Understanding Suffering

Conflict, pain, disappointment, hardships, disease, tragedies, sickness, disillusionment, meanness, crime, violence, divorce, abuse, wars, anxiety, revenge, hatred, rape, murder, injustice, poverty, hunger, dangers, death. The world suffers, “groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (Romans 8:22)

People suffer too. Individuals. You and me. And our suffering is uniquely ours. Your pain is not my pain, it’s yours. Only you feel it exactly the way you feel it. Only I feel my disappointments the way I feel them. Yet, we ask common questions: Where is God in my suffering? Why am I suffering? Why am I suffering in this way? Who caused my suffering? What does God expect from me? When will it end?

In answering these questions Scripture paints a vivid picture with many details. James 1:2 for example says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” But how does that single admonition fit into the larger context of Scripture?

Below is a basic biblical framework for understanding suffering. It will help you know how to endure it, overcome it, and benefit from it in your own life, and hopefully assist you as you reach out to others.

The Cause(s) of Suffering

Scripture resists reducing hardship to a single cause. Instead, it presents a number of possible sources:

People: Do a quick random scan through a number of the Psalms and you’ll likely notice that about half of them describe people crying out to the Lord because of the oppression of others. Some tell of people who betray or abuse. Some tell of people who make and break their commitments. Some tell of people who wound, scatter, and destroy because they care only about themselves, oblivious to the pain left in their path.

My Sin: Rage causes divorce and the consequence is aloneness. Stealing causes imprisonment. Fears, anger, and selfish desires fit alongside depression. Anger also seems to find its way into the majority of these stories. Beneath suffering you will often find the sins we have committed in response to the evils we have endured.

My Fallen World and Body: Perhaps the most obvious and overlooked cause of suffering, our world, including our physical bodies, progressively weakens and wastes away. This has occurred ever since the original Fall of Man, and now every disease lays a possible path toward suffering. Watching disasters strike or seeing those we love suffer physical decline and death contribute to our own personal pain and depression.

(The famous English preacher Charles Spurgeon struggled with depression throughout his life as a result of one specific tragedy. He was preaching to a huge congregation with more than twelve thousand people jammed inside the church and another ten thousand waiting outside. The meeting had just begun when someone in the crowd yelled, “FIRE!” Chaos followed as the frantic crowd tried to get to safety. Seven people were trampled to their death, and Spurgeon was inconsolable.)

Satan: The Evil One’s influence is perhaps most clearly seen in the story of Job. Satan brought physical destruction and pain to Job’s family, and then spread lies about God in an attempt to confuse Job’s
allegiances. Satan loves to cause suffering and create doubt... doubt about God’s existence... doubt about God’s character... doubt about God’s moral laws and control in the world.

God: Of all the causes of suffering, perhaps the most mysterious is God Himself. We often like to say that God “allows” suffering, and there are times when Scripture uses that very language. But the biblical authors are equally persuaded that God is the one, true, sovereign, Creator God and He is always in control. They could not even begin to imagine a world where things happen outside his sovereign oversight, including our suffering.

The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. (I Samuel 2:6-7)

I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity. I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

However difficult it is to believe that God is over all things and that nothing happens apart from His knowledge and will, including our suffering, without that belief everything about the universe is random and out of control. There is no guiding hand bringing all things to a purposeful and majestic conclusion.

God and Evil

Let’s take a look at some broad principles from Scripture about God in relation to evil and suffering:

The ways of God in this world with regard to evil are defensible (not unanswerable). The problems of evil are not unanswerable and should not be avoided by the Christian. The Word of God is sufficient in its self-authenticating power and offers the only adequate response to the question, "How can suffering exist in a good God's world?"

God is not the author of evil nor does He approve of it (James 1:13; Psalm 5:5). Attempts to blame God for the presence of evil fail to reckon with what God has said about the creation’s rebellion against Him.

Knowledge of God is essential to an unshakable faith in the face of suffering. A partial or distorted understanding of the true character of God inevitably leads to disappointment.

