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Simone Weil, translated from *Attente de Dieu* (1950)

## 2

# The Love of God and Affliction

In the realm of suffering, affliction is a thing apart, specific, irreducible. It is wholly different than simple suffering. Affliction grips the soul and marks it to the depths with a mark belonging only to itself: the mark of slavery. Slavery as it was practiced in ancient Rome is only the most extreme form of affliction. The ancients, who knew this question very well, would say, ‘A man loses half his soul the day he becomes a slave.’

Affliction is inseparable from physical suffering, and yet quite distinct. In suffering, anything not bound to physical agony or something analogous is artificial, imaginary and can be eliminated by a suitable disposition of thought. Even in the absence or death of someone we love, the irreducible part of grief is something like physical agony, difficulty breathing, a vice around the heart, an unappeased need, hunger or the nearly biological disorder caused by a brutal release of energy, until then oriented by an attachment and now without direction. A grief that does not gather around such an irreducible core is simply romanticism or literature. Humiliation is also a violent state of the whole corporal being, which wants to pounce (surge up) under the outrage, but must restrain itself, constrained by impotence or fear.

On the other hand, agony that is only physical is a very small thing and leaves no trace in the soul. Toothaches are an example. A few hours of violent pain caused by bad teeth passes in time, and comes to nothing.

It is otherwise with physical suffering that is very long or very frequent. But such suffering is quite another thing from normal suffering. It is often an affliction.

Affliction is the uprooting of life, a more or less protracted

equivalent to death, rendered irresistibly present in the soul by impairment or the immediate apprehension of physical agony. If physical agony is completely absent, there is no affliction to the soul, because our thoughts can still turn towards any other object. But thoughts flee from affliction as promptly, as irresistibly, as an animal flees death. Only physical agony here below has the properties to chain down our thoughts, a condition that includes with physical agony certain phenomena—difficult to describe, but corporal—that are exactly equivalent to it. Fear of physical agony, notably, is of this kind.

When one's thoughts are constrained by an attack of physical pain, however slight, to recognize the presence of affliction, it produces a state [of mind] just as violent as that of a condemned man who is constrained to look for hours at the guillotine that will cut off his head. Human beings can live twenty years or fifty years in this violent state. We pass beside them without noticing them. What person is able to discern them, if Christ himself does not look through our eyes? We only notice that they behave strangely sometimes, and we reprimand the behaviour.

It is not truly affliction unless an event that grasps a life and uproots it attacks it directly or indirectly in all its parts—social, psychological, physical. The social factor is essential. It is not truly affliction unless we are under some form of social degradation or fear of such degradation.

Like the boiling temperature of water, there is both continuity and separation at the threshold between affliction and all other griefs that, even if they are very violent, very profound and very long lasting, are a different thing than affliction, properly defined. There is a limit beyond which we find affliction and not before. This limit is not purely objective; all sorts of personal factors enter into account. The same event may precipitate affliction in one human being and not another.

The grand enigma of human life is not suffering, but affliction. It is not astonishing that innocents should be killed, tortured, flushed from their countries, reduced to misery or slavery, imprisoned in camps and cells—since we know there are

criminals who commit these acts. Neither is it astonishing that sickness imposes long periods of suffering that paralyze life and make it an image of death—since nature is subject to the blind play of mechanical necessity. But it is astonishing that God has given affliction the power to take hold of the very souls of innocents and to seize them as their sovereign master. In the best case, the one marked by affliction only keeps half his soul.

Those to whom one of these blows has happened—after which they struggle on the ground like a half-crushed worm—have no words to express what has happened to them. Among the people they meet, even those who have suffered much, those who have never had contact with affliction (properly defined) have no idea what it is. It is something specific, irreducible to any other thing, like sounds we cannot explain at all to a deaf-mute. And those who themselves have been mutilated by affliction are in no state to bring help to anyone at all, and nearly incapable of even desiring to help. Thus, compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility. When compassion truly produces itself, it is a miracle more astonishing than walking on water, healing the sick or even the resurrection of the dead.

