



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

## Sermon Notes

### Growing Our Perspective on Life and Trouble

#### Observations on Thinking Theologically

##### *Introduction*

1. In an essay entitled, "Letter to An Aspiring Theologian: How To Speak of God Truly," Kevin Vanhoozer shared this insight and advice:
  - a. "An Evangelical theologian who shall remain nameless once advised a student, 'be prepared to be misunderstood and under-valued.' I would add, prepare to be unpopular: Many people resent being told they are not lords of their own lives. Theologians ought not be nags, but they must be 'the conscience of the congregation' (Thielicke), reminding people that faith is not the same as anti-intellectualism, and that God is not a supporting actor in their stories but that we have bit parts in his."<sup>1</sup>
  - b. According to Vanhoozer's criterion, I'll risk being unpopular, though hopefully not a nag.
2. I'll begin with a few stories designed to prompt thought about important issues for growing our perspective on life and trouble.
  - a. My own story: I'm present for a widowhood retreat because my wife Carlynn died just 2½ months after we learned she had stage 4 kidney cancer. She died 2½ weeks before her 61st birthday and 3½ months before our 40th wedding anniversary.
  - b. On July 15, 2018, a member of the College church of Christ in Searcy was invited to share his story and some things he had learned after his adult son committed suicide. He shared it with the congregation as the preface to a lesson on the lament in Psalm 88. Two things stood out to me from his reflection.
    - i. He said that, after months of coping and despair, and additional reflection since, he had learned that, "the big question, Why? cannot be answered."
    - ii. He explicitly raised the question many have about healing prayer: why was this person cured, but not that one?
      - (1) That stood out because, in the ten months that had passed since Carlynn's death, his was the first public statement I recall that even mentioned that question.
      - (2) During that time, we heard multiple lessons about prayer, mourned over the loss of numerous other members of our church family, and several times heard expressions of joy and gratitude over the fact that this or that person had recovered from a crisis or debilitating illness in answer to prayer.<sup>2</sup>
  - c. When I was a senior in college, my roommate from the previous year and several others were killed in a plane crash; he had been married less than six weeks. I remember hearing the preacher at his funeral say directly to his widow, "\_\_\_\_, we don't know why God took \_\_\_\_ at this time."

- i. Because of an introduction to the problem of evil the year before in a unit of a Christian Evidences course, I was startled by his statement. Over the years, I've refined and expanded on the questions that I had when I heard his statement.
    - (1) Does God arbitrarily "take" this or that person? Always? Or does he allow human freedom and a fallen world's effects to occur and then work out his plan for good in light of events (cf. Jer 18.7-10)?
    - (2) If God acted directly, and the action was not arbitrary, then why this was comparatively good person "taken" over someone not so good?
    - (3) What if my friend and those with him had died as victims of homicide? Been gunned down, or victims of a 911-like terrorist attack?
      - (a) Would the murderer[s] be culpable? But if God "took" him, why is he not culpable?
      - (b) Perhaps God caused the murderer to act as he did. Is God culpable? What are the implications of that?
    - (4) Those and similar questions that could be added point to the bigger question: What do we believe about God, his ways, how we relate to him, and what we can expect from him? Have we really thought it through?<sup>3</sup>
  - ii. I've thought about these kinds of questions multiple times since—often when hearing church announcements!—including when I read Chris McCurley's blog post from July 10, 2018: "No! God Didn't Need Another Angel in Heaven . . . And Other Ridiculous Things We Need to Stop Saying to Those Who Are Grieving!"<sup>4</sup>
  - d. As I sat at her bedside a few days before Carlynn died, I read a post on her Caring Bridge page from a friend I've known over 50 years and Carlynn knew more than 40. She has suffered through multiple ordeals, and studied and thought deeply in light of them. She sent me a link to the video of a song by Laura Story, "Blessings." It came at a good time, and was offered an insight that was different from many other communications I was receiving.
    - i. The sentiment of the refrain will suffice: what if the trials we face are God's way of working and blessing us with his mercies?<sup>5</sup>
    - ii. The song, and the author's experience which lies behind it, presents a different perspective and raises additional questions.
  - e. Finally, I'll tell you about a woman who surprised me one Sunday evening after I preached a sermon from Job. This was not "Sunday school Job," but the Job who said, "God, if I could, I'd take you to court over this, but then, you'd be the Umpire, so how fair would that be?"
    - i. Afterward, she said to me, "I'm glad to hear it's okay to ask those kinds of questions."
    - ii. I suspect that, like many people, her church experience—and maybe some things directly *said* there—had made it clear to her that such questions are off limits.
    - iii. My sense is that she was not alone, a reality that probably explains why, every time I have taught from a biblical text dealing with this subject, it's been obvious I was striking a chord with several hearers.
3. I could add other stories, but these will be enough to get us thinking about tough questions that are raised by life as we now experience it. In light of the stories, and 40 years of undergraduate and graduate courses, books read, and lessons/series presented, here is my working premise.
- a. We are better off to think about the questions *before* we face a crisis. Doing so does not mean we will hurt less. It doesn't eliminate many, or any, of the "why" questions. It does help us to prepare to cope with the problem because we have formed some well grounded conclusions (similar to thinking what you will do when driving if you meet a car in the wrong lane).

