

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 20 · 2016 · Pages vii-xxxii

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Daniel C. Peterson

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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REFLECTING ON THE “MARKS OF JESUS”

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: Loss, pain, and suffering are too often, it seems, co-sojourners through our lives. To one degree or another, we all become familiar with these elements of a life lived in an imperfect world. It is inevitable — and virtually universal — that such companions foster questions about the meaning of life and whether there is a God who is the author, director, and finisher of that meaning. For those who conclude that God is real and has part in our lives, suffering can have or acquire eternal significance, enhanced by the personal realization that God, too, suffers and has suffered. In the Christian paradigm, God shares our suffering and we, in turn, share in His. In the depths of our sorrow we have, literally, a “co-sufferer” sharing our journey. As Christians, we are called upon to take upon ourselves the name of Christ. This act not only gives us a new name, but may require us to bear loss, pain, and suffering as did Christ — to acquire the “marks of Jesus” in our own lives. Indeed, for some, such bearing may be a key part of becoming what God plans for us to become.

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth:
he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her
shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.¹

During a recent visit to the campus of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, I took the opportunity to drop by the bookstore of the Duke Divinity School. Spending more than 60 seconds in a bookstore is extremely dangerous for me; it's a rare bookshop in which I can't find at least *something* that interests me, and usually *many* things. Unsurprisingly, therefore, I emerged with a book: *Pascal's Wager: What Is It To Be Human*, by Ray Barfield.²

I've always been interested in the famous "wager" proposed by the great French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662); it even figures somewhat in a book manuscript that I've been tinkering with, on and off, over the past few years.

For those who might be unfamiliar with it, the Wager, which is outlined in Pascal's posthumously published *Pensées* (or "Thoughts"), runs essentially as follows:

1. Either God exists or he doesn't.
2. Reason cannot conclusively prove or disprove his existence.
3. Each person must decide or wager, one way or the other. Wagering isn't optional. (Not to decide is, itself, to decide.)
4. If God exists, the potential gains for acting on that correct assumption are infinite (e.g., salvation and eternal life in heaven).
5. If God doesn't exist, the losses from having acted on an incorrect assumption are finite (e.g., some pleasures foregone, some luxuries missed) and won't matter in the long run, anyway, because the mistaken person will no longer exist.
6. Therefore, a rational person will wager that God exists (and particularly so because there is at least some actual evidence for God's existence).³

1. Isaiah 53:2–7. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this essay come from the King James Version.

2. Ray Barfield, *Pascal's Wager: What Is It To Be Human?* (N.pl.: The Veritas Forum, 2013).

3. The Wager is discussed in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, III.233. There are numerous editions.

The subtitle of Barfield’s little book (it’s only 56 pages long) suggested a new approach to the topic. Similarly, the author’s unusual background hinted at a potentially different vantage point from which to look at it: Professor Barfield is a pediatric oncologist at the Duke University School of Medicine as well as a Christian philosopher who teaches at Duke’s Divinity School. He holds both a medical doctorate and a doctorate in philosophy from Emory University in Atlanta.

Dr. Barfield’s slim volume is adapted from a 2011 lecture that he delivered at the University of Oklahoma under the auspices of the Veritas Forum, which, a note on the back cover of *Pascal’s Wager* explains, “hosts university events that engage students and faculty in discussions about life’s hardest questions and the relevance of Jesus Christ to all of life.” It includes not only Professor Barfield’s lecture but a transcript of the audience questions that followed his formal presentation and of his answers to them.

I won’t be reviewing the book here, nor pretending to offer an exhaustive or even balanced summary of its contents. What I want to do, instead, is to highlight some remarks from Dr. Barfield and to comment upon them and then to bring it into a kind of conversation with yet another book that I read upon my return to Utah from that trip to North Carolina (and elsewhere).

On the day following our return, I learned that the still relatively young daughter of a friend, neighbor, and member of our ward had suddenly and unexpectedly died while we were gone. And, later that same day, another friend was horrified to find his even younger daughter dead in her apartment. These two shocking stories led me to turn to a book that had long been on my list of must-reads.

Among the most eminent living Christian philosophers, Nicholas Wolterstorff (b. 1932) taught for 30 years at Calvin College in Michigan before becoming the Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University from 1989 to 2001. While also serving as a visiting professor at various universities in Europe, England, and the United States, and helping both to establish the Society of Christian Philosophers and to launch its journal, *Faith and Philosophy*, he also delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at Scotland’s St. Andrews University and published extensively not only in the philosophy of religion but on subjects ranging from aesthetics through epistemology, metaphysics, and political philosophy to the philosophy of education.

