

Not all suffering is alike. I'd like to distinguish three different kinds. We sometimes expect all suffering to be as noble as the crucifixion, but not all suffering is alike.

The first kind of suffering let's call senseless tragedy. The driveby shooting of a child. A tornado killing Palm Sunday worshippers in an Alabama Methodist church. An employee fired three years before retirement. Sexual harrassment. Rape. Genocide. Innocent people. Although we search for an explanation, nothing good can be said. We cheerfully suggest, "Everything happens for a reason," but we know there's no reason for this. The first kind of suffering is senseless tragedy.

The second kind of suffering let's call unwanted good. In this kind, something good comes from the suffering, but we never wanted it to happen this way. The death of one family member causes two others to speak to each other for the first time in twenty years. The spouse who did not want to divorce finds that sadness can turn into new freedom. Someone who nearly dies gains a new appreciation for life. The second kind of suffering is unwanted good. It's easier to accept than the first kind.

The third kind of suffering is willful redemption. Parents have another child, fully aware of the hardships. Families take in an elderly member, knowing that stress will follow. Students apply themselves to homework; athletes to exercise; musicians to practice; employees to the job. They willfully seek suffering because redemption follows. This was the suffering of the cross. It's the most noble form of suffering, but it's not the only form. Some suffering is not noble; some suffering serves no purpose at all, and all we can do with it is cry.

Jesus accepted death--willful redemption. He suffered the third form to keep us from despair when we face the first form. When tragedy fills our days, his death promises a better life. I truly believe that sometimes our sufferings are worse than Christ's. His sufferings had purpose; some of ours don't. His sufferings were noble; some of ours aren't. But we waste a lot of energy asking why something happened, harboring resentments, planning revenge, growing angry with God. God knows some suffering is pointless. That's why there was a Good Friday--to help us look beyond our cross, beyond our grave, and into the loving eyes of the suffering Jesus. He gives hope to all who share his pain.