

Theological Essay: Theology of Suffering - based on the Book of 1 Peter (NIV based)
by David M. Coddington

Peter wrote his first epistle letter to the exiles in the Diaspora ('the scattering' - 1 Peter 1:1) in order to encourage and instruct them how to deal with suffering. The believers were being verbally and physically abused for their faith. The explanation to the readers is that God uses trials, which are instigated by Satan, to test the genuineness of their faith. One example of the trials is persecution from unbelievers. This persecution should result from righteousness, rather than sin, so that the sufferer will be blessed and God be glorified. In response to their suffering, believers should be joyful, trust in God, and repay their attackers with good. The suffering believers are partners in the suffering of Christ and thereby share in His glory.

This discussion on suffering begins by reminding believers that trials are a good thing because trials test the genuineness of their faith. "...You may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine..." (1 Peter 1:6-7). Trials and suffering should not be viewed as a horrible experience. Instead, they are the means through which God tests the faith of believers.

Even though God uses trials to test believers, the ultimate source of persecution and suffering is Satan and his demon army. "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (v.5:8). In this verse 5:8 is used Satan's name, "diaballo" (in Greek), which means 'accuser' (Strong's #1228; Longman 355). Satan and his demon army are the authority and power ultimately behind instigating those humans who persecute Christians and cause them to suffer.

The foundational part of this theology of suffering is that suffering and persecution should result from righteousness, not from sin, because this dynamic brings blessing on the believer. "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20). There is no blessing or glory for suffering for doing evil; however, God blesses those who suffer for doing what is right.

Suffering for righteousness also brings praise to God. "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (v.2:12). "The day of visitation" or "inspection" that is being referred to here is the day of the judgment of God (v.2:12, Strong's #1984, Grudem 116). On that day, the evildoers will glorify God for the righteous manner that believers lived. It is ironic that those who slander believers for doing good will one day have to glorify God for the righteousness of the believers.

After suffering for doing what is right, the correct response is to rejoice, trust in God, and bless the persecutors. There seems to be no reason to rejoice when suffering; however, we should rejoice because when we suffer, we share in the suffering and then the glory of Christ. "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (v.4:13). Believers suffer in the same way that Christ did, in that we suffer for doing what is right. When we accept Christ and became part of the Body of Christ, we "are not only incorporated into Christ; we are, at the same time, inducted into His sufferings" (Cotterall 804).

Because believers share the sufferings of Christ, we also get to share in His glory when he is finally revealed, "...so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (v.4:13). Everyone will glorify Jesus in his second coming for his suffering on the cross. Somehow believers on earth, who suffered for righteousness, will share in the glory that "belongs to Jesus Christ when he is revealed to the entire world" (Ericson 605). This glory should incite those who suffer to rejoice in their suffering.

During their suffering, believers should put their trust in God because He will glorify them in the end. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (vv.5:6-7). It requires humbleness to admit that we cannot handle suffering and persecution on our own. In order to withstand suffering, we need to cast our cares on God and trust in Him. He is all-powerful and knows exactly what is occurring. In fact, God is the One directing and using the trials in our lives to test our faith. Passing the test requires a reliance on God.

God will not disappoint those who put their trust in Him during suffering. He is faithful to carry out His promise of exalting them. "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (v.5:10). It may seem that suffering lasts for a long time, but in reality it is short compared to the amount of time that we will be blessed in eternal life. God will be faithful to those who put their trust in Him. We can have faith that He will "restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish" us because He did that for Christ (v.5:10 - *ESV*). After His death, Jesus was raised to the right hand of the Father and all authority was given to Him (Ephesians 1:19-21). In the same way that God was faithful to Jesus, He will be to us. Jesus is the proof and testament that God will remain faithful to those who trust in him.

Another way that believers should respond to suffering is to see it as an opportunity to "bear witness to their faith" (Marshall 647). Persecution gives a unique opportunity for believers to share their faith through their actions (1 Peter 2:12) and their words (v.3:15). Every believer must be ready to share their faith with those who ask, "...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (v.3:15).

Finally, the correct response to suffering is to bless those who are persecuting us. "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" (v.3:9). When someone wrongs us, our first impulse is to hurt him or her in return, and repay his or her evil. The command is the opposite here. We need to bless those who persecute us. This command is based on the teaching of Jesus in Luke 6:27, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you...".

The command takes it a step further in addressing slaves (and servants). "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh", "...how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?" (1 Peter 2:18,20). Blessing persecutors does not just apply to those persons who are verbally abusive. The command is for slaves (and "servants") to endure physical suffering and to return it with blessing (v.2:18, Strong's #3610). We must return suffering with blessing in all situations, no matter how bad.

Jesus is used as our perfect example here, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (v.2:21). Jesus expects us to follow His example even when He was suffering. He went through the worst form of suffering that cannot compare to our suffering. He went through the pain of being ridiculed and hated for doing nothing wrong. ““He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”” (v.2:22). Jesus was physically beaten and tortured for doing what was right. Despite His innocence and His power, He still responded with kindness and blessing to those who were making Him suffer. “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (v.2:23). Jesus trusted in God to judge those who were persecuting Him.

In the end, God will judge and punish the evildoers who persecute His children. “For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”” (vv.4:17-18). It is comforting for those who are enduring suffering to know that God will be faithful and will judge the evildoers. A comparison is made in this verse to emphasize how great the punishment will be for those who do evil. God will judge His children and they will barely get by because they are covered with the blood of Christ. How much worse will it be for those who are not His children? In the end, we must not take justice into our own hands, but rather bless those who persecute us and trust in God to punish them on Judgment Day.

In conclusion, suffering is a part of the life of every believer. We must keep in mind that Satan is ultimately behind our suffering but God uses Satan’s evil to test our faith and make it stronger. Our suffering should not come from doing evil, but rather from evildoers who hate our righteousness. Suffering from righteousness will bring glory to God and blessing to the believer. In this suffering, believers are united to Christ in His suffering and future glory. We should emulate Him by blessing those who persecute us and trust in God to judge those who curse us. In order to pass the test and prove ourselves faithful, we need to put our trust and cares in God. We can have faith that “...the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen” (vv.5:10-11).

Works Cited:

Bible. *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008.

Bible. “The Holy Bible: New International Version.” *The Bible Library CD-ROM*. Oklahoma City, OK: Ellis Enterprises, 1988.

Cotterall, F.P. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 2000.

Ericson, Norman. *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996.

Grudem, Wayne A. “The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary.” *Tyndale New Testament*

Commentaries. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1988.

Longman, Tremper, and David E. Garland. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews - Revelation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Marshall, I. Howard. *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004.

"Strong's Greek Dictionary." *The Bible Library CD-ROM*. Oklahoma City, OK: Ellis Enterprises, 1988.

Copyrights:

Scriptures taken from Holy Bible, New International Version[®], NIV[®]

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc[®]

Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Copyright © 2019 David M. Coddington and Mel W. Coddington, and permission is hereby granted that this document may be used, copied, and distributed non-commercially to non-profit organizations, individuals, churches, ministries, and schools worldwide, provided the copies are distributed at no charge and retain this sources documentation as supplied herein. This document is not for sale, resale, or for use as a gift or premium to be offered in connection with solicitations or contributions.

File name: TheologyOfSuffering-Essay.____ (.htm, .rtf, .doc, .pdf)

Translation used: NIV, quoted or referred to in various places within this document

Source: www.BelieverAssist.com