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Book Review of *Why Suffering?*

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People know that as long as they live, there will be suffering. Although we do not have the choice to decide whether we want to be born into this world, we have the choice to decide whatever reasons we want to live out. Therefore, knowing that this is a world full of suffering, people find their meaning and purpose as the driving force to thrive. Surely there are moments of happiness, but sometimes the pain and suffering are so strong and disastrous that it seemingly overrides the happy moments. What is the one purpose that will help people withstand in those critical times, the purpose that is much bigger and more substantial to help people get back on their feet when they feel defeated and destroyed, or even in the face of destruction? If there is such a life-fulfilling purpose, is it an individualized purpose that is different for each person or could it be a universal purpose that is for the whole humankind? In the face of pain and suffering, such as war, famine, death, poverty, how could some people be able to find faith and hope when there is none to be found? How could some people believe that there is a higher power, God, who is in control of everything and praise Him, when they are in the deep trench of pain and suffering?

Ravi Zacharias is an Indian-born Canadian-American Christian apologist and the founder of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. Vince Vitale is the Senior Tutor at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (OCCA) and holds a DPhil in Philosophy and an MPhil in Theology. They have collaborated and written the book, *Why Suffering? Finding Meaning and Comfort When Life Doesn't Make Sense*. They provided some possible answers to the cause and reason for suffering in the world from a philosophical and theological standpoint. This book is intended for readers who may hold a Christian worldview and skeptics who may hold a non-religious and/or other religious worldviews. Zacharias and Vitale made evident of some Christian

apologetics and emotional personal experiences to bring out the main idea that, although pain and suffering are undesirable, it is necessary and meaningful in our lives in the world.

The book raised the controversial question: why is there pain and suffering? Then the authors laid out the trilemma that both believers and skeptics hold: 1. God is all-powerful: He can do anything He wills. 2. God is all-loving: He cares with an intense value for His creation. 3. Evil is a reality: Suffering is an all-pervading part of this world. Thus, if God is omnipotent and all-loving, there would not be evil and suffering. Albeit, evil and suffering are a reality and it exists. Therefore, God does not exist. The authors listed different approaches to show how Jesus Christ alone is the most efficient answer to the meaning and purpose of suffering. The first approach is that the reality of suffering does not deny the existence of God, and it does not conflict with the characteristics of God. Zacharis (2015) argued that if God is omnipotent, then He can allow the evilness to exist and it can be coherent with His intended purpose for the world and it can be meant for good. God is not bounded in our limited vision and understanding of evil and suffering. Given that He is all-loving and omnipotent, He can exert His limitless power in a way that humans will never grasp. Therefore, the trilemma aforementioned is one of the unresolved problems that our limited mind will never comprehend. The second approach is that the argument on the consequences of exercising our free will. We have the freedom to choose. But we do not have the wisdom to make the right choice every time, which would lead to pain and suffering. From a theological perspective, Zacharias (2015) pointed out that God allows us to choose whether we want to love Him or not. But because we are made intended to love God and are created in His image, rejecting God would indeed induce pain and suffering due to the incongruence and incoherence within us. The third approach is that if God could create the world

with the exact quality and quantity of people and things, but without any evilness and suffering in it. Zacharias (2015) took a philosophical perspective here and argued that had God not created the world that allowed pain and suffering in it, we would not have existed. Even a slight change of an element of this world and alteration of any event that has ever happened in our lives, there would not be us the way we are right now. But God wants to love each individual that has ever existed, thus God allows evil and suffering to continue to exist.

Zacharias and Vitale (2015) suggested that there are benefits in suffering. They argued that loving a person does not mean all the pain and suffering should be taken away from that person's life. Suffering permits growth. Zacharias used his anecdote about his mom did not take the young Ravi away from getting hurt, instead, she asked him to punch her face which caused her to bleed while he was bleeding. Not only Zacharias presented that because he was able to experience pain and hurt, he has grown to be a man with a stronger heart, he also used this analogy as to further explain that only the Christian God would rather suffer with us than to distant Himself away from us. There is literature presented on the importance of suffering as one of the factors that helps a person to be more aware of oneself psychologically and emotionally. In the book, *Why sin matters: the surprising relationship between our sin and God's grace*, by Mark McMinn (2004), there was a client that McMinn worked with using CBT to help with the client's depression. Later in the sessions, McMinn discovered that some of the guilt and shame he has helped alleviate was caused by the client's past actions. Because the client failed to admit that his actions were wrong, he did not feel the need to repent and correct his behavior. In this particular case, there is a purpose and merit in the pain and suffering that the client was experiencing because it could help the client to understand the consequences of wrongdoing. The

fourth approach that Zacharias and Vitale brought up is that the existence of objective morality. If there was no God, there would not be a reference point for good and bad. Skeptics would argue that we can decide what is good and bad for us. Yet at the same time, we all know that we are subjective and opinionated creatures. With that being said, without the objectivity of morality and objective good and bad, we would not even talk about the subject of pain and suffering because it would not make sense as it is only a matter of different opinions.