Perhaps Nicholas Wolterstorff’s most widely known book, though, is one that he would desperately rather never have written. On

11 June 1983, his 24-year-old son Eric was killed in a mountain-climbing accident in the Kaisergebirge, a mountain range located between the Austrian towns of Kufstein and St. Johann in Tirol. Devastated by grief, Wolterstorff poured his soul into a series of vignettes and intensely personal meditations that, years later, were published in book form as *Lament for a Son* — a meditation entirely worthy to be placed alongside C.S. Lewis’s 1961 memoir of *A Grief Observed*.⁴

“Though it is intensely personal,” he explains,

I decided to publish it in the hope that some of those who sit beside us on the mourning bench for children would find my words giving voice to their own honoring and grieving. What I have learned, to my surprise, is that in its particularity there is universality. Many who have lost children have written me. But many who have lost other relatives have done so as well, along with many who have experienced loss in forms other than the death of relatives or friends. The sharply particular words of *Lament*, so I have learned, give voice to the pain of many forms of loss.⁵

As I read Nicholas Wolterstorff’s agonizing account of his grief at Eric’s death, I began to sense a dialogue between *Lament for a Son* and *Pascal’s Wager*. In this little essay, I’ll transcribe some of that dialogue as it presented itself to my mind, and then offer some additional thoughts that came to me in the wake of reading the two books. Among other things, the thought that pain and suffering are absolutely personal and intensely subjective, while, at the same time, universal and our common lot in mortality, is a theme that impressed itself upon me in particular ways.

I.

Predictably, given the text upon which he’s reflecting, the question of whether there is or is not a God, of whether reality is deeply personal or fundamentally impersonal, is at the heart of Ray Barfield’s remarks in *Pascal’s Wager*. But inevitably, given his background, his approach is also palpably different.

“In the experiences of beauty and love,” says Barfield,

4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987).

5. Ibid. 5.

the placeholder for the range of thoughts, feelings, and actions that emerge is gratitude. Is there or is there not someone to thank? With suffering, a question arises, but it's the question whether or not there is someone to blame.

If the universe is not created, suffering is still suffering, but it's not reasonably thought of as inflicted or maliciously permitted, and it provokes no question of why.

But if there's a God responsible for the universe and sufficiently involved to merit prayer, the character of suffering is very different. As they say, now it's personal. Everything that was uniquely and newly attractive about beauty and love in a universe created by God now presses us to ask whether the gains are worth the price.⁶

It's not surprising, of course, that a philosopher who also specializes in the medical treatment of children afflicted with cancer would find himself reflecting on the meaning or lack of meaning of pain, sorrow, and suffering. Surely these things must be on his mind almost daily. And it's from such things that his discussion of Pascal's Wager proceeds. Whereas Pascal has often been viewed as breaking new ground in probability theory and decision theory, Barfield comes to the discussion from the experience of pain and sorrow and of thanksgiving and relief — perhaps his own but certainly that of others with whom (and on whom) he's worked as a physician.

“Even if love were an illusion,” he says, “even if all love was finally nothing more than one more version of how chemicals can combine in an accidental, material universe,” there would still be a deeply human “wanting it to be more than that, the desire for something real beyond the accident of molecular combination.”⁷

However, while many believe in a significance to human acts and to humanity itself that transcends matter in motion, atoms and the void, others do not. And it may or may not be a simple matter merely of data, logic, and analysis. Perhaps they *cannot*. Or, at least, even if they're not actually incapable, they find it insuperably difficult. Personality and temperament, individual history, varying experience, even prejudices, psychological quirks, character, and intellectual capacities or incapacities almost certainly play a significant role.

6. Barfield, *Pascal's Wager*, 13.

7. *Ibid.*, 16.

In the end, there are two kinds of thinkers. Those who say upon hearing the description of the many materially describable pieces and processes underlying the appearance, ‘This is all there is,’ and those who say, ‘No, it’s not.’

The former can say to the latter, ‘Show me why I should accept the idea of something more,’ and though many arguments can be offered, offered indeed on both sides, one who starts as a materialist will attempt to account for these central experiences as merely material events, not yet explained but explainable, while one who starts as a theist will say that these experiences are most fully illuminated when we reject the prospect that the determined material universe is all there is, and propose instead [a] creator.

The theist will say that love makes more sense, truth makes more sense, value, morality, beauty, longing, joy, hope, music, mystery, and goodness all make more sense in a universe that’s not merely accidental matter. It’s not an argument that such a thinker offers (although there are plenty of arguments), nor is it an argument that the materialist offers for the baseline and controlling belief that finally love, value, morality, beauty, longing, joy, hope, music, mystery, and goodness are temporary, accidental parts of a purely material universe.

At this deep level, it seems to me simply not to be about argument.⁸

Certainly, many atheistic materialists find meaning in their lives, in service, in raising children, in sacrificing for causes larger than themselves. Or, perhaps more accurately, they choose meaning for, or ascribe meaning to, such things. However, Barfield asks, what is the meaning of that meaning? In the end, there is none. Human minds and, hence, human purposes will eventually die, disappear, reach extinction, and, in a purposeless, materialistic, unconscious universe, it will ultimately be as if they had never existed.⁹

Barfield leaves no doubt that he rejects the view that humanity is merely “a transient, though conscious vapor”; human minds, personalities, and souls are more, in his judgment, than “a conscious but transient, accidental vapor on a speck in the middle of an

8. Ibid., 18–19.

9. See the discussion at Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 46–47.

incomprehensibly massive universe.”¹⁰ Admittedly, though, he cannot prove his belief to the satisfaction of all others. But, he points out, his belief cannot be proven false, either.

