

## On suffering

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(with insights from Charles Kasenene, a friend and brother in Christ)

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### Basics

No one typically likes to suffer, except a very specific category of people who take pleasure from suffering. Unfortunately, suffering is part of the human experience. There are however different categories of suffering a Christian should be aware of.

- *Category 1:* As a result of breaking natural laws (“cause and effect”).
- *Category 2:* As a direct result of being a Christian (“Persecution”).
- *Category 3:* Suffering for which there appears no clear explainable reason or cause. This is the most difficult one for which both Christians and non-Christians struggle with. Non-Christians often accuse God of being cruel or merciless for this 3<sup>rd</sup> type, particularly where children or vulnerable people are involved.

#### **Category 1: Cause and effect suffering.**

God has put in place certain natural laws of “cause and effect” to which we are all subject. This principle for a Christian is most clearly reflected when a Christian breaks a law. Suffering may inevitably result, as God has appointed worldly authority to enforce laws and punish wrong doers. The bible addresses this as follows:

*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. (1 Peter 2: 13-15, NIV).*

The principle being, if you must suffer, let it be for doing good, not for doing wrong<sup>i</sup>.

Christians are called to live with integrity and have good reputations, including among non-Christians but we of course all make mistakes and Jesus is just to forgive us when we confess our sins<sup>ii</sup>, but this does not necessarily mean He will also remove the consequences (e.g going to jail, paying a fine).

Suffering in this instance, could therefore be considered a megaphone notice to you – turn away from your sins before something worse happens. <sup>iii</sup>

A Christian should NEVERTHELESS show compassion to those who are suffering – including from their own mistakes. Jesus told a story of the day of judgement to give us a model.

*“I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”. (Matthew 25:36)*

So be compassionate to those suffering – including from their own mistakes. Just as Jesus has mercy on you, have mercy on others in suffering.

## Rejoice God's people... Your salvation is near

For those facing suffering in *Category 2: As a direct result of being a Christian* the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor 11: 23-30 (NIV) **seems to "boast" in his suffering** thus:

*".. I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?"*

*If I must boast, I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am."*

## How about suffering without reason?

So what is God's attitude to suffering in *category 3 – where there appears no clear cause?* Sin is in the world and because of it, God's judgement has fallen on the world. This sometimes means "those less evil" suffer while the "most evil" escape. It even means the righteous, who live in this fallen world, suffer the consequences of this fallen world – sin and suffering.

Here is an example of how Jesus explained it:

*Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1 -5 (NIV).*

Jesus is showing clearly that not everyone who suffers or perishes is because they were worse sinners than those alive. He is showing that suffering is not necessarily a **one for one** (those who sin worse, get punished more in this world) – you should focus on your own repentance.

*Where is God when we are suffering?*

Jesus having explained some suffering and perishing doesn't mean he is insensitive to those suffering. Here is an example when a man called Lazarus had died and Jesus came to the village, being met by the dead man's sisters – Mary and Martha (Mary, Martha and Lazarus were all Jesus' friends).

*"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept." (John 11: 33 – 35, NIV).*

God is therefore not so interested in philosophical reasons or explanations for suffering. **What He is more interested in is our response** – running the race with endurance like your brothers and sisters before you (who are watching). Keeping your eyes on Jesus<sup>iv</sup> and remembering that longsuffering is one of the fruits of the Spirit<sup>v</sup>. While you endure suffering – he is nevertheless with you. He seems to whisper to you and me in suffering:

*“When you turn, I turn, when you weep, I weep”.*

If I was to therefore look at the entire bible and sum up what the attitude of the Christian saints to suffering should be, a clear pattern from above and an online lecture I listened to<sup>vi</sup> emerges:

- Suffering comes [During Suffering here on earth, God will be with you];
- But in the end God wins;
- So endure, persevere – just like many of your brethren, from ages past and worldwide.

