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Following Jesus in a World of Suffering and Violence

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I Introduction

Suffering is a fact of life for many people in our world. With advances in our time of global communication and information technology, countless stories of horror, pain and suffering are brought daily into our living rooms. Whenever we switch on the television or radio or read the newspapers, we come face to face with millions of people who are either actual or potential victims of suffering and disaster in our world. We are constantly made to realize that ours is a dangerous world, a place prone to disaster, war, famine and natural tragedies.[1] We live in a world in which tsunamis, hurricanes, wars, HIV/AIDS and death are possible realities.

But it is into this world that Jesus Christ commands us to go and follow him as his disciples and servants. He asks us to share the good news of his love and grace with suffering humanity. However, Jesus clearly warns that we will have tribulations in the world and yet he comforts us and calls us to be of good cheer because he has conquered the world. Though we are his and not of the world, Jesus has sent us into the world to be his witnesses and followers, knowing very well we may suffer.[2]

Keeping this in proper perspective, we still groan inwardly as we try to maintain our faith in him as a loving saviour in the face of the glaring reality of suffering and disaster in our world. In this tension of faith and suffering we ask questions: what does following Jesus mean if and when suffering and disaster strike us? How can we keep the balance between his grace and love and the reality of suffering? Since we as his disciples are also sub-

1 Isaiah M. Dau, *Suffering and God* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2002), pp. 13-117.

2 Mt. 10:17-42; Jn. 15:18-16:4; Rev. 2:10.

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ject to suffering and disaster, what difference does it make to follow and serve him?[3]

II A Realistic Look at Our World

A realistic look at our globe reveals that there is much suffering. Suffering, from the beginning of time, seems to be an inseparable part of human existence. The biblical record has it that from the fall of humanity, sin and suffering entered the world. Consequently, we are born, we live, we suffer and we die. Our life begins, grows, ails and ends. In recent times, wars, famines and natural disasters have caused immense human suffering. The tsunami tragedy in southeast Asia in 2004, the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and in London on 7 July 2005, the genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s, are but a few in a long list of examples.

Among the many ongoing crises in Africa, I know from firsthand experience that the Sudanese region of Darfur remains a bastion of death and suffering. When I visited Darfur in 2006 I witnessed the immense suffering inflicted by the ongoing conflict. As has been the case for centuries in this region of rich resources contested by dominant Arab tribes and African indigenous people, the people have suffered horrifically. Land and pastures, water resources and lately unexploited oil lie at the heart of the conflict. It is estimated that two hundred thousand people have died and three million others have been displaced since the conflict began five years ago. The Janjaweed[4] militias, allegedly funded by the Sudanese government, continue to violate human rights, destroying properties and committing rape and murder with impunity.

Efforts by the United Nations to send peacekeeping forces to the region have been repeatedly rejected by the Sudanese authorities. The Sudanese government insists that the situation is under control and that only African Union peacekeeping forces should be the ones to maintain peace in the region. However, recent pressure from the international community, particularly the United States, has forced the Khartoum government to allow the United Nations to act as a mediating force in Darfur. The Darfur region remains volatile, a place of suffering and violence, contrary to Khartoum's insistence that all is well.

When we consider all this, we can say the following regarding suffering and disaster in our world: in the first place we acknowledge that suffering and disaster are normal human experiences. Although we try to avoid suffering, it still overtakes us, one way or the

3 As I write this paper, we have had serious sickness in our family. Our third boy, 13-year-old Joseph, has been unwell for most of the year 2006, suffering from a mysterious nerve disease, attacking his muscles and making him unable to stand or even walk. All the medical tests performed on him yielded nothing. Although he is a little better now, he has suffered a great deal. My wife Lydia also had a thyroidectomy operation in December 2006.

4 Janjaweed means 'devils on horsebacks'. They are merciless. They kill with no mercy. They rape women and then kill them. They loot and burn down villages.

other. Jesus himself tells us that we should expect suffering if we are his followers. He warns the disciples that if the world persecuted him they should know it will persecute them as well (John 15:18-21 and 16:2-4). No human being escapes suffering even if they do not follow Christ. In reality, suffering and disaster are going to happen to all those who come into this world.[5] It seems that life and suffering are inescapable. They are unpleasant but normal human experiences.

