

## TRULY GOD IS GOOD: SUFFERING IN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE



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*Abstract. This article discusses the concept of suffering in the Old Testament. It first looks at passages in the Pentateuch that describe life before the fall, which paints a picture of human existence before suffering. It then examines what the Pentateuch and Proverbs teach about avoiding suffering through living a life of faithful obedience. Next, it examines suffering in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, which tackle head-on the issue of the suffering of the righteous. It then moves to the New Testament to examine how suffering differs on this side of the cross and how modern-day Christians must live in light of the reality of suffering. The article concludes with few proposals for how to apply the biblical theology of suffering.*

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### WHY IS THERE SUFFERING?

Why does God allow—or as some might say, cause—suffering in the world? This question is as relevant today as it was millennia ago when the biblical authors struggled with it. The Old Testament offers no pat answers to the problem, opting instead to place human suffering and God’s blessing right next to each other, with often little effort to resolve the ensuing tension. We find in the Pentateuch, Proverbs, and portions of the Prophets that God blesses obedience and that those who follow him may expect to live a long, full life with plenty of resources and children with whom to share their abundance. Yet, we also encounter people, such as Joseph and Job, who suffered greatly despite their faithfulness to Yahweh.

This tension caused by unjust suffering and explored in Ecclesiastes and Job is finally resolved when in the New Testament we meet a Savior who suffers to redeem humanity. And yet, the New Testament modifies the idea that obedience leads to earthly rewards by stating clearly that the righteous will suffer greatly in this life. It is no longer a singular Joseph or Job

who suffers—an anomaly in the biblical narrative—or even “the oppressed” (Eccl. 4:1). Now, *all* Christians can expect suffering (Matt. 10:16–25).

There are several possible reasons for human suffering: direct sin (God’s discipline or punishment), indirect sin (the result of living in a fallen world), and righteousness. Job’s friends were most familiar with suffering that resulted from direct sin, holding to the bitter end that Job’s sin *must* have resulted from his own sinfulness. They had good reason to believe this because the theology with which they—and we—were familiar teaches that the wicked will receive their just deserts.<sup>1</sup> For example, Bibldad states in Job 8:20 that “Behold, God will not reject a guiltless person.”<sup>2</sup> As we will see, such sentiment is common throughout the Bible, and indeed the human experience bears this out. We know intuitively that poor choices usually result in undesirable consequences. Yet, we also know that sometimes “bad things happen to good people,” a theme that features prominently in the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Second, sometimes people suffer as a result of the human condition: we live in a fallen world that “has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:22) and are surrounded by fallen people. While there was certainly a larger plan at work with Job’s suffering, we may point to the fact that his very existence in a world riddled with sin enabled his suffering to occur.

Finally, people may experience suffering because of their faith in Jesus Christ and proclamation of the gospel. The New Testament promises us repeatedly that such will be the fate of Jesus’s followers. Christians living in the United States live a peculiar sort of existence because we experience religious freedom that is unparalleled throughout the rest of the world, and indeed throughout history. For our brothers and sisters living in the majority world, however, suffering through persecution is often a very real possibility.

In the following pages we will discuss the concept of suffering in the Old Testament. First, we will look at passages in the Pentateuch that describe life before the fall, which paints a picture of human existence before suffering. We will then look at what the Pentateuch and Proverbs teach about avoiding suffering through living a life of faithful obedience. Next, we examine suffering in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, which tackle head-on the issue of the suffering of the righteous. We will then move to the New Testament to examine how suffering differs on this side of the cross and how modern-day Christians must live in light of the reality of suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (1926; repr., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), cxxxv.

<sup>2</sup> All OT Scripture taken from author’s translation unless otherwise noted. All NT Scripture taken from ESV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Kushner, *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, Jewish Encounters (New York: Schocken, 2012).

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We will conclude the chapter with a few proposals for how to apply the biblical theology of suffering.

## SUFFERING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### *Sin Enters the World: Genesis 3*

The first passages of the Pentateuch present readers with a good world. In this good creation there is no sin, no suffering, and no death. God walks with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, indicating the perfect relationship they enjoy together. God gives Adam and Eve the simple command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, about which Robin Routledge states, “This command gave human beings an opportunity to play an active part in their relationship with God. It gave a choice: obey God’s word and maintain the relationship, or disobey and reject the relationship. This shows that God wants a relationship with human beings that is entered into freely. It also emphasizes that a key element within that relationship is obedience.”<sup>4</sup> It takes a mere three chapters for humanity’s perfect relationship with God to change, as Adam and Eve rebel against God by disobeying his command not to eat of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Suddenly sin enters the world, and with it suffering.

