

# The Theology of Suffering: Finding The Purpose (of Suffering and Persecution)

Bishop Ron Libby

Notes

When we think of a theology, one has much to ponder. For our purposes, we want to focus on one aspect of theology: *the theology of suffering*.

Definition of Theology: The study of the nature of God and religious belief.

As we study the scriptures through the lenses of brokenness and suffering, we will uncover a plethora of passages and accounts of persecution. I will attempt to delineate and make sense of the trials, pain and disappointments we as Christians face down this path we are called to journey.

Many Christians become disillusioned and discouraged by the trials and adversity that comes their way. Often, young Christians get a taste of the euphoria associated with their newly-established relationship with God. They are born again of the water and of the spirit, and the gleeful aspect of this supernatural encounter can shield them for a short period of time. Life then becomes increasingly challenging and it's at this point, that if they are not securely anchored in the Lord and His Word, the initial euphoric feeling gives way to puzzlement and bewilderment concerning what they are confronted with.

Whether "young" or "old" in the Lord, many get disheartened by opposition. It can even feel like God has "left". Of course, we know that to be impossible because our God will never "leave nor forsake us" (1 Kings 8:57, Hebrews 13:5).

In my early Christian walk, I was often confused by the very things I'm sharing with you today. I was born again at 21 years old. Two years later, with the help of the Lord and the guidance of my pastor, my 20-year old wife and I started a church. That became a launching pad for learning how to understand and to grow through the suffering I experienced. I learned what trials meant and what they did not mean. All Christians can easily become despondent if they cannot find purpose in their suffering.

Anybody understand what I'm talking about? Did you have similar experiences? Perhaps someone is struggling with some things along these same lines today. Let's launch and find out.

## **As We All Know Jesus Suffered in His life and Ministry.**

**To Suffer** is defined as: To struggle in a contest, to strive, to undergo hardships.

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Now, let's hone in on a few references of Jesus' suffering.

Luke 9:22 (KJV)

*"Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day."*

Luke 17:25 (KJV)

*"But first must he suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation"*

Luke 22:15 (KJV)

*"And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer:"*

Luke 24: 46 (KJV)

*"And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day:"*

Acts 3:18 (KJV)

*"But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled."*

## Not only did Jesus suffer, but his disciples did as well.

Acts 5: 40-41 (KJV)

*"<sup>40</sup> And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> And they departed from the presence of the council, **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.**"*

The Greek definition of beaten:

1. To skin, to thrash
2. To flay, to scourge

In this context, being beaten is not some soft kind of rebuke. It involves agonizing pain. Take notice at their response to being gruesomely mistreated.

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This seems odd; vicious beating and gratefulness (coupled with high praise for the privilege to suffer). They do not go hand in hand. It is an **anomaly**.

Definition of anomaly: something that deviates from what is standard, normal or expected.

Would you be an anomaly and rejoice if you were beaten for the Lord's sake or would you be offended and feel angry that God wasn't helping or saving you from that persecution? I feel disappointed that I haven't been beaten for my faith. I don't feel like an anomaly. In fact, I'm just normal...

Greek Definition of Shame:

1. To dishonor, to insult
2. To treat with contempt

This definition is not pleasant to look at, let alone embrace because it could apply to us later down the road. Are we prepared or willing to be that committed and be joyful in hard times like the Lord's disciples were?? Are we willing savor shame for the Lord's sake? How do we become them?? Do we believe it to be an honor? The disciples considered being dishonored for their faith to be an honor. What a stark contrast!

<sup>1</sup> Peter 2:20 (KJV)

*"For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God."*

Do you really want to be right with God? Do you want to please God no matter the price?? You and I are greatly challenged by this verse. We often focus on not having a bad attitude and we think we "do well!" This scripture "jacks up" the requirements of being pure before God; not somewhat pure but totally pure. Let's read this verse one more time.

