

# Suffering with the Messiah: Finding grace beyond 2020

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Reflection on 2020 can hardly elide the irruption of suffering—randomly, capriciously—into hundreds of thousands of lives. In this article, I will observe how some of the biblical authors are fellow-travellers in naming the unfair and scarifying excesses of suffering in lived experience. Their laments are acts of emotional intelligence that resonate with the narratives of our “*Zeitgeist*,” where suffering elicits unmitigated horror, despair, and hopelessness. But as I will go on to argue, this modern kind of articulation of suffering as an ultimate existential abyss that can only be resolved by banishing it, cannot suffice. More is needed, and more is offered in the Psalmists’ framing of the fact of suffering; and then in the solidarity Christ offers in his “paschal cycle,” a journey into and out of suffering pioneered by him, and then graciously extended to us, whatever forms of suffering we may endure. I will close by suggesting that our churches are a better context in which we may *together* appropriate this surprising new framing of our sufferings.

I

We thought it horrendous enough over the Australian summer, as bushfires endlessly tore through community after community. While the homeless hunkered down in tents and halls, the southeast endured an apocalyptic haze that stole, it seemed, the very air from our lungs. Meanwhile, in a

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major Chinese city most Australians had never heard of, lungs were truly robbed of breath in case after case of a brutal new pneumonia. As if that were not enough, the prospect of geopolitical conflict has since surged. And within all this, one of the most egregious and traumatising vignettes the world has ever seen flew around our devices: the pointless and callous slaying of George Floyd.

In each of our attempts to “digest” and “process” this terrible year, it becomes apparent how hard we find it to react proportionately to our own specific setbacks, challenges, and insults. Often, the anxiety these elicit is not commensurate to the magnitude of insult. You remind yourself that your own situation is nothing; privileged even, compared to this comatose person on a respirator, or that person whose house is a carbonised ruin, or the shocked and grieving family of Mr Floyd. But the acidic and breath-catching sting when smoke content hits four-hundred parts per million; or the fifteen-hour road blockage when I am supposedly on holiday; the miasma of work and home and schooling and Zoom while in lockdown; or the ignominy of JobSeeker, while my workplace goes into a near-death hibernation, is each its own species of suffering.

The more sternly moralistic of us amplify the anxiety we are experiencing with guilt, reprimanding ourselves that we should count our blessings, and that we have it good by comparison. But all change involves loss; all loss involves grief; and grief always brings suffering. The Scottish philosopher David Hume named, and sought to reinstate, the intense closeness to us of our fear or grief or despair. “It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger,” he famously exaggerated, driving the point home by adding that although in that way we might even be choosing our own ruin, we would still do so in defence of our sore finger rather than “prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian, or a person wholly unknown to me.”<sup>1</sup> It is hyperbole, and we may not quite go that far. But there is an indecent kind of honesty here, as Hume normalises and affirms those moments of quiet panic when we believe that our corner of the world really is falling apart.

Because we are “wired” thus, we cannot help but resonate with each Psalmist’s cry of lament, irrespective of their particular context. “My soul is [ . . . ] struck with terror, while you, O Lord—how long?” (PS. 6:3).<sup>2</sup> The translator notices the expletive nature of that final interjection—its desperate, ungrammatical “won’t you *act*?” Similarly in Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

In these Psalms, the enemies are shadowy and not much is gained by trying to identify them, since the white-heat of the text resides in how suffering corrodes its way into the very atoms of *nephesh*, “soul”. We are wrong to regard “soul” in some disembodied way: this is flesh-eating stuff. “My bones burn,” in Psalm 102:3. These moments are not unlike each person’s worst during 2020.

If we find these texts of lament causing us to bow our heads in tearful appreciation of the response to their naming of *our* situation, there is at least one subtle difference between how they frame suffering in comparison to our typical mental and emotional “moves”. These authors wrote against a backdrop of such suffering that they presumed its immediacy, knowing they simply inhabit a world full of it. That is, the arrival and survival of suffering does not interest them in the same way that it scandalises us. For us, the presence of suffering as the “rock of atheism”<sup>3</sup> governs our mental Gestalt. When in 2011 Boris Johnson opined after the Japanese earthquake and tsunami that “we are tiny blobs of flesh and blood crawling on the thin integument of a sphere of boiling rock and metal,”<sup>4</sup> his intention was to establish the godless randomness of human suffering, using the naturalism of our *Zeitgeist* to shrug off any further questions about its meaning. Suffering, godlessness, and randomness are mutually reinforcing on this common view. In contrast, the reality and persistence of suffering is for the biblical authors a premise within their theistic order. Because of it, they would naturally question God’s goodness (or, more accurately, God’s caring interest in the sufferer). But they do not equally question God’s existence, presumably because that notion would raise more questions about all of God’s acts in the world than it solves.

