

Suffering

Suffering is anything that a person or group experiences, over a prolonged period, that causes pain or discomfort. Suffering as a biblical concept can include physical pain or sickness, emotional grief, or a sense of hopelessness.

Concept Summary

In Hebrew, the concept of suffering is expressed with a rich variety of vocabulary. The most general and common term for being downcast or humble is the verb עָנָה (*ʿānâ*). The similar verbs נָגַע (*nāgaʿ*) and נָגַפּ (*nāgap*) can convey a physical sense of striking or being struck by a plague or military defeat. The idea of distress as something that metaphorically presses upon a person is found in the verb צָרַר (*šārar*). The verbs כָּאַב (*kāʾab*) and עָצַב (*ʿāṣab*) provide general terms for physical pain or emotional grief, while the noun יָגוֹן (*yāgôn*) typically refers to mental or emotional anguish. The nouns עָמַל (*ʿāmāl*) and אַוֶּן (*ʾāwen*) are often paired to denote general toil and sorrow (e.g., [Psa 90:10](#)). A key OT passage for the concept of suffering is the Suffering Servant text of [Isa 53:3–12](#), which uses 19 distinct terms related to suffering. The NT is more unified in its terminology related to suffering. The verb πάσχω (*paschō*) and the related term πάθημα (*pathēma*) are the most common terms that denote suffering in the NT. The idea of grief is primarily expressed through the Greek verb λυπέω (*lypeō*) and related noun λύπη (*lypē*). Other nouns that also contribute to the language of

suffering in the NT include [ἀγών](#) (*agōn*, “struggle”) and [ἀγωνία](#) (*agōnia*, “agony”).

Theological Overview

The Bible offers a vision of the beginning ([Gen 1–2](#)) and eventual culmination of God’s creation as times free of suffering ([Isa 65:17–25](#); [Rev 21:4](#)). From the time of the fall ([Gen 3:16–17](#)) until new creation, however, human existence is characterized by suffering.

Suffering is then a topic of considerable treatment in the biblical narrative and manifests itself in various ways. Most generally, suffering is the result of the loss of something significant to the experience of being human. Suffering can be physical: The loss of possessions ([Job 1:10–21](#)), illness ([Job 2:4–7](#)), violence done by enemies ([Lam 2:10–12](#)), and various plagues ([Exod 11:1](#)) are all examples of physical suffering ([2 Cor 11:27](#)). Suffering can also be psychological: The mental anguish of the anticipation of violence ([Matt 26:37–38](#); [Luke 22:44](#)), impending death ([Psa 88:3–5](#); [Jer 8:18](#)), exclusion from community ([Lev 13:45–46](#); [Psa 88:8](#)); care for community ([2 Cor 11:28](#)); or the grief experienced after loss ([Pss 13:2](#); [31:10](#); [Matt 16:10](#)) are types of psychological suffering. Suffering can also be experienced spiritually: The anguish of the perceived loss of favor with God is a significant theme in the Psalms ([Pss 22:1](#); [25:2](#); [38:21](#)) and plays a significant role in the Passion Narratives ([Mark 15:34](#); [Luke 22:42–45](#)). The role of spiritual war, which reverses spiritual oppression, is also an important theme in the NT ([Matt 12:28](#); [Eph 6:12](#)).

Suffering is seen often as directly and retributively tied to sin ([Deut 28](#); [Rom 1:18–32](#)). This retribution can be the result of natural consequences or divine agency. The pre-

sumed agency of God as a source of suffering produces some tension in the biblical accounts ([Job 5:18](#)). [Theodicy](#) is the attempt to explain the goodness of God in light of the presence of suffering and evil in the world. Some of this tension is reduced with the introduction of third party agents (the serpent [[Gen 3:1](#)], Satan [[Job 1:6–12](#)], and demonic spirits [[Matt 8:16](#); [12:22](#); [Mark 7:29](#); [Rev 12:9](#), [13](#)]) who perpetrate suffering upon God’s people. At other points suffering is portrayed as God’s disciplinary exercise producing positive results ([Gen 50:20](#); [Heb 12:11](#)).

