

Suffering and the heart of God

John Wyatt

Some dangers of theological "explanations" of suffering

1) We minimise or trivialise the awfulness and depth of human suffering

2) We imply that God is less than fully good – that his goodness is partial, variable, suspect

3) We reduce God to a relatively powerless observer of a world that is not in his absolute control

“Suffering is not a question which demands an answer, it’s not a problem which demands a solution...

It’s a *mystery* which demands a *presence*”

Anon

**1. We need to reflect more deeply
on our created nature
as human beings.**

Humans created out of dust (*Genesis 2:7*)

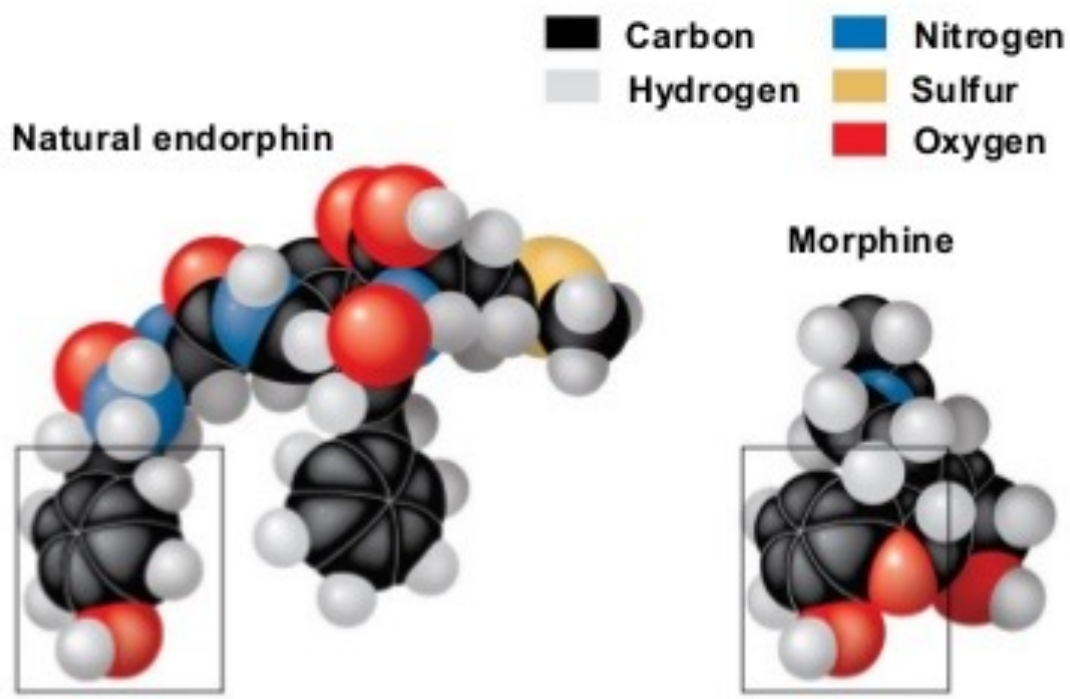
We are created as dependent, frail, fragile, vulnerable and contingent beings.

This is not a consequence of the Fall – it is part of the goodness of creation.

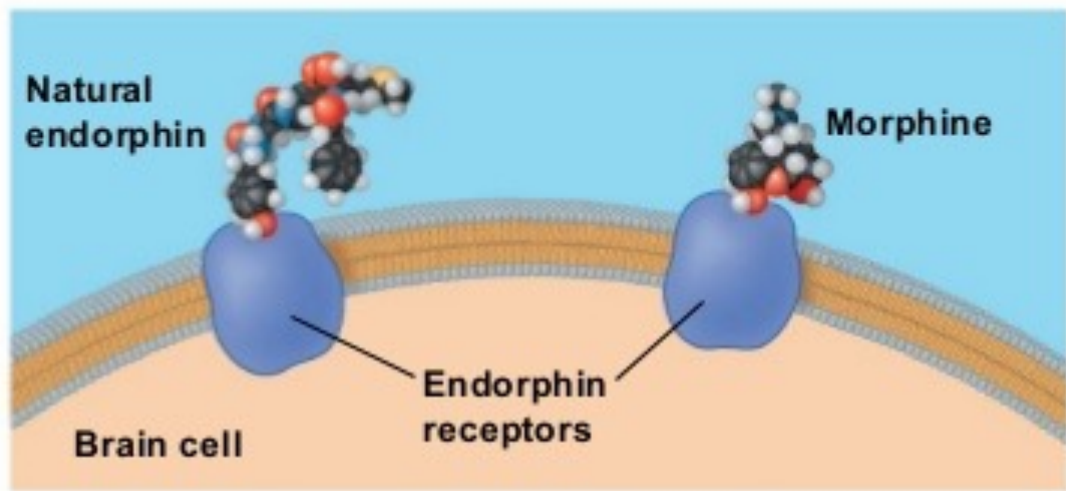
Dependence and vulnerability are not alien, subhuman, undignified realities – they are part of the narrative of every human life.