Affliction constrained Christ to beg to be spared, to seek for consolations from men, to believe his Father had abandoned him. It constrained a just man to cry out against God, a just man as perfect as any human nature can be, perhaps more, if Job is less a historical person than a figure of Christ. ‘He laughs at the affliction of innocents.’ This is not a blasphemy; it is an authentic cry wrenched from anguish. The life of Job, from one end to the other, is a pure marvel of truth and authenticity. On the subject of affliction, anything that differs from this model is more or less stained with falsehood.

Affliction renders God (God seems) absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than the light in a completely dark cell. A sort of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that in this darkness when there is nothing to love, if the soul ceases to love, the absence of God becomes definitive. The soul must continue

to love in the void—or at least want to love—be it even with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then one day God comes to manifest Himself to them and reveals the beauty of the world, like God did in the case of Job. But if the soul ceases to love, it falls into something here below that is nearly equivalent to hell.

This is why those who precipitate affliction on people who are not prepared to receive it are killing them. On the other hand, in an epoch like ours when affliction is suspended over all of us, bringing help to the soul is only effective to the point of preparing it for affliction. This is no small thing.

Affliction hardens and discourages because it imprints the depths of the soul—like a branding iron—with contempt, disgust and even that repulsion of oneself, that feeling of culpability and defilement, which crime should logically produce but does not. Evil inhabits the soul of a criminal without being felt there. But it is felt in the soul of the innocent afflicted ones. Everything happens as if the state of the soul was, in its essence, that of a criminal—as if the soul had been separated from crime and attached to affliction. And the affliction even seems to be there in proportion to the innocence of the afflicted ones.

If Job cries out his innocence with an accent of despair, it is because he himself can no longer believe it; within himself, his own soul takes the side of his friends. Job implores the testimony of God himself, because he can no longer hear the testimony of his own conscience; it is no longer anything more than an abstract and dead souvenir (memory).

Humanity has the same carnal nature as animals. Chickens rush to peck an injured chicken. It is a phenomenon as mechanical as gravity. So too, our sensibilities (senses) attach all the contempt, all the repulsion, all the hatred to affliction that our reason attaches to crime. Except for those in whom Christ occupies their whole soul, the whole world, more or less, despises the afflicted even though almost no one is conscious of it.

This law in our sensibilities also applies to ourselves. The contempt, the repulsion, the hatred in the afflicted is turned against themselves, penetrating to the centre of the soul and from

there, their poisoned color poisons the whole entire universe. Supernatural love, if it survives, can prevent the second effect produced by it, but not the first. The first is the very essence of affliction; there is no affliction where it does not occur.

‘He was made a curse for us.’ It was not only the body of Christ suspended on wood that was made a curse—it was also true of his whole soul. In the same way, all innocent beings in affliction feel themselves cursed. This remains the case even in those who had once been in affliction and then have been withdrawn from it by a change of fortune, if one was bitten profoundly enough.

Another effect of affliction is to render the soul its accomplice, little by little, injecting the poison of inertia into it. Anyone who has been afflicted long enough becomes an accomplice to his own affliction. This complicity hinders every effort they attempt towards improving their lot; they go to the point of preventing themselves from even searching for a way to be delivered, sometimes even to the point of preventing the desire for deliverance. They are then established in affliction, and such people can even believe they are satisfied. Better still, this complicity can push one to avoid and to flee the means of deliverance; their complicity then veils them under some ridiculous pretexts (excuses). Even in those who have come out of affliction, if they have been permanently bitten to the depths of the soul, something will exist in them, pushing them to precipitate it anew, as if the affliction was installed in them like a parasite directing them to its own ends.

