

‘WHY DO WE SUFFER?’: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE ‘JESUS HEALS CANCER’ SIGN AND RESPONSES TO IT

NAOMI COMPTON

Associate Pastor, Karori Baptist Church

Wellington, New Zealand

(naomi@kbc.org.nz)

ABSTRACT

In 2012, a church in Napier displayed a billboard reading ‘Jesus Heals Cancer’. The billboard created a wide variety of public reactions from anger to support. Whilst the billboard is interesting in itself, this article explores the implicit beliefs that were displayed regarding suffering by both Christians and the wider New Zealand public. Embedded within the sign and the responses to it were assumptions about the role suffering should and should not play in people’s lives. These assumptions arise in the specific context of Western culture and its belief that suffering is a problem to be overcome. This belief that upholds suffering as an aberration is then contrasted with the biblical narratives of the Joban drama of suffering and the call for faithful suffering in Revelation within the context of eschatological hope. Finally, the article concludes with the rich possibilities for worship in the midst of suffering. Drawing on the language of lament within an eschatological vision of hope, this article explores the role that worship can play in forming a community of hope who can worship well in the midst of suffering and, therefore, suffer well.

Culturally conditioned ideas about the ultimate way of life for humanity sway perceptions of, and responses to, suffering. In the face of suffering we in the Western world easily become consumed with ‘why’ questions and desperately seek rapid relief.¹ The common question posed in our time seeks to understand how God could allow suffering. An interesting point to consider, however, is why such a question is so frequently asked in today’s Western society, in comparison to less developed societies?²

An important question that this essay seeks to explore is not ‘why do we suffer?’ but ‘why does it trouble us so much that we suffer?’ In 2012, a church in Napier displayed a billboard reading “Jesus Heals Cancer”.³ There were conflicting opinions within the community about whether making such a public statement was ethically right. Yet, another significant question to contemplate is why this text was created within our western New Zealand (NZ) society at all? The billboard’s message is a cultural text highlighting surrounding worldviews.⁴ This essay explores key aspects of society that relate to the production of, and responses to, this sign. It proposes that NZ culture is afflicted with deep concern for achieving instant comfort and happiness, and that this has affected not only society but the Christian church and our

1 L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 7.

2 Stanley Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), x.

3 3 News, “Church Promises Cancer Cure,” *Campbell Live*, February 27, 2012.

4 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts And Interpret Trends* (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Slesman, eds.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 48.

understanding of the gospel.⁵ Furthermore, arguments are made, based on biblical and theological perceptions of suffering, that the church must be formed through worship into an alternative community, who anticipate and witness to the true hope of Christ's eternal Kingdom in the midst of our suffering. This essay seeks a renewed perspective on suffering in the light of Christian hope so that the church might be a community who knows how to 'suffer well' in the light of the gospel. It is not intended to undermine the ongoing searing pain that suffering brings to people's lives. ontology to do justice to the biblical narrative of the Dominical man turned deified person, for the salvation of the world.

I. OH HAPPY DAYS—OUR HUMAN-MADE PARADISE

In their study of the informal faith of Christian teenagers in America, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton coined the term 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' (MTD) to describe the kind of faith displayed.⁶ Key aspects of MTD are:

- a) a god who looks upon humanity but is largely removed from everyday life
- b) each person must be nice to the other
- c) happiness and feeling good about self are life's main goals
- d) God's involvement in life is expected in crisis
- e) when they die good people go to heaven.⁷

Smith and Denton conclude that the "... dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace...attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people."⁸ In response to the study Kenda Creasy Dean acknowledges that this 'faith' is not confined to youth, but rather has been taught and modelled by generations before them.⁹

MTD is a parasite drawing its life from preferred characteristics of various religions, a prominent one being American Christianity.¹⁰ In many cases Christianity now looks more like MTD's pursuit of the American dream than the historical devotion and practice of what it means to follow Christ.¹¹ MTD seeks personal comfort and happiness at minimal sacrifice for the individual. These cossetting characteristics of living are not restricted to American society but are common in other developed societies.¹² Thus, this American pseudo-faith also breeds in other developed countries, including NZ. These developed societies

⁵ The following does not focus specifically on perceptions of and responses to suffering experienced by those who have cancer, rather, it considers suffering as a broader and more general concept.

⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Collin Hansen, "Death by Deism," n.p. [cited 26 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/aprilweb-only/116-11.0.html>.

⁷ Hansen, "Death by Deism".

⁸ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 48.

⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.

¹⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 166.

¹¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 10.

¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 55. Bauman makes the link between those living in comfort in developed world and their endless obsessions with security and safety of self in the hope of protecting such a way of life.

boast a culture that births and nurtures confusion and concern toward suffering, as it challenges the happy and cosy ‘faith’ to which many subscribe.