Any explanation of the ways of God not allowing for mystery should be suspect because they fail to account for the deep struggles of biblical characters like Job and Habakkuk. Any defense of God's ways must humbly submit itself to the infinite wisdom of God and leave the secret things with Him. (Deuteronomy 29:29; Matthew 11:20-30; Romans 11:33-36)

For the non-Christian, unbelief stands in the way of his only satisfactory answer to the problem of evil. If there is to be any lasting hope, it will be found in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. (John 6:68; 2 Corinthians 2:14-16)

To summarize, Scripture resists reducing hardship to a single cause. Instead, it presents a number of sources. Joseph, for example, was betrayed by his brothers (and his own naiveté), sold into slavery, slandered by a jealous woman, and falsely imprisoned in a foreign land. After enduring all of that he watches God orchestrate a famine across the land.

Explaining it all to his brothers years later, Joseph summarizes, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).
Joseph identified two causes for the same events, and in doing so he opens a small light into the nature of suffering. By Joseph’s own declaration, God could be a cause of the hardship, but in such a way that even the hardship evidenced God’s goodness. No wonder Scripture portrays Joseph as a wise man and fully aware of far greater mystery!

Click here for additional information about God & evil, including how God decrees, permits, prevents, restrains, directs, controls, and rules evil for His glory.

**Examples from the Bible**

Click on any of the following for a closer look at suffering in the Bible:

- **Habakkuk** – The problem of the evil of suffering
- **Job** – A testing of allegiance during suffering
- **David** – A type of Christ in suffering
- **Joseph** – A model response to suffering
- **Paul** – Reasons for a believer’s suffering
- **Jesus** – Suffering as the Son of God

**Significance of the Cross**

Understanding the significance of the Cross of Christ is central to understanding our own suffering:

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals the kind of world in which we live. It is one of absolute unfairness.

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals God’s answer to the problem of suffering. The answer is found in the triumph of justice and love. They have kissed at the cross.

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals the destiny of evil. Satan was judged and evil was issued a death warrant.

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals the trustworthiness of God. He is a God of sacrificial love.

The cross of Jesus Christ and its great guarantee, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, reveal a door of hope for all who will believe. The Cross changed a dark hole into an open door.

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals that pain and suffering is not always for our sin. What is worse than suffering?

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals the promise of the presence of Christ in the believer's sufferings.

"What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation, but a reinforcing presence-Christ to stand beside you through the darkness, Christ's companionship to make the dark experience sacred." (James S. Stewart)
The Purpose of Suffering for the Non-Christian

The purpose of suffering in the life of a non-Christian is primarily to demonstrate the sovereign power of God and to confront that person with his need for a right relationship with God.

"The worst thing that can happen to you is not the death of a loved one, a prolonged illness, or a painful accident. The worst thing that could happen to you would be to suffer for nothing, die, and be lost forever." (Warren Wiersbe)

The Purpose of Suffering for the Christian

As with the causes of suffering, Scripture resists reducing suffering to a single purpose. Instead, it presents a number of purposes for the life of a Christian:

Suffering may come because of an unrepentant condition and should call the Christian to confess sin (Hebrew 12:6; James 5:13-16; Proverbs 28:13). Click here for more information on this.

Suffering is for the purpose of developing staying power (James 1:3; Hebrews 12:1-3, 7, 11; Romans 5:3). Staying power creates a foundation for staying the course to maturity, rather than simply running away. (Hebrews 11:8-19: Colossians 1:28)

Suffering is for the purpose of developing wisdom or "skillful living" (James 1:5, 9-11; Psalm 73:17; 119:71). Trials create emotional and mental "dust clouds" in that they can result in confusion for the Christian. What wisdom does James say is possible for the poor or rich Christian? Whether in desperation (poverty) or in prosperity (blessing) we are not to tie up all of our efforts in the things of this world—instead, invest in the world to come. (James 1:9-11)

Suffering is for the purpose of providing opportunities to bear witness for Christ. (2 Timothy 2:9-10; Philippians 1:12-13; I Peter 3:15; Acts 8:1-5)

Suffering is for the purpose developing godly character. (Romans 5:4; Job 23:10; Hebrews 12:10-11; Galatians 5:22-23; John 15:2; 2 Corinthians 4:11)

Suffering is an opportunity to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)

