

BIBLICAL RESPONSES TO SUFFERING

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INTRODUCTION: Globally, people are getting acquainted with news and updates on deaths, economic crisis, loss of dignity, loss of freedom of movement, security threat, possibility of wars, mistrust on people, fear of the unknown, etc. The overarching consternation is that there is too much freedom with too little responsibility; too much of wealth with a few and too little left for the rest of the world; too few with too much power over the vulnerable millions, with too little accountability! Human rights violations, war crimes, food insecurity, violence, celebration of obscenity, loss of value for human life, public shaming by online trolling, disappointing legal system are becoming part of the 'new normal.' When we look at the Church, there is a loss of emphasis on Beatitudes and godly virtues. We wonder what is causing erosion of trust and deterioration of peaceful co-existence. The frustrated millions ask: Why God allows suffering? Can a loving and wise God permit His children to suffer?

I. PURPOSES OF SUFFERING: Bible has historic records of the sufferings of the righteous: Young Joseph was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, severely tempted, falsely accused and imprisoned. Job, we see how his oxen and donkeys were stolen, his farmhands killed, his sheep and herdsmen were burned by a fire, his camels were stolen and his servants killed; his sons and daughters died in a windstorm and Job himself was struck with boils. Jeremiah was persecuted by his own family, plotted against by his own town folks, rejected and ridiculed by his religious peers, arrested, beaten and accused of treason. Paul was plotted against, stoned, left for dead, subjected to satanic pressure, beaten and jailed at Philippi, ridiculed, and falsely accused. He endured a number of violent storms at sea, was bitten by a serpent, and forsaken by all. The problem of suffering is a painful question for a believer and an unbeliever. Bible teaches on suffering with clarity and it hardly needs profound interpretations.

a. To Produce Fruit: Apostle Peter exhorted, 'Suffering produces patience, joy, knowledge and maturity. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast' (1 Peter 5:10).

b. To Silence the Devil: Every true believer will face frequent attacks from the Devil. It may come, with God's permission or through blood-thirsty people who hate whatever is good or noble. Invariably God's intension is to silence the Devil! The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he (Job) has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger' (Job 1:12). Satan accused Job of serving God merely for material blessings. Then, the Lord allowed the devil to torment Job to demonstrate that His servant loved God because of who He was, and not for what Job could get from Him.

c. To Glorify God: Jesus answered to the question of human suffering thus: 'Neither this (blind) man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him' (John 9:3).

d. To Make Us Like Jesus: Paul suffered persecution for preaching Christ, yet, he makes it clear that his avowed goal was: 'I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and

participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead' (Philippians 3:10-11).

e. To Teach Us Dependence: Jesus taught us to depend on His energizing and enabling grace, saying, 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

f. To Refine Our Lives: King David who even ran for his life could observe suffering with optimism thus, 'For You, God, tested us; You refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but You brought us to a place of abundance' (Psalm 66:10-12).

g. To Rebuke Our Sin: God is holy and His words are pure. Therefore, He disciplines the unruly and disobedient child of His. The Bible instructs, 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastens everyone He accepts as His son' (Hebrews 12: 5-6).

h. To Enlarge Our Ministry toward Others: Saint Paul explained suffering to Corinthian church thus: 'God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God' (2 Corinthians 1:3).

II. RESPONSES TO SUFFERING: Many tend to view Bible as a mysterious jigsaw puzzle and dig out a truth here or interpret a prophecy just to suit their pre-existing convictions or temperaments. The pious may note, 'In that day,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping' (Amos 8:10). Those with apocalyptic anticipations may caution, 'for, in just a little while, He (Christ) who is coming will come and will not delay' (Hebrews 10:37). Those relying on predestination may tend to calmly quote unmoved, 'Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do' (Ecclesiastes 9:7). Those who stress on choice and freewill may attempt to, 'Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season' (2 Timothy 4:2). Pessimists may rue, 'I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because Your hand was on me and You had filled me with indignation' (Jeremiah 15:17). The cautious may stay as per, 'Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until His wrath has passed by' (Isaiah 26:20).

