

SUFFERING

- I. Representative Biblical references to "suffering"
- A. Primary Greek words *pathema* and its root *pascho*
 - B. Suffering of Jesus
 - Matt. 17:12; Mk 8:31; 9:12; Lk. 9:22; 17:25 - "Son of God must suffer"
 - Lk. 24:46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23 - "Christ had to suffer and rise again"
 - Acts 1:3 - "He presented Himself alive, after His suffering"
 - Heb. 2:9,10,18; 5:8; 13:12 - "He has suffered"
 - I Pet. 2:21,23; 4:1; 5:1 - "Christ suffered for you, ...in the flesh"
 - C. Suffering of Christians
 - Acts 5:41 - "considered worthy to suffer shame for His name"
 - Acts 9:16 - "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake"
 - Rom. 8:17 - "if indeed we suffer with Him in order to be glorified with Him"
 - I Cor. 12:26 - "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it"
 - Phil. 1:29 - "granted for Christ's sake...to suffer for His sake"
 - Phil. 3:10 - "that I might know...the fellowship of His sufferings..."
 - Col. 1:24 - "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"
 - I Thess. 3:4 - "we kept telling you we were going to suffer affliction"
 - II Thess. 1:5 - "the kingdom of God...for which you are suffering"
 - II Tim. 1:8 - "join me in suffering for the gospel..."
 - II Tim. 2:3 - "Suffer hardship with me..."
 - James 5:13 - "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray."
 - I Pet. 3:14 - "even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness"
 - I Pet. 3:17 - "if God should will it, that you suffer for doing what is right"
 - I Pet. 4:13 - "share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing"
 - I Pet. 4:19 - "let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right"
 - Rev. 2:10 - "Do not fear what you are about to suffer"
- II. Attempting a definition of "suffering"
- A. Abstract philosophical questions of suffering
 - 1. Why do people suffer? ...good people? ...innocent people?
 - 2. If God is good, loving and omnipotent, why does He allow suffering?
 - a. not loving or good enough to disallow?
 - b. not powerful enough to disallow?
 - c. (Is it not presumptuous of man to think that his human perspective is so omniscient that he can assume that suffering cannot be accommodated into God's love and omnipotence?)
 - 3. Suffering often defined as
 - a. man not getting what he wants
 - b. anything other than pleasant comfort and security
 - B. Biblical references more concrete and personal
 - 1. Numerous synonyms in Scripture - ex. affliction, anguish, distress, grief, misery, oppression, vexation, sorrow, travail, pain, tribulation, plague, chastisement, discipline, persecution, endurance, woe, etc.
 - 2. General category of personal experiences, situations, circumstances, "trials"

- C. Specific definition difficult
1. Severity of the experience?
 - a. Not just inconvenience, annoyance, irritation - ex. hang-nail, haircut, blisters, mosquito bite, sunburn
 - b. Usually involves discomfort, unpleasantness, pain or anguish
 - (1) physiological
 - (a) intensity of pain?
 - (b) risk of death?
 - (2) psychological
 - (a) intensity of pain? heartache?
 - (b) risk of becoming unbearable? "killing me"
 - b. Prolongation or protraction of painful experience?
 - (1) Not just momentary or temporary
 - (2) What duration qualifies?
 - (3) Is "suffering" defined by chronic pain?
 2. Types of experiences often identified with "suffering"
 - a. Physical illness, disease, injury - childbirth? menopause? old age?
 - b. Broken relationships, death, divorce, rejection, alienation - parenting? pastoring?
 - c. Persecution, oppression, enslavement, ostracism, repression, harassment
 - d. Natural disasters - flood, fire, famine, epidemic
 - e. War
 - f. Suffering the consequences of one's choices - loss of liberty, incarceration, financial loss, hangover
 - g. Suffering with a purpose - exercise? basic training?

