VIII.

DIVINE LIBERATION
AND BLACK SUFFERING

The reality of suffering challenges the affirmation that God is liberating the oppressed from human captivity. If God is unlimited both in power and in goodness, as the Christian faith claims, why does he not destroy the powers of evil through the establishment of divine righteousness? If God is the One who liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery, who appeared in Jesus as the healer of the sick and the helper of the poor, and who is present today as the Holy Spirit of liberation, then why are black people still living in wretched conditions without the economic and political power to determine their historical destiny? Why does the Holy One of Israel permit white people to oppress helpless black people when the Scripture says God came in Jesus Christ to set the captives free? The persistence of suffering seems to require us to deny either God’s perfect goodness or his unlimited power. According to which view is adopted, God is either unwilling or unable to deliver the oppressed from injustice. William Jones’s exploration of the question, “Is God a white racist?”3 is a cogent example of the first alternative, while E. S. Brightman’s “finite God” illustrates the second.

Black Theology, while recognizing the seriousness of the problem, cannot accept either logical alternative for solving it. It is a violation of black faith to weaken either divine love or divine power. In this respect Black Theology finds itself in company with all of the classic theologies of the Christian tradition. However, the problem is resolved differently in Black Theology, which takes the liberation of the oppressed as its starting point.
Suffering in the Bible

The best place to begin an examination of the problem of suffering is with the Bible. How does Scripture reconcile the suffering of the innocent and weak with its claim that “the Lord is a man of war” (Exod. 15:3 RSV) who “delivers [the poor] in the day of trouble” and “protects him and keeps him alive” (Ps. 41:1-2 RSV)?

The Old Testament tells the story of Israel’s faith in the faithfulness of God to liberate the lowly and downtrodden from the proud and the mighty. Israel’s faith in the promise of God to be with the little ones in time of trouble is grounded in Yahweh having been with her in the Exodus–Sinai event, thereby disclosing his mighty power and unlimited love on behalf of the helpless. Because the Exodus was the decisive event in Israel’s knowledge of God, the people naturally were troubled when historical events seemed to contradict their faith in God as the Liberator of the oppressed. The more they believed that God “heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds” (Ps. 147:3 RSV), the more the suffering and the pain of the poor emerged as a problem in their religious consciousness. Since God is who the people know him to be, why then did he not always intervene to liberate his faithful servants? Why did the God of the oppressed permit the innocent to suffer?

On the one hand, Israel firmly believed that “the Lord is a great God” (Ps. 95:3 RSV), whose “steadfast love endures for ever” (Ps. 136 RSV) and who is the “great King above all gods” (Ps. 95:3 RSV). On the other hand, Israel could not ignore the obvious historical contradictions inherent in her faith, particularly when the wicked continued to “slay the widow and sojourner, and murder the fatherless” (Ps. 94:6 RSV). Consequently, the integrity of her faith in Yahweh’s faithfulness was dependent upon her asking.

O Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?
Psalm 94:3 RSV
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING: 165

This is not a theoretical question arising out of an intellectual concern about the content of divine justice. It is a practical question emerging out of the struggle of faith with the negative dimensions of human experience. Whatever else may be said about biblical faith, it did not affirm divine revelation in lieu of facing the reality of human suffering. Indeed it was not the mere presence of suffering that troubled Israel’s faith. “The problem in Scripture is not why suffering exists, but why it afflicts some people and not others. The problem is not the fact of suffering but its distribution. Why do the wicked prosper, while those who try to keep faith with God suffer?”

One of the simplest and most common responses to this problem was the suggestion that suffering was distributed in exact proportion to the sins committed. This formula was applied both to the community in general and to the individual in particular. Suffering therefore was understood as the just punishment of God inflicted on those who had disobeyed his will. This view is directly related to the covenant experience at Sinai wherein Israel agreed to obey Yahweh’s Law and to live according to his holy ways. To be sure, there were many instances of Israel’s disobedience, and Yahweh did not always administer the punishment merited by the people. But that was due to God’s grace and mercy which tempered his justice but did not negate it. Furthermore, the establishment of divine justice in Israel meant that those who keep the covenant will be rewarded, and those who disobey will be punished by God according to the extent of their disobedience.

Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them,
for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds.
Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him,
for what his hands have done shall be done to him.
Isaiah 3:10-11 RSV

This view is the theological assumption of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic theory of history as found in I and II Kings. It is also found in Proverbs.
The fear of the Lord prolongs life,  
but the years of the wicked will be short.  
Proverbs 10:27 RSV

Although the idea that suffering was the just punishment for sins is clearly present in the Bible, that formula was often contradicted by history. It was not difficult for the people to see that the wicked person did not always suffer for his wrongdoings, and neither did the righteous one prosper. The opposite often occurred. That is why Jeremiah complained:

You have right on your side, Yahweh,  
when I complain about you.  
But I would like to debate a point of justice with you.  
Why is it that the wicked live so prosperously?  
Why do scoundrels enjoy peace?  
Jeremiah 12:1 JERUSALEM BIBLE

And Habakkuk, who was concerned about the use of evil as an instrument of divine purpose, also questioned the justice of God.

Thou who are of purer eyes than to behold evil  
and canst not look on wrong,  
why dost thou look on faithless men,  
and art silent when the wicked swallows up  
the man more righteous than he?  
Habakkuk 1:13 RSV

It is important to note that neither Habakkuk nor Jeremiah received an answer to his perplexing question. Both prophets illustrate how biblical religion, on the one hand, faced squarely the reality of suffering but, on the other hand, refused to let evil count decisively against Yahweh’s sovereignty. That suffering is real and thus contradicts Israel’s knowledge of God is affirmed throughout biblical history. But despite suffering, biblical faith continued to insist on the sovereignty of Yahweh’s justice and his will to establish divine righteousness in human history. Indeed it was the strength of Israel’s monotheising faith in God’s abso-
lute sovereignty, which finally (and canonically) excluded any form of metaphysical dualism, that created the seriousness of the problem of the distribution of suffering. Since evil was under the aegis of God's sovereignty and not an independent power co-eternal with him, why then does not God establish divine righteousness here and now, by distributing rewards and punishments in accordance with the obedience and disobedience of his creatures?

