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## You Can't Believe the Joy! A Biological Theological View of Suffering

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### Abstract

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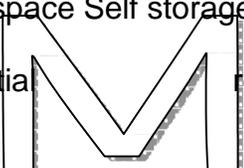
"Consider it pure joy whenever you go through any sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested this makes for endurance. Let endurance come to its perfection so that you may be fully mature and lacking in nothing." (Jam 1: 2-4). The Book of James speaks tough words that seem the opposite of our societal notions concerning suffering. At first, such a claim seems outrageous, not grounded in reality, and provides no real solace to those suffering. It leads one to question: why must human beings suffer, did not Jesus suffer once and for all? Humankind has asked such questions when it comes to the nature of suffering. The Hebrew nation guided by Yahweh formed the theological foundation for Christians to follow, but were unable to answer these questions. Theologians across the centuries have argued back and forth over the nature, value, and mystery of suffering. Modern theologians attempt to repress the very value of suffering. Similarly, American culture seems set on repressing all suffering and pain, whether psychological or physical. While some modern scientists cite the value of human suffering, others are far more seemingly on a quest to eradicate it. The historical Catholic perspective - yielding such devotions as the *Mater Dolorosa*, the *Holy Wounds of Jesus*, and the *Sorrowful Mysteries* - is no coincidence, for suffering is part of God's plan for humanity. Only by looking at biological and theological models that seek to understand and value suffering can one see it as a God-given gift that leads to pure joy."

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# You Can't Believe The Joy!

## A Biological and Theological View of Suffering

By: Justin Miller

### ***I. Introduction***

“Consider it pure joy whenever you go through any sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested this makes for endurance. Let endurance come to its perfection so that you may be fully mature and lacking in nothing.” (Jam 1: 2-4). The Book of James speaks tough words that seem the opposite of our societal notions concerning suffering. At first, such a claim seems outrageous, not grounded in reality, and provides no real solace to those suffering. It leads one to question: why must human beings suffer, did not Jesus suffer once and for all? Humankind has asked such questions when it comes to the nature of suffering. The Hebrew nation guided by Yahweh formed the theological foundation for Christians to follow, but were unable to answer these questions. Theologians across the centuries have argued back and forth over the nature, value, and mystery of suffering. Modern theologians attempt to repress the very value of suffering. Similarly, American culture seems set on repressing all suffering and pain, whether psychological or physical. While some modern scientists cite the value of human suffering, others are far more seemingly on a quest to eradicate it. The historical Catholic perspective - yielding such devotions as the *Mater Dolorosa*, *the Holy Wounds of Jesus*, and the *Sorrowful Mysteries* - is no coincidence, for suffering is part of God's plan for humanity. Only by looking at biological and theological models that seek to understand and value suffering can one see it as a God-given gift that leads to pure joy.

Fr. John Corapi speaks of the value of suffering. After an Augustine-like reversion to the faith from a life of materialism and drug addiction, he and a fellow seminarian underwent many hardships during their first year of major seminary at the Vatican. For Corapi, it was chronic migraines. It was far worse for his critically ill friend, and both missed more classes than they could attend. Corapi felt himself asking God why this was happening, why bring him to study in Rome only to leave him and his friend bedridden? Their pains grew progressively worse, and within a few months, his friend was near death. Corapi witnessed his friend's final moments after the latter had received the Anointing of the Sick at a hospital. From his deathbed, this seminarian struggling painfully, waved Corapi over, and whispered into his ear, "You can't believe the joy!" as his last words before he died. Were they not in Vatican City, one might presume such a statement would have shocked any physician in the hospital room. Yet, recent scientific study has become re-interested in some degree of human suffering. Thus, one must begin with science, specifically Biology, to begin to ascertain the value of human suffering and God's plan for it.

