The Problem of Suffering

A Father’s Hope

Revised and Expanded

Gregory P. Schulz
For Paula, 
beloved wife and loving mother.

For Kara and Daniel, 
loving sister and brother to Kyleigh and Stephan.

On the foundation of His promise for us all:

“\textit{I will turn their mourning into joy}”

\textit{(Jeremiah 31:13)}
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Call Me Job</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Test</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Baptized to Die</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Never-Ending Story</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Scream</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: In Memoriam</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: Prayers and Poems Written by Sufferers</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WARNING: After you’ve read this book you’ll never be the same again. You will be challenged by its intellectual depth, encouraged by its spiritual consolation, and blown away by its honesty. Like a roller-coaster, it will lift you to dizzying heights of insight, plunge you down into the deepest imaginable human pain, then lift you out again into hope.

Pain and suffering come in different sizes and intensities for different people, but they come inevitably to us all. A lot of ink has been spilled over the centuries on the so-called “problem of evil,” but there’s not much help in that. Anyone who has personally experienced the mind-numbing and gut-wrenching impact of suffering, pain, or loss can tell you the last thing anyone needs in the midst of that mess is intellectual reflection and explanation. What you need is the honest truth. And such honesty is rarely pleasant.

Gregory Schulz is a first-rate philosopher and academician. He is also a pastor and a teacher with decades of experience in parish ministry and both secondary and
post-secondary education. But first and foremost, he’s a husband and a father. Greg the philosopher will stimulate your mind, Greg the pastor will strengthen your soul, but Greg the father will grip your heart. Woven throughout this remarkable little book is the heartbreaking story of the suffering and death of two of the Schulz’ four children, victims of rare and debilitating diseases.

Greg pulls no punches and minces no words; he portrays a father’s pain in all its bitter reality. Not only does he open his remarkable mind to his readers, but he dares to open his hurting soul as well. And we are all the richer for it. Using language reminiscent of C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, the personal chronicle of the Oxford don’s raw anguish at his wife’s death, Dr. Schulz lays bare the unthinkable torment and wrenching loss he and his wife, Paula, experienced during the lingering illnesses and subsequent deaths of their baby girl Kyleigh and their adolescent son Stephan.

During the years I was privileged to teach pastoral theology at Concordia Theological Seminary I used the earlier edition of this book to teach fledgling pastors the art of caring for suffering souls. It was a transformational experience for my students, many of whom were themselves fathers of young children. Greg’s vivid narrative put a face on human suffering, to be sure, but it also placed his personal horror squarely into the larger context of God’s own suffering Son and His healing love.
Martin Luther, himself no stranger to suffering and pain, once wrote, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.” God’s love, you see, is revealed most vividly in the bitter suffering and horrific death of His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. Christians needn’t camouflage grief or paint smiley faces on human suffering; we take our reality straight. In the light of Christ’s cross we can discover God at work in the very midst of suffering.

Greg’s premise is that grieving people don’t ever “get over” their grief. It is, rather, their God-given task to grieve and to mourn. Christian or not, grieving people all mourn the loss of their loved ones. Grief is the experience of the absence of those we love. In this remarkable book Gregory Schulz ably serves us all as companion in our grief. He knows intimately well the severe mercy of God hidden under grief and tears. He teaches us how to grieve in hope—with quiet confidence in the One who Himself was raised from the dead and now lives forever in triumphant glory.

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In his 1940 book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis explained that he was writing “to solve an intellectual problem raised by suffering,” but that people in pain need “the least tincture of the love of God” more than anything.¹

There are many of us who hunger and thirst for God’s love while we watch our children suffer and die. In the middle of days spent at bedsides in intensive care units and during dreary nights spent monitoring temperatures and blood counts, we need a tincture of God’s love more than anything. In my first congregation I regularly visited a shut-in church member whose throat had been so ravaged by disease that she could not tolerate even a swallow of wine. For Holy Communion I would break off a tiny wafer and dip it into the Communion wine so that she could receive her Lord’s body and blood by *tincture*.

Lewis wrote as if the problem of pain can be solved intellectually, as if we can acquire equilibrium by thinking about suffering in a certain way. I have learned from Job,
from St. Paul, and from the father of Magdalena Luther (who died at age 13), that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in my Lord or come to Him. More, I cannot find a satisfactory intellectual answer for the suffering and pain my children have been through. As a Lutheran pastor and theologian of the cross, I know that my responsibility is to preach Christ crucified, not suffering justified. As a philosopher, I recognize the obscenity of arguing by means of calculations of consequences or instrumentality that the pain of others can be explained. As a parent of children who have suffered and suffered before their deaths, I know that there is no equilibrium to be had this side of heaven.

The Lord has been my tutor for this problem of evil, as philosophers call it. His curriculum is what one widower called “a severe mercy.” To be honest with you, there have been months when the last thing I wanted was to be anywhere near the Lord, my God, much less to listen for an explanation for the agony wracking the little soul being held on my lap, or for the torment being visited on my dear wife and other children.

I anticipate more days and nights of suffering until He lifts me out of this valley of tears. I am very tired, undeniably weak. My presence in the green pastures of heaven will have to be all His doing, as is my presence in His church today. This is what we believers have learned from Holy Scripture to call grace. Grace is what we taste in the tincture of God’s love.
For a decade and a half I was witness to the pain my Jesus inflicted on my older son through a complicated chronic autoimmune disease. I also witnessed His hand on my youngest daughter, a lovely little girl who died five days before her first birthday following a year of surgeries, seizures, and infections. I wrote the first four chapters of this little book while the earth was settling over Kyleigh’s tiny grave. The last two chapters I wrote a number of years later. Now it is time to send this to you.

This book you are holding will never share Lewis’s purpose of providing an intellectually satisfying answer for pain. It is not meant for that. When those that we love, and especially our children, are suffering and dying, what answer can there be? As long as we live in this life, this great tribulation, there can be no closure to our grief. In place of a comprehensive, intellectual answer, this book is meant to bring a tincture of God’s love for us in our suffering. From that little taste, we may go on to enjoy a rich measure of His mercy, pressed down and overflowing.

These chapters come from one soul to another. From a parent to a parent. From someone else’s father to you in your suffering. From one sufferer to another. They come from God’s unending Word to our everyday world. Together, let us endure awhile longer. Let us “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).
“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

(2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

Gregory P. Schulz

Please note, for a fuller discussion and Bible study of suffering and Luther’s theology of the cross, and for an annotated bibliography, see The Problem of Suffering: A Companion Study Guide and Resources for Pastors and Christian Caregivers, also from CPH.
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