<sup>1</sup> Peter 2:20 (KJV)

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*"For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God."*

1 Peter 2:20 (AMP)

*"After all, what kind of credit is there if, when you do wrong and are punished for it, you endure it patiently? But if when you do what is right and patiently bear [undeserved] suffering, this finds favor with God."*

1 Peter 2:20 (MSG)

*"There's no particular virtue in accepting punishment that you well deserve. But if you're treated badly for good behavior and continue in spite of it to be a good servant, that is what counts with God."*

1 Peter 2:20 (NLT)

*"Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you."*

Clearly, I am not there yet, but I want to be there; and as I'm working through this, I am going to get there... as far as I can. I think I should make it a priority for the rest of my life to continue to be more and more righteous through this teaching. What do you think of you joining with me by fervently following what the apostles taught us to do and never go back? Perhaps you and I can confer and help one another in small groups or within friend groups with the purpose to achieve that goal. What do you think?

Why come to a seminar like this and not be completely committed to what is being taught?

1 Peter 4:15-16, 19 (KJV)

*"<sup>15</sup> But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. <sup>16</sup> Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf...<sup>19</sup> Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."*

Revelations 2:10 (KJV)

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*"<sup>10</sup> Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."*

Endurance through suffering produces favor with God.

It's staggering to me, that this band of young Christians would have an attitude of selflessness and willingness to serve the Lord to the degree that they would find themselves excited that they were chosen to be physically, emotionally and spiritually tormented for Jesus' sake.

**Additional material for personal study:** 1 Peter 3:14, 17-18. Luke 6:22.

## The Apostle Paul is "Superman" in my World.

What makes him great is that he was a man. Although he was, what he committed to and suffer for God was astonishing. His sold-outness and offering of self, to my understanding, is unmatched to this day. He was truly a Giant in his humility, brokenness for the Gospel, fearlessness, resoluteness and grace. I would dare say for people to think him to be any less than that would be ignorant.

Paul was promised suffering. It was an integral part of his calling.

In the passage below, Jesus commissions Ananias to go meet Saul. He then helps Ananias with his hesitancy and fear of meeting Saul, who at the time had the reputation of being a persecutor of Christians. The Lord does so by helping Ananias understand Paul's calling and mission:

Acts 9:15-17 (KJV)

*"<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: <sup>16</sup> For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. <sup>17</sup> And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost."*

Paul was to flourish in ministry and abound in suffering.

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Romans 8: 16-18 (KJV)

<sup>16</sup>The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: <sup>17</sup>And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. <sup>18</sup>For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Romans 8: 16-18 (AMP)

<sup>16</sup>For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. <sup>17</sup>And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. <sup>18</sup>But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering."

Again, these verses convey faith from a man who knew unparalleled suffering. He speaks of it as it were a little matter; and Paul's sufferings were never a little matter!

I want us to take a pause at this juncture. Let's take a few minutes. Get into a group of three or four people, and share your thoughts concerning what Paul talked about in the verse we just read. One person in each group would lead the discussion within your group and keep it moving.

Is it reasonable that suffering seems to be compulsory (mandatory, required and obligatory) if you want to partake in God's glory? The passage we just read implies that in the end it will be worth whatever our sufferings are. In fact, we should rejoice about trials. They seem to be our measure of success. What do you think about that?

Get in a circle with three of four of your brothers and sisters and answer that question together. We will then come back together and share our thoughts.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (AMP)

<sup>17</sup>For our momentary, light distress [this passing trouble] is producing for us an eternal weight of glory [a fullness] beyond all measure [surpassing all comparisons, a transcendent splendor and an endless blessedness]! <sup>18</sup>So we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are unseen; for the things which are visible are temporal [just brief and fleeting], but the things which are invisible are everlasting and imperishable."

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1 Corinthians 4: 12-13 (KJV)

*"<sup>12</sup> And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: <sup>13</sup> Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day."*

1 Corinthians 4: 12-13 (AMP)

*"<sup>12</sup> We work [for our living], working hard with our own hands. When we are reviled and verbally abused, we bless. When we are persecuted, we take it patiently and endure. <sup>13</sup> When we are slandered, we try to be conciliatory and answer softly. We have become like the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now."*

Would being in the spot of these 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians be humiliating?