If all were darkness with absolutely nothing suggesting the possibility that there’s more — that there’s a God — that would be easy. Or if all were light, with clear and absolute, unwavering signs of a creator God everywhere we look, that would be easy.¹¹

Barfield does think, however, that belief — or even the simple openness to belief — can enable us to see things differently, and perhaps to see different things. (The maxim of St. Anselm of Canterbury [1033–1109] comes to mind: *Credo ut intelligam*. “I believe so that I may understand.”)¹²

The very habit of approaching different parts of lived experience with the mere openness to the possibility of God may itself be a condition for seeing certain qualities in the world, certain parts of what’s real about the world.¹³

Bach’s concertos do not themselves compel us towards conclusions regarding their origin, meaning, and purpose. But if we begin in a strict materialist universe with a kind of reductive naturalism, our starting point will lead us to devise theories and explanations that account for Bach’s brain producing this music and our own brains hearing the music. Writing a concerto is just another interesting (interesting to us, at least) manifestation of determined chemical reactions that are, as chemical reactions go, qualitatively no different than a reaction in a beaker when a teaspoon of sugar dissolves in water (though the reactions in Bach’s brain are more complex).¹⁴

But just as Barfield isn’t concerned to demonstrate that God is real and doesn’t think it possible to do so by objective evidence beyond a reasonable doubt, so, likewise, that isn’t Blaise Pascal’s focus, either.

10. Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 23.

11. *Ibid.*, 24.

12. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 1. There are various editions.

13. Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 30.

14. *Ibid.*, 32.

Pascal is not in the business of proving God's existence, and people frequently get confused about this point. He is in the business of attending to probabilities — the stakes in a gamble — and the answer to the biggest gamble we have, namely, how we should live our lives.

Pascal wants to say that if it's even *possible* that there's more to the universe and myself than atoms in the void, and if it *might* be the case that this possible more is God, then it approaches *certainty* that I should include this in my life planning as I answer the question, *What should I do?*¹⁵

In a very significant sense, Pascal's concern is a practical one. We must act. We have no alternative. But *how* should we act? Our concept of the nature of the universe, of whether (in some sense) it's personal or not, will strongly affect our answers to that question.

Either there's a God or there's not. No matter how much you strain your reasoning abilities, [Pascal] wants to say, you will not be able to prove with certainty the truth of the question, one way or the other.

But you are in the game, and you don't have a choice about whether you're in the game because here you are, alive, spending your time with no choice on whether you spend it. So consider the options.¹⁶

If you've ever hesitated to get on a roller coaster, worried over what's ahead, but finally sit in the seat and buckle yourself in, then you know the feeling that there's no way to do anything but ride the ride to the end. We are all most assuredly and irrevocably strapped in, and there's no way off the ride except to ride it to the end.¹⁷

II.

How does this work in the real world? Barfield cites two passages from the apostle Paul to illustrate his answer to that question:

I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor

15. Ibid., 24–25. Italics in the original. Compare page 29, on the purpose or intended result of Pascal's Wager: "It's not an argument to feel a certain way."

16. Ibid., 27.

17. Ibid., 34.

height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁸

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed, day by day, for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure because we look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.¹⁹

“St. Paul’s ‘slight momentary affliction,’” Barfield notes, “included injustice, imprisonment, hunger, whipping, snakebite, shipwreck, and so forth.” Nevertheless, he continues, Paul wasn’t intending to minimize those trials, nor to “pretend them away.” The words spoken by Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,” are “at the center of the Christian story.”²⁰

The universe, understood in a Christian light, is not a place without suffering or a place in which suffering is minimized or trivialized. Pain, whether emotional or physical, isn’t *maya* or “illusion.” It’s utterly real, and, in a real sense, no less painful for Christians than for other theists or for unbelievers. “There’s no less suffering in such a universe,” Barfield rightly comments.²¹ On a theistic understanding, however — certainly on a Christian one — such suffering can have or at least acquire eternal meaning, even if we can’t always discern that meaning and even when (thank you very much!) we would prefer to do without it.

It’s not necessary to go back to the apostle Paul and the first century, however, to see serious pain and suffering. It’s all around us. Everywhere. Every day. Even in quiet and prosperous neighborhoods. Nicholas Wolterstorff, to choose an example, was and remains a convinced Christian, but his agony is no less real because of his belief in eternal life and in the resurrection of Jesus.²²

18. Romans 8:38–39, cited at Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 14. For this quotation and the succeeding one, I’ve been unable to identify the translation that Barfield is using.