God’s people experience unique suffering throughout the Bible. For example, the imprecatory ([Psa 137](#)) and lament psalms ([Pss 22](#); [69](#); [88](#)) reflect the tension of unjust suffering at the hands of enemies and in the presence of God. [Jesus](#) himself notes that he would suffer ([Mark 8:31](#)) and give his life for many ([Mark 10:45](#)). The full significance of [Jesus](#)’ suffering and death is developed by later NT writers. First Peter perhaps makes the most use of the language of suffering and atonement ([1 Pet 2:21](#)), while the author of Hebrews makes it clear that [Jesus](#) has come to identify with humans in their weakness and suffering ([Heb 2:17–18](#); [4:15](#); [11:36–38](#)). The NT also teaches that followers of [Jesus](#) are subject to suffering for their faith ([Rom 8:18](#); [1 Pet 5:9](#)).

Lexical Information

Old Testament

[עָנָה](#) (*‘ānā*). vb. to afflict, torment, to be bowed down, afflicted. Referring to being downcast, depressed, afflicted, poor, or humbled. In the Niphal, can have the sense of humbling oneself (e.g., [Lev 16:29](#)).

The verb עָנָה (*‘ānâ*) and its cognates are the most common Hebrew terms used in the OT to designate the human experience of affliction, torment, or despair. For example, the Isaianic Suffering Servant of Yahweh is described as being “afflicted” (מְעֻנָּה, *mē‘unne*; [Isa 53:4](#); 7). The derivative adjective עָנִי (*‘nî*) and the related nouns עֲנוּ (*‘nāw*) and עֲנִי (*‘ānî*) refer to people who are poor, weak, or in humble circumstances. Job describes his season of suffering as “days of affliction (יְמֵי עָנִי, *yēmî ‘ōnî*)” ([Job 30:16](#), 27; [Lam 1:7](#)). The noun derivatives also can be used in characteristic narrative or prayer phrases such as “God saw the affliction (עָנִי, *‘ānî*) of ...” ([Gen 29:32](#); [Exod 3:7](#); [Psa 9:14](#)) anticipating a reversal of fortune.

נָגַע (*nāga‘*). vb. **to touch, strike, afflict**. *Used of touching or striking in order to cause harm or to defeat. Used passively of being stricken by a disease or being defeated in battle.*

The verb נָגַע (*nāga‘*) most commonly means “to touch” but is used figuratively meaning “to strike, punish, or inflict with pain.” God is often the subject who stretches out his “hand” to afflict ([Job 1:11](#); 2:5). The derived noun נֶגַע (*nega‘*) is used to denote a type of wound or illness inflicted by another person or divine agent (e.g., [Gen 12:17](#)). The “plagues” of Egypt are called נֶגַע (*nega‘*; e.g., [Exod 11:1](#)). The Suffering Servant of Yahweh ([Isa 53:4](#), 8) is considered “stricken (נֶגַע; *nāgû‘*)” ([Isa 53:4](#)) and the related noun נֶגַע (*nega‘*) describes the “blow” he received on account of the transgression of the people ([Isa 53:8](#)).

נָגַף (*nāgap*). vb. **to smite, strike, afflict**. *A verb similar to*

נָגַף (*nāga'*) but used exclusively to refer to the more intensive “striking” or “smiting.”

It is used often as a term to denote general military defeat (e.g., [Judg 20:32–39](#); [1 Sam 4:2–10](#); [7:10](#)). In Prophetic and Poetic literature it can also carry the idea of “stumbling” over an obstacle ([Isa 8:14](#); [Psa 91:10](#)). It is used to denote the ultimate defeat of God’s enemies ([Zech 14:12, 18](#)). The related nouns נֶגֶפַּת (*negep*; [Exod 12:13](#); [Num 17:11–12](#)) and מַגְפָּה (*maggēpâ*; [Exod 9:4](#); [Zech 14:12, 15, 18](#)) also denote the various “plagues” or “punishments” inflicted upon people. The verb *nāgap* appears throughout the narrative of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and journey to the promised land. For instance, it is used to refer to God “smiting” the Egyptians during the Passover ([Exod 12:13, 23, 27](#)). The initial failed attempt to enter the promised land resulted in Israel being “struck down” ([Num 14:43](#); [Deut 1:42](#)).

נָגַף (*nāgas*). vb. **to oppress**. *The core meaning of this verb means to force someone to do something. Related to the concept of suffering, it often functions as a substantival participle to denote “oppressors.”*

The OT writings frequently use this verb as a participle to describe various oppressors. For example, the Egyptians are called “taskmasters” of Israel during the period of slavery ([Exod 3:7](#); [5:6, 10–14](#)). Those who take Israel into captivity are referred to as “oppressors” in the Prophetic literature (e.g., [Isa 3:5, 12](#); [14:2, 4](#); [Zech 9:8](#); [10:4](#)). In the Torah there is a prohibition of oppressing fellow kin by “exacting” (שִׁגְגֹּס; *yiggōs*) interest from them ([Deut 15:2–3](#)). The Servant of Yahweh is described as “oppressed” (נִגְגָּס; *niggas*; [Isa 53:7](#)).