I will return to our *Zeitgeist*. But let us pause again to note how present to us are their laments. “I loathe my life,” says Job (10:1). “I am weary with my crying,” says the Psalmist (69:3). “I die every day,” says the Apostle (1 Cor. 15:30). There is a decent kind of honesty here, as these authors seek neither to sidestep nor minimise their experiences. They decline to affect a stoic posture, rather embracing, accepting, and owning the stark intensity of

their experience. Also, the varying contexts of these utterances indicate no comparison, grading, nor rating of experiences into more- and less-worthy modes of suffering, nor any self-consciousness about the severity or not of their own form of suffering in comparison to unfortunate others. Whatever form their suffering takes, heartfelt lament flows.

These aspects of response among the biblical authors—the assumption of it within a theistic order; the straightforward recourse to lament; the disinterest in taxonomies of “worthy” and “worthless” sufferings; and the absence of guilt over comparing the severity or not of our own suffering to that of others—are, arguably, more adaptive responses than our own. By contrast, and in addition to other maladaptive responses to suffering within our wider culture, the prescribed pious reaction to suffering has for some become immediate recourse to consequentialism, the assertion of hidden benefits that will arise from it (“all things work for good!”). This sentiment alludes to a biblical text, but has no intelligibility when abstracted from its richer theological weave.

Equally useless during the crucible of suffering are attempts at theodicy—that theological cognitive therapy which sets about narrating the arrival and survival of suffering in an intellectually coherent and satisfying justification of God. We may suspect, however, that this tactic often hides an agenda to settle the disturbed emotions of we who look on to suffering, avoiding any empathic journey into the raging loss of the sufferers. This theodicean reflex becomes, according to practical theologian John Swinton, “a potential source of evil in and of itself.”<sup>5</sup> For whatever we may say about how or “why” it happened, the sufferer’s bones still burn.

## II

Christian tradition has more to offer to the sufferer than the authenticity of the Psalmist’s lament. But to access it, we have first to come to terms with its melancholy account of longstanding fractures zig-zagging in and out of our communities, our loved ones and ourselves. “The Christian doctrine of original sin,” suggests the U.S. Jungian psychotherapist Thomas Moore, “teach[es] that human life is wounded in its essence, and suffering is in the nature of things. We are wounded simply by participating in human life, by being children of Adam and Eve. To think that the proper or natural state is to be without wounds is an illusion.”<sup>6</sup>

If that be true, it follows that the *Zeitgeist's* use of suffering to express contempt for God, and our shared conceit that suffering *should* have no part of us, can offer no balm to our wounding. Like bad theodicy, these ploys can also only inflame our pain. Christian resistance to the *Zeitgeist* (when not taking the form of glib theodicy) is not really motivated by the need to keep alive some dream of God. Properly understood, it arises from a dawning awareness that much as we are swept along within a current of the wounded of the race, One is also in that current who loves us, and whom we grow to love.

“For Christians,” says the US Franciscan Richard Rohr, “we learn to identify our own wounds with the wounding of Jesus and the sufferings of the universal Body of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> The Canadian Oblate Father Ronald Rolheiser extends upon this thought. “In Christian spirituality, Christ is central and, central to Christ, is his death and rising to new life so as to send us a new Spirit.” Rolheiser characterises Christ’s journey into, through, and beyond suffering as his “paschal cycle”. Furthermore, this “paschal cycle”:

is something we must undergo daily, in every aspect of our lives. Christ spoke of many deaths, of daily deaths, and of many risings [. . .] The paschal mystery is the secret to life.<sup>8</sup>

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain,” cites Rolheiser; “but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Rolheiser’s expansive reading of this text could be contested, given that the Johannine Jesus goes on to imply the prospect of martyrdom (in a parallel to Mark 8:34–38). Unfortunately in some Christian pieties, arising from the extensive biblical witness to martyrdom, there has emerged a highly Pelagian *de facto* “league-table” of suffering: first the missionaries and martyrs (for we respect their will-power); then the sick (for their will is not to blame); then, those stressed by middle-class life (for at least we work fairly hard); followed by the stresses of a disorganised life (because they *could* pull themselves together if they really *wanted* to); followed a distant last by the results of addiction, sexual excess, and law-breaking (because they, obviously, “deserve” it).