Sometimes this compulsion prevails over every movement of the soul toward happiness. If the affliction ends as a result of some kindness, it can be accompanied by hatred toward the benefactor. This is the reason for certain acts of apparently inexplicable savage ingratitude. Sometimes it is easy to deliver the afflicted from their present affliction, but it is difficult to liberate them from their past affliction. Only God can do it. Yet the grace of God Himself does not heal the nature of the irredeemably wounded here below. Even the glorified body of Christ bore the wounds.

One can only accept the existence of affliction by considering it from a distance.

God created by love, for love. God created nothing else but love itself and the means of love. God created all the forms of love. God created beings capable of love from all possible distances. God personally crossed the maximum distance, the infinite distance, because no other could do it. This infinite distance between God and God—the supreme tearing, agony that no other has approached, marvel of love—is the crucifixion. Nothing could be further from God than the One who was made a curse.

This tearing apart, through which supreme love is the link of the supreme union, resonates perpetually across the universe to the depths of silence, like two notes separated and merging, like a pure and heartbreakening harmony. This is the Word of God. The whole entire creation is only a vibration. When human music in its greatest purity pierces our souls, this is what we hear through it. When we have learned to hear the silence, this is what we grasp through it even more distinctly.

Someone struck by affliction is at the foot of the Cross, near to the greatest distance possible from God. One must not believe that sin is the greater distance. Sin is not a distance. It is the wrong orientation (direction) of one's gaze.

It is true that there is a mysterious connection between this distance and an original disobedience. From the beginning, we are told, humanity turned its gaze away from God and walked in the wrong direction as far as it could go. It is because they were still able to walk then. As for us, we are nailed in place, free only to direct our gaze, subject to necessity. A blind mechanism, which takes no account of the degree of spiritual perfection, continually tosses people and throws some of them at the foot of the Cross. It depends only on them to keep—or not—their eyes turned towards God through the shaking. It is not that the providence of God is absent. It is by His providence that God willed necessity as a blind mechanism.

If the mechanism were not blind, there would be no affliction.

Affliction is before all things anonymous; it deprives those it takes of their personality and makes them into things. It is indifferent, and it is the coldness of this indifference—a metallic coldness—that freezes all those whom it touches to the very depths of the soul. They never again find warmth. They never again believe that they are somebody.

Affliction would not have this attribute apart from the element of chance it contains. Those who are persecuted for their faith and who know it, although they suffer, are not afflicted. They fall into affliction only if the suffering or the fear occupies their soul to the point of making them forget the cause of the persecution. In the books of the martyrs, those who entered singing into the arena with the beasts were not afflicted. Christ was afflicted. He did not die as a martyr. He died as a common criminal, mixed with thieves, only a little more absurd (ridiculous). For affliction is absurd.

Only blind necessity can hurl humans to the point of extreme distance, all the way to the foot of the Cross. Human crimes—the cause of most afflictions—are part of blind necessity, for criminals do not know what they are doing.

There are two forms of friendship: meeting and separation. They are indissoluble. The two both contain the same good, the unique good: friendship. For when two beings who are not friends are close to each other, there is no meeting. When they are away from each other, there is no separation. Containing the same good, they are equally good.

God produces Himself, God knows Himself perfectly, just as we fabricate and know (poorly) objects outside ourselves. But before all, God is love. Before all, God loves Himself. This love, this friendship in God, is the Trinity. Between the terms united in this relationship of divine love, there is more than proximity, there is infinite proximity, identity. But through the Creation, the Incarnation and the Passion, there is also an infinite distance. The totality of space, the totality of time, interposing their immensity, set an infinite distance between God and God.

Lovers and friends have two desires. One is to love so much

that one enters the other to make a single being. The other is to love so much that with half the earthly globe between them, their union would not suffer any diminishment. Everything that we desire vainly here below is perfect and real in God. Those impossible desires are within us as a mark of our destination, and it is good for us when we don't hope to accomplish them.