- b. Thinking ahead helps build a theological framework for meeting life's crises, a structure that includes appreciation of God's mystery and need to trust him despite appearances.
  - c. The good news is that, even if we haven't thought about trouble ahead of time, all is not lost. We can still benefit from thinking about it in the middle of or after a crisis. Then, we can use what we learn to help others. But whenever, we do it, we need to think about it.
  - d. I'm glad I built such a framework—even as I've discovered alternations I need to make in it.
    - i. Having it did not eliminate pain or questions; nor did it mean that I have not found it necessary to change my perspective on some things.
    - ii. But, I shudder to think how different my journey would be without it.
4. My aim here is to merely *introduce* just four of the conclusions I've reached from my study, observations, and experiences. Two summarize matters of method; two involve conclusions about living in what some have called this "vale of tears."

### Body

- I. We need to be clear-eyed about the idolatrous challenge we face from our culture.<sup>6</sup>
  - A. Much of Western culture has an "under the sun" worldview and perspective on life.
    - 1. "Under the sun" (38x) is the key phrase and perspective of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes (see also "under heaven" - 3x; "on earth" - 6x) (cf. Eccl 1.3, 9, 14; 2.11; 4.1; 8.9; 9.3, 11; etc.).
      - a) The things he tried in his search for meaning parallel the views and aims of our culture, both its practice and philosophy (read the *Humanist Manifestos* and related writings).
      - b) Peter Kreeft has argued that, "Ecclesiastes is the one book in the Bible that modern man most needs to read.... Whenever I teach the Bible as a whole, I always begin with Ecclesiastes. In another age, we could begin with God's beginning, Genesis. But in this age, the Age of Man, we must begin where our patient is; we must begin with Ecclesiastes."<sup>7</sup>
  - B. Our culture grows increasingly secular, self-confident, and idolatrous.
    - 1. It is not only our pursuits; our advances and accomplishments have convinced us that we have solved (or can and will solve) our problems and create *nirvana*.
    - 2. The Declaration of Independence, in a phrase that meant something different then from what most people think now, affirms the *right* to "life, liberty, and the *pursuit of happiness*."<sup>8</sup>
    - 3. Our confidence in accomplishments and quest for the good life here-and-now lead people to see trouble as an intrusion, not a fact of life (cf. Matt 5.45).<sup>9</sup>
  - C. My observation: I've seen believers whose trouble was made worse because they seemed completely surprised it could happen to *them*.
    - 1. They knew what James 4.13-17 says, but had not internalized it.
    - 2. Their actions indicated that they had apparently not noticed that James 1.2 does not say, "if" you meet trials, but "*when* you meet trials of various kinds."
    - 3. We can—and should—enjoy our blessings and opportunities; but we must guard against seeing them or being devoted to them in the same way as the culture around us.
- II. Relative to trouble, we need a more thorough and accurate reading of Scripture (cf. 2 Tim 3.16-17).
  - A. We need to be more comprehensive in the passages we read.
    - 1. In my files are sermons, class lessons, and lesson series on passages from Job, but also Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Habbakuk, Romans, 2 Corinthians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and James, *all* of which include *sections* dealing with trouble, suffering, and evil.

