

A Brief Discussion on the Suffering of Christians

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What is Christian suffering?

Why must we suffer?

How should we suffer?

1. What Is Christian Suffering?

To understand the meaning of suffering in this article, we must first examine how the Bible describes the sufferings of Jesus. Scripture teaches that God made Jesus “perfect through suffering,” thereby accomplishing our salvation (Hebrews 2:10).

The sufferings of Jesus included being tempted (Hebrews 2:18), oppression, affliction, and finally being led like a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7; 1 Peter 3:18).

The Bible also encourages believers to learn from the example of the prophets, who both suffered and showed endurance (James 5:10). What kinds of suffering did the prophets experience?

They were killed (Nehemiah 9:26; Matthew 23:37), rejected (Nehemiah 9:30), mistreated (Psalm 105:15), and endured many other forms of persecution.

What about the apostle Paul? He declared that he rejoiced in his sufferings (Colossians 1:24). What kinds of suffering did he experience?

Paul endured imprisonment and chains (2 Timothy 2:9); countless beatings, floggings, and stonings; shipwrecks and being adrift at sea; dangers from rivers, robbers, his own countrymen, Gentiles, the city, the wilderness, the sea, and false brothers. In addition, he experienced hard labor, weariness, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, daily concern for all the churches, physical weakness, and righteous indignation (2 Corinthians 11:23–29).

From these biblical examples, we can see that suffering includes not only physical pain, but also persecution, hardship, emotional burdens, spiritual warfare, and every form of affliction endured for God and His kingdom.

2. Why Must We Suffer?

Jesus commanded His followers to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow Him is not worthy to be His disciple (Matthew 10:38). Therefore, suffering for Christ is not optional; it is an essential part of Christian discipleship.

Paul rejoiced in his sufferings because he understood that these sufferings were a continuation of Christ's afflictions for His body, the church (Colossians 1:24). He also connected a deeper knowledge of Christ and the power of His resurrection with sharing in Christ's sufferings and becoming like Him in His death (Philippians 3:10). The closer we walk with Christ, the more willing we become to share in His sufferings.

Paul also exhorted believers to “share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God” (2 Timothy 1:8). Moses likewise chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin (Hebrews 11:25). Suffering for the kingdom of God is far better than temporary sinful pleasure, for such pleasure quickly passes away. Moreover, enduring suffering for the sake of God's kingdom shows that we are counted worthy of the kingdom of God (2 Thessalonians 1:5).

As sinful human beings, we experience suffering in various ways because of sin (Psalm 32:10; 119:67). Therefore Peter calls us to adopt the biblical perspective on suffering. We may suffer because of our own sins, or we may choose to suffer for doing good. Being beaten for our own wrongdoing brings no credit; but suffering for doing good is in accordance with God's will and is pleasing in His sight (1 Peter 2:20; 3:17; 4:15).

Peter further exhorts believers to follow the example of Christ and willingly suffer in the flesh. One benefit of such suffering is that it helps us cease from sin (1 Peter 4:1). Likewise, the psalmist declares: “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Psalm 119:71). God often uses suffering as a means of sanctification, teaching us obedience and drawing us closer to Himself.

Paul reminds believers that it has been granted to them not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29). Therefore, suffering for Christ is both our duty and our privilege. It is also the path to future glory, for if we suffer with Christ, we will also be glorified with Him. Our willingness to suffer with Him demonstrates that we are fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17).

Furthermore, suffering confirms our identity as servants of God. Paul describes the marks of genuine ministry as “great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (2 Corinthians 6:4–5). Although suffering cannot save us, it often proves the genuineness of our faith and ministry in the midst of trials, as long as we remain faithful to Christ.

3. How Should We Suffer?

Jesus is the most perfect and eternal example of suffering. Like a sheep silent before its shearers, He remained silent in the face of the great injustice He suffered (Isaiah 53:7). He willingly endured such suffering in order to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18). Therefore, a clear understanding of God’s redemptive mission provides believers with the motivation to endure suffering faithfully.

As mentioned earlier, Paul also connected knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection with sharing in Christ’s sufferings and becoming like Him in His death (Philippians 3:10). Our love for Christ and our desire to know Him more deeply give us the strength to suffer faithfully for Him.

Peter teaches that it is a blessing to suffer for righteousness’ sake. Therefore we should neither fear nor be troubled nor be ashamed. Instead, we should rejoice, because we share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 3:14; 4:13, 16). Joy in suffering is possible when our eyes are fixed not only on the present trials but on the eternal glory that is to come.

Prayer is indispensable in times of suffering. James simply teaches: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray” (James 5:13). Through prayer we receive God’s strength, wisdom, comfort, and endurance to remain faithful.

Jesus also taught His disciples not to fear those who kill the body and after that can do nothing more (Luke 12:4). When we suffer according to God's will, we should entrust our souls to a faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19), just as Jesus in Gethsemane entrusted Himself to the Father's will (Matthew 26:39–44). Trust in God's sovereignty enables us to endure suffering with faith and peace.

Endure Suffering in Ministry (2 Timothy 4:5)

In his final charge to Timothy, Paul exhorted him to “endure suffering” while faithfully fulfilling his ministry (2 Timothy 4:5). Earlier, Paul compared the servant of God to a good soldier of Christ Jesus who willingly endures hardship (2 Timothy 2:3). Therefore every servant of God should regard suffering as a normal part of faithful ministry, not as an unexpected interruption.

No believer suffers alone. When one member of the body suffers, all the members suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26). God has also given His people the fellowship of the church so that believers may encourage, comfort, and intercede for one another in times of trial.

Importantly, we find comfort in knowing that God sees, hears, and cares for those who suffer (Psalm 22:24). Although we may need to endure suffering for a little while, God Himself will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish us (1 Peter 5:10).

Finally, those who suffer for Christ not only share in His sufferings but also share in His comfort (2 Corinthians 1:7) and future glory (1 Peter 5:1). This hope of glory enables believers to persevere in faith, knowing that the present sufferings are temporary, but the reward in Christ is eternal.

Conclusion

Suffering is an inevitable part of the Christian life, yet it is never meaningless. God uses suffering to conform us more to the image of Christ, deepen our fellowship with Him, strengthen our faith, and prepare us for the glory that is to come. Therefore we should neither seek suffering for its own sake, nor fear it, nor try to escape it at all costs. Instead, we should follow the example of Jesus, entrust ourselves to a faithful Creator, rejoice in sharing the sufferings of Christ, and remain faithful to the end. May God grant us grace to endure every trial with faith, hope, and love, knowing that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). May every trial draw us closer to Christ and bring glory to God.