For the Sake of
Suffering

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Introduction

Man suffers. We are born in pain, we live in pain, and we die in pain. It is a basic fact of life that ranges from the infant to the elderly, the destitute to the wealthy, it stretches from north to south, and from east to west. We hurt physically, mentally, and spiritually. With weights on our shoulders and baggage in our arms, we pass through life in misery. As real as this picture is of our lives and our pains, none the less we do not live in a bleak world. We still wake up in the mornings, we still endure pain, we still laugh, we still love, and we still see beauty in this world. In the face of all this suffering that surrounds us, man still attributes the creation of the world and of himself to a loving God (Lewis 3). How can these two seemingly opposite experiences be dealt with and reconciled?

All parents, all workers, and all peoples deal with suffering in varied ways; some choose to avoid it at all costs. To these people the cause of suffering is of no concern because of their view of the purpose and end of man. They believe that man’s purpose is to seek pleasure, acquire wealth, and fulfill other base desires. Man has no transcendent aspect as he is solely a physical being. Suffering is seen as just a result of the fact that we are physical beings. In other words, there is no problem associated with suffering because there is no disparity between what they hold as the ultimate reality and the reality they experience. The true and final reality is this physical world and suffering deals with this physical world. Suffering is not opposed to any worldview that their minds hold and is instead just an obstacle to get around; suffering is to be avoided, it is senseless, and without meaning. Life is meant to be as pleasurable as possible, suffering does happen, but it can be circumvented. The only problem with suffering is that you have to
experience it, but this experience does not raise any real questions. The solution to suffering is avoidance and therefore it raises no issues at all. This is why dealing with suffering with alcohol or drugs seems perfectly plausible. All worries and all bruises can be taken away with a single pill. Why not take the pill, why not avoid all suffering?

For those, however, who do not hold such views; this is not where the discussion ends. Avoiding suffering is not the solution to the deeper problem that suffering, pain and evil raise in their minds. A certain incongruity between their vision of reality and their experience of reality exists. Suffering poses a problem for these people because their view of reality includes an all-good and all-powerful God who loves all human beings and created all things good. With a God like this, how can suffering exist in the world? How can He permit His beloved to experience sorrow and pain?

This rift is greatest in the Christian context. Christianity puts forth a system, a worldview, which grasps at the most ultimate of realities (Lewis 14). Reality itself at its summit is perfect love, perfect wisdom, and perfect goodness. In an eschatological event, the ultimate Goodness sent His Son to Earth to redeem and save humanity. The end and purpose of man changed. Man now has the ultimate end of eternal rest with God. We were designed to accept our salvation and embrace our redemption. What makes this so pivotal a mindset is that the Christian takes this seriously. The story of God and of Jesus is not a story at all but a reality; it is the highest of truths. Thus a seeming contradiction exists between a God of love and a God who, although all-powerful, does nothing to eliminate the fact of evil and suffering in the world.

If suffering were a minute fact of life that only some people experienced, it would not be such a problem. The truth about suffering, however, is that it not only spreads
across life, but it is intimately experienced, and is not something that man can just ignore. This together with central tenants of our faith and the very nature of God is why suffering presents itself as such a bold issue and needs to be dealt with.

It is through our faith that we gain an understanding of suffering. When we examine the issue more carefully, suffering does not present itself as something contrary to Christianity. It is not as though a Christian has to choose between believing in Christ or believing in the existence of suffering. Instead, suffering has to been incorporated into Christianity throughout its history (Lewis 14). The reality that Christianity presents must be something that is encompassing of the entirety of humanity’s real experience. Therefore, the system Christianity puts forth must make sense of the fact of suffering, just like any mathematical or physical system must make sense out of every situation it applies to (Lewis 15). Unlike the laws of physics, mathematics, and chemistry, Christianity must deal with all things because its discipline stretches across the entirety of human experience. Similarly, just as a planet’s orbit must be explained by gravitational theory, so too must suffering be explained by Christianity. People suffer and Christianity should give meaning to that experience. In the end, the problems surrounding suffering are enlightened by the Christian context so that they are not ignored, but rather the mystery and experience surrounding them is illuminated so as to focus on suffering with a luminous clarity. A Christian does not need to deny the existence of suffering because of his faith, however, the realities that are put before a Christian in his experience of suffering must be fleshed out because if they are not, then the sufferings endured by him may sway him away from hope and faith. What is at stake here is whether the Christian
can overcome suffering or be overcome by it. The mystery of the origin, cause and reason for suffering must therefore be grasped.

These mysteries spring into human history because most spiritual or religious cultures believe in some sort of god or gods that can control waves, fire, disease, rain, and even death (Hart 2). That is why when tragedy does strike; the question of origin is always present. Where did this evil and pain come from? The next logical question is who wills this disaster? What is the cause of this pain? Then in grief and sorrow man demands meaning and sense from this experience. In these moments a speck of courage and faith may serve more than all the logical discourse may provide (Lewis xii). It may be the case that it is better to say nothing in comfort to the suffering, but man’s search for reason propels us to this point of discussion (Hart 6). It can be sure that whatever meaning suffering has will intimately be read back into our humanity, our reality, and our God and this is of the utmost importance.
The topic of suffering is clouded and blurry because of the wide range of experiences associated with it. We use the word “suffering” to describe a multitude of experiences. This man is suffering from arthritis, this woman is suffering because her son died, and this teenager is suffering from depression. With so many uses it is hard to come to the reality that suffering presents. For example, a broken leg is very painful. It is a wound to the body that is recognized and that leg has a severe decrease in functioning. A person with a broken leg suffers from pain. However, that person also suffers because he can no longer play football on that broken leg. He must stay inside all summer for the pain to stop and for the functioning of that leg to return. There is a suffering associated with the loss of function in that leg, and a suffering associated with the fact that he can’t play football on that leg. He let the team and himself down because of that broken leg. When he begins to use that leg again it will hurt and he may begin to question his ability to return to his previous strength. His spirit to reclaim that leg may be broken because of the suffering he experiences. As you can see, a broken leg causes more suffering than just the pain associated with the initial wound. There is suffering throughout the entire experience and throughout the entire person. In order to discuss suffering intelligently, we must explore the different relationships between the suffering of the body and the suffering of the soul. When speaking of suffering, a connection is made between evil, pain, and sorrow. Although these terms have all been used to describe suffering, and thus are somehow related, nonetheless they do not seem interchangeable. Similar as they are, the common usages of them vary. It would be uncommon, if not unheard of, to hear about the evil of a paper cut. However, their
differences are not readily apparent and therefore they must be investigated. In this section we will focus on the different categories of suffering in an attempt to bring a clearer picture to what exactly is meant by suffering. In order to do this, I will make the distinction between physical pain and spiritual sorrow. However, in order to discuss pain and sorrow we must first begin with evil. A discussion of evil and its nature will lay down a framework on top of which we will build our understanding of the suffering seen in pain and sorrow.

