**A Straw god**

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**FORWARD**

 The thoughts and perspectives I have built upon in this work are ones that have slowly become a part of who I am over the span of my entire life. It has sprouted out of God’s dealings with me personally, the ways I have seen him interact with others (most notably the recorded interactions of scripture), and his gift to me of a brain that thinks very deeply, and is quick to recognize abstract connections which can be investigated, studied and brought to a conclusion.

 Two years ago when I decided on this topic for my Malone University Honors Thesis, I had only a tiny spark of light by which to see the things I have attempted to illuminate for you in the following pages. With that tiny spark, however, I investigated many of the ideas set forth in this work. I learned their contours, shapes, and sizes; as well as the ways in which they connected to each other. Over the course of two years, researching the work of others and sitting in class lectures, I discovered that some of the things I saw had also been seen in some way, shape, or form by others; but that no one had seen them connected the way I had, and no one had seen the broader picture that I saw. My research and study acted as an intellectual spotlight of sorts, allowing me to see more clearly the things I had already come to know dimly.

Now I liken myself to the one in Plato’s allegory of the cave,[[1]](#footnote-1) who has escaped the chains and turned to see the reality of the physical bodies which cast the shadows on the wall. Then being taken outside the cave, he came to understand that the real world was of a much higher status and quality, than the world he had known in the cave. Like this one, I desire to gather those who live in the cave, and bring them out into the real world as well. I truly consider this theodicy of mine to be the real nature of things, and to be as different to the current vein of worldly thinking as the outside world would be to those in Plato’s cave.

 I would like to extend much gratitude to those who have helped me along the path of writing and editing this piece. First I would like to thank Dr. Chambers, who was the Director of the Honors Program during my first two years. The time she spent challenging me and guiding me in the thesis process was very valuable. Thank you! Next I would like to thank Dr. Renea Brathwaite, who was my original faculty advisor. Dr. Brathwaite helped me to narrow my focus, taught me how to read and process at a graduate level. He did this by requiring me to read a book a week for an entire semester, and also teaching me how to, and challenged my ideas; forcing me to see the possible objections of others in order to address them. While working with Dr. Brathwaite I learned how to write a thesis proposal, a literature review, and how to research all the other views on my subject. With his guidance I wrote a proposal that was rich and full, as well as narrow and precise. Thank you so much for all you taught me Dr. Brathwaite.

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 As you read the following work, consider the struggles you have faced in your own life, in light of who God is and what his singular purpose is.

Blessings,

Louis Powers

**CHAPTER ONE**

**A Straw god**

**“For thousands of years, human beings have been obsessed with beauty, truth, love, honor, altruism, courage, social relationships, art, and God. They all go together as subjective experiences, and it's a straw man to set God up as the delusion. If he is, then so is truth itself or beauty itself.” -- Deepak Chopra**

MY MOTIVATION

 I began this project out of a longstanding personal relationship with suffering and evil, and a longstanding belief that immense good has come into my life because of them. I was born to a fifteen year old mother who was unable to properly take care of me, taken away by the state at age two, placed in foster care, and eventually adopted. I was raised in a home where I was consistently abused mentally, physically and verbally. My intimate relationship with suffering and evil goes back as far as I can recall. Once I became an adult and moved out on my own, I experienced more suffering and evil. Years as a drug addict as well as life on the rough and tumble streets of Bridgeport, Connecticut; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Houston, Texas gave me a new and broader view of suffering and evil.

Reading about things like the holocaust, massacres of Native Americans by the settlers, atrocious war crimes committed by people such as Saddam Hussein, or the men of Japan’s army while in China just prior to WWII, have caused great pangs of empathy in me. They have caused me to question the depths of humanity's ability for evil, but not to question the goodness of God, in spite of the fact that I have not always understood the deeper purposes he has had in store for me, especially whilst in the midst of some of my suffering. My adopted father fashioned instruments of torture, hung them in the dark, cold, moist cellar for me to stare at, for what seemed like an eternity, before coming down to actually use them on me. When I lay naked, bruised and alone on the floor after a session, I sobbed with the tears of one who felt rejected and tormented. He screamed at me, telling me daily that I was stupid and would never amount to anything. He grabbed me by the hair, and yanked, pulling me towards himself. Mean tricks, mean words, unloving hands. This was my reality as a child. However, I do not relate to Ivan Karamazov, of *The Brothers Karamazov*, when he argues against *a kind god.[[2]](#footnote-2)* Ivan is intellectual and well read. He is great with arguments and disputations. He is also struggling with the loss of his father and questioning the values of life. Ivan is a rationalist who is disturbed by what he believes to be pointless suffering. He expresses this by telling the following story:

(A) poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by (her) cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty- shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night (as though a child of five sleeping its angelic, sound sleep could be trained to wake and ask), they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child's groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to dear, kind God. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Unlike the fictional character Ivan, I, in real life experience, have come to understand, and even to know, that the cries of my heart, the prayers I prayed while laying naked and bruised on the concrete floor, in the dark and damp basement of the house I grew up in, and the deepest desires and longings inside me, have been, and are being, fulfilled; even in the midst of, and often by the hand of, the suffering which I have endured.

THE CLASSICAL PROBLEM

For many others though, the existence of suffering and evil causes an intellectual dilemma. A question I often hear, after some tragedy, is “what type of god would allow this to happen?” On a more academic level, the argument is made: If god is all loving, all powerful and knows all things, then he would want to get rid of suffering and evil, he would know how to, and would be able to. This is sometimes called ‘The Problem of Evil.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

The problem of evil is the so-called dilemma of reconciling god’s absolute (or relative) goodness, knowledge, and power, with the obvious fact that suffering and evil exist. Attributing these three statements to god seems to cause a contradiction. Suffering and evil exist; therefore god is either unable to get rid of them, and so is not omnipotent, or he is not aware of their existence and so is not omniscient, or he is not all good, because he does not do away with them; in spite of his knowledge of them and ability to do away with them.

Commonly this problem is used to cast a blemish on the idea that Christianity is coherent and reasonable as a belief system. However, the earliest known framing of this question is generally thought to come prior to Christianity, from the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE). The ascription to him takes place in chapter 13 of Lactantius’ *De Ira De*i (c. 318):

God, he [Epicurus] says, "either wants to eliminate bad things and cannot,

or can but does not want to,

or neither wishes to nor can,

or both wants to and can.

If he wants to and cannot, then he is weak and this does not apply to god.

If he can but does not want to, then he is spiteful which is equally foreign to god’s nature.

If he neither wants to nor can, he is both weak and spiteful, and so not a god.

If he wants to and can, which is the only thing fitting for a god, where then do bad things come from? Or why does he not eliminate them?

The philosophy of Epicurus was focused around a central theme of achieving happiness, peace, and serenity. Its distinctive features were: freedom from fear, the gaining of peace, and the absence of pain. Epicurus believed and taught that good and evil are measured by the pleasure and pain in one’s life, pain being evil and pleasure being good. During the Renaissance, there was a restoration of these Epicurean ideas, and this has really influenced how modern Philosophy has evolved. The spreading of this idea, that pain is to be avoided and pleasure maximized, into our modern culture, has led many to believe that there does not exist a god who is concerned with the interests of humans.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The evaluation of god by Epicurus is integral to the entire debate. There are many religions with many gods, but it is the God of scripture at whom this accusation is usually flung. However, God has a great many more attributes than just the three used in the argument (benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent). Who then, are we calling god in the Epicurean argument or in the problem of evil?

David Hume, in *his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, revisits the Epicurean questioning of god. While asking the same question foundationally, a distinct humanism can be seen in Hume's dialogues. No longer are god’s goodness, knowledge, and power merely questioned in the face of evil, but they are also now compared to the goodness and mercy of human beings; as if to say that we humans are the standard by which goodness is to be measured.

[God's] power we allow [is] infinite: Whatever he wills is executed: But neither man nor any other animal are happy: Therefore he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite: He is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end: But the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity: Therefore it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge, there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is to the God of scripture, that the problem of evil is inadvertently leveled. So then, it must be the God of scripture whom we inspect and hold up to scrutiny. Omnipresence, judiciousness, holiness, patience, eternality, mercy, grace, wrath, longsuffering, immanence, immutability, righteousness, self-existence, sovereignty, and transcendence are also part of who God claims to be[[7]](#footnote-7) and these other attributes of his Person will inevitably affect the outcome of any action or inaction. To merely choose three of God’s eighteen (or more) attributes and set them up alongside the argument from evil, is nothing less than arguing against, and defeating, a straw god.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

This subject is very important because we would like to understand why we suffer, why evil is in the world, its origins and purpose. It is also important because the argument from evil mischaracterizes God. Take for instance, the quote from David Hume previously mentioned. In three sentences he claims that no one is happy, “neither man nor animal,” that nature does not contribute to human happiness, that in all of human knowledge nothing is more true and precise than these two things, that because of this it is obvious God does not will our happiness, nature is not made to assist us in happiness, and that the goodness and mercy of humanity is better than the goodness and mercy of God. These are very bold claims, and if Hume is right that no one on the planet is happy, if no one ever has been happy or ever will be happy, then one might rightly be inclined to question some of the attributes claimed of God. But the truth is, we often are happy. I believe that most people are happy more than not happy. Also, nature does aid us in our happiness. We enjoy eating, sleeping, sex. We enjoy the warm rays of sunshine, those same rays make our food grow, and the list is endless. This topic is important, because of the many deceptions out there about reality. This topic is important for me personally, because of what I have been through. But it is also important for everyone because so many do not have time to sort through the mess of claims both true and false. Therefore I would like to sort through them, and present them in a way that the average person can read and understand. Not just an academic work, for the scholarly, but a work that all people will find accessible.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**The Roads Most Traveled**

APPROACHES BY OTHERS

This problem has not fully been leveled at the God of scripture, but rather at a straw god who is merely all loving, all powerful and all knowing. In spite of this, a great many scholars, philosophers and theologians, have attempted to defend this god against the alleged contradiction between god's nature and the existence of suffering and evil. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss some of the approaches others have taken.

THE THOMISTIC ROAD

Eleonore Stump's book *Wandering in Darkness* contains many wise thoughts about topics like the nature of love, the place of narrative in the philosophical debate over the problem of evil, and the importance of second hand personal experience.

 She takes a unique Thomistic, or Catholic approach which says that evil does not exist in a positive, ontological way, but is rather the lack of good. A thing is called evil if it lacks a perfection it ought to have.[[8]](#footnote-8) Working from this perspective, Stump gives a defense against the problem of evil which is unique in several ways. First, she looks at suffering through the lense of second hand personal stories rather than made up analytical scenarios created to push the boundaries of ‘what if’s’, proposing that these types of arguments have become too analytical and isolated from concerns of the real world. She believes that analytic philosophy is not even capable of dealing with personal relationship and has become too detached from the real world to give us an accurate path to understanding why or how an all loving, all powerful, and all knowing creator, has allowed evil and suffering to exist.