III. Universality of "suffering"

- A. All of creation suffers in dysfunctionality and misuse
Rom. 8:20,21 - "the creation was subjected to futility..."
- B. All of humanity is subject to "suffering"
Job 5:7 - (Eliphaz) "man is born for trouble"
Job 14:1 - (Job) "man is short-lived and full of turmoil"
- C. God's people are not exempt or immune from "suffering"
 1. Israel, the people of God in the old covenant
Heb. 11:25 - "Moses...chose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God"
 2. Christians, the people of God in the new covenant
Jn. 15:18 - "the world hated Me before it hated you"
Jn. 15:20 - "If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you"
Jn. 16:33 - "in the world you have tribulation"
II Tim. 3:12 - "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"
 - a. Triumphalists - In the "victorious Christian life" you have power to overcome all adversities. Denial of problems.
 - b. Works advocates - not enough faith; not praying enough; not working hard enough; God is withholding His blessings
 - c. Happiness, health, prosperity are not a divine right.
- D. Looking forward in hope to time of no suffering
 1. Prophetic
Isa 25:8 - "He will swallow up death...wipe tears away...remove the reproach of His people from all the earth"

- Rev. 21:4 - "there shall no longer be mourning, crying or pain"
2. Comparative
 Rom. 8:18 - "sufferings of present time not worthy to be compared with glory that is to be revealed to us"
 II Cor. 4:17 - "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"

IV. Source, causation or derivation of "suffering"

- A. Is God the source of human "suffering"?
1. God is the efficient cause of all things, but not the blameworthy cause of evil. Is suffering evil?
 2. To permit suffering is not to take pleasure in it
 Ezek. 18:32 - "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone..."
 3. Is suffering the result of God's punishment or retribution?
 Gen. 3:16-19 - "in pain you shall bring forth children...in sorrow you shall eat..."
 Exod. 7-12 - plagues of God upon Egypt
 I Cor. 11:29,30 - "judgment to oneself, if do not judge the body rightly"
 4. Is suffering the will of God? Does He orchestrate suffering?
 Job 2:10 - "shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?"
 Jere. 32:42 - "I brought all this calamity on this people"
 Amos 3:6 - "if a calamity occurs in a city, has not the Lord done it?"
 I Pet 3:17 - "if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing right"
 I Pet. 4:19 - "those who suffer according to the will of God"
 5. Does God push the misfortune buttons? dented fender, clogged sink, heart attack?
- B. Is Satan the source of human "suffering"?
- Job 2:6 - "the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, he is in your power...'"
 Rev. 2:10 - "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. The devil is about to cast some of you into prison..."
- C. Is suffering self-inflicted? Is suffering a result of the free choice of human sin? individually and/or collectively? Do we bring it upon ourselves? Is suffering the result of being bad or sinful?
 Job - this was the advice of Job's counselors
 Jn. 9:2,3 - "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed..."
- D. Is suffering the fault of others? Is it the result of the sins of our fathers? Hereditary suffering?
 Exod 20:5 - "I am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations..."
 Lev. 26:39 - "because of the iniquities of their forefathers they will rot"
 Jere 16:10,11 - "this calamity...is because your forefathers forsook Me"
 Is this why innocent children suffer? Are sufferers victims?
- E. Is suffering the result of fate? bad luck? Murphy's Law?

V. Reasons, purposes, benefits of "suffering"

- A. Divine retribution - cf. IV.A.3
- B. Divine discipline - "growing pains"?
 Prov. 3:11 - "do not reject the discipline of the Lord"
 Heb. 12:5-11 - "those whom the Lord loves He disciplines"
- C. Testing, proving
 Gen. 22:1 - "God tested Abraham" (Heb. 11:17)
 Deut. 8:2,16 - "God led you...that He might humble you, testing you..."
 James 1:3 - "testing of your faith"