2. Do you recall that Paul suffered, wondered why, asked for relief, and had to learn to accept things as they were (2 Cor 12.7-10)? See also Acts 16.16-34; 1 Cor 15.30-33; 2 Cor 1.4, 8; 2.4; 4.17; 7.4; 11.22-29; 2 Tim 1.8-15; 4.1-8, 11, 16-18; etc.
  3. We need to be more aware of just how many texts (and characters) deal with suffering and ask questions “faithful people are not supposed to ask” (cf. Job 9-10, 12-13; Hab 1; 2 Cor 12.7-10; Heb 12; Jas 1.2-4, 13-15; 5.1-11; 1 Pet 3-4; also multiple Psalms).
  4. No, these are not among the “favorite” passages of many, but they take up considerable space in Scripture. Are we really open to God’s complete revelation if we bypass them?
- B. We need a more comprehensive use of biblical texts to define theology and shape our worship.
1. Two questions.
    - a) Did you know that more than one-third of the Psalms are *laments* (cf. Pss 6, 13, 44, 88)?<sup>10</sup>
    - b) Have you ever really read Lamentations? Just chapter 3? Or more than 3.22-24?
  2. Did you know that many of the lament Psalms are *community* laments (cf. Pss 12; 44)?
    - a) Have you ever experienced a church service built around the lament theme?
    - b) Must “the worship service” be upbeat to be holy, and edifying?
  3. Taking into account that most lament Psalms end with an affirmation of praise (but see Psa 88), and “the steadfast love of the Lord” is but three of sixty-six verses in its chapter (Lam 3.22-24), is it possible our praise will be more fervent if we periodically join together to honestly reflect on life’s troubles and depths?
- C. We need to be more knowledgeable about what is revealed regarding *why* we face trouble.
1. The way the world is: a place where tornados can wipe out towns, including church buildings; a place created to let us choose for or against God.
  2. The way we are: sometimes, we suffer because of the consequences of our sins.
  3. The way others are: sometimes, we suffer because others sin (and their intent often makes little difference regarding the suffering outcome; a stray bullet fired carelessly can be as deadly as one that is intentionally aimed).
    - a) Recognizing this takes the principle of human freedom seriously (cf. Jer 18.7-10; Jon 3.4-4.2).
    - b) God is omniscient and sovereign (cf. Isa 46.10); but he allows us to choose.
  4. Sometimes, we suffer because the world has been corrupted by sin and things are not as they were supposed to be (cf. Rom 8.18-23).<sup>11</sup>
    - a) Note: this point amounts to a sharpening of the previous points, especially # 1, but also #s 2 & 3.

### III. We need Paul’s perspective on Job’s story.

- A. Earlier, I mentioned the “Sunday-school Job.”
1. Trials came to Job as a test to see if he was really righteous (Job 1-2).<sup>12</sup>
  2. He refused to “curse God and die” (Job 2.9), endured his horrible trials (cf. Jas 5.11), was proved right, and was rewarded with doubled fortunes and a replacement family (Job 42.7-17); in modern terms, he “lived happily ever after.”<sup>13</sup>
- B. To review the rest of the story:
1. Job insisted that he did not deserve his suffering (*contra* the charge leveled by his friends), and God responded, as he requested.

