

# The Suffering of Christians

Christians and non-Christians alike experience great blessings and great tragedies. Everyone can experience suffering. However, for the Christian, suffering does not have to be without purpose and meaning. The Bible tells us clearly that God has purpose for the things we experience and that nothing will separate us from God's love (Romans 8:28, 38-39). All of our pain and suffering first pass through God's loving hands. Seeing these two things, God's love and God's purpose, help us endure the things we suffer.

**Romans 8:28 (NASB)** *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

**Romans 8:38-39 (NASB)** <sup>38</sup> *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a famous German theologian. The Nazis imprisoned Bonhoeffer and executed him just days before their defeat in WWII. Bonhoeffer summed it up well when he said,

*"Should it be ours, the cup of grieving, even to the dregs of pain, at Thy command, we will not falter, thankfully receiving all that is given by Thy loving hand (New Years 1945)."*

Suffering can shape us for greatness, and help us to comfort and instruct others or destroy us with bitterness. How we understand and deal with suffering is important to our spiritual life and our sanity.

God's love and purpose are the two things we must always remember. When pain places us in an emotional wasteland, we must cling to those two things, or we will lose our way. If we trust in God's love and accept His purpose, we can endure and overcome the difficulty. We must

trust in order to accept. We must accept in order to learn. How many things had Bonhoeffer previously endured before he uttered those words of simple acceptance and faith? Even Christ had to learn obedience from suffering.

**Hebrews 5:8 (NASB)** *Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.*

The Bible tells us plainly of five ways a Christian may suffer.

1. Suffering for the benefit of others
2. Consequences of our sins and when we are disciplined by the Lord
3. Suffering for what we do not know
4. Suffering as a result of persecution or injustice, sharing in Christ's sufferings
5. Suffering and pain relating to a burden or calling from God, pain from knowing

In addition to these, the Bible gives us many examples and lessons from the lives of real people who suffered. What God has told us plainly is supported by these examples. Because God's nature is unchanging, we find that His dealings with those in both the Old and New Testaments are consistent. The same lessons that applied to Old Testament believers can apply to us today.

**James 5:10-11 (NASB)** <sup>10</sup> *As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.*

Let us first consider what the Bible plainly says about the different ways we may suffer. Next, let us consider some examples taken from the lives of Job, David, and the prophet Jeremiah.

## **Suffering for the benefit of others**

**2 Corinthians 1:6-7 (NASB)** <sup>6</sup> But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; <sup>7</sup> and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

**Colossians 1:24 (NASB)** Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

## **Consequences of our sins and when we are disciplined by the Lord**

**Hebrews 12:5-6 (NASB)** <sup>5</sup> and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; <sup>6</sup> FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."

**1 Peter 2:20a (NASB)** <sup>20</sup> For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?

**1 Peter 4:15 (NASB)** Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;

**James 4:17 (NASB)** Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

## **Suffering for what we do not know**

**Hosea 4:6a (NASB)** My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge....

**Proverbs 10:21b (NASB)** ...But fools die for lack of understanding.

## **Suffering as a result of persecution or injustice, sharing in Christ's sufferings**

**Matthew 5:11-12 (NASB)** <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. <sup>12</sup> "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

**1 Peter 4:12-14 (NASB)** <sup>12</sup> 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; <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

**1 Peter 2:20b-21 (NASB)** <sup>20</sup> ....But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. <sup>21</sup> For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

## **Suffering and pain relating to a burden or calling from God, pain from knowing**

**Ecclesiastes 1:18 (NASB)** Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

## **Biblical examples of suffering**

Suffering is a complex, and sometimes confusing, subject. It may not always be clear why we are suffering. Is our suffering from persecution, because of a calling or knowledge given to us from God, for the benefit of others, or because of our own sin or lack of knowledge?

There are times when we might experience several different types of suffering. We may have a burden for others while being persecuted by those who are the focus of the burden. Frustrated with the injustice, we might justify

(in our minds) some sin. Our sin may bring about consequences and the discipline of the Lord. We may know the right thing to teach and yet fail to do it. We may be disciplined for our disobedience, but those who should have heard our message may also suffer because of what they do not know. We may have a calling from God, but in our impatience we may try to fulfill that calling through our own power or intellect, most often with negative results.

The lives of Job, David, and Jeremiah, show us many different views of suffering. Job was a blameless man, but God allowed Satan to unleash great afflictions against Job. Job went from “*the greatest of all the men of the east*” (Job 1:3) to losing his children, his wealth, and his health. Supported in sympathetic silence by his friends for seven days, Job’s friends quickly became his biggest critics, declaring that Job was suffering for some sin. Job spoke of his loss and pain yet he did not sin with his words.

