

# Facing Evil: Evil's Many Faces

## *Five Paradigms for Understanding Evil*

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Evil is both the experience of suffering and the fear that suffering subverts all meaning and order in the world. Given evil's many faces, at least five paradigms can be identified to account for God's relationship to suffering.

*God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

Genesis 1:31a

**A** central tenet of the Christian faith is that the world in which human creatures abide is a "creation," formed, ordered, and blessed by a creator who has named it good.<sup>1</sup> The earth, our bodies and our passions, our dependency upon one another, our strengths and our vulnerabilities, the complexities of life lived in community with all sorts of creatures—all of this is good.

But the good creation entrusted to human beings for their enjoyment and care is also the creation we experience as laden with suffering, conflict, violence, and death. Children die; poverty and famine gnaw at the blessing of life; AIDS ravages an entire continent; animal and plant species become extinct; nations war against nations; age-old conflicts continue to erupt in violence; a century is named as genocidal as millions of innocent victims die in the name of ethnic cleansing; the twin towers of the World Trade Center are struck by hijacked commercial airliners bringing violent death to thousands, grief and fear to many, and a sense of vindication and victory to others; and men and women who resist acts of human treachery and systemic injustice in the name of love and peace are themselves murdered. How can there be such misery in a good creation?

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<sup>1</sup>See D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 80–98, for a discussion of what it means to speak of creation.

Evil is an awareness of this disjuncture between the pronouncement that life is God's good creation and the knowledge that suffering and violence are real and threaten not only life and health but also any sense of meaning, order, and blessing. Evil is the experience of suffering, misery, death, *and* the accompanying fear that such suffering undermines any hope of meaning and order in the world or of a God who exercises providential care. What we call evil is a suffering and a fear—and by naming this phenomenon “evil,” we protest against that suffering and fear as well as the God who created a world where such suffering happens. Evil cries out for theodicy, for a justification of God's relationship to evil that allows the sufferer to hope that evil does not have the last word. But such justification is a delicate task in the face of radical human suffering, of suffering that is undeserved and so destructive of the human spirit that it cannot be thought of as pedagogy or testing.<sup>2</sup> Theodicy, the justification of God's relation to evil that in a sense domesticates that evil,<sup>3</sup> cannot undermine anthropodicy, the justification of human outrage in the face of such suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing evil—the experience, the fear, and the protest—and upholding the theological coordinates of creation, providence, and radical suffering, I will examine five paradigmatic responses to evil that are nestled within the Christian tradition. This is an exercise in theo/anthropodicy that seeks to reveal the complexity of the phenomenon of suffering that we name evil: identifying all the players (human and divine; sufferers and perpetrators), while evoking enough clarity that readers may be better able to fashion appropriate responses to actual situations of evil.

## A MORAL VIEW

*But we rebel against God, we hide from our creator. . . .  
We deserve God's condemnation.*

A Brief Statement of Faith of the  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Moments before his execution, a convicted murderer who has blamed his violent act on others, confesses his crime to his spiritual counselor who has insisted both that he is a child of God and that he must tell the truth.<sup>5</sup> An attorney, after years of investigation, finally proves that a manufacturer has been for years dumping toxic waste into the local river,

<sup>2</sup>The term “radical suffering” is borrowed from Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990). Farley defines radical suffering as suffering that destroys the human spirit and cannot be justified. Radical suffering cries out not for theodicy but for vindication.

<sup>3</sup>See Peter Berger's argument that the primary task of religion is to recast the experience of evil that threatens any meaning into a mere anomaly—an exception that as such does not undermine the overall meaning (*The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* [Garden City: Anchor, 1969]).

<sup>4</sup>See Z. Braiterman (*God*) *After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), who develops the category of anthropodicy and insists that theodicy cannot be addressed at the expense of human sufferers.

<sup>5</sup>See Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

and that many children of the community who had become sick or died were victims of his malfeasance.<sup>6</sup> Acting out of greed, corporate executives siphon off huge profits for themselves, lie to their stockholders (while leaving their stock worthless), and leave employees without jobs or a pension.

The dominant paradigm for understanding the suffering of evil in the Christian tradition is a moral one. Evil as we have described it is a consequence of human sin. Human beings, created by God for relation with God and with one another, do not choose to live accordingly. Desiring to be like God, human beings by free choice turn from God and violate God's intention for creation. As a consequence, all sorts of havoc break loose. Created to be comfortable in their own skin, human beings know shame in their nakedness. Made for community with one another, they become alienated from one another. Created by God for trusting relationship, they hide from God and know God's judgment upon them. Created to till and keep a garden, their world becomes a wilderness where life is toil and pain. And sin has cosmic implications as all of creation groans under its weight. Creatures reap what they sow.

