

## Christian Meaning-Making Through Suffering in Theology and Psychology of Religion

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**T**HOUGH UNWELCOME, SUFFERING SOMETIMES yields positive outcomes. Psychologists have been keen to understand why some report growth or positive transformation and some do not. Meaning-making has risen to prominence as a critical process by which those who experience suffering achieve positive results. When empirically testing meaning-making processes during and subsequent to painful life circumstances, psychologists often use religion as the means for operationalizing beliefs, since religions comprise comprehensive meaning-making frameworks.<sup>1</sup> Very little has been done, however, to consider the role of the specific content of religions in meaning-making from suffering. The purpose of this article is to take a first step toward constructing an interface between empirical research on suffering in the psychology of religion and Christian theology.

Psychologist Crystal Park developed a model to synthesize the empirical findings on growth and positive outcomes in the process of suffering.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we extend and elaborate Park's meaning-making model using resources from Protestant Christianity. Following a brief overview of Park's theory, we build out each of the components of her model using Christian theological concepts. Our purpose is to illustrate Christian-specific religious constructs for shaping meaning in suffering, since comprehensiveness would go far beyond the scope

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and W. Paul Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005); Taylor Newton and Daniel N. McIntosh, "Unique Contributions of Religion to Meaning," in *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*, ed. Joshua A. Hicks and Clay Routledge (New York: Springer, 2013), 257-270.

<sup>2</sup> Crystal L. Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257-301.

of this article. In the final section, we provide future research trajectories and questions for the psychological model on the basis of theological reasoning.

### RELIGION AND THE MEANING-MAKING PROCESS

Park's model begins with the notion of global meaning, which consists of core beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings.<sup>3</sup> Global beliefs include core schemas and cognitive frameworks, which people use to interpret life events.<sup>4</sup> It includes beliefs about the nature of the world such as justice, controllability, predictability, and the self. It is one's worldview that has developed over the course of one's lifespan. People interpret their experiences by means of the orienting set of beliefs from their global meaning structure. Global meaning also includes goals—the motives and desires a person holds. According to Park, global meaning also includes a subjective sense of purpose.

In the second part of the model, specific life events are interpreted in relation to one's global meaning system. Stressful life events initiate a set of processes that yield temporary meaning specific to the suffering being experienced. This is known as situational meaning.<sup>5</sup> If one's initial appraisal of the stressful life event is congruent with one's global belief system then no further processing need take place. If this appraisal or interpretation of the suffering is discrepant from global meaning then distress is experienced. The greater the discrepancy the greater the resulting distress over the meaning-gulf that has opened.<sup>6</sup> The function of the meaning making process is to reduce the discrepancy between global and situational meaning and restore a view of the world as meaningful, one's suffering as understandable, and one's own life as worthwhile. The process employs varying resources; we

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<sup>3</sup> Freya Dittman-Kohli and Gerben J. Westerhof, "The Personal Meaning System in a Life-Span Perspective," in *Exploring Existential Meaning: Optimizing Human Development Across the Life Span*, eds. Gary T. Reker and Kerry Chamberlain (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 107–122; Gary T. Reker and Paul T. P. Wong, "Aging as an Individual Process: Toward a Theory of Personal Meaning," in *Emergent Theories of Aging*, ed. James E. Birren and Vern L. Bengtson (New York: Springer, 1988), 214–246.

<sup>4</sup> Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Cynthia McPherson Frantz, "The Impact of Trauma on Meaning: From Meaningless World to Meaningful Life," in *The Transformation of Meaning in Psychological Therapies: Integrating Theory and Practice*, ed. Mick J. Power and Chris R. Brewin (Hoboken: Wiley, 1997), 91–106; Walter Mischel and Carolyn C. Morf, "The Self as a Psycho-Social Dynamic Processing System: A Meta-Perspective on a Century of the Self in Psychology," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June P. Tangney (New York: Guilford, 2003), 15–43.

<sup>5</sup> Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Camille B. Wortman and Roxane Cohen Silver, "The Myths of Coping with Loss Revisited," in *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care*, ed. Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Henk Schut, and Wolfgang Stroebe (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 405–429.