We will begin with a discussion of evil because an understanding of evil is necessary in order for us to speak about the diversity found in suffering. Evil stands by itself and it can be discussed apart from the world of suffering; however, the opposite is not true because suffering cannot be comprehended without knowledge of evil. Evil’s proximity to suffering begs an understanding of it. First we must begin with an understanding that evil is not matter but rather is a “certain lack, limitation or distortion of good” (John Paul II 7). Evil is a nonbeing at its very core because it is identified with the very absence of a good itself. Take the familiar example of a toothache. Just as it may be caused by the absence of part of the crown of the tooth, so too is evil caused by the absence of something that should be there. Therefore, when a person experiences evil, he experiences a limitation of the good, he is severed from that which should be there but is not. There is a sense of a gap here between he who experiences evil and the good that should be there but is not. This distortion or twisting causes everything to operate in a limited manner. For example, it is hard to use a knotted up rope, and an engine without gasoline does not work. In creation, all was created as good, but the created can be distorted, leaving it to be a shadow of its former goodness.
An understanding of the nature of evil is necessary, but it only draws out more questions. Evil as a nonbeing is hard to comprehend, but an understanding of evil’s origin is much harder. How does nonbeing occur? The main problem is how do we explain evil’s presence in the world? How can the good be distorted and limited? Evil’s presence in the world around us has compelled many to blame evil on the world itself (John Paul II 7). In this view, evil can only be overcome when we are released from this physical world. For matter and the physical world, it is argued, were created by an evil god. This belief does give an explanation for evil, but it is not the Christian explanation. For a Christian, the world, creation, matter, are all good. They were all created good by goodness and love. If matter cannot be blamed, then what or who can? Where does the presence of evil come from?

In order to explain the origin of evil we must look at our experience and interaction with it because evil by its nature is a nonbeing. In other words, our understanding of an absent good begins with our interaction with that absence. It is easier to discuss evil when we discuss our experience with it. People interact with evil in two separate ways. First, an evil “happens to a human being” (Reimers 448). A person experiences an impediment in their progress, or something occurs that distorts the order that was thought to exist. A good friend spreads malicious rumors about you. The goodness that you thought existed in that relationship was disordered. The response is simple, this should not happen. Second, an evil “is also something that the person does” (Reimers 448). Evil acts can be willed by an individual. They are choices affected by the will, the most interior part of a person. These acts are marked by evil as they are the direct cause of disorder and disunity. Instead of acting in a perfectly good way that
promotes or even preserves unity and order that God intended for us, a person may choose to introduce his own order apart from or even contrary to God’s order, thus twisting an act into evil. This choice is at the heart of the suffering discussion because the origin of evil can be found in those distorted choices.

With the understanding of what is meant by evil, a broader connection between evil and suffering can be drawn. Man suffers when “he experiences any kind of evil” (John Paul II 7). When man separates himself from the good, from the way things were meant to be, from the way things were created in goodness, he deprives himself of the very goodness that was intended for him, and thus causes disorder in the world. Depriving a being of what belongs to it will consequently result in suffering. This description of the relationship between evil and suffering always centers itself on the interaction between the two. When we are deprived of a good we suffer. We can see this clearly in our own lives because we do suffer when we lack the good of food, health, or friendship, however, the lack of food is much different from the lack of friendship. How do we account for this? Now with an understanding of evil, we need to move into the different manifestations and experiences of evil.

When we lack food, we experience pain. “Pain” is another charged word that gets used in the suffering discussion. Most of the time we use “pain” to describe physical ailments. The human body has pain receptors that register experiences that cut, scrape, and hit the body. There are dull pains and sharp pains, daily pains and momentary pains. Physical pain has an effect on the mind and on our experience with the world. One forgets about the most delicious steak in their mouth when they bite their tongue. It becomes almost impossible to read a book with a migraine. Some pain is bearable. The
pain of running the last lap of a race can be enjoyed; the pain of a last push up does not
take away from the satisfaction of completing it. Our understanding of pain seems to be
as foggy as our understanding of suffering itself. In order to bring clarity, we must first
begin with a description of what is meant by pain.

Pain involves a “wound to the body and is completed in our apprehension of it
Loughlin 763).” We recognize that the wholeness and operation of the body has been
hurt by a wound that hinders the normal functioning of the body. Pain does not involve
the higher aspects of our humanity hence, the terminology of “feeling pain” is quite
appropriate. This feeling occurs when we are injured and we recognize this injury as
something in opposition to our physical integrity. Like a stone in our shoe or a sliver in
our foot, we are aware of it, but will and reason play no role in this experience other than
effecting recognition. The higher aspects of our humanity are not necessary for our
experience of pain. Pain, by its very nature, does not involve our higher faculties.

Our comprehension of the nature of pain remains unfinished until we expand our
discussion to include the connection between evil and pain. We have already seen a
relationship between evil and suffering. Our suffering results from evil. Now our
discussion moves to clarify a type of suffering called pain and its connection with evil.
Pain is an experience of an evil. When someone is punched, it is definitely an experience
of an evil act. This begs the question of evil’s association with pain. If an evil limits a
good, an evil can limit the good of the body as it was created. The body now has an
absence of something that ought to be there and pain is felt. Now is all pain evil? Is pain
an evil in itself? Pain as a result of a wound is natural. In fact, the inability to feel pain is
a sickness. However, if we look at the proper functioning of man in his created
goodness, pain is evil. Pain is a result of a malfunction with the proper order of the body. The goodness of the body is interrupted when we are wounded. Without evil, pain does not exist because there is no distortion of the integrity of our bodies. In the absence of evil, the body functions as it was designed to function, with perfection and goodness.

