

“Only the Suffering God Can Help” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Divine Vulnerability and a Theological Ethics of Trauma

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I. Introduction

The experience of trauma presents the church with a profound challenge. When confronted with forms of suffering that cannot be easily resolved or explained—the kind that persists long after the events that caused it have passed—attempts to help survivors of trauma can often be found wanting. Traditional frameworks for responding to trauma collapse under the weight of what cannot be made sense of.

The challenge facing the church, then, is whether forms of theological speech and practices of ministry can avoid compounding harm. Too often, when the church attempts to respond to those experiencing trauma, it reaches for explanations and solutions, whether theodicies that justify suffering, narratives of resilience that push the survivor toward a quick recovery, or pious platitudes that minimize one’s anguish. Even responses offered with sincere intention may deepen wounds, transforming trauma into a religious problem to be solved, or worse, implying that the pain is evidence of spiritual weakness, as if they do not trust God enough, their faith is too small, or their struggle itself signals a failure to believe.

It is here that the late writings of the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer may be instructive.¹ While imprisoned by the Nazi regime at the end of World War II, Bonhoeffer faced his own form of profound vulnerability while at the same time wrestling with questions about God’s presence in the world. One of the most provocative turns in his thought came in a letter to his theological interlocutor and closest friend, Eberhard Bethge, on July 16, 1944. The letter opens with personal matters, as he reflects on Bethge’s new military posting in Northern Italy, comments on music and reading, and expresses concerns about his family. However, the letter shifts when Bonhoeffer traces at

¹ All citations from the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE) are given as DBWE volume:page after their first full reference.

length the history of Western thought and the autonomy of the world where God is no longer a “working hypothesis” for morality, politics, or the sciences.² Rather than lament this development, Bonhoeffer argues that we must accept this reality, writing, “Before God, and with God, we live without God,” naming the paradox of Christian existence in a “world come of age” — a world that no longer invokes God to explain how things work.³

Bonhoeffer’s recognition of this transformation marks a key moment in the letter. While the “world come of age” may no longer rely on God as a “working hypothesis,” he is fully aware of the religious instinct to reach for an all-powerful or intervening deity, a *deus ex machina*, God as a stopgap, summoned to solve a crisis or fill gaps in human understanding.⁴ However, Bonhoeffer resists this impulse, insisting the God of the Bible is revealed precisely in weakness. He writes to Bethge, “God is weak and powerless in the world, and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us... Only the suffering God can help.”⁵

While Bonhoeffer was not explicitly writing about human suffering in his letter that day to his friend, I suggest here that his thoughts offer a framework for developing a theological ethics of trauma. His insight that “only the suffering God can help” describes God’s fidelity, in which divine help comes not as intervention from above but as a form of divine accompaniment. God is the one who co-suffers. Bonhoeffer’s vision moves beyond responses that rush toward resolution or meaning. He points instead to a form of pastoral care rooted in God’s solidarity with humanity rather than in explanations, in presence rather than solutions, and a willingness to remain in the ongoing rupture of trauma. It is hoped that Bonhoeffer’s insights offer a way of approaching the experience of trauma that does not further harm, but accompanies survivors, by staying with them in their pain and tending to wounds that will not go away.⁶

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Volume 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, , 478.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 479

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), EPUB edition. Hereafter cited as Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*.

My essay is divided into three parts. First, I draw on the work of practical theologian Katie Cross and others to examine unhelpful responses to trauma, such as theodicies that seek to justify suffering and triumphalist narratives of resilience that move quickly to resolution, the “the rush to life” that does not take time to face the realities of death.⁷ Second, I analyze Dietrich Bonhoeffer's late prison theology, which offers his most mature expression of God's presence in the midst of suffering. And third, I seek to articulate what Bonhoeffer's theology means for practices that seek to embody an ethic of accompaniment rooted in divine solidarity rather than human explanation or spiritual solutions. I conclude by exploring how Bonhoeffer's theology of weakness maps onto trauma theologian Shelly Rambo's concept of Holy Saturday, the middle space between death and resurrection, where survivors of trauma often dwell, a framework for approaching trauma that should resonate deeply with Seventh-day Adventists.