צָרַר (*šārar*). vb. **to distress, trouble, bind, tie up**. *Intransitively used in a negative sense of being cramped, impeded, or in distress.*

As a verb **צָרַר** (*šārar*) can be used to denote binding something up (Exod 12:34) but is used more often to describe the action of distress in the presence of an enemy or rival. Jacob is distressed (**יָצַר**, *yēšer*) upon reuniting with Esau (Gen 32:7). David is distressed by his political enemies (1 Sam 30:6; 2 Sam 22:7). The related nouns **צָר** (*šar*), **צָרָה** (*šāra*), and **מִצָּר** (*mēšar*) are used in conjunction with the participial form of the verb to identify distress, adversaries, or foes. The Psalms often employ the language of “distress” and “enemies.” For example, the psalmist declares that “Yahweh is our refuge and shelter, a well-proven help in distress (**בְּצָרוֹת**, *běšārôt*)” (Psa 46:1). Similarly, Psalm 23 says of the Lord, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies (**צָרָי**, *šōrēray*)” (Psa 23:5). Distress is often accompanied by a “cry for help” (Psa 18:6). The Day of Yahweh is sometimes called “a time of distress” (**צָרָה עֵת**, *‘ēt šārâ*; e.g., Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1).

כָּאַב (*kā’ab*). vb. **to be in pain, cause pain**. *Refers to being in a state of physical or mental pain or anguish.*

This verb occurs several times along with its related noun, **כָּאַב** (*kē’ēb*), to denote physical pain (e.g., Gen 34:25; Job 14:22) or mental anguish (e.g., Psa 69:29). The pain associated with the term often results from disappointment or disaster. The notion of mental anguish is captured in Prov 14:13—“Even in laughter the heart may be in pain (**יָכַאב**, *yik’ab*).” The related noun **מִכְאוֹב** (*mak’ôb*)

represents a more intense term for pain and suffering. When Israel suffers in slavery in Egypt, God sees their sufferings (מַכְאֵב, *mak'ōbāy*; [Exod 3:7](#)). Job is racked with pain (מַכְאוֹב, *mak'ôb*) on his bed ([Job 33:19](#)). This is the term used of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh to describe him as a “man of sorrows” who also bears “our sorrows” ([Isa 53:3–4](#)).

יָגוֹן (*yāgôn*). n. masc. **agony, grief, sorrow**. *Mental anguish*.

The noun יָגוֹן (*yāgôn*) is identified primarily with mental anguish and has a different semantic range than Hebrew terms that denote physical pain. The psalmist looks to God for reprieve from the last effects of his “sorrow” ([Psa 13:2](#); [31:10](#)). At times the weight of “sorrow” or “grief” is overwhelming ([Gen 42:38](#); [Jer 8:18](#)). Yet God is able to bring about a reversal of fortune in which sorrow (יָגוֹן, *yāgôn*) is exchanged for joy (שִׂמְחָה, *simḥâ*; e.g., [Isa 51:11](#); [Jer 31:13](#); [Esth 9:22](#)).

עָצַב (*‘āṣab*). vb. **to grieve**. *The activity of experiencing mental anguish or physical pain*.

The OT uses this verb to express the activity of grieving by both humans and God ([Gen 6:6](#)). Many times such distress is associated with the heart or spirit ([Isa 54:6](#); [63:10](#)). The verb and its related noun feature prominently in account of the fall in [Gen 3:16, 17](#). As a result of the fall, the woman experiences “pain” (עָצַב; *‘eṣeb*; [Gen 3:16](#)) in childbirth and the man is left to eat from the cursed ground in “pain” (בְּעִצְבוֹן, *b‘ṣbwn*; [Gen 3:17](#)).