## ***II. Biological Perspectives on Suffering***

Humans enter the world after their mothers' excruciating toil through labor. Newborn babies' first contact with the outside world will generally come in the form of a slap from the doctor and they begin cry. Thus begins the human life cycle and aptly, pain and suffering occur at the onset. This will continue throughout a human's life as one ages and later dies. C.S. Lewis calls pain the "unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt" (Lewis, 92). Yet, Lewis later goes on to prove that the necessary "evil" of suffering can always bring a greater good, because God can use this "wrong" to make humans "right" (Lewis, 92). The same is true in science where the model of suffering has great long-term benefits.

Humans have evolved to their current state only through great suffering almost as if there is some larger plan for suffering. This suffering is central to the theories of Charles Darwin and is logically self-evident (Rolston,133). Suffering is as fundamental to Biology as an organism's life and death, and just as important. Because the concepts of "suffering" and "struggle" are losing importance in many Biology textbooks, Holmes Rolston devoted a chapter of his text Science and Religion: A Critical Survey to the biological value of suffering. He asserts life struggles sustain one's life and lead one to greater things; sufferings are actually "a blessing in disguise" (Rolston, 134). Although science may not value suffering as a "blessing," one cannot deny its benefit to life forms in nature. He puts it best when he states,

Every life is an unceasing adventure in endowment and risk, and all organic being is constituted - to employ a scientific metaphor - in a mixture of environmental conductance and resistance, where the world is both a resource *and* threat. To adapt the Psalmist's religious metaphor, life is lived in green pastures *and* in the valley of the shadow of death, nourished by eating at a table prepared in the midst of its enemies. Struggle is a driving motif, but then again, its product is life forms selected for maxim adaptation to their environmental niches, and the harmony that comes out of the struggle quite as impressive as the struggle. (Rolston, 137)

Rolston echoes Lewis when he proves that it is only through this struggle that the ecosystem "writes straight" with the "crooked lines" that are Earth's life forms (Rolston, 137).

By looking at certain organisms as models of suffering, Biology proves the value of suffering. Rolston establishes this point by looking at the biological "macrolevel," when he explains the interactions of sibling pelican chicks (Rolston,137). These birds are not biologically suited for walking and often live in some of the most remote environments (Rolston, 138). Further, pelican parents are often very violent toward their offspring, are easily distracted, and leave one quarter of "nests abandoned often for no obvious cause" (Rolston, 138). Amidst all this, science discovers further suffering, because the dominant pelican chick seems to have an unbridled instinct for "fratricide" (Rolston, 139). At first,

one is unable to make sense of this cycle of suffering pelicans; yet several biological reasons necessitate such a life. Each “runt” is a needed sacrifice to increase the food intake and wellbeing of the dominant chick; thus, the “runt’s” suffering - however saddening - is crucial for the continuation of the life. Both pelicans would not have nearly the potential for survival as the dominant one alone. However, he notes that such a life is not characteristic of a creature made in the image of God (Rolston, 140).

In addition, science demonstrates that suffering is necessary for the future evolution and continuation of human life. On a molecular level, a look at the genetic disease Sickle Cell Anemia, wherein a defective hemoglobin molecule cannot transport oxygen, proves the scientific and genetic value of suffering (Rolston, 140). Providentially, the gene safeguards its carriers - more than 15% of the African population, depending on the region - against Malaria (Rolston, 140). Both Malaria and Sickle Cell Anemia can be deadly and claim lives at an early age. Malaria, however, has only been a problem as of late, seemingly with a change in African populations from small nomadic tribes to settled larger-scale farmers (Rolston, 141). Still, the hemoglobin deformation has survived through the blood-lines of many Africans. Studies as of 1987 suggest that the evolution of the hemoglobin molecule is working towards an optimal balance between anemia and malaria to increase the survival rate of the population (Rolston, 141). Overall, the struggle against anemia is necessary for most to farm collectively and be resistant to malaria. As biology shows in Sickle Cell Anemia and pelicans, life is a “passion play,” a grand tragedy where a sacrificial individual will start the chain reaction to allow the survival of all (Rolston, 141).

This parallel to Christ is surely no coincidence.