For the most part, our discussion of pain has centered on its association with the functioning of the body. When we speak of pain, we are mainly concerned with the external experience of it, this is the pain associated with the body, but when pain begins to move into the interior of a person, it changes characteristics. Cognition increases and reason begins to be involved. This interior pain is experienced through our reason so that we begin to worry about its future effect on our lives (Loughlin 764). This is the common experience of pain moving into sorrow. This is the difference between an asthmatic hurting because he can’t breathe, and that same person sorrowing over the fact that he will never be a great runner. Sorrow is a human experience because it involves a “cognition that is then evaluated by us” (Loughlin 763). In order for sorrow to occur we must recognize that something is wrong. We are presently in a situation that is contrary to our welfare with an evil we hate and it cannot be warded off but instead has come to rest on us. A cancer patient may feel physical pain as organ systems shut down, but they sorrow over the fact that they are dying. There is an evil present that they cannot fight off.

Sorrow does not always involve a physical pain and pain does not always lead to sorrow. The pain involved with the runner winning the last lap does not move into sorrow because victory has been obtained and evil has been fought off. Many individuals have gladly accepted pain over denying things like philosophy, country, and God.
(Loughlin 765). For these people, sorrow results from choosing bodily care over spiritual fortitude. They too have victory over evil because they do not let evil seep into their will so as to degrade it into denying the truths they hold dear to them. Peter must have experienced great sorrow when he denied Jesus during the Passion. Peter experienced no physical pain, but a weakness of will came to rest on him, and he was unable to claim victory over it. Peter experienced a great depth of sorrow.

Since sorrow deals personally with our humanity, it is more unbearable and excruciating than any physical pain. Sorrow interrupts our humanity. It hinders our ability to reason properly but it also affects our lower capacities. We can no longer hope to search out the highest truths because of the weight that sorrow brings to us; it drains our ability to learn and seek. Just as weight keeps a high jumper from performing his very best, so too does sorrow keep us from performing to the best of our humanity.

“Sorrow is the most damaging of all the emotions” (Loughlin 770). Man seeks the good by his very nature, but this journey is hindered by sorrow because it hinders the pursuit of good and its acquisition (Loughlin 769). That is why it is so dangerous. The evil involved with sorrow is a powerful force because of its close proximity to us and eventually, we may give into it letting it mold us and become part of us. The suffering seemingly ends, but now the person has been formed to that evil. In the face of great pain and sorrow the person gives into it and accepts it.

A battle occurs between the person and evil when we speak about sorrow. The person continues to lose against this evil, but the fight goes on, giving us a sense of hope. Sorrow is a good thing in that it helps us to recognize evil as something to fight against and not to accept (Loughlin 777). This perception of evil comes from the development of
the individual. Formation of an individual’s character is of the utmost importance because it is only through this development that a person can recognize and reject an evil. Sorrow rejects that evil that has perched itself on our shoulders and it attempts to silence what evil whispers into our ears. The education of an individual must effect the detection and rejection of evil. If an evil is not recognized, it can easily become part of a person’s character, leading him astray on his journey towards the good. This is why it is important to choose virtuous mentors for the formation of your character.

Along with sorrow being connected to education, sorrow also reflects those things that we love and desire (Loughlin 771). If our love is directed towards those things that are true, good, and just, then those evils that are in opposition to the things we love are recognizable to us and in opposition to those things we most desire. We only want those movements that bring us closer to the things we love. Where our heart lies and how we are oriented to the good play a crucial role in defining those evils that bring us sorrow. If our heart rests in the baser things of our existence, then we will be unable to recognize the evils that seep into our highest of functions. The more we love something, the more we desire it and the more we are willing to fight for it. We are given two choices with sorrow. We can rest in those evils or we can fight them. If we love the good but choose to rest in the evil we experience despair. However if we choose to fight, sorrow pushes us to action for those things we love. The more we love goodness, the more we can recognize attacks against it, and the more we are willing to fight for it.

In the discussion that follows, I will use suffering to mean that sorrow that comes only with our humanity. Suffering in this sense is more than just physical pain; it is mental and spiritual anguish. It involves an experience of evil that seems to linger in our
lives, in our minds, and in our hearts. This is the type of suffering that needs to be addressed because it is a specifically human affliction that draws out the larger questions that need the most clarity.
The Existence of Suffering

Why does suffering exist? Where does all of this evil come from that terrorizes our lives? The answers we give to these questions should not be taken lightheartedly. It should be known that the connections we draw between God and suffering tell us a good deal about the image we have of Him (Hart 23). To that effect, the connections we draw between suffering and ourselves also reveal truths about our existence. With utmost care, we move into the root of suffering.

Watching the news or reading the paper, it is clear that there is disorder around us. Things aren’t what they should be. This experience of recognizing evil in the world leads us to believe that creation itself is disordered. This is beautifully articulated by C.S. Lewis when he says that, “the whole world was infected by the uncreating rebellion of Adam” (Lewis 137). Whether or not we believe in the accuracy of the Fall of Man story in the Bible, most of us would agree that, throughout all of recorded history, man has affected evil by his actions. Flowing from reason and will, evil has been intended time and again in untold actions. In effect, by choosing evil, man has performed an act of “uncreation.” Since evil distorts the perfect good of creation, performing evil acts “uncreates” that which is good. This terminology gives a new meaning and a new insight into what evil does. Choices are binding and cannot be taken back once they are performed. No amount of apology will ever let a wife forget a husband’s infidelity. That action cannot be erased in the fabric of reality. Choices do not go away, but build the world around us, creating the reality that we take part in. For a minute, imagine that your father forgot to comb his hair on the day he met your mother, then your mother might not have given him a second look. As a consequence you, your kids, and your grandchildren
were never born. This may seem an outrageous example, but it does shed some light on the fact that our choices are an essential constituent of the fabric of our reality. A single evil act can have incalculable results just like that one simple act of your father not combing his hair had unforeseen and limitless results. In a like fashion, the Catholic tradition teaches us that the evil choice of Adam ended up distorting all of reality itself. That evil of “uncreating” that was introduced by the Fall of Man unwound the order and placed it at the abyss of nothingness from which all is derived. There is chaos and disorder now because the goodness of creation has been violated by man’s free choice. That is why the idea of “uncreating” the good of creation can be used when speaking of suffering and evil. Suffering is directly linked to that chaos that is now present from the binding choices of man. Since the fall, many more evil actions have been unwinding reality. If experience leads one to see a chasm between us and the good, it is because we have uncreated the good by our evil actions that distort, limit, and fray creation.

