

Redeeming Sam: The difference Jesus makes

by [David H. Kelsey](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

Just as he turned eight, a boy I will call Sam became totally paralyzed and spent three months on a respirator in a coma. The rest of the year he spent in a children's rehabilitation hospital. He emerged with minor brain damage, learning disabilities, complex emotional problems and severe behavioral problems.

Under the strain of trying to cope with Sam, the family began to disintegrate. His mother suffered a psychotic break and was briefly hospitalized. At first when she returned home she was very depressed. Because neither the public school system nor his family could manage him, when he was 12 Sam was placed in the first of a series of residential schools that combined academics with programs of behavior modification.

Several weeks after Sam's mother returned home from the hospital her depression lifted enough that she felt she could take a part-time secretarial job. She continued in the care of a very able psychiatrist and seemed to be managing increasingly well. Then she killed herself.

Twelve-year-old Sam was certain that his mother had committed suicide because she was upset by his bad behavior that, he believed, had caused him to be sent away to school. He began acting out in dangerous ways, was deemed suicidal himself and was placed in a children's psychiatric hospital. He lived there, attending the hospital school and fortunately being helped by a skillful therapist, until he was 15. The mother's suicide, of course, was also deeply traumatic, if in less dramatic ways, for Sam's two sisters and his father.

What earthly difference could Jesus make to this particular situation? There are at least three familiar ways, or models, to imagine the difference Jesus in his passion can make for terrible situations like that of Sam and his family: 1) evil as punishment; 2) perfection through suffering; 3) Jesus as the fellow sufferer who understands. Each of these models is finally, however, unhelpful in imagining how

Jesus could redeem the situation in which Sam's family finds itself.

Evil as punishment. This traditional view is widespread in popular Christianity, although I am hard-pressed to name one major Christian thinker who defends it in this form. It reflects a deeply rooted primal response that many people have to experiences of evil, whether their own experiences or those of others: Maybe, so the thinking goes, I am (or they are) being punished for something.

This perspective is older than Job and his friends. It imagines evil undergone as punishment for misbehavior according to an unfailing rule by which the degree of punishment is proportionate to the seriousness of the misbehavior.

If the evil we experience is imagined as punishment for our sin, then the evil that Jesus undergoes in his passion must also be imagined as punishment. However, what Jesus undergoes cannot be imagined as punishment for Jesus' own sin, for he is held to be sinless. If Jesus' passion must be imagined as punishment for sin and yet he is himself sinless, whose sin can it be that he is punished for if not ours?

In this way of imagining the redemptive difference Jesus makes, he takes on the punishment that our sins have deserved. Instead of us, he undergoes the full extent of that punishment. Whatever evil does befall is nowhere near proportionate to the magnitude of our sins. Punishment proportionate to our misbehavior would be unimaginably greater than anything any of us in fact suffers. That our suffering is not more severe is because Jesus suffered what he did in his passion for us. The evil that Jesus undergoes redeems us from the full punishment our sins deserve. It also gives meaning to the evil we do suffer by showing it to be our way of participating in what Jesus suffers. Thus, we can say that Jesus' passion redeems us, not only from our sin but also from the evil we undergo, or at any rate from its meaninglessness.

Clearly, this way of imagining redemption of the evil that Sam's family has experienced would erase the distinction between the redemption of evil the family undergoes and the redemption of the sin they commit. In this picture redemption of evil follows from and depends upon redemption of the sin for which the evil was the punishment.

This understanding is entirely unhelpful not just in the case of Sam and his family but in every case of horrific evil undergone by anyone. What happened to Sam's sisters and parents was largely the result of what happened to Sam. It is impossible to imagine that seven-year-old Sam had committed any sins of such seriousness

that what happened to him and his family was proportionate punishment. It is even harder to imagine that what happened to Sam and his family was *not* terrible enough to count as “proportionate” punishment, so that Jesus’ passion can and must supplement it to redeem them from additional punishment. This way of imagining the redemptive difference that Jesus can make simply does not fit them. It is unhelpful to their case to try to imagine how Jesus in his passion can redeem the evil that befell them merely by redeeming the sin that they, and Sam in particular, had committed.