- I Pet. 1:7 - "proof of your faith...even though tested by fire"
- D. Vicarious suffering
 - Numb. 11:1-15 - (Moses willing to stand in their place)
 - Hosea 1-3 - (suffers unfaithful bride to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness)
 - Isa. 52:13-53:12 - (Jesus as suffering servant "oppressed and afflicted")
- E. Educational - "learn the lessons God wants you to learn"
 - Heb. 5:8 - "He learned obedience from the things which He suffered"
- F. Revelation
 - C.S. Lewis - "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a dulled world."
 - Jn. 9:2,3 - "that the works of God might be displayed"
- G. Repentance, seek God
 - Hosea 5:15 - "in their affliction they will earnestly seek Me"
 - Isa. 19:22 - "striking but healing, so they will return to the Lord"
 - II Cor. 7:9,10 - "sorrowful to the point of repentance...sorrow produces repentance"
- H. Self-denial
 - Lk. 22:42 - "not My will, but Thine be done"
 - II Cor. 1:8,9 - "affliction...that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God"
 - II Cor. 12:7 - "to keep me from exalting myself"
- I. Character of God displayed
 - Rom. 5:3,4 - "tribulation brings perseverance...proven character"
 - Rom. 8:29 - "conformed to the image of His Son"
 - II Cor. 4:10,11 - "life of Jesus manifested in our mortal bodies"
 - Heb. 12:10 - "that we might share His holiness"
 - Heb. 12:11 - "yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness"
 - James 1:2 - "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"
- J. Solidarity - In suffering we band and bond together
 - Rom. 12:15 - "weep with those who weep"
 - I Cor. 12:26 - "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it"
- K. Ministry of comfort
 - II Cor. 1:3,4 - "comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God"
 - Heb. 4:15 - "sympathize with our weakness"
- L. Glorification
 - Rom. 8:17 - "we suffer with Him that we might be glorified with Him"
 - II Cor. 4:17 - "affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory"

VI. Responses to "suffering"

- A. Various perspectives and responses
 - 1. All of life is suffering
 - a. Buddhism - cause of suffering is desire; seek to end desire in *nirvana*
 - b. nihilism - pessimism - desire to unlive - "stop the world, I want to get off"
 - 2. Suffering is an unfortunate fact of life
 - a. dualism - good and evil, two sides of coin; all equalizes; go with the flow; what goes around comes around.
 - b. fatalism - accept it; what will be, will be
 - c. stoicism - bear it; learn to cope, to survive, "positive thinking"
 - d. humanism - conquer it, overcome, take charge of own destiny
 - e. escapism - avoid all that you can

3. Suffering is an illusion
 - a. idealism - deny it, don't believe it, it is unreality
- B. Christian perspective of "suffering"
 1. Suffering is a fact of life, but not necessarily unfortunate fact of life
 - a. How big is our perspective? Is meaning compressed in the matter of our own existence, in which case suffering is the darkness of 'lights out'. Or is the matter of our own existence just a vignette on the cosmic stage of meaning, in which case suffering is but a temporary shadow in the corner of the stage?
 - b. God's loving goodness and omnipotence are so great as to encompass painful and unpleasant circumstances in serving His ultimate good of drawing all things to and in Himself - Rom. 8:28
 2. The suffering of man has been taken up by the Divine Suffering Servant (cf. Isa. 52:13 – 53:12)
 - a. Emptied Himself to become incarnated into suffering humanity - Phil. 2:5-8
 - b. Denied His self-will to accept work of Suffering Servant - Lk. 22:42
 - c. His resurrection reality is the victory over suffering - I Cor. 15:57
 - d. Christians are incorporated into the suffering Person and work of Jesus Christ in the Body of Christ - Rom. 8:17; II Cor. 1:5; 4:7-12,17; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; I Pet. 4:13
 3. Suffering has a beneficent purpose
 - a. Suffering is the birth pangs for the greater experience of life
 - b. In suffering life becomes more real than the superficialities of comfort.
 - c. Suffering is analogous to the surgery required to heal the disease of our self-orientation - Matt. 9:12
 - d. True love is strengthened and perfected by suffering.
- C. Christian responses to "suffering"
 1. Positive value of suffering does NOT mean that Christians should
 - a. seek, desire, court, invite, or pursue suffering
 - b. claim proud badge of courage in "suffering for Jesus"
 - c. develop persecution-complex or martyr-complex
 2. Acceptance of the situations of life
 - a. Suffering is not so much a problem to be solved rationally, but a mystery to be observed personally and spiritually. Only way to "see" the mystery is by the reception of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Thus we participate in the mystery of Christ - Col. 1:27; 2:2
 - b. Our sufferings, sicknesses and adversities are not happenings in themselves, but are defined by the effect we allow them to have on us.
 3. Entrust ourselves to God, His purposes and ways
 - a. Recognize His sufficiency of grace in the situations - II Cor. 3:5; 12:9
 - b. Receptivity of God's activity - Faith
 - c. Persevere - Rom. 5:3; 12:12; James 1:12
 - d. Endure - I Cor. 4:12; II Tim. 4:5; James 1:3,4
 - e. Entrust ourselves to God - I Pet. 2:21-23; 4:19