<sup>6</sup> Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 259.

focus on beliefs, practices, and virtues. Park's model suggests that successful resolution results, not only in a reduction of the discrepancy between global and situational meaning, but also in perceived or real physical and mental health gains. The outcomes of the process, then, are meanings made.

### **A CHRISTIAN MEANING-MAKING MODEL**

In this section, we work through the four main facets of Park's psychological model of meaning-making (i.e., Christian global and situational meaning, Christian meaning-making processes, and Christian meaning made). For each facet of the model, we describe a few relevant Christian theological concepts to build an interface between Park's psychological theory and Christian-specific resources of meaning making in the midst of suffering.

#### **CHRISTIAN GLOBAL MEANING**

Often, the Christian belief system is structured as a narrative with four main acts describing God's working in the world: creation, fall, redemption, and glorification. God is the primary agent in this narrative. Thus, the Christian worldview has as its central focus the character and nature of God. God is a personal and transcendent being who has acted (creation and redemption) and spoken (sacred writing) in history, and who has perfect attributes in relation to power and authority (omnipotence), time (eternality), and knowledge (omniscience). God exhibits perfect virtue; humans in the image of God are meant to reflect these characteristics (e.g., holiness, justice, goodness, loving kindness, graciousness, truthfulness, and faithfulness).<sup>7</sup>

God granted humankind personal agency in order to contribute as actors in the narrative. As secondary actors within the grand narrative of history, humans are dependent upon God for establishment of their own significance and for knowledge of their significance. They were granted the capacity for free appropriation of the meaning and significance given to them by God, but several biblical texts explain the limited perspective and knowledge that humans have of the broader contours of the narrative in which they find themselves. The prologue to the book of Job, for instance, explains the causes of Job's suffering of which he is unaware. Within the narrative of the book, Job does not discover the source of his affliction, and God's communication with him at the end of the book emphasizes Job's limited perspective and knowledge in contrast to God's. Human limitations contrast with

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<sup>7</sup> David S. Dockery, "Introduction," in *Shaping a Christian Worldview: The Foundations of Christian Higher Education*, eds. David S. Dockery and Gregory A. Thornbury (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 1-15.

God's exhaustive knowledge (omniscience) with respect to past, present, and future. Humans are meant to reflect God as knowers but in a limited manner. Although Christian scripture portrays God as having comprehensive knowledge of the world and its events, including suffering, humans are not always nor regularly given insight into the meaning of specific instances of suffering.

Large portions of scripture convey a divine perspective on the meaning of suffering. Prior to the exile, at the end of the Old Testament era, God sends prophets who explain that the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile are God's punishment for waywardness from the covenant. Similarly, post-exilic authors reflect on the events and interpret their meaning by means of this divinely provided one. For example, the Chronicler interprets the exile as a needed Sabbath rest for the land (2 Chronicles 36:21). Likewise, in the New Testament, the suffering of Jesus Christ is interpreted as being the means for salvation and healing of humankind.

Thus, the Bible contains two contrasting modes: humans are limited in knowledge but are sometimes given insight into the meaning of specific instances of suffering.<sup>8</sup> Both modes share the perspective that God is superior in knowledge to human beings. Although some insight into evil and suffering is granted to human beings, some is withheld. Some instances of suffering are given with an interpretation. Others are not. Therefore, revelation is central to the Christian interpretation of evil and suffering. What God has chosen to reveal provides the framework for potential interpretation of what God has not revealed.

The Christian worldview narrative includes personal agents other than God and humans: angels and demons. In a prominent interpretation, Job's calamities come from the hand of Satan, the chief of fallen angels (Job 1:13-2:8). These agents also play a role in the narrative. Following the pattern outlined above, some instances of evil are revealed to be the result of demonic activity, while others are not. Overall, then, the Christian narrative encourages a balanced, non-reductive approach to suffering and evil. Suffering comes from multiple causes and has multiple explanations.

### *Creation*

Turning to the first act of the four-fold narrative: God created everything. Though humans do not have the incommunicable attributes of God, we were created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28; *Catechism*, nos. 355-357), and thus have the limited potential to develop virtuous characteristics such as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

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<sup>8</sup> Neither of these modes precludes general human knowledge concerning suffering and its causes, nor non-revealed insight into specific causes of suffering.