Furthermore, the Jesus whose redemptive difference is imagined in this tradition is reported to have explicitly rejected its basic image. In Luke, for example, Jesus says: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did” (13:2-5 NRSV).

Here Jesus may even be challenging the very notion that sin can be quantified and compared as greater or lesser. In challenging the quantifiability of sin and the image of evils suffered as punishment proportionate to sins done, Luke’s Jesus challenges this entire way of imagining the redemptive difference that Jesus can make in his passion.

Perfection through suffering. There is a clearer New Testament basis for a second traditional way of imagining the difference Jesus can make for awful situations like those that Sam’s family underwent, although I think it also is finally unhelpful. This way of imagining the difference Jesus can make goes as follows: In his passion Jesus is the exemplar for Sam and his family of why God sends suffering. The world is an arena of soul-making. Human beings are distorted, impure, imperfect. God sends suffering as part of the process of our redemption from spiritual and moral imperfection, and it is particularly through suffering that human souls are purified and made perfect. The proof text for this has been Hebrews 2:10: “For it is fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many . . . to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation [Jesus] perfect through suffering.”

According to this way of imagining redemption, Jesus as pioneer of salvation (read “redemption”) is the example of someone becoming perfect through suffering. He shows Sam and his family the point of accepting all that befell them as God’s gift. And he shows them how to go through such suffering faithfully.

This tradition has a long history in Christian thought and piety. It received a powerful new lease on life in 20th- century Christian circles through C. S. Lewis’s widely influential early book *The Problem of Pain*, especially in its first edition. Lewis’s thesis comes through in a few brief quotations: “We cannot know . . . that we are acting at all for God’s sake, unless the material of the action is contrary to our inclinations, or (in other words) painful.” And: “The redemptive effect of suffering lies chiefly in its tendency to reduce the rebel will.”

There is something right about this way of imagining redemption. There is a “self” that needs to be “abdicated.” It is the self that Jesus has in mind in saying in Matthew 10:39: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

It is important that we be as clear as possible about just what or who that self is. Much of the time for a few of us, and perhaps a little of the time for all of us, the self that we need to lose really is a “rebel” self that refuses to commit itself to live with God and neighbor in love and insists on reorganizing the cosmos as though the self were God.

However, the notion that human beings are inherently titanic figures storming against God is almost comically overdrawn. Most of the time most of us are far too confused and indecisive about what we most want, too passive and self-protective, to fit such a description. Most of us don’t want to storm God, let alone be God; we want to be inconspicuous enough to keep out of God’s way.

More often the self that needs to be abdicated is an insular self that is complacently oblivious of the particular reality of other creatures. It is not that it denies that there are realities other than itself. It is aware that there is that which is “other” to itself, including God, but it lacks interest in the other realities for themselves. Lacking interest, it fails to attend to the concrete particularity of each “other” as a reality in its own right which is independent of the self. Like the first version of the self that must be abdicated, this one is also profoundly self-centered. Its self-centeredness, however, is not a willful challenge to God’s primacy, an aggressive seeking to

substitute itself for God, but is rather mindlessly passive, inattentive to other realities and oblivious of the way in which in their particular actualities they are independent of the self.

Here lies what is right about this traditional way of imagining the redemptive difference Jesus can make in his suffering and death: Suffering does accompany the deep change in the pattern of our lives that comes with redemption. Furthermore, the suffering caused by horrendous events, events in which we “hit bottom,” can be the occasion for beginning to learn how to attend to others with the attention that is “perfect love.”