II. “Everything Happens for a Reason” Unhelpful Responses to Trauma

Traditional responses to suffering within Christianity, particularly the classical framework of theodicy, often compound the experience of trauma, at times furthering rather than alleviating harm. Theodicy generally seeks to reconcile God's nature with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. However, many theologians who study trauma argue that this approach proves inadequate for those experiencing trauma due to the “radical break” that has occurred in the person's life between the old self and the new self.

Katie Cross, a practical theologian at the University of Aberdeen, contends that theodicy is “bound up in overly abstracted philosophical dialogue, and thus undermines the realities of evil.”⁸ “All too often,” Cross writes, “theoretical renderings of theodicy are inapplicable to human experience, pass over the particularities of suffering, and perpetuate a culture of blame. In sum, theodicy can hold greater potential for hurt than for healing.”⁹ In fact, Cross's colleague, practical theologian John Swinton, has gone so far as

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Katie Cross, *The Sunday Assembly and Theologies of Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2020), 15

⁹ Ibid.

to characterize theodicy as “theologically questionable” and “pastorally dangerous.”¹⁰ For Swinton, this is largely because the abstraction of theodicy often stands in “stark contrast to the experience of most of the world’s population.” Swinton even argues for the end of the practice of theodicy, believing it should give way to practical Christian approaches that are “equipped with creative and grounded approaches to suffering to account for evil, but to bring healing.”¹¹

In addition to explanations of theodicy, Katie Cross has also observed how many churches tend to “pass over” suffering, moving swiftly from the acknowledgement of pain to the celebration of life, a form of denial or avoidance of suffering. Cross again cites Swinton, who observes that most churches do not make time for lament; their worship is more triumphant and celebratory. As Swinton writes, there is “no room in our liturgy and worship for sadness, brokenness, and questioning,” prioritizing instead “joy, praise, and supplication.” These triumphalist approaches are often well-intentioned and born of a desire to give survivors hope, to experience recovery, and to discover new life in Jesus Christ, yet the urgency to quickly move to resurrection can inadvertently compound harm, often resulting in platitudes, bypassing the depth of a person’s pain and the complexity of trauma. Shelly Rambo, a theologian who has written extensively on trauma, argues that this “rush to life” fails to account for the persistent reality of suffering, glossing over “the realities of death in life” that trauma survivors know all too well.¹²

In her book *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*, Duke Divinity School professor Kate Bowler recounts the experience of being “rushed to life” as she lived through the trauma of cancer, recalling with humor how “Everyone is trying to Easter the crap out of my Lent.”¹³ Bowler is describing the “cheerfulness” she experienced when encountering common responses to her pain and suffering, effectively demanding

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shelly Rambo, “How Christian Theology and Practice Are Being Shaped by Trauma Studies,” *The Christian Century*, 2019.

¹³ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018), 88.

she skip the necessary period of darkness and grief (Lent) and move to the celebration of resurrection (Easter).

This impulse to move quickly past suffering reflects an additional theological assumption that can bring harm to those experiencing trauma. As Shelly Rambo further observes, traditional forms of theology often seek to “fix” the survivor, in which the primary role of the pastor or church is to provide answers, to lead the wounded to spiritual victory, or to help them overcome their circumstances. However, while sometimes well-intentioned, this focus on solutions may actually interfere with authentic healing, imposing a premature form of healing that may hinder rather than assist the long-term process of wound tending. Many traditional theologies remain bound to the language of recovery and triumph, whereas those living with trauma know the reality that wounds do not simply disappear—they persist, and the survivor must learn to live with their effects.¹⁴ Thus, “a space for grief is needed—a place in which the pain of the human experience might be held and acknowledged.”¹⁵ It is here that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s late prison theology can prove helpful and where I now turn.

