

Strategies for Coping with Suffering

📖 1 Corinthians 15:12; 30-32

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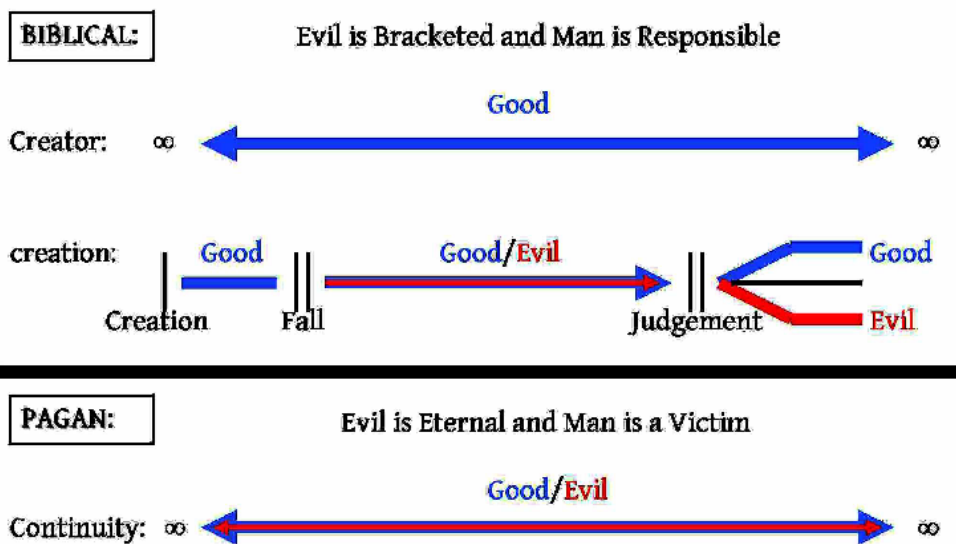
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We've been talking about the Fall and the effects of sin on man and nature. Today we come to the implications of this for suffering. You might think a diagram like this good/evil depiction is theoretical, heady stuff, but you'd be wrong, and today you'll see why because what we're going to do is look at the two ways you can cope with evil and suffering. Just as there are two views of origins, there are two views of coping with evil; the pagan strategies and the biblical strategies. All people develop coping strategies, they become almost automatic in your life, every time some difficulty comes in to your life; something breaks, something goes wrong at work, you get sick, someone dies, whatever, you automatically fall into a coping strategy that you have learned as babies and children and in many ways, adults are nothing more than big kids. You may be trying to cope with what I'm saying here right now. And the reason you fall into your particular coping strategies is because you are trying to protect yourself. So let's look at some of them.



We're going to start with the pagan coping strategies. They fall out of the image on the bottom of this diagram, the idea that evil is unbounded and eternal, therefore, I am just a victim, it's not my fault. The first strategy, a very

interesting one, was put forward in its purest form by the founder of the cult of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. This view is that suffering is just an illusion. She wrote: "Sickness, sin and death are...not real, but...illusion; the mirage of error,"¹ Her solution, and that of her followers, was that this stuff isn't real, it's just an illusion. She gives the example of a disappointed young widow who imagined herself as a young girl all her life. "In this mental state she remained young. Having no consciousness of time, she literally grew no older. Some American travelers saw her when she was seventy-four, and supposed her to be a young woman." So, this is an interesting strategy, just convince yourself that it's all in your mind. Does this work? Well, toward the end of Mary Baker Eddy's life she had a very persistent toothache and she received injections of morphine for the very real pain that was going on in her mouth. Obviously this strategy breaks down. No matter how hard you try to convince yourself otherwise, you have pain.

The second pagan coping strategy is that our evaluation of evil is incorrect and needs to come in line with nature. Sir Arthur Keith, British anthropologist said, "Christian ethics are out of harmony with human nature and are secretly antagonistic to Nature's scheme of evolution." In other words, our consciences have been programmed by Christian ethics to think something is evil but our conscience is wrong. And the proof of that, in his view, is that evolution is the model of the universe and if there's evil in the universe, that's normal, so just get used to it. There's nothing wrong with it, what's wrong is our conscience and we just need to adapt, evolve to come in line with nature. If you see a kid get run over, accept it, if you see a loved one dying of cancer that's normal, just accept it as normal and the sooner the better.