Second, her defense is also unique in the way she views emotional suffering as a result of losing what our hearts desire. We want a certain thing or situation and don't get it, or we get it then lose it, or we get it and it does not turn out the way we had imagined it would. These losses of perceived goods then, cause us to suffer. Her defense argues that the things our hearts desire are often not ultimately good for us; and the loss of these perceived goods is painful but necessary in order for us to become the type of being we were meant to be. A being in union with its Creator. Unlike most philosophers, she looks at the problem from the point of interpersonal relationships rather than from the view of intellect alone, believing (in my opinion, rightly so) that intellectual arguments and made up hypothetical stories can never lead us to answering this question. Instead, the answer can only be discovered through true stories of events in the lives of individuals and how they personally view the redemption of, or lack of redemption, in their suffering.

 Third, she grapples with the definition of what types of suffering meet the requirement of being evil, and shows that pain is not bad just because it hurts. In the end, she concludes that suffering which we consider evil, has to do with suffering because of the loss of something we perceive as valuable to us, a thing we care about. However, just because we consider a thing evil, does not make it so. In fact she proposes that since God is outside of time, and we are inside time, that it is possible we already (in eternity) have looked back and seen the good in our pain and agreed with God, telling him we would not have him take it away for we agree with the outcomes and goods that the suffering brought. Essentially, we have given God permission, in eternity, to purify us, which requires fire.

 In discussing the nature of love, she touches on some issues important to my own thesis. After looking at theories of love from a contemporary perspective (responsiveness, volitional, relational via Harry Frankfurt, and Niko Kolodny), she goes on to discuss Aquinas's description of love. Her argument is that Aquinas’ account of love as requiring two mutually governing desires, is correct. Love must both desire the good of the beloved as well as desire union with the beloved.

THE PROTESTANT FREEDOM ROAD

 C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain*, takes a more Protestant approach and looks at what it means to have free will in a universe of fixed laws. The free will argument, which in my opinion is the most often used and leaned upon, directly affects an understanding of the omnipotence of this tri-attributed straw god, or any god for that matter. Even the God of scripture. How God’s omnipotence interacts with human freedom is important to this problem. Does divine omnipotence actually mean God can do *anything*? According to Lewis, God can do anything intrinsically possible. He believes this to be consistent with the Christian claim that with God all things are possible because an intrinsic impossibility is not actually a thing.[[9]](#footnote-9) Aside from the obvious argument that being all powerful does not mean a god can do such things as create a square circle, or create a being more mighty than himself, Lewis asserts that in a universe which contains free will, this god would automatically be limited in power over creatures who can choose freely between available options. This approach goes on to say that god cannot limit the options available, to only options that are good. This is because a world “in which wrong actions were impossible, (is a world in which) freedom of the will would be void.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

His approach is very simple and straightforward, and on most levels, traditional. Yet he does have one area that I believe is unique (in spite of also being popularized), and helpful to my thesis. Lewis claims that we often mistake kindness for love, and it is this mistaken idea of love that leads to the perceived problem between the attributes of god and the existence of suffering. He believes that free will, in a material universe means suffering is natural and essential. The free-will defense to the alleged problem of evil is a common one, and also an important one. Many of the scholars I have read, address free will in some way or another, and I believe it is just as important to define freedom as it is to define love, before making an argument for or against the problem of evil. C.S. Lewis defines freedom as ‘freedom to choose.’ For Lewis, it also means the creature that is free to choose, must have options to choose from. While these two points seem obvious, I believe that they do not fully describe true freedom in all its facets. Is having free will the same as being free? I do not believe so. Neither did Anselm of Canterbury, and I will approach this in my own project.

However, I agree wholeheartedly with Lewis’ idea of love’s mistaken identity. It seems to run in the same vein as Stump’s claim that love must desire the good of the beloved as well as desire union with the beloved. In this thesis project I intend to show that our wrong ideas of *what love is* and *what love would do*, are the largest contributors to the false idea that suffering and evil disprove the existence of the God of scripture.

THE LOGICAL ROAD

 Another approach which relies heavily on a free will argument is the formal, logical defense put forth in the book *God, Freedom, and Evil*, by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga uses a heavy philosophical edge to plow through aspects and solutions from the standpoint of reason. He attempts to show that there is no contradiction when claiming the straw god to be all powerful, all good and all knowing; yet evil exists. His main approach is a free will defense centered around whether or not god could have created a world with the same moral good this world contains, but without the moral evil. Plantinga notes that several ‘quasi-logical’ arguments must be added to the premise that evil and suffering could not exist alongside an all loving, all powerful and all knowing creator, in order for it to be true. Premise one is that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and premise two is that there cannot be any limits to what an all powerful being can do. Premise one runs against the current of what I am proposing in my thesis, and Plantinga shows it is easily refuted by telling a story about a man who hurts his knee rock climbing. The pain in the man’s knee is considered an evil, but the doctor can not make the pain go away unless he amputates the leg. The benefits of living with the pain for a few days outweigh the obvious long term repercussions from amputating the leg. A good doctor would not amputate the leg to get rid of the knee pain. It seems, however, that in light of the argument from the problem of evil, the suggestion is that an all loving, all powerful and all-knowing god, would have prevented the initial knee injury to begin with, thereby eliminating the pain altogether. So it is necessary somehow to show that god could not prevent the knee injury. Obviously the freewill defense is capable of that. This is one of the reasons the freewill defense is so popular. While it is obvious that free will plays a huge role in the overall question at hand, I believe that there is much more to it. And this takes us into the rest of Plantinga’s argument.

If god is all knowing and all powerful, could he not have created a world in which humans were free, yet only choose to do good? Plantinga believes that there is a stalemate here. He claims that every possible person that could ever be created would make at least one wrong action and so god could not create a world with only moral good and no moral evil.

While I believe this to be true in premise, it also alludes too strongly to the possibility that the amount of evil and suffering we see in this world, is beyond what we would see if god were all loving, all powerful and all knowing; even with human free will absolving him of wiping it out completely. In my opinion, to justify the evil and suffering we see, it must be shown that good comes from it.

THE ACADEMIC ROAD

A much less philosophically academic approach can be found in the book *Learning to Live With Evil*, by Theodore Plantinga. He exposits the topic of evil in depth, while defending the straw god. Like many others, he also refers to the God of scripture and yet makes no note of the differences between the two. One of the first arguments he brings up, is that God’s claim the earth is good, does not automatically mean it is/was perfect. He has instead, a view of a creation that is good, but is ever increasing in perfection, which would make it good. However the fall of man seems to have reversed the direction of the creation from increasing toward perfection, to the direction of death and decay. Scripture teaches that the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus reverses that curse and will one day return the creation to its march toward perfection.

Another thing this author addresses is the corporate nature of sin, and I believe the corporate nature of humanity as a whole should be addressed when looking at the problem of evil. It is only in modernity that we have the idea of individualism to the extent which we see it today. How did pre modern societies view suffering and evil? Plantinga suggests we have a corporate guilt and much of suffering and evil result from our oneness as humanity. He maintains that we often look away from suffering and evil when it does not directly affect us and that we all have the capacity for evil within us.

Plantinga also looks into the important subject of freedom, talking about freedom as the ability to either obey or disobey God. However, once we disobey, he believes we are no longer free to obey, and become slaves to sin.

THE PRACTICAL ROAD

N.T. Wright puts forth a biblical practical approach in *Evil and the Justice of God*. In this approach, we are given an account of the evolution of the problem of evil, how it has gone fromthe confusing and difficult philosophical problem of the past, to one in which we ignore evil that does not directly apply to us. In this new problem of evil, as suggested by Wright, we are surprised when evil affects us and we often react immaturely. He attributes this evolution to the doctrine of progress which states that the world is progressing through the dialectic process. We now expect a steady march forward. He believes that the modern world has accepted that some suffering is necessary on the path to progress, as long as there is light at the end of the tunnel and suffering will eventually cease. He also, more than anyone else, talks about what God *is doing* about evil and suffering, instead of attempting to explain why God would allow it. He brings up many interesting points, such as how the remedy for evil, has within itself a germ of evil.

 This defense also claims that, since God does not, in scripture, spend much time explaining the origin of evil and suffering or why it exists, we should not spend time on that either. What we do see, Wright claims, is what God has done about evil. This defense looks at the existence of evil within each of us and what God’s response is to that, as well as what our own response should be.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**The Roads Least Traveled**

APPROACHES BY OTHERS

All of the approaches I mentioned in the last chapter fall under the classification of a defense. A defense is an attempt to prove that it is possible for an all powerful, all good, and all knowing god to exist and for suffering/evil to exist as well. A defense is by far the easiest answer to the question of the problem of evil because no explanation of why this god allows evil, is needed, only the proof that it is not impossible for them to co-exist. A different approach category is called theodicy.[[11]](#footnote-11) A theodicy is much more difficult because it attempts to explain where exactly evil/suffering comes from and/or give specific reasons that god allows it.

THE RATIONAL/MATHEMATICAL ROAD

A great example of theodicy is found in the writing of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. A noted proponent of rationalism, Leibniz concludes in his theodicy that this world is the best possible world the straw god could have created out of all possible worlds. He relies heavily on free will and the belief that the world we inhabit is the the result of god’s intellect. Much like the solving of an algebraic equation, this world was formulated out of the equation that brought the best possible good at the end. Therefore, for Leibniz, the individual occurrences that make up history, past present and future, contain evil and suffering, but the end result is good. Best. His theodicy is made up of conclusions that he reached through the use of reason.