Yet, human suffering is often quite a different story. As the only creatures with intellect, we seek both to express our displeasure with suffering and to alleviate it through innovation. No physician would refuse to operate for the sake of not afflicting

the patient with a degree of pain because temporary suffering is necessary for the greater good of the patient. Instead, medicine has spent billions of dollars and man-hours creating new drugs to alleviate pain. Major hospitals are now “viewing chronic pain as a disease and creat[ing] pain teams to counteract the stifling pangs of discomfort” (Sandeep, 6).

This begs the question, how is the so-called disease of chronic pain any different from the disease Sickle Cell Anemia? For science, it appears there are two irreconcilable modes of suffering, wherein (1) an individual’s chronic pain is meaningless suffering unless it contributes to (2) the evolutionary process of humanity. Thus, mainstream science and medicine value suffering only to a certain extent. One can imagine any physician or nurse bursting into laughter if a patient refused anesthesia or pain relievers before an operation claiming, “No thank you, I consider it pure joy to suffer.” Yet, by looking at suffering from a theological perspective, one can see how such a revolutionary notion is possible: Christians must embrace suffering to understand the mysterious quality and joy of the Cross they carry along with Christ.

### ***III. Theological Perspectives on Suffering***

The foundation of theology, the Jewish Tradition, is unable to come to a clear understanding or value for suffering within God’s plan for humanity. In Deuteronomy 11:10, the Lord tells Israel his plan or model: if it keeps the Lord’s commands, He will grant them a blessed land with all they desire. Only if they are lured away from God, “serv[ing] other gods and worship[ing] them,” will suffering come upon them (Dt. 11:17). Yet, this notion of the reason for suffering goes against the book of Job wherein Job is an upright man who undergoes many trials, although he holds no false gods and has no grave sins. One might see a potential contradiction in these two depictions. The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes notes such a contradiction and thus seems to refute the idea of a God’s higher plan for humanity and suffering. He argues that there is no plan -

just God. This was the worldview of the leading Jewish scholars until the work of one revolutionary - Jesus Christ.

John's Gospel says Jesus was in Divine spiritual existence from even before the beginning of the universe, as "the Word [was] and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). The original Greek intended meaning for "Word" represents the concept of "idea, intent, or *plan*." Thus, the plan of God is clearly evident and eternal. Yet God's instrument to enact the plan entered time and came to earth only at the moment of the Incarnation, when "the Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14). Within the next 33 years Jesus would be the catalyst in a revolution of the theological view of suffering. God's primary plan for sending Jesus to earth was to teach, minister, and suffer in order to redeem humans from sin. The climax of his earthly life is also the point of his greatest humility and suffering. In Christ's Passion, we see the extent of the passionate love God has for humanity. Only after this extreme suffering can God reveal the true joy that is the Resurrection. This is the ultimate model of suffering, the Cruciform. A much better model for human suffering than the pelican chick or malaria sufferers, the Cruciform is God's overarching plan for humanity. We must all die with Christ - the trials of each day adding up, bringing us closer and closer to Calvary - a share in his suffering so that we can share in his resurrection and eternal joy.

God uses pain to bring pure joy. While Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, he also came to afflict the comfortable. If a human becomes too comfortable in life, it is generally an indication of a lack of growth and thus a lack of suffering. One can note this in the statement, "...pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument [...] but it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebellious soul" (Lewis, 95). Whether it be physical or emotional pain, discomfort leads us to one of two things: submission or perseverance.

To persevere is to pass the test; if one submits, he or she fails. However, if one earnestly submits one's pain to God, offering up his or her sufferings for the hope of solace in Christ alone, one has passed the test and gained 'something more.' This "offering up" brings pure joy.

Suffering is a central part of God's plan for the spiritual development of the individual. God calls Christians to take up their crosses daily and to walk with the suffering Christ. Christians mature through this suffering and are refined from a flabby spiritual state into a more fit form. Ideally, this process of suffering, reform and renewal will happen daily. It is only through the process of suffering that we grow closer to God. C.S. Lewis puts it best when he says,

We must lose our childhood will and learn instead "the necessity to die daily": however often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive. That this process cannot be without pain is sufficiently witnessed by the very history of the word mortification. Paradoxically, mortification, though itself is a pain, is made easier by the presence of pain in its context. (92)

When we put our pain in the context of suffering with Jesus, mortification becomes a spiritual pleasure. Thus, pain and suffering are the metaphorical weights that Christians lift as they strive for holiness, and to be "fully mature and lacking in nothing" (James 1: 4). Temporary discomfort is necessary for greater results. Christ is the spiritual trainer in the weight room that is life. Will we become like spiritual body-builders or remain sedentary?