Secondly, suffering and disaster are natural. They are natural in the sense of being universal. This understanding prepares the disciples and gives them courage to take up their cross daily and follow Jesus. This must be what concerned the apostle Peter when he exhorted the believers not to be surprised at the painful trials they were experiencing as though something strange was happening to them (1 Pet. 4:12). Simply put, Peter seems to say that suffering and disaster are natural and should not surprise us. Instead, Peter underscores the fact that we should view them as transitory means that lead us to glory (1 Pet. 4:14).

Thirdly, suffering and disaster are neutral. The basic idea here is that though suffering and disaster will wreck souls and cause damage to untold millions of people, one thing remains clear: it is how you take it. One might choose to learn valuable lessons from it or to learn absolutely nothing from it. Suffering may embitter some but ennoble others. Our choice determines whether the ramifications of the same are negative or positive. But we all have to struggle with suffering at one point or another in our lives. It is how we take it that makes the difference.

The example of Job amplifies this truth. Though he suffered from things beyond his control, the way he took it made him a legend and an example of patience in suffering. He chose not to go the way of cursing God as his wife suggested,[6] or to explain it away simplistically as his comforters tried to do.[7] Rather, he 'refused to buy into the retributive theology of his friends and maintained his right to plead with God to remember him in his suffering'.[8] What a powerful example! Following Jesus within the frailty and wretchedness of human life accelerated by suffering and disaster demands a heart ready to wait for the 'self manifestation of God which ultimately leads to self surrendering adoration'.[9]

III Following Jesus

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Following Jesus in a world of suffering and disaster first means a call to discipleship. In Mark 1:16-17, Jesus calls Simon and his brother Andrew to follow him. It was a call to discipleship. This call is not short-term or based on instant gratification but on a lifelong walk with God.[10] David Watson[11]

5 Dau, *Suffering and God*, p. 202.

6 Job 2:9.

7 Job 3-31.

8 Dau, *Suffering and God*, p. 205.

9 Dau, *Suffering and God*, p. 210.

10 Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 8.

11 David Watson, *Discipleship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), pp. 19-33.

explains that this is a call to a person (Jesus), a call to obedience and submission to his will and plan for our lives, a call to serve, and more importantly, a call to suffer. Following Jesus in a world of suffering and disaster requires following the way of Jesus, that is, the way of the cross. Life for Jesus ended, if you like, in suffering and disaster, rejection and pain and agonizing death. We should not be surprised if following Jesus demands that we walk the same way.

Let us take the example of some of Jesus' followers to illustrate this call to suffer: Peter and John were imprisoned and beaten for their boldness in witnessing to Jesus and the resurrection. Stephen was stoned to death and by the sword James was killed (Acts 8:1ff). The apostle Paul, an ardent follower of Jesus immediately after the Damascus road experience and subsequent ministry, catalogues his sufferings: beaten five times with 39 lashes, three times with rods and stoned once and shipwrecked once, often going hungry, sometimes misunderstood and many times falsely accused (2 Cor. 11:25-29). For Paul, his call to follow Jesus involved emotional pain and constant grief and deep concern for fellow unbelieving Jews and co-workers in ministry (Rom. 10:1-10; 2 Tim. 4:10, 14).

Secondly, following Jesus means a continuous and unceasing carrying of the cross as we follow him on the road of obedience. Jesus made it crystal clear that following him demands that we take up our cross and follow him (Lk. 14:27, Mk. 10:38). According to Sanders, this involves a willingness to accept ostracism and unpopularity with the world for his sake.[12] Commenting on the bearing of the cross, Keener says:

> In those days a condemned criminal would 'carry the cross' (i.e. the horizontal beam of the cross) out to the site of his crucifixion, usually amid a jeering mob. No one would choose this fate for himself but Jesus calls upon his true followers to choose it and hate their own lives in comparison to their devotion to him.[13]

Carrying our cross demands that we give up our own desires and live according to Christ's desire.[14] This includes such things as our comfort, pleasure and rights. We live for ourselves before we come to Christ. When we become his followers we live for him. In other words, a follower of Jesus 'turns around from his own way and starts going Jesus' way'.[15]

Thirdly, following Jesus means surrendering our 'heart affections, life's conduct and personal possessions'.[16] It is what Jesus means when he says whoever would follow him must give up everything (Lk. 14:33). This is quite a task in our materialistic world where we hold the things we own with clenched fists, claiming that we got them by the sweat of our brow. This

12 Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship*, p. 22.