The passion for healing displayed in the sign “Jesus Heals Cancer” is an expression of MTD. This message joins many advertising campaigns communicating within a largely self-fulfilling culture. Embedded in the consumer-driven messages are beliefs about human identity. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman highlights the power of modern consumption to sell the illusion of one’s ability to select, buy, and don the identity of their choosing. Meanwhile, the core of consumerism manipulates the identity type which individuals desire.¹³ The learnt worldview of self-fulfilment guides a lot of media, including the billboard in question, to articulate the emotionally charged memo—that each person should adopt and maintain the expectation that they deserve a happy and comfortable life, which illness impedes. Media promotes this ‘utopia’ and supplies products needed for its achievement. Instant attainment of human-made paradise and ‘meaning’ is the promise at the end of every fingertip purchasing a product. Tim Costello discusses this religion of ‘acquiring’ and notes that malls have become the latest temples intended to nurture entering souls with guarantees of happiness.¹⁴ Malls have the ‘other worldly’ characteristic of the “temple of consumption”, and its romantic representation of ‘life’ creates a seductive space to be enjoyed by anyone seeking the ‘better life products’ media advertises.¹⁵ In an individualistic world, devoid of meaningful metanarratives, modern consumption essentially defines human meaning.¹⁶

This consumeristic definition of human meaning guides responses from media’s recipients. The utopian messages delivered by the media commonly meet submissive acceptance by recipients, in turn, birthing a culture that eagerly welcomes products that promise self-fulfilled personal ‘utopia’. Human-made utopia is a goal of human life post-Enlightenment. Colin Gunton highlights modernity’s displacement of the transcendence of God. Since modernity, God’s immanence has been overemphasised, as life’s meaning was not believed to be found in something beyond, but rather through the certainty of autonomous human reason.¹⁷ From the epistemology of Cartesian thought, truth claims, especially those relegated to the private realm (e.g. belief), have been highly individualised.¹⁸

On a foundation where ‘truth’ is searched for within oneself a “displacement of eschatology” is built.¹⁹ Humans are described as ‘tourists’, living for instant experience, blind to the transcendent vocation once realised when humans were ‘pilgrims’.²⁰ Divine attributes are attributed to self, thus, anxious need to gain control of a happy future on earth is life’s focus whilst the possibility of one *true* hope for all people is commonly dismissed. An ironic reality exists, as fullness of life in the instant present can be missed while people participate in a fear-filled hunt for their ‘utopia’. Furthermore, people struggle to realise any ultimate future possibilities of life when consumerist ideas and ideals of ‘hope’, restricted to this independent life

13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 83-84.

14 Tim Costello, *Streets of Hope: Finding God in St Kilda* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 124-125.

15 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 98-99.

16 David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 192.

17 Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28.

18 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 18-23.

19 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 90.

20 Derek Tidball, “The Pilgrim and the Tourist: Zygmunt Bauman and Postmodern Identity,” in *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Fred Hughes; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 191-192.

alone, dominate the present. This is evident in the society's disgruntled response to the billboard's message, as opposed to the usual passive acceptance of other products. Assurance of 'utopian' outcomes from a 'product', 'Jesus the Healer', that was other than what was *known* to be present truth, was deemed to be inappropriate and deceitful advertising.²¹

II. FEAR

The Western 'faith' of comfort and happiness gives way to an anxious society. In dire attempts to achieve the 'ultimate' for human life *now* and to avoid threats against this goal, fear has become a prevalent mood of society. Anxiety has become the "framework" through which many experiences are understood.²² It is the subconscious tool regularly called upon in order to justify and dictate action. Furthermore, media takes advantage of society's fear, using it to sell a product. The intent is to draw the consumer by their realisation of need for utmost security. Therefore, fear has become embedded in the understanding of what it is to be a 'developed' human, hunting for their human-made utopian dream.

Bauman highlights that the relentless striving for security and safety is embodied by people living the most comfortable and indulgent lives history has recorded.²³ The promise of happiness by the modern Western world began, for many, the never-ending pursuit from happiness to greater happiness. This pursuit of happiness became so embedded in the expectations of society that a potential breach of promised happiness could be accused to be deprivation or an ethical injustice. Ironically, this injustice has become the forte of the cunning producers of products, ultimate happiness is promised by consumer products yet remains the unattainable goal. As each new iteration of a product becomes the new object of desire, the old products, formerly objects of desire, must be disposed of. People are encouraged to move "from one temporary oasis to another"; the much improved 'new' is designed to point out the blemishes in the once perfect 'old'.²⁴ This persuasion of comfort within the West is influencing the Church. Costello shares his grief and frustration with Christians who, he observes, have mistaken the never-ending call of achieving worldly comfort and security as being the will of God.²⁵

Fear causes distortion of priority. 'Normal' lifestyle choices are often estranged from what should be. Caught up in the 'faith' of happy comfort, perspectives of self and other can become drastically disoriented. Panicked behaviour of those who believe they need to secure comfort is triggered by personal threat. For example, the actual or even potential attack of terrorists is likely to cause chaotic and irrational terror in Westerners.²⁶ However, these same people can experience peace and safety despite, and as a result of, the immense suffering experienced by other societies stricken by poverty and injustice, which is only

21 3 News, "Church Promises Cancer Cure."