This point must be made carefully, however. It is one thing to say that suffering regularly accompanies the changes in our lives which are brought by redemption and to note that deep suffering is sometimes the occasion for starting to learn to attend to others in their particularities and for their own sakes. It is quite another thing to say that suffering as such is inherently redemptive. That is simply not true; so it cannot be true that Jesus’ passion is an example of the redemptive power of suffering as such.

Suffering as such does not necessarily have the power to perfect lives. Suffering can also disintegrate people and corrode their relationships. What befell Sam’s family did just that to Sam, to his mother and to the family itself. So, as far as Sam and his family are concerned, we must set aside as unhelpful the story of Jesus’ passion as the exemplar of redemption-as-perfection-through-suffering.

The fellow sufferer who understands. There is a distinctly modern way of imagining the redemptive difference Jesus can make in his passion, and variations of it are omnipresent in late-20th-century, pastorally enlightened, empathic Christian talk. It is imagined this way: In Jesus’ passion God is present among us in the midst of our suffering as—in Alfred North Whitehead’s famous phrase—“the fellow sufferer who understands.”

Although this argument also is ultimately unhelpful in imagining what difference Jesus could make in his passion, there is something right about it too. It *is* important to know that someone understands what we are going through. If God’s relating to Jesus and Jesus’ relating to God are both essential to Jesus’ personal identity, then in Jesus’ passion God is in some way participating in what Sam and his family undergo. God is in solidarity with them in their suffering. So it can be affirmed to Sam and his

family: God does understand what you are going through; God is going through it with you.

All the same, left at that there is something profoundly inadequate about this way of imagining redemption. As David Tracy remarked, characterizing God as the fellow sufferer who understands risks making God in the image of an Edwardian gentleman who, stereotypically, is benevolent in a generalized sort of way, with a sensibility so exquisitely refined that he registers the distress of each fellow creature—he is well intentioned but terminally ineffectual.

If “the fellow sufferer who understands” is the best way to imagine Jesus’ redemptive effect in his passion, then Sam and his family would be fully justified in saying to the God who works in and through what Jesus does and undergoes, “Sir, we really appreciate your concern and your understanding. It does strengthen us to survive. But couldn’t you help change things a little?”

The image of the fellow sufferer can be revised in a helpful way. One difference that the afflicted and crucified Jesus can make for Sam and his family is to free them from the power that distorts their personal identities in a living bondage. Whether or not one’s identity is distorted by such bondage turns, I suggest, on how one answers the question, “What makes life worth living?” Correlatively, the way Jesus’ passion can make a difference turns on the same question.

Perhaps most of us answer that question as follows: A life that has a certain dignity which commands respect is a life worth living, and this respect derives from the quality of things we do. In particular, perhaps most of us live trusting—it is a kind of faith—that our lives will have value and so be worth living if we do what a responsible citizen, a productive member of society, a provident parent, a loyal friend, a decent person would do in our circumstances and social roles.

Every human society teaches its members a set of such roles, and it also teaches the rules by which to assess the degree of excellence with which those roles are filled. The closer we come to satisfying the rules, the more excellent our performance of the roles we take on; the more excellent our performance of the roles, the more clearly valuable our lives; the more valuable our lives, the more firmly grounded our sense that the time and space we take up living is justified and that this life is worth living. I am not saying this is a policy that people adopt explicitly and intentionally. Rather, I am talking about a pattern and dynamic that

people's lives show whether they are conscious of it or not. It is a pattern that many cultures, and ours in particular, reinforce from earliest childhood onward.

What I am describing is the idea of living our lives trusting that they are justified by works that satisfy some law. When the apostle Paul inveighed against justification by works of the law, the law he had in mind was quite specifically Torah. Reiterating the polemic, the Reformers understood the law more broadly as moral law, whatever its source and grounding. In modern Protestant theology the law has been understood even more broadly as any social convention that serves as a criterion of excellent performance.

According to each of these variations on the theme, living in trust that our lives are justified by what we do in accord with standards of excellence lies at the very heart of sin. What we do sinfully need not even be immoral; even if what we do is morally good, it is sin if we trust the doing of it to show that our lives are worth living.