II. “Only the Suffering God Can Help” Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology of Weakness

By July 1944, Bonhoeffer had spent more than a year in Berlin’s Tegel Prison. His experience was marked by isolation and fear. Early on, Bonhoeffer described his trauma as “prison shock.”¹⁶ He had endured solitary confinement and recurring interrogations. He worried about the constant threat of torture and nightly anxiety from Allied bombing raids. Even when his conditions improved, Bonhoeffer faced discovery surrounding his role in the conspiracy and the possibility of execution. All this gave shape to his radical ideas in his July 16 letter to Bethge. However, many of his thoughts in the letter, particularly his claim that “only the suffering God can help,” reflect ideas he had been developing throughout his life, now brought into focus by the socio-political crisis that defined his era.

¹⁴ Cross, 146

¹⁵ Ibid., 146

¹⁶ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 324

In the summer of 1933, ten years before his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer delivered a series of lectures on Christology at the University of Berlin. The period marks the peak of his academic life. Adolf Hitler had just been elected as Reich Chancellor, and the German Christian movement was rapidly aligning itself with National Socialism. The lectures reveal Bonhoeffer's refusal to begin Christology with abstract concepts, metaphysical speculation, or a historical reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth. For Bonhoeffer, theology must start with the concrete Christ who encounters and claims us—the one in whom God and humanity are revealed together. Crucially, Bonhoeffer insists that this revelation is given in the form of suffering and humiliation, in which God is at once revealed and hidden. Any attempt to speak of God apart from this self-revelation in the humiliated Christ slips into abstraction and distorts the gospel.

Michael Mawson, a Bonhoeffer scholar, has made two significant observations in his reading of Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology lectures. The first is Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Chalcedonian Creed: "One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only begotten, acknowledged to be unconfusedly, unalterably, undividedly, inseparably in two natures."¹⁷ Mawson contends that Bonhoeffer believes any attempt to "conceptualize Christ's divinity and humanity by means of fixed or static philosophical concepts, that is, 'nature', 'person', and so forth" amounts to heresy because such attempts, as Bonhoeffer says, "invariably compromise his [Christ's] full humanity."¹⁸ In other words, Bonhoeffer argues that if one begins with a predetermined concept of the divine, Christ's humanity will always be diminished to fit that concept; for Bonhoeffer, "nothing can be known about either God or human being until God has become a human being in Jesus Christ."¹⁹ As he goes on to say, "the λόγος (word) no longer exists otherwise than in the σάρξ (flesh). God is no longer other than the one who has become human." For Bonhoeffer, then, the divine is revealed not in majesty, but in the humiliation of the one who becomes fully human; the God who can be known is the God who has taken on the conditions of human weakness. As

¹⁷ Richard Alfred Norris, ed., *The Christological Controversy*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 159.

¹⁸ Michael Mawson, *Standing Under the Cross: Essays on Bonhoeffer's Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 121

¹⁹ DBWE 12: 352

such, for Bonhoeffer, the divine is revealed not in majesty, but in the humiliation of the one who becomes fully human; the God who can be known is the God who has taken on the conditions of human weakness.

Mawson's second observation concerns Bonhoeffer's turn to Luther to clarify his reading of Chalcedon.²⁰ Rather than treating Christ's natures as abstract categories, Bonhoeffer argues that the only place to speak truthfully about God is in Christ's concrete humanity. He appeals to Luther's *communicatio idiomatum*, the conviction that attributes of Christ's humanity and divinity belong to the one person and must be spoken of together, drawing on Article VIII of the Formula of Concord, where Bonhoeffer says, "everything human ... can be ascribed to and believed about God and everything divine ... can be ascribed to and believed about the human Christ." For Bonhoeffer, this demonstrates how Luther binds knowledge of God to the incarnate life of Jesus.²¹ He then underscores Luther's claim that the divinity and humanity of Jesus can be spoken of "as if they were one nature," insisting that Christ's humanity is itself the place where divinity is made known.²² In other words, Bonhoeffer means that Christ's divinity cannot be approached apart from his embodied, historical existence, and that any attempt to speak of God must continually return to the particularity of this human life. It is this commitment to Christ's concrete humanity that shapes Bonhoeffer's view of how Christians must speak about God.

