

# Simone Weil on Affliction and the Cross in [\*Awaiting God\*](#)

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## Introduction

Suffering is the experience in one's deepest being of the evil that is everywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup> According to Simone Weil, in the realm of suffering, affliction is set apart as something that grips the soul and marks it to the depths. In her opinion, affliction is inseparable from physical suffering and yet also quite distinct.<sup>2</sup> She describes it as an, 'uprooting of life, a more or less protracted equivalent to death'. True affliction occurs when an event grasps a life and attacks it directly or indirectly in all its factors; social, psychological and physical.<sup>3</sup>

Simone Weil was a French philosopher who, although she refused to be baptised, had deep religious insights and a faith which embraced most fundamental Christian beliefs. From an early age Simone had a strong sense of justice, self-sacrifice and absolute compassion and empathy for those suffering. This manifested itself in extreme generosity and the refusal of any of life's comforts, she would even send her own meagre rations to soldiers in the trenches.<sup>4</sup> She was a very intelligent woman and towards the end of her life she produced some of her finest writings, including 'Awaiting God'. It is in this book that Simone outlines her belief that, 'divine love is the perfect model of justice', and that this divine love can only be understood through attention, affliction and consent to the absence of God.<sup>5</sup> In this essay I will begin by exploring further Simone's understanding of this 'divine love' and how affliction makes the soul ready to receive it. Exploring her work will take us to her theology of the cross and the suffering of Jesus, where, Simone says, is exactly where those struck by affliction meet God. Throughout the essay, I will access the way in which charismatic theology today views suffering and how Simone's insights might help us as the Church to support those who are afflicted.

## Further Reflections on Affliction

Simone Weil was writing at a time (c.1951) when the world was witnessing the horrors of the Second World War. Her experiences lead her to write about affliction, listing examples such as, innocents killed, tortured, reduced to slavery or imprisoned in camps. She explains that these experiences can mark the soul and create, what is best described as, a living hell. She describes affliction as being anonymous and striking people by chance as part of a 'blind mechanism' with which the world operates. We are subject to necessity and therefore tossed by affliction, not knowing what it is or where it

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret A. Agnew, "Suffering," *The Furrow* 29 (1978) p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> [Simone Weil, \*Awaiting God\* \(Paris: Attente de Dieu, 1951\)](#) p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God: Finding Justice through Love and Affliction in Simone Weil's Writings," *The Journal of Religion* 88 (2008) p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 54.

comes from.<sup>6</sup> It is the indifference, coldness and unnamed nature of affliction that robs sufferers of their personality, making them into things and touching the very depths of their souls.<sup>7</sup> Affliction, when understood as above, is an evil which deprives people of good.<sup>8</sup> It is due to this blind necessity that affliction exists at all, as, if we knew the purpose of our suffering we would be able to endure it. It is also by this concept that we understand that those who commit human crimes (often the cause of many afflictions) do not know what they are doing and why Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).<sup>9</sup>

## The Absence of God

It is from this concept of blind necessity that we now move to consider the ‘absence of God’ which can be experienced, according to Simone, at the foot of the cross; the point of extreme distance where many facing affliction find themselves.<sup>10</sup> She believes that affliction makes God seem absent, creating a darkness where there is nothing to love, and if the soul ceases to love, the absence of God can become definitive.<sup>11</sup> We are not pioneers in the darkness.<sup>12</sup> There are many stories of the afflicted feeling extreme loneliness, as described by Pete Greig when his wife was taken into hospital, “I was lonelier than I had ever been before”, and by Job, “I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer” (Job 30:20).<sup>13</sup> Jesus himself cries out on the cross, quoting Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). Simone believes that affliction recognises the absence and silence of God.<sup>14</sup> She speaks of the ‘distance’ that is experienced at the foot of the cross. She explains that the cross is the infinite distance between God and God, as nothing could be further from God than the One who was made a curse.<sup>15</sup> By dying on the cross, God personally crossed the maximum distance, a distance that no other could travel. When suffering from affliction we find ourselves at the cross and therefore near to the greatest distance possible from God.

Simone helpfully clarifies within this concept that it is affliction that sends us to this point and not sin. Her view on sin is that, rather than creating a distance between us and God, sin is the ‘wrong orientation of one’s gaze’.<sup>16</sup> When experiencing affliction there is the tendency to question why it is happening and we perhaps begin to feel as though cursed ourselves; that this must be the reason for God’s absence. Therefore, to understand that the distance we’re feeling is not directly caused by sin but is due to the

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<sup>6</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (ed. University of Notre Dame Press; Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 2000) p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> J. Todd Billings, “Undying Love,” *First Things* (2014) p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Pete Greig, *God on Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer* (Eastbourne: David C Cook, 2007) p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Willox, “The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God” *The Journal of Religion* p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 36.

affliction we're suffering, can give a refreshing and healing perspective for those suffering today. As the Church, we must be careful when serving the afflicted not to search for some deeper meaning to the suffering they're experiencing. By attempting to name the affliction and find a root cause, we may be bringing up feelings of condemnation or refusing to allow the sufferer to call their feelings affliction at all, leaving them even more bewildered. Simone was a deeply compassionate individual who often risked her own reputation and health to be attentive to those who were suffering. To her, through love, we are able to witness another's affliction and feel the desire to help and stop the pain. This draws us to love and cherish all human beings and to love Christ, the cross and most of all, the silence and absence of God.<sup>17</sup> Suffering in others is a call for a practical response from the Church which cannot be evaded by a lapse into vaguely religious mutterings.<sup>18</sup> If affliction causes people to experience utter abandonment, then this must be met with the hand of friendship.<sup>19</sup>