Most people can't do those two things, they can't believe evil and suffering are an illusion and they can't just adapt to it like it's the normal state of affairs, so most people adopt another strategy. The third strategy is known as the Absurd. That's a technical term in this view. It doesn't mean what we mean by it, that something is ridiculous. They mean that yes, the universe has evil and suffering in it, but there's nothing that you can do about it, it's eternal and they call this the Absurd.² And this is capitalized, this is the proper way of spelling it. So if evil is upsetting, and it's also eternal, then I just have to live with it. You have to live with this unresolved and unresolvable tension. You will never ever solve it, it can't be done. And the sooner you realize that and give up the better off you're going to be. This seems to have caught on in our society in a very profound way. I am sure there are people who walk in here Sunday after Sunday and basically have this outlook, they are hopeless. So they know there is suffering, but they see no light at the end of the tunnel.

If you're caught in this, practically speaking, what do you do? I have a quote from an atheist who tells us what to do. Here's a guy who wrote a book called *The Faith of a Heretic* and look what he says. Atheist Walter Kaufmann, "Man can stand superhuman suffering if only he does not lack the conviction that it serves some purpose." Is that true or false? That's true, that's a true observation. Dr. Kaufmann is right with that sentence. "Man can stand superhuman suffering if only he does not lack the conviction that it serves some purpose. Even less severe pain, on the other hand, may seem unbearable, or simply not worth enduring, if it is not redeemed by any meaning."

Is that true too? Yes, that's true. A person can go stark raving mad over something tiny if it really is absurd and has no meaning. And this is a guy who has read the Bible, rejected consciously Christianity, and here's his conclusion on how to cope with evil. "It does not follow that the meaning must be given from above;... We are free to give our own lives meaning and purpose, free to redeem our suffering by making something out of it... The plain fact is that not all suffering serves a purpose; ... and that if there is to be any meaning to it, it is we who must give it." This strategy is saying that even though there really is no meaning to it, I have to convince myself that there is a meaning, assign it, and go with that. If I'm dying of cancer in a hospital bed and this thing really doesn't have any purpose, just make something up. Is that a comfort? To sit there and lie to ourselves? Now that's the best the non-Christian can do. That's the very best explanation they have, because if God isn't there to give meaning to it, where's the meaning going to come from? Tell me that.

By reading this it ought to make you appreciate what we have in the Scripture. If you want to test if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, jump the fence and see... we just did, I'm taking you on the other side of the fence, that grass that you thought always looks so green over there is very brown. Even though you know the whole cosmos is purposeless, pretend you're a pagan and you know all along that you're pretending, because you know really there is no purpose. You're practicing self-deception. Now who are the hypocrites? If you're a non-Christian and you claim to have meaning, you're the hypocrite because you know fundamentally there is no meaning out there, and you're just making it up. Don't come to me and talk to me about hypocrisy in the Christian church, I'll show you hypocrisy, pagans are the biggest hypocrites of all.

Let's look at the fourth pagan coping strategy, this one is the most common and we find it over in 1 Cor 15. Paul knew all about this strategy, it's been around for a long time. Paul was a great intellect and here Paul shows us what strategy he would use if he didn't believe in the resurrection. We might call it anesthesia, some form of drowning out the problems. 1 Cor. 15:32. "If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me?" What's the point Paul asks? If the dead are not raised, EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY FOR TOMORROW WE DIE." If the resurrection didn't happen this whole thing is a big fake and you can just go get drunk, go eat yourself into oblivion, do drugs, get involved in sex. Is that a logical conclusion? Of course it is.

It deadens the pain, for awhile. If I've got pain, why not drink alcohol, why not drug addiction, musical ecstasy, listen to music so long and so loud that it controls you, people lose themselves in this, sexual ecstasy. Why are people doing this? Because they are hurting. It's to deaden the pain, erase momentarily the pain of existence, and that's why all the anti-drug therapy programs that don't recognize this problem fail. You can go in and try to solve these problems but if you don't deal with the ultimate cause of the pain you can never finally get a solution. You may seem to get better for a little while but before you know it the problem resurfaces. This is why you can change someone's environment and they'll get better for awhile but as soon as they go back to the original environment they fall right back into the addictions. Or people slide from one addiction to another, drinking to drugs. The problem was never solved to begin with because the problem was never dealt with

sufficiently. If you start with the wrong diagnosis then you end with the wrong solution. Unless you deal with the cause of the pain. And you can't blame the person for trying these things. They're hurting. And a pagan who is hurting will turn to one of these four coping strategies we've outlined. It always happens in every century, on every continent and you can see it all over the place.