This moral view of evil is a major stream in biblical thought. It begins in the second creation narrative, is woven through the stories of Cain and Abel, Babel, David and Bathsheba, finds voice in prophetic pronouncements of doom against Israel and Judah, and is spoken by Jesus in his vision of a final judgment where goats are cast out of heaven because they failed to respond in love to their neighbors in need. In this moral vision, evil is rooted in human sin. Creation is tarnished by sin and evil, but evil does not threaten human confidence in a just and meaningful world order.

If the moral view of evil lodges the origin of evil in human sin that resists the design of creation, it does not leave the reality of evil outside God's purposes. If creation suffers the consequences of sin under God's judgment, creation also knows God as one who exercises providential care over the fallen creation. Human sin, intended by human beings for evil, is used by God for God's purposes. Evil is therefore understood as God's judgment upon human sin that re-establishes or vindicates God's order. It can also be seen as divine pedagogy—God's way of instructing human beings to place their hope appropriately in God. As Calvin explains:

Now our blockishness arises from the fact that our minds, stunned by the empty dazzlement of riches, power, and honors, become so deadened that they can see no farther. The heart also, occupied with avarice, ambition, and lust, is so weighed down that it cannot rise up higher. In fine, the whole soul, enmeshed in the allurements of the flesh, seeks its happiness on earth. To counter this evil, the Lord instructs his followers in the vanity of the present life by continual proof of its miseries. Therefore, that they may not promise themselves a deep and secure peace in it, he permits them often to be troubled and plagued either with wars or tumults, or robberies, or other injuries. That they may not pant with too great eagerness after fleeting and transient rich-

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<sup>6</sup>See J. Harr, *A Civil Action* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

es, or repose in those which they possess, he sometimes by exile, sometimes by barrenness of the earth, sometimes by fire, sometimes by other means, reduces them to poverty, or at least confines them to a moderate station. . . . But if, in all these matters, he is more indulgent toward them, yet, that they may not either be puffed up with vainglory or exult in self-assurance, he sets before their eyes, through diseases and perils, how unstable and fleeting are all the goods that are subject to mortality.<sup>7</sup>

To name suffering as evil is to protest that this world is not the way it is supposed to be. Thus, the moral view lodges culpability for evil in human creatures' failure, individually and collectively, to be who they are supposed to be.<sup>8</sup> Evil, while threatening the well-being of creatures and the creation, does not threaten an overarching view that the world is a creation where God's purposes are revealed and accomplished.

This view of evil has many strengths. Even when human suffering conjures up fears that life is meaningless and that there is no good God, the moral view affirms that such evil fits within the purposes of God's order. Evil functions as punishment for sin, but also to correct the human heart, shatter sinful imaginings, and reorient human beings toward the giver of life. This paradigm asserts that most suffering is the result of human sin—the ways in which human beings violate each other and themselves. The notion of the sinfulness of creation captures the sense that evil is not an isolated event but a systemic threat to order, meaning, and the blessing of creation. The affirmation of God's providential care in the context of sin pulls evil under the domain of God's intent—rescuing the sufferer from nihilism. Indeed, experiences of evil *can* function to test and instruct, to bring to repentance, and to quicken in human beings a hope in a world that is brighter than this one of sin. This paradigm thus affirms the experience that evil is real and a threat to human hope but contains that reality under the overarching mantle of God's purposes. God does not cause evil; it is a result of human free will. God is complicit in evil by creating such creatures, but not indictable,<sup>9</sup> since human sin is truly our own and God's good order ultimately prevails.

**[Evil] can also be a site where suffering and despair are transformed by an act of eschatological imagination that turns the meaninglessness of that suffering on its head.**

But there are also weaknesses in this paradigm. If we take seriously scientific evidence that earth and life precede the birth of human beings (and by implication human sin), then can we really charge all of life's sufferings—e.g., death and the vulnerabilities of life—to

<sup>7</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) III.ix.1.

<sup>8</sup>See C. Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) for a fuller development of this view of sin and suffering.

<sup>9</sup>This distinction is borrowed from Anna Case-Winters, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

human sin? Does sin emerge only from human misuse of free will, or is creation structured with conflict, vulnerability, and a tension between limit and possibility that breeds anxiety and temptation and makes sin inevitable?<sup>10</sup> Does God's use of evil for God's purposes really protect God's goodness (especially in the case of those theologians, like Calvin, who say that God not only uses the evil action but wills it, although with a different intent than the human agent)?<sup>11</sup> Would a good God let radical suffering so erode the human spirit that all hope is lost (and would that lost hope be justly charged to the sufferer as the sin of despair)?<sup>12</sup> Does a moral paradigm adequately consider the perspective of those who suffer the consequences of the sins of others? Is acceptance of suffering as divine pedagogy (as suggested by Calvin) an appropriate counsel for victims of oppression and abuse or for parents whose children are poisoned by toxic waste? Does the understanding that suffering is divine pedagogy accurately diagnose *the* human malady as sin—or might sinful postures be both sin and survival strategies born of a broken heart?<sup>13</sup> Without disparaging the critical insights of this paradigm, and with these weaknesses in mind, we turn to another paradigm for understanding evil.