But if Rolheiser’s expansive reading has any warrant, it seems that we are invited into the paschal, with Christ offering “alongside-ness” to *all* who suffer. There is further biblical evidence for such warrant, indicating that the concept is at the fore in other New Testament writing, at least. That

alongside-ness seems to be on view in the (initially disturbing) outburst of Colossians 1:24: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

When working to modern notions of suffering as irreducible horror, Paul's "rejoicing" seems perverse. But if we put aside that notion, we notice that the "rejoicing" springs from alongside-ness with the Christ who also suffered. Paul inhabits ("in my flesh") a dignity afforded to him by Christ's own passion. Similarly: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection," says the apostle, "and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10–11). His conception of participation in the paschal cycle is clear, and based, we may surmise, on his deep conception of mystical union with Christ.

The New Testament authors do primarily emphasise experiences of persecution as a participation in the sufferings of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5–8; 4:7–11; 12:9–10; Phil. 1:27–30; 2 Tim. 3:10–12; Heb. 12:3; 1 Pet. 2:19–23; 3:13–18; 4:12–19; 5:9; cf. Mt. 5:10–12; Mark 8:34–38; Luke 16:22–23; John 15:18–24; 16:33). A dignity for such people around the world, whether past or present, is to be recognised and upheld. The honour due to martyrs is a kernel of truth in the "league-table" above—although more because of *how and whom they love* than in view of their will-power.

But such is the grace of Christ that the offer of participation in the paschal cycle is extended even to we who experience internal struggles erupting from weakness. Our struggles are paralleled to those of the "one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). This author parallels Jesus' endurance of persecution (Heb. 12:3) to our inner struggle "against sin" (Heb. 12:4). Similarly, in another epistle, "Christ suffered in the flesh," so "arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin)" (1 Pet. 4:1–2). If the translational decision in the NRSV and NIV is correct, then here is the tantalising possibility that *even our agonies against sinning* are paralleled to Christ's suffering, with the concomitant offer of exit from those agonies through the hope and love afforded by Christ's "alongside-ness" with us in it. It is only a hint, but also qualifies as an instantiation of the paschal cycle applied to every person's suffering. Such an audacious inhabitation of the paschal cycle simply explodes our conceits that only some sufferings are

worthily named as with Christ. Such an audacious inhabitation of the paschal cycle assures us that no suffering is alone, even when our loneliness is our most salient awareness in the moment.

Somehow then, these early Christians saw themselves and Christ in solidarity in suffering, with the differences in time and place between his suffering and theirs not mattering at all. Their trials were on a continuum with Christ's own life and death. By putting suffering in this context, they make it more intelligible and regard it more hopefully. Christ's suffering means Christ participates in their suffering, and so Christ's suffering turns their wounds into sacred wounds, like his own.

There is more to this "alongside-ness". The sinless Jesus was made even "more perfect" through suffering according to the author of the epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 2:9–10; 5:8–9). Christ's suffering made him more complete, more "mature," more the person whom he was meant to become (a conception of actualisation that completed, rather than compromised, the essential perfection of the pre-incarnate Only Begotten and that of Jesus of Nazareth before his crucifixion).

The human journey could not be much different than Christ's own, reasoned the second-century Irenaeus of Lyons. His conception of this parallel has been termed "recapitulation". God "saved the children of Israel, revealing in a mystery the sufferings of Christ by the sacrifice of a lamb without spot [. . .] And the name of this mystery is Passion, the source of all deliverance."<sup>9</sup> It therefore follows for humanity—as a kind of elemental truth within the universe—that "tribulation is necessary for those who are saved, so that in a certain way winnowed and mingled with the Word of God by patience and finally set on fire, they may be suitable for the festival of the King."<sup>10</sup> While "recapitulation" technically refers to Christ's better inhabitation of the journey of Adam and of Israel, it can help us to regard the term as pointing to how we may follow in the footsteps of Christ's journey. Indeed, in Irenaeus' writing these life-journeys are articulated in a kind of recursive relationship with each other, cosmically intertwined in "alongside-ness". One gives up trying to discern whose journey "comes first".

