

**What does the Bible
say
About suffering?**



Living Water Resources

What does the Bible say about suffering?

There is a reason for suffering	1
God has a purpose for our suffering	5
The world suffers with Satan as its god	12
Suffering is a part of following Christ	17
The Church suffers through false teaching	22
This world of suffering is not the end	23

Compiled by

Robert C May

Copyright © 2017

cometotheriver@optusnet.com.au

What does the Bible say about suffering?

There is a reason for suffering

When we witness pain and suffering from disaster or even murder, there can often be a feeling that what has happened should not have happened. So when we look to find meaning in tragedy, we must have the right perspective. We need to approach the question in a way that allows for a reliable and meaningful answer, and this is only possible through a Christian worldview. This view accepts that in the beginning God made all things good, but the nature of this world changed for the worse when Adam and Eve disobeyed God; and in doing so they handed over their dominion to Satan, and the whole world suffered the corruption coming from their disobedience.

God said to Adam; "Cursed is the ground because of you." (Gen 3:17) Cursed is the world because Adam disobeyed God in his pride of wanting to be like God, and gave up dominion over the earth to Satan. Cursed because what was good in man and creation was now corrupted. Pain and suffering was now to be the normal life of man. The relationship man had with God was

defiled, and man was separated from the presence of God.

Satan was now the puppet master pulling the strings making the creation and man dance to his tune. Instead of man looking to God for all things, man now looked to the creation and its people which would result in futility, for only God is good.

What was once good was now not so good. Mankind was still made in God's image but unable to live up to that image. Man's relationship with God was broken, and personal relationships would suffer as a result. The creation was still beautiful, but it would now be the source of pain and struggle.

So both mankind and nature can be the cause of tragic events. Fortunately, God speaks to us about this if we are listening so that we can find not only meaning, we can find salvation and relief from the sufferings of the world.

The book of Romans tells us that we and all creation are subject to futility because of paradise lost, but it also speaks of the longing for the complete salvation to come. *'For I consider that*

the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.'

Rom 8:18-23

Therefore Christians are not exempt from the consequences of futility and suffering that comes from the actions of man and the natural order of life; so Christians are still troubled in all things like the rest of humanity, they also suffer disease and natural disaster, along with the consequences of the wilful depravity of the evil intent of sinful people.

So the only valid reference point for tragedy is God. We have to understand the nature of this world, and our relationship to God in order to draw any meaning at all from the things we see. And because God gives us wisdom in His word, we can have confidence that He understands what we are going through, and will teach us about His way. *'But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.'* James 1:5

While God has sovereign control over all things, He is not the source of tragedy. The vast majority of human suffering is caused by human sin, i.e. rebellion and disobedience to God. All too often it comes from the actions of people who are self centred, and abuse the good of others. For instance, murder is the fault of the murderer disobeying the moral law of God.

Exod 20:13; Rom 1:18-21

The hardship and suffering of this world was originally caused by mankind's disobedience, (Rom 5:12) which is always a matter of choice and personal responsibility. 1 Cor 10:13

While God is perfectly capable of stopping tragedies before they begin, sometimes He chooses not to according to His wise plan of salvation. Since sin has entered the world causing suffering, mankind has to make an effort to resist sin and instead trust and obey God. While we may not know the why of suffering, we do know that He is perfect, just, and holy, and so is His will. God in His wisdom uses suffering for our Good. He intends the suffering we experience in this world do three things. Leads us to seek God, develops our spiritual strength, and increases our desire for heaven.

James 1:2-3; Titus 2:13; 1 Peter 1:7

God has a purpose for our suffering

Of all the challenges Christianity faces in modern times, the most difficult to explain for many is the problem of suffering. Suffering comes as a result of human calamity and natural disaster; and includes wars, illness and disease, broken relationships, murder, hunger, poverty, corruption, nature's disasters like earth quakes, fire and flood. Suffering is also experienced in persecution, corruption, abandonment, along with accidents which cause injury and death.

Some ask, how can a loving God allow suffering to continue in the world which He created? For those who have endured or witnessed massive suffering themselves, this is a deep-seated personal and emotional question. How does the Bible address this issue? Does the Bible give us examples of suffering and some indicators on how to deal with it?

The Bible is realistic about suffering. The Bible devotes the whole Old Testament book of Job to this issue. It begins with a scene in heaven which shows us that Job suffers because God contested with Satan about the genuineness of Job's faith. This was never known by Job or any of his friends. All Job's friends struggled to explain his suffering from the perspective of their ignorance.