The people's failure to reconcile divine justice with human suffering in the present led some to attempt reconciliation by an appeal to the future. Habakkuk suggests this solution:

For still the vision awaits its time;
it hastens to the end—it will not lie.
If it seem slow, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Behold, he whose soul is not
upright in him shall fail,
but the righteous shall live by his faith.
Habakkuk 2:3-4 RSV

The emphasis of facing the enigmas of history in faith, confident that God will make things clear in the future, is also implied in Jeremiah when he says, "the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (31:31 RSV). While Jeremiah and Habakkuk held onto belief in God's sovereignty in the context of injustice and suffering, looking forward to the inauguration of God's future establishment of divine righteousness, others before and after them insisted on the classical explanation, suggesting that the divine punishment of the wicked is only temporarily delayed.

Better is a little that the righteous has
than the abundance of many wicked.
For the arms of the wicked shall be broken;
but the Lord upholds the righteous.
Psalm 37:16-17 RSV;
But the application of the Deuteronomic ethic of election to the case of individual suffering in Diaspora could not stand up against the facts of history, even with the appeal to future historical happenings. The wicked did not always get their punishment before death and neither did the righteous get their reward, as Psalm 37 in a simplistic application of the Deuteronomic formula insists. The basic Deuteronomic answer, thus applied, did not explain the problem of suffering, and its inadequacy was brought to a head in Job and Ecclesiastes. The latter not only rejects the Deuteronomic success formula as affirmed by the sages of the book of Proverbs, it says clearly that the problem of suffering is insoluble, completely beyond any rational or religious explanation.

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All its vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 RSV

With this affirmation, the central theme of Ecclesiastes is set in unambiguous opposition to the classical explanation of human suffering. The Preacher does not deny God's existence or his sovereignty, for "who can make straight what he has made crooked" (7:13)? Ecclesiastes merely contends that God is completely transcendent and thus his ways are hidden from human wisdom. Therefore the Preacher concludes that as far as human understanding goes:

One fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As to the good man, so is the sinner; . . . The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so are the sons of men snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Ecclesiastes 9:2; 11-12 RSV

Job, while not embracing the skeptical and sometimes cynical attitude of Ecclesiastes, also wrestles with the problem of suffer-
ing, as that problem is directly related to human fellowship with God. Job is described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil" (1:1 RSV). According to the wise men's retribution dogma, his prosperity and good health were true indicators of his righteousness. But suddenly the situation changed, and Job lost everything he had: wealth, family, and good health. While the Job of the Prologue keeps the faith, the Job of the poetic sections becomes extremely defiant, cursing the day of his birth and insisting that he has done nothing to merit the punishment inflicted on him. He challenges God to a debate in order that his integrity might be vindicated. Job wrestles with suffering, not as a metaphysical problem but as a practical problem related to the life of faith. Like Ecclesiastes, this book is concerned with suffering insofar as it usurps life's meaning as defined by human fellowship with God. Because Job's friends accepted the dogma of retribution as the rule for measuring human fellowship with God, Job protested that their God was unjust.

Far be it from me to say that you are right;  
till I die I will not put away my integrity from me.  
I hold fast to my righteousness, and will not let it go;  
my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.  

Job 27:5-6 RSV

Job concludes with an audacious challenge: "Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35).

The Almighty answers, but not according to Job's definition of the problem of suffering. God transposes the issue to another level, emphasizing divine power and knowledge in contrast to human weakness and ignorance.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  

Job 38:4 RSV

After God's challenging confrontation, reminding Job of his ignorance, Job repents. Job's repentance is not due to his acceptance of his punishment as just when understood in the light of
the retribution dogma. His contribution is due to his recognition that God’s revelation transcends human comprehension. God cannot be defined by human logic. Consequently “prosperity and adversity have no necessary connection with goodness and wickedness.” Thus Job says:

I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....
I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.

Job 42:3, 5-6 RSV

In addition to the idea that God’s revelation cannot be limited to the dogma of retribution, the book of Job suggests two additional responses to human suffering. First, the Prologue suggests that Job’s suffering was a test of his faith (1:6-12), a theme also found in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19). Second, the Epilogue touches on the theme that suffering can be redemptive (42:10), a theme that is dominant in Second Isaiah. “By his suffering shall my servant justify many, taking their faults on himself” (Isaiah 53:11 JERUSALEM BIBLE).

Second Isaiah’s contention that suffering can be redemptive was a new departure in biblical theodicy and requires further examination. The historical setting is Israel’s exile in Babylon. Here Israel faced the most severe test of her faith. As the people whom Yahweh chose as his own, liberating them from Egyptian slavery and thereby bestowing upon them a sense of peoplehood, the people of Israel found it difficult to reconcile their faith in God as Savior and Liberator with their existence as exiles in a foreign land. To be sure, the people realized that they had sinned and thus their exile was partly justifiable in view of the orthodox dogma of retribution. Had not the prophets warned Israel to repent or suffer exile? But how was Yahweh justified in using the works of evil men to accomplish his purpose? And if we grant that the answer to the previous question lies in God’s inscrutable will, the justice of God still has to face the fact that Babylon was
pitiless in her oppression of Israel, and thus “showed them no mercy” (47:6 RSV).

When the poor and needy seek water,
    and there is none,
    and their tongue is parched with thirst.
Isaiah 41:17 RSV

Why did Israel receive “double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:2 RSV)? It is not surprising that many Israelites concluded that Yahweh was either impotent (Isa. 40:28) or had cast them off. “My way is hid from the Lord,” said Israel, “and my right is disregarded by my God” (Isa. 40:27 RSV). “The Lord has forsaken me, [and] my Lord has forgotten me” (Isa. 49:14 RSV).

