

SUFFERING Provides an overview of the Bible's presentation and discussions of human suffering, both physical and emotional.

Introduction

In [Genesis 1–3](#), evil entered the world through temptation and the [fall](#). The result was alienation from [God](#) and one another, broken relationships, physical and emotional pain, toil, and [death](#). Thus, the early chapters of the biblical canon portray suffering as an intruder of paradise. This account of the fall serves as a basic explanation for the origins of human suffering. The pain of childbirth and the agony of death are specifically connected with the original curse of humanity at the fall ([Gen 3:16–19](#); compare [Rom 5:12–21](#)).

The Old Testament

The Pentateuch

The [Torah](#) includes paradigmatic accounts of suffering, such as the mistreatment of [Joseph](#) and the enslavement of Israel in Egypt. The Torah promised Israel health, prosperity, and blessing for obedience but afflictions and chastisement for disobedience ([Lev 26](#); [Deut 27–28](#)). In covenantal faithfulness, God promised never to destroy His people completely ([Lev 26:42–45](#); compare [Psa 106:40–45](#)). Yet He would discipline as a parent ([Deut 8:5](#)). The Deuteronomic materials underscore the corporate and material nature of the blessings and curses (Ehrman, *God's Problem*, 66–69). The sins of individuals can lead to intergenerational consequences ([Exod 20:5–6](#); [34:6–7](#); [Num 14:18](#); [Deut 5:9](#)).

The cycle of disobedience, repentance, and deliverance found in the [book of Judges](#) serves as an illustration of this covenantal structure (compare [Judg 2:6–23](#)). [Second Kings](#)

17 reiterates a sense of reward and punishment in the moral order, as God actively executes [justice](#). At the same time, Old Testament narratives sometimes portray God as anguishing over the sufferings of His people.

The Wisdom Books

The [Psalms](#) frequently portray shame, fear, grief, heartache, and inner unrest. One third of the [Psalms](#) are laments, which can include graphic descriptions of suffering (e.g., [Psa 22](#)). The psalmists consider why the righteous sometimes suffer and the wicked sometimes prosper ([Pss 37; 73](#)). [Psalm 73:16](#) describes the attempt to understand this conundrum as “a wearisome task” (ESV). In [Psalm 44:24](#), the psalmist cries out to [God](#), “Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?” (ESV).

[Ecclesiastes](#) examines the futility of life “under the sun” ([Eccl 8:14](#)), including human suffering. In this framework, the Preacher concludes that one should simply “eat, drink, and be merry” ([Eccl 2:24; 8:15](#); but compare [12:13–14](#)). In the [book of Job](#), the protagonist, [Job](#), wrestles with the problem of suffering and seeks an explanation of why [God](#) permits the righteous to suffer. The narrative of [Job](#) does not end with a full explanation of God’s ways but rather accents Job’s commitment to [God](#) even in the face of pain and loss. God’s concluding speeches and rhetorical questions emphasize the complexities of creation and the finiteness of human knowledge. Humans may not speak *against* [God](#) by calling Him to court, nor can they speak *for* [God](#), but they may speak *to* [God](#), who hears them (see Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*).

The Prophets

The Prophetic Books frequently portray suffering as pun-

ishment for individuals and nations or as chastisement for God's people. [Jeremiah](#) and [Lamentations](#) provide a prophetic vision of national suffering (see [Jer 9:17–26](#)). Yet [God](#) is present in suffering, and He is a broken-hearted mourner even when He chastises. As Fretheim notes, “[God](#) is not indifferent to what has happened to the people. [God](#) does not view Israel's fate with a kind of detached objectivity” (Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 136). Ultimately, [Lamentations](#) directs readers to the faithfulness and gracious character of [God](#) (Kaiser, *Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*, 10). Isaiah highlights the afflictions of the Suffering Servant, a “man of sorrows” ([Isa 42:1–4](#); [50:4–9](#); [52:13–53:12](#)). The prophets also communicate that the sovereign Lord oversees misery and calamity ([Isa 45:7](#); compare [Amos 3:6](#)). In hope, the prophets looked forward to a future era of blessing and abundance.

Development within the New Testament

The Gospels (especially the Synoptics) focus on the afflictions of [Jesus](#), who announced that suffering was a necessary component of His mission ([Matt 17:12, 22–23](#); [20:17–19](#); [Mark 8:31](#); [9:31](#); [10:33–34](#); [14:34](#); [Luke 9:22](#); [22:15, 44](#); [24:46](#)). He suffered anguish while considering the plight of others ([Luke 13:34](#)), and He wept, being “deeply moved within” ([John 11:33](#) NASB). The [Beatitudes](#) bestow a blessing upon those who are persecuted for the sake of [righteousness](#) ([Matt 5:10–12](#)). The passion of Christ was a focal point of agony and suffering, even an experience of abandonment ([Matt 27:46](#)).