Even as God creates our vulnerability to pain and suffering, he also creates natural mechanisms of pain relief, and amelioration.

Figure 2.18



(a) Structures of endorphin and morphine



(b) Binding to endorphin receptors

Our human frailty and vulnerability
which comes from creation is
exacerbated, pervaded and
imprisoned by evil

"Dust you are, and to dust you will return."

Genesis 3

"What happens to the children of man and
what happens to the beasts is the same; as
one dies, so dies the other."

Ecclesiastes 3:19

"....But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.

Job 2:5-8

2. We need to practice biblical lament, a practice which is both honest and faithful to God.

Biblical lament is prayer, but a particular kind of prayer. It takes the brokenness of human experience to God and asks, prays, cries out for God to answer.

Lament takes pain and suffering seriously.

Lament provides faithful language with which we can bring our pain to God. It is a way of **reframing suffering in the light of the hope and promises of God.**

There is frequently a movement in the process of biblical lament. It starts with articulation of the heart's pain – this may include anger and disappointment with others and with God.

Then it moves from the articulation of pain to claim the goodness of God's character and his purposes, to submission to God's will and then ultimately to relinquishment.

Psalm 22 is the paradigm, the supreme expression, of godly personal lament in the Old Testament.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?”

Godly lament is not an activity of faithlessness and despair – it is an activity of faith and resistance to evil.

By practising Godly lament we become the kind of people who take seriously the pain and sadness of the world but we refuse to be crushed by it.

3. God himself enters into the process of lament

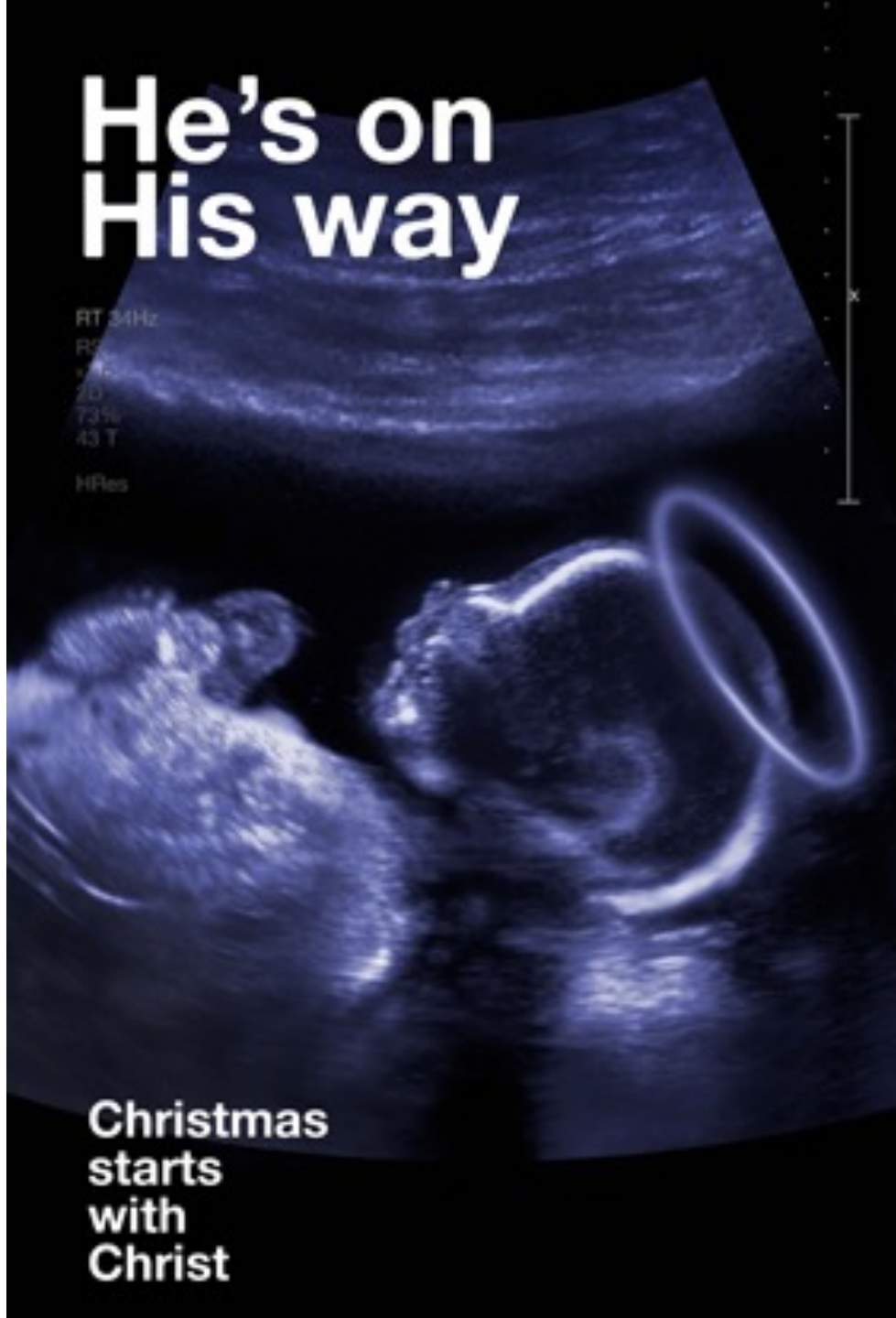
The godly laments of the Old Testament cry out to God for an answer to the mystery of suffering.