This passage makes me feel like a tiny, weeny Christian. What can I do about that?? How can we become more Christ-like to the point that we find ourselves in persecution and pain? How do we translate this passage into its reality?

1 Corinthians 10: 13 (KJV)

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

You are certainly able to handle what comes your way. You are capable and have the grace to do so, even though it may be overbearing and overwhelming. Remember, "be still" (Refer back to *The Gift of Stillness* lesson). No stillness, no victory. You cannot do it by yourself, you need something more than you to do this. What would that be?

Pay attention to the amplified. It will illuminate your understanding of this verse.

1 Corinthians 10: 13 (AMP)

<sup>13</sup> No temptation [regardless of its source] has overtaken *or* enticed you that is not common to human experience [nor is any temptation unusual or beyond human resistance]; but God is faithful [to His word—He is compassionate and trustworthy], and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability [to resist], but along with the temptation He [has in the past and is now and] will [always]

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provide the way out as well, so that you will be able to endure it [without yielding, and will overcome temptation with joy].

This means if you fail, you weren't steadfast. The Word tells us we can do it. If you fail, it's because you gave up. **You chose to fail.**

1 Corinthians 12: 26 (KJV)

"And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it."

This speaks to the inter-connectedness of the body of Christ. We cannot be idle when brothers are in pain. It's totally contrary to the Word of God; and we should rejoice with brothers and sisters when they enjoy successes.

**Sympathy vs. Empathy.** Sympathy says, "I feel sorry for you" while empathy says, "I enter in your situation." Sympathy really doesn't help me. We must be empathetic with and towards our struggling brothers and sisters. Rather than just observing them, we must extend a hand, i.e. do something about it. Join them! Walk with them!

2 Corinthians 1: 6 (AMP)

*"But if we are troubled and distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted and encouraged, it is for your comfort, which works [in you] when you patiently endure the same sufferings which we experience."*

2 Corinthians 1: 6 (MSG)

"When we suffer for Jesus, it works out for your healing and salvation. If we are treated well, given a helping hand and encouraging word, that also works to your benefit, spurring you on, face forward, unflinching."

Is the apostle telling us that we should embrace trouble and rejoice about it because we can use that experience to help others through the same difficulties? We can leverage our witness for the sake of the brother. Are we supposed to find fellow Christians who are hurting the way we once were, and share with them how God carried us past some opposition?



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Commenting on this passage, the Apostolic Study bible says: “[a]s our Father, God provides His children with mercy and comfort... Paul and the church at Corinth had shared in Christ’s sufferings. God’s merciful deliverance of Paul from his tribulation served as an encouragement to the Corinthians that [God] would deliver them also.”

The world, and even some shallow Christians do not grasp what appears to be a rigid dichotomy between suffering and comforting. The Word of God reconciles this chasm by teaching us to have a godly perspective. When we endure suffering then share our experiences, these experiences testify of God’s power to see anyone through even the most challenging of hardships.

The next verse lays before us a dual purpose all Christians have:

Philippians 1:29-30 (KJV) says,

*“<sup>29</sup> For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; <sup>30</sup> Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.”*

Philippians 1:29-30 (AMP)

*“<sup>29</sup> For you have been granted [the privilege] for Christ’s sake, not only to believe and confidently trust in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, <sup>30</sup> [and so you are] experiencing the same [kind of] conflict which you saw me endure, and which you hear to be mine now.”*

Our faith in Christ and our call to deepen through suffering are inseparable.

Philippians 4:12 (KJV)

*“I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”*

In our lesson on “stillness”, we talked about “Godliness with contentment being great gain” (1 Tim 6:6). The same concept is portrayed here. We were taught that whether being blessed or not, we should be unruffled and content; whether joyful or in pain, we should be still.

1 Thessalonians 3: 3-4 (KJV)

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*"<sup>3</sup> That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. <sup>4</sup> For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know."*

Paul is telling the churches over and over and over, so they do not miss it. We are "appointed thereunto" i.e. destined for afflictions.