It was Paul's point that sin—that is, trusting works done in accord with a law to justify our lives—will lead only to a living death. If we define who we are by the excellence of what we do, as measured by a law, our life is in bondage to that law. But, Paul insisted, the law cannot give life because trying to satisfy it perfectly is a never-ending project. If the worthwhileness of one's life depends on completing the project, life is impossible; only failed life, only living death, is possible.

A second way in which people at least implicitly answer for themselves the question, "What makes life worth living?" also values respect. In this case, people suppose that what shows that life is worth living is that something about them commands respect.

One way to gain that respect—though frequently derided nowadays—is to define oneself above all as a victim. One lives on the supposition that what justifies the time and space one takes up living is the respect one commands simply because one has been victimized by some unspeakable evil. This pattern need not be adopted with self-conscious intent; what matters is the pattern to the way people live, whether they are aware of the pattern or not.

Defining oneself as worthy of respect because of one's victimization is sometimes rightly derided because it seems to be a way to wallow in self-pity, to manipulate other people's pity, and to avoid taking responsibility for oneself. Nonetheless, people do adopt this pattern of life because, however briefly, it can evoke the

respect that reassures them that their lives are worth living.

Away at school, separated from his family, Sam learned that he could win sympathy and present himself as deserving his classmates' respect and even awe by telling his story as one not only of unique victimization by a frightening disease, but even more as a unique story of being abandoned as a result of his mother's suicide. Sam was living on the supposition that what made his life worth living was the respect owed him because of the uniquely terrible things that had made him their victim.

There is another general way in which people seek to show that because their lives command respect their lives are worth living. It shares with the first version only the fact that the people who adopt it have undergone terrible events. In this case, however, what commands respect is not that persons have been victimized, but rather the horrific events themselves. Horrific events evoke a terrified awe in those who watch or hear about them. Those who pass through such events then command a certain respect. Their persistence through those events and their sheer presence now are in themselves mute testimony to just how terrifyingly horrendous the contexts of our lives can in fact become. That testimony receives deep, inarticulate respect.

Consider, for example, the respect accorded Holocaust survivors. It is respect evoked not by victimization, but by survival. Here too the pattern need not be adopted with self-conscious intent. What matters is the pattern to the way people live, whether they are aware of the pattern or not.

Soon enough both Sam and his father were living in different variations of just that pattern. It may be that Sam's sisters did also; however, since I know this story chiefly from the perspective of Sam and his father I can comment only on them. Separated from his family, entering adolescence and unskilled in relating to his peers, Sam learned to define his identity in terms of the terrible things that had happened to him. He lived his life as though his identity were simply that of the kid who had that terrible disease, who has that scary tracheotomy scar on his throat, whose mother killed herself. That identity commanded not just pity, but a measure of respect that helped counterbalance the animus he regularly generated by his obnoxious behavior.

For his part, Sam's father, overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a single parent and his apparently unlimited liability in the face of Sam's seemingly

interminable dependence on him, lived his life as though his identity were simply that of the man whose son has an appalling medical history, whose wife has committed suicide, who alone is responsible for caring for his almost unmanageable son for the rest of his life.

On plenty of occasions both of their personal identities were steeped in self-pity, although it would be too simple to say that Sam and his father defined themselves merely as victims. They certainly did in part, but their identities were also defined as survivors of horrific situations. The sheer horror of those situations commanded respect. Both Sam and his father lived on the tacit supposition that that respect underwrote the worth of their lives. This pattern in their lives was another way to justify the time and space they took up living.