Biblical Ways of Coping with Evil and Suffering

Let's turn to the biblical ways of coping with evil and suffering. The first things we want to do when we face a suffering situation is get back to the basics. The basics are what help us focus so we don't slip into a pagan coping strategy. Let's face it, when we face a suffering situation, if we don't worship God and obey Him in the midst of that situation, we're failing a test. He puts us in those situations to prove that we will pass the test. So when we don't we are disproving Him. So what are the basics we need to focus on. The first thing is the Creator-creature distinction and the doctrine of God. The Creator-creature distinction is saying that God is not a part of the created order, but He created it and is sovereign over it and has a plan for it. That's why so many Christians have dealt with suffering by falling back on the sovereignty of God. It's comforting to know when life seems like it is flying out of control that there's a higher level of control that He is exercising. That higher level we don't have access to but it is under His control, and He has planned this thing for our life and there is a purpose for it, even if we can't see the purpose, even if we never know the purpose. It's enough to know that there is one.

Back to the Basics 1: Creator-Creature Distinction

Think about Job's situation. We've already seen how God dealt with Job when he was suffering, and we noticed that God seemed almost cruel to Job, it was very harsh and that's what we're getting at. Job's argument is that he's suffering but he hasn't done anything to deserve it. And God storms on the scene and just asks him question after question. "Who made this, who made that, where were you when I did this, can you tell Me about this? And He went on and on and on, and you sit there and think "God, you're not really being nice to poor Job, where's Your compassion?" And that's a good question to ask. And I'm not sure I have the whole answer, but I suggest that one reason He does that is because when you are suffering you have to get shocked out of it to really start thinking. And one of the only ways to do that is to come face to face with who God is and who we are. He's the Creator, we're just the creature. And He's got to get that idea through or we're never going to be able to evaluate the situation correctly. So this shocking us is apparently a way of dealing with it. I'm not saying it's the only way, sometimes God is very gentle, but I'm saying that there are times in Scripture where He comes on pretty strong and you wonder, "Man, I thought God was a God of love? Well, yes, He is a God of love, that's precisely why He's getting our attention. He's trying to shock us back into reality so we can start interpreting the situation properly and coping biblically. We may not like it at the time, but what are your alternatives? Am I going to resort to the Absurd? Is that going to give me hope? Am I going to get drunk or high? Is that going to solve my problem? So, that's the first thing, get back to the basics of the Creator-creature distinction and who

God is, because if you lose sight of Him you've lost the whole thing and you're going to wind up running straight into a pagan coping strategy.

Back to the Basics 2: Evil is Bracketed

The second basic to get back to is the idea that evil is bracketed, it's not just running loose. God, if He's really sovereign must be controlling the shape of evil. That is, He must be giving boundaries of how far evil and suffering can go. And yes, some people experience more suffering than others and that's where we really struggle to understand. Why God does everything horrible happen to X, when they are such a good person and all of that. We don't know. We just know that God knows what is best for each one of us. But everyone faces some suffering. And on a serious note, at least the question should be posited, "Why so little God?" Given the Fall why is there so little suffering and evil? Given the serious nature of sin you've got to wonder at the tremendous restraint God must be putting on the effects of sin. Think of the places in Scripture when God releases His restraint. Think of the Global Flood. Think of the Global Tribulation. It's healthy, when we suffer, to think of the restraint God must be putting on our sin. We may not feel like thinking about that when we've got the pain but it could be a lot worse, think of Job. And it may make us angry at God if we're getting socked more than everybody else but at least then we're talking to Him. At least then we've advanced. The problems changed from "there's nothing that can be done about this" to "God, You can do something about this, You can work with this." Then we can begin to ask "Why me God, why are you sending me all this suffering?" Why this particular suffering at this particular point in my life?" But, just remember that to get to the "Why?" you first have to get back to the basics of the Creator-creature distinction and who God is and the Biblical idea that evil and suffering are bounded. God wants us to ask "Why" in that context and no other, He demands that and until we come to Him saying "God, you're sovereign, you know what you're doing, you've got a plan and I can't see it all but I know it's for the good and I'm thankful that you've restrained the effects of sin to this degree." Until you say that you can't get to the "Why?"

Back to the Basics 3: Patterns of Suffering

We come then to the third basic which is the "Patterns of Suffering" that you can observe from Scripture. I've given you a handout with 11 patterns that you can detect in Scripture, some are direct suffering, directly because of something you did, and others are indirect, not because of anything you did. Take this and look it over before next time. The reason you want to do that is because each one, while not giving a total answer for suffering, does show that there are reasons why God shapes evil the way He does in people's lives. So, by looking at these you may be able to see one or more of these apply to a given suffering situation and it can be helpful in reaching the goal of the Biblical strategy toward evil which is to have that inner peace that comes from looking at God and knowing, really knowing that He has a perfect plan for your life. But you can't get to that conclusion without soaking in the Scriptures. We really don't study and meditate on Scripture enough, and that's why we find ourselves falling into the pagan coping strategies.