Suffering provides the opportunity for future reward. (James 1:12; Matthew 25:14; I Corinthians 3:10-15; II Timothy 4:8; I Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10; 3:11; 4:4, 10)

Suffering can be the occasion for learning contentment whatever the circumstances. (Philippians 4:11-12; James 1:10, 11)

Suffering can teach us how to comfort others who suffer. (2 Corinthians 1:3-24; 7:6, 7; 1 Thessalonians 3:6, 7)

"Someone who has faced a frightening trip down a hospital corridor on a stretcher is able to comfort with special understanding another who is about to leave for the emergency room or operating room... The strain of living day by day with another human being who irritates and distresses you is best
understood by someone who has lived under the same strain, but has been comforted and shown how to go on." (Edith Schaeffer)

**Suffering is the opportunity to experience the power of God in our time of weakness** (2 Corinthians 11:24-33; 12:7-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8; Acts 17:5-6). Failure in an area of a previous strength means dependence upon God reaffirmed.

"The sequel to Paul's mystical experience was a distressing, indeed humiliating, physical ailment which he feared at first might be a handicap to his effective ministry but which in fact, by giving his self-esteem a knock-out blow and keeping him constantly dependent on the divine enabling, proved to be a help, not a handicap.... Infirmities like this were welcomed, together with the other hardships which were a part of the apostolic lot, if they were the condition on which the power of the risen Christ operated through him. They constantly reminded him not so much of his own inadequacy as of the total adequacy of Christ, in whom when he was personally most weak, he knew himself to be most strong." (F. F. Bruce)

**Suffering can be the opportunity to stimulate generosity, and to grow in grace.** (2 Corinthians 8:2)

**Suffering provides the opportunity to vindicate the character of God before Satan.** (Job 1:11; 42:1-6)

**Suffering is the opportunity to demonstrate the genuineness of the believer's faith to God's enemies.** (Job 1:8; Rev. 12:10; 2:10)

**Suffering encourages the believer to trust God.** (Isaiah 50:10; 55:8-9; Job 42:5, 6; Psalm 46; I Peter 2:9)

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. Affliction will slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.” (Psalm 34: 19-22)

**How Should I Respond to Suffering?**

**In suffering I should NOT...**

- Be surprised when suffering comes (I Peter 4:12). Bad theology leads to disappointment.
- Become angry with God. (Jonah 4:1-3)
- Doubt God's love and feel sorry for myself. (Jeremiah 20:1-18)
- Jump to hasty assumptions. (Job 4-37; John 9:1-3)
- Allow myself to fall into despair. (Psalm 42:5, 11; Genesis 42:36)
- Allow fear to paralyze me. (I Kings 19:3)
- Respond to God with a clenched fist. He is not cruel and unknowing. (Ex. 17:1-7; John 11:21, 32)

**In suffering I should... go to God in prayer.** (James 5:13; Hebrews 4:15-16)

- There must be self-examination to determine if there is sin to be confessed. (James 5:13-18; Psalm 139:23-24)
- Pray that God might be glorified. (Matthew 26: 37-43; John 17:1; 1 Peter 4:11, 16) This moment is about God’s Name and God’s Fame, not necessarily ours.
- Pray that there might be protection from temptation. (Matthew 5:13; 26:41; James 1:13-16)
- Pray that the suffering might be removed if that would bring greater glory to God. (Isaiah 38; 2 Corinthians 12:8-10)
- Ask God for wisdom and reflect upon the Word of God. (Psalm 119:9-16, 71)
- Express your questions and innermost struggles to God. (Habakkuk 1:2-2:1; Luke 22:39-46; I Peter 5:6-7)

In suffering I should... respond to trials with joy. (James 1:2; I Peter 1:6-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Romans 8:18-19)

- Joy is a way of thinking about one’s trials.
- Joy is a decision, not just a feeling, about one’s trials. (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:22-23)
- Joy springs forth from the reality of the resurrection of Christ and the hope of glory. (John 16:20; Hebrews 12:2; Romans 8:22-25)

In suffering I should... respond to trials with patient endurance and perseverance. (Rom. 12:12; 5:3-5; James 1:3-4; 5:7-11; Hebrews 12:3-5)

