

The purpose of suffering as a Christian

PLEASE NOTE: This article is not really about suffering in general and it probably wouldn't be helpful to someone facing sickness, bereavement, breakdown of relationship or the other kinds of pain which can afflict us in life.

Rather it is primarily about the suffering which Christians experience because of their obedience to God. It includes painful opposition, rejection, exclusion and persecution. It is the sort of suffering which could be avoided if a Christians soft-pedalled his or her commitment to Christ and his church and to witnessing in the world. But that is too high a price to pay.

It should go without saying that if we are dealing with someone who is suffering we must beware sounding trite or uncaring.

Everyone experiences suffering, but for some it seems meaningless and unjust. Sometimes prayer for healing or to be set free from other forms of pain seems to be unanswered. Life in this world may not be fair or just for the individual. But seen in the light of eternity there is infinite opportunity for such injustice to be corrected.

However, suffering has meaning and importance in the purposes of our redeeming God. It is participating in the sufferings of Christ. There are things God can't do in our lives other than through suffering. He allows it and redeems it so that it prepares us for eternity. Purgatory is in this life! There are also things he can't achieve in the world other than through the suffering of believers. We need to offer our suffering to God as a sacrifice he can use in his purposes of sanctification and spreading the kingdom. This is why the New Testament urges us to rejoice in our sufferings. The following is an outline of the biblical teaching on the subject.

1. Suffering is a universal experience

Gen. 3:16-19

- i. *The Psalmist often expresses great suffering, in words which sometimes have a second reference to the sufferings of Christ.*

Psalm 22:1-24 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death."

2. Suffering is a particular calling for Christians in a fallen world

a. Suffering is part of discipleship

Paul wrote: "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29).

It involves sharing in the sufferings of Christ; identifying with Christ

Paul said: "The sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives" (2 Cor. 1:5) and spoke of "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Phil 3:10). He added: "I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Col 1:24). Similarly Peter writes: "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:13).

b. Partly this is suffering for the sake of the kingdom

We suffer because we are seeking to extend the Kingdom. Also history proves that “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”. See 2 Thess. 1:5.

c. Partly this is because the world rejects us as it rejected Christ

Paul promises: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Peter adds: “Resist [the devil], standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Pet 5:9).

Note that the great prophets and apostles suffered persecution:

Jesus speaks highly of the blessings which come upon those who are persecuted: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:10-12). “Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets” (Luke 6:22-23 cf. Jer. 15:15; Acts 5:41; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:7-11; 11:23-30; 12:10; Eph 3:13; 2 Tim. 3:10-11; Heb 11:32-38).

3. Suffering purifies the children of God

a. Suffering made Jesus perfect

This does not mean Jesus was morally or spiritually imperfect but that he perfectly fulfilled the incarnation by his suffering. The writer to the Hebrews says: “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb. 2:10) “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8).

b. Suffering draws Christians closer to Christ

Jesus said: “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20-21). Peter writes about our being called to suffering: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

c. Suffering proves and strengthens the faith of Christians

Peter writes about the benefits of Christians having “had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” He writes: “These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Compare the experience of Job (Job 1:1-12, 20-22; 2:6-7; 9:28; 10:15; 16:6; 30:16-17, 27).

d. Suffering produces perseverance in Christians

Paul writes: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom 5:3-5).

James says: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

e. Suffering keeps Christians humble

After his vision of heaven Paul spoke of “a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me” to keep him from being conceited” (2 Cor. 12:7).

f. Suffering makes Christians compassionate

Paul explains this in 2 Cor. 1:3-6 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.”

g. Suffering prepares a person to share in the glory of Christ

The New Testament makes this very clear: “We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom 8:17-18). “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:17). “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12).

© Tony Higton: see conditions for copying on the [Home Page](#)