

# Suffering

## It's Going to Happen

Whether it is today, tomorrow, or sometime in the future, every person will face the reality of suffering and pain. Many have already walked through seasons of life where pain, sadness, anger, and anxiety have filled their souls; some may be experiencing this now. Believers should take comfort in the fact that the God they serve is not silent about their suffering. He does not hide from or neglect addressing the hardships that humanity experiences. The Word of God is honest, open, and direct about this issue. We do not have to speculate about how we persevere through and respond to life in a broken world.

Despite what God has revealed in Scripture, a lack of proper theology regarding suffering is common among God's people. As a result, we often struggle processing and dealing with suffering when it comes. Our hearts question the Lord, our faith is stretched thin, and we are left with the stinging accusations and lies of the enemy.

We spend a considerable amount of time trying to prevent suffering from coming to ourselves, our families, and our loved ones. This is not a horrible thing. It is commendable much of the time. We prevent, but we often do not prepare. In some ways, there seems to be no proper way to prepare for certain types of suffering. But knowing and understanding Scripture should lead believers to prepare our hearts and minds about how to deal with the reality of suffering. It could greatly benefit us to begin to develop a proper theology of suffering before hardship comes. We do not learn CPR as soon as someone stops breathing and neither should we wait until we are faced with suffering and pain to learn how we should biblically respond.

## How Do We Suffer?

Many think of suffering as it relates to physical pain. While physical pain and sickness are assuredly types of suffering, we suffer in many other ways. We see the various writers of the Psalms suffering emotionally and mentally<sup>1</sup>. Paul suffers in the same way in the New Testament<sup>2</sup>. He is faced with decisions and complications that heavily weigh on his emotional and mental health. Suffering can touch all parts of our lives. Pain and hardship can be experienced physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, financially, and numerous other ways. Often one type of suffering leads to suffering in another aspect of our humanity. For example, physical suffering can affect our emotional well-being and lead to depression, anger, and bitterness. We can also become so mentally burdened that it affects our physical health. It is possible for every aspect of our humanity to be affected by suffering.

## Why Am I Suffering?

Some suffering will be difficult to categorize. Our lives are complex and it may prove difficult to pinpoint the reason behind each specific situation. While this is true, it is still helpful for us to understand the reasons behind various examples of suffering that occur throughout Scripture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 22; Psalm 44; Psalm 60; Psalm 79

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:8-10

**Romans 8:20-23; Romans 5:16-19.** Adam stood as a representative for all of humanity. When Adam sinned, the whole human race was associated with him, inherited a sin nature upon birth, and is born into a fallen world. Some suffering is simply the result of being a part of Adam's race—human. This means that all people will suffer to some degree, in varying ways, because of Adam's sin, our sin, and the sin of others. This places humanity, and the decision to disobey and distrust God, as the source of the suffering and brokenness we experience in the world. This is important to remember since so many wrongly blame God for evil and suffering.

**Proverbs 1:29-31; Proverbs 21:23-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:10.** There are many examples, especially in the Book of Proverbs, where suffering is a result of foolish decisions. A lazy person suffers from hunger; some suffer because of the friends they have surrounded themselves with; others can't stay out of trouble because they are constantly speaking without even taking the time to listen to others. A lot of our suffering is the result of foolish life decisions and surfaces when it is time to deal with the consequences. For example, poor eating habits and lack of exercise leads to physical suffering. Living above your means leads to financial difficulties. Being selfish, rude, and hurtful will eventually lead to a lack of close friendships. The consequences of our poor decisions brings suffering into our lives and could often be prevented by making wise and biblically sound decisions.

**James; 1 & 2 Peter; John 15:19-20.** Some suffering is a result of others doing harm against you because of your profession of faith in Christ. The Old Testament prophets, the disciples, and Jesus himself suffered as the result of persecution. This includes both physical and non-physical suffering. Much of the suffering that comes from being persecuted can be verbal in the form of harassment, lying, and mocking.

**Genesis 12:10; Exodus 2:23; Numbers 14:18.** This type of suffering comes from being associated with a certain group, culture, family, or nation. Someone may suffer because of where they were born. Many are born into hardship, war, conflict, or famine, while others are born into families with destructive habits and practices.

**Luke 6:28.** This tragic type of suffering is the result of someone's direct sin against someone else. The victim did not sin, but was sinned against. Rape, molestation, abuse, being cheated on, and abandonment are just some of the painful examples.

**2 Corinthians 2:4; Romans 12:15.** When someone we deeply love and care for is suffering, we suffer alongside them. While this is easily understood in reference to our families, the New Testament lets us know that this will also be common in the church.

**Acts 5:16; Luke 13:16; Revelation 12:10; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10.** Satan and demons are not the cause of all suffering like some wrongly teach, but that does not exclude them from being the cause of some suffering. The New Testament teaches us that Satan and demons can cause suffering such as torment and oppression, physical sickness, and condemning accusations. For some, eternal suffering will result from being deceived by false miracles that are carried out by demonic spirits.

**Hebrews 12:5-11.** God reveals himself to be a Father who lovingly disciplines those that are his children. This discipline will often feel like suffering. It is not to be categorized as punishment, because Jesus took all our punishment on the cross, and is always done for our good. The discipline the Lord exercises in the lives of his children originates from his loving heart and his desire to help us grow in holiness and faithfulness. Additionally, it causes believers to reconsider their sinful decisions and the trajectory of their lives.

*John 9:2-3; Genesis 39:20.* Some suffering will not make any sense until God's purposes start to be revealed. Like the Old Testament figure of Joseph<sup>3</sup> and the blind man<sup>4</sup> we encounter through the earthly ministry of Jesus, they experienced suffering so they could be vessels through which God communicated his greatness and glory.

