

# A BIBLICAL VIEW OF SUFFERING

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PART I

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All of us at one time or another examines the age-old question, "If God is a kind, loving God, why does He allow people to suffer?" In this teaching I want to explore the various Scriptural aspects of suffering, and in particular, the sufferings of Christians. I am convinced that suffering is an aspect of life which I believe the Lord wants us to understand.

I fully realize that this is not a pleasant subject. I also realize that there will be those who read this article who are suffering unspeakably. No "teaching" should in any way make light of the reality of the agony and pain many are enduring. Nor do I want anything written in this article to add guilt to the pain many are presently bearing. Rather it is my hope that the ideas set forth here will bring understanding to those who are suffering and through that understanding ease the weight of their heavy burden.

Webster's dictionary defines suffering as, "the bearing or undergoing of pain, distress, or injury." We have all seen people suffer physical pain or injury. This kind of suffering is usually easy to see. It is visible. But there is also invisible pain and invisible injury. These are endured emotionally and mentally. This kind of suffering can be more easily hidden. It becomes visible only when the severity of the invisible suffering becomes so great that it begins to affect the outward behavior of the one suffering. As we proceed through the subject of Christian suffering remember that suffering can be physical and/or mental/emotional. It can be visible or invisible.

## Theological Clarification

Dozens of times in the face of tragedy or severe suffering I have heard people ask, "How could God do this?" This question implies that it is God who caused the accident or brought about a severe illness or stressful situation. This question is not only theologically unsound, it borders on blasphemy. We Christians must recognize that this world is not ours, nor does it belong even to God. It belongs to Satan. And we are, as Peter described us, "...aliens and strangers in the world..." (1 Pet 2:11 NIV). As aliens and strangers, we should, rather than accuse God, recognize that our "real" place is with Christ and God our Father in the eternal where there is no suffering, only indescribable joy.

## Sources of Suffering

Sometimes it helps to look at the various sources of Christian suffering. If we understand the sources of the suffering it helps us to know how to pray and how to act. This understanding can give a focus and a clarity of vision.

### 1. MAN/NATURAL

We live in a world populated with billions of people. Many, if not most of these people, are to some degree selfish, inconsiderate and willful. At best many are just thoughtless and unmindful of the effects that their words and deeds have on others. They say and do things that have

devastating impact on other people. They never give a thought to the suffering others may endure because of their actions.

A most tragic example of this is drunk drivers and auto accidents. It's obvious that the person who becomes intoxicated on alcohol or drugs has no intent of driving his or her vehicle onto the street to purposefully kill or injure others. But such thoughtless people do send many to the grave, permanently maim others, and in general, decrease the quality of life of many thousands every year. These kinds of people cause suffering.

Many more examples can be given of suffering caused by man. For instance, a selfish, thoughtless spouse/parent can inflict horrible pain and agony on his or her family. A cruel, mean-spirited employer can produce great misery on those whom he employs. The long-term suffering produced by sexual abuse is often indescribable, particularly when it involves children. The list seems endless.

I have also listed "the natural world" as a source of suffering along with man. By "natural" I am referring to the fact that there are also natural causes of suffering. In this category, not only are there earthquakes, floods, droughts, and so on, but there are various diseases and illness that may be categorized as natural. For example, your child comes home from school with the flu bug and the whole household comes down with the flu. This flu is caused by a natural virus. We live in a fallen world where it is appointed to us all to eventually decline and die. "...it is appointed unto men once to die..." (Heb 9:27 KJV). Our illnesses and deaths can be caused by a cancer virus, a heart that just quits, or dozens of other natural causes. These then are the "natural" sources of suffering and always, eventually lead to death.

### 2. SELF

Often people suffer because of their own deeds. This is difficult for many of us to admit, but it's true. Generally we like to think of ourselves as always right...always the victim, never the cause of our own problems. In order to make this belief system work we become masters at "blame-shifting" thereby making someone else the culprit. Blame-shifting isn't new. Adam was the first to use it. God asked, "...Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (Gen 3:11 NIV). Paraphrasing Adam's response, he answered, "It's this woman that you put here with me, it's her fault...I'm innocent!" We are all still suffering from what Adam did!