The Christian worldview affirms that the created world is radically contingent. None of this had to be here. The explanation for why anything exists at all rests solely with divine agency. God was not compelled to make the world. Instead, God created as a fitting exercise of creativity and love. Jonathan Edwards suggests God made God's own self the purpose in creating the world.<sup>9</sup> The telos of the created universe is God himself. The design of humans and the entirety of creation is grounded in teleological completion in God. The goods of humanity, then, are subordinate to the goods of God. Therefore, any goods that result from suffering should also be subordinate to the goods of God, as this is built into the created order.

God ordered the world and its goods in a state of shalom: a harmonious wholeness reflective of, and dependent on, God's own well-being. Although the biblical narrative provides a tantalizingly brief image of this pristine condition prior to a devastating disruption of this interconnected web of harmonious relationships, the created order is repeatedly affirmed as being good throughout scripture.

### *Fall*

Christianity also teaches that the fall into sin—the deliberate turning away from God—has damaged but not obliterated the shalom of creation. Sin prevents humans from living in a healthy relationship with God, others, nature, and themselves. This rebellious disruption of the idyllic narrative starting point resulted from human freedom. God did not introduce evil into the world he created and is thus not the author of suffering. Having been thwarted by sin, freedom results in variable connections between objective standards of goodness, human desires, and outcomes of human agency. Many Christians have contended that evil is parasitic on goodness and cannot have independent existence;<sup>10</sup> it is alien to the structure of creation. Evil and suffering are nevertheless real and not illusory.

While creation affirms God's power, the fall into sin may be thought to undermine it. However, Christianity affirms God's omnipotence, which is the attribute of having infinite power, enabling God to do anything that can be done. As a result of divine omnipotence, there is an important sense in which everything that occurs is willed or at least allowed by God. Therefore, all suffering on earth can be experienced as God having chosen to allow such suffering and as having good reasons for allowing that suffering. That being said, many

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Made the World*, [www.ccel.org/e/edwards/works1.iv.html](http://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/works1.iv.html).

<sup>10</sup> Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "An Overview of Patristic Theodicies," in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, ed. N.V. Harrison and D. G. Hunter (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1-6.

Christians believe that there are things that cannot be accomplished by omnipotence, such as the instantiation of contradictions. God can't create a square that is also a circle or cause two plus two to equal five. Most relevant to the issue of suffering is that God cannot give humans genuine free will and then force them to use that free will only for good purposes.

### *Redemption*

God's loving response to the fall into sin is to make reconciliation possible through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Such love not only allows for redemption, that is, human reconciliation with God, but also serves as an impetus to love both God and others, which is central to a Christian understanding of goodness. When asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31). Jesus Christ, as the mediator between God and people, also serves as the model for what the image of God is; the Christian process of transformation (known as sanctification) is a journey to become more like Christ. Falling short through sin and human suffering are expected experiences in Christian global meaning and viewed as opportunities to grow in the likeness of Christ. Further, becoming more Christlike, growing in unity with Christ, and glorifying Christ are more important goals than avoiding suffering.

### *Glorification*

Although the end of the narrative has not yet arrived, Christian scripture provides a glimpse of this future state. The Christian story ends with the hope of glorification in which Christ will come again, the sanctification process will result in conformity to Christlikeness, and resurrected believers will enjoy a new heaven and new earth that has been completely redeemed from the effects of sin. The world will be healed from its corruption during the reign of sin and evil; the original state of shalom will be restored. Moreover, the spiritual adversaries of human beings, Satan and his demons, will be destroyed and rendered unable to afflict human beings any longer. These glimpses of the end of the narrative provide hope for the present by showing that suffering and evil are not inherent to the world or to the human condition and will one day be eradicated from human experience. Furthermore, in the Christian narrative there are close ties between suffering and the process of glorification.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Suffering as Formation: The Hard Road to Glory," in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Formation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Diane Chandler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69-88.

