

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
WASHINGTON, DC
6PT731/01 UNSOUGHT GIFTS: CHRISTIAN SUFFERING
Winter 2011

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5-7 January, 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
McLean Presbyterian Church
McLean, Virginia

COURSE PURPOSE

We shall explore the place of suffering in human life, starting with C. S. Lewis's widely influential view in his *Problem of Pain*, supplemented by some philosophical essays that frame some of the issues more precisely, and then restricting our consideration to Christian suffering and working our way towards a biblically grounded view of it. In developing a view of Christian suffering, we shall explore questions such as these: What is it about our agency that makes suffering affect us in the ways that it does? What does Scripture say about God's role in our suffering? And, What are the goods that are likely to come to God's people as they suffer?

We shall be particularly concerned with what I call 'profound suffering', since it is the kind of suffering that is most likely to challenge our faith. Profound suffering involves experiencing a hurt so deep that its presence dominates our lives, usually arousing perplexity and even indignation: "*This*"—whatever 'this' is—"is so bad that I cannot understand how a good God can allow it to 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, Psalm 88, and Lewis's *A Grief Observed* attest, God's people are not exempt from profound suffering.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Required reading

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001)

_____, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001)

Selections as noted below from Michael Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1992)

Additional readings that will be available as pdfs on the RTS internal website, including extra pieces by Marilyn Adams, C. John Collins, Hugh McCann, and your instructor

Students will be expected to have read these materials 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.) Whatever is cited below in the course details as a pdf will be available on-line at the RTS internal website.

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, most likely from the readings cited below, that the student will read carefully and then write 1000-word evaluative summaries. These will be submitted to me electronically for comment and grade. They 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. (I will try to grade them as soon as they come in so that you can have some constructive criticism as you move to the next assignment.)

Paper

A 3000-word paper on some topic that has been covered in the course will be due on February 15th, submitted electronically with a word-count at its head, standard margins, and double-spaced. (The 3000-word limit regards the body of the paper. Footnotes and bibliography don't count.)

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 (January 7)

The morning's topic: **WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? AND ONE SOLUTION**

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Selections from David Hume, Dostoevsky, Camus, and Elie Wiesel (in Peterson, pp.39-86)

ONE SOLUTION

Lewis's *Problem of Pain*, Preface and Chapter 1

The afternoon's topic: **ONE SOLUTION, *continued***

Lewis, Chapter 2: "Divine Omnipotence"

The problem restated: J. L. Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence" (in Peterson, pp. 89-101)

Another response: Alvin Plantinga's "The Free Will Defense" (in Peterson, pp. 103-33)
Lewis, Chapter 3: "Divine Goodness"
Rethinking the terms of the solution: Marilyn McCord Adams's "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers" (pdf) and "Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil" (in Peterson, pp. 169-187)

Second Day (January 6)

The morning's topic: **ONE SOLUTION, *continued***

Lewis, Chapters 4 & 5: "Human Wickedness" and "The Fall of Man"
What should we think about Adam and Eve? C. John Collins's "Adam and Eve as Historical People, and Why It Matters" (pdf)
Lewis, Chapters 6 through 10

The afternoon's topic: **ANOTHER APPROACH**

REALIZING THE POTENTIAL DEPTHS OF SUFFERING

Talbot's *Unsought Gifts: Christian Suffering*, Chapter 1: "When the Stars Disappear" (pdf)
Lewis's *A Grief Observed*

Third Day (January 7)

The morning's topic: **ANOTHER APPROACH, *continued***

IDENTIFYING WHAT SUFFERING IS AND HOW AND WHY IT AFFECTS US

Talbot's *Unsought Gifts*, Chapter 2: "Human Suffering: What It Is, and How and Why It Affects Us" (pdf)
Hasker's "On Regretting the Evils of This World" (in Peterson, pp. 153-167)

WHAT PART DOES GOD PLAY IN OUR SUFFERING?

Talbot's "All the Good that is Ours in Christ: Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts that Others Do to Us," from John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (pdf)
McCann's "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will" (pdf)

The afternoon's topic: **ANOTHER APPROACH, *continued***

SUFFERING AND HOPE

Talbot's "Bad Actors on a Broken Stage: Sin and Suffering in Calvin's World," from John Piper and David Mathis, eds., *With Calvin in the Theater of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life* (pdf)
Adams's "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God" (pdf)