*James 1:2-4; Acts 14:22; 1 Peter 4:12-19.* Like many recipients of the letters in the New Testament, some undergo suffering to test, strengthen, and prove their faith. Not to God, but to themselves and others. As a result, their trust in the Lord is increased, the faith of other believers is strengthened, and unbelievers see a testimony of perseverance that points to God's goodness and faithfulness.

*2 Peter 2:9; Jude 1:7; Exodus 4-15.* God punishes unbelievers whose lives are marked by unrepentant sin. It reveals the justice of God, brings (in part) an end to sin that hurts others, urges non-believers to repent and avoid eternal punishment, and encourages believers to continue to trust in Christ and repent of sin. Christians do not suffer in this way because Christ has already taken their punishment for sin on the cross.

*The Book of Job.* Some suffering cannot be explained. God simply is to be trusted and faith is to be exercised despite the painful circumstance we find ourselves in. Take Job for example, who was unaware of what God was doing while he was suffering. To him and others, there seemed to be no discernable answer as to why his suffering was happening.

While this list is not exhaustive, it does provide many biblical reasons as to why we walk through suffering in our lives. It is common for suffering to be caused by *several* of these reasons rather than one reason on its own. We are also not suggesting that one should experience anxiety and stress trying to discern the reason behind every specific circumstance in their life that could be interpreted as suffering. Rather, the aim of this list is to provide a biblical worldview of suffering so we are not tempted to believe unbiblical and untrue theories regarding human suffering.

### How Do We Respond?

It is extremely important that Christians know how to respond to suffering *before* they find themselves in a difficult situation. Without proper preparation and biblical guidance, it is a likely possibility that one will struggle to continue to serve the Lord joyfully during their suffering. The following truths should help us walk through suffering faithfully and further equip believers to have a biblical view of suffering.

***God is at work in your suffering.*** Even if Satan is behind your suffering, like Job, God can use it to bring about his good purposes. He is able to use your suffering so that he is glorified and you grow in your faith. It is better to suffer and bring God glory than to live comfortably and glorify yourself. There will be precious and eternal truths worked into your heart from having walked through suffering. Your suffering is not an indicator that God has abandoned you or that his love for you has ceased. You can trust that God is a good Father who has good purposes for allowing suffering in your life. The suffering you experience in this life will seem insignificant once the eternal work God was doing is fully realized and understood<sup>5</sup>.

***It makes us more like Jesus.*** Romans 8:28-29 assures us that all circumstances, including suffering, come into our lives to conform us to the image of Christ. We learn to depend on our Heavenly Father rather than the

---

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 50:20

<sup>4</sup> John 9:3

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

temporary treasures of this world. Suffering has a way of removing the things that do not matter from our hearts and lives.

***We respond with faith and joy.*** This is easy to say and tough to do. Romans 5:3-5 details the proper response to suffering. We are to rejoice in suffering because we understand that God is working endurance, character, hope, and his love into our hearts. We should pray in advance, when our lives are relatively comfortable and absent of suffering, that this will be our action and attitude when times of affliction come.

***You will be tempted to quit.*** Satan tempted Jesus to avoid the cross and take a path that led away from suffering<sup>6</sup>. You can be sure that in your season of suffering you will be tempted to walk away from the Lord and his will for your life. You may wonder if serving the Lord is worth it, doubt God's love for you, and become discouraged by spiritual practices that were once a source of great encouragement. Do not condemn yourself for dealing with this temptation—it is very common. Be ready to fight it with the Word of God and the help of others. It is easy to think that the path that represents minimal suffering and hardship is the one that leads to joy. The cross of Christ, which he endured because of the joy on the other side of his suffering<sup>7</sup>, teaches us that obedience to God, even if it is accompanied with suffering, is the path that truly leads to joy.

***You can pray about it.*** Jesus has compassion on those who are suffering<sup>8</sup>. He also has the power to do something about it. We can bring our sorrows and pains to the Lord and ask him to perform a miracle. Bodies can be healed, relationships can be restored, and sin can be redeemed. While God does not guarantee to alleviate all our suffering, he wants us to ask him to both privately<sup>9</sup> and corporately<sup>10</sup>.

***You are not alone.*** What is left to do when you have faithfully and continually prayed about your suffering and yet it remains a part of your life? You can press into a relationship with a God who understands and knows what it is like to suffer. Jesus suffered greatly while on earth and can relate to what you are going through. This is a great comfort in a time of suffering. Because he can identify with human suffering<sup>11</sup>, Jesus can minister and provide for those suffering in a deeply personal, intimate, and helpful manner. He has also put you alongside other believers who can support, pray for, and walk with you in your time of hardship. Suffering is made more tolerable when you know that you are not alone.

## It Will End

Christians have a hope that unbelievers do not. Suffering as followers of Christ has meaning, purpose, and will produce something in our lives that matters for *eternity*. Unbelievers do not have this hope as they walk through suffering. For them, their earthly life is their sole focus so suffering often brings about deep despair and confusion. Additionally, they cannot look towards the future with the assurance that their suffering will end. Revelation 21:3-4 assures followers of Christ that one day our suffering will cease. Evil, injustice, pain, suffering, sickness, and sin will not be present as we enjoy eternity with the God who saved and rescued us. For now, we persevere through suffering, remembering this promise, as we eagerly anticipate this day to be revealed.

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 4:8-10

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 12:2

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 9:36, 14:14

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 6:6

<sup>10</sup> James 5:13-16

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 4:15