### CHRISTIAN SITUATIONAL MEANING

In Park's model, situational meanings are the initial appraisal made of a stressful life event. Initial appraisal of an event may be implicit rather than explicit. Since global beliefs are worldviews, many situational appraisals will be sub-conscious or will challenge deeply held assumptions. Christian beliefs regarding the situational meaning of painful life events include an affirmation that most or all causes of suffering are ultimately traceable to the fall into sin, including moral injuries, disease and death, and even natural catastrophes.<sup>12</sup> The solution to suffering at a universal level is found in the person of Jesus, whose salvific work will achieve the end of all suffering at the time of his second coming. At the individual level, suffering, while negative in that it is a consequence of sin and the Fall, can be redeemed to accomplish God's loving purposes in the world, and to shape individual believers to become more like Jesus. Jesus is the savior who can sympathize with suffering because of his own experience of suffering; he is considered the unparalleled model for how to suffer (Hebrews 5:7-9).

Discrepancy between appraised situational meaning and global meaning may arise in several ways. It can arise at the level of beliefs or in discrepancy with goals or purposes. Theologian Todd Billings, in his theological reflection on his terminal cancer, noted that many expect a long life, especially in Western countries. A cancer diagnosis, for example, challenges such a belief. For Billings, it also challenged his goals and subjective sense of purpose with respect to the raising of his young children. His plans for the future had centered around providing for his family for the long term; his cancer diagnosis challenged these expectations and formed a discrepancy.<sup>13</sup> Many instances of suffering increase awareness of mortality. Yet, in the Christian perspective, the individual's narrative and its ending does not encompass the entirety of the story. As Billings puts it, "We enter as characters in the middle of the story, not as authors of the story who know all of the reasons God allowed the fall or this evil event. We may have partial explanations—and those partial explanations have usefulness in certain contexts."<sup>14</sup> Discrepancy can arise in my understanding of how my individual narrative fits within the larger gospel narrative.

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<sup>12</sup> M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Richard Langer, and Jason McMartin, "The Role of Suffering in Human Flourishing: Contributions from Positive Psychology, Theology, and Philosophy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38, no. 2 (2010): 111-121.

<sup>13</sup> J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer & Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 4-12.

<sup>14</sup> Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 29-30.

**CHRISTIAN MEANING-MAKING PROCESSES**

When a stressor generates discrepancy between appraised meaning of the event and one's global meaning system, a meaning-making process is initiated with the goal of ameliorating the discrepancy. Successful resolution has been found to result in positive outcomes, such as character growth.<sup>15</sup>

Psychological theorists have distinguished between assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the adjustment of situational beliefs to align better with global beliefs. Accommodation is the revision of global beliefs. Situational meaning that is too different from one's global beliefs is challenging to accommodate as it requires one to question what he or she knows<sup>16</sup> and explore the basis of one's values and beliefs. When situational meaning does not comfortably fit with one's current schemas,<sup>17</sup> one can block out or refute life events that prove too strange. Psychologists dispute whether assimilation or accommodation is more common and more advantageous.<sup>18</sup> In other words, there are multiple routes toward resolution of discrepancy.

Some have been tempted to assume that theodical questions are primary for those who suffer and thus constitute the larger part of the meaning-making process in the midst of suffering. It is not clear that this generalization is warranted. In one qualitative study of Christian cancer sufferers, theodical questions were not prominent. Two thirds of participants did not report experiencing such struggles.<sup>19</sup> "Why" questions form one part, but perhaps not the most extensive part of the Christian meaning-making process. Instead, consideration of how to suffer well can, and should, command a larger portion of our attention.<sup>20</sup>

Christian global and situational religious beliefs provide the foundation for engaging in certain practices for the purpose of growing in the likeness of Christ. Humans are called to respond to the divine initiative; many practices are prescribed toward that end, while others may be beneficial for fulfilling human purpose for some but not for others. Though frequently spanning several facets of the Christian narrative, some practices may be especially connected with some phases in the divine narrative. Spiritual disciplines develop Christian virtues

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 257-301.

<sup>16</sup> J. Mezirow, ed., *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

<sup>18</sup> Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 260.