In the context of despair and hopelessness, Second Isaiah emerges on the scene to proclaim that Israel’s servitude is over, because Yahweh, the Creator and Redeemer of humankind, still loves his people. How absurd it is to think that Yahweh, the God of the poor, has forgotten about his people in Babylon. And how ridiculous it is to think that Yahweh, the everlasting God, has grown faint and weary. His power is unlimited and his love knows no bounds for those who are weak and helpless. Then the prophet moves beyond the simple moral coherence of the dogma of retribution and introduces the idea of the Suffering Servant. Israel’s suffering must be understood, in the light of the purpose and sovereignty of God wherein old Israel became a new being, his servant for the redemption of the nations.

Although there has been much scholarly debate about the identity of the servant in Second Isaiah, there are several passages where the servant is explicitly identified with Israel.

And he said to me, “You are my servant,
    Israel, in whom I will be glorified”
Isaiah 49:3 RSV

But you Israel, my servant,
    Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
Isaiah 41:8 RSV
Because Israel as a new being is Yahweh’s servant, her mission is to “bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1 RSV) by enduring the transgressions and sins of others (Isa. 53). The sins of others are placed upon Israel when she remains faithful to Yahweh, even though evil men inflict pain and suffering upon her. Her mission is to be Yahweh’s people in the world by expressing the liberating presence of God among the nations. This act is the vicarious suffering of the innocent for the guilty. This is the meaning of Israel’s double portion which she received from Yahweh’s hand: expiation for her own sins, and transformation into a new being for the sake of others.

Two questions arise from this analysis of Israel’s suffering: (1) Why should Israel suffer for others? and (2) What makes Israel’s suffering redemptive? The answer to the first question is found in the meaning of divine election. To be chosen by Yahweh involves service, and thus the responsibility to participate in his will to establish justice in the world. To share in Yahweh’s inauguration of divine righteousness involves the willingness to suffer in the struggle of freedom. Election therefore is not a privileged status that is given to favorite people. It is a call to serve, to suffer with God in the divine realization of justice in the world. And Yahweh’s justice is not only for Israel but for all who hurt and inflict hurt in the world. For the oppressed, justice is the rescue from hurt; and for the oppressors it is the removal of the power to hurt others—even against their will—so that justice can be realized for all.

When viewed in the context of Yahweh’s sovereignty and purpose, Israel’s exile experience is not merely the fulfillment of the dogma of retribution. It is also the time when she receives a new vocation equal in importance to that of the Exodus, a higher vision of her calling as God’s people. To be Yahweh’s servant not only means that God will strengthen and help you and “will uphold you with [his] victorious right hand” (Isa. 41:10 RSV); it also means that Israel suffers with Yahweh in the divine establishment of justice in the land. There is no divine election without the call to suffer for justice.

But how can Israel’s suffering become redemptive for others? Israel’s suffering is redemptive, because she is suffering with and for her Lord who is always identified with the little ones in
agony. Therefore, it is God who makes human suffering redemptive! For Yahweh takes upon himself the pain of the widow and orphans and transforms slavery into freedom. This is what a later Isaiah meant when he said:

In all their affliction he was afflicted. . . .
In his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Isaiah 63:9 RSV

As Yahweh's Suffering Servant, Israel becomes God's visible presence in the world, enduring suffering for the freedom of humanity. Her suffering is redemptive because Yahweh is present with her, bearing the pain of sin so that liberation will become a reality among all people.

Second Isaiah's description of Israel as Yahweh's Suffering Servant influenced Jesus' understanding of his ministry as presented in the synoptic Gospels and John. Mark opens his Gospel with a quotation from Second Isaiah, and says that John's preaching is the fulfillment of that prophecy (see Mark 1:1-3 and Isa. 40:3). Matthew and Luke refashion the same passage with their own distinctive approaches (Matt. 3:1-3; Luke 3:1-6). A unique and dramatic use of Isaiah 40:3 is also found in John 1:19-23. The heavenly voice, which combines Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7, not only occurs at Jesus' baptism⁶ (Luke 3:21f.; Matt. 3:16f.; Mark 1:9f.) but also near the close of his ministry at the transfiguration (see Mark 9:7; Matt. 17:5; Luke 9:35). A reference is also made to the Suffering Servant theme in the important Q saying, the reply of Jesus to John (Luke 7:22; Matt. 11:5) and Jesus' direct reading from Isaiah 61 is found in Luke 4:18f. All these passages point to Jesus' acceptance of the role as the expected Messiah and his reinterpretation of messiahship in the light of the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah. And in Mark 10:45, Jesus' identification of himself with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is made with unmistakable clarity: "For the Son of man . . . came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The passion predictions⁷ make a similar point, as well as the Fourth Gospel's reference to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 36; cf. Isa. 53:4f., 7, 11).
Though Paul does not call Jesus the Servant of the Lord, his saying that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (I Cor. 15:3 RSV) has virtually the same meaning. Other echoes identifying Jesus with the Suffering Servant are found elsewhere in the New Testament. 8 “It is thus fair to say,” writes Millar Burrows, “that from Acts on the identification of Jesus with the Suffering Servant of the Lord is constant in the New Testament and there is no compelling reason to doubt that Jesus himself originated the idea.” 9

But the theological question is, What does Jesus’ acceptance of the role of the Suffering Servant of the Lord have to do with human suffering? The answer to this question is the crux of the biblical view of suffering. The approach to suffering is not derived from the philosophical definition of the problem of evil (If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there evil?), although the philosophical statement of the problem is relevant to the Bible, since philosophy emerges out of the culture to which the gospel seeks to speak. The weight of the biblical view of suffering is not on the origin of evil but on what God in Christ has done about evil. According to the New Testament, God became human in Jesus Christ, and defeated decisively the power of sin, death, and Satan, thereby bestowing upon us the freedom to struggle against suffering which destroys humanity. This is the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. During Jesus’ life, God became the Suffering Servant in Israel’s place, and thus took upon the divine-self human pain.

