



# Old Time Religion: Good Enough for Jesus

John 14:15-21; Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22

A title caught my eye in a bookstore this week: *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer.*<sup>1</sup> This is indeed one of our most perplexing questions. On one level, it may be that Buddhism answers the question of why most directly—we suffer because we desire. In another sense, the Bible gives us the answer that we suffer due to sin, whether our own or that of others. On another level, we suffer because of faulty expectations. None of these answers, however, is truly satisfying. They speak to part of the equation, but not the whole picture. Does the Bible really have no fitting answer, however, to the problem of suffering and pain?

While I must agree with the author that the Bible does not present a decisive answer to the issue of suffering, the larger problem is that we just don't like the answer it gives. The most significant Biblical response to suffering is Jesus Christ—God in human flesh. The Bible may not fully answer why, but it shows God participating in our suffering. Suffering may be part of our lives, but it was also part of Jesus' existence, becoming life for us. Luke, Paul, Peter, and the author of Revelation do not seem nearly as distressed by suffering as we would like them to be. Is what was good enough for them good enough for us?

As human beings, we tend to glamorize aspects of the past. Some things we highlight as worse than reality, but all too often we paint the good life of the old days with too broad a brush. The Archie Bunker theme song spoke of the good old days when Archie's issues had not yet arisen. Tim McGraw sings of a simpler life "Back When."<sup>2</sup> The old spiritual, "Gimme Dat Ole Time Religion," follows the same line of nostalgia.

*Gimme dat old-time religion, gimme dat old-time religion, gimme dat old-time religion. It's good enough for me. It was good for our mothers. It was good for our fathers. It will save all our children. It was good for Paul and Silas. It was good for the Hebrew children. It was tried in the fiery furnace. It was good for the prophet Daniel. It will do when I am dying. It will take us all to heaven. It's good enough for me!*

Why nostalgia? Nostalgia, because it does not address the reality of faith in the lives of our heroes of the past. Archie Bunker longed for the days of Herbert Hoover, ignoring the realities of the Great Depression. The spiritual sings of the glory of faith in Daniel, ignoring the exile and captivity of the people. It glows over Paul and Silas, glossing over their beating and imprisonment. It longs for a past to escape the issues of present living. See, the biggest problem we ever face is the one of the moment. The great problems of the past are over. It is the pressing issues of the moment that always take center stage in our lives. Nostalgia for the past is often an attempt to escape life in the present—a common response to anxiety and suffering.

The reality of that old time religion faith is not our true longing. Paul' and Silas' faith saw them torture and prison, yet it was only such experience of suffering that it could be found "good enough." When Paul later stands in Athens to witness, he speaks of Christ Jesus as one who suffered death and

<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer.* New York: Harper Collins, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey David Stephens, et al. "Back When". <http://www.cmt.com/lyrics/tim-mcgraw/back-when/6678630/lyrics.jhtml> release 2004.

only then resurrection. Just before his betrayal, Jesus speaks to the disciples about his departure in death. He recognizes their coming grief. He makes preparation for it in the coming of the Spirit. He pledges to demonstrate God's love for them, but love does not come in the absence of suffering. Rather, it is enacted in the very presence of pain and suffering.

Peter speaks of a faithful witness amid unjust suffering as a means of identifying with Christ. He reminds us that intimidation and fear are not necessary ingredients in our lives. In Christ, we live a faith extending beyond the bounds of worldly anxiety. While suffering is part of our living experience, it need not control our living, for the experience of Christ Jesus carries us beyond our issues with suffering. Here is Peter's answer to suffering—it was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.

What kind of answer is that? It is not nostalgia—Jerusalem had been recently destroyed, the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. It is not calling suffering good—he takes pains in desiring to avoid suffering. It does not negate God's power over evil, God's love, or goodness. It says there is more to reality than our limited grasp.

Peter goes back to the story of Noah's proclamation of God's will. In spirit, Jesus had preached grace through Noah, though only a handful had heeded God's word. As there was more to the story than most saw in Noah's ark building, so there is more to the story in our suffering than often meets our eyes. That true "Old Time Religion" of Noah's example was to look beyond the limits of our eyesight to trust God for that hidden from view. It was to accept the reality of struggling against an antagonistic popular opinion in laying claim to ultimate victory of God's blessing.

Noah's example was to lay everything down to obey God in confidence. Peter related it to the experience of baptism—conversion in the language of his day. Baptism meant laying aside all other claim to God's blessing in submission of wholehearted faith in the sufficiency of God's grace.

That was Peter's answer to the issue of suffering and violence against the body of Christ. That is just not the compelling answer we are seeking. It does not shove suffering into a controlled, manageable package from which we might steer clear. It gives no parameters to avoid suffering, even in the course of faithful living. Rain still falls for the just and the unjust. Jesus himself suffered more than we are likely to comprehend. He gave all there was to give to reconcile a world that would deny him a right to live. He said, "Fear not, for I have overcome the world."

What was good enough for Jesus? It wasn't a nostalgic view of an artificial past. It wasn't a life that ignored the real issues human beings struggle through. It was not a false idea of security against the unexpected suffering. It was not a life without problems. Rather, good enough for Jesus was embracing the love and provision of God's grace in spite of our experience with suffering.

Somehow, God's love looked different to Jesus' eyes than our expectations on love. We see love making the world a perfectly safe environment where nothing could possibly cause any harm. That is not the world of God's creation. Rather suffering in God's eyes becomes an opportunity to experience the fullest provision of God beyond our limitations.

Perhaps we need to discard our superficial, selfish ideas of love, faith, and reality for those issues of the Old Time Religion—you know, the one that was truly good enough for Jesus.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*