22 Frank Furedi, "The Only Thing We Have to Fear is the 'Culture of Fear' Itself," n.p. [cited 26 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/3053>.

23 Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 130.

24 Costello, *Streets of Hope*, 146.

25 Ibid., 137.

26 Bruce Barber and David Neville, "Introduction," in *Theodicy and Eschatology* (ed. Bruce Barber and David Neville; Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005), xix.

heightened in the developed world's restless pursuit for happiness.²⁷ A prominent goal shared by many in a developed society is to protect one's life. Therefore, striving to secure health and happiness despite cost to the other is part of the art of living. Such self-absorbed persistence would have been ruled absurd by the likes of Thomas Aquinas, who deemed life's ultimate priority as "friendship with God". Unlike the higher priorities of Aquinas and the Westminster Catechism of the 17th century—"to glorify God and enjoy him forever"—today's Western living is too often obsessed with hunting down safety and security, passionately protecting their emerging 'paradise'.²⁸ Such endless devotion, Bauman argues, has been mistaken as the very utopia Westerners seek. Human purpose has been re-defined as the individual's anxious chase after the 'ultimate' life. This hopeless pursuit 'unites' an individualised society. The rarity of community generates the shared denominator of one's fear of the stranger.²⁹ The 'commonality' of fear due to estrangement forgets the fundamental nature of what it is to be human, a being in relationship. The Western pursuit for happiness exposes them to the hopeless and fearful endeavour of a loss of identity and purpose.

In the culture of fear, people are taught to make decisions favouring security and avoiding threats to comfort. Like the parent consumed by fear for their child, life becomes manipulated by protective prevention strategies rather than hopes and dreams for transformation. Scott Bader-Saye suggests fear motivates the Christian subculture that exists; 'Christian-consumption' will provide the safety or security we seek.³⁰ Similarly, the church, through fear of its own decline and demise, seeks to attract numbers by providing the "religious commodities...in demand".³¹ Fear drives demand and both can be mistaken to be healthy tools for persuading consumers towards Christ, feeding into the need to control life and experience the utopian dream. Expectation of instant achievement of utopian living is prevalent in the billboard. Ours is not a world commonly known to stop and dwell in the midst of suffering, this space is lost amidst the anxious need to overcome.³² The billboard tactically communicates a familiar fear, it provides the 'product' needed to overcome the threat, and, as a result, desires to attract consumers to its 'product'.³³ Interviews performed concerning the "Jesus Heals Cancer" message present the text's authors expressing their ulterior goal for people to "believe" in Christ; one says: "What have they got to lose from coming to church".³⁴

III. ILLUSIVE IMMORTALITY

The use and underlying tone of 'cancer' in the billboard is the doorway to analysing many characteristics and beliefs of Western culture in NZ. Perhaps the most obvious characteristic is the perception of human immortality. The attitudes toward death and suffering by secular and Christian minds in the West demonstrate desired immunity from these evils and expect individuals have a right to a long life and peaceful

27 Ibid., xix.

28 Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 28.

29 Bauman, *Liquid times*, 72.

30 Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, 20-21.

31 Michael Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

32 Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering*, 150.

33 Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, 14, 16.

34 3 News, "Meet the Parishioners Who Say Jesus Cured Their Cancer," *Campbell Live* (February 29, 2012).

death.³⁵ The desire to side-step vulnerability and ultimately death is often based in embarrassment, for inability to determine and control one's fate is considered failure.³⁶ With the knowledge of inability to dictate the timing of death one's view of death is driven largely by fear. The subject of death is taboo in Western culture; conversations around it are awkward and vague. It is evident the authors of the billboard keep these underlying beliefs in mind. Furthermore, those responding to the sign's message reveal deep anguish at the thought of 'cancer', the devastating shadow that is a frequent and painful reminder of the mortality society has learnt to ignore and avoid.

New Zealand culture (like many Western cultures) is largely influenced by the medical world and the 'we must overcome' attitudes that have developed within this area. Stanley Hauerwas argues that medicine says a lot about who we are - our desires and our fears. It acknowledges a negative cultural view of death and dying, this is evident particularly in light of the possibility of suffering. From the 'tactful' and fuzzy ways of speaking about death to preferences around how to die there is evidence of an avoidance of suffering, which is pursued relentlessly. Thus, medicine is one of a number of areas in society that highlights the human desire to conquer, or at worst to limit, the reality of human fragility.³⁷ The reaction to the pain-filled threat of human mortality (even in 'the developed world') occupies much energy and resource. The illusion of immortality takes control in the shocking presence of death. Medical identification of death's cause is required in order for the griever to find comfort and to eventually move toward joy once more, only with the hope that future cures may yet be discovered. Very rarely, Bauman suggests, is someone's death attributed to their mortality.³⁸

Western society longs to unravel the problem of suffering. They seek a present utopia of comfort and happiness, which suffering destroys. Such issue taken with suffering is linked closely with an understanding of human meaning and purpose. The following section will explore the motif of suffering through the biblical books of Job and Revelation in order to develop a biblical and theological understanding of the significance of suffering to faith.