<sup>19</sup> M. Elizabeth L. Hall, Laura Shannonhouse, Jamie Aten, Jason McMartin, and Eric Silverman, "Theodicy or Not?: Spiritual Struggles of Evangelical Cancer Survivors," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 47 (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Kelly M. Kapic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 17-26.

and enable religious adherents to experience the Christian worldview in a more personal and dynamic way. These practices are embodied ways of bringing the self into closer touch with the abstract values and theoretical Christian claims that aid in meaning making.<sup>21</sup>

Some of these practices are common to many religions (e.g., gratitude). Others are also common across several religions, but may take specific forms within Christianity (e.g., the prayer of examen). Still other disciplines are unique to Christianity (e.g., holy communion). One recent handbook of Christian practices identified sixty-two spiritual disciplines that have been practiced by diverse Christian groups throughout the centuries.<sup>22</sup> Some of these may be particularly relevant to meaning-making in suffering, such as petitionary prayer, contemplative prayer, meditation on Scripture, the practice of forgiveness, submission, and lament. These practices are embodied ways of bringing the self into closer touch with the abstract values and theoretical Christian claims that aid in meaning making. To illustrate the manner in which Christian meaning making processes can intersect with experiences of suffering, we briefly discuss gratitude, “sanctification,” and lament.

### *Gratitude*

Gratitude is defined as “as a tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of others’ benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains.”<sup>23</sup> Psychological gratitude interventions have been found to lead people to recall deeply meaningful memories and identify the presence of meaning in their lives.<sup>24</sup> Since nothing compelled God to create the world, gratitude to God comprises a central human response to God’s gift of creation. St. Paul suggests that ingratitude constitutes an essential breach in relationship with God (Romans 1:18-23). Thankfulness is broadly the pro-attitude and disposition towards recognizing the good one experiences in life, especially the unmerited good. The importance of acknowledging the unmerited favor surrounding our lives is an important contributor to meaning-making.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Adele A. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> M. E. McCullough, R. A. Emmons, and J. A. Tsang, “The Grateful Disposition: A Conceptual and Empirical Topography,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, no. 1 (2002): 112–127.

<sup>24</sup> N. G. Wade, W. T. Hoyt, J. E. M. Kidwell, and E. L. Worthington, “Efficacy of Psychotherapeutic Interventions to Promote Forgiveness: A Meta-analysis,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, no. 1 (2014): 154–170.

The experiences of divine grace and mercy are two aspects of this undeserved good. Divine grace is the positive unwarranted good that all humans experience to varying degrees in life. In contrast, mercy is the undeserved withholding of negative consequences for wrongdoing and foolishness. Additionally, the goodness of existence itself, the act of divine love in creation and the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of this world ensures that there are always an abundance of things for which to be thankful.

As a disposition, gratitude inclines one globally toward the reception of the world as a gift and not as an entitlement. Such an orientation has the potential to shift how losses are experienced, since my expectation regarding my possession of those things is different. When grateful, I acknowledge my insufficiency and dependence. I am not self-made but rely on others for my well-being.<sup>25</sup> Gratitude can also be a facet of one's initial appraisal of event, perhaps even including events of suffering. Much care must be exercised here, but there appears to be room to be grateful for suffering itself (e.g., 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; James 1:2-7).

### *Sanctification*

Psychologists of religion have investigated the construct of sanctification, which must be distinguished from the Christian conception of growth in holiness or being set apart for God's purposes. In the psychological literature, sanctification is seeing a particular aspect of one's life as imbued with divine purpose. For those domains that have been studied, such as marriage or motherhood, sanctification has been shown to yield positive outcomes and to be distinguished from the outcomes experienced by those who do not similarly sanctify their activities.<sup>26</sup> Like the theological conception of sanctification, psychological sanctification involves a consecration process of a thing, event, or relationship. There is some empirical evidence that suffering can also be sanctified.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mark R. McMinn, *The Science of Virtue: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos 2017), 73-75.

<sup>26</sup> M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Kerris L. M. Oates, Tamara L. Anderson, and Michele M. Willingham, "Calling and Conflict: The Sanctification of Work in Working Mothers," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 1 (2012): 71-83. Jacqueline Davis, Kerry Horrell, Tamara L. Anderson, and M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Religious and Role Contributions to the Marital Satisfaction of Evangelical Women," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46, no. 3 (2018): 184-198.

