



A Theology of Suffering

A Catholic Perspective

Key Themes:

- **Redemptive suffering:** Catholics believe suffering can be united with Christ's passion and offered for the benefit of others—a concept rooted in **Colossians 1:24** (“I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions...”).
- **Sacramental worldview:** Suffering is often approached through **sacraments** like the **Anointing of the Sick**, which offers grace and healing (spiritual or physical).
- **Purgatory:** Post-death suffering (purification) is seen as a part of sanctification, preparing the soul for heaven.
- **Saints and martyrs:** Catholicism elevates examples of those who suffered faithfully, encouraging believers to imitate their trust in God.

Summary:

Suffering is **meaningful** when offered in union with Christ. It can purify, sanctify, and even assist in the salvation of others through intercessory suffering.

Protestant Perspective

(Protestantism includes a broad range of traditions—Lutheran, Reformed, Evangelical, etc.—but here are common threads.)

Key Themes:

- **Sola fide (faith alone):** Suffering does not earn salvation, but faith in God's grace does. Thus, suffering is not meritorious in itself.
- **God's sovereignty:** Especially in **Reformed** (Calvinist) theology, suffering is part of God's providential plan—even when we don't understand it (**Romans 8:28**).
- **The cross as central:** Evangelicals stress the cross as the ultimate answer to human suffering—Christ suffers **instead of us** (corrective substitution).
- **Character formation:** Like in the book of James, suffering is often seen as God's way of maturing believers (**James 1:2–4**).

Summary:

Suffering is a **test of faith** and a tool for spiritual growth, under God's control. It points believers to the cross and hope in Christ's return.

1. Suffering as Purification

Mystics often saw suffering as a way to burn away selfishness, pride, and attachments, making the soul receptive to God.

- **Gregory the Great** (on Job): trials purify like fire.
- **John of the Cross**: the *Dark Night* strips away illusions and desires so only God remains.
- **Meister Eckhart**: detachment in suffering frees the soul from self-centeredness.

2. Suffering as Union with Christ

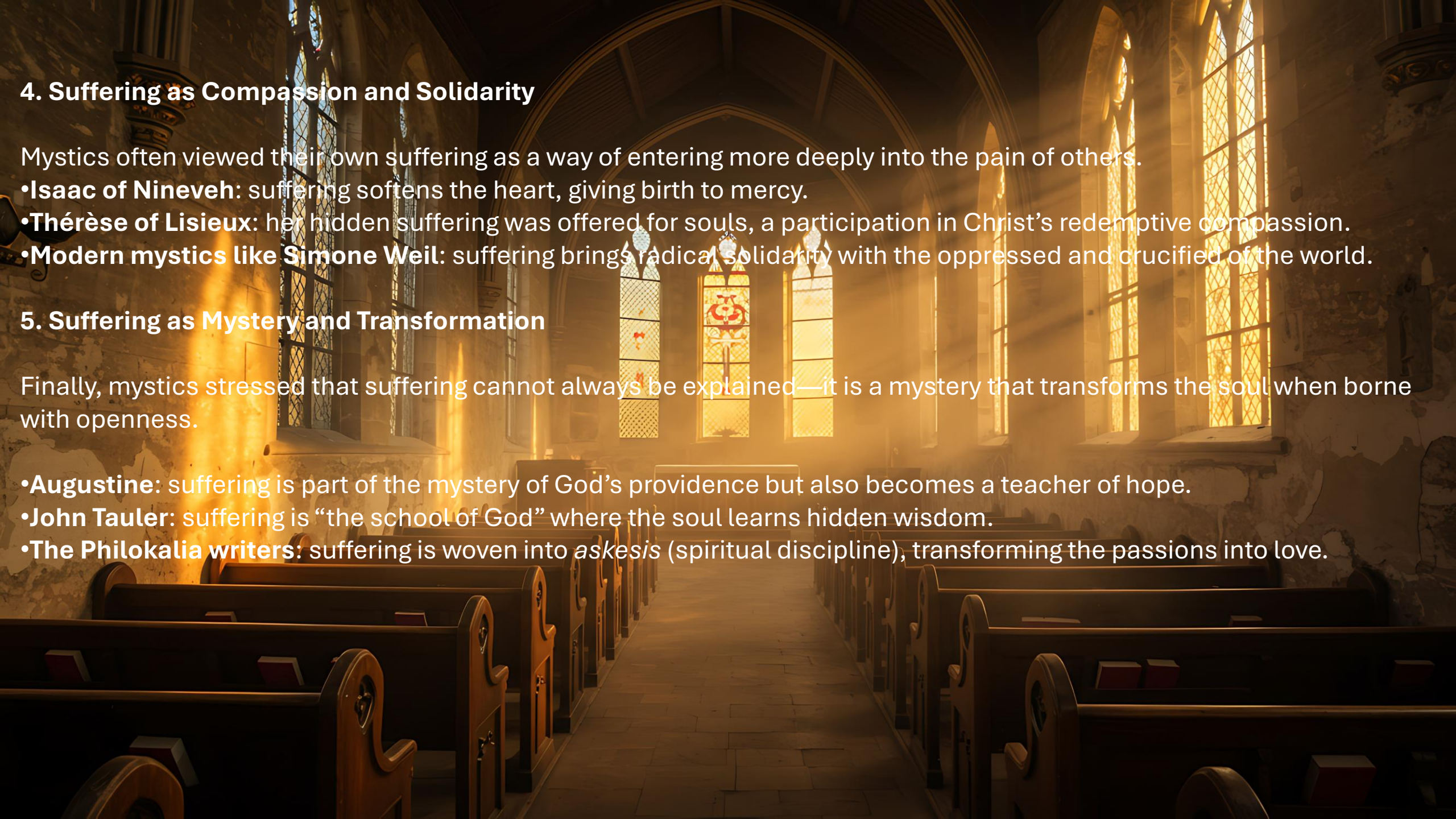
Sharing in Christ's passion was central for many mystics, who saw their pain as participation in His redemptive love.