19. 2 Corinthians 4:17, cited at Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 14–15. See note above.

20. Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 15.

21. *Ibid.*, 15.

22. In fact, he was surprised at how little comfort he found, in the immediacy of his pain right after Eric’s death, in the promise of an eventual reunion at some distant future time. See Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 31–32.

“We took him too much for granted,” writes Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Lament for a Son*.

Perhaps we all take each other too much for granted. The routines of life distract us; our own pursuits make us oblivious; our anxieties and sorrows, unmindful. The beauties of the familiar go unremarked. We do not treasure each other enough. He was a gift to us for twenty-five years. When the gift was finally snatched away, I realized how great it was. Then I could not tell him. ... I didn't know how much I loved him until he was gone.²³

It is the *neverness* that is so painful. *Never again* to be here with us — never to sit with us at table, never to travel with us, never to laugh with us, never to cry with us, never to embrace us as he leaves for school, never to see his brothers and sisters marry. All the rest of our lives we must live without him. Only our death can stop the pain of his death.²⁴

There's a hole in the world now. In the place where he was, there's now just nothing.²⁵

It's so wrong, so profoundly wrong, for a child to die before its parents. It's hard enough to bury our parents. But that we expect. Our parents belong to our past, our children belong to our future. We do not visualize our future without them. How can I bury my son, my future, one of the next in line? He was meant to bury me!²⁶

Ray Barfield suggests that, if you want easy explanations for human loss and suffering, if you seek neat little stories punctuated with smiley faces and decorated with pretty butterflies, Christianity isn't a very promising place to find them:

A faith that has at its center the Son of God dying on the cross at the hands of the Roman army after asking God to let this cup pass, and crying out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is not a faith that's likely to have

23. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 13.

24. Ibid., 15.

25. Ibid., 33.

26. Ibid., 16.

simple, formulaic responses to our personal experience of suffering and prayerful lament.²⁷

Though a physician specializing in an area rife with suffering and loss, Barfield is speaking here as a philosopher of religion. Nicholas Wolterstorff, though a highly accomplished philosopher of religion, speaks as a bereaved parent:

“I cannot fit it all together,” he admits.

I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric’s death I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son’s life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.²⁸

As Joseph Smith did from captivity in Liberty Jail,²⁹ Wolterstorff cries out in his anguish:

How is faith to endure, O God, when you allow all this scraping and tearing on us? You have allowed rivers of blood to flow, mountains of suffering to pile up, sobs to become humanity’s song — all without lifting a finger that we could see. You have allowed bonds of love beyond number to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself.

We strain to hear. But instead of hearing an answer we catch sight of God himself scraped and torn. Through our tears we see the tears of God.³⁰

Plainly, as with Joseph, his faith reasserts itself in spite of his despair. Strikingly, too, as in Joseph’s case, he’s reminded, amid his own pain and hopelessness, of the suffering of Jesus.³¹

27. Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 34.

28. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 67, 68.

29. See Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–11; 122:1–8.

30. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 80.

31. Doctrine and Covenants 122:8.

“God is appalled by death,” Wolterstorff writes. “My pain over my son’s death is shared by *his* pain over my son’s death. And, yes, I share in his pain over *his* son’s death.”³²

This awareness that God, too, suffers, that he’s not the literally apathetic “Unmoved Mover” of Aristotle and of the classical theism that flows from Aristotle, plays a major role in Wolterstorff’s reflections on his own grief:

For a long time I knew that God is not the impassive, unresponsive, unchanging being portrayed by the classical theologians. I knew of the pathos of God. I knew of God’s response of delight and of his response of displeasure. But strangely, his suffering I never saw before.

God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers.³³

Christians know this because they understand that Jesus Christ is the perfect representation of the Father,³⁴ and because Jesus himself died upon the cross — unjustly, painfully, and young. Moreover, although he was “the resurrection, and the life,” Jesus too sorrowed at loss, bereavement, and pain. He mourned the death of Lazarus because he loved him.³⁵ John 11:35 (“Jesus wept”) is well known as the shortest verse in the Bible. It’s less known, however, as one of the Bible’s most significant passages. But it is precisely that. Why? Because it demonstrates the Savior’s personal care for humanity and shows him, though divine, to be emotionally involved with us.

In that regard, however, the account given in Moses 7, in the Pearl of Great Price, is perhaps even more remarkable:

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains? And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?³⁶

32. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 66–67.

33. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 81. The classic source for the doctrine of the Unmoved Mover is Book 12 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

34. See, for example, John 1:1, 18; 5:19; 8:28; 14:9; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3.

35. See John 11:25–26, 35–36.

36. Moses 7:28–29.

How is it possible for God to weep? For centuries, classical Jewish, Christian and Islamic theologians have agreed that it isn't. Such behavior would be unworthy of him. God's emotions seem, it's true, to be on display throughout the scriptures, but the passages describing them have typically been dismissed as metaphorical, as symbolic of something else.