Finally Job rests in nothing but the faithfulness of God and the hope of His redemption. *'Though He slay me, I will hope in Him.'* (Job 13:15) When Job is finally confronted by the Lord, Job is silent. Job's silence underscores the importance of trusting God's purposes in the midst of suffering, even when we don't know what those purposes are. Suffering, like all other human experiences, is allowed by the sovereign wisdom of God. In the

end we may never learn the precise reason for our suffering; but we must agree with the Bible and trust in our sovereign God.

The greatest example to follow of someone who suffered is Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God in whom the fullness of God dwells. He lived as a human being like us and endured hunger, thirst, temptation, shame, persecution, nakedness, bereavement, betrayal, mockery, injustice and death. Therefore, He is in a position to understand and fulfil the longings of a suffering world. Jesus suffered that mankind may receive forgiveness of sins in order to have an eternal life in the presence of God.

We especially learn from scripture that suffering is not escaped by becoming a Christian. Paul's letter to the Romans contains some comforting words for those enduring hardship and suffering: *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* (Rom 8:28) Paul goes on to write, *‘Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?’*

Rom 8:5

These verses show us that in His divine intervention, God manages every event in our lives, even suffering, temptation and sin, in order to accomplish His plan that we be transformed into the image of His Son. *'For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.'* (Rom 8:29) To this end, God uses difficult people and trying circumstance for our training to help us grow into the life of Christ Jesus our Lord.

And as with Job, Satan is sifting us to see if we are the genuine article.

So according to the great love of God, His ultimate purpose is for our greatest good, this means we become like His Son. Even innocent children who die are raised to Glory in the wonderful love of God; for God does not judge those who are unable to understand their accountability to Him. *"Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"* (Gen 18:25) *'The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the*

punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.'

Ezek 18:20

Meanwhile, Christian belief in Jesus Christ and God's sovereign will is in fact, the only worldview which can consistently make sense of the problem of evil and suffering. The cross of Christ can be regarded as the ultimate manifestation of God's justice in a world of suffering and darkness.

When asked how much God cares about the problem of evil and suffering, the Christian can point to the cross and say, "enough to die on a cross Himself as God's Son."

Christ experienced physical pain as well as feelings of rejection and abandonment for the sinful disobedience of mankind. He experienced the same suffering as people today who know the bitterness of isolation, pain, and anguish. He trusted in God, so we too need to trust in God even if we don't understand.

Nothing in our lives is insignificant to God, everything concerns Him. In fact, God assured us

that we would face trouble in this world (John 16:33) and that He has experienced our struggles personally. Heb 2:14-18; Heb 4:15

A beneficial aspect of tragic events is that they remind us not only that we live in an imperfect fallen world which is alienated towards God, but that there is a God who loves us and wants something better for us than the world has to offer. And if we have a heart at all, we will also suffer when we see people in the world suffering, and be moved to help, because God also suffers the pain and suffering of all mankind whom He originally made in His image. When we have compassion, we want to elevate suffering, so we must do what we can practically and in prayer, while we trust in God to work His will and His way in us and the world.

When we are moved by God's compassion to help those who are suffering, we must remember we do not have the Divine power over nature Jesus had to prove He was God; and we are not authorised as His original disciples were to prove they were His messengers by performing many miracles in order to establish His Church. *'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all*

perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.' (2 Cor 12:12) However, we have received power from Him to witness to Him and express His loving presence as we obey His teaching; which means we pray continuously as we serve Him, loving others as He loves us while we leave the miracles to God our Father.

A few people in Christ have the spiritual gift of healing according to the Spirit's desire, but it is still God's choice regarding outcomes. We can see only the surface, but the Spirit of God sees the whole story of every individual.

Therefore when we are working with unbelievers, we witness to them by word and deed that God's salvation in Jesus Christ is the only enduring answer to suffering. Where believers are involved, we declare that our God, who lives in us by the Spirit, upholds us by His powerful presence even though we walk through the valley of death and darkness.

The Lord never promised we will not suffer; indeed He said we would, but the Lord has promised He will never leave us or forsake us while we walk in the darkness of the world and

suffer for Him. Therefore we walk by faith and not by sight. Consequently our circumstances should never determine our level of faith or peace, for Christ who lives in us is our peace, regardless of what He allows us to experience in the world.

The world suffers with Satan as its god

Many people are shocked when we say the world suffers because Satan rules on earth. But the Biblical phrase "*god of this world*" or "*god of this age*" indicates that Satan is the major influence on the ideals, opinions, goals, hopes and views of the majority of people, especially those who don't know God. Satan's influence encompasses the worlds so called knowledgeable thinking, education, and commerce. The thoughts, ideas, speculations and false religions of the world are under his control and have come from his lies and deceptions.