This explanation does not give us much comfort. Even though creation may be disordered and skewed, why doesn’t God just fix it? How can He allow this evil to go on affecting the innocent and the good? How can any sense come from all the senseless tragedies that surround us? From drive by shootings to earthquakes, the answer given above does not bring any peace of mind with it. How can God allow this to go on?

The answer to this question was articulated wonderfully by C.S Lewis in his book, “The Problem of Pain.” His description of Divine Omnipotence laid the framework that I will build upon in order to answer the question of God’s involvement in the existence of evil.
First, it is important to understand the law of contradiction that states that one cannot affirm and deny the same thing in the same way at the same time. In other words, something cannot be contrary things. Common examples include a sharp, flat surface, a square circle and things like that. At a fork in the road, I cannot travel down both paths by myself at the same time. Between these two things there is exclusiveness. Reality cannot be bent so that I can travel both the right and left path. These nonentities make no sense; they are self contradictions and real impossibilities. Usually, the word impossible is used to describe something that is relative (Lewis 17). It is impossible for something to happen unless something about that situation changes. It is impossible for me to hear you four miles away unless you call me on the phone. I cannot see the top of your head unless I stand on a stool. These only seem impossible. There are ways to get around these impossibilities. However, real impossibilities cannot be solved by changing the situation. Something about the nature of the things described has to change in order for these impossibilities to occur, either a square’s nature of being a square changes to conform to being a circle, or the circle’s nature changes to be a square. It is impossible for a square to also be a circle because of the very nature of a square. That is why true impossibilities cannot happen because they are meaningless. Stringing words together does not give something meaning. On top of that, stringing words together to make nonentities of contradiction and then saying that God can do this is preposterous (Lewis 18). God can do all things, but he cannot do non-things; he cannot contradict Himself. Along with this God cannot, “give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it” (Lewis 18). This is similar to the circular square. We cannot have the gift of free will and be controlled by God because free will excludes this control. Controlled
freedom is a true impossibility. The reality of the situation is that either we are free beings or we are not. We cannot be free and not free at the same time in the same way.

Being an individual, man needs a certain medium in which to interact with other men. Try imagining a way in which two separate beings can interact with one another. Unless there is a neutral environment that both can interact with in order to recognize the other’s existence such interaction will not occur (Lewis 21). This neutral environment is the role that matter plays for us here on Earth. We manipulate and act through matter in order to interact with others. This matter obeys, in a sense, certain rules. The water that quenches a thirsty man’s throat is the same water that soaks my shirt when it rains. Matter has certain properties and no matter how hard I try, I cannot make that matter match everyone of my desires without changing those properties. Matter cannot obey my wishes any differently than it obeys another’s wishes. For example, if someone is rowing downstream in the opposite direction that I am moving, I must be moving upstream. The stream cannot magically change directions in order for it to be beneficial for both of us. This does not mean that the world is flawed in this description. These properties leave a great amount of room for acts of love and unselfishness (Lewis 24). The other rower can jump in my boat and help me paddle upstream. However, this nature of matter can also leave a lot of room for evil acts to be transmitted through it. A fist that can kindly knock on my door is also capable of knocking on my face. So when asking the question, why God allows these evils to exist, it is because he cannot give us free will and then take it away from us when it goes against the good. It is also because we live in a world of matter that we have to manipulate in order to interact. For God to turn that person’s fist into a pillow before it hit my head would violate our freedom to work with matter.
Furthermore, nature cannot be manipulated by our desires to act in a certain way one moment, and then change characteristics completely the next. In a “world where souls can meet” (Lewis 86), pain and suffering can and do occur.

We have seen that in a world of neutral matter, man can freely choose to interact with another in an evil manner. This evil is obviously experienced by an individual, and that individual reacts to it. Suffering “demands a response” (Reimers 447) and it is only natural for man to have a reaction to it. We have talked before that suffering occurs when an evil is detected and rejected. That rejection of evil is a response to it. The ability of suffering to change a person has long been known. Look at how the athlete or the academic suffers for their desires. They both push their limits and suffer greatly in doing so, but they end up in a stronger position than when they started. They do this out of love for the wisdom or the strength. From the very depths of suffering, one can find strength that was previously unrealized. At the end of a marathon, the runner has the ability to go an extra mile. The changing aspect of suffering can be seen simply in the child that experiences pain when he sets his hand on the stove and he quickly learns not to do that again. There is a response and a change that occurs because of that pain. Just as human suffering is substantially more complex than simple pain, so too is the response generated by suffering. It is not so much that suffering changes us directly, rather, suffering is something we take notice of and hopefully it makes us reevaluate our situation.

The problem of suffering arises from the truth that God is love. If God loves us so much, how can he allow evil to exist? This question was dealt with earlier in speaking about the power of God. We have to revisit this question again here when we speak of the goodness and love of God. We might imagine that a perfect God would be one that
would make life just pleasurable without any suffering. Couldn’t man just remain content and happy in a world without suffering? Isn’t this a wonderful picture of God? The truth of the matter is, that suffering does exist and God does allow it. Does this mean that God is not perfect love? I propose, along with Lewis, that instead it is our perception of perfect love that is askew (Lewis 30). There must be a deeper reality here to love that needs to be uncovered.

A distinction between love and mere kindness needs to be uncovered (Lewis 32). Kindness does not care about the state of its object as long as it is happy and content. For example, if I am kind to my neighbor I care about him only so far that he is not suffering. It is out of kindness that I bake sugar cookies for the sweet tooth diabetic. In short, kindness does not punish, it does not harm, it does not teach. It has a disconnection with its object because it gives no care for the goodness of another. Kindness smiles at the ignorant because it cares nothing about them. People can keep their deformed and maimed souls because an action to help them may hurt their feelings or self worth.

Love is so much more than mere kindness could ever be. Love does not allow false happiness and pitiful states to endure in the beloved (Lewis 33). The father is willing to watch his son suffer so that he becomes a man. With children, this is easily viewed when a young son has to be punished after committing a wrong. Once again, suffering demands a response. It can change us. Since we are divine creations from God, He will not rest until we are as He created us (Lewis 34). God will not allow us rest until we fit the mold of humanity that He has placed before us. That is the mold we were made to fit and that is the only mold that will bring us happiness. It is love itself that “demands perfecting of the beloved” (Lewis 38). If we can find true happiness in the evil
acts we perform, then God has settled for something less than He has intended and we have settled for something else than what we are. When we do evil acts and still want to be completely happy, we are seeking to diminish our nature (Lewis 35). To make this clear, it is not God that wishes suffering. It is God who created us for the intention of loving Him. Our suffering is a testament to the fact that we cannot find happiness in things that don’t fulfill our intended nature. Out of love, God permits us to suffer when we chose to search for Him in those things of this world.