He was despised and rejected by man;  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
Isaiah 53:3 RSV

On the cross, God’s identity with the suffering of the world was complete. This event was the actualization of Second Isaiah’s prophecy.
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING: 175

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stipes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:4-5 RSV

In this context, Jesus' death was a sacrifice: "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearsers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7 RSV). Thus the reality and the depth of God's presence in human suffering is revealed not only in Jesus' active struggle against suffering during his ministry but especially in his death on the cross. The cross of Jesus reveals the extent of God's involvement in the suffering of the weak. He is not merely sympathetic with the social plan of the poor but becomes totally identified with them in their agony and pain. The pain of the oppressed is God's pain, for he takes their suffering as their own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control of their lives. The oppressed do not have to worry about suffering because its power over their lives was defeated by God himself. God in Christ became the Suffering Servant and thus took the humiliation and suffering of the oppressed into his own history. This divine event that happened on the cross liberated the oppressed to fight against suffering while not being determined by it.

The resurrection ignites joy and excitement because it is the sign of God's victory over suffering on the cross. The oppressed are set free to struggle politically against the imposed injustice of rulers. The Suffering Servant was raised from the dead, and this means that God is now present not only with Israel but with all who fight for the realization of humanity. Without the resurrection, Jesus was just a good man who suffered like other oppressed people. There is no reason to believe that God was with Jesus and thus defeated suffering unless Jesus transcended death and is
alive and present in the struggle of freedom. But if he is alive and present with God, then we have every reason to believe that we too will be raised from the dead and will be given the eternal freedom of communion with God. A foretaste of that freedom is already breaking into our present history and that is why the oppressed can struggle for freedom in this world. The freedom to struggle against suffering is the eschatological gift of a new humanity derived from Jesus’ resurrection. For without this gift of new humanity, the oppressed would have no grounds for struggling against suffering. They would be defined by the limits of history. The resurrection, therefore, is God breaking into history and liberating the oppressed from their present suffering, thereby opening up humanity to a divine realization beyond history. That is why Paul says: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain. . . .” (I Cor. 15:14 RSV). For his resurrection is the foundation of our freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1 RSV).

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection render the orthodox law of retribution inadequate as an explanation of human suffering. God is not an even-handed Judge who inflicts punishment according to the crime. Rather, he is the Loving Father of Jesus, the crucified and risen One, who suffers on our behalf. The legalistic structure of the orthodox formula, therefore, fails to deal with the complexity of divine involvement in suffering and the divine call of freedom to the oppressed in their situation of injustice. The divine involvement in suffering, radically revealed in Jesus’ cross, counts decisively against any suggestion that God is indifferent to human pain. Whatever else may be said about the philosophical difficulties that the problem of evil poses, whether in the traditional definition of classical philosophy or in Albert Camus’s humanism or even in the more recent black humanism of William Jones, faith arising out of the cross and resurrection of Jesus renders their questions (“Is God evil?” or “Is God a white racist?”) absurd from the biblical point of view. The absurdity of the question is derived from the fact that its origin ignores the very foundation of biblical faith itself, that is, God becoming the Suffering Servant in Christ in order that we might be liberated from injustice and pain.
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING : 177

However, the biblical view that God suffers for us and has defeated the powers of evil decisively in the cross and resurrection of Jesus does not mean that suffering no longer exists. The New Testament is clear that though the decisive victory has been won on the cross and through the resurrection of Jesus, the war against evil and suffering is still going on. The final victory will take place with the Second Coming of Christ. In the meantime, Christians are called to suffer with God in the fight against evil in the present age. This view gives us a new perspective on suffering. The oppressed are called to fight against suffering by becoming God’s suffering servants in the world. This vocation is not a passive endurance of injustice but, rather, a political and social praxis of liberation in the world, relieving the suffering of the little ones and proclaiming that God has freed them to struggle for the fulfillment of humanity. Suffering therefore is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus’ cross and resurrection and of our call to become liberated sufferers with God. There is joy in our suffering insofar as we have to suffer for freedom. There is joy not only because we know that God has defeated evil but also because God is present with us in our fight against suffering and will come again fully to consummate the freedom already given in Jesus Christ. Therefore when suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed, it is evil and we must struggle against it. But when suffering arises out of the struggle against suffering, as in the fight against injustice, we accept it as a constituent of our calling and thus voluntarily suffer, because there is no freedom independent of the fight for justice.

Suffering in the Western Theological Tradition

Regarding the definition of the problem of suffering, it is unfortunate that most of the exponents of the Western theological tradition have not paid sufficient attention to the biblical view. Although the Bible makes the divine liberation of the oppressed its starting point in the analysis of the problem of suffering, the classical theological tradition generally and Euro-
American theology in particular have usually taken their clue from the speculations of Greek philosophy or from a naïve orthodox providential claim that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28 KJV). Both alternatives have contributed to a political conservatism that locates the resolution of the problem of suffering either in the logical structure of the rational mind or in the interior depths of the human heart, and thereby negates the praxis of freedom against the structures of injustice and oppression.

When theology defines the problem of suffering within the context of philosophical discourse, it inevitably locates the Christian approach to suffering in the wrong place. In philosophy, human suffering is an aspect of the problem of evil. Thus the crux of the problem is: How do we rationally reconcile a God unlimited both in power and in goodness with the presence of evil, moral and natural? Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) was probably the first to state the theoretical implications of this dilemma.

God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them.\[1\]

Whatever else may be said about this philosophical definition of the problem of evil, the political action against evil is not built into it. Thus the problem is basically theoretical and not practical. Here then is one of the essential differences between the Bible and Greek philosophy. The latter tends to be more concerned about the theoretical formulation of the problem and less concerned about its practical elimination. The Bible is the exact reverse. Its emphasis is on what God has done in Jesus’s cross and resurrection to destroy the powers of evil and give the oppressed the freedom to struggle against humiliation and suffer-
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING

The Bible has little or no interest in rational explanations regarding the origins of evil. That evil exists is taken for granted. The focus is on what God has done, is doing, and will do to defeat the principalities and powers of evil. Thus God’s past and present acts of liberation bestow upon the oppressed the freedom to fight against their slavery and oppression.

