

The Sufferings of Christ and the Suffering of Believers

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. Jn 16:33

Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God". Acts 14:22

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. 2 Tim 3:12

In the current evangelical church scene the concept of suffering has fallen upon hard times. It seems that most modern Christians believe that the Gospel has freed them from every type of suffering that could be endured. Suffering seems to be anathema, especially to Charismatic believers. For those that still suffer, every possible sort of ministry has developed to ensure that any type of suffering is dispelled as soon as possible, for a price. Those that still fail to have their suffering relieved are castigated as having insufficient faith. For bodily sickness there are a variety of healing and miracle ministries, many of which rely upon a person falling over. For depression one can undergo emotional healing. For serious cases it may be diagnosed that demonic agencies are at fault requiring the necessity of exorcism. Many 'deliverance ministries' will also use sacramental objects to aid the effectiveness of prayer; some also use inappropriate physical contact. For psychological problems there are a variety of psychotherapy techniques, mostly borrowed from the experiments of occult atheists like Freud and Jung. One can even regress into the past and miraculously have old memories healed as a result of guided imaginings.

Needless to say that the vast majority of the techniques that have grown up around these ideas have not an ounce of Biblical foundation. But what has happened is that a multitude of practitioners have become household names in the church and have made a very good living out of the suffering of the saints who have been made to feel that their distress should not be tolerated. Biblical phrases like 'patient endurance' are seldom heard.

Now there is a genuine healing ministry from God. God is sovereign and heals when he chooses; to say that he never heals would be false. James promises that the prayer of elders, for instance, can result in healing. But the purpose of this paper is to examine the scriptural nature of suffering and discover what its purpose is in the life of a believer. There is a great deal of anguish out there. This is why the healing ministries continue to grow. Despite all the antics of the healing charlatans, the majority of believers do not seem to have any lasting benefits from their shenanigans. This is why people go forward for ministry time after time. All they receive, in most instances, is an emotional high, an endorphin rush, an altered state of consciousness, which temporarily relieves physical and emotional pain. We do not see withered arms restored, documented evidence of the blind seeing or the deaf hearing, or eye witness accounts of public resurrections.

What, then, is the point of so much pain in the lives of believers? Has something gone terribly wrong?

Since this subject is so infrequently examined, I intend to show every single relevant New Testament text in this paper. Christians need to see that this is not a small matter in scripture.

The Sufferings of Christ

The vast majority of Biblical references to suffering are found in the NT not OT. The first New Testament references are to Christ:

The NKJV has the following instances of the NT word 'suffer' (and its derivatives):

- suffer 37
 - suffered 20
 - suffering 6
 - sufferings 13
 - suffers 3 (plus 2 refs. not relevant)
- Total 42

This compares to 77 references to healing; however, there are many other words that cover the concept of suffering (such as 'tribulation') which we examine later. Thus there are far more references to suffering than to healing; in fact there is no example of a saint being healed in the NT.

The main purpose of Jesus' ministry was to be a physician to sin-sick souls so there is an unquestionable emphasis upon healing in Jesus' ministry. The Gospels reflect this prominence. The signs of Jesus' healing and miracle ministry were a prophesied testimony to the divine source of his mission. Despite this, there are over half as many references to suffering as there are to healing in the NT. It is not an insignificant subject.

Jesus' suffering verified his authority as Messiah, fulfilling OT prophecies

It may also seem surprising that Jesus spoke very often of his sufferings as an equal verification of his ministry:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Matt 16:21 [Mk 8:31; Lk 9:22]

But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Matt 17:12 [Mk 9:12]

But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands. Lk 17:25

Then He said to them, 'With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.' Lk 22:15

Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day.' Lk 24:46

This aspect of Jesus' mission was also prophesied by the prophets:

He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. ... He was despised, ... we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. ... the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. Isa 53:3-7

But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Acts 3:18

Then He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' Lk 24:25-26

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. 1 Pt 1:10-11

The humiliation of Jesus

The atonement through suffering

The main focus of Christ's suffering is obviously his death upon the cross, although that is not the only aspect of his suffering.