Recent biblical scholarship, however, is reconsidering the emotions of God. The sections of the book of Jeremiah that precede the Babylonian captivity, to choose from among many possible examples, are absolutely replete with images and divine statements that depict God as deeply caring, worried even, about the punishment that he himself has to impose upon his people. He is no distant, uninvolved, unemotional monarch. He loves Israel.³⁷

For those who accept the Bible and the scriptures of the Restoration, Heavenly Father is not only a being with emotions but a God who, because he is perfect and perfectly embodied, feels more deeply than we can even begin to imagine. “God is love,” says John.³⁸ He not only has and enjoys an emotional life, but the most perfect emotional life possible. His love is richer, deeper, than any love we can imagine. In fact, God “so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”³⁹ Accordingly, however, he also felt enormous sorrow and pain at what was done to his Son, just as he feels pain and sorrow for his children — as well as boundless love and, if possible, joy for them both.

Nicholas Wolterstorff finds this all astounding, overwhelming, and, in a real sense, inconceivable:⁴⁰

What does this mean for life, that God suffers? I'm only beginning to learn. When we think of God the Creator, then we naturally see the rich and powerful of the earth as his closest image. But when we hold steady before us the sight of God the Redeemer redeeming from sin and suffering by suffering, then perhaps we must look elsewhere for earth's closest icon. Where? Perhaps to the face of that woman with

37. See the extended discussion at Daniel C. Peterson, “On the Motif of the Weeping God in Moses 7,” in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen* (Provo: FARMS, 2002), 285–317; <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1122&index=12>.

38. 1 John 4:8.

39. John 3:16.

40. As did Enoch. See Moses 7:28–40.

soup tin in hand and bloated child at side. Perhaps that is why Jesus said that inasmuch as we show love to such a one, we show love to him.⁴¹

Wolterstorff suggests that there is a remarkable “identity in suffering” between God and the oppressed, the abused, the poor, the sorrowful, and the sick.

We’re in it together, God and we, together in the history of our world. The history of our world is the history of our suffering together. Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God. But also the history of our world is the history of our deliverance together. God’s work to release himself from his suffering is his work to deliver the world from its agony; our struggle for joy and justice is our struggle to relieve God’s sorrow.⁴²

Viewed in this light, Christ’s teaching in the New Testament regarding the giving or withholding of help to the needy definitely does take on deeper meaning: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”⁴³ So, too, does King Benjamin’s teaching that “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.”⁴⁴

Very plainly, however, understanding that God, too, has emotions and experiences pain yields up no neat theological propositions, delivers no precise doctrinal formulae. And it doesn’t actually lessen our pain. It simply tells us that, in our deepest depths, we have a divine co-sufferer.

Nonetheless, Wolterstorff deems his sorrow precious. “Some do not suffer much,” he says, “for they do not love much. Suffering is for the loving. If I hadn’t loved him, there wouldn’t be this agony.”⁴⁵ “Grief,” he writes, “is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved. That worth abides. So I own my grief. I do not try to put it behind me, to get over it, to forget it. I do not try to *dis-own* it.” A friend, he says, once described *Lament for a Son* as a “love-song.” “That took me aback. But Yes, it is a

41. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 82. He has previously referred, on page 72, to “one of those mothers one sees in poverty posters, soup tin in hand, bloated child alongside, utterly dependent for her very existence on the largesse of others.”

42. Ibid., 91. It would be worthwhile to consider Wolterstorff’s suggestion here in conjunction with Moses 1:39: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”

43. Matthew 25:40; see the entire passage, Matthew 25:34–46.

44. Mosiah 2:17.

45. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 89.

love-song. Every lament is a love-song. Will love-songs one day no longer be laments?”⁴⁶

Not only does Wolterstorff hold onto — “own” — his grief. He rejects easy answers and smooth explanations, palliatives that would lessen the ache of his loss:

Not even the best of words can take away the pain ... Please: Don't say that it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.⁴⁷

Wolterstorff became acutely aware of what he calls “the solitude of suffering.” “We say, ‘I know how you are feeling.’ But we don’t.”⁴⁸ Suffering, once again, is both universal and very particular, distinctly individual.

And yet, Latter-day Saint scriptures assure us, there is One who really does know, who really does understand. Christ, they say,

ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth.⁴⁹

Alma, testifying early in the first century BC prophesied of Christ that

he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God. And he shall 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.

46. Ibid., 5–6. Italics in the original.

47. Ibid., 34.

48. Ibid., 25.

49. Doctrine and Covenants 88:6. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–20.

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.⁵⁰

In the meantime, though,

We are surrounded by death. As we walk through the grasslands of life it lurks everywhere — behind, to the left, to the right, ahead, everywhere in the swaying grass. Before, I saw it only here and there. The light was too bright. Here in this dim light the dead show up: teachers, colleagues, the children of friends, aunts, uncles, mother, father, the composers whose music I hear, the psalmists whose words I quote, the philosophers whose texts I read, the carpenters whose houses I live in. All around me are the traces and memories of the dead. We live among the dead, until we join them.⁵¹

So, in the midst of all this dimness, death, and pain, does Nicholas Wolterstorff, the distinguished Christian philosopher, the bereaved and despairing father, lose his trust in God? He realizes that despairing disbelief was a real possibility in his loss.