<sup>27</sup> M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Laura Shannonhouse, Jamie Aten, Jason McMartin, and Eric Silverman, "The Varieties of Redemptive Experiences: A Qualitative Study of Meaning-making in Evangelical Christian Cancer Patients," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2018): [psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-27076-001](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-27076-001).

*Lament*

Lament is a spiritual discipline that assists the sufferer in reconstructing meaning after the disorienting effects of suffering.<sup>28</sup> It is drawn from biblical sources such as the Psalms and the book of Lamentations; the gospels record Jesus' practice of it. Lament is a stylized form of speech consisting of five elements: an address to God, complaints, request, expression of a motivation for God to act, and an expression of confidence in God.<sup>29</sup> This latter element in particular makes Christian lament unique in its unexpected turn toward God in trust. Lament provides an emotional process that allows for the creation of new meanings, organizing and facilitating the process of meaning-making in suffering. Lament encourages psychological movement from distress to praise and from disorientation to new orientation. In line with Park's meaning-making model, lament begins in a place of tension with God and structures experience in order to move the sufferer to a place of intimacy, trust, and worship of God.

**MEANINGS MADE: OUTCOMES OF THE MEANING MAKING PROCESS**

The previous section provides the three categories that can be used as resources in the meaning-making process. Those three categories can also be outcomes of the process. Meanings made can include having made sense, acceptance, causal attribution, growth and positive life changes, identity reconstruction, reappraisal of the stressor, or changed global beliefs, goals, or purposes.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most important meaning-making concepts in Christianity is the idea that the ultimate purposes of human life consists primarily in relationship with God and secondarily with others. Moral, spiritual, emotional, and physical development are subordinate to the purposes of relationship. Accordingly, in times of suffering, the Christian can seek goods oriented toward relationship, despite the loss of the lesser goods such as health and physical well-being. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism claims, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever."<sup>31</sup> Christianity portrays enjoying communion with God as the central goal to life, both on earth and in eternity. Accordingly, the ultimate goals Christianity places before humanity are moral and spiritual rather than earthly, materialistic, or hedonistic.

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<sup>28</sup> M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Suffering in God's Presence: The Role of Lament in Transformation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 9, no.2 (2016): 219-232.

<sup>29</sup> Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 260-261.

<sup>31</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647, [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.iv.xviii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.iv.xviii.html).

Developing virtues, deeply embedded character traits embodying intellectual, moral, volitional, and emotional excellences, is at the center of the Christian concept of moral development and is a means by which we fulfill our purpose to become like Jesus. Since we live in a good but fallen world our dispositions have naturally good potentials yet are twisted from their original virtuous functioning. Since God cares about the character of the individual, Christians have long believed that divine aid for character development through the indwelling Holy Spirit is a normal part of the Christian experience. Ideal traits enable humans to live well on earth. Yet the ultimate potential for humanity is eternal communion with God. Supernaturally empowered virtues make us more God-like and better prepared to experience intimate closeness with God both in this life and the afterlife. Spiritual practices create the contexts within which the virtues are developed. Christian scripture links suffering with specific virtues such as obedience (Hebrews 5:8), empathy, compassion (Hebrews 2:18), perseverance (James 1:2-4), and hope (Romans 5:3-5).

All of these virtues and practices are developed within Christian community, the church. A faith community committed to Christ made up of individuals with whom one shares life including the reality of suffering in difficult times can serve in meaning making. Sharing suffering with co-religionists is a way of reducing personal suffering and drawing upon the strength of the community. Embracing dependency upon others during times of suffering can cause an increase in intimacy of relationships. The relational context of suffering helps shape shared meaning during times of hardship. We provide some illustrations of meanings made: fortitude, intellectual humility, and identity reconstruction.