## RADICAL SUFFERING

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me,  
From the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
And by night, but find no rest.*

Psalm 22:1–2

A woman who has never smoked a cigarette in her life receives the news that she has terminal lung cancer and rages over the injustice of her plight. Two snipers torment the nation's capital killing persons at random—robbing citizens of any way of rationalizing why one is killed while others are not. Six million Jews are murdered—mothers and their children shepherded into gas chambers, starving victims forced onto a death march, men and women living daily in the reality of demoralizing degradation and the threat of random violence. There is evil in this world that can bear no justification, that cannot be explained as deserved punishment for sin or as a pedagogic technique. There is evil that leaves sufferers helpless and brokenhearted and that threatens faith in God's providential governance of

<sup>10</sup>See R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1 Human Nature* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1964) for a fuller development of this argument.

<sup>11</sup>See Case-Winter's argument in (*God's Power*, 39–93) that Calvin's model of power as domination and control erodes his insight that God exercised providential care for creation. She argues that a different model of power (i.e., the power to influence and to be influenced) would better honor this insight (201–32).

<sup>12</sup>See M. L. Bringle, *Despair: Sickness or Sin?* (Nashville: Abindgon, 1990) for an argument that despair is both sickness and sin.

<sup>13</sup>See R. N. Brock, *Journeys by Heart* (New York: Crossroads, 1988) for a discussion of sin as a symptom of human brokenheartedness; and S. Nelson, *Healing the Broken Heart: Sin, Alienation, and the Gift of Grace* (St. Louise: Chalice, 1997) for a fuller discussion of the interweaving of sin and brokenheartedness.

history.

The paradigm of radical suffering looks at evil from the perspective of the one wounded by sin without the strange consolation of the moral view, where victims may be tempted to see themselves as sinful and thus deserving of punishment or pedagogy rather than know that evil, while caused by someone's sin, is undeserved, chaotic, and capable of threatening any sense of moral coherence of the world.<sup>14</sup> The paradigm of radical suffering does not seek to explain or justify such suffering or assume any posture that would mask the terror of the undeserving sufferer. Such justification threatens to undermine the one thing that such sufferers need to know: their suffering makes no sense at all. This paradigm does not explain but insists that such evil be acknowledged. But this is not an easy perspective to assume. For to assume that evil happens without justification as punishment or pedagogy is to stand in a place where incoherence truly threatens meaning and where ultimately all are vulnerable.<sup>15</sup> While the moral view offers coherence to the world, radical suffering tears at that coherence by insisting that evil happens "for no good reason."<sup>16</sup> The paradigm of radical suffering stands in this place of suffering and incoherence, recognizes everything such evil threatens, realizes that this evil cannot be justified but must be resisted, and asks in the face of such evil, "Where is God?" or "What kind of God. . . ?" or "Is there a God at all?"

Awareness of such radical suffering is not foreign to the biblical tradition. The psalms of lament cry out in suffering without reference whatsoever to sin and punishment.<sup>17</sup> Job resists the council of his "friends" that suffering corresponds to sin (and, indeed, the reader of the book of Job knows that Job's suffering is not a result of sin). The sufferings of the Hebrew people in Egypt are "for no fault of their own" (in fact, it is Pharaoh who is the sinful party).<sup>18</sup> Jesus, himself, resists the moral paradigm on a number of occasions (as in the case of the man born blind in John 9) and calls out to God from the cross with words of utter abandonment: "My God, my God, why . . . ?" The paradigm of radical suffering is reflected in theologies from the underside of history; feminist theologians who insist that there are two poles to human alienation—sin *and* radical suffering.<sup>19</sup> African-American theologians do not explain the origin of their suffering in their sin but focus on God's eventual resolution of evil.<sup>20</sup> Korean *minjung* theologians speak of *han*.

Han is the suffering of the innocent who are caught in the wicked situation of helplessness. It is

<sup>14</sup>For further discussion of this point, see E. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

<sup>15</sup>For an argument that in the shadow of the holocaust one must stand in such a place, refusing to justify its horror, see L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: SUNY, 1982).

<sup>16</sup>The voice, of course, is Job's. See S. Balentine's article, "For No Reason," in this journal issue (pp. 349–69).

<sup>17</sup>See F. Lindstrom, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1944). See also J. D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>18</sup>See Walter Brueggemann, "The Shrieking Voice of the Wounded Party," in *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against*, ed. A. S. Park and S. L. Nelson (Albany: SUNY, 2001) 29.

<sup>19</sup>See Farley, *Tragic Vision*, and M. P. Engel, "Evil, Sin, and Violation of the Vulnerable," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. S. B. Thistlethwaite and M. P. Engel (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990) 152–64.