### *Blessing and Curses: Deuteronomy*

The Book of Deuteronomy confirms what we see in Genesis 3: suffering results from sin. Deuteronomy 30:16–17, for example, clarifies the relationship between actions and consequences: “I command you today to love Yahweh your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments, statutes, and judgments. Then you shall live and multiply and Yahweh your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not obey, but you allow yourself to be led astray and if you worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you will utterly perish.” Throughout Deuteronomy the people of Israel are reminded that they are heirs to a special relationship with Yahweh that is based in his gracious choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Deut. 1:8). Israel cannot choose to be *unchosen* by Yahweh, yet their choice either to obey or disobey God plays a significant role in the quality of life they will

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 147.

experience in the land. Deuteronomy 7:11–15 delineates the type of blessing Israel may expect for their faithfulness to the covenant: Yahweh’s love, large families, abundant harvests, increased livestock, and no sickness.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Deuteronomy 28:15–68 promises that they may expect the opposite if they disobey: sickness, disease, death, defeat in war, famine, barrenness, and lack of provision (unfruitful crops and the inability to eat from one’s livestock). As with blessing, the curses are conditional upon the people’s behavior and come from the hand of Yahweh.

### *Unjust Suffering: Job*

In the very first verse of Job, we learn that Job is a righteous man who feared God and shunned evil (Job 1:1), going so far as to offer sacrifices for his children in case they sinned against God (Job 1:4–5). Incidentally, Job was also fantastically wealthy (Job 1:2–3). The text does not say explicitly that Job’s wealth resulted directly from his obedience to Yahweh, but Job’s friends thought as much. Satan’s view was a bit more nuanced; he argued that Job worshiped Yahweh because of Yahweh’s blessing, rather than Job’s blessing being a result of his faithfulness. Both Job’s friends and Satan incorrectly judged the situation.

Deuteronomy presents the worldview that things will generally go well for those who fear and obey Yahweh and that the righteous may rightfully expect to receive blessings for their faithful lives. The book of Job, however, seeks to rectify the common misunderstanding and misappropriation of this theology, as Robin Routledge states, “[W]hat [Job’s friends] are saying is not wrong, and similar principles are stated in other parts of Scripture. The error is in their rigid *application* of it.”<sup>6</sup>

Job’s friends present two basic reasons for Job’s suffering: either he has sinned and God is rightly punishing him (Job 4:8). Or, he has sinned and God is using his suffering to discipline him.<sup>7</sup> Eliphaz sums up the first explanation for Job’s suffering: “plowers of iniquity and sowers of trouble will reap it” (Job 4:8). Certainly Eliphaz is correct, and the New Testament confirms that the wicked can expect God’s punishment, as was the case with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. However, Job has committed no sin. Thus, while the principle of suffering as a result of sin holds true in general, Job demonstrates that it does not hold true in each particular instance of suffering.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Deut. 30:11–20, where Moses assures the Israelites that the commandments are doable—the commandments are near to them, in their hearts (11–14). The people, therefore, cannot charge Yahweh with making the conditions of blessing too difficult. The passage goes on to explain what blessing consists of: descendants, reputation, physical provision—both sustenance and victory over enemies—land, and long life.

<sup>6</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 257.

<sup>7</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 256–57.

Elihu sums up the friends' second explanation to Job's problem: "And he opens their ears to discipline and commands that they return from wickedness. If they obey and serve him, they will finish their days in goodness, and their years in singing. But if they do not obey, they will perish by the sword and die without knowledge" (Job 36:10–12). Again, Job's friend is expounding biblical truth. God disciplines in order to teach his children obedience, which the Old Testament demonstrates and the book of Hebrews reiterates (Heb. 12:5–11). Elihu and Eliphaz are both correct: God does sometimes, perhaps even often, use suffering as a method of both discipline and punishment. However, they fail to recognize that God is not limited to a strict set of principles that we humans use to understand his dealings in the world. Jesus brings this out when he states that his Father "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Deuteronomy gives believers a general set of principles by which to live, but we must understand that God's ways are mysterious, as Job learns when he encounters the Almighty.