Not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another -- He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Heb 9:25-26

Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Heb 13:12

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness -- by whose stripes you were healed. 1 Pt 2:21-24

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit. 1 Pt 3:18

To whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Acts 1:3

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. Heb 2:9

The humiliation as a man

It is often forgotten that, as God in the flesh, the close proximity to sin in all its forms must have been a continual vexation to his righteous spirit. Once or twice we get a glimpse of this, for instance in the tears he wept at the site of Lazarus's tomb. These sufferings of Jesus humiliation are held up as an example for us to follow. Suffering here cannot be referring to the cross:

Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. 1 Pt 4:1

The aspects of suffering experienced by Jesus in his humiliation include:

- Rejection by those he came to serve (Matt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Lk 20:17; 1 Pt 2:4).
- Failure of disciples to understand him (Mk 6:52, 7:18, 8:17-18, 9:32, 15:16; Lk 9:45, 18:34).
- Slandered by religious leaders (Matt 10:25, 12:24).
- Violently opposed by secular authorities (Mk 6:19; Lk 13:31).

- Conspiracy to murder him by religious leaders (Matt 21:38, 26:4; Mk 9:11; Lk 22:2; Jn 5:16).
- Fatigue, weakness, hunger (Matt 4:2; Jn 4:6; Heb 2:17).
- Homelessness (Matt 8:20; Lk 9:58).
- A poor background (Lk 2:24 with Lev 5:7, 11, 12:8).
- No financial support as an adult (Matt 17:24-27).
- Sadness in the face of the suffering of others (Jn 11:35).
- Long-suffering in the face of faithlessness (Matt 8:26, 17:17; Mk 9:19, 16:14)

The purpose of Jesus' suffering

The sufferings of Jesus before the cross are thus clearly identified in the New Testament and were to accomplish specific things:

... though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. Heb 5:8

Jesus' mission was incomplete without suffering:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. Heb 2:9-10

This does not imply that Jesus was imperfect. The word has the meaning of maturity, accomplishing, bringing to a full end. A baby may be physically perfect but is not yet mature. Jesus was not complete, as Messiah, until he had completed the work of suffering for his people. As the great shepherd, he had to gather his elect people by dying for them. As the Lamb of God, he had to lay down his life in sacrifice for the sins of his people. He would not be the Lamb of God if he did not die. He would not be the shepherd if he did not gather the sheep. Jesus' perfection needed suffering to accomplish the will of God. Being a perfect man was not enough. He had to suffer to make redemption possible. In doing this he submitted to the will of the Father, learning obedience through trust. This shows the greatness of Jesus' ministry for us. He was equal with God the Father but submitted himself, as a man, to God's will in performing redemption. The suffering of Jesus was vital to the plan of God.

Furthermore, Jesus' suffering enabled him to completely identify with his people who suffer in the world. If he had not suffered, he would not be able to intercede effectively for them.

For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. Heb 2:18

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all *point*s tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. Heb 4:15

Interim conclusion

The sufferings of Christ are clearly spelled out in the NT and occupy many verses. These sufferings include the cross but are not limited to it; Jesus suffered in many ways. However, these sufferings had a purpose in bringing Jesus' ministry to maturity and helping him to identify with us in our suffering.

Since believers follow Christ, we should expect to experience the same sufferings as our Master. Suffering should not come as a surprise.

The Suffering of Believers

We must first note the occurrences of the key words applicable to believers:

Comparison of suffering and healing / prosperity

Suffer

Acts 5:4, 9:16; Rm 8:17; 1 Cor 12:26 (2x); 2 Cor 1:6; Gal 5:11, 6:12; Phil 1:29, 4:12; 1 Thess 3:4; 2 Thess 1:5; 1 Tim 4:10; 2 Tim 1:12, 2:9, 3:12; 1 Pt 2:20, 3:14, 3:17, 4:19; Rev 2:10.

Suffered

2 Cor 7:12; Gal 3:4; Phil 3:8; 1 Thess 2:2, 2:14; 1 Pt 2:21, 4:1, 5:10.

Suffering

Jam 5:10, 5:13; 1 Pt 2:19.