Because Western theology has been influenced too much by philosophy and too little by the Bible in its analysis of the problem of suffering, it has often contributed to the religious justification of unjust structures that oppress the poor. That is why theologians spend more time discussing metaphysical speculations about the origin of evil than showing what the oppressed must do in order to eliminate the social and political structures that create evil. By focusing on metaphysics, theologians make the problem of evil a matter of intellectual theory and more often than not end up suggesting solutions that have nothing to do with the liberation of the poor from bondage.

This is especially true of John Hick’s analysis of the problem of evil. He accepts the classical definition of the problem: “If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish all evil; if He is unlimitedly powerful, He must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists. Therefore either God is not perfectly good or He is not unlimitedly powerful.” With this definition as his starting point, Hick proceeds to outline two classical approaches to the problem of evil in the Christian tradition: the Augustinian and the Irenaeus. He summarizes their difference as follows:

There is... to be found in Irenaeus the outline of an approach to the problem of evil which stands in important respects in contrast to the Augustinian type of theodicy. Instead of the doctrine that man was created finitely perfect and then incomprehensibly destroyed his own perfection and plunged into sin and misery, Irenaeus suggests that man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented, as in the Augustinian tradition, as an utterly malignant and catastrophic event, completely disrupting God’s plan, Irenaeus pictures it as something that occurred in the childhood of race, an understand-
able lapse due to weakness and immaturity rather than an adult crime full of malice and pregnant with perpetual guilt. And instead of the Augustinian view of life’s trials as a divine punishment for Adam’s sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man’s development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God’s good purpose for him.\textsuperscript{13}

From a theological point of view, however, the differences between the two theories are not so significant as the similarities. Due to the influence of Greek philosophy, both are focused on the origin of evil rather than on the political structures that make for human suffering. The difference therefore between Irenaeus and Augustine does not lie in their political analysis of suffering. While Irenaeus stressed the biblical emphasis that Christ’s work was primarily a victory over sin, death, and Satan, he fails to draw out the political significance of this theme. Augustine’s analysis of suffering was unquestionably dependent on Neo-Platonism, a factor that surely de-emphasized the place of the Bible in his thinking. Thus he defined evil as the privation of the good, and not as a power independent of the human will. Although Irenaeus and Augustine differ in many respects, neither has much to say about God’s empowerment of the oppressed to fight against injustice.

The same is true of theologians of Western Christianity who were influenced by them. Even John Hick, who seemed to be aware of the limitations of theoretical analyses of evil,\textsuperscript{14} fails to add anything that would be relevant to the liberation of the oppressed. While I do not discount the value of the intellect in analyzing the problem of evil, Hick’s analysis might have taken a different turn had he taken more seriously the distinction that Gabriel Marcel makes between the spectator and the victim.

In reflecting upon evil, I tend almost inevitably, to regard it as a disorder which I view from outside and of which I seek to discover the causes or secret aims. Why is it that the “mechanism” functions so defectively? Or is the defect merely apparent and due to a real defect in my vision? In this case the defect is in myself, yet it remains objective to my thought, which discovers it and ob-
serves it. But evil which is only stated or observed is no longer evil which is suffered: in fact, it ceases to be evil. In reality, I can only grasp it as evil in the measure in which it touches me—that is to say, in the measure in which I am involved, as one is involved in a lawsuit. Being "involved" is the fundamental fact; I cannot leave it out of account except by an unjustifiable fiction, for in doing so, I proceed as though I were God, and a God who is an onlooker at that.¹⁵

It is hard not to conclude that the main reason theologians have said little that can be used in the struggle of the oppressed is due to the fact that they have been only spectators and not victims of suffering.

A similar criticism must be directed against the religious orthodox approach. It, like the philosophical approach, has too often been a spectator's viewpoint, contributing to the oppression of the poor by justifying the unjust status quo. One of the typical representatives of this approach is Emil Brunner. The key to his view of divine providence and thus the problem of theodicy, is found in his interpretation of Romans 8:28.

In the presence of the Cross we cease to talk about "unjust" suffering. On the contrary, as we look at the Crucified all suffering gains a positive significance. "To those who love God all things work together for good"—we know this as those who have perceived that the sufferings of Christ were for the good of the world. Now we may unite our sufferings with the sufferings of the Crucified; as those who are united with Him in faith we may conceive them as suffering with Christ, even when from the moral point of view our sufferings are well deserved. For us suffering loses its negative character; it becomes fruitful, as God's means of discipline, by means of which, in paternal severity, He draws us to Himself. This is the greatest transformation possible in the sphere of human experience. Without taking away the sting of suffering, without fostering a desire for suffering, suffering becomes a positive instead of a negative principle.

Finally, there is yet another result: "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward" [Rom. 8:18]. The believer looks beyond his suffering to the final goal which it must serve;
compared with the promised glory, his suffering does not count. Suffering becomes the way to eternal life. Here, then, the theodicy problem is not solved intellectually, but by a real redemption, it is overcome. This does not mean that what is terrible becomes less terrible; terrible as it is, it is conquered by Him who permits us to bear this suffering, in order to purify us, and thus to prepare us for that life which no longer contains suffering. The real solution of the problem of theodicy is redemption.\textsuperscript{16}