Since evil distorts and “uncreates”, we should never be able to find total happiness within that reality. Without suffering, we would settle for something less than ourselves. God allows suffering to occur for our sake because he loves us.
Divine Providence

The suffering discussion raises more questions the deeper one delves into it. The intelligibility of suffering can only be as comprehensible to us as the nature of our finite minds allow. However, this is not to say that we should not look into the deeper truths of suffering. On the contrary, we should ask questions and push as far as we are able in the face of this phenomenon. For there will be a time when my neighbor, my friend, my brother, or even I will beg for some deeper order or meaning behind those sufferings experienced. This is readily displayed by the fact that whenever tragedy strikes, God is typically put on the stand. In the last chapter, we ended by saying that God allows suffering because he loves us. However, in light of the subjective experience of suffering itself, such discussion seems only preliminary. The questions posed in the heat of suffering are difficult especially when, “an individual puts them to another individual, when people put them to other people, as also when man puts them to God” (John Paul II 9). These are the questions that deal directly with God’s participation in suffering. What part does God play in suffering? Does He direct it in some fashion, does He cause it? To these questions, many different versions of the true God have been depicted (Hart 23). An understanding of God, his nature, and his interactions with us is put forth in these discussions. The answers we give with respect to God’s involvement in suffering reflect back on our image of God. Does God cause our pain in a wrathful way? Does He allow suffering because He loves us? Many of the common answers show shadows of God. This is why we must approach these questions with great reverence because what is at stake here is our understanding of the one, true God that is love, goodness, and power. Remember that this is the same God that many have spent their entire lives worshipping,
and some have given their lives for. Out of respect, then, we seek an understanding of God’s relationship with our suffering.

It may be easier to understand how suffering inflicted on another directly by a person may be explained, but the randomness of natural disasters and disease seems to import into this discussion another facet. Many answers have been given in order to reconcile God with moments of natural tragedy. Many believe that it is the will of God that these things happen. These people, they say, were killed in a tornado because they were pagans, or this disease was made by God in order to kill the promiscuous. It has also been claimed by some that these tragedies are somehow divine lessons by which God teaches us or that these instances serve some greater purpose (Hart 26). They argue that God is trying to reveal to us some divine truths about Himself through, say, the death of a child (Hart 28). Another popular explanation is that man needs to balance out the accounts of evil and the only way that this can happen is through pain. Man has committed countless acts, these people say, and these can be expunged from creation only through the pain of man. Our pain is repayment for a debt that our disordered actions have created. Looking at these explanations carefully, all of these have something in common, namely, they each attempt to draw meaning into suffering, to make something that appears senseless sensible. However, I argue that by making suffering comprehensible, they end up distorting the image of God. By cleaning up suffering, they turn the already cloudy waters of our comprehension of God into darkness.

In my attempt to tie these versions of suffering together, I argue that they all look for some divine plan behind suffering. Their distorted view of God is apparent only
when their claims about suffering are drawn out. They claim that by the will of God, calamities occur. The picture these explanations give of Divine Providence helps to bring meaning for them into the suffering experienced by the world. At the heart of this scheme, is the hope that all things happen for a purpose and that all pains that are experienced were given by God out of His will. Consequently, they believe, everything that happens is exactly how it should happen. If what they say is true, it says nothing for us. Man is diminished because he acts only through Divine Will. Man is not free to act on his own, but instead is directly controlled. This means our thoughts are not ours, and our actions are not ours. In other words, by their claims, suffering is given meaning by tracing it back to the Divine Will but this leaves humanity meaningless (Hart 30). We are meaningless because we have no choice in how we act. They say that this divine plan works throughout all of nature. The very things that seem disordered and chaotic are actually carrying out God’s plan (Hart 29). In one sense, this is great news because we become perfect movements of God’s will, however; this is bad news because we are nothing. We do not have a will of our own and our actions and sufferings are directed by God. Man is just playing out God’s chessboard, or we are just God’s actors. We have no movements of our own. Meaningless ourselves, we finally find meaning in suffering. Placing God’s hand directly behind the chaos in this world does not provide a sufficient argument for suffering. With great joy in this, given the implications of such a statement, we move on.

We move to a question that is generated by a Christian and his own interpretation of God’s role in suffering. Once again, this view depicts the understanding that the individual has of God and that is why it must be addressed. Recall that the interaction we
draw between God and suffering, in our mind, determines the image we have of God. The answers we draw upon greatly influence our notion of what God is like. Coming from a background of faith, a Christian may draw a connection between suffering and God’s will. This connection eventually leads him to deny God. Drawing this out, he may believe that God is to blame for suffering. In effect, he believes that God is the cause and the force behind our suffering. Placing God’s as the cause of suffering, he admits a belief that in the end all things will be saved, made whole, satisfied, forgiven, and happy (Hart 38). God controls suffering in order to accomplish His end. However, he detests that God must use the means of suffering in order to bring about that final end. He rejects God’s paradise because he cannot forgive the conditions that bring it about (Hart 39). He struggles with the necessity of suffering in God’s divine plan for salvation. If suffering flows forth from God’s will, even for the ultimate purpose of salvation, those terms are too much to accept. All the happiness gained through our redemption cannot be justified by the means of a child’s cries. The prerequisites necessary for salvation, in his mind, are too much to ask for. Consequently, he rejects God and God’s plan for us.