<sup>20</sup>J. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1975).

the void of the soul that cannot be filled with any superficial patch. This void is the abysmal darkness of wounded human beings. . . . [It is] a physical, mental, and spiritual repercussion to a terrible injustice done to a person, eliciting a deep ache, a wrenching of all the organs, an intense internalized or externalized rage, a vengeful obsession, and the sense of helplessness and hopelessness.<sup>21</sup>

That such evil exists is a hard existential and historical truth. What such evil tells us about God and the meaning and order of creation is a thorny and threatening theological dilemma. Does evil that tears at the coherence of creation come from God? If so, is God good? If not, then can God's purposes be resisted or even overwhelmed? What do we do with a God who appears to be absent, inattentive, or impotent and who seems to let oppression and suffering happen for no good reason?

Facing such threatening questions without recourse to easy and dishonest consolation is the strength of the paradigm of radical suffering. It vindicates the sufferer. It confesses that such suffering does exist and risks admitting that such suffering challenges faith in the moral coherence of creation and the goodness and providential governance of God. Moreover, if Calvin's view of suffering as pedagogical can risk the passive acceptance of suffering that is destructive, then the paradigm of radical suffering should engender outrage, resistance, and compassionate response to such suffering.

But does the paradigm of radical suffering offer any grounds to hope that incoherence is not, in the end, the way of the universe? Why is not nihilism as possible a response to radical suffering as courage and defiance? Perhaps resistance to evil is a courageous act that is ultimately tragic (an act of defiance that reveals the injustice of the world and is then consumed by it). Are there grounds to hope that radical suffering is not the final word—that coherence and meaning will win out? But what coherence would that be? What God is left in whom we can place our trust? The paradigm of radical suffering insists that we view evil without rose-colored lenses—but we need other paradigms to understand evil that can offer us a solid place to stand.<sup>22</sup>

## THE AMBIGUOUS CREATION

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*

Job 38:4a

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<sup>21</sup>A. S. Park, "The Bible and Han," in *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against*, eds., A. S. Park and S. L. Nelson (Albany: SUNY, 2001) 47–48.

<sup>22</sup>As noted earlier, I am borrowing the term radical suffering and the argument of this paradigm from Wendy Farley. For Farley, radical suffering itself is not a solid place on which to stand—but as one stands at that place with compassion for the suffering and *in resistance* to radical suffering, then one does find a solid place on which to stand—for that is where the compassion of God that sustains the sufferer and resists the evil is revealed. I have broken Farley's argument in two, allowing radical suffering to stand apart from the place of resistance, which I have included in the category of the eschatological imagination. I separate the two in order to emphasize both the reality of radical suffering and the difficulty of standing in such a place.

A long-dormant volcano erupts, and hundreds of people living at its base are killed as tons of mud, lava, and volcanic ash catch them by surprise. A parent sends her child off to college—proud of his achievements and promise, yet grieving for the little boy he will no longer be. A rising executive is offered a promotion that entails moving his whole family across the country and wonders if it is fair to pull his teenage children out of their familiar surroundings just as their high-school careers are in full bloom. A pastor finds herself caught daily between equally valid yet conflicting demands of her young family and her growing congregation. A loved one's cancer goes into remission, and we realize how vulnerable we all are—and how the gift of relationship seems all the more poignant precisely because of its fragility. A young woman dies, and the family, who had decided to care for their mother/wife/daughter themselves, marvel at her funeral at the love and beauty they experienced in the process of her dying. Life seems to have suffering, conflict, vulnerability and loss built into its very structure.<sup>23</sup>

While the moral view names suffering, conflict, and death a result of sin and thus not natural to creation, the paradigm of ambiguous creation understands that some suffering and conflict are in fact part of the design. Creation is finite, and thus creatures are subject to limitation, suffering, and death. Creation teems with diversity, thus conflict is a given. Human beings are given freedom to shape the world, and that freedom is the ground both for imagining good and evil and also for an anxious awareness that human beings are limited and not in control. Limits, change, conflict, and death all tear at an anthropocentric sense of how life should be and tease out nagging doubts about whether there is any order or meaning to creation at all. For this paradigm, creation is a gift of God and it is good, but not unambiguously so.<sup>24</sup>

**Redemptive suffering reaches down into sinful hearts and pulls on the cords of compassion that bind one creature to the suffering of another.**

The biblical tradition has acknowledged this ambiguity in its own discourse about creation. For example, Job calls God to account for his sufferings and is given not the justice he wants but a view of creation that is theocentric (and not anthropocentric). God speaks out of the whirlwind taking great delight in the forces, fierce beauty, and even conflicts that are part of creation. Clearly God's logic of creation does not match Job's expectations. Genesis 1:2 speaks of "waste" and "void," "darkness" and "the deep" that are present as God is creating. Donald Gowan argues that this verse can be understood to reflect a sense that there are "conditions in the material world that are inadequate for God's purposes since