“Faith,” he writes, “is a footbridge that you don’t know will hold you up over the chasm until you’re forced to walk out onto it.”⁵²

Why don’t you just scrap this God business, says one of my bitter suffering friends. It’s a rotten world, you and I have been shafted, and that’s that.⁵³

Wolterstorff cites the prophet Isaiah and, yes, Blaise Pascal:

Truly, you are a God who hides yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior.⁵⁴

50. Alma 7:10–12.

51. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 79.

52. *Ibid.*, 76.

53. *Ibid.*, 76.

54. Isaiah 45:15, cited at Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 75. I haven’t identified the translation that he uses here.

A religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true. *Vere tu es Deus absconditus* — truly you are a hidden God.⁵⁵

But his faith did sustain him. Recall Ray Barfield’s summation of the ambiguous world in which we find ourselves:

If all were darkness with absolutely nothing suggesting the possibility that there’s more — that there’s a God — that would be easy. Or if all were light, with clear and absolute, unwavering signs of a creator God everywhere we look, that would be easy.⁵⁶

Responding to the kind of question posed by his bitter and suffering friend, Wolterstorff writes that he *can’t* simply “scrap this God business”:

I’m pinned down. When I survey this gigantic intricate world, I cannot believe that it just came about. I do not mean that I have some good arguments for its being made and that I believe in the arguments. I mean that this conviction wells up irresistibly within me when I contemplate the world. The experiment of trying to abolish it does not work. When looking at the heavens, I cannot manage to believe that they do not declare the glory of God. When looking at the earth, I cannot bring off the attempt to believe that it does not display his handiwork.

And when I read the New Testament and look into the material surrounding it, I am convinced that the man Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. In that, I see the sign that he was more than a prophet. He was the Son of God.⁵⁷

“At this deep level,” says Ray Barfield, “it seems to me simply not to be about argument.”⁵⁸

“I shall look at the world through tears,” Wolterstorff writes. “Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.”⁵⁹ And, if Ray Barfield is correct, his faith will help him to see, as well:

55. An unidentified passage from Pascal, presumably from the *Pensées*, cited at Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 75.

56. Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 24.

57. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 76.

58. Barfield, *Pascal’s Wager*, 18–19.

59. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 26.

The very habit of approaching different parts of lived experience with the mere openness to the possibility of God may itself be a condition for seeing certain qualities in the world, certain parts of what's real about the world.⁶⁰

Already, as he remarks at several points in *Lament for a Son*, Wolterstorff recognizes that he's been stretched and made more aware, that he's become more sensitive and empathetic, through the anguish that he's been forced to endure. "In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making."⁶¹

Still, he cries out, "Will love-songs one day no longer be laments?"⁶² To which the answer is, "Yes."

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.⁶³

And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.⁶⁴

"All your losses will be made up to you in the resurrection," the Prophet Joseph Smith testified, "provided you continue faithful. By the vision of the Almighty I have seen it."⁶⁵

III.

In the meantime, though, we're resident aliens in a world of ambiguity, injustice, pain, and loss.⁶⁶ What are we to make of the sorrows and struggles, the defeats and betrayals and bereavements that we experience in this "vale of soul-making"? Or, to put the question another and perhaps better way, what are they to make of *us*?

60. Barfield, *Pascal's Wager*, 30.

61. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 97.

62. *Ibid.*, 6.

63. Revelation 21:4.

64. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

65. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 296.

66. I owe the phrase *resident aliens* to a well-known book of that title: Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, expanded 25th anniversary edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014).

We're all familiar with the New Testament account of “Doubting Thomas,” who, after the resurrection of Christ, demanded a personal demonstration before he would surrender his understandable reluctance to believe that a man who had been cruelly and brutally killed had come back to glorious, physical life.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.⁶⁷

“The wounds of Christ are his identity,” writes Nicholas Wolterstorff, commenting on this very passage.

They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him — visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds.⁶⁸

And, truly, there is a powerful sense in which a person's history, and perhaps especially that person's history of suffering and struggle and sorrow, defines and identifies him or her. (Christ is, significantly, “a man of sorrows.”)⁶⁹ As Wolterstorff puts it,

If someone asks, “Who are you, tell me about yourself,” I say — not immediately, but shortly — “I am one who lost a son.” That loss determines my identity; not all of my identity, but much of it.⁷⁰

67. John 20:24–28.

68. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 92.

69. Isaiah 53:3.

70. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 6.