- Patience should be exercised because of the coming of Christ. (James 5:7-8)
- The lack of patience will be evident to the extent that we complain. (James 5:9, 12)

"The person who doesn't learn patience will have a difficult time learning anything else." (Warren W. Wiersbe)

In suffering I should... respond to trials by showing love for others in the midst of my pain. (Matthew 22:39; John 13:34-35; Romans 13:8; II Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2; 3:15; 4:1-3; I Peter 4:8)

- Suffering love will be evident in being hospitable to others. (I Peter 4:9; Hebrews 13:2; Romans 12:12-13)
- Suffering love will be evident in blessing those who persecute you. In doing this you will “overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:14; Matthew 5:44; I Corinthians 4:12-13)
- Suffering love will be evident in confronting and exposing evil. (I Thessalonians 5:15; Ephesians 5:11-12; I Timothy 5:20; Acts 16:37-39)

In suffering I should... respond to trials by trusting in the faithfulness of God. (Job 42:1-5; I Peter 4:19; Romans 8:28; Daniel 3:16-18; Hebrews 11:32-40; Habakkuk 3:17-19)

- Suffering faith rests in the confidence that God is sovereign over all the circumstances of life, is infinite in wisdom, and is perfect in love. (Lamentations 3:37-38; John 19:10-11; Romans 11:33; Lamentations 3:32-33)
- Suffering faith does not demand that God make a way out of suffering, but looks to Him for a way through it. (Daniel 3:16-18; I Corinthians 10:13)
- Suffering faith keeps time and its trials in perspective. (Romans 8:18)
- Suffering faith lives by the promises of God. (Isaiah 26:3; Psalm 9:10; 118:6; I Peter 5:6; Revelation 21:4; Habakkuk 3:17-19)
"We must ask ourselves, as in the presence of God, the simple questions: Is my life based upon the faith principle? Am I submitting myself to the fact that what I read in the Bible is the Word of God and is true? And am I willing to stake everything, my life included, upon this fact? For 'the just shall live by faith.'" (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

"If it was reasonable for Job to trust the God whose wisdom and power have been revealed in creation, how much more reasonable is it for us to trust the God whose love and justice have been revealed in the cross? The reasonableness of trust lies in the known trustworthiness of its object. And no one is more trustworthy than the God of the cross. The cross assures us that there is no possibility of a miscarriage of justice or of the defeat of love now or on the last day. 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (Rom. 8:32)” (John R. W. Stott)

**Conclusion – Resolute in Suffering!**

“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” (2 Timothy 1:8-12)

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is **great** and that He is **good**.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He allows evil to exist for the demonstration of His own glory and the good of His people.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that His compassions never fail. Great is His faithfulness and He does not afflict willingly, or grieve the sons of man.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that suffering may be used by Him in the lives of unbelievers to call them to the spiritual realities of their sinfulness, with the worse suffering yet to come, if they do not repent and come to Christ.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that pain and suffering are the results of God's curse on sin, and can only be remedied as I run to God for His remedy. I know that in Adam all die, but in Christ all who believe shall be made alive.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that to have seen Christ is to have seen the Father. Therefore, to see Christ is to know God's compassion in my suffering and the answer He has given to the problem of evil.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that in my pain and suffering I am "filling up the measure of Christ's suffering." My suffering can be the occasion for being conformed to Christ's likeness.
I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that God wants to teach the perseverance, humility, obedience, bold witness, contentment, meekness, rejoicing in all things, finding His power in my weakness, how to live by His promises, and the rest of living by faith through all my trials.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that God wants us to delight in Him, come to Him, rejoice in Him, love others, and be faithful to Him in all the labors and afflictions of life.

I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that though much has been revealed in Scripture regarding the ways of God and His relation to evil in His creation, there is part of the answer that remains a mystery and is part of the inscrutable will of a sovereign, all-wise, and all-loving Father.

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Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;

It is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings;

When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again

a season of clear shining, to cheer is after rain.

Though vine nor fig-tree neither their wonted fruit should bear,

Though all the field should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there,

Yet, God the same abiding, His praise shall tune my voice,

For, while in Him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.

- William Cowper (1731-1800)