13 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 231.

14 Thomas Halle, *Applied New Testament Commentary* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1996), p. 150.

15 Halle, *Applied New Testament Commentary*, p. 150.

16 Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship*, p. 22.

sort of bragging ignores the fact that we are only stewards and not owners of all that has been entrusted to us. Jesus desires that his followers exhibit an attitude which acknowledges the ownership of God over who we are and what we have and demonstrates a willingness to say, 'Lord, if you want any of them back again, tell me, and I will let them go'.[17]

Fourthly, following Jesus means loving one another as a direct result of the love he has shown us. Establishing love as an authentic badge of discipleship, Jesus teaches that when we love one another all people will know that we are his disciples (Jn. 13:34-35). Such love is agape. William Barclay describes this love as the spirit that says, 'no matter what any man does to me, I will never seek to do harm to him; I will never set out for revenge; I will always seek nothing but his highest good'. Hence, it is the love *that is unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill*'[18] (my italics).

This love which Christ demands from his followers is essentially a 'selfless, forgiving and sacrificial love'.[19] It should be selfless in the sense that it does not have personal interest or strings attached when it is shown; forgiving in the sense that in it we can let go of those who have betrayed, hurt, or committed offences against us; and sacrificial in the sense that we are ready to meet the cost involved as Jesus did.

We all concur that the call to love is not easy. It is always a challenge to walk in the highway of love with difficult people. However, following Jesus demands that we show the love of Christ to the most undeserving of all and to the most hurting. Only then will we be able offer it to the broken world around us.

Fifthly, following Jesus means continual adjustment. This is because Jesus determines the agenda and sets the pace for discipleship. Many people want to follow leaders who adjust to their needs. But it is not so with following Jesus. There is a need for 'unconditional spiritual submission to Jesus' leadership in our lives'.[20]

Matthew 8:19-20 presents a case of the teacher of the law who was willing to follow Jesus wherever he went. Jesus, discerning the inner motives and his unspoken conditions, revealed to him that sometimes the destinations would not be reasonable and accommodations would not be appropriate. Unwilling to adjust to Jesus' stipulations, the man retreated! How many times have we hesitated to follow Jesus because we try to fit God in our plans and not vice versa? Following him is tough but it is worth it. Willingness to adjust our lives is pertinent if we are to follow him.

Sixthly, following Jesus is a relationship. Following Jesus entails developing an intimate relationship with him. This is what elevates Christianity beyond all other religions, philosophies and worldviews.[21] Mark 3:14-15

17 Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship*, p. 23.

18 William Barclay, *More New Testament Words* (London: SCM, 1958), p. 16.

19 Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship*, pp. 28-30.

20 John Kramp, *Getting Ahead by Staying Behind* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), p. 43.

21 Kramp, *Getting Ahead by Staying Behind*, p. 50.

says, 'He appointed the twelve—designating them as apostles, that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority over demons'. A closer look at this scripture—'that they might be with him'—reveals that endeavouring to do anything for Jesus is linked with desiring and developing a relationship with him. Christianity in general and discipleship in particular is based on a relationship with Jesus, not on spiritual directions and rules. Once we decide to let him have control over our lives, he will show us the way and teach us. This entails all the directions we need as we deepen our relationship with him'.[22]

Seventhly, following Jesus is a change process. Following Jesus means enrolling ourselves in the school of change. Looking at the twelve disciples, it is amazing how they were transformed when they followed him. As our interests and philosophies of life change, we may mess up and fail Jesus just like the disciples, but their transformation stories become ours at that very moment. A disciple should never give up because they fail or miss the target for even the first disciples of Jesus were not exceptional. 'Because of their struggles, the positive changes that took place in their lives hold promise for all of us.'[23] Peter and Paul are supreme examples of change through following Jesus. Peter in the gospel accounts is not the same Peter in the book of Acts (Acts 4:8-12). Paul is emphatic about the undeniable change within him after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-15; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 1:11-24). Encountering Jesus transformed these individuals. Following Jesus means answering the Master's beckoning hand that lovingly declares, 'Come and follow me and I will make you…' Following him is an appointment with change, one that makes us what he always wants us to be or become.