### **Jesus and Consent to His Love**

Sometimes it is possible to deliver someone out of the circumstances that have caused them affliction, but is difficult to deliver them from the wounds that have been left behind. Only God can do this.<sup>20</sup> On the cross, divine love traversed the infinity of space and time from God to us. As, Jesus, even in his abandonment of belief in being found, never stopped perfectly loving his Father. So Simone believes that when we experience affliction we are able to partake in the privilege of knowing God's love. The separation, although painful, is good because it is love.<sup>21</sup> Simone explains that we can learn from Christ's affliction by consenting to the love of God in the midst of affliction and God's absence. If we choose to remain in affliction without ceasing to love, we end up touching something that is not affliction, but the very love of God.<sup>22</sup> This knowledge of God's 'presence', even in his absence, while it does not heal the pain, allows us to feel certain that God's love for us is the very substance of this affliction.<sup>23</sup> Even at the foot of the cross, suffering the most extreme affliction, we still possess the ability and the choice to turn our gaze towards God unceasingly, consenting and surrendering to his will, thus yielding to God's love. In order to reorient one's soul back to God, it is only necessary to recognise that through love, the soul may be rescued from affliction.<sup>24</sup> Simone Weil says, 'one needs only to know that love is an orientation and not a state of the soul. If we ignore this, we fall into despair at the first onslaught of affliction'.<sup>25</sup> This provides much hope to those suffering today, who might discern the states of their souls as being dark, empty and void of light. By turning toward God in affliction, whether our souls sense it, or whether the pain ceases or not, God's love and therefore his 'presence' is there. Despite the strong tradition that suffering has a purifying role, it can

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<sup>17</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Agnew, "Suffering" *The Furrow* p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Agnew, "Suffering" *The Furrow* p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* 44.

just as easily destroy without the turning towards God already mentioned.<sup>26</sup> Affliction, therefore, is not just a teaching method, it is where we 'grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ' (Ephesians 3:18).

## Joy and Sorrow

Christianity has a special difficulty about suffering. It carries a message of 'good news', and yet, built into that message is the command to take up one's cross and follow Christ.<sup>27</sup> Some Christians, when faced with affliction, can struggle deeply with the experience if their theology has been one of 'victory' and 'prosperity' in Christ. Their experiences aren't marrying up to their beliefs and denial of their own suffering or a belief that their faith is weak can become part of their reality. However, when Jesus asked his friends, 'can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?' he poses a question that goes right to the heart of life as a human being (Matt 20:22).<sup>28</sup> Henri Nouwen depicts this cup as the cup of life, of which each of us holds and can drink from. He believes, that if we can indeed drink from the same cup as Jesus, then we are drinking from a cup that is not just of sorrow, but is also a cup of joy. It is only when we realise this that we would ever consider drinking it.<sup>29</sup> Simone Weil also writes, 'joy and sorrow are equally precious gifts'.<sup>30</sup> She goes on to explain that it is through joy that the beauty of the world penetrates into the soul; but is through sorrow that it enters through the body.<sup>31</sup> We must be open to both joy and sorrow as both carry the message of God's beauty and love. Simone even asks the question, 'to what importance is it to the lover whether the messengers are polite or brutal, as long as they deliver the message?'.<sup>32</sup> For Simone, carrying her cross and identifying with the affliction of others was 'good news' and a real privilege. She even went as far as to say, 'every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy'.<sup>33</sup>

A common defence mechanism against suffering in today's Church is to glorify it by rendering the sufferer a saint or to go looking for a cross to carry.<sup>34</sup> However, if we are to take Simone and Henri seriously, we can understand that there is neither anything glamorous about affliction, nor is it void of love or even joy. As Christians we are able to drink the same cup as Jesus; drinking sorrow without judgement or fear but also drinking joy and therefore knowing salvation. Simone's view on suffering both allows us to experience affliction without guilt but also know the 'victory' of God's redeeming love through the experience.

## Conclusion

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<sup>26</sup> Agnew, "Suffering" *The Furrow* p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Agnew, "Suffering" *The Furrow* p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (USA: Ave Maria Press, 1985) p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> Greig, *God on Mute* p. 44.

To conclude, humanity has real contempt toward affliction, just as we do towards crime. This contempt, repulsion and hatred in the afflicted can turn against themselves, penetrating the soul and nothing but supernatural love can redeem them.<sup>35</sup> As difficult as it sounds, Simone Weil believed that any human being, whilst experiencing God's absence in affliction, could turn their gaze towards God and that this affliction could serve to prepare them for the love of God.<sup>36</sup> Simone's understanding of God's absence, consenting to His love, her views on sin and the example she has given of her own sacrificial love towards the afflicted, gives a compassionate and informed insight into how we as the Church view and engage in suffering today. A deep understanding of her theology of the cross and her views on affliction, allow us to view our own suffering in a new way, being transformed by the love and by the silence and the absence of God.<sup>37</sup> Until, in our affliction, we are truly able to say as Job did, "my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

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<sup>35</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God* p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 64.

<sup>37</sup> Willox, "The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God" *The Journal of Religion* p. 73.