Bonhoeffer builds on Luther's claim, then, by drawing out its implications for Christian speech. If Christ's humanity is the locus of God's self-disclosure, then any talk of Christ cannot begin with abstract divine attributes. Instead, Bonhoeffer argues, if we are to speak of Jesus as God, we must begin with the realities of this earthly life. Put more succinctly, "If we are to describe Jesus as God," Bonhoeffer says, "we would not speak of his being all-powerful or all-knowing; we would speak of his birth in a manger and of his cross."²³ Therefore, any discussion about God must proceed from the life and death of Jesus Christ, the human being. For Bonhoeffer, this places limits on the usefulness of

²⁰ Only a Suffering God Can Help, Mawson 121

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Volume 12, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, 346

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 354

theological concepts such as impassibility or immutability. Rather, any knowledge of God is tied to the embodied existence of Jesus, captured in Luther's formulation, "Christ alone, and no other God."²⁴

However, Bonhoeffer also observes that grounding theology in Christ's humanity does not make God necessarily accessible. In fact, for Bonhoeffer, the very form in which Christ exists, fully divine and fully human, is marked by hiddenness. He insists, "This God-human [Gott-Mensch] is *veiled* [emphasis mine] in his existence as the humiliated one."²⁵ Here, Bonhoeffer turns to the Gospels where he does not see Christ in glory but as a humiliated human being. Because of this paradox, God's presence in Christ is always revealed and hidden. In the closing section of the lectures, he refers to this form of God's presence as a stumbling block, "frustrating any straightforward or immediate recognition of who Christ is."²⁶ In saying this, Bonhoeffer aligns himself with Martin Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross), as opposed to what H. Gaylon Barker, a former president of the International Bonhoeffer Society and editor of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Editions, refers to as a *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory), a theology that seeks God in power, whereas here, Bonhoeffer insists God is revealed *abscondito sub contrario* (under its opposite)—God's glory is not found in majesty, but in the humility and shame of the cross.²⁷ Or as Bonhoeffer says more pointedly, Christ remains "incognito," entering the world as "a beggar among beggars, and outcast among outcasts."²⁸

Bonhoeffer will continue to work out his theology along these lines in the years that follow, from his role in the Church Struggle and work in the illegal seminary at Finkenwalde to his leadership in the Confessing Church, in the writing of his spiritual classics, *Discipleship* and *Life Together*, and later in his involvement with the conspiracy against Hitler and his unfinished *Ethics*. However, the limits of this essay do not allow for a

²⁴ Martin Luther, 'On the Councils of the Church', in Luther's Works 41: Church and Ministry 3, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), 286.

²⁵ DBWE 12:356

²⁶ Ibid., 355–360

²⁷ H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 91, 107–108.

²⁸ DBWE 12:356

complete survey of his thinking on the weakness of God during these years. Nonetheless, even this brief look at his Christology should help make clear that his insights in prison did not emerge in isolation. Bonhoeffer's correspondence with Bethge is the culmination of years of thought, pressed into the experience of confinement, his church's failure, Germany's impending collapse, and the moral crisis of his time. With this background in mind, we can now read the prison letters not as a departure from Bonhoeffer's earlier thought but as a lived expression of his theology.

Barker provides a helpful way of reading Bonhoeffer's July 16, 1944, letter. As previously mentioned, he has shown that Bonhoeffer drew on Luther's *theologia crucis* in his 1933 Christology lectures, and continued to do so throughout his life. However, Barker contends that the concept of *theologia crucis* is fully expressed in Bonhoeffer's claim that "only the suffering God can help," in which God is known precisely in weakness and humiliation rather than in metaphysical power. To make his point, Bonhoeffer contrasts human religiosity, which seeks a God who intervenes, a *deus ex machina*, with the biblical witness, which directs us to the powerlessness and suffering of God. God is no longer a "stop-gap" or "working hypothesis" invoked when human resources fail, but the one who "consents to be pushed out of the world on to the cross," who is "weak and powerless in the world," and precisely in that weakness is "at our side and helps us."²⁹

Here, then, when Bonhoeffer speaks of a "world come of age," he is not suggesting that faith has disappeared; he is referring to the way humans have rejected false concepts of God and learned to live and act without appealing to a divine hypothesis or to images of a remote, interventionist problem-solver. This development is not a threat to the gospel but the very means by which God frees us from "caricatures or versions of God" so that we may recognize the God of the Bible who "gains ground and power in the world by being powerless."³⁰ In a world marked by profound suffering and unresolved trauma, Bonhoeffer insists that divine help does not come through displays of overpowering force that eliminate vulnerability, but through God's decision to enter fully into the human condition.

