

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
WASHINGTON, DC
UNEXPECTED GIFTS: CHRISTIAN SUFFERING
Summer 2008

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26-28 May, 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
McLean Presbyterian Church
McLean, Virginia

COURSE PURPOSE

We shall explore the place of suffering in the lives of God's elect, starting with a biblically grounded phenomenology of suffering, supplemented by an investigation of what it is about us as human agents that makes suffering affect us in the ways that it does. We shall then go on to determine what Scripture says about God's role in our suffering as well as try to specify the goods that are likely to come to God's people as they suffer. Finally, we shall search the Scriptures to find out how Christians should suffer.

We shall be particularly concerned with what I call 'profound suffering', since the dynamics of other kinds and degrees of suffering are more easily understood in its light. Profound suffering involves experiencing a hurt so deep that its presence dominates our lives, usually arousing perplexity and indignation: "This"—whatever 'this' is—"is so bad that I cannot understand how it can be!" Profound suffering challenges human life at its most fundamental level by causing us to lose—or at least to be at risk of losing—the convictions by which we make sense of our lives. It tends to disorient and discombobulate us and thus tempts us to think that life is (at best) meaningless. As Job 3, Jeremiah 20:14-18, and Psalm 88 attest, God's people have often experienced profound suffering.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Required reading

Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006)

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001)

_____, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperCollins,)

Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994)

Eleonore Stump, *Faith and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1999)

Students will be expected to have read these books and the biblical book of Job before the first day of class. (It is important that we all have copies of the editions cited, since we will want to be able to go to the exact page of these texts to discuss particular claims. The Stump book can be ordered by writing Stob Lectures, Alumni and Public Relations Office, Calvin College 3201 Burton Street, SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546. It is available for \$4, prepaid, including postage and handling.) *The Problem of Pain* will serve as general background for several discussions in

this course, although I do not cite it below in the course details. There will be a number of articles, available on-line through the RTS internal website, of crucial philosophical and theological readings that will be discussed during the course. Whatever is cited below in the course details will be available on-line.

N.B.: No one is expected to master all of the readings specified below, and especially not the more philosophical ones. Those readings are included because points made in them will figure into our discussion, although I will make it my business to find ways to make those points accessible in class.

Analytical Readings

Each student who is taking the course for credit will consult with me concerning a final paper topic and then I shall assign two pieces on which the student will read carefully and then write 1000-word evaluative summaries. These will be submitted to me electronically for comment and grade and will then serve as part of the research base for the final paper. One is due in my e-mail mailbox two weeks before the due date of the final paper and the other one week before that due date.

Paper

A 3000-word paper on some topic that has been covered in the course will be due on June 26, submitted electronically with a word-count at its head, standard margins, and double-spaced.

Assessment

Students taking the course for credit will be evaluated in terms of the three written assignments detailed above (roughly 20% apiece for each of the analytical readings and 50% for the final paper), as well as their interaction during the three days of class that we have together and any other interaction that takes place between them and me by e-mail.

COURSE DETAILS

First Day (May 26)

The morning's topic: **OVERVIEWS OF SCRIPTURE'S TEACHINGS ON SUFFERING AND EVIL**

Surveying various articles from biblical and theological dictionaries, including:

“Suffering,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed.

“Evil” and “Suffering,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

“Suffering and Evil,” *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*

The afternoon's topic: **WHAT IS SUFFERING AND WHAT DOES IT DO TO US?**

WHAT IS SUFFERING?

Biblical cases of suffering, with emphasis on Job, Jeremiah, and the Psalmists

The experiences of Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, and Wiesel, *Night*

Theological reflection on these cases and experiences

Henri Blocher. *Evil and the Cross*. "Introduction"

Philosophical insight regarding suffering

Emmanuel Levinas. "Transcendence and Evil"

WHAT DOES SUFFERING DO TO US?

Scripture's picture of human agency

Philosophical articulation of this picture

Charles Taylor. "What is Human Agency?"

_____. "Self-Interpreting Animals"

_____. "The Concept of a Person"

Terence Penelhum. "Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil"

Theological reflection on this picture

Mark R. Talbot. "Starting from Scripture"

_____. "Growing in the Grace and Knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"

Second Day (May 27)

The day's topic: **WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE CLAIM ABOUT GOD'S WILL AND HUMAN SUFFERING?**

Our first investigation: **HAS GOD ORDAINED EVERYTHING, INCLUDING EVIL?**

A survey of Scriptures pro- and con-

Talbot, "True Freedom"

_____, "All the Good that is Ours in Christ"

Theological reflection on unbiblical answers

Blocher. *Evil and the Cross*, chapters 1-3

Our second investigation: **IN WHAT SENSE DOES GOD ORDAIN EVIL?**

Theological reflection

Talbot, "True Freedom"

_____, "All the Good that is Ours in Christ"

Blocher. *Evil and the Cross*, chapter 4

Philosophical defenses of this theological position

Hugh McCann. "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will"

_____. "The Author of Sin?"

William E. Mann, "God's Freedom, Human Freedom, and God's Responsibility for Sin"

Third Day (May 28)

The morning's topic: **WHAT IS THE GOOD OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING?**

Biblical and theological reflection

"Job" and "Wisdom," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

Psychological and philosophical elaboration

Richard T. McClelland, "Normal Narcissism and the Need for Theodicy"

John R. Schneider, "Seeing God Where the Wild Things Are: An Essay
on the Defeat of Horrendous Evil"

Eleonore Stump, *Faith and the Problem of Evil*

Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, chapter 5 and conclusion

The afternoon's topic: **HOW TO SUFFER**

(As the course wrap-up, this afternoon's discussion will not be based on any new reading but will pull together what we have discovered in terms of practical advice for Christians while they or their loved ones are suffering.)