What's very interesting is that the Biblical strategy is the opposite of one of the pagan strategy of anesthetizing yourself. The anesthesia strategy is to drown out the suffering by alcohol, drugs, sex, music, anything that will shut down the mind so I don't have to think about the pain. The biblical strategy is just the opposite. It says "think, put on your thinking cap and go back to the Scripture and realize that God has a plan, that God has a purpose." Isn't that what Jesus did in the temptations? He faced a suffering situation, pinned down personally by the master deceiver, and He didn't run, He didn't put it off, He didn't get drunk, He faced it head on by quoting Scripture in context. And there was the other time when He was on the cross, suffering a kind of separation from the Father that He had never in all eternity faced, and He was offered an anesthetic. But what did He do? He rejected it. He said "Not now." But after He finished the work on the cross He accepted it. Why did He do that? What was the meaning of that difference? Because while He was doing His cross work He wanted to talk with His Father, think through the implications of what was taking place, the plan of the Father for Him and look beyond the cross to the other side, the resurrection, the glory, the kingdom to come. And after He finished His work, then He would take it. I think that's the model of how to handle suffering. And I think you can sketch out some reasons we go through these same kinds of sufferings and so I've given you 11 patterns of why we suffer.

Direct Suffering Patterns

(CLEAR CONSEQUENCES OF CREATURES' CHOICES)

1. General existence of sickness & death (physical and spiritual): law of Gen 2:17 was disobeyed by Adam and Eve and consequences spread throughout world (Rom 5:12-14; 8:19-23); the "fall event" vindicates God's Word as reliable. Applies to all men.
2. General existence of "self-induced misery" (intensified physical, mental, and spiritual deterioration): law of Gal 6:7 works out through the first divine institution of responsible labor; continued rebellious living yields corrupt fruit of foolishness showing again that God's Word stands (Rom 1:24-32; Eph 4:17-19). Applies to all men.
3. General judgment pattern on families and nations: law of Gal 6:7 works out through the third and fourth divine institutions; preserves opportunities for repentance among those inside these families and nations (Exod 20:5-6; Num 14:18; Acts 17:26-27). Applies to all men.
4. Eternal judgment in Lake of Fire: justice of God originally directed against the fall of angels but which a man comes to share through Adam's fall, if he never responds to God's grace in this mortal life (Matt 25:41, 46; Rev 20:10-15); provides for a permanent exclusion of evil from the new universe to come (Rev 21:1, 4). Applies to unbelievers only.
5. Judgment in Time of Believers: God the Father disciplines every believer as a spiritual parent when he rebels against His authority; warning to confess sin and be restored to fellowship (1 Cor 11:29-31; Heb 12:5-13; Rev 3:19-20); can include physical death; can work simultaneously with authorized church discipline (Matt 18:17-18; 1 Cor 5:1-5). Applies to believers only.

6. Judgment Seat of Christ for Rewards: Jesus Christ evaluates fruit of believers whether produced in obedience to His Spirit or produced in the energy of the flesh (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10-11; 2 Tim 2:11-13). Applies to believers only.

Indirect Suffering Patterns

(GOD PERSONALLY INTERVENES BUT NOT AS A DIRECT CONSEQUENCE OF SOME PARTICULAR CHOICE BY THE INDIVIDUAL)

7. Evangelistic "Wake-up Call": specially designed suffering can shock arrogant unbelieving self-confidence in pagan idolatries and self-righteousness (1 Sam 5; 1 Kings 18:21-40; Jonah 3; Acts 9:1-9); provides an extra opportunity for repentance unto salvation independent of choices of unbeliever. Applies to unbelievers only.
8. A "Nudge" to Spiritually Advance: specially designed suffering to immunize against arrogant autonomy and protect a sense of dependency upon God's grace (Deut 8:2-6; Ps 119:71, 75; 2 Cor 12:1-10; 1 Pet 1:5-9; 5:5-10); provokes growth and preparation for coming service to others (2 Cor 1:4-7). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 2:10; 5:8).
9. Evangelization of Unbelievers: specially designed suffering to convince unbelievers of the truth of the gospel (1 Tim 1:16; 1 Pet 2:12-3:17). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:13-18).
10. Edification of Believers: specially designed suffering to convince other believers of the adequacy of the gospel (2 Cor 1:5-15; 4:7-18; Heb 12:1). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5-9; 1 Pet 2:21-23).
11. Resolution of Unseen Angelic Conflict: specially designed suffering that has unknown (to us) ramifications in the angelic conflict between God and Satan (Job 1-2; Lk 22:31-32; 1 Cor 6:2-3; 11:10; Eph 3:10). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 4:1-11; 26:53-54).

¹ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, 243-244.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absurdism>