Sufferings

Rm 8:18; 2 Cor 1:5, 6, 7; Phil 3:10; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 1:8; Heb 10:32; 1 Pt 4:13, 5:9.

Suffers

1 Cor 12:26, 13:4; 1 Pt 4:16.

Affliction

2 Cor 2:4, 4:17, 8:2; Phil 1:16; 1 Thess 1:6, 7.

Afflictions

Col 1:24; 1 Thess 3:3; 2 Tim 3:11; 2 Tim 4:5.

Tribulation

Matt 13:21, 24:9, 24:21, 24:29; Mk 4:17, 13:19, 13:24; Jn 16:33; Rm 5:3, 8:35, 12:12; 2 Cor 1:4, 7:4; 1 Thess 3:4; Rev 1:9, 2:9, 2:10, 7:14.

Tribulations

Acts 14:22, 20:23; Rm 5:3; 2 Cor 6:4; Eph 3:13; 2 Thess 1:4; Heb 10:33.

Persecute

Matt 5:11, 5:44, 10:23, 23:34; Lk 11:49, 21:12; Jn 15:20; Acts 7:52; Rm 12:14.

Persecuted

Matt 5:10; Jn 15:20; Acts 22:4, 26:11; 1 Cor 4:12, 15:9; 2 Cor 4:9; Gal 1:13, 1:23; 1 Thess 2:15; Rev 12:13.

Persecuting

Phil 3:6.

Persecution

Matt 13:21; Mk 4:17, 10:30; Acts 8:1, 11:19, 13:50; Rm 8:35; Gal 5:11, 6:12; 2 Tim 3:12; 2 Cor 12:10; 2 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 3:11 (2x).

On the positive side, believers are informed that they need:

Perseverance: (11x)

It is commanded in Rev 3:10; it is included as a sign of an apostle (2 Cor 12:12, 2 Tim 3:10), and is the means of waiting for hope (Rm 8:25).

Longsuffering 16x

Endurance 2x; Endure 14x; Endured 7x; Endures 11x; Enduring 2x

Note the comparison with healing and prosperity:

Heal

19x, but all refer to the ministry of Jesus and the disciples, one is a reference in a prayer of the apostles.

Healed

47x, but 36 are references to Jesus' ministry, 7 are references to the apostles ministry, one is figurative (Heb 12:13), one refers to the healing of sin at the cross (1 Pt 2:24), and two are prophetic (Rev 13:3, 12).

Only one refers directly to the healing of believers (Jm 5:16) and some think this reference is to the healing of sin, but in any case it is restricted to the prayers of elders.

Healing

7x, but 5 are references to Jesus, 1 to the apostles and 1 is symbolic.

Healings

3x all referring to the gifts of healings.

Heals

1 referring to apostolic gift.

Health

1 (3 Jn 1:2)

Prosper

2x, but one is referring to savings the other is 3 Jn 1:2.

Prosper

3 Jn 1:2

So regarding health and prosperity, we have one verse referring to healing by the prayer of elders, and one verse which hopes for prosperity to a specific individual (Gaius). The meaning of this is to have a good journey, and is a form of greeting like our: 'good health'.

The promise of abundant life – how does this square with suffering?

Jn 10:10 has clear reference to the fulness of life which we will experience at the coming of the Lord when our bodies are changed to their glorious state. The rest of the NT references to the word 'abundant' have to do with suffering, trials or our love to God and his love/grace to us.

So, actually, there are none or few references to believers being guaranteed enjoyment of physical, earthly blessings; in fact we are promised tribulation. Over against this there are scores of references to the fact, likelihood and necessity of suffering for all Christians. The fact that some Christians live a relatively peaceful and quiet life is a blessing, which deserves much thanksgiving and should not go unnoticed. However, most Christians in most ages know considerable suffering, and leaders in particular.

