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Spoiler Alert: This article reveals key plot points of Shusaku Endo's novel, now a film by Martin Scorsese, *Silence*.

In his *New York Times* bestselling novel, *Silence*, Shusaku Endo confronts our tension with God's response to human suffering, facing the raw questions we often choose to ignore because we lack adequate answers.

Set in seventeenth-century Japan, two Portuguese Jesuit priests travel to remote villages, encouraging small gatherings of persecuted Christians. As the priests witness the torture of their Japanese congregations by government officials, who urge them to publicly renounce Christ, they are forced to question God's apparent absence and silence toward their oppression. They question God's love and His goodness.



...twenty years have passed since the persecution broke out; the black soil of Japan has been filled with the lament of so many Christians; the red blood of priests has flowed profusely...and in the face of this terrible and merciless sacrifice offered up to Him, God has remained silent (55).

Searching for Meaning in Suffering

After a man in his congregation asks what evil they committed to deserve such severe persecution, Rodrigues writes, “I know that the day will come when we will clearly understand why this persecution with all its sufferings has been bestowed upon us—for everything that Our Lord does is for our good... Why has Our Lord imposed this torture and this persecution on poor Japanese peasants?” (54). When he tries to reconcile the torment they endure with God’s silence, Rodrigues continuously returns to asking God ‘why.’ He cannot understand God’s seeming neglect of His children, let alone His refusal to speak to them.

As Christians, when we witness injustice and abuse we fight to decipher a reason for it. After all, the Apostle Paul told the persecuted church in Rome that “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). If we can find a reason for the pain, we can prove God is still sovereign and that He is still good. Endo addresses this desperate need to find meaning in our misery, as Rodrigues reflects on the martyrdom of two men from his congregation:

But I know what you will say: ‘Their death was not meaningless. It was a stone which in time will be the foundation of the Church; and the Lord never gives us a trial which we cannot overcome... Like the numerous Japanese martyrs who have gone before, they now enjoy everlasting happiness.’ I also, of course, am convinced of all this. And yet, why does this feeling of grief remain in my heart? (60).

Here, Endo accesses the crux of our human experience of suffering: even while we know that ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church’ (*Apologeticus*, Chapter 50, Tertullian), we must still grieve the lives lost. Similarly, when we attempt to comfort a friend who has lost a loved one with the phrase, “They’re in a better place now,” in a way, we miss the glaring reality: a gaping hole has been left on earth.

When Words Offer No Comfort



A terrible anguish rose up in his breast. Violently he shook his head trying to control the ugly imaginings and the words rose up to his throat like nausea... Repeating the prayer again and again he tried wildly to distract his attention; but the prayer could not tranquilize his agonized heart. 'Lord, why are you silent? Why are you always silent...?' (140-141).

In this moment of mental distress, Rodrigues cries out to the Lord for peace, but receives no answer. Toward the end of his imprisonment, Rodrigues is confronted by an old mentor, Father Ferreira, who apostatized during extreme torture and began working for his persecutors to demoralize Japanese believers. Ferreira describes how he was forced to watch his congregation bleed: "I did pray. I kept on praying. But prayer did nothing to alleviate their suffering. Behind their ears a small incision has been made; the blood drips slowly through this incision and through the nose and mouth...Prayer does nothing to alleviate suffering" (255).

Ferreira is wrong, but not wholly. Sometimes Scripture and prayer can bring comfort in a way that truly nothing else can, but not always. Sometimes mere words, no matter how heartfelt, cannot mitigate pain. Often the only thing we can do is be present with those in sorrow. Mourn *with* those who mourn, weep *with* those who weep (Rom. 12:15). These words affirm the most comforting thing we humans can offer to an aching friend: company.

The Root of Suffering: Isolation

The nature of human suffering is that it divides, it isolates. It pushes us to seek solitude, away from our loved ones, our community, even our God. This solitude is not always physical. Sometimes it manifests in the way we desire to grieve alone, emotionally shutting others out because they cannot feel what we feel.

The most excruciating element of Rodrigues's anguish lies not in the torture of his Japanese congregation, but rather in his feeling abandoned by God. Over and over he asks the Lord why He does nothing and says nothing in response to the evil persisting in Japan. At one moment of sorrow, he cries out:

Why have you abandoned us so completely? ... Even when the people are cast out of their homes have you not given them courage? Have you just remained silent like the darkness that surrounds me? Why? At least tell me why (96).



three times in the narrative does Rodrigues receive the impression of Christ's voice in his thoughts, never audibly, and never when he aches most for God to speak.

The key to combatting despair in suffering is lamenting. David, Job, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Jesus—they all lamented their agony or the agony of others. They took their cries of grief and pain to the Lord, trusting He would hear them. The presence of the Book of Lamentations in the Bible means that grieving with the Lord and asking “why” is okay. Lamentations does not shy away from the rawness of tribulation. In chapter 3, the author begins by mourning that “his hope from the Lord” has perished. He grieves his circumstances and describes his affliction in brutal detail, but then his tone changes. He writes, “I called on your name...you heard my plea.” The passage concludes with the author relinquishing his anger toward his oppressors to God. If we cannot invite God into our grief, if we choose to cut ourselves off from Him—we will fall into despair. Offering up our anger, laments, and questions allows us to draw closer to the Lord by trusting Him with the honest state of our hearts.

Knowing who God is, specifically His omnipresence and omnipotence, leads us to trust Him to hear our laments and never abandon us. The Psalmist proclaims, “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?...This I know, that God is for me...in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps. 56:8-11). We serve a God who sees us, and a God who answers our laments, though rarely in ways we expect.

At the climax of Endo's book, Rodrigues apostatizes to end the torment of four fellow believers. Like Ferreira, he then begins working for the government to quell the rise of Christianity in Japan. In the last few pages, Rodrigues confesses, “Lord, I resented your silence.” A voice responds: “I was not silent. I suffered beside you.”

Endo concludes his novel with these words:

...even if [Rodrigues] was betraying [his fellow priests], he was not betraying his Lord. He loved him now in a different way from before. Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love. “Even now I am the last priest in this land. But Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him” (190-191).

When we know the surpassing love of Jesus Christ, we can trust that everything we endure is not only preparing us for whatever lies ahead, but ever-deepening our love for Him. And above all, we can trust that God is never silent—He speaks precisely when we must hear His voice.

More from Claire Zasso
