

*Can joy be found in suffering?* This is a very strange question. Since “joy” and “suffering” appear as polar-opposites, few people would even consider this to be rational. A similar question, but a question that *is* commonly asked, is *if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving then why is there suffering*. This question is possibly the single largest cause for Christians to lose their faith and for non-Christians to remain so. Not because philosophers can’t effectively argue against it (although it is difficult), but even if it could be proven true that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving – how can we love Him back? According to Christians, this is God’s number one expectation of us – we are to love Him! Yet, there is suffering. Even the youngest, most innocent among us, suffer. This appears contradictory. Genesis offers a nonsensical sounding explanation: just one stupid little act of juvenile disobedience and “all heck breaks loose” – literally! Suffering and death enter the world – Adam and Eve are to blame for all suffering that has ever existed and will ever exist – at least that’s one interpretation. This too, sounds absurd, but is it? Regardless, it seems like God must take some responsibility for the whole mess – why doesn’t He fix things? He is all-powerful, after all.

Is human reason our only tool to answer questions? It is certainly not in a scientific endeavor. We can conduct empirical tests and create mathematical models to probe and explore reality. Neither the “dual nature of light” nor “quantum weirdness” satisfy human reason. If such ideas seem reasonable and rational to you, then you probably don’t really understand them. Yet, these concepts have been shown to be true. Just because our mind can’t really grasp something, doesn’t mean it is false. It doesn’t mean it is true, either. We can test physical principles to see if they are true or false, but we cannot put God in a test tube. So if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, why is there suffering? We know there is suffering; it’s God’s nature that we question.

Most people can accept that God (if He exists) is all-powerful and all-knowing. After all, something created this universe, you and me, the DNA inside cells, everything. If nothing created it, then it (or its predecessors) must itself be eternal and infinite – and darn lucky...but that’s a different story. If God created the universe, then He must be at least very-powerful and very-knowing. But all loving? Why is there suffering if this is true?

Here’s another odd thing about suffering: rather than ignoring it, Christianity places suffering front and center. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ is the foundation of the faith. The Christian claim is that Christ suffered and died so my sins and yours can be forgiven! Really? What does the historical death (a death that really did happen) – how did the historical death of a man named Jesus, allow my sins to be forgiven? Even if Jesus is the Son of God, as Christians claim, it makes little sense. Christians do not stop there. They also claim that not only *did* Jesus die for the forgiveness of sins, but he *had* to die! But isn’t God all-powerful? If he is, then did Jesus *really have* to die so sin could be forgiven? And not just die, but to suffer horrendously? Can such a challenging thought be true? Maybe the Resurrection answers that question – if he didn’t die, then he couldn’t be raised from the dead. That’s logical. But it fails to address the question. If God is all-powerful, then why couldn’t he save us through some other way? He really could have – couldn’t he?

If God is all-powerful then He can do anything, true? No, this is false! There are things we are capable of doing, you and I, that God cannot do! Then God is not all-powerful! Or is He? Is the

ability to do something the result of power? Not in all cases. What is it we can do that God cannot? We can sin, we can turn away from God, we can die. God is not able to do so. Yet God is all-powerful and we are not.

But those are bad things. Helping people – curing illness, preventing accidents, preventing crime, all the *corporal works of mercy* – these are good things. We can do these things, at least to some extent. God can too. The Gospels tell us of many miracles worked by Jesus and his disciples. Miraculous healings have occurred throughout history. In recent history, medical professionals are brought in to confirm such miracles. Two confirmed miracles are required before canonization of saints. Miracles happen. So if God can create miracles, why doesn't He do so with much greater regularity? Why does He allow so much suffering? Maybe it's our fault – God expects us to do the good for him – we are the Body of Christ after all. Certainly, the Gospel mandates such action. But we can't cure everyone, stop all accidents, and end all suffering. Or could we? Regardless, God allows suffering, why? Why does He heal some, but not others? Did certain people do something wrong and He's trying to teach them a lesson? That's the conclusion some may reach, but history contradicts that answer. Maybe we lack sufficient faith? After all, faith moves mountains. Christ told us "ask and it shall be granted." If we only prayed with enough faith, we would be healed of all suffering. Some modern Christians claim that to be the case. I don't believe it is true. It is not the Christian response. While some bible verses seem to support this idea, it neglects the very essence of scripture. It sees a tree, but misses the forest. While Christ worked miraculous signs, his message was to "pick up your cross and follow me." That's what the disciples did. That's what disciples do.