The reason for this is that earthly blessings are not the focus of the Gospel message at all. The hope, which is set before us, is an eternal one kept in the heavens for us [‘an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you’, 1 Pt 1:4]. Even the great saints of old looked forward to the fulness of their inheritance; Abraham looked to a city that had foundations in heaven for instance (See the argument in Hebrews 10ff).

All the prophets knew great suffering and many died by persecution. Jesus’ example is also one of great suffering. Why should the position of New Covenant saints be any different?

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers. Acts 7:52

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matt 5:11-12

For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they *did* from the Judaeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men. 1 Thess 2:14-15

The message of Christ

The Sermon on the Mount is a central plank of Christ’s teaching and the beatitudes are a crucial part of this sermon, as their historical popularity reveals. We will examine these to show the essence of Christ’ position on the subject of suffering without continuing to examine huge amounts of data in the Gospels. The beatitudes will give us, in a nutshell, what value Christ placed on hardship in the Christian experience.

The beatitudes present nine examples of Christian ‘types’ and show the rewards due to the differing positions. Two categories are rewarded with the kingdom of heaven, both of these represent suffering people: the poor in spirit (Matt 5:3) and the persecuted (Matt 5:10). Blessings are also promised to the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, and the peacemakers. The persecuted get two sections (Matt 5:10, 11) and more is said about them than about any other type of believer; in fact 450% more than most. Ironically, Jesus states that believers are blessed when reviled and that the reward is great for the persecuted.

There is nothing about the lot of the prosperous, the financially secure, the gifted healers, the spiritual warriors, the Charismatic, the prophets and so on. The kingdom [which the health and wealth teachers / Charismatic Restorationists / dominionists continually harp on about] is only promised to the sufferers, not the successful. This shows clearly that Jesus taught that believers would not only know suffering, but it was a majority experience and was a source of blessing to those in it. The kingdom belongs to such.

The apostolic Message

The first thing to notice is that the idea of Christ’s suffering formed a vital part of the original Gospel presentation (Acts 3:18). This was not only true of the original 12 apostles, but was also the practice of Paul:

Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’ Acts 17:2-3

Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come -- that the

Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles. Acts 26:22-23

The concept of suffering is a foundational part of the Gospel presentation.

The apostolic experience

Suffering was part and parcel of apostolic Christianity. The 12 were delighted that they had an early chance to share in Christ's sufferings:

So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. Acts 5:41

This suffering continued throughout the apostolic experience. James and Stephen were martyred very early on and the rest of the church experienced wave after wave of persecution until all the apostles were martyred except John, who was exiled and later died in Ephesus about 98 AD.

The lives of the apostles demonstrate a pervasive suffering.

Apostolic commission

Even the commissioning of the apostle Paul involved a clear explanation of coming sufferings:

For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake. Acts 9:16

Paul was not told that he would have a powerful ministry, have a solid support organisation, be loved by thousands or exert a great influence; but he was informed that his ministry would be the cause of great pain. The idea that apostles are special people reserved to experience great authority and blessing, leading charmed lives would have made Paul laugh. A mark of apostleship is suffering. It was because Paul was an apostle that he suffered much.

To which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. 2 Tim 1:11-12

Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained. 2 Tim 2:9

The believer's experience

This experience of suffering was not just relegated to the rank of great apostles, but was explained to be the lot of all believers:

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me. Phil 1:29-30

and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. Rm 8:17

We could easily multiply such passages; indeed many are mentioned in this paper. Believers were warned that they would suffer and their lives manifested that suffering. Suffering was normal for early Christians but it did not diminish their working great things for God.

The necessity of suffering

It seems that suffering is one mark of a genuine son of God. Therefore, the total lack of suffering would appear to suggest that there is only a superficial relationship to God. Furthermore, suffering is also a mark of righteousness since -

All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. 2 Tim 3:12

Far from prosperity, health and the absence of pain and grief being evidence of closeness to God, the New Testament experiences of the apostles and ordinary believers suggests that such things would be an indication of the opposite. Where do *Word-Faith* teachers get their ideas? Certainly not scripture! In fact, far from suffering being the mark of a curse or evidence of God's displeasure, suffering is often a route to blessing:

And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'

Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Cor 12:9-10

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. 'And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.' 1 Pt 3:14

For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 1 Pt 3:17

Since suffering can also be the result of the chastening hand of God, we must not be quick to judge people who are going through a hard time. Suffering may result from either sin or blessing. We should be slow to judge the experience of others.