The difficulty with Brunner’s antiphilosophical approach is not located in what he says but in what he fails to say, thereby negating the central meaning of biblical revelation which he intends to affirm. He rightly makes divine revelation the starting point of his analysis of the problem of suffering and also correctly concludes that redemption is the answer to that problem. But his analysis of biblical revelation and its meaning for the victim of suffering radically distorts God’s self-disclosure in that he leaves out the divine will to liberate the oppressed from social and political bondage. According to the Bible, the cross and resurrection of Jesus are God’s decisive acts against injustice, against the humiliation and suffering of the little ones. Indeed, it is because God disclosed himself as the Oppressed One in Jesus that the oppressed now know that their suffering is not only wrong but has been overcome. This new knowledge of God in Jesus grants the oppressed the freedom of fighting against the political structures of servitude which make for pain and suffering. Brunner seemed to have overlooked entirely God’s gift of freedom to the oppressed for the struggle against injustice. He did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that God’s election involves the responsibility to struggle with him in the fight for justice. In this regard, theologians would do well to listen carefully to Ernst Käsemann’s comment: “Every word, every deed, every demonstration is a denial of our Lord and ourselves; unless we test them from the point of view of whether they are opium of the people, or can be regarded and abused as such.”\textsuperscript{17} I contend that it is only in the struggle of an oppressed community for justice that problems of suffering and its relation to the gospel can be properly analyzed. For it is only in the fight for justice that God is encountered; and it is from this divine encounter in struggle
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING: that the oppressed also know that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18 RSV). But without struggle, this vision of a new heaven becomes a sedative that makes the victims of injustice content with servitude. Without struggle, the negative suffering inflicted by oppressors becomes positive and thus leads to passivity and submission. Without struggle, the idea of redemption becomes a human creation of oppressors designed to numb the pain and forestall challenges to the structures of injustice. Why is it that Brunner and many other contemporary Euro-American theologians have not recognized this danger? Why is it that white theologians in America have interpreted God's relation to black suffering in such a manner that the divine empowerment of the oppressed to fight actively against the evils of racism is absent from their analyses? Can this be due to anything else than the fact that the social existence of the oppressors inevitably distorts the biblical message? Only the oppressed can receive liberating visions in wretched places. Only those whose thinking emerges in the context of the struggle against injustice can see God's freedom breaking into unfree conditions and thus granting power to the powerless to fight here and now for the freedom they know to be theirs in Jesus' cross and resurrection.

Suffering in the Black Religious Tradition

In contrast to the spectator approach of the Western theological tradition, the black religious perspective on suffering was created in the context of the human struggle against slavery and oppression. Whether we speak of the spirituals or the blues, the prayers and sermons of black preachers or the folkloric tales of Br'er Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, black reflections about suffering have not been removed from life but involved in life, that is, the struggle to affirm humanity despite the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and oppression. Therefore, to understand the dynamic movement of black thought in relation to black
suffering as black people attempted to make sense out of black life, it is necessary to keep in mind the social and political existence from which black thinking emerged. Black religious thought represents the theological response of an African people to their situation of servitude in North America.

On the one hand, the Bible says that the God of Jesus Christ is the Liberator of the oppressed from social and political bondage. Black people therefore concluded that just as God had delivered Moses and the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Daniel from the lion’s den, and the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, he will also deliver black people from American slavery.

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, An’ why not every man.

But on the other hand, the continued existence of slavery and oppression seemed to contradict God’s will and power to deliver black people from the power of white people. The more black people believed that “God is a God, God don’t never change,” the more difficult it was for them to reconcile their religious faith with their bondage. Black suffering was not so much a conflict in rational theory as a contradiction in black life. What is the meaning of black existence, and how do we reconcile black servitude and oppression with the biblical claim that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1 RSV)?

For some black people, slavery was clear evidence that God either does not exist or, if he does, his existence is irrelevant to black suffering. If black people are to be liberated from white tyranny, it will be black people themselves, and not God, who will do the liberating. This perspective is found in the slave seculars and blues, in the work of black poets and novelists from the Harlem Renaissance to the 1970s, and more recently in black power and the black humanist philosophy of William Jones.

The slave seculars actually ridiculed the religious perspective of the spirituals. As Sterling Brown reports, some black slaves
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING: 185

sang: "I don't want to ride no golden chariot; I don't want no
golden crown; I want to stay down here and be, just as I am
without one plea."

One father, who is in heaven,
White man owe me eleven and pay me seven,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
And if I hadn't took that, I wouldn't had none.18

The blues, on the other hand, do not make many direct
criticisms of the black religious faith. Yet they are clearly indifferent
toward God and thus represent an attempt to create meaning
out of life without reference to Jesus Christ. They are an expres-
sion of black people's recognition of the absurdity of black life in
a white world, which regards blackness as nonbeing.

They say we are the Lawd's children, I don't say that ain't
true,
They say we are the Lawd's children, I don't say that ain't
true,
But if we are the same like each other, ooh, well, well, why
do they treat me like they do?

Because the Christian answer to that question was not satisfac-
tory to many black poets and novelists of the twentieth century,
they concluded that the God of Jesus Christ was an opiate for
black people. As early as 1906, in response to the slaughter of
black people in Atlanta, W. E. B. DuBois made his protest against
the silence of God.

Done at Atlanta, in the Day of Death, 1906.

O Silent God, though Whose voice afar in mist and mystery
hath left our ears an-hungered in these fearful days—
Bewildered we are . . . mad with madness of a mobbed and
mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy
Throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by
the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers,
by the blood of Thy crucified Christ: What meaneth this? Tell us
the Plan; give us the Sign!
Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely Thou too art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing?  

By 1933 Langston Hughes had concluded not only that an appeal like DuBois's was pointless but that the entire history of black religion, particularly as characterized in the "sorrow songs," had contributed to black people's passivity and submission in the context of slavery and oppression.

Bitter was the day
When...
... only in the sorrow songs
Relief was found—
Yet no relief,
But merely humble life and silent death
Eased by a Name
That hypnotized the pain away—
O, precious Name of Jesus in that day!

That day is past.

I know full well now
Jesus could not die for me—
That only my own hands,
Dark as the earth,
Can make my earth-dark body free.  

Some writers like Hughes and Richard Wright experimented with communism. But finding that white racism was not limited to white preachers and capitalists, they rejected the communist philosophy. However, the agony and depth of black suffering remained within their consciousness, and they expressed its contradiction with literary imagination. Without the reality of black suffering and its contradiction of life's meaning, Richard Wright would not have created Bigger Thomas and neither would James Baldwin have felt the need to "Go Tell it on the Mountain" and to warn white America about the "Fire Next Time." The fire about which he wrote erupted in Watts,
Detroit, and Newark; its political implications were set forth in
Willie Rick's cry of "black power" in the summer of 1966. The
poetic significance of black power was articulated by LeRoi Jones
(Imamu Baraka), Don Lee, and Nikki Giovanni. These events
and persons represented black people's revolutionary declara-
tion that they will be free from white oppression "by any means
necessary." The Christian faith came under severe attack be-
cause most black intellectuals viewed it as the white man's
religion, used as an ideological justification of black passivity in
the context of oppression. Although not written in the height of
the black power revolution, William Jones' book *Is God a White
Racist?* is a fitting climax to the black power mood. Using
philosophical rather than political categories, Jones examines the
claim of black Christians that God is involved in liberating black
people. He contends that no evidence supports this claim, in
particular that no "exaltation-liberation" event has taken place in
black history to vindicate the black Christian faith in Christ the
Liberator. Therefore the work of liberation is left in the hands
of black people alone.

