

The Morning Star

Wycliffe College Student Newsletter



The Only Answer to Suffering

By Ephraim Radner

I once heard a priest address a congregation with a question: “What is the complaint I hear most from parents?” Then he answered it by saying: “they lament the fact that their grown children have stopped going to church.” The priest went on: “Do you know what I tell them? Pray to God that your children suffer more.” It was a shocking statement, and people audibly gasped when they heard it.

But the priest’s point here was simply that, for many people, God comes clear to them – rises up before their eyes and hearts – only when their need strips away other lesser, and ultimately false hopes and foundations. It’s not a strange thought, in fact. We often talk of people – those struggling with alcohol or drugs – needing to “hit bottom” before they can face the truth of who they are and what needs to be done to turn things around, often with God’s help. We all need to have our illusions stripped away in order to see God; and suffering often performs that task.

The converse to this bit of advice, however, is also true: for those who suffer, we pray that they will find God, or “be found” by God. Obviously, we first pray for their relief, through God’s mercy. But just as often, we seek God’s presence for them, simply and in an unadorned way. We tend to think, perhaps, that God will encourage them, give them strength, provide hope, and this will help “get them through.” There is surely truth to this expectation. More so, and deep down, we believe that suffering, otherwise so difficult to bear, let alone explain, can find its sense, however mysteriously, only with God, never apart from Him. This is even more true.

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I have often been asked to “explain why we suffer,” as if theologians or priests have access to this bit of knowledge that the world has sought after, like gold, since time immemorial. I don’t think we can do this. The only “answer” to suffering is life with God, something we cannot control for others, however deeply responsible we may be for it when it comes to our own selves. Life with God, as a follower of God’s grace, who is Jesus: suffering is dealt with only there.

Christians have tried to “make sense” of suffering and evil in several important ways – explanations about the Fall of Adam and Eve, the value of free will, the fact that we can grow and learn through suffering, and so on. Books on apologetics have outlined and argued these matters, and each of these responses is true in its own way. Still, these arguments rarely convince people. Why? Because these answers do not resolve suffering, which always remains in place in human life, and just because it is suffering, is always discouraging, back-breaking, potentially destructive of the warmest heart. We have to accept and be open about the fact that we can never explain suffering away, however intellectually plausible our arguments might be. Suffering always sticks around – that’s its nature.

We also need to be honest about the fact that the Christian is going to suffer just like the non-Christian, with or without good arguments. Being a Christian isn’t a charm that protects from suffering. How could it be? Paul actually writes that our salvation is given us in a way that must pass through suffering (Rom. 8:17; cf Acts 14:22). Suffering is built into the Christian life, not just because we are human (that too!) but because we are Christians bound to Jesus who also suffered (cf. Mat. 16:24). And if it is truly suffering that the Christian experiences, not some knock-off version of pain, then the Christian too will bend and sometimes break beneath its burden. This is absolutely key to grasping, because it goes quite counter to our religious instincts and desires, though of course we know it to be true deep down.

Finally, as the Christian follows Jesus, enters with him into his life, his suffering, and his death – as the Christian is truly “baptized,” in this sense (cf. Mat. 20:22) – then the truth of all this is slowly made evident, but also revealed as bound to Truth itself, that is to God’s own

being. Not with an argument, or even an “answer”; but with the following itself. We learn what suffering is “all about” only with God. That is why one person cannot tell another in advance how suffering will find its meaning for that person or what it will feel like when it does. That is why the minister in the hospital or hospice, or at the graveside, cannot offer words that can “make sense” of what someone is going through in the midst of terrible pain. That person must “follow” for her- or himself. Or at least must be able to see you following.

In this sense, the only answer, the only apologetic response, to suffering is evangelism and formation – not in the moment of pain, of course, where it is rarely heard; but as the context in which suffering finds its profile, the context of drawing into the faith and forming in the faith. In the face of suffering – yours or another’s – there is only following. It is yours to do. No one else’s. Yours to discover. And you will, if you follow with Jesus.

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We tend to teach our children to be good, to work hard, to make “wise decisions,” to be nice, to accomplish something. And we pray that nothing bad happens to them. This, after all, is pretty much what we hope for ourselves. But it’s not who we really are; nor is it where we are really going. We will pass through all kinds of landscapes, but eventually each of us will suffer, and see those we love suffering. The truth of God’s life, in its fullness, is something that transfigures all things, and it is this that we yearn for whatever we end up passing through or wherever we end up coming to rest. Shall I pray that my children suffer? Of course not! It will happen anyway. Pray instead that they will follow the one who came to give abundant life, even in the face of tribulation (Jn. 10:10; 16:33).