Spiritual warfare and suffering

Modern Restorationists tell us that spiritual warfare requires many Charismatic things for success these days: marching through streets, spiritual mapping of demonic strongholds in streets, tongues, Charismatic praise, demonstrations of words of faith, prophetic words, Charismatic prayer sessions with corporate shouted prayers, identification of territorial demons and so on. What is not explained is that Jesus overcame the enemy by suffering not by force. He defeated Satan and his hordes at the cross, not in some spiritual fisticuffs (Col 2:14-15). The New Testament is also clear that believers, likewise, engage the enemy in their suffering and defeat him in it, by being faithful to the Gospel and enduring the pain (Heb 12:3-4). The blood of the martyrs has always been the seed of the church.

The book of Revelation is all about this subject. The example of Christ is set before believers early on (Rev 3:21), we conquer as he conquered. Rev 4-5 reveals how Jesus won the battle and explains the fruit of it. Much of Revelation is then given over to the suffering of the church and how it conquers the enemy in this suffering, on the basis of the victory already obtained through Christ. Christians do not overcome the enemy by Charismatic chicanery and false acts of power. Signs and wonders do not defeat the enemy, fortitude in suffering does. If the Charismatic emphasis was indeed successful, the church and the world should be a better place after 50 years of its expression. In fact, in this time, both the church and the world has worsened dramatically. Church attendance in Britain is now lower than ever. Actually, any references to signs of power are attributed to antichrist in Revelation, not to the saints. The saints overcome the enemy by 'not loving their lives unto death' thus effecting a great testimony and witness to their words (Rev 12:11). The saints are thus called, not to effect great works of power against satanic strongholds, but to endure faithfully unto death (Rev 13:10, 14:12). The testimony of a godly church/saint, at

the end, is not success in worldly terms (power, money, possessions, popularity etc.), but dying faithfully in the face of persecution. The reward for such is great (Rev 15:2, 21:7). The church does not need modern techniques but patient endurance.

Types of suffering

Now at this point, someone might be thinking that the only suffering being spoken of here is persecution and that this was only relevant to the early church. Well, in general terms there has been more persecution of Christians in the 20th century than any other, and secondly, suffering includes much more than outright persecution. Biblical suffering is:

Poverty

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. Phil 4:12

Tribulation

For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. 1 Thess 3:4 [Note that Jesus said that there are many types of tribulation, not just persecution.]

Paul's list

Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. 2 Cor 1:6 [Paul refers here to the list enumerated later which includes: shipwreck, the problems of journeys, being endangered by rivers, threatened by robbers, hardship, false brethren, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, the pressures of the city and anxiety for his churches as well as persecution.]

Undeserved reviling

For to this end we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe. 1 Tim 4:10

Persecution

And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offence of the cross has ceased. Gal 5:11

So that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer. 2 Thess 1:4-5

(Moses) choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. Heb 11:25

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Rev 2:10

But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. 1 Thess 2:2

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. 1 Thess 2:14-16

The corporateness of suffering

Suffering is so important that it becomes a corporate activity. True koinonia involves sharing in suffering as well as honour.

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. 1 Cor 12:26

Indeed, suffering reflects God's sovereignty in the body so that the sufferings of one person become a preparation to help and comfort the sufferings of another.

Israel is given to us in the Old Testament as a picture of God's elective purpose working through his chosen people. It is interesting that God chose to take Israel through many times of suffering. Sometimes this was to test their loyalty to him. Israel failed, and frequently complained that under old gods their lot was prosperous and happy, but under God's plan it entailed suffering. In Jer 44:15-19 the Jews, at the time of the Babylonian captivity, said that when they gave offerings to the queen of heaven they had plenty of food, prospered and saw no evil but since they stopped they had lacked everything and been persecuted. In fact, Jeremiah explains that their suffering was because they worshipped false gods. In the time of the wanderings, the people complained to Moses that when they were in Egypt they had fish, cucumber, melons, leeks, onions and garlic for nothing (Num 11:4ff) but in the wilderness they had only manna and were weak; they quickly forgot that it cost them hard labour in Egyptian bondage.