In this regard Satan is also called the "*prince of the power of the air.*" (Eph 2:2) He is the "*ruler of this world.*" (John 12:31) These titles and many more indicate Satan's capabilities. To say, that Satan is the "*prince of the power of the air*" is to show that in some way he rules over the world and

the people in it, especially when they disobey God. This is not to say that he rules the world completely; he has limits; God is still sovereign.

But it does mean that God, in His infinite wisdom, has allowed Satan to operate in this world within the boundaries He has set for him. When the Bible says Satan has power over the world, we must remember that God has given him domain over unbelievers only as a result of rebellion and disobedience. God has handed unbelievers over to the consequence of their rebellion (Rom 1:24) so that they may turn to Him to seek mercy.

John 3:16-17

While believers are no longer under the rule of Satan, (Col 1:13) unbelievers are caught "*in the snare of the devil,*" (2 Tim 2:26) and live in the "*power of the evil one,*" (1 John 5:19) and are in bondage to Satan.

Eph 2:2

The world is Satan's hunting ground through which he broadcasts his propaganda and disinformation. By confusing people about what to believe, he intends to manipulate humanity. Satan's story to mankind is aimed directly at exciting human nature's pride and self-indulgent

cravings to have things our own way. So, when the Bible says that Satan is the "*god of this world*," it is conveying the idea that Satan rules over the unbelieving world in a specific way so that the unbeliever follows Satan's agenda: "*The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.*"

2 Cor 4:4

Satan's scheme includes promoting false beliefs that blind the unbeliever to the truth of the Gospel. Satan's dark knowledge is the fortresses in which people are imprisoned, and they must be set free by Christ Who is the Light and the Life of God in the world, in Whom '*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*'

Col 2:3

An example of Satan's false belief is that man can earn God's favour by a certain religious act or acts. In almost every false religion, meriting God's favour or earning eternal life is a predominant theme. Earning salvation by works, however, is contrary to biblical revelation. Man cannot work to earn God's favour; eternal life is a free gift from God. (Eph 2:8-9) And that free gift is only available through Jesus Christ and Him.

John 3:16; 14:6

We may ask why mankind does not simply receive the free gift of salvation. (John 1:12) The answer is that Satan, the god of this world, has tempted mankind to follow his pride instead of Christ. Satan sets the agenda, the unbelieving world follows, and mankind continues to be deceived. No wonder Satan is called a liar.

John 8:44

Scriptures highlights the world's danger as an agent of Satan. The apostle James writes: "*Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4). This Church letter is written to a Christian congregation who were being tempted to compromise their faith. Even as the Old Testament shows Israel to be a spiritual adulteress to God through the people's compromise and disobedience, and so are Christian as part of the bride of Christ, who become a spiritual adulterers when they unfaithfully disobey Him.

I John 2:15 adds to James' warning: "*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*" John's guidance stresses strong

dependability rather than mere affectionate attachment. Paul says: "*God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" Gal 6:14

However, the world's pressure never ends. Paul warns in Rom 12:2 "*Do not be conformed to this world.*" He is saying; "Stop allowing yourself to be fashioned to the pattern of this age," "Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold." This is the danger we face when we allow the world to become too important, especially in our daily lives.

The world cleverly and relentlessly tries to manipulate us into conformity with its thinking, its value systems, and therefore its attitudes and conduct. If we are alert and truly guarding against an invasion of worldly attitudes and practices, we will make ourselves better equipped by God's word to stand firm in our faith and not compromise our commitment to Christ.

And due to this satanic effort to deceive mankind, even though we are converted, we are apt to become misinformed, spiritually lazy,

disinterested, and discouraged. We must be aware of this deception and absolutely resist it. The Bible warns us, "*Evil company corrupts good habits.*" (I Cor 15:33) Friendship with the world can corrupt everyone, even those who claim Christ to be their Lord. '*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*'

1 Pet 5:8

Our Lord Jesus recognised Satan's ability and authority on earth, and so should we. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, He did not doubt Satan's ability to give Him all of the Kingdoms of the World. He knew Satan was the ruler of this world and could turn them over to him if he so wished. Christ also knew that by obeying God instead of Satan, He would be qualified to dethrone Satan at His return in power and glory. Overcoming Satan's temptations were necessary so mankind could achieve its true destiny. And as Satan tempted Christ to compromise, he continues with Christ's followers.

Suffering is a part of following Christ

Jesus says the world is dangerous to a Christian: "*If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me*

before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also."

John 15:18-23

The followers of Jesus were often ostracised by their own families and communities. Some of the worst persecution came from religious leaders (Acts 4:1–3). Jesus told His followers, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt 5:10). He reminded His disciples, "*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.*"

John 15:18

Second Tim 3:12 says; "*Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" As in biblical times, many Christians

today have found that making a public declaration of faith in Christ can result in imprisonment, beatings, torture, or even death.