THE CATASTROPHE ROAD

 Theodicy in the tradition of Augustine is the dominant theodicy of Western Christianity both Protestant and Catholic.[[12]](#footnote-12) According to this school of thought, humanity was perfect at the time of creation but became imperfect and sinful though a devastating turn of events, namely the choosing of their own will above God’s. This horrible event “disrupted God’s plan,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and catapulted the entire creation into death, decay, darkness and sin. This theodicy explains the presence of suffering/evil by combining the free will defense with the Thomistic idea of evil as non-being and placing the blame on humanity’s choice, taking the responsibility off of God’s shoulders. God is seen mostly as non-personal.[[14]](#footnote-14) While anyone who takes time to think this through, realizes that in the end, God is still responsible for creating humans who introduce suffering and evil into the world, this tradition “thinks it impious to state explicitly what (Augustine’s) doctrine implies.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

THE IMMATURE ROAD

Irenaeus was the author of “the church’s first systematic theology.”[[16]](#footnote-16) It was written in response to Gnosticism, and so, having “originated in the earliest and most ecumenical phase of Christian thought;”[[17]](#footnote-17) his theodicy is the view closest to the actual life of Christ. This theodicy states that man was created in a state of imperfection. Innocent and good, but not perfect. In this state humanity was “to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his maker.”[[18]](#footnote-18) If man was created immature, with or without the fall, man would have needed to be brought into maturity and perfection. In this view there is a distinction between the image of God in man, and the likeness of God in man. Man was created with the image of God, but the likeness would come through learning and growing. In this way of thinking, creation is comparable to a seed that is planted, then sprouts and grows.[[19]](#footnote-19)

MY APPROACH AND ITS LIMITATIONS

 I have many problems with the problem of evil, and while all of these aforementioned approaches (roads) carry notes and tones which I find pleasant and close to truth, none of them reach the deep and wide ideas that I carry within myself. My main issue with the so called problem of evil, as I have stated already, is that it has never been properly leveled against the God of scripture. No one has ever asked, “if God is all loving, all powerful, all knowing, self-sufficient, omnipresent, judicious, holy, wrathful, patient, eternal, merciful, gracious, longsuffering, immanent, immutable, righteous, self-existent, sovereign, and transcendent, then why do suffering and evil exist?” If this question were asked, how would the answer be affected by the total and full account of who God is? Well obviously, an entire volume of books would be needed to accurately pursue the answers to that question. Reason indicates, however, that since the problem of evil is leveled at a different god, the conclusion reached, for or against him, cannot then be applied to the above mentioned God. I hope to someday delve into each of these characteristics of God’s nature, and see how they affect the question of evil and suffering; however the focus of my thesis will be more narrow.

The argument leveled against a straw god carries many problems itself. For example, what is love and what does it mean for this god to be ‘all loving’ (or all good)? Assuming this god is all loving; does that truly mean that this god would want to get rid of all suffering and evil? Does being all powerful actually mean this god can do anything he wants? What is evil and what do we mean when we call something evil? Are we, like Epicurus, claiming evil and suffering to be synonymous? When we say that suffering and evil are bad, what do we mean? What also, then, is good? How would our thoughts change if we had an eternal perspective rather than a temporary one?

Considering the limited scope of this thesis project, I have chosen to focus on the attribute of love or kindness. What is love? What is kindness? Assuming that God is all the attributes he claims to be, can the bold statement actually be made that omni-benevolence automatically means he would want to get rid of all evil and suffering? Or does that fall into the line of thinking that we see in Hume’s dialogues, where this God is now measured against the goodness and mercy of man; where our idea of love and goodness becomes the standard rather than God’s?

 In the beginning of this thesis, I shared that I believe a lot of good has come to me from the suffering I have endured due to evil. The good things are deep and permanent (lasting for my entire life), while the suffering was not as deep, and it was also temporary (lasting anywhere from hours to years). The goods I have received are goods I do not believe I could have gained without my experiences. I also shared a section of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Ivan could not understand why the little girl (and possibly he would have felt the same about the little boy Louie) should “weep her unresentful tears to dear, kind God.” I propose, as does C.S. Lewis, that there is a large difference between kindness and love. In the *The Problem of Pain* he says that we mistakenly think of kindness as love. That what we really want is “not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven - a senile benevolence who, as they say, like(s) to see young people enjoying themselves.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Kindness and love, however, do not have the same scope, duration or boundaries. The god whom the author of *The Brothers Karamazov*, David Hume (who also refers to a kind god), and many others, aim their darts at is a straw god. The God of scripture does not claim to be kind, at least in the contemporary sense of the term; rather, he claims to be loving and good (and all the other sixteen attributes I have twice now mentioned). We confuse ourselves and others when we mistake kindness for love, and in my thesis I will make clear the differences and how they drastically affect the problem of evil.

As I mentioned earlier, the questioning began with Epicurus, who believed that good and evil are determined by pleasure and pain. This way of thinking is now intimately tied to modernism and humanism. We largely believe that pain is to be avoided and pleasure maximized, and this is how we determine happiness, how we value and decide what is ‘good.’ We also, in Humean fashion, judge the actions or inactions of God from the standpoint of a human measure of good. Our standard is the baseline from which God should be held accountable. Therefore, we believe that our immediate happiness would be God’s main concern if he were truly good. In the following pages I will show that true love would not do away with all suffering, because suffering can be good, and without pain we would not know that something was wrong and seek for God’s solution. True love would, however, join us in our suffering, and walk through it, with us, to the other side.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Divorcing Suffering from Evil**

EVIL DEFINED

 What is evil? Where does it come from? We all likely think we know, at first thought, what evil is. It is anything that is wrong, especially if it is maliciously wrong. It is anything that hurts, rips our hearts, or tears our souls. Evil, to us, is often whatever goes against our idea of a eutopia. *The Wordsworth Concise English Dictionary* defines evil in this way:“wicked, bad, mischievous, disagreeable, unfortunate.”[[21]](#footnote-21) I cannot help but notice a clear progression in the definition. A progression from what evil truly is, to what we wrongly choose to label as evil. I don’t think anyone would argue against calling wickedness evil. In fact, the God whom I wish to defend in this thesis, would wholeheartedly call wickedness evil and call evil wicked. But from there we see a clearly humanistic definition beginning to form. Take for instance “bad.” To say that evil is bad, is at once an understatement as well as a mis-statement. Evil is much more than bad, it is evil, and bad is not always wicked or malicious; sometimes it is just poor quality or even unfavorable, but sometimes unfavorable is still good, in spite of the fact we do not favor it. When when we choose to define something, we are claiming to “fix the bounds or limits of (it), to determine with precision; to describe accurately; to fix the meaning of”[[22]](#footnote-22) a thing. In doing so, we automatically ascribe an equality between the thing defined and the words used to define it. And so, when we choose to define evil as bad, mischievous, disagreeable, unfortunate etc. we are also choosing to define those things as evil. When we choose to define bad as evil, incorrect, unfavorable, painful, etc., it is easy to see where the idea comes from that if God were all loving and all powerful and all knowledgeable, he would want to do away with pain. We have wrongly taught ourselves to believe that pain is something evil, something to be avoided, and that pleasure is good, and something to be maximized. We have then moved into thinking that God would naturally agree with us and see things the way we do. Therefore, if he does not do away with pain, he is either evil, or does not exist.

 So, if evil and pain are not synonymous, if evil and bad, or unfortunate are not all the same thing, what then is evil? As I mentioned in my review of others’ approaches, Aquinas defined evil as a lack of good rather than as a specific entity itself. Stump grapples with this a bit in *Wandering In Darkness*. In attempting to define what types of suffering meet the requirement of being evil, she does not actually come up with solid parameters, but she does successfully show that pain is not bad simply because it hurts. In the end, she concludes that what we have taken to doing is labeling as evil, any pain we experience as a result of losing something that we believe or perceive as valuable to us, whatever we care about at that particular juncture of time/space. But anyone with any real life experience can easily attest, that very often we come to understand later, that the thing we perceived as valuable to us, as good, often was not. We then become glad that we were not able to hang on to it, in spite of our efforts to do so. We then understand that just because it hurt to lose the thing, does not mean that the losing of it was evil or even bad. The value in the thing then shifts. What we once perceived as valuable in itself, now becomes something in which the true value lies in our losing of it, and the lessons we learned from the experience.

 There are those that view evil as a substance. Plantinga quotes Herman Bavinck, who believes evil is a disturbance of all the gifts and energies given to man which makes them work the opposite direction, against, away from God. This goes well with the slippery slope Plantinga talks about as well as with the alien entity that William Greathouse mentions in his commentary of Romans.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Others view evil as non-being. The metaphysics of Aquinas claims that whatever God creates will be something altogether other than God and so will be subject to limited goodness. Evil then, is absence of good in the same way that darkness is absence of light and cold is absence of warmth. It is logically impossible that God would be able to create a being that is also God, and so all things created will naturally be relative, dependent and have limitations.[[24]](#footnote-24) And thus naturally have a measure of evil inherent. This means that evil, apart from actually entering the world through the freewill act of man or even Satan at his fall, was already a part of the creation by virtue of the limits of God’s omnipotence. So in this view the term evil signifies nothing else than ‘privation of perfect being’. In its proper acceptance, privation is predicated of that which is fitted by its nature to be possessed, and to be possessed at a certain time and in a certain manner. Evidently, therefore, a thing is called evil if it lacks a perfection it ought to have. Thus if a man lacks the sense of sight, this is an evil for him. But the same lack is not an evil for a stone, for the stone is not equipped by nature to have the faculty of sight (*Compendium theologiae* 114, 125-126). From the perspective of God, however, the man who lacks sight, rather than experiencing an evil, is experiencing a good. This has happened so the glory of God can be revealed. Is it an evil for the transcendent God to wish for us to be able to experience and know his glory? Is he running after an evil and transforming it into something good? No, it has actually happened *so that* the glory of God might be known.[[25]](#footnote-25) It has happened for good, it is not an evil that God is saying “well that sucks but here, I’ll make something good come from it.” It was part of his plan, his good plan, the entire time. The problem is not with God, it is with us measuring the good of God by our idea of what is good and evil.

What evil is, whether it is an absence, a distortion, or an actual entity, is important. However, I do not believe in dualism, and therefore no matter what, God is not struggling against evil in an epic, evenly matched battle, with good barely winning out over evil. Therefore it must be that God allows evil, for a time, to reign. And his purpose must be good. What evil is, is something I do not have space to dwell on in this thesis, but will come back to in future adventures of my pen.

EVIL’S ORIGINS

Where does evil come from, then, is the question we want to ask. Many argue that it comes from human free will decisions. C.S. Lewis argues that it comes from subjectivism[[26]](#footnote-26)Anselm argues that evil is not “a power alien to God’s.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Aquinas argues that evil is the lack of good and thus comes from a thing not reaching its potential. Obviously there is some overlap here between what evil is, and where it comes from. This is unavoidable however, since what it is will determine how we reason where it came from. If evil is an entity, then it had to have come from something or someone or somewhere. If it is an entity it had to have been created and thus have a beginning, or it would have to be eternal and thus equal to God. If, however, it is not an entity, but rather a lack of good, then it has an entirely different origin. I propose that evil is in fact a lack, a deficiency rather than an entity and thus, is part of God’s good plan. We like to imagine God, placing free will in the universe out of necessity. Placing the opportunity for man to fall, and hoping he would not, but also preparing for the worst, knowing man would sadly choose the wrong tree. This is mistaken. This is not a picture of the God revealed in scripture, but a build-a- god we have created because we believe, as does Hume, that the goodness and mercy of humans is the standard by which the goodness and mercy of God should be judged. Then if the goodness and mercy of God looks in any way different, less than, the goodness and mercy of man, we either recreate God in our image or we deny him altogether.