<sup>23</sup>For an elegant analysis of the human condition as described here, see E. Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>24</sup>See Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and Farley, *Good and Evil*, for arguments that this ambiguous character of creation and the anxiety and vulnerability it entails are a precondition for sin—the crucible in which sin and evil are formed.

they do not support life. . . .<sup>25</sup> He concludes:

This is P's [the author's] wise way of acknowledging the problem of evil, the evils that afflict human existence but cannot be attributed to human sin. To whom can they be attributed, then? Not to God, P insists. They do not fit the structure of the creation of the universe because they are what God did not will. They stand awkwardly between the announcement of the creation of a complete cosmos (1:1) and the description of how God produced order and life. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Karl Barth speaks of the "shadow side" of creation:

The diversities and frontiers of the creaturely world contain many "nots." No single creature is all-inclusive. None is or resembles another. To each belongs its own place and time, and in these its own manner, nature and existence. What we have called the "shadow side" of creation is constituted by the "not" which in this twofold respect, as its distinction from God and its individual distinctiveness, pertains to creaturely nature.<sup>27</sup>

Formed *ex nihilo*, creation is finite, imperfect, impermanent and "even on the verge of collapsing back into non-existence."<sup>28</sup>

If the conditions of creation are ambiguous, if some suffering and conflict are natural to creation, if creation knows the threat of collapsing back into non-existence (and, as in the case of the flood, has experienced the reality of that chaos), then God is not innocent of the suffering of the world. In creating a world that is finite, diverse, and free, God has created a world where suffering and conflict are implicit. Of course, such suffering and conflict are not without their value. If the conflict between the lion and the lamb leads to death for the lamb, conflict between opposing forces can lead to new possibilities born of the tension of their opposition. God is not to blame for the treacherous and unjust ways people choose to resolve their conflicts or protect themselves. But God can be held accountable for the suffering implicit in an ambiguous creation.

If God is complicit, however, then so is humanity. Existence is predicated upon space and resources that are denied to others. As human beings live into their possibilities, they change the context of others' lives. Without willfully intending harm to another (or acting out of rebellion against God), human beings invariably bump into others, use resources others cannot have, misconstrue the intentions of others, and have to mediate conflict between just causes that usually leaves a good cause (or person) abandoned. From the perspective of this paradigm, before we can even begin to talk about sin, human beings are not innocent of the suffering of the world.<sup>29</sup>

The strength of the paradigm of ambiguous creation for understanding evil is that it

<sup>25</sup>D. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 21.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>Quoted from J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 135.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>29</sup>See K. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). According to Sands, the realization that we cannot, by nature of our existence, be innocent frees the world from the damage we do in our attempt to appear innocent.

accurately describes the structure of human existence. It releases human beings both from guilt over sufferings that come with creation's turf and from habits of blaming others and self for suffering over which creatures exercise little control. Yet it also paradoxically insists that human beings are not innocent and that they should not aspire to be. Human beings are thus freed from expending immense energy in self-righteous justification. The creation model helps them to be honest with one another and themselves. Once the veil of guilt is lifted, they see another's suffering and respond with compassion. This paradigm names God as complicit in evil by creating a world where suffering is a piece of life and where the vulnerability entailed in such a world can become a lure for human sin.

The weakness of this paradigm, however, is that it runs the risk of naming God as one who is unaffected by the suffering of creation. God delights in the Behemoth and Leviathan that cause great terror for human beings. Of course, God could both delight and grieve at the same time—loving creatures in all their beauty and grieving over such beauty, which can entail suffering. But is this God good and loving?

## ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*

Matthew 25: 40

A slave people, told that their oppression is the will of God, choose to believe instead that their enslavement is evil. Identifying with the story of the Hebrews in Egypt, they sing "Let My People Go" with a conviction that God will bring their suffering to an end. The gas chambers, famine, disease, and brutality that mark Auschwitz as a site of radical suffering daily took the lives of prisoners. The threat of random cruelty added to the horror. Prisoners were totally at the mercy (or more correctly the inhumanity) of their captors. This context denied all meaning to the prisoners' lives, and life understandably became a matter of survival. However, survival and hopelessness in the face of such horror were not always the final word. Prisoners at Auschwitz practiced acts of resistance to the evil of that place. Some destroyed a crematorium (and were executed for their act); others resisted evil by practicing simple acts of justice and kindness that bore witness to a world order far beyond the terror and cruelty imposed by the Nazi's. As one prisoner described his experience:

The loaf of camp bread, always the same shape, was supposed to be cut into four pieces, one for each prisoner. It never was that way. We never got more than one slice. All the rest vanished on the way to us. Many hands grabbed their share as the bread rations were distributed to us: the kitchen kapo and company, the barrack kapo with his court, the room supervisor and his pals. Only at the end of the line, we, the prisoners, with our primitive scales made with a stick weighed those slices, and even then we divided up the bread crumbs so that every thing was

equal. *That was our internal justice.*<sup>30</sup>

A simple act of sharing crumbs of bread with equity becomes a witness to an order of justice that challenges the dominant order.