Christ's sufferings became a theme of the apostolic proclamations. The Apostle [Paul](#) commonly discussed suffering (see Proudfoot, *Suffering*), and he frequently mentioned his own trials ([2 Cor 4:10](#); [11:23–28](#); [Phil 1:29](#); [Col](#)

1:24). When one member of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer together (1 Cor 12:26–27). The Apostle Paul desired to “know” Christ and “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil 3:10 NKJV). He declared that we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him” (Rom 8:17 NASB). Therefore, “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword” cannot separate the believer from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35 ESV). He argues that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17 ESV).

Hebrews depicts Christ as a high priest who can sympathize with human weaknesses, “since He Himself was tested and suffered” (Heb 2:18 HCSB; compare Heb 4:15). According to the author of Hebrews, Christ learned obedience by the things He suffered (Heb 5:8; compare Heb 12:2–3), and He was made perfect through suffering (Heb 2:10). First Peter also portrays Jesus as an example in suffering (1 Pet 2:2–21; 4:1) and depicts sharing with Christ’s sufferings as a foretaste of sharing His glory (1 Pet 4:13; 5:10). The author of 1 Peter also reminds the recipients that believers elsewhere share “the same experiences of suffering” (1 Pet 5:9 NASB). The book of Revelation warns of God’s wrath being poured out upon the earth and the eternal suffering that awaits unbelievers (Rev 20:11–15). The book also promises believers that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes” in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21:1–4 ESV).

Suffering as a Theological Problem

The existence and quantity of suffering in the world provokes theological discussion. Yet the Bible does not systematically address the problem of suffering or provide a com-

prehensive explanation. Scripture frequently depicts suffering as a direct or indirect consequence of living among a fallen humanity in a fallen world. As Anthony Tambasco notes, suffering happens “in large part because of the arrangement of social processes and how power and access are arranged and legitimated” (Tambasco, *Bible on Suffering*, 12). Some suffering is the direct result of personal sin or the evil actions of others (Gen 34:1–2).

Suffering can come as a result of God’s fatherly discipline (Heb 12:5). Such discipline “yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11). God sometimes sends suffering to punish offenders. God may permit Satan to afflict even the Lord’s people (Job 2:7–8, 13; Luke 13:16; Rev 2:10). The biblical traditions also acknowledge the role of natural causes and accidents (2 Sam 4:4). Yet none of these causes or agents fall outside God’s sovereignty and power (Jer 12:1–4). Christians should expect to suffer even as Christ did (John 15:20; 1 Thess 3:3–4; 2 Tim 3:10–12). Christians can suffer for the sake of Christ, His name, His Church, and His kingdom (Acts 5:41; 9:16; 2 Thess 1:4–5; Heb 11:26). However, they should not be found suffering for the sake of wrongdoing (1 Pet 2:20; 4:15).

The biblical texts note that God can work good even out of suffering (Gen 50:20; Rom 8:28–29). Suffering can develop character, refine perspectives, and enrich experience (Rom 5:3–5; Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 1:3–9). Afflictions can potentially demonstrate God’s power and grace and engender dependence upon Him (2 Cor 1:8–10; 4:7–12; 12:7–10). Those who have suffered may be able to comfort others in their afflictions (2 Cor 1:3–8).

Theodicy

The various explanations mentioned above, however, are

only partial answers in particular cases. They are not universalized, general theodicies. Some theologians now argue that the attempt to construct a full-scale theodicy was misdirected from the beginning. In Tambasco's words, "The towering project of theodicy not only blocked the sight of other ways Christians responded to suffering and evil, but even made things worse by effectively denying the reality and power of genuine evils that didn't fit into the theodists' categories" (Tambasco, *Bible on Suffering*, 1).

Philosophical theodicies often address suffering abstractly. Bart Ehrman explains, "What I find morally repugnant about many such books is that they are so far removed from the actual pain and suffering that takes place in our world, dealing with evil as an 'idea' rather than as an experienced reality that rips apart people's lives" (Ehrman, *God's Problem*, 18). Eleonore Stump argues that we must address the personal, framing "desires of the heart," alongside the nature of individual "flourishing" in this life and the afterlife (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 419–20). Suffering can sometimes be assessed within narrative and personal relationship, when "heartbreak can be woven into joy through the reciprocity of love" (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, xix).

Alvin Plantinga distinguishes between the lesser project of a defense, which simply creates space for logical possibilities, and a full theodicy, or a rational justification of God's ways (see Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*). We must take care not to confuse resultant consequences with a full, explanatory purpose. A sense of mystery still surrounds any attempt to explain the existence and meaning of suffering entirely. Nevertheless, within the scriptural materials, God's purposes encompass human suffering, even when those divine purposes are not fully understood.