IV The Cross—Its Message and Implications

In this section, I will examine the message of the cross and its implications for following Jesus in a world of suffering. I will do so in dialogue with Elie Wiesel's *Night* which recounts his Nazi camps' experiences and his struggles with suffering.[24] As we know from this influential novel, the suffering and death of a child on the gallows caused Wiesel to conclude that God himself was dead on the gallows. Theologians of the cross agree, further arguing that God, who was present at Auschwitz, suffered and died with its inmates. The cross and the gallows are thus viewed not only as instruments of God's presence in Auschwitz but also of his identification and suffering with the victims of the holocaust.

22 Kramp, *Getting Ahead by Staying Behind*, p. 54.

23 Kramp, *Getting Ahead by Staying Behind*, p. 58.

24 The implications for theology and suffering arising from my dialogue with Wiesel's *Night* will be presented in greater detail in an article entitled 'God on the Gallows: the image of God in Elie Wiesel's Night' with publication pending in the *African Journal of Evangelical Theology.*

But in what way, if we may ask, does the cross differ from the gallows? If it is granted that both the gallows and the cross are instruments of death, what makes the cross more meaningful than the gallows in a situation of suffering? From the perspective of Christian theology, the cross conveys the following.

First, the cross speaks of God's presence and participation in human suffering. As Martin Luther King has noted, God does not leave us alone in our agonies and struggles, but he seeks us in dark places and suffers with us and for us in our tragic prodigality.[25] In other words, God does not observe our suffering from a safe distance, but he comes down to us and participates in it. Consequently, the cross is the supreme demonstration of God's solidarity with humanity in this world of suffering. In the cross, we see God allowing himself to suffer as we do, not because he was obligated or pressurised to do so but because he willingly chose to do so out of love for humanity.

Thus, the cross of Christ will always stand as a powerful reminder that God was prepared to suffer in order to redeem the world and that he expects his people to share the same commitment as they participate in the task of restoring the world to its former glory.[26] The gallows as experienced at Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps negates all this and puts all other gods except the *crucified God* on trial. Only the suffering God would have been present at Auschwitz and could therefore have helped its inmates transcend and transform the holocaust. He participated in the pain and suffering of Auschwitz.

Second, the cross directs our gaze from the lonesome and morbid contemplation of our own anguish and suffering and redirects our gaze to the suffering and transforming God who shares in our pain.[27] When we look at the cross, we realize at once that God gave his very best so that we might live. In that way, God demonstrated his love for us. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross brings us face to face with the wonder of God's love and grace, so much that we are strengthened to deal with our suffering with courage and determination. Thus, by directing our gaze to the cross, we find incredible power and courage to face the fear and terror of suffering.

Suffering possesses what Alister McGrath has called 'a double cutting edge: the sheer pain of experiencing it and the unbearable intensity of what it means or implies'.[28] The prospect of facing suffering intimidates and freezes us. But the cross reminds us that its power has been broken and its sting has been blunted. Similarly, the cross points to the future ultimate defeat and elimination of suffering

25 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1981), p. 16. Much of what I say from this point on is taken from Isaiah M. Dau, *Suffering and God: a theological-ethical study of the war in Sudan* (Diss. U Stellenbosch, 2000).

26 McGrath, *Suffering and God*, p. 15, 26.

27 Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: an Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), p. 180.

28 McGrath, *Suffering and God*, p. 68.

even if its presence and reality are still pertinent in this life. The gallows in the Nazi concentration camps did not only symbolize the death of God but also the death of humanity. If there was ever a god who did not die at Auschwitz, it was the suffering God of Calvary, not the human god that the Nazis purported to believe in or the god that Wiesel rightly rebelled against and rejected.