IV. THE JOBAN DRAMA

The Joban drama begins with fascinating parallelism with Creation. The perfect place of Uz is described as a type of Eden, thus, the world of God's mystery and promise for humanity is seen to be Job's world. Job is an 'Adam' character, identifying his story as a close continuation of the Garden of Genesis.³⁹ Uz was the Eden of "happy harmony...living in full accord with creations design" as intended and established by the

35 D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord?: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (2nd ed.; Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 25, 103.

36 Alfred G. Killilea, *The Politics of Being Mortal* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 4-7.

37 Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering*, 97-107.

38 Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 40.

39 Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2006), 41-42; Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 97.

Creator. The world that remained after the fall was a place where goodness still dwelled and memory and hope of the vision for humanity that was known in Eden still existed.⁴⁰

In Uz, suffering was absent from Job's life. However, the belief of retributive justice informed Job's society of how evil could disrupt this peaceful place, thus, Job zealously avoided the 'tree of good and evil'. This belief system could suggest that righteousness was something like an 'insurance policy' people adopted to prevent personal suffering.⁴¹ Is the fallen default for all humanity to seek comfort? Did Job's society, like today, understand themselves to be creators of their own instant utopia? Possible temptation to turn righteousness into self-service is reflected in the satan's questioning. He challenged God saying, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). Samuel E. Balentine suggests the question centres on the Godhead, its intention to prompt divine reflection on whether God is inherently sufficient for the worship of humanity.⁴² In light of this, Job's journey of suffering emphasises the intrinsic ontology of God, worthy of all worship, from all of His creation, despite circumstances.

The prelude makes exhaustive effort to assure readers of Job's righteousness. Job made regular offerings to God in case his children had sinned. Job is the ultimate man of his time, godly and righteous beyond readers' imaginations. His goodness was accredited to him by God. Yet, despite his righteousness, God allowed Job to suffer immensely. The irrational disturbance, according to humanity, of the good place of Uz began. Suffering was immense. Pain became Job's puzzling norm despite his innocence. His story digressed from Adam's as Job's 'known' order of human life was destroyed. Mark O'Brien argues that Job's suffering intensified because he had no explanation of 'why'.⁴³ Meanwhile, Job's friends proudly reminded Job of the retributive understanding of suffering. Simply put, Job had sinned and therefore he suffered. Yet, Job's innocence was overlooked in their foolish attempts to defend their 'watertight theology' of the Almighty God, for this the friends were reprimanded by God (42:7-9). Job's imperative warning is that human understanding of suffering is feeble and, therefore, one's approach to it must recognise the ambiguity that surrounds it.⁴⁴ No theology is complete. Job's suffering is illogical to the human mind, so how is it to be understood?

Bruce Barber and David Neville suggest our view of sin severely sways our understanding of suffering.⁴⁵ The mysterious presence of sin in its essence contradicts the ontological makeup of humanity. This speaks to the irrational invasion of suffering upon the innocent Job. Mostert rightly observes that because of sin's ambiguous nature those attempting to rationalise it lack wisdom. Yet, the person who demonstrates wisdom by acknowledging its mystery is wrongly accused of folly.⁴⁶ This we see of Job whose wisdom concerning evil's mysterious presence was mocked by his friends. Job's story opposes the deep-set

40 Ibid., 71–72. For Balentine this understanding ensures that in the midst of suffering God's purposed home for humanity, which was present in Eden, is not forgotten.

41 David J. Atkinson, *The Message of Job* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 21.

42 Balentine, *Job*, 74.

43 Mark O'Brien, "Theodicy and Eschatology: Old Testament Considerations," in *Theodicy and Eschatology* (ed. Bruce Barber and David Neville; Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005), 11.

44 Christiaan Mostert, "Theodicy and Eschatology," in *Theodicy and Eschatology* (ed. Bruce Barber and David Neville; Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005), 97.

45 Barber and Neville, *Theodicy and Eschatology*, xiii.

46 Mostert, "Theodicy and Eschatology," 97.

need to rationalise suffering, and humanity's imprudent hope to bring the pieces of the puzzle – 'God' and 'suffering' – together because humanity does not understand the fullness of either one.⁴⁷

How, then, should we approach the one who suffers? The role of 'comforter', alternated between Job's friends, is given bad press (16:1-6). From a safe distance they analysed the reason for suffering and dictated the response required. They aimed to give Job the key to overcome his suffering. Such a quest failed to be of help and, instead, magnified and distorted the problem. Suffering was the enemy to be avoided, instead of being understood as an announcement of the enemy. Interpretation of the friend's perspectives illuminates the instinctive desire to stifle Job's suffering voice.⁴⁸ The self-assigned responsibility of the 'comforter' was to direct Job to sidestep his pain and hardship. This mentality and motivation caused Job's friends to fail to care for Job in his raw existence, a fragile mortal dependent on God. The reality and logic of suffering in a world disturbed by evil was ignored, and the lowly creature failed to be acknowledged.