 It seems natural to us, to assume and claim that if God intended evil to be a part of the experience of time and physicality then that makes him bad. But the problem is with our perception, not with what God has done. As mentioned above, we cannot properly judge a thing until we know what its function is. What its purpose is, what it is. If evil is something, rather than a lack of something and if all things were made by him and for him, then evil can not be abridged from the created universe. Anselm certainly never abstracted it.[[28]](#footnote-28) This then, places the person and work of Christ in redemption as part of the original “context of the comprehensible beauty of God’s will and order”[[29]](#footnote-29), rather than a plan b. As I have mentioned, and will likely repeat often throughout this work, I do not believe that God is running around picking up the pieces and attempting to make something good out of a horrible situation. Like Leibniz, I believe the creation is good and is moving towards God, even if we do not often understand his larger purposes, especially in the midst of some of our suffering caused by evil. Did God have a purpose for raising up Babylon, and then using them to enslave his people Israel? Of course he did! It is no different with evil, in my opinion. And just like Babylon was judged and overthrown after being used for God's purposes, so too evil has been judged and is being overthrown, never to be seen of again. Yet the lessons will remain for eternity.

Having said all of that, I must move on. There is not space in this work to delve deeper into where evil comes from, but I have laid a foundation for my beliefs, which profoundly impact the body of this particular work. It is my sincere hope that in the future I will be able to write a body of work on the topic of evil, what it is and where it comes from. But for now, my purposes here are to give a hint as to my beliefs, to separate evil from suffering, and then to move forward with the problem of suffering and the nature of God, leaving the deeper and more problematic “problem of evil” for my next work.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**The God of Scripture**

WHO IS GOD

 I have successfully argued that the god to which this accusation is leveled, and the god defended, intentionally or inadvertantly up until this current work, is not the God of scripture. Therefore the obvious next question would be “who is the God of scripture?” However, immediately that question sets the inquirer up for an answer that is errant. The more accurate question, in my opinion, would be “what is God?” Once that is established, then we can begin to ask about who he is in the sense of his nature. The question “who is God” immediately starts off with a view that is much too human. God is not human. We were made in his image, and therefore bear some of his traits and by them we can only vaguely relate to him. In our desperate attempts to understand a being that transcends us immeasurably, we often make the mistake of thinking of God as being only like us, or like us, but more powerful. This is very far from the truth. This problem of thinking of God as if he were like ourselves is not new. God complained to Israel about their sacrificing with a wrong heart attitude, “when you did these things you thought I was exactly like you.”[[30]](#footnote-30) The question of the problem of evil has come about because men think of God as being like themselves. They mistakenly believe God is moved by feelings or emotions rather than an all knowing plan. They believe if God really did have a plan, it is obviously a plan like the one they would have and has surely been thwarted by some enemy.

The god of the twentieth century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The god who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible Conferences is the figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while the millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their own carnal mind.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Even referring to God as “him” is inaccurate. However, the only way to express revealed knowledge of a being unlike us, is through use of anthropomorphisms and God himself has made himself known by use of them. He has brought himself down to our level so that we could know him who is beyond the ability to be known fully.

 So what is God? One of the first things that must be established is that God cannot be known by searching for him, for he is beyond the grasp of our human limitations. However, since he desires to be known by us, he has stooped down to our level and has revealed himself to us. Second, he can not be known to us by human wisdom, but by revelation alone.[[32]](#footnote-32)

He has revealed to us in scripture, three things that he is. God is spirit,[[33]](#footnote-33) God is light,[[34]](#footnote-34) and God is love.[[35]](#footnote-35) These are not attributes, characteristics, or parts of his being. These *are* his being. These are *what* he is. To say that God is spirit is not to say that he *is* a spirit like angels are spirits. John, writing in the Greek, did not include an indefinite article, which would have been needed in order to say that God was *a* spirit. Therefore, God “is spirit in the highest sense.” [[36]](#footnote-36) Since he is Spirit, he cannot be known by intellect. He can only be known spiritually and by those whom his Spirit resides in.[[37]](#footnote-37) Since he is light, he can only be known by those who have been taken out of darkness and placed into light.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Another aspect of his being spirit is that he is not physical, and not made of parts. All the attributes that flow from his being are one. They cannot be separated and inspected individually. One of the mistakes I have seen in much of my research, is the attempt to isolate and exegete a single attribute of God, or even worse, to pit two of them against each other. For example, in the book *God the Almighty[[39]](#footnote-39)* by Donald Bloesch, the author mistakenly claims that God has two sides to himself and these sides are at odds with each other. He claims that love and holiness “coexist in a certain tension”[[40]](#footnote-40) within God. This cannot be the case however, since scripture tells us plainly that a house divided cannot stand.[[41]](#footnote-41) Since God is one, and not made of parts, it is impossible for him to be divided. We call this *unity* or *simplicity*. All off his essential attributes then, are identical to each other and with his being.[[42]](#footnote-42) His holiness and his mercy, his wrath and his goodness, all 18 or more of his attributes have different meanings but are identical with each other and his being love, light and spirit. This is too hard to grasp you say? Think of it like this. George Washington and the 1st president of the United States have different meanings but refer to the exact same person. Still, this begins to creep into the realm of human wisdom and such can never truly explain the depths of God’s singleness.

In his book *God of Love and God of Judgment*, Stephen K. Moroney tackles this problem in depth. Agreeing that God’s attributes are united and cannot be separated nor in conflict with each other,[[43]](#footnote-43) he lays out several alternatives. Perhaps the wrath of God is subordinate to his love?[[44]](#footnote-44) This view however, would be too similar to the view above and have the attributes in conflict. This cannot be so in a God who is spirit and not divisible into parts. The author concludes that God's wrath and his mercy must both be present at the same time and unified.[[45]](#footnote-45) Dr. Moroney likens this to a cut and polished diamond which has many facets.[[46]](#footnote-46) Each of these facets is an angular surface upon the unified whole which reflects light back to us in a unique way. Each facet of his character, his omnipresence, judiciousness, holiness, patience, eternality, mercy, grace, wrath, longsuffering, immanence, immutability, righteousness, self-existence, sovereignty, transcendence, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience are unified and one as a body with many surface facets. All of the above mentioned attributes flow from his central being. From that which He is. Since God is love, light and spirit every single one of these attributes of God will be acted out or displayed from love, light and spirit. And since all of his attributes then are united in this way, “everything he says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Considering the scope of this thesis, I will only have time to look deeply into God as love. As I have already mentioned, this is the focus of my thesis. How God being love, rather than having love, affects the question of the problem of evil.

GOD’S PURPOSE

As I have mentioned several times, the God of scripture has eighteen or more attributes. These attributes flow out of his essence which is love, and cannot be separated from his singleness. In the same way that God is solitary or singular, so is his purpose.[[48]](#footnote-48) As I mentioned earlier, we all too often think of God in human terms, and compare him to ourselves. We do this when we think of his purposes as well. God does not have multiple purposes, he has one purpose, one decree. In Romans 8:28 we are told that all things work together for good to those who love him, those called according to his *purpose* (singular). Again in Ephesians 1:11 we are told that he works everything out in conformity with the (singular) purpose of his will. Finally Romans 8:29 shows us what that single purpose is. We are to be transformed into the image of Jesus, in order to be brothers and sisters in a single family unit. Undivided, unified and perfect.

Since we think linearly, and since there are works that take place in linear time, objects of his purpose,[[49]](#footnote-49) we think of each of these successive events as having distinct purposes.[[50]](#footnote-50) God does not think linearly.[[51]](#footnote-51) His single purpose is concerned with all things past, present, and future. It is concerned with all things big and small. It is concerned with all things good and all things evil.[[52]](#footnote-52) This is not to say he authored evil in the same way he authored good. No, this is to say that he foreknew our choice for evil and included it in his singular purpose.[[53]](#footnote-53) God, having a single and loving purpose, the perfection of his creation in the likeness of himself, “fixed all the circumstances in the lot of individuals, and all the particulars which will comprise the history of the human race from its commencement to its close.”[[54]](#footnote-54) He determined the number of each of our days[[55]](#footnote-55) and the boundaries of nations as well as their appointed times in history.[[56]](#footnote-56) He did this so that hopefully they would find him although he is not far from each of us. Just as all his other attributes flow from what he is, love, so too his purpose flows out of that which he is, love.

Any theodicy must address the purpose of God in allowing suffering. As we saw in Chapter 3, the two main views are that of Irenaeus and Augustine. You may remember that the Augustinian view says man was created perfect and lost that perfection when choosing to follow his own will rather than God’s. This is based solely on the revelation in scripture that man was innocent and that the creation was good. But does the statement “it was very good” [[57]](#footnote-57) automatically mean that it was perfect and fully mature with no growing to do? If so does that mean a seed is bad? Is a person in the early years of college bad? Does innocent mean perfect? If so, is a baby bad?[[58]](#footnote-58) Irenaeus would argue against, holding the view that man was created “as an imperfect immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

Whether or not one ascribes to the theodicy of Irenaeus, or that of Augustine, the purpose of God remains the same, to mature and perfect us from what we are, into the likeness of himself. It seems however, that those who present us with the problem of evil have a different view of the purpose of god. It is said that if the straw god knew all things, he would know how to get rid of evil and suffering. The idea behind this argument is that our comfort and happiness must be the main goal of god, or at least at such a high priority that it would be immoral for us to suffer. It implies a purpose for god that is far different than the purpose maintained by the God of scripture. The purpose of god, according to this problem, is our happiness, contentment and fulfillment rather than our perfection. Under this view, god is thought of in similar terms as a pet owner. The world being our terrarium, should be as clean and stress free as possible for its inhabitants. If it is true, that god has no other intention for our lives other than to keep us around as pets, then it is unthinkable that the world should have so many challenges. David Hume states that “it is obvious God does not will our happiness.”[[60]](#footnote-60) However, if it is true that God’s purpose is to take humans and, through their own choices and experiences, transform them into children of God, then we must take a whole different view of the purpose of suffering and evil.[[61]](#footnote-61) We want immediate and temporal happiness, but God seems to be thinking eternally rather than temporally.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**FICTION VS. NON-FICTION**

HUMAN NARRATIVE

Would we really be happier without being perfected? It seems this question must be answered on an individual case by case basis. Quite possibly there are some who would rather have an easy life with no perfecting being done, even if that meant they could not live happy and fulfilled eternities. I find it interesting, however, that nearly all of the arguments made on behalf of the problem of evil, seem to be people measuring the pain of others against what an all good, all powerful and all loving god would allegedly do. William T. Rowe uses the story of a fawn, badly burned in a forest fire, who suffers for several days in horrible agony “before death relieves its suffering.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Dostoevsky uses the story of a little girl.[[63]](#footnote-63) As for the poor fawn in Rowe's hypothetical example, fear not for there are no known or documented cases of this ever happening. In fact Rowe’s own logic works against him in this. As I mentioned earlier, he claims since there is no consensus on what is good and what good things are worth suffering for, we must focus on what can be rationally known “in light of our experience and knowledge.”[[64]](#footnote-64) According to an investigative report done by Michael James of ABC news, animals almost always escape forest fires. “Don’t worry about the animals,” says Bill Leenhouts, a fire ecologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “Most animals actually escape the fires.”[[65]](#footnote-65) And even for the few who don’t, smoke inhalation would kill them. So, Rowe has picked a scenario that, using his own language “seems an extraordinary absurd idea...in light of our experience and knowledge.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