²⁹DBWE 8:479–80

³⁰ Ibid., 480

As Bonhoeffer writes, Christ “helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.”³¹ Paul Van Buren reflected on this in his essay Bonhoeffer’s Paradox,:

Bonhoeffer’s God was powerful, but it was that odd sort of power that takes the form of weakness. [...] God’s power according to Bonhoeffer was in fact the power of powerlessness. He was a weak God, and that is exactly what Bonhoeffer liked about him. [...] Bonhoeffer thought there was much to be said for what weakness could accomplish in this world.³²

The theological weight of Bonhoeffer’s claim then rests on the conviction that God is the one who suffers and cries out in the depths of human abandonment. Drawing again on Luther’s *communicatio idiomatum*, Bonhoeffer maintains that in the crucified Jesus, God *himself* bears sin, experiences forsakenness, and participates fully in a world that feels godless.³³ God’s solidarity with those who suffer is therefore not sentimental or merely empathetic; it is truly the form of God’s redemptive presence. For Bonhoeffer, this is what makes the suffering God the “real God,” the one revealed in the manger and the cross, and why all other gods, especially those of religious triumph or metaphysical forms of security, must fall away. “Only the suffering God can help” thus names both the center of Christian confession and a decisive reframing of divine presence: God is found not above suffering but within it, not in power that removes vulnerability but in love that accompanies us through it. This vision opens the way for a theological account of suffering that can speak meaningfully into experiences of trauma, where resolution is often impossible and where God’s presence must be understood as abiding rather than intervening.

Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the weakness of God in his letter to Eberhard Bethge in 1944 offer a vision of divine presence that refuses modes of abstraction, triumph, or easy explanation. God is the one who suffers with the world, the one who abides in places where resolution is not yet possible, and whose help is given in the form of presence rather than intervention. This vision reframes what it means to speak of God amid the pain of trauma.

³¹ DBWE 8:480

³² Paul M. van Buren, “Bonhoeffer’s Paradox: Living with God without God,” in *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age*, ed. Peter Vorkink and Paul M. van Buren (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 7.

³³ Barker, 104

Here, divine fidelity takes the form of accompaniment, refusing to turn away from wounds that persist. Having examined Bonhoeffer's insight, the task is now to consider what this may mean for the lived practice of the church. How might a theology centered on divine vulnerability shape our response to the experience of trauma? To move from theology to practice, we must ask: what does it look like to accompany survivors in the spaces where Bonhoeffer's suffering God dwells? This question gains theological purchase when we turn to trauma theologian Shelly Rambo's account of Holy Saturday—the "middle space" between death and resurrection where survivors of trauma often find themselves.³⁴ Bringing Bonhoeffer's vision of divine accompaniment into conversation with Rambo's understanding of Holy Saturday allows us to outline a theological ethic of trauma that seeks to avoid harming survivors and to honor the God who abides in the depths of human pain.

III. Holy Saturday, The Middle Space and Theological Ethics of Trauma

In considering Dietrich Bonhoeffer's provocative claim that "only the suffering God can help," we must ask a crucial question: What does it mean for the church to accompany survivors of trauma? And how does a theology of weakness reshape the way we come alongside those who suffer? These questions are not academic, but pastoral. They push us to consider whether we have the theological, ethical, and spiritual resources to meet survivors of trauma where they dwell, spaces where answers fall short, where healing timelines collapse, and where the presence of God must be found in solidarity rather than interventions. This, of course, raises a further question: What approach allows us to move from understanding divine accompaniment to embodying it? The answer of course does not lie in developing therapeutic techniques or spiritual programs, but in reconceiving the pastoral task itself, specifically, in understanding accompaniment as an act of what, practical theologian Andrew Root has come to refer to as curation. Root writes:

