

Jesus And Our Suffering

Suffering is one of the most difficult theological questions and one of the most relevant pastoral issues. Much of this apparent difficulty stems from the fact that suffering is often perceived as just one issue, when in fact it has many different aspects. Like physical pain, suffering is generally a symptom of something else. Just as dizziness can have many different causes (such as a knock on the head, a tumor, low blood pressure etc) so our suffering has many aspects and causes. In the following article I shall look at the nine broad categories of suffering in the New Testament and briefly comment on how Jesus meets us in each of them:

1. **Human suffering such as illness or demon possession which is always regarded as negative and is often healed by Jesus** 1 John 3:8, John 10:10, Matthew 4:23-24, 8:16,17; 9:20,21,22,35; 12:15, 17:14-17, Mark 3:10,11; Luke 4:40, 5:15, 6:17-19, 13:1-5, James 5:13-18

Jesus never told someone to be patient with their illness and never prayed "Father, if it be Thy will heal such-and-so". Jesus healed all who came to Him - of all their diseases (Matthew 4:23, 8:16). Neither does Jesus leave anyone demon-possessed. Jesus came to reverse the Fall and to undo the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8) and to bring life abundantly where it has been stolen from people by Satan (John 10:10). Jesus is filled with compassion and like any compassionate person He longs to alleviate the common burdens and sufferings of mankind in response to faith.

2. **Suffering as a result of sinful behavior** Romans 1:21-32, 2:8,9; 1 Corinthians 10:6-10,11-28-30, James 5:13-16, 1 Peter 4:15

Some suffering is a direct result of sinful behavior. The drunken and disorderly behavior of the Corinthians during Communion meant that many were sick and some even died as a result of their sin (1 Corinthians 11:28-30). The apostle Peter tells us that Christians are to suffer righteously not as murderers or thieves. Jesus calls us to repent and be healed.

3. **Suffering as a result of persecution, which is to be avoided or endured, even rejoiced in! Jesus warns his disciples about it but promises reward for, not relief from such suffering.** Matthew 5:10-12,44; 10:21-23, 23:34, Mark 10:30, John 5:16, 15:20, Acts 8:1, 9:4, 16 Romans 8:35-39, 1 Corinthians 4:12, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Galatians 4:29, 2 Thessalonians 1:4,5; 2 Timothy 3:11,12; Hebrews 10:32-35, 13:12, James 5:10, 1 Peter 3:14-17, 1 Peter 4:12-19, Revelation 2:10

This is just a small sample of the NT verses about persecution and suffering! Persecution is seen as inevitable in a world governed by hostile powers and principalities (2 Timothy 3:11,12) until Satan is defeated by Christ's return. At that point believers will be rewarded a hundred -fold and reign with Christ during the Millennium. Christ promises us reward for such endurance, but not relief from such suffering. But if we can avoid it we should do so e.g. 'flee to the mountains'. Jesus often avoided confrontation (Matthew 12:14,15; John 11:53,54) and it is wise for us to do so also. However when it cannot be avoided such suffering, for righteousness sake, is our glory. Jesus strengthens, consoles and rewards.

4. **Redemptive suffering such as the Cross which is gone through on behalf of others. This is done by Jesus alone on the Cross. To some (much lesser) extent we suffer with Christ when we proclaim Him and are persecuted.**

Matthew 16:21, 17:12, Mark 8:31, Luke 17:25, 24:26; Philippians 2:5-11, Hebrews 2:9,10,18; Hebrews 12:3 1 Peter 3:18, 2 Timothy 2:10

Jesus suffered and died for our salvation. This was 'once for all time' suffering and since then there has no longer been any sacrifice for sin. This suffering was totally unique and deeply spiritual in nature and was confined to Christ. Jesus suffered on the cross so that we might not suffer in Hell. However we suffer like this to a limited extent in ministry when we consciously endure suffering for those who are yet to be saved - as Paul said: "I endure all things for the sake of the elect". (2 Timothy 2:10)

5. **Suffering as a result of the disciple's cross, death to sin & the world. This kind of suffering tests our obedience and renunciation and disciplines us to righteousness and is to be accepted. We don't have any choice about it, we are 'appointed' to such suffering (1 Thessalonians 3:3)**

Matthew 10:32-42, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, Luke 9:22-26, Acts 14:22, Romans 5:3-5, 8:17-18, 2 Corinthians 4:17,18, 1 Thessalonians 3:3,4; Philippians 1:29-30, 1 Timothy 4:10, 2 Timothy 1:8, 3;10-12, 4:5; Hebrews 5:8,9; 11:25, 12:3-13, 1 Peter 2:18-23; 1 Peter 4:1-2, 5:8-10,

This is the suffering of the disciplined sanctified Christian life. It may overlap to some extent with persecution. However, even if we are not being persecuted God will still 'discipline us as sons'. This seems sorrowful for the moment but is ultimately for our good (Hebrews 12:3-13). We may have to renounce the world, and break some inappropriate associations with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). While we are in the flesh and in need of sanctification such suffering is inevitable and we are appointed to it (1 Thessalonians 3:3). It results in the perfection of our character (Romans 5:3-5) and it is through many tribulations that we enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22) and get to share Christ's glory (Romans 8:17-18). We are to take up the cross of the disciple daily (Matthew 10:32-42, Mark 8:34-37, Luke 9:23-25) and to accept self-denial as normal for the Christian life. Jesus is our sanctifier and High Priest who has been tempted in every way as we have and who understands our infirmities and who gives us grace and help in time of need (Hebrews 4:12-16).

