Suffering and the Question of God

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What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature!

—from a letter to Joseph Hooker
Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

[M]an was surrounded by a fearful void—he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, “why do I suffer?”

Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering.

—from On the Genealogy of Morals
Nietzsche (1844-1900)

What can this suffering of the innocents mean? Is it not proof of a world without God, where only man measures Good and Evil? The simplest and most common answer would be atheism. This is also the sanest reaction for all those for whom previously a fairly primary sort of God had dished out prizes, inflicted punishment or pardoned sins—a God who, in His goodness, treated men like children. But with what lesser demon or strange magician have you therefore filled your heaven, you who claim that it is empty? And why, under an empty sky, do you continue to hope for a good and sensible world?

True monotheism is duty bound to answer the legitimate demands of atheism. The adult’s God is revealed precisely through the void of the child’s heaven.

— from “Loving the Torah more than God”
(from Difficult Freedom)
Lévinas (1906-1995)
The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope [which is concerned with a redemption from cares, distress, fears, and longings, from sin and death, in a better world beyond the grave] is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament. The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself (“My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” [Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, Psalms 22:1]), he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ.

— from a letter to Eberhard Bethge

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world etsi deus non daretur [even if there were no God]. And this is just what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34 [“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”]). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 [“This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.’”] makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

— from a letter to Eberhard Bethge

(from Letters and Papers from Prison)

Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

— from Worstward Ho

I can’t go on. I’ll go on.

— from The Unnamable

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)