

Why Christians suffer?

Suffering, pain, and distress, are some of the most persistent and perplexing of all human problems. Even those who experience relatively minor suffering in their own lives are constantly confronted with the suffering of others, within their own families or among their acquaintances. Suffering takes many forms such as physical pain, frustrated hope, depression, isolation, loneliness, grief, anxiety, spiritual crisis, and more. Whether you are a Christian or not, you will suffer, either deservedly or undeservedly. When Pontius Pilate killed some Galileans for no apparent reason and when a tower in Siloam fell and killed eighteen people, Jesus Christ pointed out to the disciples that neither disaster in any way suggested that sin was a cause of those deaths. They had done nothing wrong. They suffered undeservedly (Lk. 13:1-4). And Job's well-known suffering of horrible disease, together with the loss of all his wealth and death of all seven children, was permitted by God as a test of Job's spiritual maturity and dependence upon God's provisions for life. In these instances of suffering found in the Bible, both unbelievers (the Galileans and the victims at Siloam) and believers (Job) suffered. Suffering strikes everyone at some point in life.

So what should we do about it? We must understand it. Like everything else in life, understanding suffering is the key to enabling us to deal with it. We should seek out biblical understanding to cope while believing in God's power and goodness.

Suffering is a result of human sin.

The most general way to understand the presence of suffering in the world is to say that it is a result of human disobedience. The first three chapters of Genesis state that the world was intended to be a good place. The human race was created perfect by God, and initially, resided in a perfect environment. Suffering was impossible. God provided everything necessary for life and happiness (Gen. 2:9). But at the same time, God's justice provided for human will. Man was allowed either to accept God's gracious provisions for life, or he could become his own "god" and his own provider. God warned Adam and Eve in Gen. 2:17, "but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die." Genesis 3:6 tells us that both Adam and Eve chose to disobey and eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. Man rejected God's authority, Word, and provisions. At that very moment man became sinful, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), and became unrighteous "There is none righteous, no not one" (Rom. 3:10).

Under the justice of God, He is compelled by His own perfect character to set suffering in motion as a penalty for rejecting His command. God established a suffering environment of pain, thorns, and thistles immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:16-19). That was the moment that sin entered into the human race, and consequently "in Adam all die." We all now exist in a sin-cursed world of suffering. The entire human race suffers "spiritual death" (separation from God) at birth (Rom. 5:12). Thus we see that because of the inherent sinfulness of mankind, suffering is here to stay. We cannot avoid it, as hard as we try. All descendants of the first parents are born into a sinful world where there is the potential for suffering. All are vulnerable to the possibility of suffering in their lives. The mere fact of being human and living in a world where people hurt themselves and each other can account for much of what is called suffering.

There are two major classifications of suffering.

The two overarching classifications of suffering are "deserved" and "undeserved." Both believers and unbelievers are subject to pain and difficulty. Undeserved suffering affects us all because we live in a sin-cursed world "the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth" (Rom. 8:22). Because nature has been tainted, agony and affliction come from natural disas-

ters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, fires, etc. As already noted, an example of this can be seen in the falling tower of Siloam where personal sin was clearly not the cause of that great tragedy (Lk. 13:4). Suffering also comes our way because of the wickedness and evil of others such as Pilate's murder of the Galilean worshipers (Lk. 13:1). These were innocent worshipers who died as a result of a natural disaster and at the hands of an evil that comes from man.

The second classification is "deserved" or (self-induced) suffering. We all bring on this category of suffering as a result of inherent sinfulness, unrighteousness, and evil. Deserved suffering arises from the justice of God because of our sins such as lust, pride, selfishness, greed, and poor decisions that contradict God's will. Believers, such as the apostle Paul, experience self-induced suffering. Because of Paul's own pride, he was chastised by God, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself" (2 Cor. 12:7). We learn from Jonah, "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs" (Jonah 2:8). So both believers and unbelievers suffer under both categories of suffering.

Suffering also comes from evil world forces.