## Other examples from the bible

So, how did Jesus deal with his own suffering? Just before his death, when overcome by extreme grief, He prayed 3 things (Mark 14: 32 – 34):

1. *Everything is possible with God (or nothing is impossible with God);*
2. *Please take away this cup of suffering (Lord, remove it or shorten it, it's tough!)*
3. *That God's will be done. (If it's your will that I go through this, let your will be done).*

This is our model – let's ask God to remove the pain, but if not, let his PERFECT will be done. This pattern is indeed reflected in many of the verses in the bible which give hope to Christians suffering, particularly for being Christians including:

*“So when all these things begin to happen, stand and look up, for your salvation is near!”*

*(Luke 21: 28, NLT).*

*“He said, “I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!””*

*(Job 1:21, NLT)*

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*  
*(Revelation 21: 1- 4, NIV)*

## Today's perspective

An article on psychology by Robert Puff Ph.D.<sup>vii</sup> describes the three ways we can deal (or not) with the inevitable suffering we all go through.

- **Option 1:** We can suppress our feelings – typically the easiest option. Humans often turn to drinking, substances, food, prescription medication, “rebound” relationships to shut off or numb the pain temporarily. Most of us never go beyond this option.

- **Option 2:** We can feel it – This involves “owning the pain”. This often results in tears, anger. This is where for example a recovering alcoholics program or a psychiatric counselling session helps. Choosing this second option is what often leads to the third below.
- **Option 3:** We can grow from it. We use the suffering experience as learning tools for making good choices. Suffering and growth seem to be directly correlated. The article says:

*“Often there’s a direct correlation between the amount of suffering we experience and the amount of growth that we experience. If you ever want to prove this point to yourself, just think of a person you know that you feel has done the most with their life --- that very deep, deep person that you know and admire. I think you will find, without exception, that people that are very deep have gone through a great deal of suffering.”*

## Dealing with suffering

Modern science and psychology including as shown above is consistent with the bible which shows that we follow the following steps to overcome suffering:

### **Step 1) We don’t suppress our feelings – rather we “cast our burdens” on God for he cares for us.**

Our hearts are laid out before God, as clear as the sun and since we cannot hide our hearts from him, rather than letting bitterness, resentment and anger towards God fester, we humble ourselves before him and speak to him – about our troubles, which he already knows about, that’s humility:

*“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”* (1 Peter 5: 6, NKJV).

### **Step 2) We count it all as part of the process of becoming like Christ – who suffered.**

The ultimate purpose of your life is to know Christ and believe in Him. God is therefore not interested in your comfort (or discomfort) as much as he is interested in your Holiness and making you become perfect like Christ... Suffering seems to therefore be God’s refining fire. Paul explains it this way:

*“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”* Philippians 3: 7-11 (NIV).

### **Step 3) We overcome pain by rejoicing in the Lord.**

Knowing that the pain will come to an end soon and our redeemer who lives forever more, the blessed Amen, will rescue us – whether in this life or the next, we rejoice. It is so important that we rejoice that God the Holy Spirit, speaking through Paul repeats the command to us thus:

*“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Philippians 4: 4-7 (NIV)

### Step 3(b) If you are suffering through persecution, especially rejoice!

*“Happy are you if you are insulted because you are Christ's followers; this means that the glorious Spirit, the Spirit of God, is resting on you. If you suffer, it must not be because you are a murderer or a thief or a criminal or a meddler in other people's affairs. However, if you suffer because you are a Christian, don't be ashamed of it, but thank God that you bear Christ's name.” 1 Peter 4: 14-15 (GNT)*

### Your turn

What will you now do differently? Examples to think about include:

- Where does your hope lie in suffering? Do you place your hope in your merciful Judge?
- In what ways are you unlike Christ during your suffering (who like a sheep led to slaughter, did not open his mouth<sup>viii</sup>)? How can you change that?

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Paraphrase from 1 Peter 3: 17 (NLT)

<sup>ii</sup> Paraphrase from 1 John 1: 9

<sup>iii</sup> Paraphrase from John 5: 14

<sup>iv</sup> Paraphrase from Hebrews 12: 1 – 2

<sup>v</sup> Galatians 5: 22 – 25

<sup>vi</sup> New Testament, its structure, content and theology, by Dr Bill Mounce. Lecture on “Mark 13”. Source: [www.biblicaltraining.org](http://www.biblicaltraining.org)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/meditation-modern-life/201410/the-three-ways-we-deal-or-not-suffering>

<sup>viii</sup> Paraphrase from Isaiah 53:7 (NIV)