2 Thessalonians 1:4-5 (AMP)

*"<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we speak of you with pride among the churches of God for your steadfastness [your unflinching endurance, and patience] and your firm faith in the midst of all the persecution and [crushing] distress which you endure. <sup>5</sup> This is a positive proof of the righteous judgment of God [a sign of His fair verdict], so that you will be considered worthy of His kingdom, for which indeed you are suffering."*

2 Timothy 2: 9, 11-12 (KJV)

*"<sup>9</sup> Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound... <sup>11</sup> It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: <sup>12</sup> If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us:"*

2 Timothy 3: 12 (KJV) lays a promise before us.

*"Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."*

2 Timothy 3: 12 (AMP)

*"<sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who delight in pursuing righteousness and are determined to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be hunted and persecuted [because of their faith]."*

Should the fact that we are not suffering for the Lord's sake prompt some self-examination? If "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution", why haven't we? Have you ever thought about that?

If we have not witnessed or lived it, and the Word foretells that it will happen to each of us... brace yourself, because it is certainly coming.

**Additional material for personal study:** 2 Timothy 1:12.

***Suffering Serves Several Purposes.***

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- a) Suffering tests and exposes your faith for the purpose of teaching you reliance on Jesus... not self.

1 Peter 4: 12-14 (AMP)

*"<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which is taking place to test you [that is, to test the quality of your faith], as though something strange or unusual were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, keep on rejoicing, so that when His glory [filled with His radiance and splendor] is revealed, you may rejoice with great joy. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted and reviled for [bearing] the name of Christ, you are blessed [happy, with life-joy and comfort in God's salvation regardless of your circumstances], because the Spirit of glory and of God is resting on you [and indwelling you—He whom they curse, you glorify]."*

- b) Suffering is crucial for our salvation; scripture says so.

Romans 8:16-18 (KJV)

*"<sup>16</sup> The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: <sup>17</sup> And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. <sup>18</sup> For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*

- c) Suffering teaches the flesh submission and obedience to the spirit.

Hebrews 5: 8(KJV)

*"Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;"*

Hebrews 5: 8 (AMP)

*"<sup>18</sup> Although He was a Son [who had never been disobedient to the Father], He learned [active, special] obedience through what He suffered."*

Philippians 3:10 (AMP)

*"<sup>10</sup> And this, so that I may know Him [experientially, becoming more thoroughly acquainted with Him, understanding the remarkable wonders of His Person more completely] and [in that same way experience] the power of His resurrection [which overflows and is active in believers], and [that I may share] the fellowship of His sufferings, by being continually conformed [inwardly into His likeness even] to His death [dying as He did];"*

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d) Although the enemy can inflict pain on us, God uses that suffering to mature us.

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1 Peter 5:10 (KJV)

*"But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you."*

1 Peter 5:10 (AMP)

*"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace [who imparts His blessing and favor], who called you to His own eternal glory in Christ, will Himself complete, confirm, strengthen, and establish you [making you what you ought to be]."*

When you are feeling overwhelmed and undone, drive yourself to your knees for strength and empowerment from Jesus. The spirit will then renew you in fresh anointing, which will allow you to go to a higher place in God. The Lord wants us on our knees, because when we pray through, we grow. Our pain motivates an earnest search for God thus yields maturity in Him.

So, what will you do about what you have just been called to do? Since suffering is not only compulsory but also necessary, how will you approach it? Will you embrace it?

We know "neither the day **nor** the **hour** wherein the **Son of man** cometh" (Mathew 25:13, Mark 13:32). Therefore, I believe we will be glad to have had this equipping exchange about how to face the persecution that is coming, and could very well be upon us. Evil will undeniably try to stamp out righteousness. I suggest you seek Him, and seek Him again. You will end up with what God has created you to be.

**Additional material for personal study:** 1 Peter 5:10

Definition of **Perfect**:

1. To complete

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2. Thoroughly restore
3. Mend

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Definition of **Stablish**:

1. Resolute
2. Steadfastly

Definition of **Strengthen**: To make more capable.