### *Fortitude*

Several virtues would appear only to be gained by means of suffering. Among these are the constellation of virtues associated with courage and fortitude: perseverance, patience, resilience, etc. Fortitude helps us to persevere in times of overwhelming challenges, make meaning, and remain faithful through periods of adversity. Within the Christian tradition, fortitude and courage are commonly associated with pursuing good in the face of fear and hardship.<sup>32</sup>

### *Intellectual Humility*

Two closely intertwined concepts within Christianity are intellectual humility and mystery. Humility is the proper response in the face

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<sup>32</sup> Jason McMartin, "The Virtue of Courage in the Western Philosophical Tradition," in *Continuity versus Creative Response to Challenge: The Primacy of Resilience and Resourcefulness in Life and Therapy*, eds. Marek Celinski & Kathryn Gow (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2011), 155-174.

of that which cannot be understood. Mystery is the reality that there are matters that only God fully understands and that go beyond intrinsic human limitations as creatures and as secondary agents within the divine narrative. These two constructs and related practices and attitudes can serve to aid in meaning making in times of crisis. Acceptance of suffering, including instances when its causes are unknown, are significant expressions of humility. As Wolterstorff explains, "Some suffering is easily seen to be the result of our sin: war, assault, poverty amidst plenty, the hurtful word. And maybe some chastisement. But not all. The meaning of the remainder is not told us. It eludes us. Our net of meaning is too small. There's more to our suffering than our guilt."<sup>33</sup> Since many instances of suffering have no direct explanation, those who suffer may grow in their humility. As an example from a qualitative psychological study, one cancer survivor described relinquishing control on his life via his attempts at becoming physically fit. He moved to a mode of spiritual surrender in which he sought to "release and let God be God."<sup>34</sup> Meaning-making will not be the same thing as comprehensive understanding, since the human perspective is limited.

### *Narrative and Identity*

In close relationship to intellectual humility, suffering has the potential to reshape one's identity. Park notes briefly that a "potentially important outcome of meaning-making involves identity reconstruction, shifts in one's autobiographical narrative as a result of experience."<sup>35</sup> The losses of various kinds of suffering often impinge closely on our sense of self along with the roles and relationships we have. As a result, "Loss leads to a confusion of identity. Since we understand ourselves in large measure by the roles we play and the relationships we have, we find ourselves in a vertigo when these are changed or lost."<sup>36</sup> Our sense of self is closely connected to the story by means of which we make sense of our lives. Hauerwas suggests that "what bothers us even more about childhood suffering is that it makes us face our deepest suspicions that all of us lack a life story which would make us capable of responding to illness in a manner that would enable us to go on as individuals, as friends, as parents, and as a community."<sup>37</sup> In other words, life events threaten our global meaning systems and our

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 74.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, Shannonhouse, Aten, McMartin, and Silverman, "The Varieties of Redemptive Experiences," 9.

<sup>35</sup> Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 261.

<sup>36</sup> Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, expanded edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 81.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 67.

sense of the meaningfulness of life. An outcome of the meaning making process can include a renewed sense of identity and a revised personal narrative. Hauerwas continues by saying, “I suspect that if Christian convictions have any guidance to give us about how we are to understand as well as respond to suffering, it is by helping us discover that our lives are located in God’s narrative—the God who has not abandoned us even when we or someone we care deeply about is ill.”<sup>38</sup> Reappraisal of suffering can include placing our narrative within God’s, which situates our relationship with God and other people.<sup>39</sup>

### **FUTURE RESEARCH TRAJECTORIES AND POTENTIAL ADJUSTMENTS TO THE MODEL**

There are several places for further exploration in relationship to this model. First, by way of illustration, we have surveyed only a handful of Christian beliefs, practices, and virtues that may be salient to the meaning making process in the midst of suffering and that may also be outcomes of the process (i.e., meanings made). Many other facets of the meaning-making process could be fruitfully brought into conversation with Park’s model and with the social scientific literature on growth in the midst of suffering more generally.

Second, since we have begun to build out Park’s model with theological concepts, we offer these back to psychologists to be empirically tested. This presentation is a first attempt to develop a Protestant Christian framework for the meaning making process. Future empirical study can consider which of these facets emerging from this Christian tradition are actually used by Christians. Then we can test the extent to which these meaning-making resources deliver on their promise to generate positive outcomes for those who suffer. For example, to date, only one empirical study has been conducted on lament. Increased involvement with these psalms by college students was correlated with reports of intimacy with God.<sup>40</sup> Since some of the potentially identified resources will be underutilized by believers, we can consider potential interventions. How can we inculcate these beliefs, practices, and virtues among our congregants to equip them with resources for their seasons of suffering?