Another prisoner, Roman Catholic priest Maximillian Kolbe, offered to take the place of another inmate who, with nine others, was to be sent to a hunger cell to die of starvation as a punishment for the suspected escape of a fellow prisoner. Whereas one might surmise that the norm at Auschwitz would have been for the officer in charge either to reject Kolbe's

offer or to send him off to the hunger cell with the other ten, thus consigning Kolbe's gracious offer to the category of useless gestures, the officer (perhaps because he was momentarily caught off guard) accepted Kolbe's offer. One man was saved and Kolbe was sent to the hunger cell, where (the collective memory attests) he ministered in love to his dying companions and

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where he died so slowly that he was finally murdered by lethal injection. The memory of his sacrificial act did not die with him but remained as a testimony that a site of radical suffering—a place haunted by death and terror—could also be a place where a sacrificial gesture speaks meaning.<sup>31</sup> Suffering and cruelty may have dominated the day, but they were not the only word.

Radical suffering has the capacity to crack open the moral view of evil—insisting that not all suffering can be justified as punishment or pedagogy for sin. Like the paradigm of radical suffering, the paradigm of eschatological imagination insists that radical suffering cannot be justified, that it must be resisted and the sufferers vindicated. Yet, we have asked, as one resists such evil and works for vindication and justice, as one calls God to account for a world where such destructive and undeserved evil happen, on what ground can one place hope that evil is *not* the ultimate logic of creation? Resistance and justice reveal both the courage to defy the world as it is known (where there are always innocent people who suffer the workings of individual and systemic sin) and the capacity to live *as if* resistance to the suffering of the innocent is where the moral meaning of the universe must be found. The paradigm of eschatological imagination addresses this “as if.” It stands in that place of

<sup>30</sup>Marian Kolodziej, as quoted in the brochure describing his exhibition of Auschwitz, “Plates of Memory.” The website of The Father Kolbe Center in Harmeze, Poland, where Mr. Kolodziej's work is on exhibit is <http://franciszkanie.pl/harmeze>.

<sup>31</sup>Details from the life of Maximillian Kolbe can be found in *A Man for Others* written by Patricia Treece (San Francisco: Harbor & Row Publishers, 1982). A fictional account of Kolbe's story can be found in *Orbit of Darkness* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991) which tells the Kolbe story as it might possibly have impacted both the prisoners and the guards.

radical suffering and protest and dares to claim that the act of resistance not only defies the world that lives by such violence and posits an alternative order, but also insists that the place of resistance is precisely where God's desire for the world is revealed. God is with those who suffer such evil, and God's solidarity with sufferers is God's judgment upon the world as we know it, where evil destroys lives and yet has the potential to become banal and ordinary.

In an eschatological reversal, God is not the one who brings the suffering, but one who identifies with the suffering and in so doing demands that it stop. If the cry of radical suffering calls God to account, the eschatological imagination names God advocate of the oppressed, judge of human cruelty, and fellow sufferer. For this paradigm, God's logic with humanity is revealed not through the history of the dominant but in those "strange places" where "the word of God comes into the wilderness," where the powers of death and destruction are exposed, haunted places are lived in, and victims are remembered.<sup>32</sup> It is precisely at the place where suffering is named radical—where the veil of justification is lifted and radical suffering is revealed in all its horror, where its threat to meaning and moral order are felt in one's very bones, where the deception and callousness that protect one from seeing evil are exposed, and voices rise in protest that this should not be. It is precisely at this place where God's ultimate meaning for history is revealed. Evil as we have defined it, then, can be not only deserved punishment or pedagogy, the cost of creation, or the surd in creation that challenges all sense of meaning. It can also be a site where suffering and despair are transformed by an act of eschatological imagination that turns the meaninglessness of that suffering on its head.

The eschatological imagination is threaded throughout the biblical tradition wherever the oppressed cry out for vindication and are heard, where God's word of hope is proclaimed to a people who suffer. It is reflected in the eschatological promise of a Kingdom where every tear shall be wiped away and suffering shall be no more. For Christians, the primary revealer of the eschatological imagination is Jesus Christ, whose life and ministry embodied a reversal of expectations. He was a Messiah who hung on a cross. He preached and practiced a Kingdom of God where the least would be the greatest, where the Son of Man "rules" through serving, and where a friend "gives up his life for his friends." Jesus did not assume the expected mantle of kingly power nor did he protect himself from the ravages of sin—suffering, abandonment, and death. Jesus lived by a different logic, the logic of the cross, and he taught his followers to live that way as well. And his resurrection—the final reversal that is the story of Jesus Christ—is God's affirmation that "people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe."<sup>33</sup>

The eschatological imagination—the understanding that the cross reveals the "grain of

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<sup>32</sup>See D. Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder: Westview, 1998) 210.