This seems to be the habit across the board. However, I agree with Eleanore Stump when she says that looking at suffering like this, through made up scenarios is too analytical and isolated from the concerns of the real world.[[67]](#footnote-67) She even takes it a step further and proposes in her prologue that suffering is redeemed on an individual basis as well.[[68]](#footnote-68) Consider the story of suffering by Jesus' friend Mary, as she was helpless to help him in his suffering and death, and then as she was unable to fulfill her heart's desire at the tomb, we see two types of suffering. We also see the suffering flee at the reunion with Jesus. Yet is there any redemption? Some would say not, since she did not appear to receive anything that she did not have before the suffering. Some would claim that her life would have been better off if she had not suffered. Stump proposes that this is completely dependent upon the individual themselves. If “Mary herself would prefer her life with the suffering in it, if she would be unwilling to lose what the loss of the suffering would take from her, then, for her, the suffering is surely redeemed.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

What about Stump’s suggestion that maybe it is possible we already (in eternity) have looked back and seen the good in our pain and agreed with God, telling him we would not have him take it away for we agree with the outcomes and goods that the suffering brought? I think she is on to something! Augustine, in his analysis of the flow of time, insisted that time moved from the future into the past, rather than the other way around as common sense implies,[[70]](#footnote-70) and that all time is the present.[[71]](#footnote-71) He compares the procession of time to “the recitation of a poem which a man knows by heart. Before it has begun the recitation exists only in anticipation; when it is finished, it is all in memory; but while it is in progress, it exists, like time, in three dimensions.”[[72]](#footnote-72) If this is the case, then all suffering can easily be determined by the sufferer ahead of time, and I believe in fact it is.

Is it possible then, to see suffering as a gift? I believe it is. Look at the story from my own life. Or any of the stories that you will see in the last section of my thesis. Regardless of our personal positions, it seems that it is only proper to allow each individual to decide for themselves whether or not they would prefer their life with or without the suffering in it. In the section of personal stories, you will see that many would not give up their suffering, if they could go back and do so. Myself included. Therefore, those who argue against God on the basis of any suffering outside of their own experience should automatically be disqualified as fighting an invalid fight. They must argue against god or God using their own life experiences. I propose that those who have suffered most, often trust God most and believe in his goodness most, and those who have suffered little often are the ones who look upon the suffering of others or the made up scenarios of suffering and claim god is not all loving all powerful and all good.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**SO WHAT *WOULD* LOVE DO?**

THE NATURE OF A QUESTION

There are, in the history of mankind, several deep questions that continuously find recurrence throughout history. The question posited concerning the problem of suffering is one of those. As the time passes and more and more people ask the same question and a few attempt to answer it, it seems to me that rarely, if ever does anyone stop and focus on the question itself. The question becomes tradition and no one pays much mind to the way the question is asked. This is a grave error. Questions themselves contain within them strong power of suggestion. The way a question is asked will direct our thinking towards certain possible answers and *appear* to leave all the different possibilities open, however what the question is truly doing is limiting possibilities in the very way in which it is framed.[[73]](#footnote-73) This is the strategy Satan used with Eve in the Garden. “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from *any* tree in the garden?’"”[[74]](#footnote-74) (emphasis mine) What God had actually said was that they could eat from every tree in the Garden except one. The way Satan worded this question seemed to imply that God was withholding something from them. In fact, Satan suggested, that he waswithholding *all* the trees in the garden! It seems that when Eve considered the question, she was answering him from the (likely subconscious) position of ‘no, he is only withholding the one tree.’ I propose that the form of the question led her to answer from that position and when she subsequently saw that the tree was “good for food, pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom” she came to believe that God was withholding something good from them and was therefore not loving. There can be no correct answer to a question wrongly stated, and it is exactly so with the question of the problem of suffering and the existence of a tri attributed god (all loving, all powerful, and all knowing) who is set up as God but is merely made of straw. The question ‘If God is all loving… then why does suffering exist’ implies that suffering is bad prima facie without proof.

THE NATURE OF LOVE

The biggest problem with ‘the problem’ however, is the problem of a widespread wrong view of what love is and what love would or would not do. In fact, this issue of love is so important that it is likely the main reason for the argument being aimed at the straw god rather than the God of scripture. I intend to show that if the argument from evil is aimed at the God of scripture, the question of His *being* love will yield a much different result than that of the straw god being all loving. So we must now look at what the Christian idea of love is, and how does that differ from our social idea of love (which leads to the conclusion that love would want to do away with all suffering). When I say the “Christian” idea of love, more specifically I mean the biblical understanding of what love is through a congruent and interconnected view of scripture.

We can learn much about the character of God through what appear at first to be opposing patterns of intimacy with Him. The first pattern is found in the Old Testament and the second in the New. In the Old Testament, it seems that the way to be right with God was to obey the law (works), and In the New Testament it appears that the way to be right with God is through faith that shows itself in good works. However things are not always as they appear, and in fact, we can look back at the Old Testament now, in view of the New, and see that all along God was saving humanity through faith. However during the time that Israel was a nation before Christ, most did not understand this. Under the old covenant, observance of the law “gave (one) value and made him acceptable to God.”[[75]](#footnote-75) The pious Jew would have held obedience to the law in high esteem and would have had a natural contempt for sinners. Their life would have been modeled after Psalm 1.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Blessed is the one

 who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

 or sit in the company of mockers,

**2** but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,

 and who meditates on his law day and night.

**3** That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,

 which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—

 whatever they do prospers.

In the New Testament, we see Jesus come on the scene and sit down to have meals with sinners. He spoke openly declaring “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."[[77]](#footnote-77) The very essence of piety was being attacked by this man who claimed to be sent by God, to even be his Son, so similar to the father that one could know the father simply by knowing

*him*. [[78]](#footnote-78) Those who had been raised to be devoted to the law of God inevitably viewed Jesus’ teachings as “a violent assault on the very foundations of their inherited religion and morality.”[[79]](#footnote-79) What was more was that Jesus claimed he was sent by God for this very purpose. That God anointed him and sent him to the sinners and therefore his actions are representative of God's heart.[[80]](#footnote-80) The New Testament reveals that God desires fellowship with those who are his enemies. That he loves them. He is not characterized only by justice, but by love, and this is shown in the death of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the entire world.

The way this whole narrative plays out, from Old Testament to New, gives us a great idea of what love really is. First and most importantly, we see that God loves his enemies. The Old Testament covenant required them to love God and neighbor, but this meant only those of the same nation or outsiders who gave up their gods and came to live among them and serve God.[[81]](#footnote-81) Beyond this, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 tells us in the simplest terms what love is:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Now, it would be very easy for someone to quickly point out that it says in there that love always protects and so the argument about a loving God preventing suffering can now validly be aimed at God. And I agree. This is why I spent time earlier in this work discussing the unified purpose of the unified God who is love. What his purpose is and what it is that he is protecting us from needs to be looked at. The biggest cause of our questions and doubts when suffering comes into our lives “is our incomplete knowledge of God’s great and good intentions.”[[82]](#footnote-82) We tend to see only the pain and not the reward or the benefit. Even Christians are all too often discouraged “by the constant conflict with the enemy of their souls and the downward pull of sin.”[[83]](#footnote-83) God however sees from a different perspective. His goal is not our temporary comfort. As I mentioned earlier, we are not his pets. We are meant to be like him and to be in union with him.

 In our modern, western society, we tend to believe that if God loves us he would want us to be happy. While this may be true to some extent, we often look at happiness as an immediate feeling of ease, satisfaction, gratification, and comfort. All our problems should be solved for us, with no trouble or trials. We want our prayers to be answered immediately and in our favor. But what if this is not really what love does?

THE NATURE OF KINDNESS

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis makes the claim that we mistakenly think of love as kindness and kindness as love. When I first began this project, I totally agreed with Lewis on this. Then someone challenged me with this question, “But isn’t kindness a fruit of the Spirit though, and and also an attribute of love?” I was thrown for a loop. I was caught off guard. ‘Well, yes, yes it is’ I thought. I immediately believed that I had made a mistake. I began to search for a word I could use to replace kindness. After weeks of continued research I came to discover that I had fallen prey to the very same power of suggestion which I spoke about at the beginning of this chapter. The way this question had been worded to me, suggested that there could not be any conflict between a fruit of the Spirit and love. Assuming this to be true, I was horrified at my seeming mistake. However, the truth is, we can have social service without love. We can even have spiritual gifts without love. Paul says that if we have these things without love we are nothing. So there are two ways to be kind, one flows from love and the other from a desire for recognition or from a desire to feel good about oneself. Paul says that if “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”[[84]](#footnote-84) So, I once again agree with Lewis, that we often mistake kindness for love and love for kindness. However, I maintain that there is a type of kindness that flows naturally out of true love and this is not the kindness that either Lewis or I refer to.

As I mentioned in chapter two, Lewis goes on to say that what we really want is “not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven - a senile benevolence who, as they say, like(s) to see young people enjoying themselves.”[[85]](#footnote-85) Kindness and love, however, do not have the same scope, duration or boundaries.

 To understand this, one need only look as far as the recent trend in our society to commit random acts of kindness. We love hearing stories of people paying for the coffee, or meal of the person behind them in the drive through. We get warm fuzzies inside and many of us think ‘I want to do that too.’ “Random acts of kindness are selfless acts performed by a person wishing to either help or positively affect the emotional state (mood) of another person.”[[86]](#footnote-86) As much as we would like to view this as ‘loving’ others, it is not. This type of kindness has been “separated from the other elements of love, it involves an element of indifference… (it) cares not whether its object becomes good or bad”[[87]](#footnote-87) but only that an immediate feeling of happiness is attained, both for the giver and the receiver.

 To further illustrate this confusion between kindness and love, let us take a look at an elementary school curriculum titled *The Kindness Curriculum*. Taught in schools, this curriculum has chapters on love, gentleness, respect, and self control among others. In the chapter on love children are taught that love is “an unselfish and benevolent concern for

others.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Here benevolence is ‘well meaning and kindly,’[[89]](#footnote-89) and concern simply means “to worry about or be interested in.”[[90]](#footnote-90) We can see that love in this respect simply means caring about the needs of another. This does not even require actions. Simply feeling concern will pass for kindness on this level. The Kindness Curriculum goes on to say that this type of love is “priceless and is the key to our happiness and well-being.”[[91]](#footnote-91) It is no wonder then, that these same children (and adults as well) expect that if God is love, he will be like a kindly old grandfather who just wants children to be happy.