Love between God and God, which is itself God, is the link of a double virtue; this link that unites two beings to the point where they are indistinguishable and really are one soul, the link that extends itself across the distance and triumphs over an infinite separation. The unity of God where all plurality disappears, and Christ's abandonment of belief in being found, yet without ceasing to perfectly love his Father—these are forms of divine virtue of the same love, which is God Himself.

God is so essentially love that unity, which in a sense is its actual definition, is a simple effect of love. And corresponding to the infinite virtue of unification of this love is the infinite separation over which it triumphs, which is all of creation, spread through the totality of space and time, made of brutally mechanical matter, interposed between Christ and his Father.

As for people, our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of having a part in this distance placed between the Son and the Father. But this distance is only separation for those who love. For those who love, the separation, although painful, is a good because it is love. Even the distress of Christ's abandonment is a good. There cannot be a greater good for us here below than having a part in this. Here below, God cannot be perfectly present to us because we are flesh. But God can be almost perfectly absent to us in extreme affliction. It is for us on earth the unique (only) possibility of perfection. For this reason, the Cross is our only (unique) hope. 'No forest bears such a tree, with this flower, this foliage, and this fruit.'

This universe where we live, of which we are just a particle, is that distance placed by divine love between God and God. We are a point in that distance. Space, time and the mechanisms that govern matter are that distance. All that we call evil is only that

mechanism. God made it so that His grace, when it penetrates to someone's very center and illuminates their whole being, permits that person to walk on water without violating the laws of nature. But when someone turns away from God, they simply give themselves over to gravity. Then they believe they will and choose, but they are only a thing, a falling stone. If we look at this closely, with a truly attentive gaze—at human souls and societies—we see that wherever the virtue of supernatural light is absent, everything obeys mechanical laws as blind and precise as the laws of falling bodies. To know this is beneficial and necessary. Those we call criminals are only tiles detached from a roof by the wind, falling randomly. Their only fault is the initial choice that made them into tiles.

The mechanism of necessity can transpose itself to any level while remaining true to itself. It remains true to itself in brute matter, in plants, in animals, in nations and in souls. Considered from the point of view where we are, according to our perspective, it is quite blind. But if we transport our hearts outside ourselves, outside the universe, outside of space and time, where our Father is, and if we regard (look at) this mechanism, it appears quite different. It would seem that necessity becomes obedience. Matter is entirely passive and therefore entirely obedient to the will of God. It is a perfect model for us. There can be no beings other than God and those who obey God. By its perfect obedience, matter is worthy of being loved by those who love their Master as a lover tenderly regards a needle that had been handled by the wife he had loved but who has died. The beauty of the world tells us that it merits our love. In the beauty of the world, brute necessity becomes an object of love. Nothing is as beautiful as gravity in the fugitive folds of ocean waves or the nearly eternal folds of the mountains.

The sea is no less beautiful to our eyes just because we know sometimes boats sink. On the contrary, this makes them more beautiful. If the waves modified their movement to save the boats, they would be beings endowed with discernment and choice and not fluid, perfectly obedient to every exterior

pressure. This is perfect obedience that is its beauty.

All the horrors produced in this world are like folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. This is why they contain an element of beauty. Sometimes a poem, like *The Iliad*, renders this beauty sensible.

Humankind can never escape obedience to God. A creature cannot help but obey. The only choice offered to humanity as intelligent and free creatures is to desire obedience or not. If we do not desire it, we obey nonetheless—perpetually—in that we are things subject to mechanical necessity. If we do desire it, we remain subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity supplements it—a necessity constituted by laws that belong to supernatural things. Certain actions become impossible for us; others are accomplished through us, sometimes nearly in spite of us.

When we feel that we have disobeyed God on some occasion, this means simply that for a time, we ceased to desire obedience. Of course, all things being equal, we cannot perform the same actions when we consent to obedience as when we do not. Like a plant, all things being equal, we do not grow in the same manner when we are in the light as we do in the darkness. The plant exercises no control, no choice in the affair of its own growth. We, though, are like a plant that can choose whether or not to expose itself to the light.