Job 42:6 highlights renewed understanding of human identity for Job. David J. Atkinson claims in this passage Job is not withdrawing his cries of innocence, but rather is expressing renewed vision of God and heightened appreciation for his own humble state.⁴⁹ It is through this humble state that Job's awareness of self is refined. Theology gives birth to authentic anthropology. Human identity, along with its fragility and disposition to suffer in a world yet to be restored completely, is understood and welcomed by the Job who sees God more fully as Creator and Sustainer.⁵⁰ Uncertainty and anguish are approached through renewed knowledge of God. "Job's questions of theodicy are not answered; they are placed in a broader, more personal, context in which they no longer need to be asked".⁵¹ Job's commitment to metanarrative is also evident in the depths of his suffering when he surprises readers with his stubborn will to hope. "Job dares to hope that God is as committed to the truth about suffering as he is..."⁵² His hope, though flickering, acknowledges a greater story that witnesses to his eternal connectedness with the true and perfect God who brings restoration.

Job's story does not feed the fear-driven hunger to understand the problem of suffering. Rather, it deconstructs beliefs about God's nature and his world in light of suffering.⁵³ Answers remain few and Job is presented as a man willing to have his knowledge of God challenged and matured; despite darkness Job holds fast to God's self-revelation. In his suffering Job's self-constructed understanding of God is destroyed, his own feeble logic can but muster up a god who is monstrous. Job's story demonstrates spiritual transformation in the face of suffering. Job gains a renewed perspective of suffering, and, thus, a renewed response. Ultimately, he finds his comfort in his God who he sees more clearly.⁵⁴

47 Long, *What Shall We Say?*, 95–96; Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 109.

48 Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 110.

49 Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 157; Balentine, *Job*, 693.

50 Long, *What Shall We Say?*, 109–110.

51 Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 161.

52 Balentine, *Job*, 225.

53 Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 90.

54 Long, *What Shall We Say?*, 111.

V. THE 'NOW' AND 'NOT YET' OF THE REVELATION

Though humanity is deeply perplexed by the presence of evil and suffering, God is not. Unlike humanity, attempting to unravel this mystery while being governed by the evil they wish to dismantle, God understands these mysteries in light of His eternal purposes.⁵⁵ Thus, wise reflections regarding suffering can be accomplished through the lens of eschatology.⁵⁶ Mostert's approach toward understanding evil and suffering reflects the greater Christian story of salvation. He argues there is a pull within humanity toward the ultimate 'not-yet' intention of God for all of humanity, and His entire creation.⁵⁷

The book of Revelation illuminates God's powerful eschatological message for His people. However, its crucial points are commonly missed by comfortable Westerners. The Revelation responds to cries of the marginalised desperately seeking truth and hope in their present struggle. It expects the Church is a people constantly in crisis, under persecution and exposed to immense pressure to compromise the gospel. Thus, the meaning of the Revelation is frequently overlooked by those who know little of suffering.⁵⁸

The Revelation John saw proclaims hope and encourages firm commitment to truth in the midst of troubled circumstances. The Revelation realises the eschatological tension of current life, which anticipates the ultimate freedom to come and yet experiences the painful struggles of today.⁵⁹ God has conquered and is now Ruler over all, however, evil remains a confident imposter in the lives of individuals and the world.⁶⁰ Suffering is only increased for those who seek light and oppose things of darkness. Yet, even in the miserable presence of satanic power, God's rule supersedes. Faith-filled trust that God has already overcome the evil of sin and death enables genuine hope for that which is to come.⁶¹ Marva J. Dawn suggests that future paradise is tasted presently; "fleeting moments of victory" are captured even now.⁶² God's tabernacling with us completely in the future (Rev 7) is anticipated as we remember His continued presence throughout the past and know His company in the present. It is in weakness we can ultimately experience God's tabernacling. By living in suffering one understands and participates in their call to depend on God. Through vulnerability and fragility humanity begins to comprehend the sufficiency of God's grace.⁶³

Furthermore, suffering is the key to Christ's victory. The door to the ultimate paradise of God's complete dwelling with us, in Christ by His Spirit, has been opened by the suffering Christ yielded himself to. In the Revelation all honour and power is realised in the One who suffered. Of all persons there is but one worthy to open the seals on the scroll of God's judgement and justification—the Lamb who appeared

55 Peter Hicks, *The Message of Evil and Suffering: Light Into Darkness* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 15.

56 Barber and Neville, *Theodicy and Eschatology*, xiii.

57 Mostert, "Theodicy and Eschatology," 120.

58 David M. Scholer, "Breaking the Code: Interpretive Reflections on Revelation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25 (2001): 316–317.

59 Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 125.

60 Laurie Guy, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2009), 135.

61 Scholer, "Breaking the Code," 308.

62 Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness*, 124, 126.