The leading of God does not necessarily entail happiness and prosperity. In fact we have example after example in Israel that it leads to the opposite. The New Testament reiterates this theme and shows that the fulness of abundant life promised to believers, is reserved for heaven. Both Abraham's city and Paul's crown were looked for in faith not expected by sight. Jesus summarised this as, 'In this world you have tribulation'. Individually and corporately, God's people will be led into times of difficulty if they truly belong to him. All the scriptures testify to this. In the wisdom of God, who knows what man is like, suffering is necessary for the church, not least in that it helps us minister to one another out of love and compassion and also makes us cling to God.

An apostolic example of the intensity of suffering and the attitude towards it

Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us. 2 Cor 1:5-10

Paul lived in the real world, just like us. He knew disappointments, anxiety, rejection of friends, grief, loss, poverty, riches, pain, 'misfortune' and all the things which go to make up the human experience. Modern apostles, so called, do not live in the real world. They are treated to all sorts of comforts to assist their 'important' ministry; usually this assistance comes from ordinary stressed people giving of their time and money. They get

chauffeured to airports, fly first class (if they don't own their own aeroplane as many do; some have several). A new car every year is vital to their travelling ministry. They need big smart houses to entertain other respected leaders. The list goes on and on; all being paid for by hard working, worn out believers. The financial and commercial aspects of many famous ministries, now being made public, is shameful. The danger of leaders being cushioned from the real world themselves, but then teaching people suffering in it, have yet to be fully appreciated.

Paul knew nothing of this. He worked with his own hands to support himself and his ministry. Even when he could lawfully have received funds from Corinth, he refused. He seems to have only rarely accepted gifts (there are no salaries in the NT) when it advanced the cause of the Gospel. Paul knew physical ailments, which hurt enough for him to cry out to God for special grace (2 Cor 12). His many sufferings are enumerated elsewhere; but here we see the intensity of pain and depression associated with his work. Paul got to the point where he 'despaired of life itself'; where he felt 'utterly unbearably crushed'.

Many Christians who get to this point feel terrible guilt for feeling this way. They feel that it is a sin to experience such depths of despair. Yet God has frequently put his servants through the mill in order to get the most out of them. Ministry is completely tied up with the person. God's gifts are not disassociated from God's men. People can only teach out of what they have learned of God in the crucible of testing. That is why suffering is vital for ministry. It is also why God's men suffer as they do. Job is the clearest example. Possibly the earliest recorded historical man of God and yet what a clear testimony to substitutionary redemption, what closeness to God is revealed in his experience.

The sufferings of David are well known, but without this preparation he could not have been a king and a man after God's heart. The depth of this can be seen in his distress after the sack of Ziklag (1 Sam 30). His suffering gave rise to his deep experiences of God and the human heart, as revealed in his poems (psalms), which enabled him to rule the people under God. But what of men who became so distressed that they also despaired of life? Men like Elijah, perhaps the greatest prophet of all, and Jonah, who saw massive results among the Gentiles and testified to the sovereignty of God in salvation. Despondency, in the midst of the work, is not unusual in God's men.

But Paul's experience teaches us two important things about this type of experience. Firstly, God intends us to use our suffering to the good of others. Once we have come through the pain, we must share what we have learned with others and endeavour to comfort those whom we meet in similar difficulties. Suffering must be embraced, and endured, so that we are enlightened, enabled and empowered.

But secondly, suffering should lead us away from ourselves. It enables us to not trust in ourselves. It brings us down a peg or two, brings us to reality. When one is in pain, one really appreciates how much one needs God. It is when things are going right that we are apt to rely upon ourselves. When things go wrong, we realise just how weak and helpless we are, how much we need others, how much we need the grace of God.