It has been the case, that many disbelievers want Christians to draw a line between God’s will and the harsh realities of human life. What is even more interesting is that in order to support their faith, many Christians do it (Hart 61). In essence, they want Christians to account for the suffering in world and give a reason why God wills it. This is a wrong approach for believers and this is one of the problems that many Christians deal with. Suffering and evil have no worth. In order to argue this, look at the definition we placed forth. They are, “intrinsically devoid of substance or purpose” (Hart 61). On their own, suffering and evil do not carry any real meaning for us. Evil and
suffering deal with nothingness, nonexistence, deprivation, “uncreation”, and distortion. They hinder and take away from what is good. “We could say that man suffers because of a good in which he does not share” (John Paul II 7). Ultimately, the unrest stems from the idea that God needs suffering (Hart 68). All of these questions focus around that discussion. If God needs suffering, He must will it on us. This accounts for the tidal waves, the diseases, and the deaths of so many men. God must will suffering in order for the final end of man to be realized. In order for us to come back to God, in order for us to be saved, suffering must occur. This is at the heart of many questions concerning suffering. Holding a belief like this has many monumental implications. Any statement of need implies an incompleteness. In order to need, one has to be less than whole. When we say that God must need suffering, we are implying that God needs something for His existence, or His happiness, or something else which is not complete in Him. Obviously, since God is perfect unity, He is complete. This is not, however; enough to silence the Christian’s question. The response can be made that God may not need in our sense of the term, but maybe He needs to work by willing suffering in order for us to be saved. It is not as though God needs suffering. Rather, suffering is necessary for our salvation and therefore, God must will it. This is illogical because of the very nature of God. To say this is to say that God needs distortion and nothingness. God serves to save us through willing nonexistence? This is absurd to think.

The essence of this question is still based on Divine Providence. What role does God take? Does God use suffering? In the last paragraph, we briefly discussed that God could not need suffering, or directly will it. It is essential that we break down these questions even further because of the implications they have if they are true. By claiming
that all suffering is due to God’s divine plan, we once again lose our freedom. If all suffering comes from God, we do not claim any responsibility for it. The truth is, life is not the subject of one will but many. The world we see around us is not completely directed by the one will of God, but we also have an influence on it. By tracing suffering back to God, we separate out our will from the world. Our will and our actions no longer matter because they have no effect on the world. The truth is, we affect creation. It is my choice and my act to cut down a tree, to punch someone’s nose, and to smoke a cigarette. Our actions do affect our situation. This simple statement opens the discussion up. The choices we make are permanent and they can act on the world with goodness or evil.

God gave us the beautiful capacity to choose Him above all else. It is our choice to desire God above money. By choosing His love, we deny those other distortions of happiness that the world gives us. We choose to order ourselves accord to the Good. It is by our choice that we are able to embrace His love, and because of that choice we also run the risk of falling into earthly desires, evils, and sufferings. If one believes in the distorted Divine Providence, one must also believe that there is too much of a risk for free souls to exist in a world. If God’s will is the only one that directs our world, then we can never choose God freely. Our choice would be directed by His will and would not be free. God did take a risk by giving us free will to choose Him above lesser goods. When we believe that God directs suffering, we must also believe that we are objects moved by God and our freedom to affect this world around us does not exist (Hart 69). However, this is not the truth. We do have freedom and we do affect this world.

This argument does not quiet the heart of the pained. We have answered that God does not need suffering and that God’s Divine Providence did not create a world that
responds to his will alone. However, there is still one lingering thread that connects God with evil and suffering. In a world where God does not need suffering and in a world with many individual wills, can God still will evil? Are there moments where God can will evil upon us to serve some purpose that we do not see?

In order to answer these questions, we must look at freedom and choice. We have the freedom to choose between actual choices. For instance, if I’m presented with two options and only two options, I cannot make a third option appear out of nothing. We live by choosing different options and those choices are binding. We can never go back and do something over again; we cannot erase the blackboard of life. Connected to our human nature is our ability to choose freely. We remain free when we continue to choose the good, to choose those things that most fully help us to realize our humanity (Hart 71). We have the ability to choose to accept our nature and live it to its fullest and this frees us. We were created free, and every time we choose to embrace our humanity we accept that gift of freedom. Choosing love, goodness, and God enforces that freedom. This freedom is most obviously taken away when we make the choice of evil. Evil limits us and destroys our humanity (Hart 71). It encages out freedom and choosing it “uncreates” that wonderful gift we were given. Paralyzed by our evil choices, we cannot exercise that perfect freedom because we turn away from the very nature that permits that freedom.

In this worldly condition, man finds himself full of potential. Man has the potential to embrace his full humanity, to accept who he is and what he was made for. However, we are unable to fully actualize our humanity because there are too many forces on us that steer us away from this actualization. Evil and our experience of it serve as obstacles to our actualization. Although we live in a world of potential, God is
ultimate actualization (Hart 72). He is fully realized and He acts from His nature perfectly. There are no external forces on Him like evil and suffering. Because God is perfect actuality, He cannot will evil. Since evil deteriorates and hinders actualization, God cannot will it. Willing evil would take away from Himself. Since God, by His nature, is complete and full, His expression of His nature is complete and full. Evil separates one from one’s nature and therefore, being fully actualized, God cannot will evil.

The correct view of Divine Providence can now be articulated in light of our discussion. This is the answer that many Christians so desperately need. His view of God willing evil in order to bring about salvation has been destroyed. God wills good for all of His creation and that good will be realized even though creation has rebelled against Him. This goodness orders all creation so that evil itself is just one more situation for God’s grace to light the world (Hart 82). There is hope in this message because the light of the world has come. We now have a perfect example of our humanity and of our suffering. Man’s ability to suffer perfectly is fully realized with the eschatological event of Jesus.
Jesus and Suffering

Previously, we have struggled to understand God’s part in our suffering discussion. Now, instead of relating God to the cause of suffering, we are going to draw out the deeper truths of our experience with suffering through Jesus Christ. Through Christ, we get the normative vision of how man should perfectly experience suffering. All is drawn together in Christ because He presents us with suffering that is perfected by Him. Finally, the cause of suffering is given through Jesus Christ. The ultimate reason behind His suffering is the same reason we suffer. All of our questions find an answer in Him through our salvation. In order to find the answers we are seeking, we need to start by looking at Jesus’ mission and the connection between our salvation and suffering.

