 18 HOURS is a comprehensive presentation of every detail of Jesus's final hours, from His entry into Jerusalem for the Last Supper, through His prayerful agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, His trials before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the brutal ascent to Golgotha bearing the weight of the cross, the nailing of His hands and feet, and those final three hours of torment, ending in His death.

The commentary of four world-renowned experts in their fields will give you the most thorough understanding it is possible to acquire of the reality of Jesus's passion from the perspectives of a medical examiner, a physician expert on pain, a historian, and an archaeologist.

Nothing will ever bring you closer to an understanding of what our Savior endured than watching HOW JESUS DIED: THE FINAL 18 HOURS.

GUARANTEE

Complete Satisfaction or Your Money Back

Your purchase of HOW JESUS DIED: THE FINAL 18 HOURS comes with this unconditional guarantee: If you're dissatisfied with the video in any way, for any reason, you may return it in good condition for a full and complete refund at any time within 90 days of your purchase. Enclose a copy of your original invoice and we'll issue a refund for the full amount you paid.

John Dauer, Producer/Director

Trinity Pictures

VHS VIDEO
COLOR, 35 MINUTES,
STEREO SOUND

1 copy: \$29.95

PLUS: \$4.50 SHIPPING
AND HANDLING

TO ORDER

1-800-303-9595

believe the following passage is the closest we get in all Paul's letters to his own method of handling suffering. He makes direct reference to a particularly bothersome ongoing suffering, the famous and still mysterious "thorn in the flesh." The conclusion of the passage, however, implies that his other sufferings are handled in a similar way—all his weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and agonies:

About this thing [the thorn], I have pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me, but he has said, 'My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness'. So I shall be very happy to make my weakness my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, and that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong. (2 Cor. 12: 7-10)

Where is God in all this? The typical Jew, even of Paul's day, might presume God is causing these sufferings as a punishment for infidelity to the covenant. Yet nowhere does Paul suggest that his sufferings are sent by God as a punishment for his sins. Indeed, it would not even strike us as surprising should Paul be at least a little disturbed by the extent of the difficulties he encountered in preaching the Good News. But Paul bypasses the meaning context approach to suffering and focuses upon the support-context approach. The reason for this is abundantly clear: Paul has found God in his sufferings. They have become blessings, not curses. He has nothing to fear from personal weakness or external persecution. Instead of alienating him from God, these trials have become privileged occasions for experiencing God's presence. He can even boast in them.

Moreover, Paul's experience of God's power in suffering has the advantage of conforming him more closely to Jesus *who also suffered*:

We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we are constantly being given up

to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor. 4: 7-11)

This love from Jesus would always be with him. Paul's most poignant expression of the presence of Christ's love even in suffering is found in his letter to the church in Rome that was undergoing martyrdom for faith, a martyrdom he would soon share:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? As Scripture says: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day long: we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.' Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of him who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8: 35-39)

What reasons for his suffering does Paul give? Reasons are not asked by Paul nor given by God. Perhaps Paul's exclamation in Romans is the best expression of his mind: "How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11: 33-34).

Where is God in Suffering?

The deaths of our six students through the careless driving of others raised this question on our campus and heightened my own search. We Christians usually attempt to respond to this age-old question within the meaning-context approach, seeing God as the direct cause of all suffering and looking for reasons. The vast amount of suffering in our world makes it difficult to maintain God's goodness—floods and earthquakes, birth defects and disease, wars and rapes, human accidents and betrayals, the suffering of children, suffering arising from race, class, gender. Fortunately the New Testament does not demand this approach. Its silence warrants our admission that we simply *don't know* God's role in causing suffering. This answer is not satisfying intellectually, but it does have the virtue of being in harmony with the New Testament. For me the only satisfying

response to our question falls within the support-context approach.

Throughout our discussion I have been referring to the dominant Old Testament approach to suffering. This approach is also challenged in the Old Testament—most radically and most poignantly by the Book of Job. Rabbi Kushner, influenced by Job and trying to reconcile the premature death of his son with his belief in a caring God, boldly puts forth an approach entirely different from the traditional Jewish approach:

Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God. The psalmist writes, "I lift mine eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of Heaven and earth." (Ps. 121: 1-2) He does not say, "My pain comes from the Lord," or "My tragedy comes from the Lord." He says, "My help comes from the Lord." Could it be that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us?... Could it be that "How could God do this to me?" is really the wrong question to ask? (pp. 29-30)

In this, Kushner moves toward the support-context approach.

Where is our God in suffering? Our God, Emmanuel, is with us. The Good News of the Gospel is that God cares for us at every instant of our life. Yes, God continues to care for us even in times of suffering. This care is manifested, one hesitates to say it, even more dramatically in suffering. I believe that opening ourselves to experience this care during suffering as Paul did—and Jesus at Gethsemane and Calvary—is central to a mature Christian faith. Nothing in our life has greater potential for uniting us with Jesus than suffering. Is not this truth at the heart of Paul's notion of the wisdom of God, the wisdom of the cross: "The message of the cross is absurdity to those who are headed for ruin but to us who are experiencing salvation it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18)?

It is difficult for us practical people, used to rational approaches to life's problems, to rest content with a "mere experience" of God's presence, while leaving unanswered our intellectual questions. But in receiving strength to cope with sufferings, have we not received the greatest gift of all, greater than an intellectual understanding of its sources? Had our university community appreciated this, we would have suffered less. ■