Modern interpreters<sup>11</sup> tend to reduce Irenaeus's account into a divinely consequentialist exercise of "soul-making" literally at all costs. Viewed from a certain angle—squinting past Christ, as it were—that is one construction. Not so for Irenaeus, for whom the Passion so permeates the history of Israel<sup>12</sup>



and even the cosmos as to relativise the seeming enormity of human suffering, encompassing it, so that humanity can be safe in the face of and despite it.

We may surmise, therefore, that the New Testament authors' seeming optimism about the effect of suffering upon "character" is likewise based upon Christ's journey. His paschal cycle grounds their logic of how hardship grows and enables maturity, hope and trust in God (Rom. 5:3–5; Heb. 12:7–11; 1 Pet. 1:6–7; James 1:2–4). These are the texts that when pressed into service as the divine "reason" for suffering leave the hearer feeling as if they have been cosmically mugged for some putative good end. But these are Christless readings. In fact, these texts rely upon a logic of Christ's own paschal journey as the theological "weave" sustaining them. Similarly, "alongside-ness" with the cosmic Christ in Romans 8:32–35 is the necessary substrate, the warrant, for the much-abused Romans 8:28 ("all things work for good").

Thomas Moore intuits that "[s]uffering forces our attention toward places we would normally neglect."<sup>13</sup> "Pain teaches a most counterintuitive thing—that we must go down before we even know what up is,"<sup>14</sup> says Richard Rohr. These thinkers would agree that the entrée to such conclusions can and should only ever be via the apprehension of Christ's journey, whose hand is held out to us. Otherwise, they can only be clumsy and baseless consequentialisms, as if putative good ends justify these awful means—another version of the theological speech-acts in the world that Swinton regards as sources of evil. Only the way Christ's paschal cycle may make our wounds sacred can ground these intuitions into something thinkable, liveable, and real.

The perfect One has endured it, and so we may with him. This way of conceiving suffering is prefigured in several of the Psalms (e.g. PSS. 22; 69), and then again in the Servant Songs of Isaiah (e.g. Isa. 53)—an insight also pioneered by Irenaeus. The divine can somehow sympathise, participate and be alongside our manifold troubles: as Rohr puts it, "in the crucified Jesus [there] is the recognition of the cosmic and personal significance of human pain and suffering."<sup>15</sup>

### III

Of course, the Psalmists wish to avoid trials, just as Jesus taught to pray against suffering (Matt. 6:13; cf. Luke 22:42), and the later New Testament to pray for quiet and peaceable lives (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:2). Nothing in Christ's passion, nor in its resonances with our difficult lives, is ever valorised into



pious masochism. It simply contextualises human suffering, reframing it away from being that random horrific intrusion I can only endure alone. Even so our bones still burn, and the laments of the Psalmists remain eloquent testimony to how difficult it remains, in the heat of each moment, to proceed.

We are ineluctably social and left unchecked we are known to transmit and export our suffering as further hurts upon others.<sup>16</sup> Also because we are ineluctably social, the ministry of the church is not incidental to our apprehending the grace and “alongside-ness” of Christ. “God has so arranged the body, giving greater honour to the inferior member”—or perhaps in this context, to the struggling, suffering member—“that there may be no dissension in the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). “Just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ”, “so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2. Cor. 1:5, 4).

James L. Risk tells the story of 42-year old Mary, hospitalised with a cancerous condition requiring the amputation of her leg. She railed at God, particularly in view of her ongoing need to care for three children:

Mary cried out in lamentation about her losses—of her leg, her future and being able to find strength in her faith. The chaplain listened. He let her name her fears and doubts, and then he explored the positive images of faith she had learned as a child. He gently drew on those memories and images of a loving Presence and helped her reframe her future story. Over several weeks and many visits, he prayed with her and helped her to reclaim a sense of self-sufficiency as she faced an uncertain future.<sup>17</sup>

At no point in this account would some traditional theodicy, some putative justification for God in the face of evil, have helped Mary forward. The vignette highlights her need for the time of lamentation, and then for “alongside-ness”, all brought to Mary’s mind by another in Christ’s Body (in this case, the chaplain). Her losses were a kind of death of her former life, and her newfound resolution a kind of “resurrection” into a new future. In this last respect, her story illustrates Rolheiser’s contention that paschal cycles are with us all the time. When we grieve our losses, we may see

our participation in the paschal, then experience the grace of resurrection and Spirit. (Rolheiser acknowledges, it should be noted, that some griefs remain lifelong.)