Despite the best efforts of his friends to convince Job of his guilt, Job holds steadfastly to his conviction that he has committed no sin deserving of such treatment from God. Rather, he argues that if he has indeed sinned then he will gladly accept the recompense due him (Job 31). God finally reveals himself to Job in the mighty whirlwind, but God's presence brings resolution to Job's misery in a surprising way. We expect God to reveal his conversation with Satan perhaps give him a nice commendation. Instead, God inundates Job with questions he cannot answer, until finally Job repents. While Job's repentance seems strange, Norman Habel points out that "Job had sought to arraign God so as to bring the matter of his human integrity before the highest possible court of appeal. Yahweh's speech from the whirlwind, however, did not focus on the question of Job's innocence, but on the subject of Yahweh's cosmic design and governance which Job had belittled as chaotic and cruel."<sup>8</sup> Thus, it becomes clear to Job that he has misjudged Yahweh's right to rule the world as he sees fit, which explains the barrage of questions that Yahweh hurled at Job and to which he had no response. In the final summation, Job repents because he has not understood the ways of God nor admitted that God is free to do as he sees fit. For humans, God's will is often mysterious. We must not make the mistake of Job's friends in rigidly applying the retribution principle to all instances of suffering. Likewise, we must not make Job's mistake in thinking that we might be better suited to rule the world in God's place. As humans, we must seek to live by the general principles that God has outlined in his word, yet we must also remain faithfully obedient to him and trust in his goodness even when life events seem to point to the contrary.

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<sup>8</sup> Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 581.

### *Unity within Diversity: The Two Sides of Righteous Living in the Old Testament*

Deuteronomy presents one side of the issue of suffering in the Old Testament: suffering results from disobedience. Job present presents the other side: sometimes the righteous suffer. These two aspects of suffering come together in a unique way in the book of Ecclesiastes, which aptly demonstrates the unity of the Old Testament's treatment of suffering within its great diversity.

Ecclesiastes addresses the issue of unjust suffering and ultimately comes to the same conclusion as Job: God is sovereign; humans must trust and obey him. However, Ecclesiastes blends the Deuteronomic understanding of suffering with the problem of righteous suffering in a way that gets to the heart of the Old Testament's view of how one should relate to God in the face of life's mysteries. One of the primary themes of Ecclesiastes is death.<sup>9</sup> For Ecclesiastes, the concept of death is closely related to the concept of injustice, which for Ecclesiastes means the breakdown between one's actions and the expected consequences of such actions.<sup>10</sup> These two issues—death and injustice—speak to the issue of unjust suffering in a meaningful way because of Ecclesiastes's response: fear God, obey his commands, and enjoy the gifts God has given you to enjoy.

Ecclesiastes recognizes that in the fallen world life does not always turn out as we think it should: "I turned and I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the strong, and also food is not to the wise, and also wealth is not to the discerning, and also favor is not to the knowledgeable, for time and chance happen to all of them" (Eccl. 9:11). The book's author furthers this idea when he laments that the wise and foolish both die (Eccl. 2:16), and that humans and animals meet the same end (Eccl. 3:19). These sentiments are why some scholars view the book as the musing of an unorthodox sage who is raging against the theological traditions handed down to him.<sup>11</sup> However, once we read these statements in the context of the book's overall theological message, we find that the author is in fact an orthodox sage who is simply grappling with the realities of life in a world turned upside-down by sin. In essence, Ecclesiastes offers

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ethan Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless. Part 1," *JBQ* 36 (2008): 215.

<sup>10</sup> Russell L. Meek, "The Meaning of חַבֵּל in Qohelet: An Intertextual Suggestion," in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 253–55.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Hermet Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw, *Issues in Religion and Theology* 4 (Philadelphia: Fortress / London: SPCK, 1983), 141–53; Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *JBL* 105 (1986): 409–27.

a refreshingly honest portrait of “real life,” then offers two suggestions for how to deal with the suffering that humans face.