2. His theophany did not give him his answers (Job 38-41), however; it did enable him to see God more clearly, contritely express his trust in him, and be comforted (Job 42.1-6; see the ESV footnote in v. 6).
  3. But, *within* the story, Job never knew the reason for and meaning of his suffering. In that respect, his experience is the same as ours often is.
- C. Paul had a perspective Job did not, and his teaching therefore helps us begin to understand suffering's meaning even as we ask why we suffer.
1. Suffering *is* real, but is not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed (Rom 8.18).
  2. The world is the way it is because sin affected it too (8.19-22).
  3. Suffering is part of life, but a better day is coming; Jesus has risen (8.23-25; also 11, 17, 34).
  4. We have the Spirit's help when we lack answers, or do not even know how to frame the questions (8.26-27).
  5. God is working to shape us for our good (8.28-30).
    - a) Everything is not good (cancer, Jesus' crucifixion, etc.).
    - b) Good is not always what we experience now; that is, Christians are not promised trouble-free lives (cf. Matt 5.10-12; etc.).
    - c) God will work things *for* our good, even evil things (8.28, NIV); the glory will surpass the suffering (8.18); and we will be prepared for our ultimate goal: to be glorified (8.30).
  6. Therefore, we have the confidence of victory over any trouble (8.31-39).
- IV. We need to know that the ultimate answer to the problem of suffering is the coming of the Son.
- A. Notice just a few selected texts: Luke 9.22; Matt 26.38-39, 67-68; Heb 2.10-11, 14-15; Isa 53.4-9.
- B. Peter Kreeft wrote the following:

He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover.... He came. That is the salient fact, the towering truth, that alone keeps us from putting a bullet through our heads. He came.... He did the most important thing and he gave the most important gift: himself. It is a lover's gift. Out of our tears, our waiting, our darkness, our agonized aloneness, out of our weeping and wondering, out of our cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" he came, all the way, right into that cry.

In coming into our world he came also into our suffering. He sits beside us in the stalled car in the snowbank. Sometimes he starts the car for us, but even when he doesn't, he is there. That is the only thing that matters. Who cares about cars and success and miracles and long life when you have God sitting beside you? He sits beside us in the lowest places of our lives, like water. Are we broken? He is broken with us. Are we rejected? Do people despise us not for our evil but for our good, or attempted good? He was "despised and rejected of men." Do we weep? Is grief our familiar spirit, our horrifyingly familiar ghost? Do we ever say, "Oh, no, not again! I can't take any more!"? He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Do people misunderstand us, turn away from us? They hid their faces from him as from an outcast, a leper. Is our love betrayed? Are our tenderest relationships broken? He too loved and was betrayed by the ones he loved. "He came unto his own and his own received him not." Does it seem sometimes as if life has passed us by or cast us out, as if we are sinking into uselessness and oblivion? He sinks with us. He too is passed over by the world. His way of suffering love is rejected, his own followers often the most guilty of all; they have made his name a scandal, especially among his own chosen people. What Jew finds the road to him free from the broken weapons of bloody prejudice? We have made it nearly impossible for his own people to love him, to see him as he is, free from the smoke of battle and holocaust.

... He sits beside us not only in our sufferings but even in our sins. He does not turn his face from us, however much we turn our face from him. He endures our spiritual scabs and scars, our sneers and screams, our hatreds and haughtiness, just to be with us. Withness—that is the word of love.”<sup>14</sup>

- C. As his body, we are “members one of another” (Rom 12.5; Eph 4.25) who can bear “one another’s burdens” (Gal 6.2); indeed, we “suffer together” (1 Cor 12.26).

### Conclusion

1. Years before Carlynn’s illness and death, I discovered Katie Herzig’s song, “I Hurt Too.” Not long ago, it was one of the tracks in the playlist I was listening to as I walked. Even though I had often listened to it while wrestling with a problem, I found its words especially connected with my current situation.
2. When we hurt most, it is good for us to know—and hear—that Jesus and his body “hurt too.”<sup>15</sup>

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### Reading List

*These books are among the most helpful I have read on this subject. None is technical, but some are more challenging to read than others (owing to both density of argument and emotional impact).*

Carson, D. A. *How Long O Lord?* Inter-Varsity Press, 1991.