Whether or not we blame-shift isn't the point here. The fact is we often bring suffering down on ourselves because of our own words and deeds. For example, if we speak words in a careless way, or in anger, these words can be like missiles that produce irreversible results and great suffering to us.

Under the heading of "self" it seems appropriate to also refer to the irrevocable law of "sowing and reaping." Galatians 6:7 says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." (NIV). In the southern United States where I was raised there was a common saying

used to describe the sinful life-style of wayward young people. To describe such a person's actions folks say, "He (or she) is sowing his wild oats." That's very graphic, isn't it? Unfortunately, such "wild" oats don't just fall to the ground and lie there forever...they grow and multiplying themselves "some thirty, some sixty and some an hundredfold"! This ungodly sowing reaps a "harvest" which may only manifest itself five, ten or twenty years later. Yes, we may be forgiven for all our sins...but the consequences of sin will be reaped to the full. King David received forgiveness for his sin with Bathsheba but he did indeed reap the consequences of his sin. David sowed seeds of "family destruction" and reaped a harvest of family destruction from his son Absalom.

### 3. A CURSE

Suffering can come upon us through a curse. Concerning the worship of idols the Lord said,

"You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, **punishing the children for the sins of their fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...**" (Ex 20:5 NIV emphasis added).

That's straightforward. There is no mistaking the fact that the children of idol worshippers and God haters are under a curse...to the third and fourth generation!

A "God hater" is fairly easy to identify, but what is an idol worshipper? First let's define the word "idol." The Bible teaches us that an idol is anything that takes the place of God. If so, what are some of the things that take the place of God today? How about pride, the pursuit of pleasure, personal ambitions, wealth, a job, a person, or recreation. Whatever form it may take, these things can and do become idols. When they do so they take the place of God.

Then where does that leave the children, grand children, great grandchildren and even the great, great grandchildren of such idol worshippers and God haters? The answer is plain. They are under a curse. Might not this curse take the form of "suffering" of one sort or another. Obviously, the answer is yes.

We may also bring a curse down on ourselves by participating in today's cultic practices offered by demonic forces. Here I am speaking of things such as witchcraft, satanism, fortune telling, eastern religions, new age, etc. Any participation in these things certainly opens the door for a curse...a self-invoked curse.

But God has not left us as powerless victims of the evil deeds done by us or done in past generations by some ancestor we never even knew. God has made the most glorious provision to remove any curse from us! For the Bible says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal 3:13 NIV). Thus, no matter what we or our family line may have been involved in, we can break that curse through the power of Jesus Christ!

However, while we need to understand that this power is available in Christ, it doesn't flow into us automatically at salvation. We must actively invoke His power to break a curse. This is done by verbally renouncing our evil inheritance, our involvement in the occult, etc., and then verbally declaring ourselves to be free from all curses because

Jesus is our Saviour and He took our curse upon Himself at Calvary. Hallelujah!

### 4. THE DEMONIC WORLD

Suffering can be caused by the demonic world. Many times I have encountered people who were robbed of their health, finances, relationships, and even the life of a loved one by demonic forces. We are told that Satan is a lion and that he robs, kills and destroys. (I Pet 5:8 and John 10:10). One of his most effective means of robbing us is through suffering. He can cause accidents, illnesses, family strife, etc. Or while he may not be the cause of a difficult situation, he will certainly use the difficulty to multiply the pain, confusion and general suffering already present. Remember, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (I Pet 5:8 NIV). The enemy can get a foothold in a situation when someone involved in the circumstances is involved in rebellion against God. In such instances the demonic world finds a haven in which to act out its evil intent to "...rob, kill and destroy."