The Son of God came to earth so that we might be saved. He came to conquer sin and death by liberating us from evil. Because of His full divinity and full humanity, He was able to take away our sins and win for us our redemption and salvation. This is the heart of the Christian message and it is central to our suffering discussion (John Paul II 14). “Salvation means liberation from evil” (John Paul II 14). We are freed from evil by the suffering of Jesus, “liberation must be achieved by the only-begotten Son through his own suffering” (John Paul II 14). At first, the connection between suffering and salvation is unclear because we don’t understand what we were saved from. We were saved from “definitive suffering” (John Paul II 14). This is the suffering that comes from a complete and final separation of us from God and is the suffering involved in our eternal damnation. This is a purely human suffering that Jesus destroyed so that we might be reconciled with the Father. Suffering, in the temporal sense, still exists because God still respects those decisions that originally “uncreated” the good. We are still involved with
sin and our suffering is still connected with that sin (John Paul II 15). Suffering still exists but it has been conquered. It is like a thorny rose bush tangled in a fence. The root of the rose bush has been cut so that it can no longer grow and it can no longer live. You can still prick your fingers on the dead thorns of the rose bush, but that rose bush is dead. It will no longer crowd your garden because it has been conquered. We too can still “prick” our souls on sin. However, the evil that crowded our souls has been destroyed. The bridge to God has been restored if we choose to walk it. Our hope is restored that we can most intimately return to the Father. This is the new message of suffering, a message of hope (John Paul II 15). Through suffering, Jesus brought us eternal life. It is through the Cross that Jesus conquered evil (John Paul II 16). The connection between suffering and salvation is thickened. Faced with death, Jesus suffered greatly because he knew the saving power behind that suffering (John Paul II 16). We see in the life of Jesus that, “He conquers sin by his obedience unto death, and he overcomes death by his Resurrection” (John Paul II 14). By His obedience to God, he conquers sin. It was with obedience that he faced his own death. The saving power behind his suffering is a mystery to us, but with great struggle, we attempt to articulate a meaning, a connection. That suffering was not caused by Jesus or by God. He was innocent and yet suffered tremendously because of the evil of others. He came for all of us, for all of our sins, he came to save us. The weight of all evil was placed on his shoulders so that his suffering was redemptive (John Paul II 17). Because of his obedience to the Father, because of that great love, he destroyed evil. Suffering for our sake he restores the good that we uncreated. He rebuilds the connection to the Father that we rejected and distorted. This is a profound message because we too are called to that obedience. Our obedience to God, to the
nature that God gave us, shares in the conquest of evil by Jesus. New light is now thrown into the picture of suffering that was once dark. Everything can now been seen through the lenses of our salvation. If we truly believe that Jesus brought with him the defining moment of history, we may begin to see the world through that salvation that was won for us. Suffering is now looked at through salvation.

Through salvation, suffering has a new meaning. With the connection between us and the good recreated by Jesus’ suffering, we may have eternal life with the Father. With this new meaning realized for man, our lives now have new meaning and so too does our suffering. Our questions about suffering are answered entirely in Jesus because he not only suffered innocently; he also accepted that suffering to himself (John Paul II 18). He did not avoid the suffering that he experienced, nor did he condemn it, but he accepted it. The “why” question of suffering was perfected in Jesus because he truly was innocent. When we ask “why,” we come from a state of sin, but Jesus asks “why” coming from a state of perfect goodness. Not only is the question of suffering perfected in Christ, so too is the answer (John Paul II 18). Being perfectly, and wholly human, Jesus suffered in the most human of ways. His suffering cut to the core of his being so that no physical pain could ever match up against the true suffering that is at the heart of the passion. He suffered because he incorporated and perceived our separation from God, our “estrangement from God” (John Paul II 18). This separation is the greatest suffering that Jesus and man can experience because it goes against the intention for which we were made. This is the separation from love and from goodness. Through this perception of the separation between us and God, suffering was bound together with love in a perfect sense. The suffering that Jesus felt was because of his ultimate love for the
Father (John Paul II 18). In taking on our sin he felt that same separation that exists in our lives. Since Jesus loved the Father above all else to a degree that is beyond measure, separation from the Father created the greatest suffering that could ever be experienced. That is why Jesus’ suffering was so much greater than our suffering. It was not from the wounds of the nails or the whip, it was the wounds from evil, from a rejection of the goodness of creation and of God. This is perfect suffering that is completely human and fulfills our nature.

Now we are called to suffer like Jesus in this perfect sense. Our suffering is due to the separation that we create between ourselves and God. This is what it means to truly suffer for love of God. It always depends on where our hearts lie. Man can suffer because he doesn’t have his perfect house or his perfect car, but that is not the perfect suffering which was revealed by Jesus. There is no meaning in that suffering because it is a disordered suffering from our disordered desires. The suffering discussion cannot give meaning to imperfect suffering because it cannot give meaning to imperfect love. When our hearts desire those things that are changing and worldly, we will suffer and suffer senselessly. The true meaning of suffering stems from that which we should love. If our hearts desire and love God, then our suffering is meaningful because it stems from a rightly ordered love. Our suffering should be traced back solely to our separation between us and the ultimate Good which we love above all else. If this is the case, those other questions that we spent time discussing seem to dissolve. Of course God does not will evil and suffering separating us from Him; God does not use separation from Him in order to carry out a Divine Plan. God desires us too. He does not want the separation to exist between us and Him, but at the same time He respects the choices we have made to
cause that separation. Evil and suffering is the opposite of what God desires for us. I love God above all things and the separation that I experience from Him in this world causes me great sorrow. I suffer because I love God and that is something sweet.

This is the sweet suffering that has been spoken of for ages by the Saints and holy men. Situations for suffering now appear different when suffering is bound with love of God. Our suffering is now redeemed because through our suffering we share in Christ’s suffering (John Paul II 19). We share in his suffering when our hearts desire that which Jesus desired, full communion with the Father. This reinterpretation of suffering is a gift to us. The link between us and God has been reestablished so that we can hope to be with Him who we love for all eternity. Jesus does die because of the cross. The suffering he experienced did kill him, but then there is also a “lifting up” (John Paul II 23). The Cross killed Jesus, but he overcame all of suffering through the Resurrection. Through this act he turned suffering on its head. “Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good” (John Paul II 26). Now that suffering is linked to the ultimate love of the Father, it no longer has its sting. It is our duty to take up and accept this same suffering for love of the Father. By accepting the suffering of Jesus in our own lives, we continually participate in the, “Redemption of the world” (John Paul II 24). We reach our hands out to the love of the Father in hopes of being united to Him. Our love stems from a desire to be with Him and our suffering comes from the separation we experience from Him. This is the love of salvation.
The Saints

A deeper look at Christ and his proper suffering gives us a normative vision of human suffering. His example shows us suffering in a maturely human way. Through a discussion of Jesus, our look at suffering is fully drawn out and realized. This can be fleshed out further by looking at the lives of the saints. In these examinations, we will be given a practical solution to our problems showing what is possible for us. The lives of the saints provide us the closest human approximation to the person and life of Christ. The saints become our in this suffering discussion because they encourage and show us how to most closely imitate the Suffering Servant. A message of hope, delivered by Jesus Christ, flows forth from their lives and sufferings. In this conclusion, we will draw strength from the saints and their lives and apply this strength to the mystery of suffering.