The value of suffering is an irreplaceable theological tenet needed for the development of the Church. The early Christians were frequently persecuted, maimed, and martyred, yet their blood fertilized the seed of Christianity for it to grow and bear fruit. It also strengthened their resolve, solidified their belief, and increased their trust in God's plan. The early Church, specifically in Rome, would never have grown as quickly if it were not for the suffering it had to overcome and "offer up."

For most of the last 2000 years, Christians have kept the value of suffering as a

key part of their belief. This is starting to change, however, and it does not bode well for the future of the Church. For example, Douglas Hall cites evidence from Catholics in Quebec who showed a tragic loss, a “quiet revolution” in the late 1960s that included a removal of suffering objects and devotions, replacing them with a more secular worldview regarding suffering (44). This differs from the revolution that Jesus began when he accepted suffering and death in an extremely counter-cultural way. Hall gives the testimony of a man, a certain Beadet who witnessed the theological change and its effects on the Church and its members:

[W]hile his grandfather, a devout Catholic of the Old School, could accept and speak about the various experiences of suffering that came his way, his father, an enthusiastic advocate of the new secular approach, seems so locked into a gospel of success and, like the secular Protestant or Jewish Willy Lomans, has no point of reference on the basis of which to articulate his own pain. The symbolic images of success which in Quebec as elsewhere have replaced the wounded Jesus and the tormented saints - the smiling young people of TV commercials - do not permit the admitting of one's pain, failure, or anguish (44).

Since suffering is not only the human reality, but a central part of God's supreme plan, repressing it is extremely dangerous. When one does not see value in suffering and is unable to accept his or her own struggles, one also renders oneself unable to be compassionate toward others (Hall 45).

Yet, certain Christian theologians incorrectly interpret the nature of suffering and are unable to understand how it brings pure joy. One such theologian is Mary Ann McKibben Dana. She misinterprets Romans 5:3-4: “We boast in our sufferings, because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...,” by unjustly eliminating God from every step of this cycle, as Paul had intended in his letter (Dana, 33). She argues that seeing value in personal suffering and perseverance detracts from the suffering of God (Dana, 35). She also sees God as having no plan for human suffering. This contradicts the central principles of both biology and

theology. While she is right to cite the need for God to complete our brokenness, her inability to accept personal suffering leads to a worldview that represses suffering. One should note that her whole argument fails to include any other biblical comment on the nature of suffering. To deny the value of suffering is to deny the plan of God. One must not follow her urgings or those of likeminded theologians.

#### ***IV. Conclusion***

Biologically and theologically, one cannot deny the value of suffering. Yet, in this secular world, both disciplines need new witnesses who will daily accept the struggles that are a necessary part of God's plan. The evolution of species and the personal development of each individual depend on this struggle. To repress the value of suffering would bring unspeakable consequences to humanity as a whole, and to the spiritual health of the individual. Science cannot continue to eliminate suffering from its textbooks if it wishes to follow the Darwinian evolutionary cycle; theology cannot continue to eliminate suffering from Churches if it wishes to follow the plan of God in Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus suffered "once and for all" not so that he may eliminate human suffering, but so that he could be the model of suffering for all to follow in a painful world. John Corapi's friend is a witness to many - dare I say a martyr - of the joy of suffering. Yet, one must note how he did not exclaim, "you can't believe the joy!" in reference to his forthcoming death. Rather, he refers to his suffering at that very moment as being incredibly joy-filled. Suffering with Jesus brings eternal joy after death, but an experienced sufferer can find pure joy in the act of suffering itself while still on earth.

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