Third, the cross tells us that because God responded to our suffering, we need to respond to the suffering of others. The cross spurs us on to alleviate the suffering of others. Because the suffering of any of God's people grieves the heart of God, the believer needs to reach out to those who suffer with love and compassion. Meeting the practical needs of those who suffer clearly demonstrates the message of the cross. Our presence with and provision of the spiritual, emotional, and material needs of those who may be hurting assures them that God has not abandoned them in their pain and misery. In that way the cross powerfully conveys that suffering can be transcended and transformed by the practical love and compassion of God through the community of faith.

That the suffering God of the cross participates in and shares the suffering of humanity is a message that the gallows of Auschwitz could never convey. Only the cross can emphatically affirm Wiesel's assertion that God was on the gallows. This is because the God of the cross is the only God who abides with the suffering and the weak of Auschwitz and of our day.

Fourth, the cross is God's victory over sin, suffering and death. By his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus defeated these enemies. Furthermore, the cross tells us that God has done something about suffering and other evils that plague us in this life. On the cross, Christ won the victory over evil and suffering. He conquered the kingdom of this world and inaugurated the kingdom of the Father. Yet the full consummation of his victory is incomplete; it waits until the future. Meanwhile, living in the 'time between the times', we shall continue to face suffering as a defeated evil, which, paradoxically, is still present with us.

Thus a genuine response to the presence and the love of God as mediated by the cross has the power to release humanity from its chains and produce healing in suffering. In addition, as we noted earlier, the scriptures teach us that the suffering we now face prepares us for the glory, which awaits us when suffering and evil shall ultimately be defeated. For now, however, 'we must each share in Calvary and the cross, for only so can we share the glorious victory of the resurrection'.[29]

Finally, and from a distinctively Christian perspective, the cross reminds believers that discipleship involves suffering. For the followers of Christ there is such a thing as '*the koinonia of His suffering*' in this world. Not only is the disciple called to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him. There is therefore a sense in which both joy and suffering are integral parts of the Christian experience in the same manner that summer and winter

29 Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering: sermons and speeches*, ed. Mothobi Mutloatse and John Webster (Grand Rapids: Eermans, 1984), p. 74.

are seasons of the year.[30] In fact, the Bible makes it clear that the believer is not excused from suffering with the rest of humankind just because he or she is a follower of Christ. If anything, the believer is promised additional suffering just because the believer is a follower of Christ.

Returning to the question we presented at the outset of this section (ie., in what way does the cross differ from the gallows?), we see that the theology of the cross contends that God shares and participates in our suffering, enabling us to transform and transcend it. Because God in Jesus Christ experienced suffering on the cross, he is the only one who can help us through suffering. While the gallows and the cross are in many respects similar they are not the same. The gallows speaks only of death, humiliation and suffering. The cross also speaks of death, humiliation and suffering but also of victory and hope. It speaks of the resurrection, redemption and glorification. It holds out the great hope that death itself cannot destroy.

But where exactly does all this leave theology and theodicy in practical terms? What are the implications of the theology of the cross for theodicy? To these implications we now turn our attention.

V Conclusion

The first implication of the theology of the cross for theodicy is that the problem of evil and human suffering constantly challenges faith, yet it is also a problem that reveals the dark side of humanity. As a haunting reality, despite the valuable lessons learned from the holocaust, the problem of suffering reveals the seemingly inexhaustible human potential to perpetrate evil. 'Nothing has been learned', Wiesel admits. 'Auschwitz has not served as a warning. For more detailed information, consult your daily newspapers.'[31]

Wiesel is right; nothing has been learned more than sixty years after the holocaust. If that had not been the case, the genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda in the 1990s would not have occurred. But it has, starkly reminding us that the holocaust is after all very much alive in our world, in our hearts. As a matter of fact, there is no guarantee that it will never recur.

For more detailed information, examine your own heart, not merely your daily newspapers. The potential is frighteningly there in our hearts and minds, regardless of whoever we may be or wherever we come from. For the people who committed the holocaust were just like us. As morally free agents, we have an inescapable part in the problem of evil and suffering. We have an incredible potential to perpetrate evil and inflict suffering.