Ministry is the curating of these places, these in-between spaces, through facilitation of locales that allow people to share in each other's needs, to see each other as persons. No pastor has the power to create these spaces. They are

³⁴ Rambo, *How Christian Theology and Practice Are Being Shaped by Trauma Studies*, 20.

spiritual; they are outgrowths of the Holy Spirit . . . We cannot force these places, but we can curate them . . . We as pastors are not called to be incarnate, to do the work only Jesus [can do]. But we are called to be place sharers, to be attentive to curating places where the sharing of persons can happen, and in all of this to confess the presence of Christ—the person who is the relationship of the sharing of two natures.³⁵

Roots' concept of curation is grounded in Bonhoeffer's understanding that Christ enters fully into human suffering, that God descends into the depths of abandonment itself, making his presence known in solidarity with human pain. When the church curates these spaces, it is not creating anything new; it is attending to where God is already present through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the task is not to resolve the rupture, to explain suffering, or to move survivors quickly toward healing. Rather, it is to tend the space itself, to create the conditions in which survivors encounter presence, not answers; solidarity, not solutions. This is what Bonhoeffer's suffering God offers: not intervention from above, but accompaniment within the depths of abandonment.

One place where curation can happen is what trauma theologian Shelly Rambo calls the "middle spaces."³⁶ She refers to the middle as a conceptual or figurative place that emerges when trauma fails to be neatly resolved or easily concluded. She goes on to describe the middle as a space "where death and life are no longer bounded," a "perplexing space of survival."³⁷ However, it is here that Bonhoeffer's theology of the suffering God finds its full concrete expression. The God who enters abandonment, who refuses to solve pain from a distance, who offers presence rather than intervention, is the God of the middle space. Rambo says of this space,

It is a largely untheologized site, because the middle is overshadowed by the other two events. Because of its precarious positioning, the middle can easily be covered over and ignored. It is subject to the elisions of time, body, and language and therefore is difficult to witness. The good news of Christianity for those who experience trauma rests in the capacity to theologize this middle. It does not rest in either the event of the cross or resurrection, but instead in the movements between the two—movements that I identify through the concept of witness. The good news

³⁵ Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 163.

³⁶ Rambo, *How Christian Theology and Practice Are Being Shaped by Trauma Studies*, 20.

³⁷ Ibid.

lies in the ability of Christian theology to witness between death and life, in its ability to forge a new discourse between the two.³⁸

Rambo, of course, is talking about Holy Saturday.³⁹ A liturgical tradition that may be foreign to most Seventh-day Adventists. Holy Saturday is a day in the Christian liturgical calendar that falls between Good Friday (Crucifixion/Passion) and Easter Sunday (Resurrection), the theological middle day. The day is often overshadowed by the drama of death or the triumph of new life. However, Holy Saturday narrates a time and place where death and life are brought into a complex relationship with time.⁴⁰ It is the day when Christ lay dead, when the disciples hid in fear, when resurrection remained only a promise yet to be fulfilled. For survivors of trauma, Holy Saturday is not a historical moment or a day in the church's calendar but a lived theological reality.

Holy Saturday, as articulated by the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, resists the modern Christian impulse to rush toward triumphalism.⁴¹ The day interrupts theologies that leap immediately from the suffering of Good Friday to the victory of Easter Sunday, bypassing the middle day entirely. This is the experience of trauma survivors, who are often pressured by well-meaning Christians to "move on," to find the silver lining, to testify to God's redemptive purposes in their suffering. Yet, Holy Saturday refuses this pressure. It insists that the movement from death to life is not a seamless, quick, triumphant process. Instead, Christ himself descended into the experience of hell not as the Risen One claiming victory, but as a *dead* man, experiencing the total and complete darkness, absolute forsakenness.⁴² In this descent, God does not overcome death from above but fully enters into it, sharing the desolation of those who dwell in abandonment. This is the God who helps the suffering, not by removing their pain, but by refusing to abandon them in it.