Let me speak directly here about protecting our families from this kind of suffering from the enemy. God has established the family as a spiritual unit. In this unit He has given the authority to parents to cover their family with a spiritual covering against attack from the Satanic/demonic kingdom. When this covering is properly erected the demonic world is powerless to assault anyone under it. But, when this covering is not provided, or there are sinful life-styles in the family, family members are vulnerable. Spiritual attacks may come in the form of torn relationships, disease, illnesses, injury, accidents, financial stress and so on. When a godly head of the household (preferably the father) 1) erects and maintains this covering over his family and, 2) family members live godly lives, such problems from the demonic world are greatly diminished. If there is no godly father or husband present, the mother/wife can assume the authority and exercise it.

Every day I verbally declare before the throne of God and to the demonic rulers in high places that the Murphy household is off limits to principalities, powers and the demonic world. I name each family member and declare him or her to be under the covering of authority God has given me and that no demonic being has any power to harm in any way those whom God has given into my charge for protection. Note, this covering extends primarily over those family members who are right with God. It cannot extend over any adult (or young adult) family members who are in sin.

Most unfortunately, many, many Christians ignorantly or lazily failed to erect the God given cover over their family, thereby leaving the entire family open to demonic attack.

### 5. GOD

Finally, God can even be the cause of suffering. Let me give an example from Scripture:

In God's conversation with Ananias, the Damascus disciple whom God sent to pray for the blinded Saul, the Lord said, "I will show him how much **he must suffer for my name.**" (Acts 9:16 NIV emphasis added). Obviously, the Apostle Paul, as one of God's chosen vessels, was Divinely appointed to suffer, and that suffering shines throughout Paul's letters. So we see that there are those who are called by the

Lord to suffer. I do not believe that most of us are called to suffer in this way. I believe those who are called in this manner are extraordinary individuals through whom God can and does accomplish mighty things.

We need also to recognize that suffering may come from two or more sources in a given situation. For example, if a young adult is out on the road where he shouldn't be, and is hit by a drunk driver, the fault is shared between the two. In such a case the source of suffering is "man" and "self." Then, as if to add insult to injury, the demonic world may enter the situation and exaggerate the circumstances with lies, accusations and half-truths. Now there are three sources of suffering, "man," "self" and "demonic."

### **Why Does God Allow Suffering?**

We also need to understand that, regardless of the source, God uses the suffering as a tool of His righteousness. The Holy Spirit will seize the opportunity of our suffering as a means to accomplish God's purpose and His will for the life of the sufferer.

Often the Holy Spirit moves in the midst of a Christian's suffering and begins an inward heart molding, purging away the sin and dross that separates us from nearness with Jesus. He is using it as an instrument to produce spiritual, permanent changes in one's heart. If the Lord is accomplishing this, He isn't going to be in a rush to relieve the suffering, is He? I know that to some this may seem callous or even cruel, but the opposite is true. For God knows that we are creatures of eternity and that whatever kind of heart we take with us into eternity, we are going to live with it forever! So He is merciful in his use of suffering to accomplish this purifying of the heart for all eternity.

It has often been said that adverse circumstances such as suffering will do one of two things to a person. It will make that person bitter or better. If we yield to the Lord and allow Him to do his perfect work in us, suffering will make us better. But if we harden our heart and fight against God, suffering will make us bitter.

We need to learn to pray for God to give us understanding, regardless of the source of suffering.

"Heavenly Father, you know the pain I am enduring. The Bible tells us that Jesus suffered for us...the Sinless suffered for the sinner, so I know you share in my pain. Lord, help me in my suffering to become better, not bitter. Help me to know

your grace in a fuller way so I can bear this pain. Father, stand with me now in my hour of need. I ask these things in the name of my Lord and Saviour, Jesus. Amen."

In Part II of this teaching we will cover:

How God accomplishes His purposes through suffering.

How God uses suffering in the believer's life.

Earthly and eternal rewards for the sufferer.

What are we to do in the midst of suffering?

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