Christ proposes the docility of matter as a model for us by counseling us to look at the lilies of the fields, which neither toil nor spin. They do not, so to speak, propose to themselves to assume this or that color. They do not make a movement of their own will, nor dispose the means of their end (plans); they have received everything natural that necessity has brought them. If they are infinitely more beautiful to us than rich fabric, it is not because they are richer; it is through their docility. Fabric is docile too, but docile to people, not to God. Matter is not beautiful when it obeys people, but only when it obeys God. If, in a work of art, it sometimes appears nearly as beautiful as the ocean, the mountains or the flowers, it is because the light of God fills the

artist. To find beauty in things fabricated by humans who are not illuminated by God, one must understand with one's whole soul that humans themselves are only matter that obey without knowing it. For those who arrive there, absolutely everything here below is perfectly beautiful. In all that exists, in all that is produced, they discern the mechanism of necessity, and they know the infinite sweetness of obedience in necessity. For us, the obedience of things relates to God like the transparency of a windowpane relates to light. When we feel that obedience in our whole being, we see God.

When we hold a newspaper upside down, we see the strange forms of the printed characters. When we turn it upright again, we do not see the characters. We see the words. A passenger in a boat seized by the tempest feels each jolt as an upheaval in his innards. But the captain only knows the complex combination of wind, current and swell with the position of the boat, its form, its sails and its rudder.

In the same way that we learn to read or learn a trade, we must learn to sense in everything, above all and almost only, the obedience of the universe to God. This is truly an apprenticeship. Like an apprenticeship, it demands time and effort. For those who have completed their term, there is no more difference between things, between events, than the difference felt by someone who knows how to read the same phrases reproduced several times, written in red ink, in blue ink or printed with this, that or other characters. Those who don't know how to read only see the differences. For those who know how to read, it is all equivalent since the phrase is the same. For the one who achieves apprenticeship, things and events, everywhere and always, are the vibrations of the same, infinitely fresh (sweet) divine word. Sorrow (pain) is the color of certain events. When a phrase is written in red ink, those who know how to read and those who do not both see red; but the color red is not of the same importance for one as it is for the other.

When an apprentice hurts himself or else complains of fatigue, the workers and peasants have a fine saying, 'It is the

trade entering into your body.' Each time we suffer pain, we can say to ourselves truthfully that it is the universe, the order of the world, the beauty of the world and the obedience of creation to God that is entering into our bodies. After that, how can we not bless the Love that gives us this gift with more tender gratitude?

Joy and sorrow are equally precious gifts—one must savor one and the other fully, each in its purity, without seeking to mix them. Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates into our souls. Through sorrow, it enters us through the body. With only joy, we could no more become friends of God than one could become a captain only by studying navigation manuals. The body is part of every apprenticeship. At the level of physical sensibility (senses), suffering alone grants us contact with the necessity that constitutes the order of the world, because pleasure does not contain the impression of necessity. A higher kind of sensibility is capable of sensing necessity in joy, and this only happens [indirectly] through the intermediary of sensing beauty. For every part of our being to one day become entirely sensitive to this obedience that is the substance of matter—for it to form within us the new sensitivity that permits us to hear how the universe is the vibration of the Word of God—the transformative virtues of suffering and joy are equally indispensable. One must be open to both of them—when one or the other are present—to the very centre of the soul, just as a lover opens the door for messengers from her beloved. Of what importance is it to the lover whether the messengers are polite or brutal, as long as they deliver the message?

But affliction is not suffering. Affliction is quite a different thing than God's teaching methods.