Paul's example here, then, should be a great encouragement to us. It shows that it is not abnormal to go through great distress, but a believer should also learn how to overcome and put the experience to good use, for themselves and others.

What does it mean to share the sufferings of Christ?

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church. Col 1:24

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. 2 Cor 1:5

The most difficult aspect of suffering to understand is not that believers suffer, but that they actively share in the sufferings of Christ and 'fill up what is lacking' in the body of Christ. What on earth does this mean? How is our suffering also the suffering of Christ? Is there an outstanding amount of atoning work to be done by Christians? Whatever else it means, it cannot mean this. The work on the cross was complete when Jesus stated that it was finished; and the Roman Catholic idea that suffering saints can live righteously more than they need to and thus build up a store of benefit for the church to dispense, is rubbish.

This teaching is rarely preached or discussed in church circles because people in the past have developed mystical ideas from it; but it is a clear New Testament doctrine, and as such needs exposition.

2 Cor 1:5 is more easily explained as affirming that the type of sufferings which Christ experienced will be known by the church; hence, the reproach of men, persecution, reviling, rejection etc. [Compare Phil 3:10.]

The word meanings involved in Col 1:24

'Fill up' = Strong's 466, [*antanapleroo*, verb: indicative, present, active, first person singular]. This word only occurs here and means: to fill up in turn, mutually and representatively, making up a lack within a community; complete. The meaning here is, 'what is wanting in the afflictions of Christ to be borne by me, that I supply by filling up the measure of the afflictions laid upon me'.

'Afflictions' (*thlipsis*) simply means ordinary human afflictions or tribulations; just as 'in my flesh' clearly refers to Paul's physical body not anything more mystical, not his sinful nature.

So, what is being taught by Paul?

What it does not mean

It does not mean that there is anything lacking in the suffering of Christ for atonement. Apostolic teaching everywhere is that the atonement is finished, complete and perfect. Neither does it mean that saints can add their own merits to Christ's atonement. Paul does not use the Greek word for the passion of Christ, but the normal word for common-or-garden affliction, which affects all men. Christ's vicarious penal sufferings are never denoted by the Greek word used here for 'afflictions'. Christ could not have ascended into glory if his atoning work was incomplete.

Explanations include:

1. Paul suffered in the same cause as Christ.
2. Paul endured the same kind of sufferings as Christ, in reproaches and persecutions.
3. Paul had not yet suffered as much as Christ did. Though he had suffered greatly there was much that was lacking to make him equal in this respect to Christ.
4. Paul earnestly desired to be like Christ, and that his suffering was filling up that which was lacking, so that he would have a more complete resemblance to him.

5. Paul still has some afflictions to endure before his race was finished. Paul had a predestined set of afflictions to endure, the more he filled these up, the closer he was to the end of suffering and glory with Christ.
6. Christ is afflicted in all his people's afflictions (Isa 63:9). The Church is His body in which He is, dwells, and therefore also suffers.
7. The church has her measure of afflictions fixed, predestined. The more Paul endured, the less remain for the rest of the church to endure.

The Geneva Bible notes comment,

The afflictions of the Church are said to be Christ's afflictions, by reason of that fellowship and knitting together that the body and the head have with one another. And this is not because there is any more need to have the Church redeemed, but because Christ shows his power in the daily weakness of his own, and that for the comfort of the whole body.

What is affirmed is that the church will experience suffering and this suffering is under the control of God and is predetermined from eternity; we fill up a prescribed amount of suffering. In this suffering the Lord himself is closely identified with his suffering people. When his people suffer in his name, Christ (in his glorified human nature) suffers (cf. Acts 9:4). Persecution suffered by the church may be properly called the afflictions of Christ; the suffering of a part of the body is felt by the head of the body.