NATURE OF LOVING KINDNESS

 In a much different thread, stands *chesed,* a Hebrew word often translated "loving-kindness." It is a common term in the Bible for describing God's love for humankind and God's special relationship with the children of Israel.[[92]](#footnote-92) Therefore, if one is to consider the argument from evil, it must be done in light of this love, or loving kindness, rather than simple kindness. A great place to see how loving kindness differs from kindness, is in the book of Ruth.[[93]](#footnote-93) Ruth, caring about the long-term welfare and betterment of her mother-in law Naomi, left her own country and people and went with Naomi to a strange land with a strange God. Kindness would only have required that Ruth say nice words as Naomi left, and possibly pack her a travel sack of supplies for the road. But love caused Ruth to go along in order to insure that Naomi was not left to languish, decline and wither away. “Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved… mere kindness which tolerates anything but suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from love.”[[94]](#footnote-94)

 So, this could easily turn the problem of evil on its head. The problem no longer lies with God, but with us. God is all knowing in his unified attributes, therefore he understands what it will take for us to be perfected, wants to perfect us, and is able to. “Whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want.[[95]](#footnote-95) The case is not that we are simply imperfect, and need to become better; the case is that we are in a state of rebellion against our creator. Yet as I mentioned earlier, God has shown his love for sinners, his love for his enemies. And this is how his love has been displayed:

It is rare indeed for anyone to die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But [God](http://biblehub.com/greek/2316.htm) [proves](http://biblehub.com/greek/4921.htm) [His](http://biblehub.com/greek/1438.htm) [love](http://biblehub.com/greek/26.htm) [for](http://biblehub.com/greek/1519.htm) [us](http://biblehub.com/greek/1473.htm) [in this:](http://biblehub.com/greek/3754.htm)[While we](http://biblehub.com/greek/1473.htm) [were](http://biblehub.com/greek/1510.htm) [still](http://biblehub.com/greek/2089.htm) [sinners,](http://biblehub.com/greek/268.htm) [Christ](http://biblehub.com/greek/5547.htm) [died](http://biblehub.com/greek/599.htm) [for](http://biblehub.com/greek/5228.htm) [us.](http://biblehub.com/greek/1473.htm) Therefore, since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from wrath through Him![[96]](#footnote-96)

To “lay down our arms...surrendering our wills that we have claimed as our own for so long, is naturally painful .. it is a kind of death.[[97]](#footnote-97) Yet we will never give up our own wills if everything seems okay It would make no sense to do so! But pain, pain breaks our deceptions. The illusion is that everything is okay, that “what we currently have is our own and is enough for us.” [[98]](#footnote-98) God, in his love for us, brings the perfect type and amount of suffering into our lives in order that we can see where we truly are, far from what we were created to be. But he does not do this from a distance. Just like Ruth, who left her her own country and her people, God left his heavenly home and came to earth as a man. He too suffered. He was tested, tempted and tried in every way just as we are, even experiencing death. He did this for the same reasons as Ruth. God does not want us to languish, decline and wither away. He suffers with us and allows us to suffer, in order that we can become perfect.

 The argument from evil then, is not asking for a more loving God, but for a less loving God. A kind God. An indulgent God. Asking that God be at peace with, and satisfied with us in our current state. However, since he loves us, truly loves us, he cannot leave us as we are. “He must labor to make us lovable.”[[99]](#footnote-99) And therefore pain is necessary, even good.

**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**The Purpose of Suffering**

SPECIES OF SUFFERING

In my estimation there are two types of suffering. I think of them as spiritual species of a sort. I call them this because I believe they are the two main categories of suffering and that all forms of suffering, each with their unique characteristics, are descended from one of these two categories. One such type of suffering is the suffering for another's sake. God, in his singular purpose of making many sons and daughters who will inherit eternal life and Godliness, often asks us to suffer (as he himself did) for the benefit of others. This is one of the two species. Its main purpose is outward focused, but will also have benefit and teaching value to the sufferer as well.

The second species of suffering is what Eleanore Stump calls “losing our hearts

desire.”[[100]](#footnote-100) It comes from our choosing to desire a thing that God has said no to. Usually this is something we perceive to be good for us, or perceive as a means to a good end. When we have set our heart on something that is not good for us, love will not let us attain it, in fact *cannot* let us attain it, but instead will re-direct us to the thing that will bring us in union with itself and perfect us, bringing us true good. Like a fruit tree with branches that do not produce fruit and take away from the goods the tree has to offer, this type of suffering is meant to prune us, perfect us. So a case can be made, in answer to what is suffering, that it is a tool used to bring us to our fullest potential, to perfect us just as much as it is also, at times, a tool to bring others to their fullest potential and perfect them.

 We have this idea that our lives are given to us to do whatever we want with. Modernism teaches us that pain is to be avoided and pleasure maximized. The American Dream tells us that we are successful if we have lots of stuff. Even our idea of freedom is one in which we can do whatever we want whenever we want, as long as we hurt no one but ourselves. But God says that our lives are good for us and are given to us in order to mold us into the best “us” we can be. We think of our lives as the gift, but our lives are merely the means to the true gift. The gift is relationship with God. Becoming *like* him, and in union with him. And the purpose of our lives and the suffering we experience, is to bring this potential about. If God is love, and love, by nature, must perfect the beloved and bring them into union with itself, then love would certainly not want to do away with suffering. In fact, love would intentionally and carefully bring about the exact suffering needed in order to love the beloved and attain for them, their mutual goal. Even greater, love would join the beloved in their suffering and suffer alongside them, giving them strength to endure and hope of being perfected.

Before I continue my attempt to prove that God intentionally brings suffering into our lives I want to remind the reader, parenthetically, that I know the depths of pain that suffering brings. Just because suffering is good, and perfects, and actually ends with us receiving what we truly want, does not take away the enormous weight that grief and loss carry. I know the depths of agony, crying out in anguish, time and time again. In the cold dark cellar of my youth. In the sketchy shadows of big cities as an adult “*is this all my life is ever going to be*!” Pain of loss, pain of self doubt, lack of self worth, and un-loved by others. Even in my most prosperous times the pain of worry, loneliness, and the endless hole of a heart which can be filled only by God, has given me a clear and definitive education in suffering. I, as much as anyone, know that suffering is painful. It hurts. But I also know that, with the right frame of mind, we can be joyful in it, knowing that our suffering is producing in us endurance, which is producing character, which is producing hope that will never be put to shame[[101]](#footnote-101) because God is love and he pours out His Spirit into our hearts and aids us in the transition to a completely new type of being.[[102]](#footnote-102) One that is in his image. What we were always created to be. Once trials have perfected us we will lack nothing!

**CHAPTER 9**

**Personal Stories of Pain and its Redemption**

DESERT LESSONS

I can remember complaining for three straight days at the suffering I endured in the Mojave Desert during the fall of 2012. I was riding my bicycle across America on what I had labeled “The Adventure of a Lifetime.” I was heading west through the desert. Mountains on both sides, warm air rising and sucking in cooler air from the Pacific Ocean had created a wind tunnel. Each day I struggled against that very strong wind. Peddling as hard as I could, I averaged about 2.5 miles per hour. Up to this point I had been averaging between 5 and 10 miles an hour for nearly 2 months. So this was an enormous disappointment and struggle. I was peddling as hard as I could and barely making 25 miles per day, riding all day and ending the day completely exhausted. Gone was the sense of fulfillment and accomplishment I was used to, ending my day at 50-100 miles each day. I grumbled to God, who could easily have stopped the wind. On the third day I came across a stranded couple with a baby. The couple themselves were very young and the guy had no idea of what to do. We were in the desert and there was no phone service and it was over 100 degrees. The baby was in danger for sure, and likely they as well. However, me and my bicycle, tools and ingenuity knew exactly what to do to get their car going enough to get them out of the desert. I did just that, and as they drove away in utter awe and gratitude at the mystery man who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere in the middle of the desert on a bicycle and rescued them, I immediately felt bad for all my complaining. My suffering in this instance had just been redeemed. Of course I would have not given up my struggle in exchange for their lives. I would gladly struggle against the wind three more days, in order to be in the right spot at the right time to rescue them.

My suffering was mostly for their benefit, then, but it also held benefit (a valuable lesson) for me as well. I saw myself more clearly because of this situation. I was quick to grumble at the difficult things and wished life were always easy. I, like everyone else, would prefer an easy life where I was not forced to exercise and grow except when I choose it. When I know what is going on and why. When I decide. I wasn't a bad person, I had already come to understand the value of suffering for others willingly in ways such as going hungry so another can eat, suffering through some sort of discomfort (like a long stressful drive or a long boring show) in order to bring happiness to someone else, or even taking of minor punishment for another. But when it is decided by God, outside of our ability to understand why, unless we truly trust him, we will always complain and agonize and resist the suffering that he sees will most benefit others and bring them to union with him and perfection of themselves. God created us for himself, for union with him and for us to be like him. This is a great privilege, an honor. The first step of union with another is knowing and learning to trust them, to have faith in them and their goodness. In my own suffering and his redeeming of it, I saw one of many glimpses into who he is, what he is about, and how trustworthy he is. These experiences have helped me to trust him in more recent painful situations long before I could see the redemption.

This is a mild case of what suffering for the benefit of others can look like. Our main problem is that we cannot see into the future. We want to know now what possible good could ever come from our suffering. We also, even in the future, cannot see many of the benefits others gain from our suffering. So there is definitely an element of faith, always, to the problem of pain. This, then, is another important reason to use real personal stories of suffering and its redemption, to build a foundation of understanding how God, who is love, uses suffering to perfect us and those around us. Whether we see it or not.

TRIALS OF JOB

Job suffered. In a single day all his children die, all his servants perish and all his animals are destroyed.[[103]](#footnote-103) Several things must be noted here to truly grasp this story. In losing all his wealth, he went from being the Bill Gates of his day (richest man alive),[[104]](#footnote-104) to utter poverty. Losing things is hard by itself, but losing everything and being forced into a completely different life instantaneously is an altogether deeper type thing. And not a life that could be enjoyed, but one without security of any sort. But on top of this, the loss of his children is an even different type of intensity and pain. And all of this happening on one day. Shortly after this, Job experiences terrible physical suffering, and to be sure, further mental anguish as well, due to social stigma and the judgement of his friends. The question now must be, is the suffering of Job redeemed? Would Job himself wish to keep it?

 Job demands of God an explanation for his suffering,[[105]](#footnote-105) and is given one.[[106]](#footnote-106) If one reads the response of God closely, there appears a double reason. If one looks at the second hand account as a whole, there are three reasons. One purpose of Job’s suffering is to bring him into a better understanding of God, his value and his glory and therefore uniting Job to himself closer and deeper. As we have seen, this is God’s single purpose. Without this particular suffering, Job would not have had occasion to demand a face to face talk with God. As Eleanore Stump puts it “the extended face to face experience Job has… (allows him to) experience some sort of closeness with God, (and) also honors Job in a significant way”[[107]](#footnote-107) In similar fashion to the way his losses brought social stigma, this conversation with God in plain view of his friends, would have brought Job great honor. The success of this in the life of Job will not only fulfill Job, and bring actualization to the potential for God likeness in Job, but will also benefit all who are in Job’s life and who hear about Job.