- **Catherine of Siena**: embraced suffering to unite with Christ crucified and intercede for the Church.
- **Teresa of Ávila**: suffering tests and strengthens love for God, drawing the soul closer to Him.
- **Thérèse of Lisieux**: her "Little Way" turned every suffering into an offering of love joined to Jesus.

3. Suffering as Revelation of Divine Love

Some mystics saw suffering not as contradiction to God's love but as a mysterious disclosure of it.

- **Julian of Norwich**: even in her illness and visions of Christ's agony, she heard the assurance "all shall be well."
- **Madame Guyon & Fénelon**: abandonment to suffering reveals the hidden mercy of God.
- **Simone Weil**: affliction (*malheur*) uncovers the depth of divine compassion, where God is closest.



4. Suffering as Compassion and Solidarity

Mystics often viewed their own suffering as a way of entering more deeply into the pain of others.

- **Isaac of Nineveh:** suffering softens the heart, giving birth to mercy.
- **Thérèse of Lisieux:** her hidden suffering was offered for souls, a participation in Christ's redemptive compassion.
- **Modern mystics like Simone Weil:** suffering brings radical solidarity with the oppressed and crucified of the world.

5. Suffering as Mystery and Transformation

Finally, mystics stressed that suffering cannot always be explained—it is a mystery that transforms the soul when borne with openness.

- **Augustine:** suffering is part of the mystery of God's providence but also becomes a teacher of hope.
- **John Tauler:** suffering is "the school of God" where the soul learns hidden wisdom.
- **The Philokalia writers:** suffering is woven into *askesis* (spiritual discipline), transforming the passions into love.

Nelson's Five Paradigms of Suffering

- **The Moral view** – thought to be the most widespread understanding of the problem of evil, this paradigm attributes evil to the sinfulness of of humanity.
- **Radical Suffering** – explores the notion of that there is not justification for the evil in the world, and it is our response instead that matters.
- **Ambiguous Creation** – the world is finite and we have limited control over the environment and our relationships, evil is the experience of our finitude in a chaotic world.
- **Eschatological Imagination** – this view, points beyond our suffering and into narratives of resistance and liberation; this understanding of evil posits that evil will not have the last word.
- **Redemptive Suffering** – this paradigm understands the impact of suffering on people but claims that some suffering can be used to reclaim sinners and reestablish a life altering relationship with God.

Adapted from: Nelson, S. (2003). Facing evil: Evil's many faces: Five paradigms for understanding evil. *Interpretation*, 57(4), 398-413.

Privation Theory

- **Key Idea:** Evil is not a "thing" God created, but a *lack* or *corruption* of the good.
- **Theologians:** Augustine, Aquinas.
- **Implication:** God only creates what is good; evil arises when creatures fall away from the fullness of good. Thus, God is not the author of evil.