The fifth and sixth approach that I believe is more leaning toward a theological perspective. The authors expanded on how God's crucifixion gave the explanation that Christianity offers not merely a theoretical and intellectual answer, but it also offers a person, Jesus Christ who accompanies us in suffering and he suffers with us for His pure love for us. In my opinion, this central argument is connecting all the chapters throughout the book and is intended to show people that there are hope and faith amidst suffering because God is in it with us, and we are not alone in suffering. People are drawn to God closer and can be more at ease in suffering understanding that there is a purpose for the bad things they go through. And the authors reassured readers that the time we have on earth is as short as a blink of an eye. Using our limited perspective in an attempt to explain suffering would always be insufficient. As the Bible says, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4, King James Version). However, this would be irrelevant for the non-Christians and non-religious readers who do not believe in God's Kingdom and the life in eternity. The time on earth is the only time that they know they would ever live. Therefore, those readers may not resonate with this argument and may not find any comfort in suffering. I would

like to see how the authors could approach this. So how would people see any less-than-sufficient meaning and find comfort from suffering in this life on earth?

Looking from a psychological and therapeutic perspective, suffering yields healing. In the scholarly work, *The Role of Suffering in Human Flourishing: Contributions from Positive Psychology, Theology, and Philosophy*, Elizabeth Lewis, M., Langer, R., & McMartin, J. (2010) wrote, “Both positive psychology and theology recognize the constructive potential of adversity in providing a context for the cultivation of enduring, virtuous traits of character”, and they continued, “Both positive psychology and theology agree that suffering can serve to redirect people toward the goods associated with relationship and can reorient deeply held worldviews and beliefs”. For instance, a client was aware that he/she had social anxiety and stuttering when giving a public speech. If the client used avoidance in every situation where he/she had to give a public speech, that certainly would not yield a positive long-term outcome. But if he/she were to expose himself/herself more to public speaking, then the sense of self-confidence would develop and deescalate the anxiety and stuttering (Scheuricha, A. J., Beidela C. D., & Vanryckeghem, M., 2019). The more a person exposed to adverse events, the more worldview reorientation and character formation occurs (Elizabeth Lewis, M., et al., 2010).

Zacharias and Vitale (2015) presented robust Christian apologetics to deliver the message that pain and suffering could be a part of God’s intended purpose for His creation, even though we do not understand it at all. From a philosophical perspective, suffering allows room for human developmental growth. Additionally, they concluded that none of the other religious worldviews could justify the reason as to why there is suffering and how to confront it. Only the Christian worldview can offer the best explanation for the beginning and the end of suffering.

God has brought salvation and has redeemed us from the ultimate result of suffering, death (Zacharias and Vitale, 2015). There is a definitive statement that Zacharias wrote in the book, “The Bible makes it clear that the ultimate purpose of God for us is communion with the Father” (Zacharias and Vitale, 2015). Albeit it is the biblical truth. If the reviewer comes from a different theological persuasion, this concept would be difficult for the reviewer to accept.

My overall impression of the book is that I appreciate the authors attempted to provide insights on the subject of pain and suffering. I believe that each person experiences suffering uniquely but at the same time, it is a universal emotion. Thus, the authors tried to connect with readers through various emotional anecdotes. Unfortunately, the switching between Christian apologetics and personal stories is somewhat unorganized and sometimes confusing. I am interested in a discussion on how other religious worldviews and non-religious worldviews help people or mislead people in the face of suffering and evil. For instance, if some people gain a strong hope and faith through other religious worldviews, does it matter if that higher power is not Christ? How would the authors approach to those people without giving the impression that “my religion is better than yours”? If some Atheists find a withstanding purpose and meaning for their lives, is it necessary for them to admit that there is a God? How would the authors approach to them as well? These would be interesting to explore in-depth as it might help Christian readers and non-Christians readers to see that people are not drawn to God and closer to God only when they are in pain and suffering, and God does not need to make us suffer so that we would seek Him. Regardless of the circumstances, God is the Sovereignty alone and we are drawn to Him because we are long for knowing our Creator.

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