The Australia of 2021 may be very different to the one we knew in 2019. At the time of writing can be seen, both in individuals and in the community, evidences of near-frantic need to hang on to the old life. (Much plaintive handwringing about “the economy,” almost as if it had free-standing substance apart from the health of human communities, may be like that.) Our compatriots have been inducted into thinking of themselves as units in a mechanistic universe, with no thought of “sacred” woundedness, and with suffering only existing to be denied, resisted, and escaped. We believe *this* suffering should surely be over by now; that somehow, after years of education and enlightenment and progress and productivity and toleration and science, we should have arrived at the place where a vaccine, an election, or some other human leverage should return us to 2019. To concede any quotidian reality to suffering has become more than we can bear; we favour recourse to contempt or cynicism or leisure or fantasy or scapegoating; and even for those who long ago abandoned belief in God, there is perhaps also some anger at God.

This impressionistic take on our *Zeitgeist* is not meant as mean-spirited invective. I simply mean to indicate some mental and emotional prison bars that have become hard to escape without proper lament, and eventually, without taking up the “alongside-ness” Christ offers. Churches and Christians ministering that grace—to ourselves, to each other and beyond—ought simply to accept the long time it takes for denial and resistance to give way to lament, and then even to this discovery about Christ’s grace.

The church’s—and each church’s—inhabitation *together* of the paschal cycle remains as joyful a motive to gather and *re-gather* in 2021 and beyond as in the millennia prior to 2020. The church springs from this gospel, and will *re-spring* from it, irrespective of the very real and present damage that COVID-19 rules have inadvertently done to many Christian ministries. Our future may also see war, famine, more pestilence, or tyranny, all of which we pray against fervently. Even so, as we inhabit the paschal cycle *together*, 2020 may assist us to learn more of living graciously, a renewed inhabitation in Christ that will be as sorely needed as ever to bless whatever Australia we find around the corner.

## Endnotes

- 1 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Vol. II (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1911), 128. (Bk II, *Of the Passions*; Part III, “Of the Influencing Motives of the Will”).
- 2 Biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.
- 3 The phrase is attributed to Georg Büchner (1813–37) by Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, trans. David G. Preston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 9.
- 4 Boris Johnson, “Disaster as divine retribution,” *Sydney Morning Herald* March 15, 2011. Online: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/disaster-as-divine-retribution-20110314-1buff.html>, accessed July 27, 2020.
- 5 John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 13.
- 6 Thomas Moore, *Care of the soul: a guide for cultivating depth and sacredness in everyday life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 166.
- 7 Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cincinnati, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), 24.
- 8 Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 134, 139.
- 9 Irenaeus, “The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching §25,” trans. J. Armitage Robinson, in Iain M. MacKenzie, *Irenaeus’s Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching: A theological commentary and translation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 8–9.
- 10 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* §28.4, trans. Robert M. Grant, in Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Routledge: Abingdon, 1997), 176.
- 11 Including, arguably, John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 221, for whom “Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man’s development towards the perfection that represents the fulfilment of God’s good purpose for him.”
- 12 E.g. *Demonstration* §§69–83.
- 13 Moore, *Care of the soul*, 258.
- 14 Rohr, *Things Hidden*, 25.
- 15 Rohr, *Things Hidden*, 25.

- 16 Cf. Rohr, *Things Hidden*, 26: "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it. If we cannot find a way to make our wounds into sacred wounds, we invariably become negative or bitter. Indeed, there are bitter people everywhere, inside and outside of the church. As they go through life, the hurts, disappointments, betrayals, abandonments, the burden of their own sinfulness and brokenness all pile up, and they do not know where to put it."
- 17 James L. Risk, "Spiritual Struggle: Identifying persons at spiritual risk has positive impact on health outcomes," *Healing Spirit* (Fall 2008): 6. Online: [https://www.professionalchaplains.org/files/about\\_us/for\\_administrators/articles/spiritual\\_struggle\\_healing\\_spirit\\_fall\\_2008.pdf](https://www.professionalchaplains.org/files/about_us/for_administrators/articles/spiritual_struggle_healing_spirit_fall_2008.pdf) , accessed August 3, 2020.