The second purpose, as suffering always does, was to refine Job. Sometimes suffering can be a tool of rebuke, in order to get us to change behaviour. But this suffering was not that. This was a pruning type. Like a skilled doctor removing cancer, God uses suffering to rid us of impurities. The pain of suffering is like the refiner’s fire, without which the impurities will not surface, and we will not have cause to allow God to remove them. The removal of things like pride and misunderstanding that stands in the way of truly knowing and communing with God, is the most loving thing that God can ever do for us. And this is what he did for Job before restoring all that he had lost, and even giving him double what he had before.

However, this is not all! Eleanore Stump sees a third reason for Job's suffering, one that I believe holds great merit. As we have been seeing, often our suffering may be in order to aid the purification of another, or at least to give them an opportunity to be purified and drawn closer to God should they choose it. In this story we see the true almighty nature of God, the true intelligence and grand design to work all things together for good. This story begins with Satan, accusing Job of only having faith in God because he has never been tested. Satan holds hatred for both God and Job. God uses this hatred to help Job be purified and drawn into deeper relationship with himself, but also to hold out to Satan, a chance for him as well, to be drawn to God. “God succeeds in providing loving care for Satan, which would draw Satan closer to God if Satan were to accept it.”[[108]](#footnote-108)

FAITH

 Most of the time, faith is required in order to see the suffering in our lives is being redeemed and bringing good. Faith is the substance (Greek: *hypostasis*) of things hoped for, the evidence (*elegchos)* of things unseen.[[109]](#footnote-109) This verse in Hebrews, when looked at in the original language, is literally saying that faith is the foundation, the substructure, the proof that what we hope for is already under construction. It is the proof that what we believe is true. This is why true faith is not truly faith without works. When we know a thing in the manner spoken of here, we step out on that thing, because it is a solid foundation. When we understand and know the truth that God is love and that our suffering benefits us and others, then our faith will show itself in our speech and actions. This type of faith is not an opiate or an escape from reality. Talk of faith like this is not some magician’s sleight of hand used to avoid the problem of suffering. Instead, this is a challenge! It is a challenge in line with the early claims of my thesis. To come to know who God truly is and what he truly is, in light of all the ‘build a gods’ and false claims of who God is. True faith can only grow out of true knowledge and experience of the God who lovingly places us in the fire to purify us, and lovingly asks us to walk through the fire with others as they are purified. The God who has himself, walked through the fire with us and for us.

Faith does not bring an end to the desires within us, but it leads us to the place where we trust God to fulfill those desires in whatever way he sees is best, even through suffering. This is why Abraham is not only a superhero of faith, but the father of all who have true faith.[[110]](#footnote-110) He is a superhero because of the absurd way in which his faith would appear to those who do not know God as love.

THE FATHER OF FAITH

Abraham was asked by God to pack up and leave his family, his household and his country.[[111]](#footnote-111) It is hard to imagine Abraham being human if this did not cause him pain. Anyone who has had to leave loved ones, and or the comfort of familiarity, behind, knows what I mean. However, this cannot really be applied to our discussion on suffering because God made some promises to Abraham that would have been very valuable to the man and given him what he needed by way of reasoning, to accept the call to suffer loss.

After obeying, however, a series of painful events take place. Twice his wife is taken captive by foreign kings. This had to have been painful, both for Abraham as well as Sarah. However, the ways in which God helps Abraham, solidifies their relationship and Abraham's trust in God. After 20 years of waiting for God to fulfill his end of the bargain, they finally have the promised son, long after Sarah’s physical ability to bear children has passed. Then after the boy has grown and Abraham has become attached, God asks Abraham to do the unthinkable. To tie him to an altar, and sacrifice him.

How could this have not caused him enormous suffering? God intentionally brought deep suffering to Abraham. God knew Abraham would obey. So God’s testing of Abraham was not for himself, but for Abraham’s benefit, and for ours. Abraham needed to know how deep his faith was. In the same way we cannot truly say what we would do in any given situation until we are actually *in* the situation, so too, Abraham could not actually know how much he trusted God. The type of faith Abraham had was not a faith simply in God’s existence. Nor was it even simply a faith the God had enormous power.[[112]](#footnote-112) The type of faith that Abraham had, was a belief in the character of God. The belief that God was good in spite of what the situation looked like. This type of faith can only come from willingness to relate to God and willingness to come to know him and to believe what he claims about himself.

The faith that makes Abraham the father of faith has its roots in Abraham’s acceptance of the goodness of God, Abraham’s belief that God will keep his promises, and Abraham’s willingness to stake his heart's desire on that belief. In this state, Abraham is surrendering to God, letting go of his self-protective efforts to get what he wants for himself and committing himself in trust to God’s goodness.[[113]](#footnote-113)

God knew that Abraham would obey. That Abraham would trust him. God did not need to test Abraham to find out what Abraham would do. However, Abraham did not know how strong his faith was. None of us can know what we are truly capable of until we do it. Abraham was tested for his own benefit. And for ours.

CHIEF OF ALL SINNERS

The Apostle Paul referred to himself as the chief of all sinners. However, we view him as a hero of the Christian faith. Paul took great pride in his weaknesses and sufferings, knowing that God was perfecting him like a goldsmith refines and purifies gold in a fire.

Before becoming Paul, he was Saul, a man who had his heart set on destroying the Jews who believed Jesus was the messiah and preached this to others. His heart's desire was to protect the Jewish faith and honor who he believed God to be. This is what Paul says he did to Christians. "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."[[114]](#footnote-114) Paul, while he was still called Saul, was a pious and zealous Jew. “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, persecuting the church; as to righteousness [under](http://biblehub.com/greek/1722.htm) the Law, faultless.”[[115]](#footnote-115) His persecution of the early Church was him following his heart's desire to do away with heresy. The teaching that Jesus was the Messiah was ridiculous to Paul. Paul understood anyone hung on a tree to be a curse, not a saviour.[[116]](#footnote-116) Using the synagogue system of punishment, Paul (as Saul) was trying to correct false teaching. God, however, intentionally brings suffering into Paul’s life in order to redirect the desires of Paul’s heart.

While traveling to Damascus, Paul (as Saul) was struck blind.[[117]](#footnote-117) In order to enlighten the eyes of his heart so that he could know what was the hope to which the people were truly

called,[[118]](#footnote-118) God took away his physical sight. While his physical eyes remained good, Paul was not able to see God. But after becoming blind, he could! Many scholars believe that Paul never fully regained 100 percent of his sight back due to Paul's remarks in Galatians about the size of his writing. “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”[[119]](#footnote-119) Whether or not this is true, we do know from Paul's own words, that he suffered throughout the rest of his life with some sort of “thorn in the flesh”[[120]](#footnote-120) which he three times asked God to take away. It was only after suffering was brought into his life, did Paul’s heart desire become corrected, and because of this not only did he benefit from perfection and union with God, but we have been given Paul's letters to the Church which aid us in our own perfecting. These letters also help us to understand suffering from the proper perspective. Even after his heart’s desire was changed, Paul suffered greatly.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.[[121]](#footnote-121)

For all of these sufferings, we are not given a clear understanding of how God redeemed them. We do, obviously, understand that Paul’s perseverance in these sufferings, led to the solidification of the Christian Church. But I believe that there have been so many more ways in which his suffering was redeemed, more than we will ever understand this side of eternity. However, without even knowing all the ways Paul and others were pruned, benefitted and perfected through his sufferings, we can know Paul's attitude about them. Like me, Paul believed suffering to be good, and not just that it was allowed by God, but that suffering was part of God’s design for Paul’s life.[[122]](#footnote-122) That a loving God would not deprive us of our suffering, but choose intelligently the proper amount and times of our suffering, to bring the most good to us and the world. Paul says that suffering produces valuable things in us. Perseverance, character, and hope.[[123]](#footnote-123)

**Stories Nearby**

 Now let’s look at some stories closer to home. Closer to our place in time. I have already said that I would not give back any of my suffering, even if it was possible. If I were to do that, I would be giving away my progress towards unity with God and perfection of self. But am I alone? Sometimes I feel that way. Surrounded by people who seem unable to grasp the value of their pain. However, this is simply not the case for there are many who do have the faith of Abraham, Job, Paul and myself. In keeping with my belief that only the one who suffers can determine whether or not the suffering is redeemed or redeemable by God, and the use of real life stories rather than hypothetical made up ones, here are some modern accounts.

Sentenced to Life

 (in a Wheelchair)

 Joni Eareckson Tada, was born in 1945. She rode horses, played tennis, swam and hiked as a teen. On July 30th 1967 she became paralyzed from the shoulders down after diving into the Chesapeake Bay and landing on rocks headfirst. In her autobiography,[[124]](#footnote-124) she says that during her first years after the accident, she was angry, suicidal, depressed and doubted the goodness of God. As the years went on she learned how to paint great artwork while holding a brush between her teeth. She also became a writer, and singer as well as actress. Having written more than 40 books, sold numerous paintings and spoken publicly about the events of her life, her suffering has encouraged many. In spite of the fact that she once could not have cared less about the redemptive purposes God had for her suffering, God eventually became her “ever present help in (times) of trouble.”[[125]](#footnote-125) She says that even after 50 years, she continues to find the trials of life to bring her to understand “fresh new levels of how tender and powerful His help is.”[[126]](#footnote-126) Confined to her wheelchair she has battled stage 3 cancer, lung infections, and bouts with chronic pain. She believes in the goodness of God without doubt now, and says that she has come to know that unity and friendship with God is worth any amount of suffering it would have taken.[[127]](#footnote-127) She still finds (as do I) that her spirit can “still dig in its heels when it comes to cooperating with God and his redemptive purposes.”[[128]](#footnote-128) Sometimes emotions take over, but she (like myself) chooses to listen to what God has said, and what those courageous brothers and sisters who have gone before us have said, about suffering and the love of God.[[129]](#footnote-129)

Sentenced to Deaf

Allegra Habern, a student here at Malone University, lost her hearing at the age of five. Most people would consider this a horrible evil. Unnecessary and uncalled for. Allegra however, does not see her loss of hearing in that way, and like myself, would not go back and change this even if she could. Here is what she had to say about her own suffering.