63 Ibid., 215–216.

slaughtered (Rev 5).⁶⁴ The Lion who has conquered (5:5) is the slain Lamb. Though slain, the Lamb embodies God's ultimate power, its seven horns symbolise its divine power. The "victim" (Lamb) simultaneously being "victor" (Lion) upturns the historical Roman and present Western societies' understanding of what it means to triumph.⁶⁵ Suffering and vulnerability is given high status within the Kingdom of God. The Revelation illuminates a powerful and Christological theology of weakness.⁶⁶

Suffering within Scripture is unashamedly embraced in the person of Christ for the glory of the Father. Christ's suffering is the experience of the eschatological people of God who are welcomed into the life of Christ, the slaughtered Lamb. In the midst of the present struggle of Christ's Church, God justifies His people. Thus, the Revelation highlights faithful endurance to be fundamental in Christ's call for patient discipleship (Rev. 2:19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).⁶⁷ Faithful discipleship, as a way of living in the mist of suffering, witnesses to Christ in a world of darkness that slams doors in the face of truth's light.

It is through this 'way of living' that worship of God can be truly articulated. Faithful participation in the suffering of Christ witnesses to the victory accomplished by the blood of the Lamb. Revelation 7:13-14 describes a people who are robed in white, purified through washing in the Lamb's blood. These robed people are those who have been slaughtered for their resilient witness to the gospel in 6:9-11. In Christ they bear His future, both His suffering and victory over Satan's reign.⁶⁸ In raw lament they continued to witness to the rule of God in the world. United with the Lamb's blood they proclaimed God's victory and participated in the Lamb's conquering of death.

Revelation emphasises the vitality of faithful witness by God's people. The letter to the church in Smyrna highlights the richness in suffering for the sake of non-accommodating discipleship. The church is poor according to worldly standards because of their suffering but God announces their rich victory in their acceptance of eternal life. Though they anticipate deep anguish their hope in the midst of suffering surpasses fear. They are called to realise the final eschatological hope within the present rule of God in a world where evil abounds. The purpose of humanity is realised to be eternal union with Christ and His mission. Thus, through an eschatological lens of humanity there is not so much a desire to figure out suffering, but to fervently picket against evil, which allows suffering to multiply freely.⁶⁹

Costello argues that the eschatological faith of Christianity has a powerful claim against the endless pursuit of benefits in the present life, which is accompanied by the anxious avoidance of death.⁷⁰ As Dawn emphasises, the assurance of God's ultimate control, within Revelation, is crucial.⁷¹ Proclamation of the metanarrative of God's engagement with humanity needs to be redeemed in community for the *telos* of all creation to become the new hope-filled focus. Humanity must understand and trust God at the centre of all things, a reminder to cease our obsessive attention on ourselves as if we could provide the ultimate hope

64 Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 114.

65 Guy, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation*, 80. Guy points out that horns symbolised power (as seen in Deut 33:17) and 'seven' expressed the fullness of that power.

66 Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness*, 126-28.

67 Ibid., 308-309.

68 Blount, *Revelation*, 131-33.

69 Mostert, "Theodicy and Eschatology," 120.

70 Costello, *Streets of Hope*, 138.

71 Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness*, 215.

we crave.⁷² The utopia that is longed for is found ‘now’ and completed in the ‘not yet’ in Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb. No other ‘paradise’ will suffice.

This eschatological hope is ample for the restoration of humanity. Genuine knowledge of this hope does not diminish one’s anguish, but neither with it is there any dissatisfaction nor is there the desire for illusion, not ‘now’ or in the ‘not yet’. Therefore, it is in the lived experience of sure hope affirmed by God through Jesus Christ that perspective of and response to suffering can be transformed. Human identity and purpose is found within the eschatological hope of God’s greater story for all creation. This hope is both found and expressed in Christian worship, and the following section will explore the crucial role of worship in the midst of suffering.

VI. WORSHIP IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING:

Worship enables revelation and formation of human identity.⁷³ In Western churches worship is commonly considered a worthy humanly initiation to honour the Father. However, as James Torrance argues, only through Christ can we participate in worshipping the Father by the Spirit. Worship is merely response that realises Christ’s perfect worship of the Father on behalf of humanity.⁷⁴ Worship is also something done in the human, forming them to be centred in Christ through their participation in His death and resurrection. Worship is a Christocentric experience because ontologically Christ, our great High Priest, enables and fulfils all human worship of God. Formative worship witnesses to the “gospel of grace”; God’s people reconciled with the Father in the worship of the Son.⁷⁵

Genuine worship is the “*matrix*” of formation for God’s people.⁷⁶ It is a space for proclamation and shaping of belief of God’s self-revealed being and engagement with the world. Through worship a worldview centred in Christ is developed, including perceptions of and responses to suffering. Humans are a species able to ponder death and suffering and their approaches to them.⁷⁷ There is, therefore, dire need for worship to form perceptions of suffering by reorienting participants to the truth and hope of God’s narrative for His creation. This metanarrative has been lost in Western worship, causing loss of human identity as people fail to see creations’ true *telos* and, instead, seek meaning in the human-made consumerist ‘gospel’. Yet, the Christian story “is nothing if not a way of thinking about death”.⁷⁸ It enables people to live as frail mortals and to develop understanding of what it means to ‘die well’. John Witvliet mentions three important aspects of acquiring a Christocentric lens of death, which can relate to any kind of suffering. Through developing “honest lament”, “resilient hope”, and “stubborn solidarity”, in the frequent practice of worship, God’s people will learn to suffer well.⁷⁹

⁷² Ibid., 215.

