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## Christ and the Work of Suffering

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## CHRIST AND THE WORK OF SUFFERING

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Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye

**Abstract:** *Christ's voluntary subjection to the horrible realities of this world transformed him forever. His vulnerability became his capacity to save and heal all humankind. Our own suffering develops our capacity for love, which is the power that makes us useful to others, and humility, which is the root of wisdom.*

**D**uring chemotherapy, I live my life in fourteen-day cycles. On Day 1, I check myself into the infusion center. The nurse punches a needle into my chest. It connects to a catheter that dumps directly into a large vein in my neck. They hook me up to my life-saving poison. For the first hours, I type briskly on my computer. Then I start to feel the effects. Waves of nausea sweep over me. My vision feels thick. They flush my line with saline, filling my mouth with a metallic taste, then hook me up to a pump worn around my waist. It's like being pregnant with a laptop. My family members take me home, where I lie under blankets, watching episodes of the Great British Baking Show until it is time for everyone to go to sleep. But it's hard to sleep. I keep waking up, groping for the vomit bag in the darkness. My husband snores peacefully at my side. I am alone.

To elude the nausea, I imagine myself in one of my favorite places in the world, a place that now seems to belong to another lifetime. I am walking along a trail of deep, fine, black sand. The children and the dog bound joyfully ahead, tearing up and down the steep dunes on either side, hiding behind clumps of grass, leaping out with shrieks of delight. The trail opens up onto the windswept expanse of Te Henga, a wild beach on the west coast of Auckland. Waves from the Tasman Sea rise, crash, and line the sand with a layer of reflected light and sea foam. With their toes, the children sweep patterns into the shining sand. The wind rushes off the sea, blowing the tops off the breakers. Every once in

a while, a large wave rushes up unexpectedly, flooding the beach with water and chasing us to higher ground.

On Day 2 of the chemo cycle, I awake still nauseated, still connected to the pump, the needle still in my chest. Every seven breaths, the pump squirts out a bit more therapeutic poison. At midday, I tentatively eat mouthfuls of soup, vomit bag at hand. I feel some strength come back into my body. On Day 3, I awake and enjoy lying in bed. I listen to the hustle of the household as everyone gathers their things and rushes off to school. When the house is quiet again, I emerge and eat some of the miso soup with rice my husband has made and left on the stovetop. It is warm and salty. In the afternoon, I go to the infusion center and get “unplugged” from my pump. In the evening, I take a nice hot shower.

On Days 1 and 2, as I pass through that deep valley, I wonder whether Christ despaired in his suffering and wished it had never come to him. Did his moral perfection and divine knowledge insulate him from discouragement? Was he able to float grandly above the fray, detached from his body’s hurts and wants, observing frailty but not subjected to it? I remember he “felt exceedingly heavy”<sup>1</sup> and prayed, “Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me.”<sup>2</sup> I remember he “shrank not to drink the bitter cup”<sup>3</sup> but wonder if he found it unbearably bitter. Did he ever think, “I can’t do this,” or “I don’t know how long I can keep this up”?

I remember he cried out in agony and desolation, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!”<sup>4</sup>

On Days 3–14, I reenter life’s hustle and bustle. I drive kids to music lessons and athletic practices. I toss bunches of cilantro and carrots into the shopping cart. I pore over primary sources and send emails containing multiple exclamation points. I watch the kids scamper up the walls at the climbing gym and even try some routes myself. At home we fold dough into pretzels, pound rice into mochi, and pull hot sugar into buttermints. On Day 14, I feel buoyant and witty. Life is good. Only, tomorrow is Day 1.

I watched my mother endure two years of cancer treatments before passing away in December 2008. During the last months of her life she was in terrible pain. She was a woman of obedience and faith, who trusted in God. How can God, who is loving, good, and all-powerful, allow such undeserved suffering? For such a long time? In such a good

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1. See Matthew 26:37.