Opportunists may quickly cite: 'When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other' (Ecclesiastes 7:14). The strong-willed may wax rhetorical saying, 'Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?' (Job 2:10). Those judgmental may point out, 'the eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low' (Isaiah 2:11). The rich may keep partying on amazing grace, with confidence on: 'Then you ... shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household' (Deuteronomy 26:11). Those who are philosophical may summarize, 'Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment' (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

In these days, a babel of proverbial voices with Biblical overtones can be heard trying to make sense of any human suffering and its ravaging consequences, and those divergent voices expose the

unpreparedness of God's people to face uncertainties ahead. For instance, let us consider some probable causes for collective suffering: social injustice, unreasonable restrictions on freedom of religion, systemic oppression, economic inequity, crimes, and callous disregard for sanctity of life. What can the children of God do to alleviate sufferings caused by such detrimental factors as these?

a. Speak up for Social Justice: As deep-rooted evil reigns the world, the social order turns so demonic and self-destructive that we even fear the ultimate extinction of human race. Followers of Christ should strive to 'Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute' (Psalm 82:3). Solomon admonishes, 'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute' (Proverbs 31:8). Denial of justice or delayed justice has inflicted untold sufferings to innocent lives and they hardly get unnoticed.

b. Pray for Freedom of Religious Expression: Nehemiah stood before King Artaxerxes and pleaded for a leave to rebuild the ruined walls of Jerusalem. The clarion call of Nehemiah was, 'Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace' (Nehemiah 2:17). Under the leadership of Priest Ezra, 'the people ... celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. (Ezra 6:16) As God's people we are called to rebuild the walls of faith and morality, and set our own house in order and renew apostolic love and care for one another. Paul describes his suffering for the sake of the gospel, saying, 'I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.' (2 Timothy 2:9). To this effect, Paul always sought the prayers of his associates and congregations.

c. Strengthen Equity in Trade: When the world is driven by greed, black money, currency manipulation and biased trade policies, and digital fraud, we should understand, that 'The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him.' (Proverbs 11:1) For instance, the World Economic Forum article cites United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, thus: 'The annual costs of international corruption amount to a staggering \$3.6 trillion in the form of bribes and stolen money.' Christian expression in whatever form should include advocating for and contributing towards fair trade and just weights and balances, and should endeavor to make rulers and policy makers aware of the merits of fair trade.

d. Support Measures for Crime Control: King Solomon observed that even 'but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel' (Proverbs 12:10b) God told Israelites, 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other' (Ezra 9:11). We need Ezras today to rekindle the moral senses of the society, as followers of Christ are called be salt and light to the world.

e. Focus on godly Virtues: Life is short, anyway, for anyone. Much of what we believe is reflected in our attitudes and actions. Solomon says, 'For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?' (Ecclesiastes 3:22). This reminds us to be humble about our backgrounds, talents, possessions beliefs, work and our future and focus with meekness on godly virtues of faith, hope and love. We should grow in spiritual maturity enough to say like Paul, 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

f. Minister to the Sick and the Dying: Every country and province operates a health care delivery system, where God's people can collaborate by expending their time, expertise, facilities and resources. Peter advises, 'Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh' (1 Peter 2:18). God wants us to pray before He could heal as a proof that He listens to prayers of faith: 'If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land' (2 Chronicles 7:14).

CONCLUSION: The coin of suffering has two sides. On the one hand, suffering may be viewed as coming from God to bring out the best in us, for God's glory. On the other hand, Satan may attempt to use the same temptation and suffering to bring out the worst in us, if we do not heed to respond according to scripture. A person of faith may suffer because of his position or his disposition. People may unwisely despise suffering and treat it too lightly like Esau treated his birthright. Or a person may get depressed by treating suffering too seriously and fall away from faith.

God wants a believer to practically gain from suffering through spiritual enlightenment which results from exercise of faith in the promises of God as found in the Bible. Trust leads to obey God's Word, as His Word is the lamp for the feet and the light for the path, as it was for Psalmist David. Saint Paul comforts us, saying, 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' (Romans 8:28) James, the brother of the Lord, counsels, 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, a whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance' (James 1:2-3). Paul observes, 'For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all' (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Let God's people march on with a sacrificial spirit and spiritual maturity, as the battles in life are not of flesh and blood, but of the spirit. The Bible declares, 'The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord' (Proverbs 21:31). Such a realization that the Lord battles along with His children in all of life's battles will render a fresh perspective on suffering and create in them an inner peace that will defy logical understanding! For those who persevere in faith and prayer, the good news is, suffering is just for a season, as per St. Peter's benediction: 'And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast' (1 Peter 5:10).

*Oh God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Be thou' our guide while troubles last
And our eternal home*

-- Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

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