That is a tough, challenging thought. We are expected to carry crosses?! What an audacious thing to think! Certainly, that cannot be the "good news!" But do we have a choice? Do you know anyone who has not been handed some sort of a cross? Along with joy and happiness, all lives contain at least some suffering. Why would Christians, the followers of *the cross bearer* be exempt? History shows us they are not. So why should anyone be a Christian if everyone gets a cross – believers and non-believers alike? Suffering might make sense if "bad" people suffered but "good" people didn't. Suffering seems so random. One cannot become a Christian expecting life to become void of suffering.

Then what does Christianity have to offer? According to Christians, Christ offers us nothing less than to find joy and peace and to have eternal life! That's pretty good. In fact, it seems too good to be true if we really understand it. It is impossible to beat! But do I have to wait until I die to find joy; to find *peace that surpasses all understanding* (Phil 4:7)? No, Christians should *expect joy in this life*, here and now; even in the midst of suffering! Do I claim that joy can be found in suffering? No I do not. I am not that brave. But history does. History is full of joy-filled individuals who suffered immensely. The stories of saints attest to this fact. But how is this possible? Could such saints have something to teach us? In our modern minds, happiness is synonymous with pleasure which is the opposite of suffering. I do not claim that suffering should be desired, but maybe we need to reconsider what suffering is. It may not be a friend, but it may not be the enemy we fear it to be either.

Before we understand suffering, we need to understand *the nature of sin* and *the nature of love*. And before we can do that, we need to understand what is meant by *the nature* of anything. *The*

*nature* of anything describes how it behaves – what it does. The nature of gravity is to attract two objects towards each other. The nature of glass is to break when struck. When I tell you “I dropped a glass in the kitchen, be careful” you understand what I mean. You understand the natures of both gravity and glass (even if you don’t know who Isaac Newton is). The number zero has a unique nature. If zero is multiplied by any number, the result is zero. No matter how big a number is, when it is multiplied by zero, the result is zero. I can have a billion-billion empty glasses – and I still wouldn’t be able to fill the kitchen sink with water. No other number has that nature. The nature of zero is totally different than the nature of all other numbers. There is an infinite difference between the *nature of nothing* and the *nature of something*. Therefore, when you add one to zero, it is an infinitely significant change – the nature of zero has been replaced by a completely new nature – the nature of “something.”

What is the nature of sin? Volumes have been filled with that question. I don’t like to write, so we’ll keep it short. Let’s consider an alternative to the Adam and Eve story. Let’s say God created an entire village – poof – there it is. It was filled with several hundred people. And – poof – He created furnished houses for everyone, nice houses, but modest. All is well. Rules of behavior are understood and followed. One special person is endowed by God to be the best baker; we’ll call her Grandma Baker. Of course she makes awesome chocolate chip cookies! And since this is still Eden, she shares them with anyone who asks. One day, she awakes and goes to her famous cookie jar (in Eden, you can eat cookies for breakfast). But she finds no cookies! What happened – she baked a batch just yesterday, and the jar was full when she went to bed! Since the idea of stealing was not even in Grandma’s vocabulary, it took her quite some time to realize what had happened. Why would someone steal when they could just ask? (Sin never really makes sense). She felt the direct impact of sin when she went to the cookie jar and found it empty. It took quite some time, but eventually the entire village felt the impact. New industries were created. Rather than leisurely collecting food for dinner, people had to spend extra time collecting food – after all, they needed some way to pay Mr. Locksmith for his services. Over time, and generations, police forces and armies were created. Doubt, suspicion and even hard labor entered the world the night the thief stole the cookies – it just took some time for everyone to realize it.

The nature of sin is such that it affects everyone – either directly or indirectly; whether you realize it or not. We seem to think that sin does no harm if done in private. Yet sin has a direct and personal impact as well as a universal impact. When I sin, even if no one knows I’ve sinned, all are affected. If this is true, why is this not remotely obvious? Perhaps it is because we live in a world of sin. A deep sea fish does not recognize the effect of rain. Although we may recognize the direct effect, the universal effect of one more sin is not noticed. It is like emptying a bucket of water into a large lake. There is a real effect – it is just not noticeable. When there is zero sin (absolutely no sin) then adding one sin will have an infinite effect. The nature of a world with zero sin is completely different than the nature of a world with even one sin. The above creation story illustrates a believable characteristic of sin: it permeates the world. But since we have never known a sin-free world, we cannot imagine the effect of the first sin. The sin of Adam was not just stealing cookies – it was sin against God and nature. We can see how the first cookie thief changed a village forever. Is it so hard to believe that it was through the sin of Adam that death and suffering really did enter the world?