<sup>33</sup>J. H. Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," in *Studies in Christian Ethics I/1* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988) 58, quoted in Toole, *Waiting for Godot*, 216.

the universe”—is evident throughout Christian tradition. It is reflected in the lives of martyrs whose deaths—like Kolbe’s—were a practice of the logic of cross and resurrection. Radical suffering threatens all human creatures in our shared vulnerability to the forces of evil. The eschatological imagination affirms that this evil exists and yet—without justifying it—pulls it within the scope of God’s work with the world. That is its strength.

Yet evil is still real; the Holocaust was not the last genocide. While the eschatological imagination can hearten those who suffer, it is not clear how it affects those who perpetrate such evils. Eschatological imagination reveals God’s judgment—but is judgment the final word, or is there also hope that evil, without domesticating and denying its ravages, can also be redeemed?

## REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

*But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:5

In the 1960s, men and women, young and old, engaged in acts of civil disobedience against laws of segregation. They boycotted buses, “sat-in” at segregated lunch counters, and marched in protests. Resisting nonviolently, they were often met with arrest and acts of violation. They chose to risk arrest and physical harm because they believed that the suffering they endured would unmask the violation of persons that these laws entailed. Through their suffering, a nation was called to see and repent of its sin of institutionalized racism, and the people of that nation—those who suffered the wounds of segregation and those who had gained unjust privilege through those laws—would begin to heal together.<sup>34</sup> Romeo and Juliet’s love was “star crossed” because they dared to love across the boundary line that separated their feuding families. In their mutual grief for their lost children, the Capulets and Montagues saw how their hatred of one another ground up innocent victims and repented the treachery of their ways.<sup>35</sup> A bomb was dropped on Coventry Cathedral during World War II, leaving it in ruins. The congregation chose not to spend their energies on revenge, but instead prayed for the citizens of Dresden, Germany (who suffered under allied bombing raids) and made their destroyed sanctuary a place to work for the reconciliation of people in conflict all over the world. On a hill outside of Jerusalem, an innocent man was hung on a cross, and Christians proclaim not only that he was murdered by the sin of the world but that his death redeems the world from its sin.

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<sup>34</sup>For a narration of one such incident of nonviolent resistance, see Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

<sup>35</sup>William Shakespeare, “Romeo And Juliet.”

If radical suffering is the tragic truth of the world we as we know it, and if the paradigm of eschatological imagination vindicates the suffering of the innocent and says that such suffering should not be, then the paradigm of redemptive suffering knows that some suffering can be used for redemptive purposes. Innocent suffering may appear to be the way of the world as new generations are used to settling old scores, as the poor suffer from the social structure of evil and not from their own deserts, as nations violate the boundaries of other nations in the name of “living space.” The paradigm of redemptive suffering does not seek to justify such suffering but understands that God can use suffering to redeem sinners, to end cycles of suffering and sin, and to bring reconciliation and hope to a suffering world. As the eschatological imagination understands that God is with the innocent in their struggle at the margins of history, redemptive suffering understands that God’s purposes in the face of such suffering is to pull sufferer and sinner into the redemptive divine embrace.<sup>36</sup>

The logic of redemptive suffering is revealed in Second Isaiah’s narrative of the suffering servant. Isaiah 53 tells the story of a people coming to conscious awareness of their sin and their complicity in the misery of another. Confronted with the suffering of the servant, the people at first assume that his suffering is a judgment from God: “We accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted” (v. 4). But then it dawns on the people (or second Isaiah brings it to dawn on them) that the servant’s suffering is undeserved. Rather, if there is a correlation between sin and suffering (the moral paradigm), then the punishment here is suffered by one who does not deserve it. The servant suffers because of others, and this awareness brings them to confession (“he was wounded for *our* transgressions.”) and healing (v. 5).<sup>37</sup>

If to be human is to live in a world where human beings are inevitably complicit in the suffering of others, if sin is the way human beings seek to secure themselves at the expense of others, if deception and callousness are strategies by which people protect themselves from seeing the effects of their sin in the suffering of others,<sup>38</sup> then redemptive suffering shreds the veil of human deception, cuts through the calluses of hardened hearts, and confronts those who can see the truth and pain. Redemptive suffering reaches down into sinful hearts and pulls on the cords of compassion that bind one creature to the suffering of another.<sup>39</sup> Repentance, sorrow, compassion—the sinner is drawn into God’s way of redemption and is transformed.

But in this paradigm, suffering is redemptive not only because the guilty are brought to repentance, but because cycles of suffering and sin are broken. When innocent blood is shed, that blood cries out for vengeance—understandably so. *Han* is not only the suffering

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<sup>36</sup>C. S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

<sup>37</sup>For further discussion of Isaiah 53, see P. S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989) 79–81.