Hicks, John Mark. *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World.* College Press, 1999.

Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense Out of Suffering.* Servant Books, 1986.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes, Life As Vanity; Job, Life As Suffering; Song of Songs, Life As Love.* Ignatius Press, 1989.

Kushner, Harold. *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough: The Search for a Life That Matters.* Pocket, 1987.

Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain.* Scribner, 1962.

Sittser, Gerald L. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss.* Zondervan, 1996.

Weatherhead, Leslie D. *The Will of God.* Abingdon, 1976, 1999.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night.* Bantam, 1982.

Yancey, Philip. *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Zondervan Publishing Company, 1997.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Letter to An Aspiring Theologian: How To Speak of God Truly,” *First Things*, August 2018: 31.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn House’s presentation, “Our Story,” can be heard and downloaded from the College church’s website, part of the sermon recording for July 15, 2018, entitled, “Dark Night of the Soul-Psalm 88.” <http://collegechurchofchrist.org/>

<sup>3</sup> In one church where I served, we had a member who not only was unfaithful to and abandoned his family, but committed a criminal act in the process. His actions also victimized another person and family in the congregation. Multiple times afterward, as she worked through the betrayal and her pain, his wife said to me that she “knew God would bring \_\_\_\_\_ back to her.” The Bible nowhere promises to override the intentions of a person’s evil choices, but what she *thought* about God and his promises shaped her expectations. She felt let down by God as the result.

<sup>4</sup> Chris McCurley’s post can be found at <http://chrismccurley.net/no-god-didnt-need-another-angel-in-heaven-and-other-ridiculous-things-we-need-to-stop-saying-to-those-who-are-grieving/> Accessed July 28, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Mixon Story, "Blessings," <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/laurastory/blessings.html> Accessed July 21, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For a probing study of the idolatry of our culture and its challenge for believers, see Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises Of Money, Sex, And Power, And The Only Hope That Matters* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes, Life As Vanity; Job, Life As Suffering; Song of Songs, Life As Love* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis and critique of the more recent understanding of the right to "the pursuit of happiness," see C. S. Lewis, "We Have No 'Right' to Happiness," in *God In the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 317-322. Lewis's essay first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1963. He argued that the problem is not having happiness as a goal, something worthy of pursuit. The problem is with how happiness is currently defined.

<sup>9</sup> The Preacher of Ecclesiastes did not make this mistake. Two other key ideas in the book are "toil" (35x) and "striving after wind" (9x). He was also clear-eyed about evil and injustice in the world (see 2.18-23; 3.1-4.6; 8.14; 9.1-6, 11). No wonder he saw life's efforts as "vanity" (or a "mist") (38x).

<sup>10</sup> Psalms scholar James Limburg lists 43 individual laments and 11 community laments among the Psalms, 54 of the 150 psalms. Individual laments are: Pss 3-7, 9-10, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 40, 41, 42-43, 51, 54-59, 61, 64, 69-71, 77, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, and 140-143. Community laments are: Pss 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 137. See James Limburg, "Psalms, Book of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 532.

<sup>11</sup> I would include cancer in this category. If we believe Genesis 2-3, so is death (cf. 1 Cor 15.26, 50-56).

<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Job 1.8 says that it was the LORD who initiated the test, and verses 9-10a note that Job's life had basically been free of trouble, identifying the issue of the book: "Then Satan answered the LORD and said, 'Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side?'"

<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, this is an oversimplification of even the Sunday-school emphasis; many also have at least some awareness of the dialogue with Job's friends.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 133-135.

<sup>15</sup> Katie Herzig, "I Hurt Too." Lyrics available at <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/katieherzig/ihurttoo.html>. Accessed July 21, 2018.