God did not create sin. That statement should shock no one. Sin is not a creation; it is a choice against God made by freewill. Freewill is a gift from God to us. By its nature, we are free to abuse it. It is also not shocking to hear that love is the opposite of sin. What may be shocking is that God did *not create love*! Love is not a creature, it was not created. God is Love, Infinite Love, All-Love. It flows from Him to the world. The creation of the world was an act of Love. Since God did not create love, He did not create its nature. The nature of love is the nature of God. Love created the world through the Person of Jesus. *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:3). If God is love, why is there suffering?

What is the *nature of love*? That's a big question and we'll use another short story to help us explore it. Once upon a time, there was a married couple. We'll call them Christopher and Iglesia. They had been married for several years and had many children. They very much loved each other, but for no apparent reason (sin never really makes sense), Iglesia slipped – she cheated on Christopher. She was wracked with guilt and had to confess to her husband what had happened. Without knowing anything about Christopher – his experiences, his personality, anything – we *know* he was hurt by this. It's not fair, but that is the nature of rejected love – it hurts. It causes suffering. Sin is rejected love. The husband does not will the wife to suffer and the wife does not will the husband to suffer. It is in the nature of love. We also know that since they do love each other, they will work to reconcile. It will take time. It will take more than time. They can't just agree to not speak for a year, and then all will be well. They will have to work at it – they will have to unite their suffering or there will be no reconciliation. That is the nature of love. So the nature of love is suffering? No, the nature is love causes suffering when love is rejected. We could say the nature of “rejected love” is suffering. Rejected love does not just cause suffering it is the source of all suffering. Rejected love broke the world.

But what if Iglesia chooses not to reconcile? Perhaps she cannot accept her husband's forgiveness. Will she still suffer? Yes, both she and her husband will still suffer. This suffering would be without gain, without merit; wasted suffering. Self-suffering does not restore rejected love. To have reconciliation, there must be joined suffering; suffering united out of love.

The nature of sin is that it affects everyone. Not only did this sin affect Christopher and Iglesia, it affected their children, their friends, and even people they never knew. But love is even more powerful – its effect is even more far-reaching. By their suffering, their love, their marriage is healed. Their love affects everyone. Love is stronger than death; it overcomes sin and death. That is the Gospel! That is the Good News!

These two stories, the creation story and the marriage story, are the same story. They are the story told in scripture. God created the world and saw that it was good. He gave man the ability to say no to love. He did. That sin fundamentally changed the world forever. Death and suffering entered and has not left. But *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). Jesus did *have* to suffer and die for the forgiveness of sin! The nature of love, God's nature, is that way. If love is rejected, there will be suffering. To reconcile, there must be united suffering. God became man, uniting the nature of divinity to the nature of humanity. He suffered and died because that is the

nature of love. Man rejected God, man had to restore that relationship. That was achieved through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ had to suffer and die. Do we? Did he not fully reconcile God and man? Yes, he did! But there is still suffering and death (at least in this world). It is obvious that Jesus' death and resurrection did not end suffering and death. We reject Christ's reconciliation and love every time we sin. Sin is still plentiful in the world because we still choose to abuse the gift of freewill. The relationship between man and God is an ongoing and living relationship in constant need of redemption and renewal. We sin, we seek pardon, God is able to forgive us since Jesus has paid the debt demanded by the nature of love. There is reconciliation, but humanity, you and I, will experience suffering. That is the nature of love.

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23)*

I suffer. There is no choice about that. I can fight against it, and I can do some things to minimize it and even avoid it on occasion, but I will suffer; maybe only a little, maybe a lot. Should I resign myself to this fact? No, absolutely not! It is not a matter of resignation! That would be like Christopher and Iglesia accepting the pain, but choosing not to speak to each other. It would be suffering without merit. We must not resign ourselves to suffering but rather understand how to find joy within it. It is part of the human condition. That is not resignation, it is not acceptance, and it is not a desire for suffering. It is a challenge – a challenge to the heart, mind and spirit. Through his suffering and death, Christ destroyed death and restored life. We are the Body of Christ and whenever we unite our sufferings to Christ's suffering, especially through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we participate in the joyous mystery of atonement. Through Christ's suffering and death, our suffering can have merit for his body, us, the church. It is not wasted. We must find joy within that. How that is so, I do not know. It makes no sense. But it is true. "Just offer it up!"

*Even now I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church (Col 1:24).*