What does it mean theologically to dwell in this middle space without rushing toward resolution? It means embracing what Rambo calls a theology of *remaining*, from the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Greek word *menein*, to remain, to abide, to persist.⁴³ This is not resignation but fidelity. When Jesus commands his disciples to "remain in my love" (John 15:9), he speaks this word in the shadow of his anticipated death. The command to remain becomes a command to persist in love even as that love is tested by absence, rupture, and the persistence of suffering. A theology of remaining affirms that God's presence is found not in the removal of suffering but in solidarity with those who suffer. The Holy Spirit sustains this witness as a presence that remains between death and life. This is what grounds a theology of remaining. When the church curates the middle space of Holy Saturday, it cultivates space for the Spirit to remain with those who suffer, for survivors to encounter a God who remains, and for love that continues rather than resolves.

Seventh-day Adventists have valued the Sabbath as a sanctuary of rest, a day to cease labor and to trust in God's provision; however, we have emphasized the peace of Sabbath rest without fully developing the capacity to hold lament and to acknowledge the ongoing reality of suffering. The recovery of Holy Saturday invites Seventh-day Adventists to a deeper fidelity to their own Sabbath theology. True Sabbath rest includes not only peace but also the honest naming of pain that persists. It means creating sacred space for those whose suffering extends beyond a single day, who dwell in the middle space between the promise of God's rest and the lived reality of their wounds. In this way, Holy Saturday becomes a Sabbath of witness, a sacred time when the community gathers not to celebrate resolution but to honor the God who remains present in the rupture, and to accompany one another through the long work of remaining in love.

IV. Conclusion

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims that "only the suffering God can help," he invites us to reorient how we think about God's presence in the world. God is the one who co-suffers. The one who accompanies humanity in their suffering. As we have seen, this has significant implications for those who are experiencing trauma. In Bonhoeffer's late prison theology, God's power is shown not in avoiding vulnerability but in entering it. God chooses

⁴³ Ibid.

to step fully into abandonment, bearing sin and godforsakenness in the crucified Christ. Thus, when we read Bonhoeffer alongside trauma theologians such as Katie Cross and Shelly Rambo, his insights expose how easily theological speech can cause harm when it seeks to fix, explain, or rush to solutions. In contrast, the suffering God meets trauma not with spiritual techniques or religious solutions but with a fidelity that refuses to turn away.

To say, then, that only the suffering God can help is to say what the church is called to be. As Bonhoeffer writes to his co-conspirators in his essay, *After Ten Years*, during Christmas, 1942:

We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ's greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer... Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered.⁴⁴

Therefore, if God's presence is given as a co-suffering love that remains within the middle spaces of Holy Saturday, then Christian communities are summoned to practices that mirror this form of divine accompaniment. This means churches can be curating spaces where grief is not rushed, where questions are not silenced, and where wounds that will not heal are neither hidden nor explained away. This will require pastoral imagination. Bearing witness to God's remaining. Honoring the slow, sometimes fragile movements of survival and meaning-making. These are the curated middle spaces where the church does not bring Christ as though he were absent. Rather, it bears witness to the Christ who is already present, hidden but real, in the lives of those who suffer.

For Seventh-day Adventists, who are both attentive to the Sabbath and the hope of the resurrection, this ethic of accompaniment invites a renewed understanding of what it means to keep time with a suffering world. Read this way, Holy Saturday can become a space in which Sabbath rest is expanded to include lament—a time for “voicing” of pain, rather than letting it remain silent and unresolved. To inhabit that kind of space then is not to abandon the hope of resurrection or the promise of new creation. To the contrary, lament

⁴⁴ DBWE 8:49

is an attempt to refuse cheap forms of hope that bypass the cross and the grave. In the end, Bonhoeffer's claim that "only the suffering God can help" does not negate resurrection; it guards it from becoming a denial of the wounds that remain. Only the God who has entered hell, who abides in the tomb, and who remains with those who cannot yet sing "alleluia," can speak a word of life that does not erase their pain. It is this suffering God—and no other—who can help, and it is in learning to accompany this God in the middle spaces of trauma that the church may yet find a faithful and healing way to speak.