6. **Empathetic suffering as part of Christ's body the Church. As Christ's body suffers we suffer.** Romans 12:15, 1 Corinthians 12:26, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, Philippians 3:10, Colossians 1:24, Hebrews 13:3, James 2:16, 1 Peter 3:8, 1 John 3:16-18

We are not to be self-centered, but rather we are to have generous practical compassion toward each other (1 John 3:16-18, James 2:16) which means that as one part of the body suffers, all suffer with it and when one part of the body rejoices all rejoice with it (Romans 12:15, 1 Corinthians 12:26). We are to have a special burden for our brothers and sisters who are enduring persecution (Hebrews 13:3). Christ suffers as His body suffers ("Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?").

7. **End-Time suffering of (some?) Christians – accompanying the Great Tribulation.**

Matthew 24:9,10,14-22,29-31 Mark 13:9,10,13-20,24-27; Luke 21:12-19, Revelation 7:14-17, 12:12,13, 13:10, 14:12,13, 17:14

This is the wrath of Satan who has been cast down to earth who attacks the Church especially Christian Jews (Revelation 12:12,13), and is not the wrath of God. The gospel verses above tell us that they will be betrayed and killed during a time of great apostasy and persecution. Revelation tells us that the end-time saints will need great patience during the time of the Anti-Christ as they refuse to accept the mark of the Beast (Revelation 14:12,13) and that many will be killed (Revelation 13:10) by beheading (Revelation 20:4). Those who refuse the mark are considered victorious (Revelation 15:2) and are greatly rewarded (Revelation 14:13) and will reign and rule with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4). Jesus greatly rewards those who endure this Tribulation.

8. **End-Time suffering of non-Christians due to the final Wrath of God. The wrath of the Lamb.** Revelation 6:16,17, 8:1-13, 9:1-21, 16:1-21

Revelation tells a story of terrible plagues, and judgments ending at the final battle of Armageddon. These final plagues are the poured out wrath of God on those who worship the Beast and his image and who take the mark of the Beast. These are agonizing judgments and are the 'wrath of the Lamb' (Revelation 6:16,17). Here Jesus is the punisher of the defiantly and brazenly wicked and leads His army to defeat them.

9. **The final existential suffering of the Lost in Hell – those who reject Christ**

Isaiah 66:24, Matthew 3:12, 25:41,46; Mark 9:42-48, Luke 16:22-26, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 14:9-11, 20:10,15; 21:8

Those who totally reject Christ are in turn rejected by the Father and cast out from the presence of God (2 Thessalonians 1:9) into a place of everlasting punishment (Revelation 14:9-11, 20:10,15, 21:8) where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched (Matthew 3:12, Mark 9:42-48, Luke 16:22-26) and where they are an everlasting disgrace (Isaiah 66:24). However the righteous will go into everlasting life (Matthew 25:41, 46). Jesus did not come into the world to judge the world but to save it, but those who refused to believe Him, and who despised Him and His words, will be judged by His words on the Last Day (John 12:44-50). The best way to avoid this suffering is to believe in Him and find everlasting life (John 3:16-18).

Some Final Comments

The obvious question is how do we know which category of suffering applies to us? Since we are not in the Tribulation or Hell or the final End Times then categories 7,8 and 9 are not present punishments. It is also fairly easy to know when we are suffering as a result of direct malicious persecution or when we are suffering for the gospel or suffering in sympathy with Christ's body the Church. That leaves three categories of suffering – suffering as a result of being in a fallen world, suffering as a result of sin and suffering as a disciple of Christ. This is where the epistle of James is a big help:

James 5:13-16 MKJV *Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing psalms. (14) Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (15) And the prayer of faith will cure the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up. And if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him. (16) Confess faults to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous one avails much.*

James tells us that sickness should be healed yet that it may require repentance and forgiveness (confess your sins to one another so that you may be healed). Sickness can result from sin (1 Corinthians 11:28-30) or from being part of a fallen world (John 9:1,2) but either way God wants to heal it and has provided confession and forgiveness as a means of healing when the sickness is due to sin. This does not just apply to physical sickness but to emotional distress and forms of painful distress in life. God wants these healed and fixed and wants us to pray (is anyone afflicted let him pray..) to seek help from the Church and to find forgiveness, repentance and healing. This helps us to understand categories 1 & 2 above.

The final difficult to understand category is the disciples cross. This is the suffering of renunciation, purification, discipline and holiness and its central concept is self-denial unto godliness. It is often described in athletic terms such as running the race, wrestling, enduring, and exercising oneself unto godliness. The Greek verbs are generally very strong and intense. It is a terrible struggle because you are wrestling with your own sinful nature and its desires and allegiances. Sickness is never described as a 'cross' in the New Testament. Physical sickness may come if we refuse to repent or if we refuse to exercise ourselves to godliness (in the spiritual sense) but illness is not the exercise itself. The cross is not bearing sickness (which many sinners do quite well) but bearing Christ. It is the decisive break between the 'old life' and the 'new life' involving self-denial and death to self (Mark 8:34-37, Luke 9:22-26, Romans 6:6, Galatians 2:20, 5:24, 6:14).

Mark 8:34-37 MKJV *And calling near the crowd with His disciples, He said to them, Whoever will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. (35) For whoever will save his life shall lose it; but whoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospel's, he shall save it. (36) For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (37) Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Comfortable Christianity runs from this needed disciplinary suffering into a thousand snares planted by the Devil! We have to let God deal with us and train us and grow us. And we are to take up the Cross and the challenge of consecration unto God. As we overcome the trials of our faith we shall come forth as gold!

Understanding the various kinds of suffering can help us to encourage others and to stand firm in the faith ourselves. We are not to be those who seek comfort at every turn, but rather those who call on God for strength and who find Him adequate in every circumstance of life.

© Copyright John Edmiston 2009 but may be freely used and distributed for non-profit ministry purposes but may not be sold in any way, alone or as part of another work.