**1) I understand that you lost your hearing at a young age? How old were you?**

*I lost most of my hearing in my left ear and was diagnosed with it when I was 5 years old. I lost all of my hearing in my right ear sometime when I was a baby, probably at birth. The diagnosis never happened though, so I am not sure. I never recall hearing out of my right ear, so I believe that I couldn’t hear out of it ever in my life. I only wear a hearing aid in my left ear because my right ear is completely dead and useless with a hearing aid.*

**2) Many people would claim that it is simply evil that God would allow a young child to suffer. I am quite sure that you suffered because of your hearing loss. What does that suffering look like? Internally/Externally? What were the struggles that came as a result of this?**

*I don’t believe it is evil of God to allow me to have this challenge, because that is what it is… a challenge. However, yes, there has been suffering. It’s hard to explain what the suffering looks like because I’ve tried to only see it as a positive life change, and not a negative change. Externally, being deaf hurts when I miss certain words from people. I worry all the time that I miss the most important words from a person. I worry about many if’s. I often deal with a lot of drama because I jump to conclusions based on what I thought I heard, or someone else jumps because they thought I heard them right or wrong. Sometimes I forget that I am deaf. But that is on a good day. However, I am reminded again at the end of every day, when I normally take off my hearing aid to sleep. Once that silence hits me, it is when I deal with my internal suffering. In the silence, I hear many more thoughts that depress me than I do when I put on my hearing aid.*

*To understand more in depth how that silence affects me, here is a link to my blog where I wrote an essay on it:* [*https://allegrasjourneythroughwords.wordpress.com/2016/03/19/silence/*](https://allegrasjourneythroughwords.wordpress.com/2016/03/19/silence/) *.*

**3) You told me once that you would not change it, even if given the chance to go back and do so. Does this mean that you do not believe it is not chance, or accident that God allowed this? That there was/is a purpose and that it is good?**

*I believe everything has a purpose. I don’t believe anything is left to chance. Even when I don’t understand why something happens to me, I know and have to remember that God has a reason for everything. I do not believe that my hearing loss is an accident. I believe that God has allowed me to have this burden, in the form of a challenge, to become the woman I am today. I am stronger as a person because I have this disability. I would not be myself if I didn’t have this challenge. God allowed me to have it because he knows I can defeat the odds, and I’m the only one fit for this job. Somehow, God will use my brokenness for his glory. Some people have already told me that I inspire them because of how I carry on with this struggle. I have to believe that is the start of how God will use this for his love and grace.*

**4) How has God used this journey to transform you into someone that can have a relationship with Him and be a light to the world?**

*My relationship with God has definitely been a rollercoaster. But the times when I think about my hearing loss and how it affects me are when I feel closest to him because he constantly reminds me in some form that it is for a bigger purpose than myself, and it makes me a much stronger person than if I didn’t have it. The fact that I know God intended for me to be deaf and not the person next to me, is where I know God will use me somehow to share his almighty love. My story will affect others when I get the chance to tell it. People will learn that I do not want to hear. It defeats the purpose. Someone once prayed over me and my deaf siblings for healing, in the sense that they hoped we would regain our hearing by the end of the prayer or something. When that person put their hands on me, I felt really uncomfortable. I felt wrong. They did not ask me if I wanted to be healed. They just expected that I wanted to be healed. I was probably 9 or 10. And I can tell you now that I did not. I am broken. We all are broken. I may be broken in a more physical sense than most people, but I am just symbolizing what a broken person can accomplish in life, despite their burdens. My brokenness is a part of me. And if someone thinks that I can be better without it, they are probably wrong. I would be a weaker person without the weight of my brokenness. I know that for sure. I wouldn’t be me. I would not be Allegra.*

**5) As you know, your story is going to be featured in my Honors Thesis and possible future Book *A Straw God*, which responds to the question "If God is all loving, all powerful, and all good, then why has he not gotten rid of suffering?” Do you have anything you would like to add/say? Anything at all.**

*Suffering has to take place in a sinful world. We are all sinful creatures, and for us to grow and become more like the one who sacrificed his son for us, we need to get down to Jesus’ level. Christ suffered for us, to save us from eternal damnation. Suffering brings people together. Suffering helps us understand. Without suffering, we would be even more selfish humans than we already are. We would believe we were indestructible beings. It is a reminder that we are broken, and as we strive to be like the one who paid the ultimate price for us, we need Jesus Christ to help us get through suffering that he has already been through.*

**Thank you so much Allegra, for your time and for allowing the world to read about God's letter written to them on the tablet of your heart.**

**Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of (His) ministry (to) you. This "letter" is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on a human heart. 2 Corinthians 3:3**

By now, the reader is likely in one of two camps. Those who already have faith in the goodness of God, and those who do not. Those who do have this faith may still not be inclined to believe that all instances of suffering are within God's control and for intentional good. One of the arguments used is the fact that God says he does not wish anyone would perish.[[130]](#footnote-130) However, we apply that desire of God’s wrongly when we use it to claim that God did not ordain our physical deaths. When God says he does not wish anyone to perish, he is speaking on an eternal plane. We place much too high a value on these temporary earthly lives, when it is not big thing for God to raise our physical bodies back to life. Death is not powerful at all to God; in fact, since God is almighty, death (as well as all things) receive their power *from* God. For many, it is much easier to believe that God does not will suffering, but rather suffering is a result of the fall and God somehow turns it into good. God runs around behind us picking up the pieces and putting them back together. How unsovereign this god is, whom we describe, this way. The God of scripture who is the ruler of chaos, who holds the universe together with the power of his will, holding chaos back as the seconds tick by. Has he now allowed chaos to enter creation? A better understanding of God, is the one Abraham, Job, and Paul, had. It is my sincere belief, based on scripture, church history, and experience and reason, that the universe exists for one purpose. That purpose is to glorify God and to display the depths of his greatness, which includes sending suffering into our lives to make us more like him.

**Chapter 10**

**THE SUFFERING OF GOD**

**“The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;**

**They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;**

**But to our wounds, only God’s wounds can speak,**

**And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.**

**-- Edward Shillito**

TRUE LOVE

The true test of the goodness of God, I believe, is not in whether or not suffering exists. I have made a very strong case for the necessity and benefits of suffering, but even in knowing that love would not deny us our path to perfection, it is a whole other thing understand that true love would not just allow us to suffer, but would also come and join us in our suffering, and suffer alongside of us. To give us strength, help us hold on in the worst of it, knowing that he truly has been there and knows what we're experiencing, and that he came out the other side victorious, and we shall too, because the one who suffered with us and for us, is the one who directs the suffering we endure for our own perfection and the perfection of others.

JESUS: SENTENCED TO DEATH

As I have stated in this thesis, the singular God of scripture has a singular purpose. To display the glory of his grace by transforming sinful mortals into perfected immortal beings with likenesses of Himself.

Long before the universe was created, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit knew each and every one of us, loved us, and determined to show us the glory of his

grace.[[131]](#footnote-131) His desire is that we, his creations, would be able to share in His glory, understand his grace, and be physical representations of Himself. Divine wisdom understood that the best way for this to be accomplished was for God the Son to come into the created universe, in the same way as we the created ones do, and to suffer and die, just as we do. This was decided long before the world was made, and so was a part of God’s plan from the beginning. Scripture is clear on this issue. In the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth.[[132]](#footnote-132) Jesus was known (Greek:*proginōskō =* predestined) before the creation,[[133]](#footnote-133) to be handed over to suffering and death, by the foreknowledge of God[[134]](#footnote-134) for our sakes.[[135]](#footnote-135) God decided that his own suffering was the best path to displaying the glory of his grace, through the transformation of mortals into immortal images of himself. Therefore, the creator himself[[136]](#footnote-136) had to suffer and this shows that suffering is a necessary and important part of creation. The greatness of God’s grace is shown in the suffering he endured in order to overcome suffering.

 As I have mentioned before, God is not running around picking up the pieces and making something good out of our mess. The suffering and death of Jesus was not a backup plan for just in case Adam chose to disobey God and catapult the entire human race into death and decay. It was not an afterthought. The creation is going just as God planned before the foundation of the world. At that time names were written in the “book of life of the lamb that was slain.”[[137]](#footnote-137) Before the world was made, Christ was the lamb that was slain.

 Not only was Christ the suffering servant, slain from the beginning, but the grace given to us was from the beginning as well. Scripture tells us that God “has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Before anything physical existed, before we could choose anything good or bad, God already determined to suffer and die for us and to give us grace in order to display his love. It is important to notice that Jesus *had* to suffer. Not just die, but suffer.“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”[[139]](#footnote-139) “Look! The hand of My betrayer is with Mine on the table. Indeed, [the](http://biblehub.com/greek/3588.htm) [Son](http://biblehub.com/greek/5207.htm) [of](http://biblehub.com/greek/3588.htm) [Man](http://biblehub.com/greek/444.htm) [will go](http://biblehub.com/greek/4198.htm) [as](http://biblehub.com/greek/2596.htm) it has been determined, [but](http://biblehub.com/greek/4133.htm) [woe](http://biblehub.com/greek/3759.htm) to that [man](http://biblehub.com/greek/444.htm) [who](http://biblehub.com/greek/3739.htm) [betrays Him.”](http://biblehub.com/greek/3860.htm) [[140]](#footnote-140) “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then to enter His glory?"[[141]](#footnote-141)

Scripture even points out that Christ learned obedience through what he suffered.[[142]](#footnote-142)

 We often ask questions like “why did God allow or even ordain the killing of Jews in Germany?’ (or in Babylon for that matter, or any number of other atrocities we could name). What we are really asking is “why does God not act the way we want him to?” We want God to be safe, so we have recreated him and denied his revelation of himself. We may not understand why God waited 400 years to free the Israelites from Egypt. We may not understand why God did not destroy the railway lines leading to Auschwitz. However, this does not make God the problem. Just as he said to Job, he says to us “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.Who determined its dimensions and stretched out the surveying line? What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?”[[143]](#footnote-143) However, he is also saying “I suffered and died as well, and I am bringing about my glorious plan.”

 If God himself would come to earth as a man, and choose to bring suffering upon himself, how much more proof do we need that he is righteous and loving? That he does allow suffering purposefully, not because he is unloving or unable to stop it, but because it is good even though it does not feel good. Christ suffered to show us that suffering was part of the way, the truth and the life. True Life. We place way too high a value on these temporary bodies and lives we have. Death is not permanent, it is something God has complete power over. So when we suffer and even when we die, it all carries immense purpose for our good and for the good of others. Its value is so high, that God came and suffered and died with us and for us in order to defeat suffering and death for all eternity. And once this temporary time of transforming many sons and daughters is through, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."[[144]](#footnote-144)

 In the meantime, it is for our benefit to have faith in God and remind ourselves that “The creation waits in eager expectation for the revelation of the sons of God” and “our present sufferings are not comparable to the glory that will be revealed in us.”[[145]](#footnote-145)

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9. Also of note is that God claims to be almighty, not all powerful. This means that, rather than having the power to do anything, he is simply the most powerful being; and all power in the universe comes from Him. He is the provider and sustainer of all power. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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