<sup>38</sup>See W. Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 44–47, for a longer discussion of the structure of deception and callousness.

<sup>39</sup>See E. Farley, *Good and Evil*, chapter one, for a discussion of Emanuel Levinas’s description of “the face” and the obligation one has in seeing the face of another to respond.

of the innocent. It is also “an intense internalized or externalized rage, a vengeful obsession.”<sup>40</sup> What makes suffering redemptive is the innocents’ choice not to return “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” but to let the cycle of sin and suffering end with their misery—to let their suffering be a down payment on a new way of life. This is the redemption attempted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, which sought confession and truth telling instead of retribution. For Christians, redemptive suffering breaks the power of evil and its desire for repetition through the wisdom of the cross. As S. Mark Heim describes the process:

People do not unanimously close ranks over Jesus’ grave (as Jesus’ executioners hoped), nor is there a spree of violent revenge on behalf of the crucified leader. Instead, an odd new counter-community arises, dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice.<sup>41</sup>

To say that suffering can be redemptive is to say that sin, and the evil it produces, does not have the last word. That is the strength of this paradigm. It takes a violation at the center of history and makes it the source of hope. As Douglas Ottati writes:

To all but the hardest of hearts, [the cross] is the power that is able to work a change of heart, the power to make people turn from the way of inordinate self-concern toward the way, the truth, and the life marked off by Jesus Christ. It is the power that moves people to repent of their sins because it punctuates and underscores and will not let them turn their gaze from the sight of sin’s tragic consequences, namely, the suffering of God’s own Son.<sup>42</sup>

It gives people a lens by which to be outraged by the suffering of all innocents and thus be moved to work for the end of such suffering.

The innocent one who was crucified at Calvary suffered the consequences of the sins of others. This is the great parable or analogy, the discerning lens through which Christians look at the world. When Christians look through that lens, then they discern the many other Calvaries both great and small that clutter the horizons of our world. They see the innocent suffering still for the sins of the guilty—for our sins—on many an obscure hill. And in this suffering they see the cross.<sup>43</sup>

Through the lens of redemptive suffering, the horror of other hills is exposed, and those who see no longer remain the same.

## CONCLUSION

In February 2003, Adriana—the unborn baby carried for thirty-one weeks in my step-daughter’s womb—died when her umbilical cord crimped, cutting off her oxygen supply. Her grieving parents were told that there was nothing—short of clairvoyance—they could

<sup>40</sup>Park, “The Bible and Han,” 47–48.

<sup>41</sup>See S. M. Heim, “Visible Victim: Christ’s Death to End Sacrifice,” *ChrCen* (March 14, 2001) 19–23 for a discussion of how Christ’s death put an end to cycles of violence.

<sup>42</sup>D. Ottati, *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 88.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

have done to avert this tragedy. A friend is told he has cancer, and as he faces this new fact in his life, he feels as if his cancer has opened his eyes to see the gift of community in a way he had not been able to see before. In the nation of Rwanda where one million Tutsis were massacred by their Hutu fellow citizens, schoolgirls in a boarding school in Gisenyi were ordered to sort themselves ethnically or suffer the consequences.

During the attack on the school in Gisenyi, as in the earlier attack on the school in Kibuye, the students, teenage girls who had been roused from their sleep, were ordered to separate themselves—Hutus from Tutsis. But the students refused. At both schools, the girls said they were simply Rwandans, so they were beaten and shot indiscriminately.<sup>44</sup>

Phillip Gourevitch concludes “mightn’t we all take some courage from the example of those brave Hutu girls who could have chosen to live, but chose instead to call themselves Rwandans?”<sup>45</sup>

Grief, outrage, shifting consciousness, courage, resistance, repentance, acceptance of the way the world is—our study of different ways to understand the reality of evil has exposed different yet appropriate ways to see evil and to respond to it. We have allowed that there are sinners and those sinned against, that there is evil that is used by God for pedagogical or redemptive purposes, and that there is evil that can only engender outrage and resistance. We have seen how God’s “social location” in relation to evil shifts as the paradigms move around—evil can be God’s judgment, it can be the price of the creation in which God delights, but it is also the reality that God judges, resists, suffers, or uses to bring about redemption. It is tempting in conclusion to wrestle these different paradigms into one unified perspective, and the reader may choose to do so. But I will resist that urge, because I have come to believe that each one of them is necessary to comprehend the vulnerability of the human condition, the human capacity to inflict horrible sufferings upon one another, the resiliency of the human heart to suffer and resist enormous evil, the reality of redemption for both those who hurt and those who harm, and the complexity of God’s relationship with creation. They also provide multiple vantage points from which to marvel at the central proclamation of the Christian faith—nothing can separate us from the love of God. I am content to leave it at that.

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<sup>44</sup>P. Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998) 353.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*



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