Encouragement for those in pain

For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. Heb 2:18

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. 1 Pt 5:10

My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord -- that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. Jm 5:10-11

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Rm 8:18

For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. 1 Pt 2:18

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. 1 Pt 4:15

Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator. 1 Pt 4:19

Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain -- if indeed it was in vain? Gal 3:3-4

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ Phil 3:8

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? 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. Jm 5:13-14

For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. 1 Pt 2:19

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Phil 3:10

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God. 2 Tim 1:8

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Heb 10:32-34

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 1 Pt 4:12-13

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ. 1 Peter 5:1

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil. 1 Cor 13:4-5

Conclusion

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. 1 Pt 4:16

There is no shame in suffering, as long as the suffering does not result from sin. It is also normal to feel pain, or even some depression, during this vale of tears. The impact of bereavement, illness, adversity and so on, cause natural imbalances in the body which can lead to depression. However, this must not be finally given in to; there is grace to help in time of need. At first we may be despairing and can only hold on to hope; some might not even be able to do that for a while. Whatever our experience, it has been determined by God for our good (Rm 8:28; 1 Thess 5:18) and it is to him we should turn. He will give us all that we need, although we may not fully understand why this was necessary until we see him face to face. Finally, seek God's glory in the matter. This is the touchstone of all things in the universe - the glory of God. Like everything else he does, God has given us our times of difficulty for his own glory. Let us seek to honour him in this.

The same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. 1 Pt 5:9-10

Appendix

Word Studies

Suffer 1

E.g. Matt 16:21. Strong's 3958; - the root word (verb) *pascho*. Meaning: what happens to a person, to be affected or have been affected, to feel, have a sensible experience, to undergo something -

- a) in a good sense: to be well off, in good case;
- b) predominantly in a bad sense: to suffer pain or sadness, be in a bad plight, to endure, to be sick or, euphemistically, to die, suffer death (Lk 22:15).

Suffer 2

E.g: Rm 8:17. Strong's 4841, (verb) *sumpascho*. Meaning: to suffer or feel pain together, to suffer with, to share the same sufferings, to suffer evils (troubles, persecutions) in the like manner with another. Also used of the physical body in relation to it's members (1 Cor 12:26).

Sufferings

E.g: Rm 8:18. Strong's 3804, (noun) *pathema*. Meaning: that which one suffers or has suffered (usually in plural, Heb 10:32):

- a) What happens to a person and must be endured, misfortune (Heb 2:9).
- b) Externally a suffering, misfortune, calamity, evil, affliction; of the sufferings of Christ.
- c) Also the afflictions which Christians must undergo in behalf of the same cause which Christ patiently endured;
- d) Also of an inward state, an affliction, passion, strong inward emotions, impulses (Rm 7:5).
- e) Strong inward emotions, only plural, *passions* (this may not refer to actual suffering).

There are many other Greek words used to refer to suffering pain. For example:

- *Ponos*: the experience of pain, normally involving both continuity and intensity; Rev 21:4.
- *Propascho*: to suffer beforehand or previous to an event in question - 'to suffer already, to suffer before'; 1 Thess 2:2.
- *Sugkakoucheo* to be ill treated in company with, share persecutions or come into a fellowship of ills; Heb 11:25 [a variant of *sumpascho*].
- *Pathetos*: pertaining to being subject to suffering - 'subject to suffering'; Acts 26:23.
- *Kentron*: (a figurative extension of the meaning of 'sting,') the means or capacity to cause severe suffering - 'means to hurt, power to cause suffering.' 1 Cor 15:55.
- *Odino*: to suffer intensely (figurative use of 'birth pain') - 'to suffer greatly, great pain, travail.' Gal 4:19. Matt 24:8.
- *Sunodino*: to suffer great anguish or pain together, with the implication of an important and creative event - 'to suffer together'; Rm 8:22.
- *Kakopatheo*: to suffer physical pain, hardship and distress; 2 Tim 2:9, 4:5.
- *Basanos*: severe pain associated with torture and torment, severe suffering.' Matt 4:24; Rev 14:11.

- *Purosis*: (a figurative extension of meaning of 'to burn') the experience of painful suffering - 'to experience severe suffering, painful suffering'; 1 Pt 4:12.
- *Odunaomai*: to be in severe or great pain - 'to suffer greatly, to be in great pain.' Lk 16:24.

This does not include idiomatic phrases.

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