Black humanism from the slave seculars to William Jones
represents an appealing tradition. However, not all blacks ac-
cepted this perspective. Although many blacks rejected the
claims of Christianity, they did not reject religion. Some substi-
tuted Allah for Yahweh, Mohammed for Jesus, Islam for Chris-
tianity. The most visible group of this persuasion is the Nation
of Islam, often called the Black Muslims. In response to white
people's oppression of blacks, they concluded that "the white
man is the devil" whose destruction is inevitable at the hands of
Allah. The Black Muslims expound an ideology that equates
blackness with good and whiteness with evil, thereby fostering
the belief that black people can be completely self-determining
despite white oppression.

Another tradition in black history and culture is blacks who
believed that black suffering would be eliminated through politi-
cal activity alone. They did not directly deny the validity of
religion but merely interpreted it as a matter of the soul and
heart and not so much as a leverage in political change. Here are
included Frederick Douglass, the National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, and many of the past and present black officials at various levels of government. These persons believe that the constitution is the only foundation for black liberation. The struggle of freedom must be fought and won at the ballot box and through the legal structures of the state and federal government.

But the vast majority of blacks are Christians who believe that God is relevant for black life in a white society. Therefore, unlike the already mentioned perspectives, on black suffering, black Christians are faced with an unavoidable paradox: How do we explain our faith in God as the Liberator of the oppressed when black people have been oppressed for more than three centuries in North America? The importance of this question cannot be overstated, and black theologians ought to be grateful to William Jones for having brought this problem to our attention so sharply.

Of course we are not the first black Christians to recognize the significance of this problem. Bishop Daniel Payne of the A.M.E. Church (elected 1852) agonized deeply over the problem of black suffering.

I began to question the existence of the Almighty, and to say, if indeed there is a God, does he deal justly? Is he a just God? Is he a holy Being? If so, why does he permit a handful of dying men thus to oppress us? . . . Thus I began to question the Divine government, and to murmur at the administration of his providence. And Could I do otherwise, while slavery’s cruelties were pressing and grinding my soul in the dust, and robbing me and my people of these privileges which it was hugging to its breast, and giving thousands to perpetuate the blessing which was tearing away from us?24

Other black preachers had similar problems and they demanded that God give an accounting of the divine behavior in the world. Nathaniel Paul asked:

Tell me, ye mighty waters, why did ye sustain the ponderous load of misery? Or speak, ye winds, and say why it was that ye executed your office to waft them onward to the still more dismal
state; and ye proud waves, why did you refuse to lend your aid and to have overwhelmed them with our billows? . . . And, oh thou immaculate God, be not angry with us, while we come into this thy sanctuary, and make the bold inquiry in this thy holy temple, why it was that thou didst look on with the calm indifference of an unConcerned spectator, when thy holy law was violated, thy divine authority despised and a portion of thine own creatures reduced to a state of mere vassalage and misery. 25

What answers did blacks give to such questions? Some attempted to penetrate the mystery of black slavery and divine liberation by appealing to divine providence. These persons included Paul Coffee, Daniel Coker, Alexander Crummell, and Edward Blyden. Generally, they sought to explain the mystery of black servitude in North America with the idea that God willed the enslavement of Africans in America so that the American blacks could return to their native land from America and thus lift “the veil of darkness from their less fortunate brethren and [open] up the continent of Africa to modern political, economic, and religious development.” 26 According to Blyden, God has spoken providentially to black people:

First, by suffering them to be brought here and placed in circumstances where they could receive a training fitting them for the work of civilizing and evangelizing the land whence they were torn, and by preserving them under the severest trials and afflictions. Secondly, by allowing them, not withstanding all the services they have rendered to this country, to be treated as strangers and aliens, so as to cause them to have anguish of spirit, as was the case of the Jews in Egypt, and to make them long for some refuge from their social and civil deprivations. Thirdly, by bearing a portion of them across the tempestuous seas back to Africa, by preserving them through the process of acclimation, and by establishing them in the land, despite the attempts of misguided men to drive them away. Fourthly, by keeping their fatherland in reserve for them in their absence. 27

Although we certainly can appreciate Blyden and others who attempted to explain black slavery through an appeal to divine
providence, that explanation is inadequate today. Daniel Payne and Nathaniel Paul approached the problem in a way that is more useful. Payne’s answer was grounded in his confidence that God would vindicate the sufferings of black people, appealing to the mystery of God’s ways of acting in the world.

But then there came in my mind those solemn words: “with God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. Trust in him, and he will bring slavery and all its outrages to an end.” These words from the spirit world acted on my troubled soul like water on a burning fire, and my aching heart was soothed and relieved from its burden of woes.\textsuperscript{28}

Nathaniel Paul’s answer was similar to Payne’s. It focused on God’s righteousness and will to be God and to establish justice according to his holy ways.