In biblical theology, suffering must be viewed through the *eschaton*, even *sub specie aeternitatis*. Hicks notes, “The Bible’s attitude to evil and suffering, unlike ours, is not dominated by the current evil and suffering that are around us in the world. Rather, it is dominated by what is going to happen at the end of the world” (Hicks, *Message of Evil and Suffering*, 15). In the end, God will decisively defeat evil and will ultimately turn it to His glory. Present sufferings reflect the “groaning” of a creation bound by corruption and awaiting redemption (Rom 8:22–23). Believers lay hold of the promise of resurrection and the expectation of renewal (1 Cor 15:12–58; 1 Thess 4:13–18).

Meanwhile, believers are to endure in righteousness, so that suffering itself draws them closer to God through total commitment to Him (2 Cor 4:16–18; 1 Pet 4:19). Life-affirming and God-affirming decisions in ruinous situations reflect a depth that such choices would otherwise lack. Suffering can deepen one’s desire for God and closeness to God, and a shared union with God works “a transformation not only as regards the character of the heartbreak over the loss of other heart’s desires but also as regards the very nature of the loss and the possibilities for the redemption of it” (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 466).

Hicks notes that “God’s ultimate answer to evil and suffering is the Lord Jesus Christ” (Hicks, *Message of Evil and Suffering*, 106). At the heart of a Christian understanding is the mystery of God incarnate as the suffering Christ, given for the sake of humanity. As demonstrated through the cross, God is not disinterested in human suffering. One may even view the cross as a veiled proleptic victory (John 12:31; Heb 2:14).

Biblical Responses

Tambasco argues that “the key questions in the biblical tradition are not about *why* I suffer, but about *how* we can endure it, overcome it, and be faithful to our God in the face even of undeserved agony, our own sinfulness, our community’s defeat, and the untimely death that awaits so many of us” (Tambasco, *Bible on Suffering*, 2). Believers are to accept God’s sovereignty with humility and endurance (1 Pet 2:19–20), seek refuge in the Lord, trust in Him (1 Pet 4:19), bless those who persecute (Matt 5:44; Rom 12:14), and remain faithful (Rev 2:10). The New Testament even exhorts Christians to rejoice in the Lord in the midst of affliction and tribulation (Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 7:4; 8:2; 12:10; 1 Thess 1:6; Jas 1:2–3; 1 Pet 1:6, 8; 4:12–14).

Overall, the Scriptures do not call believers to resign themselves to or accept suffering. Rather, they call believers to alleviate pain and distress as they are able. The Scriptures encourage readers to respond sympathetically toward sufferers and to support them (Job 30:25; Rom 12:15; Heb 13:3). Believers are to comfort others (2 Cor 1:4–5), bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2), pray for the sick (Jas 5:13–16), show hospitality and care for the imprisoned (Heb 13:1–3), and provide material assistance (Phil 4:14; Jas 2:15–16; 1 John 3:17–18). Like Jesus, believers are to transform suffering in an active manner. They are called to combat it through sympathy and even solidarity (Gerstenberger and Schrage, *Suffering*, 242–72).

The History of Interpretation

Throughout the centuries, Christians have often viewed suffering through the lens of their own historical contexts. Early Christian literature regarding martyrs frequently portrayed suffering through the lens of *imitatio Christi* (the “imitation of Christ”). By the Middle Ages, the tendency to

insist upon temporal punishment for personal sins (although original sin had been washed away at baptism) led to a complex system of prescribed penances for specific sins. Liberation theologians have sought a theological (and often Marxist-influenced) “praxis” to alleviate human suffering, especially economic disadvantage. With the rise of Western affluence, comfort, and modern medicine, many Christians tend to view pain-free and suffering-free living as a divine right or promise.

“Classical [theism](#),” rooted in a patristic and medieval consensus, held to a doctrine of “divine impassibility.” Through the incarnation, “The Word who is above suffering in his own nature suffered by appropriating human nature and obtained victory over suffering” (Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 175). Without discarding traditional theology, [Martin Luther](#) emphasized a “theology of the cross,” which he contrasted with a “theology of glory.” Luther argued that [God](#) preeminently revealed Himself in the suffering Christ, so that the cross is the indispensable source of our knowledge of [God](#) and salvation. Jürgen Moltmann maintained that [God](#) is no stranger to suffering, and therefore churches should foster liberation and combat dehumanization: “Were [God](#) incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love” (Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 230). Process theologians speak of human suffering as contributing to God’s continuing development, and open theists emphasize God’s suffering with the creation He loves.

The theme of “divine suffering” has become commonplace in contemporary theology (see Pool, *God’s Wounds*; Fiddes, *Creative Suffering of God*). Paul Gavrilyuk declares, “Scholarly opinion shows a remarkable consensus on this issue, despite the variety of qualifications, the difference in

approaches and topics addressed” (Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 1). Nevertheless, various traditionalist Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant theologians continue to defend the classical position that the *Triune God* does not suffer passively (see the varied views in Keating and White, *Divine Impassibility*).

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