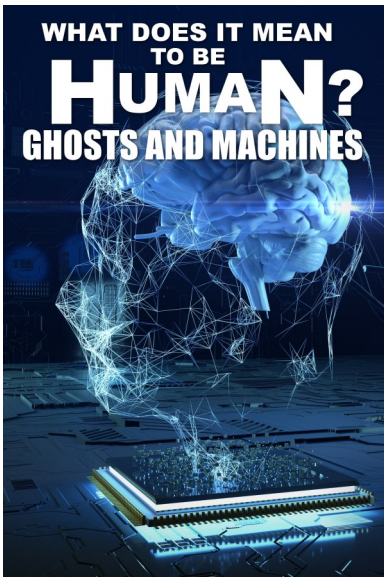
About the Author

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News & Announcements

From the Registrar – Do you expect to graduate this May? Be sure to sign up for a photo sitting for January 30 or 31. Your robe and hood will be provided for you at the session. These photos will be used for the graduating class composite which will be hung in the ambulatory, so be sure that you are included! You also have the option of purchasing copies for yourself. Please choose a time slot on the signup sheet which will be posted at the front desk the week before the photo shoot. Cannot make either day? Please contact Jeffrey Hocking (jhocking@wycliffe.utoronto.ca) to make alternative arrangements.

Christians Against Poverty Course – There will not be a CAP course at Wycliffe but for anyone interested, St. Pauls Bloor Street has invited our students to participate in their course. Tuesdays, Starting February 5th, for 3 weeks (Feb 5, 12, 19). No Cost. You do not need to be a member of the Parish to attend. Register at <http://www.stpaulsbloor.org/money-course>



Upcoming Events

What Does it Mean to be Human? Ghosts and Machines

The human soul has been described as “the ghost in the machine” [of the human body]. But not everyone agrees that the soul exists. On Jan 25, Geordie Rose, Julien Musolino and Michael Murray discuss artificial intelligence, cognitive science and the implications they have on the question of “what it means to be human.” Get Tickets:

www.wycliffecollege.ca/religionandsociety

Toronto Christian Scholar Symposium – Jan 25 An annual gathering of interdisciplinary scholars of the Christian faith to explore ways to integrate faith and the academy. The keynote speaker will be Michael Murray, Senior Vice President at the John Templeton Foundation. Buy tickets: www.wycliffecollege.ca/tcss

Wednesday Event with George Sumner – Jan 30 Don’t miss this! The former Principal of Wycliffe will give a talk “If I Could Tell a Young Seminarian/Priest 10 Things” at 3 p.m. in the Reading Room.

At Home Dinner & Dance 2019 – Feb 1 Join us for an evening of Texas BBQ and music! Wycliffe's annual At Home is a chance to relax and feel "at home" with each other. Tickets are \$15, which includes BBQ and sides + 2 drinks. Register by Jan 27: athome-2019.eventbrite.com

Preaching Day – Feb 19 Preaching is an incredible privilege and a daunting responsibility. Dr Joseph Mangina and the Rev. Dr. Annette Brownlee will be looking at the gospel of the beloved disciple, the book of John. Early bird tickets available by Jan 15: wycliffecollege.ca/preachingday

More News & Announcements

This Wednesday—TST-wide ecumenical service at St. Augustine’s Seminary

This week is Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There will be a TST-wide ecumenical service on **Wednesday, January 23** from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. at [St. Augustine’s Seminary](#). The event will feature Fr. Galadza of The Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies. A bus will be available to transport attendees from the St. George Campus to the Seminary for the service. The bus will leave from St. Joseph Street at 1:00 p.m. and will return to the same location around 5:00 p.m. Refreshments to follow. Please RSVP to sudipta@sastoronto.org

New Faculty Sermon Series on Ezekiel

Wycliffe faculty preach on the book of Ezekiel this winter term in the Chapel from 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. every Thursday. wycliffecollege.ca/ezekiel

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Chapel Service Schedule

Morning Prayer
Mon-Fri, 8:30 a.m.

Wine Before Breakfast
Tue, 7:22 a.m.

Taize Evening Prayer
Mon, 5:30 p.m.

Sung Evensong
Tue, 5:30 p.m.

Community Eucharist
Wed, 4:45 p.m.

Prayer & Praise
Thu, 5:00 p.m.

Informal Evening Prayer
Fri, 5:30 p.m.

	Service	Sacristan	Officiant / Homilist	Readers, Servers, etc.	Greeters
Mon	MP	B. Poole	E. Radner	B. Jenkins / S. Yeong	A. Tremblett
	Taize	M. Garner	A. Brownlee	A. Tremblett	G. Hynds
Tue	MP	L. Hurst	P. Robinson / N. Cunha	R. Barlett / B. Tshin	S. Caron
	Evensong	S. Lawley	E. Teel	N. Drenth / J. Mangina	N. Drenth
Wed	MP	M. Garner	+SGWA	Z. Bartkus / R. Henderson	Z. Bartkus
	Eucharist	N/A	N/A—No Eucharist— Ecumenical service at St. Augustine’s	N/A	N/A
Thu	MP	S. Lawley	T. Power / M. Taylor	B. Tshin	B. Tshin
	P&P	Z. Bartkus	R. Bartlett / C. Love	A. Tremblett	S. Caron
Fri	MP	L. Hurst	A. Brownlee	M. Taylor / S. Yeong	J. Duerrstein
	Inform. EP	Z. Bartkus	Student Officiant	R. Barlett / A. Tremblett	R. Bartlett