In the New World, the Nephites had a comparable experience (in larger numbers) with the risen Savior. Again, his wounds identify him to them, or, rather, confirm to them his identity:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto them saying: Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.

And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come.

And when they had all gone forth and had witnessed for themselves, they did cry out with one accord, saying:

Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God! And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him.⁷¹

It is also necessary for us to identify with Jesus. Otherwise, since “no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom” and since, in and of ourselves, we are unclean, we have no hope of entering back into the presence of God.⁷² Only he has the innate right to be there.

“Take upon you the name of Christ,” the Lord commanded Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer in a revelation given in June 1829 at Fayette, New York.⁷³ And, indeed, candidates for baptism into the Church of Jesus Christ must “witness before the church that they ... are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁴ And they certify their willingness to do so in the public act of baptism, which is done before the Lord, before witnesses, and before the community of the Saints.⁷⁵

However, it must be noted that, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks has remarked concerning the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament,

71. 3 Nephi 11:13–17.

72. The reference is to 3 Nephi 27:19. See also 1 Nephi 10:21; Moses 6:57.

73. Doctrine and Covenants 18:21.

74. Ibid., 20:37; 2 Nephi 31:13; Moroni 6:3.

75. 2 Nephi 31:13.

what we witness is not that we *take* upon us his name but that we are *willing* to do so. In this sense, our witness relates to some future event or status whose attainment is not self-assumed, but depends on the authority or initiative of the Savior himself.⁷⁶

Actually doing so is necessary for our salvation, since, in the end, those who “shall be found at the right hand of God ... shall be called by the name of Christ.”⁷⁷

And moreover, I say unto you, that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.⁷⁸

As the Nephite prophet Alma reminded his audience,

Behold, I say unto you, that the good shepherd doth call you; yea, and in his own name he doth call you, which is the name of Christ; and if ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd, to the name by which ye are called, behold, ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd.⁷⁹

As it was explained to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer in June 1829,

Wherefore, if they know not the name by which they are called, they cannot have place in the kingdom of my Father.⁸⁰

When, in his postresurrection appearance among the Nephites, Christ was told of disputes about the name of the Nephite church, he asked,

Have they not read the scriptures, which say ye must take upon you the name of Christ, which is my name? For by this name shall ye be called at the last day;
And whoso taketh upon him my name, and endureth to the end, the same shall be saved at the last day.⁸¹

76. Dallin H. Oaks, “Taking upon Us the Name of Jesus Christ” (April 1985 General Conference); <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1985/04/taking-upon-us-the-name-of-jesus-christ?lang=eng>.

77. Mosiah 5:9.

78. Ibid., 3:17; compare Acts 4:12; 2 Nephi 31:21.

79. Alma 5:38.

80. Doctrine and Covenants 18:25.

81. 3 Nephi 27:5–6.

Baptism, as is generally recognized, represents death, burial, and rebirth to a new identity. “Therefore,” writes Paul to the Romans,

we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.⁸²

Or, as Joseph Smith taught in a letter that was dated 6 September 1842 at Nauvoo, Illinois, and that is now included in the scriptural canon of the Latter-day Saints,

The ordinance of baptism by water, to be immersed therein in order to answer to the likeness of the dead, that one principle might accord with the other; to be immersed in the water and come forth out of the water is in the likeness of the resurrection of the dead in coming forth out of their graves ... Consequently, the baptismal font was instituted as a similitude of the grave, and was commanded to be in a place underneath where the living are wont to assemble, to show forth the living and the dead, and that all things may have their likeness.⁸³

“It is a faithful saying,” writes Paul to Timothy. “For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us.”⁸⁴

That truth is eloquently represented in the simple ordinance of baptism.

In the sacrament, worshippers partake of symbols of Christ’s broken body and his shed blood, and, in so doing, they testify “that they do always remember him.”⁸⁵ This is enormously important, as Nicholas Wolterstorff would surely agree:

One of the profoundest features of the Christian and Jewish way of being-in-the-world and being-in-history is remembering. “Remember,” “do not forget,” “do this as a remembrance.” We are to hold the past in remembrance and not let it slide away. For in history we find God. ... And when

82. Romans 6:4.

83. Doctrine and Covenants 128:12–13.

84. 2 Timothy 2:11–12.

85. Doctrine and Covenants 20:79; Moroni 5:2. Compare 20:77; also Moroni 4:3.

memory ... fails, then humanity is diminished to the point of disappearance.⁸⁶

But it's not only a question of “remembrance.” Partakers of the sacrament also “witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son.”⁸⁷ Once again, they're testifying to their willingness to assume his identity, something that they *must* do so in order to be saved. If we do not identify with Christ, we are barred from heaven. It is striking, though, that the element of the identity of Christ that is emphasized in the sacrament — as it is in the various forms of Christian communion that descend from the earliest Christian ordinance — is not his teachings or his miracles but his bodily suffering in the atonement.