**Job 1:15-22 (NASB)** <sup>21</sup> *He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."* <sup>22</sup> *Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.*

**Job 3:3-4 (NASB)** <sup>3</sup> *"Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.'* <sup>4</sup> *"May that day be darkness; Let not God above care for it, Nor light shine on it.*

**Job 3:23-26 (NASB)** <sup>23</sup> *"Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, And whom God has hedged in?"* <sup>24</sup> *"For my groaning comes at the sight of my food, And my cries pour out like water."* <sup>25</sup> *"For what I fear comes upon me, And what I dread befalls me."* <sup>26</sup> *"I am not at ease, nor am I quiet, And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes."*

**Job 19:19-27 (NASB)** <sup>19</sup> *"All my associates abhor me, And those I love have turned against me."* <sup>20</sup> *"My bone clings to my skin and my flesh,*

*And I have escaped only by the skin of my teeth.* <sup>21</sup> *"Pity me, pity me, O you my friends, For the hand of God has struck me."* <sup>22</sup> *"Why do you persecute me as God does, And are not satisfied with my flesh?"* <sup>23</sup> *"Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book!"* <sup>24</sup> *"That with an iron stylus and lead They were engraved in the rock forever!"* <sup>25</sup> *"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth."* <sup>26</sup> *"Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God;"* <sup>27</sup> *Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!"*

Job suffered as an example to others. Despite his pain, Job remained faithful, and God restored, many times over, all that Job had lost.

David was a man after God’s own heart, but King Saul (David’s predecessor) persecuted David and wanted him killed. David later became king over Israel and while he was king, he committed adultery with Bathsheba then murdered her husband. Later, David married Bathsheba, but the consequences of David’s actions resulted in the death of their first son.

Another of David’s sons rebelled and sought to overthrow and kill David, and that son also died. David understood God, but he also understood suffering. The Psalms are filled with songs proclaiming David’s love for God and also the anguish from persecution and consequences of David’s actions.

**Psalms 6:6-7 (NASB)** <sup>6</sup> *I am weary with my sighing; Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears."* <sup>7</sup> *My eye has wasted away with grief; It has become old because of all my adversaries.*

**Psalms 39:10-13 (NASB)** <sup>10</sup> *"Remove Your plague from me; Because of the opposition of Your hand I am perishing."* <sup>11</sup> *"With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth what is precious to him; Surely every man is a mere breath. Selah."* <sup>12</sup> *"Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; Do not be silent*

at my tears; For I am a stranger with You, A sojourner like all my fathers. <sup>13</sup> "Turn Your gaze away from me, that I may smile again Before I depart and am no more."

**Psalm 38:3-6 (NASB)** <sup>3</sup> There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; There is no health in my bones because of my sin. <sup>4</sup> For my iniquities are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. <sup>5</sup> My wounds grow foul and fester Because of my folly. <sup>6</sup> I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long.

**Psalm 42:3-5 (NASB)** <sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" <sup>4</sup> These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. <sup>5</sup> Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence.

David provides us with an almost complete view on suffering. David suffered for our benefit; he experienced persecution; the Lord disciplined him because of his sin, and he had moments when he chose willful ignorance over knowledge.

Jeremiah prophesied against the kingdom of Judah (Israel and Judah were divided kingdoms at that time). The people of God had turned their backs on God. They were unwilling to hear the difficult message of Jeremiah. Their hearts deceived them. Jeremiah's prophesies were filled with the knowledge of what great destruction was coming on the nation. Jerusalem was to be destroyed and the people punished, defeated and led as captives, exiled to a foreign land. The people did not listen to Jeremiah, but Jeremiah knew what horrors were to come.

His pain must have been unbearable and so extreme. Jeremiah saw starvation, the death of children, women, men who fought, but failed.

Jeremiah's "knowing" caused such intense suffering, but God was faithful and encouraged Jeremiah.

**Jeremiah 31:16 (NASB)** <sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD, "Restrain your voice from weeping And your eyes from tears; For your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD, "And they will return from the land of the enemy."

The pain of seeing the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecies is expressed in the Book of Lamentations. Like Jeremiah, we may be overwhelmingly burdened, burying our face in our hands, crying out to God, "The burden is too great." Then, when the worst happens, our own faith reminds us of God's faithfulness, love and purpose. Jeremiah gives us a perfect example of this at the end of Lamentations 3.

**Lamentations 3:1-26 (NASB)** <sup>1</sup> I am the man who has seen affliction Because of the rod of His wrath. <sup>2</sup> He has driven me and made me walk In darkness and not in light. <sup>3</sup> Surely against me He has turned His hand Repeatedly all the day. <sup>4</sup> He has caused my flesh and my skin to waste away, He has broken my bones. <sup>5</sup> He has besieged and encompassed me with bitterness and hardship. <sup>6</sup> In dark places He has made me dwell, Like those who have long been dead. <sup>7</sup> He has walled me in so that I cannot go out; He has made my chain heavy. <sup>8</sup> Even when I cry out and call for help, He shuts out my prayer. <sup>9</sup> He has blocked my ways with hewn stone; He has made my paths crooked. <sup>10</sup> He is to me like a bear lying in wait, Like a lion in secret places. <sup>11</sup> He has turned aside my ways and torn me to pieces; He has made me desolate. <sup>12</sup> He bent His bow And set me as a target for the arrow. <sup>13</sup> He made the arrows of His quiver To enter into my inward parts. <sup>14</sup> I have become a laughingstock to all my people, Their mocking song all the day. <sup>15</sup> He has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drunk with wormwood. <sup>16</sup> He has broken my teeth with gravel; He has made me cower in the dust. <sup>17</sup> My soul has been rejected from peace; I have forgotten happiness. <sup>18</sup> So I say, "My strength

