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Why does God allow suffering? How can a good God allow the innocent to suffer? Why did Jesus, the Son of God, have to suffer and die a cruel and torturous death for our salvation? Was there not an easier or a better, painless, way? Is a God who allows suffering, and even made His only begotten Son to suffer and die, even worth our praise and worship? These are but a few of the questions that have haunted Christians almost since the Crucifixion. One way some in the early church tried to tackle the problem of suffering was to redefine the Incarnation. Such as the Nestorians and Arians, who had such a problem with Jesus being fully God and suffering and dying on the Cross that they began to teach that Jesus was not fully God, or that He was not fully man. They even went so far as to teach that the Crucifixion was an illusion, or mirage. Of course, we believe that Jesus is truly God and truly Man, that He really did suffer and die on the Cross. But to this day, the problem of suffering still troubles people, as if it is unreconcilable with Christianity. Take for example the college classmate who left the church and became a Buddhist, because he could not understand how a good God can allow suffering. Or consider the one who asks what Jesus knows of suffering, when He only hung on a cross for three hours and then died! What is shocking is that this last statement came from a senior priest, though in a moment of frustration.

We live in a world where suffering is to be avoided, where it is seen as wrong, unnatural, and a mark against the power of God. We do all we can to run and hide from it, and we find the effects of this in modern religion. It is more comfortable to focus only on the salvation that we receive through Jesus' crucifixion, it is uncomfortable to come face to face with the suffering that Jesus endured, lest we remember our own. And yet it is when we consider redemption, and what redemption means, that we begin to better understand what salvation means. As the Christian Neuroscientist Curt Thompson writes, *The Cross is God's declaration that not only is He willing to suffer, but He names it as what He is going to transform through His resurrection*. Therefore, when we experience suffering, which we will as part of human experience, we are to remember that our suffering, if we unite it to Christ, if we invite Christ into it, is transformative for us. Jesus suffered; He was lifted up on the cross to draw all men unto Him. He was lifted up on the cross to pick up all the broken and shattered pieces of human life and to redeem it. He suffers on the cross so that even our suffering can be redeemed and be to us a path to salvation.

But still the questions haunt us, *what does Jesus know of suffering, He only suffered for three hours on the cross, and then died*. What does Jesus know of the suffering of the modern Christian? What does He know of illness, disease, war, or famine? What does He know of mental illness, trauma, or cancer? And yet if we look closely at the cross, we find every malady humanity has ever suffered represented there. Jesus was betrayed by one of His closest friends, He was abandoned and neglected by most of His disciples when He needed them most. He was unjustly accused, given a mock trial, with a rigged jury persuaded by mob rule, and though innocent He was condemned to death. Not even the government authority, Pilate, the Roman Governor, could understand why the crowd begged for his death. They chose Barrabas, a murdering, thieving, seditious rebel over Jesus. He was scourged, lashed with the cat of nine tails, receiving thirty-nine lashes. And in those lashes

the tradition has found something in common with every skin disease, the blood he shed refuge for every blood disease, and has also found a reminder of chastity and purity. He was crowned with a crown of thorns, which was more a helmet of thorns, and in this we find the shared suffering with every headache, migraine, and mental illness, every ailment of the mind and head. He was beaten, mocked, and spat upon by the guards; they hit Him on the head with a rod, plucked out His beard, put a rough purple robe around His lacerated back and then tore it off again. He knows well what physical abuse is. He was made to carry His cross to Golgotha, falling along the way, in order to teach us to take up the crosses of our own lives, our illnesses and vocations, the crosses, as one priest friend says, which *come tailor made for us*.

Arriving at Golgotha they stripped Him of his clothes, further humiliation. They offered Him myrrh or gall, anesthesia to dull the pain, but He refused. He was not afraid of suffering. They stretched Him on the cross and nailed Him to it with what we would consider to be more spikes than nails. I would wager that arthritis pain, joint pain, and back pain, cannot hold a candle to that kind of pain. It is believed that from being stretched out on the cross like that He struggled to breathe, identifying with every lung disease known to man. Jesus shows that He knows what it means to grieve, He knows what it means to want to get one's affairs in order, and so right before He dies, He entrusts His Mother to St. John. It is believed that St. Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus died sometime before Jesus began His earthly ministry. The Blessed Virgin Mary is a widow now and is now standing beneath the cross of her only son. Jesus' last act is to commend His Spirit to God, and He dies. He died before the two thieves on either side of Him. Jesus is no stranger to a cruel and untimely death, even an untimely death for a crucifixion.

For some reason the crowd and the soldiers do not trust Him even in death, and so they pierce His side with a spear, from which flows blood and water. Because of this it is popularly believed that His heart burst, and in this we may find solace for every heart problem to be experienced. And this is just the culmination of the earthly life of the Son of God. He was born in the cold, because the world could not make enough room for Him. His family fled their home in His infancy to save His life, but they returned to live for decades in the obscure backwater town of Nazareth. There the Son of God, present at the Creation of the world, was taught the blue-collar trade of carpentry. Yet when he began His earthly ministry, He said that He had nowhere to lay His head. He was homeless. Throughout His earthly ministry He was repeatedly questioned, mocked, belittled, ridiculed, and persecuted by the religious authorities of the day. Crowds followed Him, most of them treated Him almost like a magician, and came along to see the show. Others, including His own disciples, hoped His life mission was to overthrow the Romans and usher in a golden age for Israel.

We see in the cross that Jesus knows suffering all too well. He knows our suffering all too well. The question should not be, why does God allow suffering? But how can God use my suffering to bring me closer to Him? Because Jesus Christ has saved us and redeemed us even the illnesses, and everyday trials of this life, can aid us on our path to Him. The real question is if we will let Jesus and His Cross into our lives, and into our suffering. This is what the Cross means, it is the instrument by which Christ has won our salvation, it is the source

of our Redemption, it is the instrument by which He enters our souls to unite us to Him. John Stainer writes that it is from this cross of shame and suffering that Jesus cries out to us,

*Oh! Men and women, your deeds of shame, Your sins without reason, and number, and name, I bear them all on this Cross on high. Is it nothing to you? Is it nothing to you that I bow My Head? And nothing to you that My Blood is shed? Oh! Perishing souls, to you I cry, Is it nothing to you?*

*O come unto Me, by the woes I have borne, By the dreadful scourge, and the crown of thorns, By these I implore you to hear My cry; Is it nothing to you? O come unto Me! This awful price, Redemption's tremendous sacrifice, Is paid for you.*