But when God himself appears on the stage in the form of Jesus, he does not provide an answer to the mystery. Instead **he himself enters into the process of lament.**

He's on His way

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Christmas
starts
with
Christ





“...When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping he was **deeply moved in spirit and troubled**. And he said where have you laid him? They said Lord come and see. Jesus wept....”

John 11:33-35

“Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, **he had compassion on her** (*Greek **splanchnidzomai***) and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’”

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus was **indignant (*Greek orgisthei*)**. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"

Mark 1:40

".....Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, *whom Satan has kept bound* for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

Luke 13:16

"He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief; and as one from whom men hide
their faces he was despised, and we
esteemed him not."

Isaiah 53:3

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch”.....

.....Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

Mark 14:32-36

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Matt 27:45,46

On the cross
God is lamenting to God...

Suffering goes into the very heart
of God. In some mysterious way
Christ brings suffering and
lament into God's own life.

Through the cross of Jesus, the evil of the world is penetrated by God's suffering love.

God has refused to hold himself away from violence and suffering.

“He laid aside his immunity to pain”

He takes suffering into his own being in order to bring healing and redemption.

God overcomes the destructive effects of evil in the creation, not by shattering evil by overwhelming force – but instead by entering into it with costly divine love.

The suffering of the world is fully experienced and then overcome by God.

We worship a suffering God.

We are made as reflections of a triune God
who is suffering love, and therefore part of
the way in which we image God
is in suffering.

'As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who
fear him; for he knows how we are formed.
He remembers that we are dust...'

(Psalm 103:13-14)

**4. Suffering can be redeemed by
the power and grace of God**

God's plan for this age is not to *abolish* human suffering, but to *redeem* it – to bring blessing and healing out of evil and pain.

There is no evil situation, however twisted, however malevolent, however apparently meaningless, which cannot in some sense be transformed by God's grace and power into blessing and healing.

But this process of healing, redemption and transformation doesn't happen automatically. It requires our willing acceptance and cooperation with God's love and power working through the Holy Spirit.



Participating in the sufferings of Christ

The resurrection of Christ promises us that this earthly suffering will ultimately be overcome and transformed into blessing and healing.

But as we wait faithfully in patience and hope, we too participate in Christ's suffering and in a small way we absorb suffering and resist evil and despair.

2 Corinthians 1:5 For as we *share* abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

Philippians 3:10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may *share* his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

1 Peter 4: 13 But rejoice insofar as you **share** Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Philippians 1:29 "For it has been **granted to you** that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake", (Greek *charizomai* – closely related to *charisma* – a gift of grace.) "It has been **grace-gifted to you** that for the sake of Christ you should suffer for his sake."

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“Christ himself kisses us in the
love of our friends”

Bernard of Clairvaux

12th Century AD

5. Practising the *discipline* of Christian hope

6. Suffering will come to an end

Nothing in Christianity makes sense
except in the light of resurrection and
the future glory....

The mystery of suffering

A mystery from
the dawn of time.....

The mystery of suffering

.....but there is 'a deeper magic
from before the dawn of time'

C.S Lewis

".....everyone whose name has not been written *before the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain."

Revelation 13:8

“I consider that our present suffering is not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us”

Romans 8:18

Isaiah's vision of the coming age

".....Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years...."

"....They will not labour in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them."

Isaiah 65:20,23

“Behold the dwelling place (tabernacle) of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes*, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Revelation 21: 3-5

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy, Mark Vroegop

Near to the Broken-Hearted: The Comfort of Jesus in the Grief of Losing a Child, Dan and Anna Martin

Raging with compassion, John Swinton