First, we find in Ecclesiastes six passages in which the author commends joy as a response to various types of injustice (Eccl. 2:24–26; 3:10–15, 16–22; 5:18–20 [ET 17–19]; 8:10–15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10). Craig Bartholomew describes these passages as “the vision evoked with Eden in Gen. [sic] 2 and in the promises to the Israelites about the good land of Israel,” stating that they present “an alternative vision set in contradictory juxtaposition to the conclusion of *hebel* that Qohelet’s epistemology leads him to.”<sup>12</sup> The *carpe diem* passages therefore represent an essential component to Qohelet’s vision for how life should be lived in light of the suffering and injustice that confronts believers.<sup>13</sup> In six key places in Ecclesiastes, Qohelet states that humans should take enjoyment in the temporal gifts of God—if God so allows it. Each of these “enjoy” statements comes after Qohelet has reflected on some aspect of the reversal of retribution theology. His answer to the fact that life does not always work out as it should is therefore that humans should take pleasure in the things in which God allows them to take pleasure, such as eating, drinking, working, and one’s spouse. Essentially, Qohelet encourages his readers—and us today—to acknowledge that suffering can and will occur even to the most righteous of individuals, and then to do all that is within our power to enjoy life. Rather than worrying over things outside of human control—such as Job’s intense suffering—we should take hold of the good things in life as they come.

Second, Qohelet urges his readers to be steadfastly obedient to God and to trust fully in God and his sovereignty. These two aspects of Qohelet’s message are most clear in Ecclesiastes 12:13–14, the book’s hermeneutical lens: “The end of the matter; everything has been heard. Fear God and keep his commands, for this is the whole of humanity. For all deeds God will bring into judgment, every secret thing whether good or evil.” Though this statement is almost universally taken to be the words of an author other than Qohelet, we find that the importance of fearful obedience to God manifests itself throughout the rest of the narrative. Thus, we read in Ecclesiastes 3:14 that God has acted so that people would fear him;<sup>14</sup> in

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<sup>12</sup> Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 152.

<sup>13</sup> Following scholarly convention, I am using “Qohelet” to refer to the main speaker in the book of Ecclesiastes.

<sup>14</sup> Note that in James Crenshaw’s (*Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987], 100) estimation, fear in Ecclesiastes is terror induced by “an unpredictable despot ... jealously guarding divine prerogatives.” Tremper Longman (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 124–25) concurs with Crenshaw, stating that “Qohelet believes that God acts the way that he does to frighten people into submission, not to arouse a sense of respectful awe of his power and might.” However, neither the immediate nor larger context demands such a reading.

5:1–7 Qohelet outlines the importance of approaching God’s house circum-spectly; and in 8:10–13 he reiterates his confidence that ultimately the righteous will fare better than the wicked. These passages, taken with 12:13–14 highlight the importance of both God’s sovereignty and the appropriate human response: fearful obedience. Therefore, while Qohelet commends that humanity take joy in God’s gifts, he is careful to warn people that their enjoyment must not exceed the bounds established by God. Ultimately, then, the human response to suffering is simply to walk in faithful obedience to God and trust him, the very same lesson that Job learned when God revealed himself from the whirlwind.

Taken together, Job and Ecclesiastes present a stunning picture of the appropriate human response to suffering. Humans are free to acknowledge openly that individual circumstances do not always turn out the way that Deuteronomy teaches that they should. Deuteronomy, along with Proverbs, supplies *general* principles that should be followed, but they are not iron-clad promises of long life and material blessing. In response to suffering, Job and Ecclesiastes teach that we are to fear God, obey God, trust God, and if possible, enjoy God’s gifts. Indeed, this is the whole of humanity.

In sum, the Old Testament presents two primary voices in regards to suffering. We learned first of all that Deuteronomy outlines what is commonly called retribution theology. That is, a person’s experience of either blessing or reward in this life is directly related to that person’s obedience to God. The wicked person should expect to suffer for his wickedness and the righteous person should expect blessing because of his righteousness. However, we also learned that it is vital to understand that this theological frame of mind represents the way that life generally happens. That is, on the grand scale, retribution theology rings true. However, individual circumstances vary from person to person. It is certainly true that suffering may result from a person’s direct sin, as Job’s friends held, and represent either the discipline or punishment of the holy God.

However, when we examined the books of Job and Ecclesiastes we learned that suffering is not always the result of direct sin. Suffering could simply be the result of living in a world that operates under the curse that resulted from Adam’s and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Ecclesiastes addresses this issue head-on by acknowledging the presence of injustice and suffering—even for the righteous—and then outlining the proper response to unjust suffering: trust in and obedience to God and enjoyment of his gifts. Similarly, Job explores the problem of righteous suffering, though it leaves readers with a less obvious program for coping with suffering. Rather than answer Job’s accusations, the Lord reveals himself to Job in a way that highlights his divine sovereignty and demonstrates Job’s lack of faithful trust in him. Ultimately, Job’s answer to suffering is the same as Ecclesiastes’s answer: trust the sovereign God.