Suffering is relational insofar as the suffering we experience connects us with the saints and with Jesus. Because of this bond, we are able to draw upon the strength of the saints and apply their lessons to our own suffering. “The world of suffering possesses as it were its own solidarity” (John Paul II 8) This solidarity is not something unheard of. We find it among people who have experienced the suffering of war, disease, and death. When we experience the suffering of love in solidarity with the saints, we are brought into communion with Christ; we share our suffering with them. Because of this communion, the saints touch Jesus when they suffer like Him and for Him. This is why we must take hold of the saints’ example; they show us the right path to communion with Christ’s sufferings and God Himself.

Without fear, the saints accept their sufferings with courage. St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, says, “My heart is naturally sensitive and it is precisely
because of its capacity for pain that I wish to offer to Our Lord every kind of suffering it can bear” (St. Therese 199). For St. Therese, suffering has lost its sting because the despair found in suffering has been replaced with hope. It no longer robs her of her humanity, but instead protects it, allowing it to be properly directed in her desire for God. She suffers out of love for the Father and this draws her into communion with her beloved Christ. There is no sense of avoidance in her approach to suffering. “Should it please God I am quite content to have my sufferings of body and soul prolonged for years” (St. Therese 197). She uses words like, “offering” and “pleasing” to describe her suffering and they reveal the meaning of suffering that lies in her heart. It is not that God enjoys watching her suffer, instead there is a connection between her suffering and Christ’s suffering. At the heart of her suffering is the why. The “why” that she experiences is the same “why” that Christ experiences. She understands her suffering results from her distance from her beloved God. Because she is bounded and limited, she can only experience an incomplete union with God. Experiencing that same separation that Christ felt, she suffers. Her love for the Father makes this situation extremely painful. That is why she described it as an offering. Her choice to love God beyond all else has brought this suffering upon her, but this suffering is bearable because it is suffering out of and for the sake of love. She continually chooses to love God and that is painful, but her love makes that pain a blessing.

The love of the saints glistens with a tempered strength. The limit of their love continues to increase as they suffer. Teresa of Avila expresses this intimately, “For the increase of the love of God I saw in my soul and many other things reached such a point that I was amazed; and this makes me unable to stop desiring trials” (Bielecki 115).
There is a definite connection drawn here between love and suffering. As her love increased, so did her suffering. This correlation between love and suffering is revealed when we look at our suffering compared to that of Christ’s. St. Teresa makes it clear to us that when we take up our crosses, “You will come out consoled because you will see that they are something to be laughed at when compared to those of the Lord” (Bielecki 116). She says this not to downplay our suffering, but to reveal the ultimate truth between love and suffering. There is a reason why all of our suffering pales in comparison to Jesus’. Jesus suffered so much because he loved so much. Because His love for the Father exceeds our own love, His suffering exceeds our suffering. This means that as love increases, suffering increases. St. Teresa does not desire trials in order to test her love. Instead, she understands that with great love come great trials. A greater love encounters more obstacles. St. Teresa knew that, “If the cross is loved, it is easy to bear; this is certain” (Bielecki 117). She bears suffering with love because it is out of love that this cross exists. If she denied her love for the Father, the cross would be rejected and she would no longer experience the suffering involved with this love.

However, she would experience the suffering involved in this material world. This is the suffering we discussed earlier that stems from the fact that individuals live in a world with laws. Denying love for the Father causes her to deny her own true end. By giving up her love for the Father, she would experience a base suffering. There is no hope in this suffering because it is senseless, but to pick up the cross is to love Christ. That cross is easy because it flows from strength and it has an ultimate meaning. Suffering now stems from love and that is why the Little Flower says, “My soul has known trials of
many kinds and I have suffered much here below. In my childhood I did so with sadness, while now I find sweetness in all things – even the most bitter” (St. Therese 190).

There is a connection to Christ through our suffering. This connection is due to the fact that He opened up our suffering to redemptive suffering through Himself (John Paul II 20). Now we share in the mission of Christ through our participation and imitation of His suffering. By sharing in His suffering, man “completes the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world” (John Paul II 24). This does not mean that in some way Christ’s salvific act was incomplete, but rather our suffering continually accomplishes this act. This sharing in the mission of Christ is beautifully realized by St Teresa, “For since it no longer looks to its own satisfactions but to what pleases God, its pleasure is in some way imitating the laborious life that Christ lived” (Bielecki 115). Because we suffer for the same reason, out of the same love, we imitate Christ. By being involved in His suffering we fight the same fight. He leaves this suffering and love open to us in communion with Him. Open to the same love, St. Teresa asks, “Let us walk together Lord. Wherever You go, I will go; whatever You suffer, I will suffer” (Bielecki 115). We have a sense here of traveling the same path and completing the same journey. By traveling that same path, the saints touch Jesus in their communion with him and in their love for the Father. By asking to face the same trials, to experience the same suffering, they are only asking to love like He loved.

Suffering does cover the Earth. It can be senseless and it can lead to despair. This desperate suffering makes man question his world and his reality. Tragedies happen and at the pits of these events is darkness. However, a new suffering has come to man through Jesus Christ. Through His suffering, He has made redemptive suffering possible
for us. This redemptive suffering dissolves the old questions because at the heart of this suffering is divine love. Because of this, we have been opened to a love of the Father that redeems and sweetens our suffering making what was once senseless, now intelligible and full of purpose. Our hearts now desire Him above all else and we suffer because of this. Out of love we suffer so that as our love increases so does our suffering. This love imitates the love of Jesus. This suffering imitates the suffering of Jesus. We suffer because of our inability to be fully with Him whom we love. However, this suffering of separation does have hope. The connection between us and our beloved has been restored through Jesus Christ making our love and our suffering meaningful. We suffer because we have yet to fully realize something that now can be, an eternal rest in our beloved Father.
Works Cited