This pattern is not to be confused with the pattern of justifying life by the quality of its achievements. Strictly speaking, the pattern of Sam's life and his father's is only analogous to the pattern of lives seeking justification by works. Granted, to survive a terrible situation is to do something, to perform some sort of work. However, what is at issue here is not bad things done but bad things undergone, not sin but evil. More exactly, the issue is not the sinful living death of a life of self-justification by works that accord with a standard of excellence, but rather the distortion of personal identity by its bondage to evil endured. Accordingly, our question is not "What difference can Jesus make in regard to their living death in sin committed?" but "What difference can Jesus make in regard to their identities distorted by evil undergone?"

A problem with defining personal identity in the way Sam and his father do is that it distorts one's identity by binding it to horrible situations in the past. The problem lies not so much with the horror as with the pastness. If what justifies one's life and shows that it is indeed worth living is surviving a set of horrendous events, then everything that happens later and everything one does later must be interpreted and shaped by reference to those past events. One's future is defined by, and so is in bondage to, an event in the past.

So, for example: As Sam slowly becomes more capable of managing his own affairs, he still cannot allow himself to live more autonomously because of who he is. He has defined his identity as that of one made dependent on others by his disabilities. When possibilities arise that could expand the range of his life, he leaves them unexplored because they don't fit his definition of who he is. When he gets part-time

jobs for which he longs, he sooner or later sabotages himself by faking seizures. Although he wants to work the way everybody else does, and looks forward to the little bit of extra income it brings in, working does not fit his definition of himself as a person disabled by horrendous events. After a certain number of seizure episodes, his employers always let him go.

Sam shows some artistic talent. But when he is admitted to the school system's adult education art class, he fakes seizures and is asked not to enroll again. He lives as though he must keep his self-definition as a survivor of horrendous events continually in the public eye. His old identity must not be eclipsed by the appearance of a new identity as "ordinary worker" or "talented young adult." As he matures in his ability to make and keep friends Sam does not form a social network for himself, for it is essential to his identity that he is one who has lost family. "Lacking a support system" is part of his identity.

So too with Sam's father. Even when in young adulthood Sam's life is supported and structured by a network of social agencies, his father continues to organize his own life in such a way that everything else is arranged around the edges of his perceived responsibilities for Sam. Being endlessly responsible for Sam defines who he is.

Neither Sam nor his father could imagine or allow any new joyful event, any new creative accomplishment, any new friendship to be more definitive of who he is than the terrible events to which his identity has been bound by definition. Theirs are distorted identities, frozen in time and closed to growth.

The difference that Jesus in his passion can make to Sam's and his father's distorted personal identities can indeed be imagined in terms of "the fellow sufferer" if we follow the Evangelists' description of Jesus' personal identity. It is important to stress that God's fellow suffering in, through and under Jesus' passion is not just God's way of understanding what we go through. It is God's own odd way of going about loving us, God's concrete act of loving us in the midst of the most terrible circumstances we can go through. It is just *that* love that can redeem personal identities like Sam's and his father's from their distorting bondage to past events, for it is God's love for them that grounds the worth of their lives. Neither the excellence of what they do as measured by some set of rules nor their awesome survival of horrifying events can do that. It is only God's concrete act of loving them in the midst of the most appalling situations that makes their lives worth living. That alone can justify the time, space and resources they take up in living.

God loving them in Jesus' passion is the most embracing context of their lives. That love, not the horrors they have been through, is the context that defines who they are. That context is defined not by any past, but only by God's free and loving creativity now. Sam's and his father's identities are opened to the future and freed from bondage to the past when they are defined by that love now.

They have only to live into that context for their identities to be redeemed from imprisonment to the horrendous events they have undergone. They have only to live in trust that it is God loving them in Jesus' passion that makes their lives worth living. Living in that trust, living into the embracing context of that love, will take time. It is not the trusting that will redeem them from the distortion of their personal identities. It is God loving them that will do that.

The apostle Paul's words to the Philippians are the word of God to Sam's family and to everyone living in a horrific situation in its concrete particularity, reminding them that it is God who is at work in them: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

This article is adapted from Kelsey's book Imagining Redemption, just published by Westminster John Knox.