Therefore, in examining these voices in the Old Testament, we find that there is great unity in their diversity. Rather than being opposing voices in the canon, they complement each other in a way that equips believers both



ancient and modern to deal with the vagaries of life. Proverbs and Deuteronomy urge faithful obedience to the covenant God Yahweh, complete with stern warnings for those who would choose to disobey. Underlying faithful obedience to the Lord is the concept that God is sovereign, which was clearly demonstrated to the Israelites as he led them out of Egypt and provided for them throughout the wilderness experience and would continue to do so as they conquered the Promised Land. God's sovereignty over all things demands that we humans trust in him, which is the basic response to suffering of both Job and Ecclesiastes. Essentially, the Old Testament teaching about suffering and its relationship to righteous living is therefore that it is best, and most appropriate, to walk in faithful obedience to the Lord, which in the most normal circumstances will result in a life of blessing. However, when such blessing does not occur, the best and most appropriate response remains to walk in faithful obedience to God. The underlying premise of the Old Testament response is therefore that God is sovereign, humans are not, and that we must put our faith fully in him, which works itself out in living a life characterized by obedience to him.

## SUFFERING IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

Jesus promises those who follow him will experience suffering, but that is not all. The gospel brings resolution to the dilemma of human suffering in that God took on flesh and suffered mightily so that his followers might experience salvation in him. Thus, Jesus's suffering is significant for Old Testament theology because Jesus represents the greatest extreme of the unjust sufferer—the one with no sin became sin, so that we might be counted righteous in him (2 Cor. 5:21). If we are to make sense of righteous suffering, then we must take into account the ultimate Sufferer. Not only that, but Jesus's suffering demonstrates that something is to be learned through suffering, as Hebrews 5:8–9 makes clear. The Bible is clear that suffering will happen, and that it will happen to Jesus's followers as a result of their faith in him, and sometimes for no apparent reason. As Bartholomew and O'Dowd point out, Jesus helps to resolve this tension because

Central to the biblical narrative is the slain lamb upon the throne; his death will ultimately remove all suffering, but in the time between his inauguration of the kingdom and its consummation, believers will continue to suffer and continue to read a book like Job. In a far fuller way we know that our Redeemer lives and that we shall yet live to see him.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Craig Bartholomew and Ryan O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic / Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2011), 158.

In Matthew 10:16–25 Jesus speaks to the Christian’s new reality regarding suffering:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

In this passage Jesus demonstrates that his followers of Christ should expect suffering as a normal part of the Christian life. Christians in the Western world for the most part do not suffer on account of their faith in Christ, but this is not the case for much of the rest of the world. Thus, though Western Christians are accustomed to a life of creaturely comforts, such as excesses of food and clothing, we should not forget that our situation is unique both in the current world situation and in the history of Christianity. Therefore, we turn now to the New Testament to examine its view of suffering in the Christian life.

### *Christ as Our Example*

First, we may look to Christ as the ultimate example of suffering. Bartholomew and O’Dowd point out that, like Job, Christ protested—albeit briefly—the suffering that he was to endure on the cross.<sup>16</sup> In the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing that he would soon face the humiliation and cruelty of the cross, he asked God if he would take from him the cup of suffering: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). It was indeed the Father’s will that Christ would take on the sins of the world and the suffering included

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<sup>16</sup> Bartholomew and O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 158.

therein, culminating in Christ's stunning statement on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Jesus's death was the height of all suffering, as he experienced in the most real way the separation from his Father for the sake of those who would be called children of God (1 John 3:1).

The author of Hebrews reflects on Christ's immense suffering and teaches that his willingness to suffer offers an example to his followers today (Heb. 5:8). Rather than question the sovereignty of God, as Job did, Christ understood that the Father was in control of his life and destiny throughout all of his suffering. Therefore, as Christians today work through the unjust suffering we face, we should look to Christ as our example. Christ did not cry out against the Father, nor did he resist the Father's will. Instead, he submitted his life to God, knowing that his Father was—and still is—trustworthy. Such trust and faithful obedience serves as the ultimate example for how to cope with suffering, and coheres with the teaching of the Old Testament: trust and obey, no matter what.