Third, several theoretical and theological questions may be asked as well. Some theological reflection on suffering and evil strenuously resists reasoning, answers, or meaning as being applicable to the experience of those who suffer.<sup>41</sup> It is argued that reasoning of this sort

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<sup>38</sup> Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 148.

<sup>40</sup> Kimberly N. Snow, Mark R. McMinn, Rodger K. Bufford, and Irv A. Brendlinger, “Resolving Anger Toward God: Lament as an Avenue Toward Attachment,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 2 (2011): 130-142.

<sup>41</sup> Kopic, *Embodied Hope*, 17-26; Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 27-33.

proves to be an imposition, perhaps unwelcome, that defines another person's experience of suffering without his or her consent. In the process, evil may be rationalized or treated as illusory. At times, it is suggested, such approaches perpetuate evil rather than alleviating it.<sup>42</sup> To what extent is the conceptualization of meaning-making within the psychology of religion susceptible to these criticisms? Is meaning-making relevantly similar to the construction of theodicies and therefore subject to the same weaknesses? That theodicies can be harmful would appear to be an empirical claim—are there empirical findings in psychology to substantiate it?

A frequent theological criticism of attempts at theodicy is their reliance on modernistic worldview assumptions. The mania for mastery in the modern period overreached in an attempt at a removal of the mystery of suffering.<sup>43</sup> As a discipline, psychology was birthed in modernist assumptions. Although steps can be taken toward mitigation, Park's model operates within a modernist psychological framework that assumes that self-conscious appropriation of meaning is essential to well-being. It is arguably the case that such appropriation is neither necessary nor sufficient for well-being.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, psychology will tend to focus on immanent meaning, but Christian thought includes an eschatological dimension of meaning. Much of psychological research relies on self-reporting. In such instances, unless the person self-appraises that meanings have been made in the midst of suffering, no meaning has ostensibly been made. And yet, as philosopher Eleonore Stump argues, a person can believe himself or herself to be experiencing health or well-being in its absence as well as the converse. If true, the theological concepts we have described above are the case whether a person acknowledges them or not. Accessing their impact empirically when unacknowledged introduces additional challenges. There are means to overcome limitations of self-report through varying approaches to psychological measurement.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, this remains a significant theoretical issue to broach in developing an interface between Christian theology and the psychology of religion.

## CONCLUSION

While the importance of religious worldviews in meaning-making in the context of suffering has received substantial confirmation in the

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<sup>42</sup> John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 12-45; Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 48-53.

<sup>44</sup> Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 8-13.

<sup>45</sup> As Park herself notes in "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 291-292.

psychological literature, religions are not generic in their meaning-making resources. Different religions place suffering in different views of the world and our place in it, conceptualize suffering itself in different ways, and offer different ways of understanding how to make meaning, different practices to achieve meaning, and different goals toward which the sufferer should strive.

In this paper, we have attempted to briefly outline and offer some examples of these meaning-making resources from within Protestant Christianity. We have used Crystal Park's meaning-making model, showing how beliefs, practices, and virtues inhabit all aspects of the model.

Furthermore, the model suggests that these Christian resources are intertwined in ways that further meaning-making. In other words, there may be specific pathways between religious beliefs, religious practices, and religious outcomes. An example may help clarify this idea. A Christian facing cancer might initially appraise the cancer diagnosis as a threat and loss (the situational meaning). Global beliefs in God's power and love (a global meaning) might lead to the Christian practice of lament (the religiously-influenced meaning-making process), in which the sense of threat and loss are presented to God, and faith in God's control of the situation is verbalized, ending with praise to God. This process of lament can lead to religiously-valued outcomes, including peace, perseverance, fortitude, and increased dependence on God. Finally, these outcomes result both in greater internalization of global beliefs, for example, a deeper sense of God's power and love, as well as a reappraisal of the stressor, for example, seeing the cancer as a vehicle for greater intimacy with God. Our call is to conduct more theologically informed research on these Christian resources, in the hopes that this will advance our abilities to assist those who suffer to find meaning in the midst of their suffering. **M**

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