

***How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering & Evil.* By D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990, 275 pp., paperback.**

Reviewed by Brian G. Najapfour

“The truth of the matter is that all we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer,” declares D. A. Carson (16). How true! Indeed, suffering is part of life. Yet, despite this plain truth most Christians are still surprised when they face suffering. Sometimes, some of us are so shocked to suffer that we start doubting God’s goodness. Worst of all, unbelievers question God’s very existence because of the presence of evil. It is out of this concern that Carson penned his book *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering & Evil*.

The purpose of this book, however, is not primarily to defend God’s existence against those who question it. Rather, the goal is mainly to help believers have a biblical theology of suffering and evil, so that when the darkest hour of disaster comes, they can still praise God and sing with Horatio G. Spafford, “It is well, with my soul.” Carson is right to observe: “We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs...are largely out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith” (9).

How Long, O Lord? has three main sections. The first part shows the inevitability and universality of suffering. Regardless of our status in life we will all experience pain! Here Carson also corrects some unbiblical solutions commonly given to the problem of evil. For example, to solve the dilemma of evil, some think that God is not omnipotent—an assumption that the Bible does not support.

The second section, covering much of the volume, scrutinizes some themes in the Scriptures crucial to our understanding of the predicament of suffering and evil. The themes include poverty,

war, natural disasters, illness, death, bereavement and others. What Carson does in this section is place the problem of suffering and evil within the framework of the gospel. I believe this is the strength of Carson's book—looking into the issue through the lenses of the cross (see Chapter 10). He laments that most of the suggested answers to the problem “make no reference to Jesus Christ and his suffering, death, and resurrection” (36). Although we do not have all the answers in the gospel, it can change our perspective toward the problem. It can help us see blessings amidst our sufferings. But Carson does not stop at Calvary. He also encourages us to view our afflictions in the light of eternity (see Chapter 8). That is, for us to cope with our difficulties we need not only to look back to the cross, but also look forward to the new heaven and new earth where tears will be no more.

The third division contends for the compatibility of God's sovereignty and human responsibility especially in the context of evil. For instance, while it was God who sent His Son to the cross, those who crucified Him were held responsible. Yet, Carson humbly admits the mysteries in the issue of suffering and evil. When confronted with these mysteries, the best thing to do is just trust our good and sovereign Father who does all things for the glory of His name and for the benefit of His children. Then Carson ends his work by giving us, and in particular church leaders, some practical thoughts on how we can better comfort those who grieve (Chapter 13).

My only comment about the book is the absence of the important role of the Holy Spirit as our Great Comforter. There is no mention of verses such as John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7 that directly speak about the Spirit as Comforter. A chapter on the Third Person of the Trinity could have strengthened the volume. Nevertheless, *How Long, O Lord?* remains one of the finest works on the subject written with a humble, honest and sensitive tone. I highly recommend it!