### *Christ as Our Liberator*

A second key aspect of the New Testament view of suffering is that Christ suffered so that he might once and for all remove suffering. Bartholomew and O'Dowd are again helpful here, for they point out that Jesus's burden contrasts significantly with that of Job, another righteous sufferer:

Unlike Job, Jesus, in his suffering, takes on himself the burden of the world's guilt and sin. Unlike Job, Jesus dies, crushed by that burden, but rises triumphantly to open the gates of the kingdom to all. Central to the biblical narrative is the slain lamb upon the throne; his death will ultimately remove all suffering, but in the time between his inauguration of the kingdom and its consummation, believers will continue to suffer and continue to need a book like Job. In a far fuller way we know that our Redeemer lives and that we shall yet to see him.<sup>17</sup>

Christ, as the conqueror of sin and death, will one day wipe away every tear and remove all suffering (Rev. 21:4). However, such will occur only at the consummation of his kingdom. Until then, believers must live their lives in trust and obedience, taking the long view of retribution. The promises of Proverbs and Deuteronomy—that a life lived in obedience to God will result in blessing—still represent the norm; however, we must realize that now even more so these promises are related to the next life.

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<sup>17</sup> Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 158.

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## SUFFERING AND THE MODERN CHURCH

The Old and New Testaments clearly teach that bad things happen to good people, that God's mysterious plans often remains mysterious, and that suffering will be the norm for followers of Christ in the New Testament age. What, then, should believers today do? How are we to reconcile our belief in a good God with our belief in an omnipotent God? What are the options for dealing with the issue of theodicy in ministry both to believers and unbelievers?

First, we see clearly that retribution theology, as outlined above and seen throughout the Bible, teaches Christians today that we must remain steadfastly obedient to the Lord in all circumstances. Sinful choices will certainly result in negative consequences, whether in this life or the next. If we are experiencing suffering, we must search our hearts to see if there is any sin for which God is either punishing or disciplining us. Suffering may be used of God to lovingly bring us back into right relationship with him. However, we must be careful not to misinterpret this theology as a guarantee that righteous people will face no suffering, as Jesus himself so wonderfully demonstrates.

Second, from the book of Job and the work of Christ on the cross, we learn that our suffering may not be the result of sin. However, even if our particular circumstances do not work out *in this life* according to the broad principles of retribution theology, we must still remain faithfully obedient to Christ. The New Testament adjusts the retribution principle so that Christians are now *expected* to experience suffering for their righteousness. Our reward for obedience to Christ and faithful proclamation of the gospel will come in the next life, not necessarily this one. Persecution is promised, so we should not balk when faced with it.

Third, the book of Ecclesiastes teaches that we are to rejoice in all the gifts that God has given us. These gifts include the simple things of life, such as food, work, and a spouse. If God so allows it, then we must take great pleasure in these things because we know very well that suffering may lie ahead. Rather than fret about those things over which we have no control, we should seize every opportunity for joy that God has given.

Fourth, Ecclesiastes and Job teach us that God is both sovereign and mysterious. Our present suffering—if not the result of direct sin—serves a larger purpose in God's plan. We should certainly be honest with God about how we feel, but we must not wring our hands at him and question his goodness or sovereignty. Instead, we must humbly submit to him and trust that he rules over us with grace and mercy. Such a posture is difficult to maintain in the face of suffering, but we must nevertheless trust in God's sovereignty. A robust theology of suffering must take into account the various causes of suffering, but ultimately must submit to God's sovereignty and mystery, and trust that in his great goodness, he has allowed us to suffer for purposes greater than we can understand. Furthermore, a theology

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of suffering must embrace the good things when God allows it, and above all must live a blameless life no matter the consequences.

Fifth, and finally, for those Christians living without persecution, such as those in the North American context, we must pray for and identify with our brothers and sisters across the world who are suffering for the cause of Christ. The body of Christ knows no national boundaries, so we must not turn a blind eye to the suffering of believers in faraway places that we may never visit. Beyond simply praying for the persecuted, may we also support them in whatever way possible, which can include financial support, the sending of missionaries, or even leaving our own comfortable context to go serve in a place where persecution is a genuine threat. Maranatha.

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