Second, and as a direct consequent of the first, a fundamental admission has to be made to the effect that suffer-

30 A. E. W. Smith, *The Paradox of Pain* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1971), p. 92.

31 Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Avon Bard, 1972), p. 15, quoted in Alan Rosenberg and Paul Marcus, 'The Holocaust as a Test of Philosophy', in Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E Myers, eds., *Echoes from the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 201-222.

ing and evil are indications of something terribly wrong with us as human beings. Why do we do evil and inflict suffering on one another? It is one thing to protest against God or even heap all the blame on him when evil assails, but it is quite another thing to critically look at ourselves and ask why we are killing one another. Who perpetrated Auschwitz and the genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans? Who makes weapons of destruction, poison gases and other fatal instruments of death?

Humanity can hardly escape its responsibility by indicting God. That is why Wiesel is quite right to say that 'at Auschwitz, not only man died, but the idea of man'.[32] Wiesel is consistent in his thought because if God was murdered at Auschwitz, humanity was murdered too. The only question that we must answer is: Who committed the murder? Was it God or humanity or both?

Whatever way we choose to answer this question, we cannot eliminate human responsibility and choice in perpetrating suffering and evil. To reemphasize, we must admit that there is something terribly wrong in our nature, there is something that moves us to inflict evil on ourselves. We must admit and confront this. From the perspective of the Scripture and Christian theology that thing is called sin, an irresistible force capable of alienating humanity from God and itself and so to miss the mark or the goal of life.

We need to be set free from sin and its consequences if we are to refrain from inflicting evil on one another. We desperately need to be delivered not only from the evil that may be visited upon us but also from the evil that we have the potential to visit upon fellow humans. Only God by his grace can do this. The Scripture clearly and repeatedly teaches that he has already done it through the cross of Christ. As Alan Richardson explains,

> The ultimate solution to the problem of evil (and suffering) must lie in the fact that the God who created the world is also the God who has redeemed it; the creator is himself in Christ the bearer of all creation's sin and suffering as he is the bringer of the redemption that shall be. But only the Christian can know that Christ has explained evil in the act of defeating it.[33]

Redemption through a suffering theophany is the only truly Christian response to the problem of evil.[34]

Third, within the framework of the incarnation, the provision has been made to respond positively to suffering and evil. This provision contains the resources of community, character and hope from which the believer can draw to face suffering without being destroyed by it. God's coming to us in Jesus Christ and his identification with us in all that we may suffer are the grounds for our positive response to evil and suffering. Here we find the caring support and love of the community

32 See Rosenberg and Marcus. 'The Holocaust as a Test of Philosophy'.

33 Alan Richardson, 'The Problem of Evil', in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 196.

34 Kenneth Surin, 'The Impassability of God and the Problem of Evil', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 35 (1982), p. 114.

of believers to give us the capacity to transform and transcend suffering and pain.

The community absorbs our suffering and we practically experience what it means to have others carry our burdens. The shaping of a resilient character through suffering enables us to endure and to be steadfast amidst trials and suffering. The Christian is inspired by a living hope that suffering and evil will be ultimately defeated.

By suggesting this framework, we do not intend or attempt to explain suffering and evil but we argue that by positive action, beneficial to ourselves as well as other fellow humans, we can transform and transcend suffering and evil.

Finally, we must not be ashamed to acknowledge the mystery and insolubility of evil and suffering. If pressed to its logical conclusion, the problem of evil is actually insoluble. Its mystery is inextricably bound up with the mystery of God and of life itself. We can neither explain nor eliminate it. Its origin is inexplicable and its purpose is indefinable. To say this is not to resort to a palliative or premature consolation or to dodge the problem altogether. To say this is to accept our finite and limited knowledge as creatures of time and space.

While we must continue inquiry into this existential problem and retain our best theological and philosophical findings on it, the truth remains that in the final analysis we cannot solve it. The problem of evil cannot be solved if by that we mean its total elimination so that we no longer suffer or die in this world. As Kenneth Surin acknowledges, evil in its root and essence is a deep mystery; how God deals with it and overcomes it is a mystery too.[35]

We must ponder over suffering in the context of God's infinite love, for it is therein that we have the assurance of victory. However, we cannot use the mystery and inexplicability of evil as an excuse for indifference in the face of suffering. Neither can we use this mystery as an easy consolation for the victims of suffering and tragedy.

35 Surin, 'The Impassibility of God and the Problem of Evil', p. 115.