New Testament

πάσχω (*paschō*). vb. **to suffer**. *Experiencing physical, mental, or spiritual suffering.*

This verb occurs throughout the NT to describe physical and emotional suffering (Matt 27:19; Mark 5:26; Acts 28:5). Jesus predicts his own suffering on different occasions (Matt 16:21; Mark 9:12; Luke 22:15). Early Christians interpret the sufferings of Jesus as messiah in light of prophetic statements about suffering (Luke 24:26; Acts 3:18) and see it as a central component in his atoning work (Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 3:18). The verb is also used in the NT with reference to the sufferings of believers. For example, Paul challenges the Galatians regarding their perspective on suffering as believers (e.g., Gal 3:4; compare Acts 9:16; 2 Thess 1:5; Rev 2:10). Paul considers suffering for Christ's sake to be a privilege for believers (e.g., Phil 1:29; compare 1 Pet 3:14).

πάθημα (*pathēma*). n. **suffering**. *This noun typically denotes something that has suffered.*

The noun πάθημα (*pathēma*) occurs in the NT as a general term to denote either “passions” (Rom 7:5; Gal 5:24) or, more often, “sufferings.” Although the term can refer to suffering or affliction in a general sense, it almost always denotes Christian suffering in the NT. Paul sometimes expresses a desire to share in the sufferings (παθήματα; *pathēmata*) of the Messiah (Phil 3:10; Col 1:24). Experiences of πάθημα (*pathēma*) among the followers of Christ are typical (Rom 8:18; 1 Pet 5:9).

θλίβω (*thlibō*). vb. **to crush, oppress, compress, trouble**. *This verb can describe a crowd pressing together, but—when related to the concept of suffering—refers to oppression or to affliction.*

In the NT, this verb primarily functions in a metaphorical sense to denote being “hard pressed” in the sense of dis-

tressed, harassed, or troubled. For example, Paul claims that he and his coworkers are “being hard-pressed ([θλιβόμενοι](#), *thlibomenoi*) on every side, but not crushed” (2 Cor 4:8; compare 2 Cor 7:5). In other uses it denotes the suffering of affliction without the spatial metaphor (1 Thess 3:4; 2 Thess 1:6–7; Heb 11:37).

[θλίψις](#) (*thlipsis*). n. **trouble, tribulation, oppression.** *Trouble or affliction that causes pressure.*

This noun appears throughout the NT to describe tribulation. This term is used frequently in eschatological contexts to denote tribulation unique to the period prior to judgment (e.g., Matt 24:9, 21, 29). The term can also describe troubles in everyday life. It is in part because of [θλίψις](#) (*thlipsis*) that the seed does not take root in the parable of the Sower (Matt 13:21; Mark 4:17). In Acts, [θλίψις](#) (*thlipsis*) is depicted primarily as persecution by enemies (Acts 11:19). Paul prefers to use the term *thlipsis* to denote the general difficulty associated with the troubles of life (Rom 5:3; 8:35; 2 Cor 1:4; 4:17). This term may also be used in a technical sense to denote an eschatological “great tribulation” ([θλίψις μεγάλη](#), *thlipsis megalē*; Matt 24:21; Rev 2:22; 7:14).

[πενθέω](#) (*pentheō*). vb. **to mourn, grieve.** *A verb used to denote the grief over loss or sin.*

The verb [πενθέω](#) (*pentheō*) and the related noun [πένθος](#) (*penthos*) both denote the activity of mourning over the death of a loved one (Matt 16:10) or grieving over sin (1 Cor 5:2). In addition, some uses of the terms carry the idea of a general attitude of grief (Matt 9:15; Jas 4:9; Rev 18:15).

[λυπέω](#) (*lypeō*). vb. **to distress, grieve.** *Used to denote feelings of sadness or remorse.*

The possible meanings of the verb λυπέω (*lypeō*) and the related noun λύπη (*lypē*) range from referring to a person having hurt feelings or feeling sorry to experiencing deep sorrow. The use of the verb most often portrays the experience of being saddened as the result of an interaction with another person (Matt 14:9; John 21:17). For example, Paul acknowledges that his writings can produce a sense of sorrow in his readers (2 Cor 2:2–5; 7:8–11). Similarly, Paul warns believers not to grieve (λυπεῖτε; *lypeite*; Eph 4:30) the Holy Spirit. The author of Hebrews notes that godly discipline can be painful (λύπη, *lypē*; Heb 12:11). On occasion these terms can refer to more profound sense of sorrow. Relevant examples here include the sorrow experienced by Jesus and his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:37; Luke 22:45; John 16:6, 20–22; also the related adjective περίλυπος [*perilypos*] in Matt 26:38; Mark 14:34) and Paul’s concern for his fellow Jews and coworkers (Rom 9:2; Phil 2:27).

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