2. See Matthew 26:39.

3. See D&C 19:18-19.

4. Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.

and loving person, so needed by her family and by the world? All over the world, there are trials far beyond cancer. Families are torn apart. Bodies are mangled by war, collisions, gang violence. Minds are beset by addiction, depression, crushing anxiety. Innocent children die because of malnutrition or abuse or just the odd combination of genes. The powerful prosper at the expense of the weak. Yet God allows it all.

In “A Latter-day Saint Theology of Suffering,” Francine Bennion gently dismantles the notion that righteousness guarantees a mortal life free from danger and an afterlife with no conflict. Bennion points out that according to the Latter-day Saint teaching of a premortal struggle between God and Lucifer, the purpose of life is to exercise agency in the face of difficulty. If God were to control and shield our lives from harm at every turn, it would be like living under Lucifer’s plan: only one will in control, with no space for us to experience agency and choose our own path. She writes:

I think suffering on this earth is an indication of God’s trust, God’s love. I think it is an indication that God does not want us to be simply obedient children playing forever under his hand, but wants us able to become more like himself. In order to do that we have to know reality ... If we are to be like God, we cannot live forever in fear that we may meet something that will scare us or that will hurt us.<sup>5</sup>

Bennion argues that to experience suffering, to navigate a world of agency-created obstacles and be subject to natural laws, is to live in God’s reality. It is to live God’s life and mature in it.

On a recent Day 2, I walked the two flights of stairs to my third-floor office. Slowly, from step to step, I trudged. My lungs, compressed to two-thirds their normal capacity by a buildup of fluid, heaved without effect. After a day and a half without food or water, my body drooped. All of a sudden I remembered a story that passed across my desk as I was writing a history of Latter-day Saints in Germany — the story of a sister so faithful, so in tune with the Spirit, during World War II, she knew exactly where the Allied bombs would fall in her city. Yet she nearly starved in the postwar months when her entire family had to live on two potatoes per day, and she insisted the children eat some of her portion.

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5. Francine R. Bennion, “A Latter-day Saint Theology of Suffering,” in *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*, edited by Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook (SLC: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 320, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/at-the-pulpit/part-4/chapter-43?lang=eng>.

She was at death's door when a Latter-day Saint American soldier arrived on their doorstep with a box of food. She was so believing, so receptive to revelation, yet God allowed her to weaken day by day until she lacked the strength to stand. To a much severer degree, she also knew weakness. Her resilience carried her on to the miracle, and past it.

Suffering's value is fellowship with others and unity with Christ. It was not enough for Jesus to wield healing power, to stop up others' wounds, and to lift others' sorrows. It was necessary for him to feel wounds in his own flesh, to feel suffocating despair, to wonder when his misery would end. In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Alma taught Christ would go forth

suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:11–12)

Christ's voluntary subjection to the horrible realities of this world transformed him forever. His vulnerability became his capacity to save and heal all humankind. Our own suffering develops our capacity for love, which is the power that makes us useful to others, and humility, which is the root of wisdom.

*Yes, says a small voice inside me, but I wish it didn't have to be this hard. And how come it isn't this hard for everyone? Other people sail through life and say it is all because of God's blessings. They live to be old and cantankerous. Why do people who cook from scratch and run marathons get colon cancer at age 37, when people who eat Cheetos, drink soda pop, and watch five hours of TV a day do just fine?*

"God," I whisper on days when I am too weary to weep and rage, "this is a terrible plan. You could take away this illness, but you don't. You could fix our problems and right the world, but you don't. You're supposed to lead us in the right way, but you let us stumble and cause harm that cannot be undone. If you are good, and if you love us, why do you allow us to suffer or inflict suffering on others? If you healed a leper, or a man with palsy, or the woman who bled, why not me and those I love?"

Suffering is often a solitary experience. In pain, I do not feel beautiful, engaging, cheerful, or strong. In the midst of unbecoming symptoms, I feel abominably weak. I feel ashamed to be so useless, so untidy. I want to crawl into a dark corner and curl whimpering into a ball. Why would I drag someone else into this sickly swamp? Company brings little comfort — only the stark contrast of my illness with others' health, my shadow with their sunny skies.