has perished, And so has my hope from the LORD." <sup>19</sup> Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. <sup>20</sup> Surely my soul remembers And is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup> This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. <sup>22</sup> The LORD'S lovingkindness indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I have hope in Him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him. <sup>26</sup> It is good that he waits silently For the salvation of the LORD.

The prophet with bad news is never popular, for his words cut to the core, challenging our relationship with God and our behavior. Just as the prophet Jeremiah learned from God, in the pain of his knowing, so too we may also suffer deeply because of what we know. However, we must remain faithful, knowing that God will never test us beyond what we are able.

**1 Corinthians 10:13 (NASB)** *No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

As we examine the lives of those who suffered, we see connections and consistency. Once we understand the different ways we may suffer, we see suffering with greater clarity, making sense of our own pain and of those in the Bible.

The Bible also shows us the extremes of suffering. There are Christians who died because of persecution (like Stephen in Acts 6-7), and Christians who died because of their sin, as did Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). We also see extreme pain and burdens for others. The Apostle Paul anguished over the sins of his fellow Jews wishing to be accursed and cut off from Christ if he could save the lost of Israel (Romans 9:3-4).

The Bible is full of examples that show us the ways we may suffer. We must learn from those

examples and apply them to our lives. Even while suffering for our own sin, others are watching. As members of the body of Christ, the church, we never really suffer alone, and our suffering always has purpose. Without suffering injustice, how can we meet the needs of those who suffer unjustly? Without experiencing temptation, how can we help those who are tempted? The sins we avoid can help others by way of example to avoid those same sins. The sins we overcome help others to overcome. We are built, like Christ, for the benefit of others, and our suffering better equips us to aid others in their spiritual battles. The greatest battles are, often won by those who have suffered the greatest pain.

When we suffer because of our mistakes we experience the consequences. When we suffer because of our faith, we share in the sufferings of Christ. Just as the world hated Christ, the world hates us, for we are His body, the church. As a result, much of the suffering we experience is because the world hates the Christ who dwells in us.

God knows we receive the greatest comfort from Him, but God also knows how much we need the comfort of an understanding friend and the knowledge that we are not alone. There is nothing more demoralizing than suffering alone. God knows this. He knows how much we desperately need comfort from others. We need sympathy, affection, understanding, and support that can only come from other people. Suffering often seems senseless, and it attacks our perspective; sometimes the only way to regain that perspective is to discuss that pain with a loving and understanding friend.

Paul was certainly a battle-hardened man of God, proven by his accounts of beatings, shipwrecks, persecutions, and burdens. However, even Paul reached human limits, sometimes despairing even of life.

**2 Corinthians 11:23b-25 (NASB)** <sup>23</sup> *...in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten*

times without number, often in danger of death.  
<sup>24</sup> Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

**2 Corinthians 1:8b-9 (NASB)** <sup>8</sup> For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; <sup>9</sup> indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;

To comfort and encourage Paul, Christ appeared to Paul, reminding him that he was not alone, and often sent people to support Paul, comforting him in his need.

**Acts 18:9-10 (NASB)** <sup>9</sup> And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; <sup>10</sup> for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

**2 Corinthians 7:6 (NASB)** But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus;

God knows we need other people, and they need us. To be of use to God and others, God uses our sufferings to break us from relying on ourselves. Suffering shapes us to become more sensitive to the needs of others. The Christian response to suffering is not to become bitter and callous. God transformed Paul from a man who was bitter and who persecuted Christians to a man who was able to endure harsh pains, and still be tender, affectionate, and compassionate.

**Philippians 1:7-8 (NASB)** <sup>7</sup> For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness, how I

long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

When we respond to suffering from a worldly perspective, we become bitter or depressed even to the point of death. When we respond to suffering from a biblically solid perspective, we see the glory of God's love and purpose shining through the clouds of pain and anguish. The latter produces such understanding, tenderness, compassion, and usefulness, as we saw in Paul, who wrote to the Philippians from prison.

Suffering is one of those issues that will either shape for greatness or destroy us. As Christians, we must use our pain, and benefit from its lessons, or it will destroy us. God is reaching down, through the darkness and confusion of our misery, and He is holding our hand, leading us into the light. Nothing separates us from the love of God and the things we suffer have purpose, for us, for God, and for others. We can say, as Jeremiah, "Great is Your faithfulness."

**Romans 8:35-39 (NASB)** <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." <sup>37</sup> But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.