⁷³ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-Of-The-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 4.

⁷⁴ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 14-15.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 138.

⁷⁷ John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 291.

⁷⁸ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 291.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 292-295.

Honest lament challenges society's default to ignore or escape the reality and devastation of death. Throughout history the psalmists, prophets, and priests did not busy themselves with cures for suffering, but offered anguish up to God in prayer.⁸⁰ Honest lament acknowledges present realities for what they are and gifts space to mourn suffering, allowing one to overcome suffering in some way. Honest lament acknowledges the human self – a mortal and broken person crying out from their pile of ashes for the grace of Christ.⁸¹ Society's denial of the wretched state of humanity is rejected; the desperate need to die to self and live in Christ is realised. This truth is often softened in our worship. As Dawn argues, when God's Word is *truly* read and *genuinely* heard it has that power to "kill us", bringing death to our self-centredness. It highlights human need to embrace the reality of suffering found in union with the slain Lamb. Thus, awareness of our helpless state, as children of Adam, welcomes utter dependence on God, the One who, in Christ, has conquered all evil for all of humanity. Truth strips us and then adorns us with white robes of grace. The time to mourn is deeply connected with the time to laugh.⁸²

Lament and praise are holistic experiences. Witvliet claims that a broader range of affective elements of worship need to be adopted for holistic transformation.⁸³ The worship space, what is seen, heard, touched, spoken, and smelt, contributes to formation. Furthermore, worship introduces body postures that teach participants how to relate to God and to the other.⁸⁴ James K. A. Smith suggests the physical practices of worship direct the focus of our love toward Kingdom visions.⁸⁵ Singing is one type of full-body engagement in formative worship. The power of communication through song is immense, as it has the ability to engage every aspect of our being and is able to subtly weave its 'truths' into our memory and fasten them onto our hearts. Worship songs affect a large majority of the worshipper's theology, forming how they engage God with their entire being.⁸⁶ The persuasive power of song highlights the importance to ensure theological truths about God's ontology (Trinity) and mission are emphasised in the lyrics and tone of the music. True knowledge of God and His will for creation is a necessary foundation upon which to suffer well.⁸⁷

Furthermore, song must engage honest lament of human identity and experience. Powerful language of lament through song, both of word and body, deeply impacts individuals and communities. Reckless crying out of inner anguish reflects the wails of disorientation observed in the Psalms.⁸⁸ Songs of

80 Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 139–140.

81 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 41–43.

82 Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 206–207.

83 Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 40.

84 John D. Witvliet, "The Cumulative Power of Transformation in Public Worship: Cultivating Gratitude and Expectancy for the Holy Spirit's Work," in *Worship That Changes Lives: Multidisciplinary and Congregational Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation* (ed. Alexis D. Abernethy; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 45–47.

85 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 131–33.

86 William Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 95.

87 Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, 365. Dawn writes, "Don't tell me what I must do to make my journey better or more enjoyable; remind me instead of how graciously and compassionately God has come to us, how his powerful and merciful reign has broken into our world. The result will be the formation of my journey, but we will wander aimlessly or along the wrong paths if we are not first changed by God's advent and then transformed into his way of life."

88 Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), xii–xiii, 96–97. Brueggemann highlights the powerful transformation of praying the lament Psalms together in church. These Psalms bring structure to the chaos of one's suffering and reorient them toward the community of believers and the metanarrative of Scripture.

this depth find their way into us with their echoing rhymes and rhythms. Vulnerable honest lament must be modelled; the leader of worship leads best in their self-acknowledgement of their wounds.⁸⁹ Their language of worship needs to open people to raw lament in the context of God's great metanarrative of hope. Imagine standing united, hand in hand, arms lifted, joined in voice, passionately singing a Psalm of lament, witnessing to the truth of God and His mission in the midst of suffering. Powerful full-body experiences shape our approach to suffering as the Body of Christ.