For centuries, theologians have dedicated their lives to this question of theodicy — the arbitrary cruelty of a world created for us by an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God. I cannot solve this problem with a quote from scripture or a line from a sermon, especially when living in the middle of what Francine Bennion calls the “meeting of reality, the falling, the hungering, the screaming, the crawling on the floor, the being disfigured and scarred for life psychologically or physically.”<sup>6</sup> I know the teaching: Experiencing this world with its dangers was my choice, the choice of every human. I know my own slogans: Life is a marathon. Suffering comes from attachment. No pain, no gain. But —

*Where art thou, O God? When wilt thou deliver me?*

I have wrestled with God, seeking some epiphany that would make the problem of suffering feel right. I found there were no answers to the hurts and indignities of this world, for these things are not questions. Suffering never feels right. It feels like suffering. Like prayer, it is a form of work.

Christ worked mightily in the final hours of his life. He struggled quietly in the Garden of Gethsemane, heavy with the sicknesses of humankind, lonely and pressed down. He stood raw and wounded, enduring the banal cruelty of magistrate and mob. He bore his burden through Jerusalem's crowded streets. Exposed, he called for water, but tasted vinegar. The weight of his body dragged on his nail-pierced hands and on his lungs, arresting his breath. He witnessed his mother's torment and could do nothing for her. Alone, he cried out into the darkness, unable to hear God's voice. Then finally his task was finished.

Going from “deathly ill, very horrible” to “very cheerful, all is well” in the course of fourteen days is not resurrection. But it has taught me about beginnings and ends. Having experienced suffering, one develops power over it — not the power to stop it, or take it away from someone you love, but to know its sorrows fade. Having experienced suffering,

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6. Ibid., 321.



one receives power from it — the power to share others' burdens and be humble, to see one's own burdens and be kind.

On the other side of suffering is strength. It is a peculiar sort of confidence that derives from having had no confidence at all. Things that once seemed difficult are now no trouble, and things that seemed like trouble now reveal themselves as gifts. People who once seemed vexing, inexplicable, or foreign now strike me as familiar because they have known pain. People who once seemed broken and tainted with ruin while I imagined myself to be whole are now my sisters and brothers. Truly, now I know that I am nothing, which thing I never had supposed.<sup>7</sup>

In the middle of the Auckland Domain there is a giant pohutakawa tree unlike any other I've seen. Many years ago it split, each half crashing to the ground. It almost died. But it remained intact at the base, just above the roots. It kept drinking water and eating sunlight. Now its sprawling limbs are covered in green leaves and red blossoms, a refuge for songbirds and a shady castle for children. One day, I sat on one of the limbs that struck the ground long ago. Thicker than my waist, worn smooth by grasping hands and scampering feet, the limb stretched along the ground, curling and dividing into branches, twigs, and leaves that reached upward toward the sun. I draped myself along the limb, smelled it, felt its warmth. As the breeze blew past my cheek and rustled the leaves, I felt the great limb move — very slowly, like a tender sigh from deep inside this living spirit. Once nearly destroyed, this tree was now more wonderful than any other in the Domain because children could play in its branches.

Christ showed us the way. He walked through paths of temptation, want, indignity, and pain. He humbled himself not just before the God of the universe, but before the ugliness and cruelty of everyday life.

Christ is here, among us. Turn your eyes from heaven and behold your fellow beings who beat their breasts. Let your hearts be broken but not afraid. Let the children play in the rough branches, around the empty oil drums, amongst the refuse of the fallen world. Weep with those in pain. Stop to tend fellow travelers by the wayside.

Like the pohutakawa tree, do not cease from drinking water and eating sunlight, even when you are nearly broken. For love and its sacred power, reach out. From the ground, from the dark abyss — stretch, stretch out your hands.

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7. See Moses 1:10.

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