Hark! while he answers from on high; hear Him proclaiming from the skies—Be still, and know that I am God! Clouds and darkness are round about me; yet righteousness and judgment are the habitation of my throne. I do my will and pleasure in the heavens above, and in the earth beneath; it is my sovereign prerogative to bring good out of evil, and cause the wrath of man to praise me, and the remainder of that wrath I will restrain.\textsuperscript{29}

Although we may not fully accept these answers for our approach to the problem of suffering today, yet we cannot deny that their authors faced the problem and its extreme contradictions. They did not ignore history or encourage black passivity during slavery. Payne’s stand against slavery began as early as 1839 when he said:

I am opposed to slavery, not because it enslaves the black man, but because it enslaves man. And were all the slaveholders in this land men of color, and the slaves white men, I would be as thorough and uncompromising an abolitionist as I now am; for whatever and when ever I may see a being in the form of a man, enslaved by his fellowman, without respect to his complexion, I shall lift my voice to plead his cause, against all the claims of his proud oppressor; and I shall do it not merely from the sympathy which man feels towards suffering man, but because God, the
living God, whom I dare not disobey, has commanded me to open
my mouth for the dumb, and to plead the cause of the op-
pressed.50

This same attitude was expressed by Nathaniel Paul who
believed that the abolition of slavery in New York (1827) was a
sign of God's liberating activity on behalf of black slaves. To be
sure, we may not agree with his conclusion or with the similar
contentions of David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet and other
black Christians during slavery. But no careful student of black
history can say that their views on black religion and suffering led
to inactivity, particularly when the black Church and its minis-
ters were the most visible activists against slavery. The same
would be true of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, both of
whom were active against slavery because they were believers in
the God of Jesus Christ. This faith was the ground of their
struggle against suffering, enabling Tubman to liberate more
than three hundred slaves from bondage. Thus whatever else
may be said about the truth claims of black religion, faith in Jesus
Christ did not inevitably lead to black passivity.

Furthermore, when Payne and Paul appeal to God's mystery
and sovereignty, they offer a valuable clue, though not a full
answer, to the problem of black suffering. The ethos derived
from this appeal has enabled countless people to survive and to
give an account of their faith in the face of horrendous assault.
Black humanism cannot do as well. Nevertheless, William Jones
is right! There is no historical evidence that can prove conclu-
sively that the God of Jesus is actually liberating black people
from oppression. Thus he asks: *Where is the decisive event of
liberation in the experience of black people?*

In responding to Jones, Christian theologians have to admit
that their logic is not the same as other forms of rational dis-
course. The coming of God in Jesus breaks open history and
thereby creates an experience of truth-encounter that makes us
talk in ways often not understandable to those who have not had
the experience. *This statement is not meant to exclude my*
theological perspective from philosophical criticism. Rather, it is
an honest attempt to give an account of black faith in the social
context of a world that seems to contradict it. There is the
experience of suffering in the world, and no amount of theological argument can explain away the pain of our suffering in a white racist society. But in the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ. This faith in Jesus’ victory over suffering is a once-for-all event of liberation. No matter what happens to us in this world, God has already given us a perspective on humanity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets. Therefore, to William Jones’ question, What is the decisive event of liberation? we respond: Jesus Christ! He is our Alpha and Omega, the one who died on the cross and was resurrected that we might be free to struggle for the affirmation of black humanity. I know that this answer will not satisfy Jones or others who view black humanity from another vantage point than Jesus Christ. But for blacks during slavery and its aftermath, Jesus was not a clever theological device to escape difficulties inherent in suffering. He was the One who lived with them in suffering and thereby gave them the courage and strength to “hold out to the end.”

The idea that Jesus made blacks passive is simply a misreading of the black religious experience. He was God’s active presence in their lives, helping them to know that they were not created for bondage but for freedom. Therefore, through sermon, prayer, and song black people expressed visions of freedom in a situation of servitude. When everything else in their experience said that they were nobodies, Jesus entered their experience as a friend and a helper of the weak and the helpless. His presence in the black experience was the decisive liberating event which bestowed dignity upon them. His presence enabled blacks to believe that they were on the “Lord’s journey” despite the historical evidence that said otherwise. That is why blacks could sing and shout about freedom. They believed that God had not left them alone in suffering. To be sure, they could not rationally explain why they were slaves or why God permitted them to suffer so much. The meaning of black suffering remains a part of the mystery of God’s will. But the presence of Jesus in their social existence did reveal that God was at work liberating them from bondage.
DIVINE LIBERATION AND BLACK SUFFERING: 193

On the one hand, the faith of black people as disclosed in their sermons, songs and prayers, revealed that they faced the reality of black suffering. Faith in Jesus did not cancel out the pain of slavery.

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down,
Oh, yes, Lord!
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,
Oh, yes, Lord!

But on the other hand, Jesus' presence in the experience of suffering liberated black people from being dependent upon the historical limitation of servitude for a definition of their humanity. Thus they began to project this new knowledge of themselves with future, apocalyptic imagination. They began to sing and preach about a "home in glory" where they would "sit at the welcome table." Heaven thus was not so much an opiate as it was a revolutionary judgment that black people made about American society on the basis of Jesus' presence in their lives. It was the "age to come" that had broken into the present age, giving black people a vision of freedom that enabled them to struggle now for the liberation of the little ones. It was this vision that enabled black preachers from Henry Highland Garnet to Martin Luther King, Jr., to struggle for freedom in the social context of oppression. King spoke of the vision in terms of the "mountain top" that enabled him to take the course of freedom even though he apparently knew that it would lead to his death. But suffering that arises in the context of the struggle for freedom is liberating. It is liberating because it is a sign of Jesus' presence in our midst. Black people, therefore, as God's Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity. This suffering to which we have been called is not a passive endurance of white people's insults, but rather, a way of fighting for our freedom.

Thus the real question is whether those who inflict suffering are the true definers of humanity. I contend that it is the opposite. Humanity's meaning is found in the oppressed people's fight for freedom, for in the fight for liberation God joins them
and grants them the vision to see beyond the present to the future. Faith thus is God’s gift to those in trouble. It bestows meaning in a meaningless situation, enabling the oppressed to believe that there is One greater than the power of the oppressors.

To summarize Black Theology’s perspective on suffering, we can say it is based on the Scripture and the black Christian experience which claim that the God of Jesus is the Liberator of the oppressed from oppression. Although the continued existence of black suffering offers a serious challenge to the biblical and black faith, it does not negate it. The reason is found in Jesus Christ who is God’s decisive Word of liberation in our experience that makes it possible to struggle for freedom because we know that God is struggling too.