Through worship Christians reclaim an attitude of hope, knowing that the age to come is already penetrating the present age.⁹⁰ Resilient hope acknowledges death for what it is – a tragic doorway within eternal life.⁹¹ Suffering, like death, must be understood in the bigger picture, God's mission. This view contradicts the instant utopian perspective of society. We need to re-understand suffering in the magnificent light of hope, God's promised future for His people, and to live in this rich hope through the Spirit, rather than focusing on lesser or unimportant matters of a life *limited* to 'now'. Through participation in worship we recall God's story, both what has been promised, and the promise yet to come. This profession of hope combats hopeless despair. Jesus' worship at the right hand of the Father, His fulfilment and mediation of our worship, extends into eternity. In this realisation of the everlasting event of worship hope might be discovered in a new light.⁹²

Hope-filled worship is found in and gained through those with great hunger for this mysterious hope of the 'not yet'.⁹³ Such hunger is known by those who truly realise the broken state of this world, who live in overwhelming affliction, utterly discontent with prolonging the present, they yearn for the glorious complete reign of God. There is desperate need for a truly meaningful eschatology to be grasped in the comfortable West. The whitewashed stories of suffering within our churches need to be heard so that the incredible hope of Christ can be more fully understood and desired.⁹⁴ The nature of worship should empower congregations to adopt a Christocentric worldview as they learn to "shoulder the cross".⁹⁵

Genuine worship grasps the tension between God's immanence and transcendence. Overemphasis of God's immanence is evident in the West, yet, understanding and awe of His transcendence is less familiar in this largely irreverent society.⁹⁶ Participation in rich prayer captures this tension. We acknowledge God's presence with us and depend on His being beyond us, able to bring about His perfect purposes for all creation.⁹⁷ Offering raw suffering in prayer to God believes him to be both the true Comforter and the Conqueror of evil. Adoption of rich liturgical prayer is a powerful asset. It uses words that rip through the walls of our hearts and pour in the eternal hope of God that has been proclaimed throughout history.

Dawn suggests a significant cause of the loss of this eschatological narrative of God is the loss of

89 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), xvi.

90 Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 206.

91 Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 293.

92 Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 82–83. Torrance reminds that the "life of worship and communion with the Father which Jesus fulfilled in our humanity did not end in death".

93 Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 275.

94 Charles Hewlett and Joanne Hewlett, *Hurting Hope: What Parents Feel When Their Children Suffer* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions, 2011).

95 Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, 341.

96 Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 267.

97 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 193.

symbols.⁹⁸ Webber claims the Eucharist is a key aspect of worship where profound symbolism has been distorted by the rationalism of the Enlightenment.⁹⁹ Participation in the Eucharist remembers God's great story of reconciling humanity to himself in the life of Christ from now and for all eternity. In this hope-filled practice we come to the table as we are to feast upon the undeserved eternal grace of Christ. Communion must be articulated well in order for its necessary wealth to be received by a broken and hungry people of God. As leaders of worship who are we welcoming to come to the table? Recognising self and other as desperate for Christ's hope, found at the table, is crucial for the formative worship of participating in the Eucharist.

Stubborn solidarity acknowledges church for what it is, a community called by God to gather as a witness to the Kingdom.¹⁰⁰ It highlights the intended social approach to all of life, including suffering and death. Profound transformation occurs in worship that is focused on God's metanarrative and not on self-preference and desire. This is a massive challenge against the individualist priority of society. The best for self is only found beyond self in the God who redeems and transforms, and in unity with the other. As Philip Yancey argues, it is in the midst of the community standing before God that the fears of suffering can be disarmed.¹⁰¹ One's presence in the other's suffering defeats the loneliness that intensifies and distorts pain. Yet, church is often the last place honest suffering is found; it is a place full of "happy plastic people" participating in a "stained glass masquerade".¹⁰² Formative worship frames suffering within a maturing faith in the truth and hope of the metanarrative of Scripture. Talking about and living in suffering is normalised in a world longing for restoration. Thus, the Church need no longer fear 'suffering well together'. Individuals must live their anguish in community with others who also suffer. Gathered worship highlights true identity, found in and with the other; individuality is re-imagined in connection with the community of believers anticipating the Kingdom. Worship welcomes people into one another's suffering through symbol, testimony, remembering in prayer/liturgy the saints who have died, and learning from one another's culture. The dynamic relationship between lament and praise is truly experienced in community.¹⁰³

"The Christian community is an alternative society."¹⁰⁴ Through worship we are transformed and live transformed in our communities. Christological perceptions of suffering speak truth and hope to believers and non-believers. Our choices in life are not controlled by fear of suffering but by the eternal mission of God. In worship Christ's disciples witness to God, which results in understanding their place in His metanarrative. Dawn argues God's profound hope and salvation has been watered down to the proclamation of human remedies and materialistic consumer-driven solutions for the present.¹⁰⁵ Wise Christian leaders will realise the importance of worship for the formation of God's suffering people and invest time and energy into doing this well. It is through learning to worship well as the eschatological

98 Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 271.

99 Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 147.

100 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 160–162.

101 Philip Yancey, *When We Hurt: Prayer, Preparation, & Hope for Life's Pain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 58.

102 Casting Crowns, *Stained Glass Masquerade* (Lifesong; Brentwood: Reunion Records, 2005). In their song, *Stained Glass Masquerade* Casting Crowns, uses this imagery in reference to the nature of church.

103 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, 44–45.

104 Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 215.

105 Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, 360–61.

community of God that we will become people who suffer well. In the midst of our suffering, and the world's, we will be a people who witness to the true hope of Christ, who was and is and is to come.