I want to suggest here not only that taking upon ourselves the name of Christ is profoundly important but that it's not merely a verbal fiction and that it is connected very specifically with, among other things, the physical pain incurred during his atoning sacrifice. In some really powerful sense, we are to become genuinely identified with Jesus. Only so can we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven — he, not we, being worthy to do so. Consider the graphic, even vivid, language used by Jesus:

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you,
Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood,
ye have no life in you.

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal
life; and I will raise him up at the last day.⁸⁸

This passage can easily be connected with the emblems of the sacrament, but it strongly suggests that there is more at play here than merely a tepid commitment to remember him, important though such memory is.

One of the most puzzling statements in the Pauline corpus of writings in the New Testament is this one, from the apostle's letter to the Galatian Saints:

86. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 28, 30. Anybody familiar with cases of Alzheimers disease knows that, as the illness grows more severe, this is increasingly so. For a significant Latter-day Saint reflection on the spiritual and religious importance of community memory, see Louis Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance”; <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1111&index=16>.

87. Doctrine and Covenants 20:77; Moroni 4:3.

88. John 6:53–54.

From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.⁸⁹

The Greek word that's translated in the King James Version as *marks* is *stigmata*. The word itself is clear enough, but, as Otto Betz confirms, "The question what Paul meant by the marks of Jesus in his body cannot be answered with any certainty."⁹⁰

They are typically understood as the scars left by his beatings and persecutions.⁹¹ If this interpretation is accurate, Paul seems to be claiming what one commentator describes as a *Leidensidentität*, an "identity in suffering," between himself and Jesus.⁹² This is surely one way of identifying with the Savior, and, since some form of identification with him is plainly required for our salvation, it's important to consider: Do we all need to be physically scarred by the lashes of anti-Christian persecutors in order to be saved?

That seems unlikely.

The term *stigmata* is sometimes rendered as "brandmarks" or "brands."⁹³ "The [Greek] word *stigmata* did not mean what this word means in English today," writes Father Joseph Fitzmyer, referring to the

89. Galatians 6:17

90. Otto Betz, in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 7:663.

91. Thus, for example, Dom Bernard Orchard, in Reginald C. Fuller, Leonard Johnston, and Conleth Kearns, eds., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nashville and New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 1180; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 2:246; Beverly R. Gaventa, in James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1384; William Baird, in James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 1211. This interpretation is "most likely," says Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 776. Otto Betz concurs that this is "the most convincing explanation." See Betz, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:663.

92. Klaus Berger, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011), 687.

93. See, for instance, F. Roy Coad, in F. F. Bruce, ed., *The International Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986), 1247; also Baird, *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 1211; Fitzmyer, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2:246; Gaventa, in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 1384; Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 776.

wounds, corresponding to those received by Christ at his crucifixion, that have been claimed by certain Catholic saints (e.g., the twelfth-thirteenth century St. Francis of Assisi and the modern Padre Pio). "In antiquity *stigmata* often designated the branding used to mark a slave or an animal as someone's possession."⁹⁴

In the ancient Near East outside of Israel, such branding was also done in religious contexts. "When a man was given the sacred mark," Otto Betz explains,

he was dedicated to the god and became his servant, but he also came under its protection, so that he should not be molested. This led to a different estimation of stigmata from that of the [Greeks]; what the latter found contemptible was carried in the East with pride.⁹⁵

By contrast, Israelite biblical law forbade ritual tattooing or branding: "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord."⁹⁶ Moreover, says Betz, in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible "the sacral sign is given a new significance. It is legitimate and effective only when man does not mark it on his own body but receives it from God as a sign of protection."⁹⁷

Thus, whatever Paul meant by "the marks of the Lord Jesus," they may or may not have been literally physical and could not have been self-inflicted. Rather, they were given to him for, or as a result of, his years of service and suffering in faithful discipleship to Jesus — service and devotion that Paul urged upon others, as well:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.⁹⁸

"I am crucified with Christ," he said. "Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."⁹⁹ He had, in some manner, become Christ.

In the ministry of his apostleship, however, Paul was acutely aware of his weaknesses. Nevertheless, it seems that "the marks of the Lord Jesus" encouraged him and gave him hope of ultimate salvation and triumph:

94. Fitzmyer, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2:246.

95. Betz, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:660.

96. Leviticus 19:28.

97. Betz, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:661 (compare 7:663–664).

98. Romans 12:1.

99. Galatians 2:20.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;

Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;

Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.¹⁰⁰

When we come to the veil that separates us from God, our only hope of entering into his presence is to come under the name of Jesus. And it may be that we will identify ourselves by bearing in ourselves “the marks of Jesus” — probably not literal scars, and certainly not self-inflicted ones, but metaphorical “brand marks” conferred by God himself that demonstrate our identity with the Savior in the suffering of his atonement. For very truly, “with his stripes” — or, probably better, as a number of modern translations have it, “with his wounds” — “we are healed.”¹⁰¹

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100. 2 Corinthians 4:7–10.

101. Isaiah 53:5