The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How shall we seek for Him? How shall we turn towards Him? Even if we were to walk for centuries, we would accomplish nothing other than circling the world. Even in an airplane, we could not do anything else. We are unable to advance vertically. We cannot make a single step towards heaven. God must traverse the universe and come to us. But in fact, anyone who consents to orient

their attention and their love outside the world, toward the reality situated beyond every human faculty, is given to succeed. In that case, sooner or later, a good descends upon them that shines through them onto all that is around them.

Across the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. God comes in His time (lit. hour). We have the power to consent to welcome God's love or refuse it. If we remain deaf, it returns and returns again like a beggar. But also like a beggar, one day it does not return any more. If we consent, God plants a tiny seed in us and then goes. From that moment, God has nothing to do, and neither do we, except to wait. We must only not regret the consent we have granted him through our nuptial 'yes.' This is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed inside us is painful. Moreover, by virtue of the fact that we have accepted this growth, we cannot avoid the task of destroying whatever would hinder it, pulling up the weeds and cutting the quack grass. Unfortunately, the quack grass is part of our own flesh, so our garden-care is a violent operation. Nevertheless, after all, the seed grows all on its own. The day comes when the soul belongs to God; when it not only consents to love, but when truly, effectively, it is love. It must then take its turn in traversing the universe to go to God. The soul does not love like a creature loves. The love in it is divine, uncreated, for the love of God for God passes through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to forfeit our own sentiments to allow the passage of love through our souls. This is what it is to deny oneself. We are created only for this consent.

Divine love traversed the infinity of space and time to come from God to us. But how can love repeat the journey in reverse when it starts from a finite creature? When the seed of divine love deposited within us grows, it becomes a tree. How can we who bear it relate to its origin, reversing the voyage that God made toward us, to traverse the infinite distance?

This seems impossible but there is a way. We know this way well. We know well what this tree that has grown in us is made

to resemble, this tree so beautiful, where the birds of the air perch. We know it is the most beautiful of all trees. ‘No forest bears its equal.’ Something still a little more frightful than the gallows, here is the most beautiful of trees. It is the seed of that tree which God planted in us, without letting us know what seed it was. If we had known, we would not have said ‘yes’ in the first moment. It is that tree which has grown in us, which has become impossible to eradicate. Only a betrayal can uproot it.

When we strike the head of a nail with a hammer, all the shock received by the head of the nail passes through to the point in its entirety. If the hammer and the head of the nail were infinitely huge, all of this would still happen in the same way. The point of the nail would transmit an infinite shock through the point to that which it is nailed.

Extreme affliction, which is at the same time physical suffering, distress of the soul and social degradation, constitutes the nail. The point is applied to the very center of the soul. The head of the nail is all of necessity spread across the totality of space and time.

Affliction is a marvel of divine technique. It is a simple and ingenious device that gains entry into the soul of a finite creature with immense force—blind, brutal and cold. The infinite distance that separates God and the creature gathers entirely everything into one point to pierce the soul at its centre.

Those to whom such things happen have no part in this operation. They struggle like a butterfly pinned live to an album. But they can, through the horrors, continue to love. This is not an impossibility, not an obstacle—one can nearly say not a difficulty. For the greatest suffering, as long as it is short of fainting, cannot touch the point of the soul that consents to a good orientation.

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.

For the one whose soul remains oriented toward God while being pierced by the nail finds himself nailed to the very center

of the universe. It is the true center—not in the middle—it is outside space and time, *it is God*. In a dimension that does not belong to space, that is not time, in a completely different dimension, the nail pierces a hole through creation, through the thickness of the veil that separates the soul and God.

In this marvelous dimension, the soul can cross the totality of space and time to come before the very presence of God, without leaving the place or the instant to which the body finds itself linked.

It finds itself at the intersection of the creation and the Creator. This point of intersection is the crossing branches of the Cross

Saint Paul perhaps thought of something like this when he said, ‘Be rooted in love in order to be capable of knowing what is the width, the length, the height and the depth, and that you would know that which passes all knowledge: the love of Christ.



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