Besides sin, suffering comes to all from cosmic evil forces hostile to both God and humans. This can be described as Satanically permitted suffering. Sometimes God permits, especially the spiritually mature, to be tested in life by permitting excessive Satanic pressure. The most outstanding believer of his day was Job (Job 1:1-5). It was God's idea to give Satan permission to attack Job. Under God's supervision, Satan could do what he desired except one thing; he could not take Job's life. Satan's accusation was that Job would reject God under abnormal suffering (Job 1:9-10), implying that Job only served God because of personal blessing. Although neither Satan nor his demons can indwell believers, they can harass believers. Unbelievers can be indwelt as a tool for suffering, to produce physical illness such as in Matthew 12:22, "Then there was brought to Him a demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb, and He healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw." In the New Testament, suffering is often ascribed to the presence of demons (Luke 9:38-39), evil spirits (Acts 19:11-12), Satan (Luke 13:16), or the Devil (Acts 10:38). Psychological, physical, and spiritual suffering may be caused by these evil forces and are not due to human sin or God's execution of justice.

God directs suffering to believers for a purpose.

The next category of suffering is divinely directed suffering that is used by God to bring blessing for good. It creates within believers a motivation to enthusiastically depend upon God. This can explain why Christians suffer in unique ways and for unique purposes. Peter encouraged believers when he said,

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler, but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Peter 4:12-19).

Suffering comes in the form of fiery trials to test the believer's faith. Believers are to rejoice in this

type of suffering for Christ. Although suffering is by definition a very undesirable experience, it will lead to some greater good. Romans 8:28-30 assures believers, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." According to this promise, believers can find meaning in their suffering. It turns the sufferer toward the future and the promise that God will work something good from what seems so bad. James 1:2-4 tells us that suffering has a purpose for which we should be grateful, namely, perseverance which builds maturity. In Rom. 5:1-5, Paul told his readers to rejoice in their suffering because it will help produce endurance and character and hope in them. Such words as these have often been comforting to sufferers, though only if this is a conclusion of their own and not an answer imposed on them by someone who seems callous to the reality of their present pain.

Suffering may be of benefit to other people as well. Joseph suffered greatly at the hands of his brothers, who sold him into slavery. At the end of his life, however, Joseph looked back and saw that many people had benefited because of his suffering (Gen. 50:15-21). He was in the right place to prepare for the famine. He would not have been there if his brothers had not done evil toward him. They are indeed guilty of a hostile act toward him, but God used their wickedness and Joseph's suffering to bring about a greater good. It was, however, only with considerable hindsight that Joseph was able to come to this conclusion. Similarly, it is hard for most sufferers to believe this until enough time has elapsed that the trauma of suffering has been put into a broader perspective.

Christ is the answer to suffering. For the believer who trusts in Christ as his personal Savior through the acceptance of the gospel, he can claim the following blessings: avoiding the judgment of God (Jn. 3:18), knowing that suffering is only temporary "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18), knowing that believers are provided for during suffering "who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time, and in this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials" (1 Peter 1:5-6), and knowing that suffering is only temporary and will cease upon death "and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Fourteen reasons why God directs suffering to the believer:

1. To increase faith and love (2 Thess. 1:3-5).
2. To produce endurance and consequently maturity (Ja. 1:2-3).
3. To discipline and restore spiritual dynamics (Heb. 12:4-6, 10-11).
4. To provide a witness to unbelievers (Phil. 1:12-13).
5. To glorify Christ (Phil. 1:20-23; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).
6. To bring greater joy in eternity (2 Cor. 4:16-18).
7. To develop inner strength for comfort for others in suffering (2 Cor. 1:3-11).
8. To humble us towards spiritual growth (2 Cor. 12:7-10).
9. To provide doctrinal tests for eternal rewards (1 Pt. 1:6-7).
10. To experience the faithfulness of God (1 Cor. 10:13).
11. To visualize the grace of God in suffering (1 Pt. 5:10).
12. To develop appreciation for Christ's suffering (1 Pt. 4:1-2, 12-19).
13. To motivate us to appreciate and love others in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:25-26).
14. To encourage dependence on God through prayer (1 Pt. 5:7).