Heb 11:32–38; 2 Cor12:10; Phil 3:8; Acts 5:40

Often those of us in free nations shudder at the thought of these things. We need to understand that there are thousands who suffer daily for the sake of Christ and be thankful we don't. But this is not the only kind of persecution to be experienced by Christians.

We cannot avoid suffering by following both Christ and the old human nature the Bible calls flesh. (Luke 16:13; Matt 6:24; Rom 8:8) We cannot avoid suffering and be saved by being double minded. Jesus said, *"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."* Luke 9:62

Our obligation is to continue the work of the cross we began when coming to Christ, even if it kills us. *'So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.'* Rom 8:12-13

Therefore our greatest suffering comes from within as we battle for control over a heart that must die to its own will and surrender to Christ.

Rom 7:15–25

So suffering can take many forms. By choosing to obey the Lord Jesus Christ, we are setting ourselves at odds with the world. Gal 1:10 says, *"For am I now seeking the favour of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."* By closely adhering to the teachings of the Bible, we set ourselves up for rejection, mockery, loneliness, or betrayal. Often, the cruellest persecution comes from those who consider themselves spiritual but have defined God according to their own ideas.

If we choose to take a stand for righteousness and biblical truth, we ensure that we will be misunderstood, mocked, or worse. And all the while we need to keep in mind that no threat of suffering deterred the apostles from preaching Christ. In fact, Paul said that losing everything was worth it *"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) Consider the reaction of the apostles after they received another beating for preaching about Jesus: *"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."* Acts 5:40–41

Suffering in some form is always going to be a part of being a true follower of Christ. Jesus said the path that leads to life is a difficult narrow gate many fail to entre. (Matt 7:14). Our hardship is also a way of identifying with His suffering.
2 Tim 2:12

And since we love Jesus we must declare He is Lord. Jesus said *"if we deny him before men, He will deny us before His Father in heaven."* (Matt10:33; Luke 12:9) There are many subtle ways to deny Christ. If our actions, words, lifestyle, or entertainment choices do not reflect His will, we deny Him. If we claim to know Him but live as though we didn't by being disobedient, we deny Christ.
1 John 3:6–10

Many people choose deceiving ways of denying Christ because they do not want to suffer for Him. However, regardless of whatever form suffering comes to us, we should embrace it as a badge of

honour and a privilege that we, like the apostles, have "*been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*" *'And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.'*

Rom 5:3-5

The Church suffers through false teaching

Satan attacks the Church from within and casts doubts in peoples' minds as to the real requirements of following Jesus. There is now more world in the Church than Church in the world because salvation is now a free for all for many. False teaching of a no cost faith weakens the Church through compromise; diminishing in its ability to minister to a suffering world. Because of compromise; unbelievers have an excuse to deny God. Therefore unbelievers consider the true message of the Church to be of no value to them concerning eternal life, because they see

no appreciable difference between themselves and the so called Christians they observe; and they will then be more likely to listen to Satan's lies instead.

This suffering world is not the end

The Bible encourages us to understand this world is not our home. *'Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.'* 1 Pet 2:11

We wait patiently for our eternal dwelling. *'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.'* Rom 8:20-22

The eternal dwelling place of believers will be the new earth. The new earth is the "heaven" on which we will spend eternity. It is the new earth where the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, will be located. It is on the new earth that the pearly gates and streets of gold will be.

'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second

death.” Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, “Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

Revelation 21:1-8

The heaven that believers will experience will be a new and perfect planet on which we will dwell.

The new earth will be free from sin, evil, sickness, suffering, and death. It will likely be similar to our current earth, or perhaps even a re-creation of our current earth, but without the curse of sin.

When Revelation 21:1 refers to the new heavens, it is indicating that the entire universe will be created, a new earth, new skies. It seems as if God's heaven will be recreated as well, giving everything in the universe a “fresh start,” whether physical or spiritual.

Abide in Me

Living Water Resources



Come to the river

Christians suffer the same experiences as everyone else in a world corrupted by Satan's darkness; but real Christians walk with God and do not mourn as the rest who are alienated from God as a matter of their own choice.

Real Christians therefore show the world how to live by faith in trusting God in all things by remaining in His love regardless of painful circumstances; then God upholds them in His love.

Jesus has told us:

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved Me. Remain in My love. When you obey My commandments, you remain in My love, just as I obey My Father's commandments and remain in His love."

John 15:9-10

Robert C May

Copyright © 2017

cometotheriver@optusnet.com.au