

November Book Summary

By Dan Brent

Where the Hell Is God?

Richard Leonard SJ, Hidden Spring, 2010, 69 pp., \$12

In the Preface, author Leonard tells the story of how, twenty years ago, his young sister was injured in a car accident and has been a quadriplegic ever since. Their mother's plaintive cry at the hospital gave the book its title, "Where the hell is God?"

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"God is punishing her for something." But ours is a God of compassion and forgiveness. Or "God wanted him to learn something through the experience." Yes, we may well learn through suffering but God is not a schoolmarm with a stick.

Or "God sent the disaster to bring us to himself in prayer." The problem with that approach is that God doesn't send us the disasters. They happen because, in fact, we live in a world that is not perfect. You can blame God for that, if you want. But don't be surprised or crushed if God doesn't run around undoing the imperfect world by miraculously overriding nature or tinkering with the weather. Prayer, after all, is not meant to "change God's mind", but to help ourselves learn to trust God and to cope with life's difficulties and opportunities. Zeus was the pagan god in charge of the weather and he was moody and unpredictable. Not a good image for our God!

"God is a big picture kind of guy" Leonard explains. Coping with suffering is, for the Christian, learning to come to terms with accepting God's place in our lives. It's an acquired skill. Good (Australian) Jesuit that he is, Leonard briefly outlines some of Ignatius's thinking on reading the discernment clues that hint at God's hopes for us. "Sometimes we live in an unhealed past or an unknown future, whereas God may be found right under our nose, here and now." (p.29)

Leonard dismisses the "substitution theology" of Anselm. God needed to punish somebody for our sins, the theory goes, so he allowed his son Jesus to stand in for us. There is some sick logic to the theory, but the image of a vengeful God that it assumes isn't very attractive. Unfortunately, the theory survives in some of our devotional prayers and practices. The author quotes from the third verse from *How Great Thou Art*: "That on the cross my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin." Fascinating if you're into car wrecks; but bad theology.

Leonard's final rejected theory on suffering is the "offer it up" approach. If you are old enough, you may recall being trained to "offer up" painful experiences as a way to "get souls out of purgatory." Happily, that theology has gone to a quiet demise.

So where does that leave us?

Most of the writers at this point just decide that suffering is one of God's mysteries. We will never understand it. That's even where the Book of Job goes. In his suffering, Job is demanding an explanation from God. But God says you have no right to know my ways. "Where were you when I founded the earth? Have you an arm like that of God, or can you thunder with a voice like his?"

But Leonard presses on. He grants that God has made an imperfect world. He doesn't know why and he doesn't know even whether God *could* have made a world without suffering. But he says, suppose that we "accept that God does not know the unknowable and cannot do the undoable. If something is beyond knowing or beyond doing, is that true for God as well as for us?" We think of God as all-knowing, omniscient. But suppose that "there are things that God does not know and cannot do *because God chooses it that way!*" (My italics and exclamation point.) And suppose that the God who made the rules of nature refuses to intervene each time we don't like the painful results. So now "God could know everything, but chooses not to, and could keep intervening, but chooses not to." (p.51) Then you have suffering that God didn't see coming and won't stop.

Jesus told his audience that God counts even the hairs of our head. His point was that God doesn't lose track of us; he cares for us always in every detail. But it would be to fall into scriptural fundamentalism – everything in the bible is to be taken literally – if we conclude that God actually chooses baldness for some and gives great manes to others.

So God doesn't make suffering, death, loss go away. But God is there with us through it. God weeps with the "orphans standing up in their cribs with outstretched arms with no one to cuddle, love, or adopt them." (p.60) And eventually God has heaven to make it right. Leonard uses the story of the Prodigal Son to help us imagine what's going on. The Father is watching on the road all day, waiting. And when the son arrives, this Father rushes out, kisses him, and calls for a party. It's irrelevant whether the son's sufferings were of his own doing or not. The Father is overjoyed to have him home at last.

"Christian hope," the book concludes, "says that our parting is not a definitive 'goodbye' but more a 'see you later'."