

SUFFERING, per the BIBLE

Another man's attempt to figure it out...

It's not as easy as we are led to believe. We get sick and right away someone tells us we are being judged of God. Maybe.

Another person gets sick, and he is told there is no spiritual significance to the illness. Maybe.

Five men have damaged legs. Same leg, same damage. Five different reasons, as I understand Scripture. There may be more.

1. The first man is minding his own business when he is attacked by a violent thief. There is a scuffle, and the thief manages to push the victim over a small cliff. Upon landing he finds his leg is broken. The evil of men is the reason.
2. A man is out enjoying nature near that same cliff. He looks at an over-passing eagle, and likewise falls over the cliff. Breaks his leg. The carelessness of men.
3. The announcement is made of a child born. Father rushes back to the birthplace to be greeted by a grieving mother who has just given birth to a deformed child. One leg will never function properly. Candidate for healing, as the man born blind in Scripture. Or one who will test patience of himself and all who care for him.
4. A crazed shooter questions the faith of a line-up of people. All who are Christ's are shot in the leg. The cross of Christ.
5. A young rebel is hooked on alcohol and drugs. He gets behind the wheel. He is met by an oncoming car as Junior crosses over into the wrong lane. His leg is mangled. Idiocy. Rebellion.

All these men will suffer. And you, Christian worker, how will you deal with each of them? Certainly not the same. Suffering is not suffering. It's fruit. It's education. It's punishment. It's sovereignty of God, it's the cross. None of it should be taken lightly. Discernment must weed out exactly what this particular suffering is about. Sometimes rejoicing is in order, as those who suffered for Jesus in the Philippian jail. Sometimes repentance is the need. Sometimes pure trust. Sometimes patience. Sometimes miraculous faith for a healing.

Not all suffering is equal, by any means. The proper response to your particular form of suffering will bring about the fruit God is after. Does He want you to believe in His power? Does he allow you to share in His own suffering? Does He want you to limp as Jacob did, rest of your life, as a reminder of who is in charge? Does He merely want to take you aside –as Job- and give

you a course in His most precious subject, then bless you more than you ever experienced in your life? Is He making you weak so you can be strong?

Ask Him what He wants before you go off in a disappointing direction.

Let's examine some of the "suffering" passages and people of Scripture. Surely God has not left us without light on this matter.

Everyone's favorite and most obvious subject is Job. What can we learn from him?

Job is mentioned by two other Bible writers: Ezekiel, and James. Ezekiel – God actually – lists Job with Daniel and Noah as three of God's favorites. Here is evidence of the fact that we are not studying about a fictional character, but rather a man as real as Noah and Daniel, whose existences are seldom questioned. The other interesting fact to note is that much of the book of Job is about a man who is arguing with God and Life. We get a keen insight into the heart of God, who loved Job no less in the middle of the book than He did at its peaceful beginning and its victorious ending. God allows His children to speak their minds. He does not hesitate to speak His own, either. His relationships with His people are strong enough to endure steamy conversations.

Worthy of note in the James comment is the out-take of James of the story of Job. He says, "You have heard of the patience of Job." Yes, and that phrase "patience of Job" has become a complimentary description of all people from then until now who know how to endure. But as you are reading the book of Job, it does not seem you are listening to a patient man at all. He is angry. Bitter. Betrayed. Then rebuked for many chapters by the One Who allowed all this turmoil in his life. All we can glean about patience is that the Devil lost the day. For the Enemy had vowed that at one point Job would simply, as his lovely wife suggested, "curse God, and die."

But that never happened. He cursed his day, the fact of his being alive. He smoked his so-called friends. He lamented the loss of family. But in the midst of it all he knew that his Redeemer would somehow appear and bring victory from all this.

That is patience.

But I write not of patience. I am examining "suffering" and trying to answer the question "Why?"

Why did Job have to suffer? He was admittedly, as in the description of Noah at about that same time of history, a righteous man. Loved his neighbors. God Himself had prospered him to the point where he was overflowing with charity to others. Good father. Man of prayer. Model of character. Why him?

Answer that and you have come a long way in understanding why “bad” things happen to “good” people. Bad is in quotes because it really turned out for Job’s good. Good is in quotes because in the natural there is no one who is truly good, but God. Even righteous Noah and righteous Job and righteous Daniel had their imperfections, though we are not told of them. Perhaps Job’s “friends” told some truths about Job, though their attitude was wrong.

But Job had issues, like all of us. They were issues that everyone was willing to overlook because of all the good things I mentioned above. Everyone. Including Job. And that seems to be the point of the book. No man had a better reason to trust in his own righteousness than this holy man of old. But to trust in it before God would have been a foolish thing. God used this awful time in his life to let Job know “the rest of the story...”

And so with us... Job teaches us that sometimes God intervenes in our comfortable existence to let us know the rest of our own stories.

But Job is not the only Bible character who suffered. How about Jacob?

There is another element to add to the suffering thing in the life of Jacob: obvious imperfection. Job, and later Joseph, would suffer at the hands of a cruel enemy but in the greater hand of the perfecting God. Seeming injustice would come upon them, but they would be better in the end. Surely there were many sleepless days and nights questioning God, trying to figure it all out. In the end they would both see their own needs, and be super-blessed from it all.

Not quite Jacob’s story. His very name and his entrance into this world are shaded with some clear bent toward fleshly ways. Entering with his own mother into a plot to deceive. Quite on his own tricking his elder brother out of the blessing of God. As we trace his story we almost expect things to turn out as they do.

Jacob was beloved of, and chosen of, God. Hence God, who began a good work in him, could not stop until the work was perfected. One of the final touches on Jacob, after being deceived by Laban, and hounded by wives, and threatened twice by death at the hands of brother Esau, was a crippling touch from an angel. A limp would follow him all his days.

But there would be more. More deceit from his sons. Family intrigue. Seeming losses that were real enough to break him down to the point where even in his most glorious moment, before the Pharaoh of Egypt, he would have to confess that “few and evil” had been the days of his life.

So, sometimes suffering is for the obvious. Deserved, we say. But we should say it carefully. There is a sense in which all men deserve to suffer forever, and only by the grace of God are we set free from that possibility.

Now to David.

How does the suffering of David differ from that of Jacob? For one, Jacob seems to have been outwardly corrupted from childhood. David's youth is characterized by a zeal for the Lord, a heart after the Presence of God. Jacob entered into his difficulties as a clear and direct result of his bent toward deceitfulness. David, though tolerated – “winked at” – in so many ways by One Who loved David's heart, suffered severe penalties when the sins could no longer be overlooked. Jacob's punishment affected himself and his immediate family. David's correction touched an entire nation.

Both men would never be the same when the hand of God came down upon them. We learn from them that no man is beyond the correction of God, no matter how great was his past, or how important his legacy. Sin must be dealt with. And suffering is certainly one tool God uses to deal with sin.

What about that “national” suffering to which we have alluded? Time and again Israel as a nation is called upon to undergo evil times because of a wicked king, or a backslidden judge, or sometimes even one citizen of the nation, such as Achan under Joshua. And then there is that initial suffering of Israel in Egypt. How did that happen? Why was Israel called upon to endure such hardship before she even became a nation? And how can we understand national suffering for the sins of others? We immediately mentally fast-forward to our own day and consider “innocent” victims of 911, fire tragedies, airplane crashes, disease outbreaks. Worldwide there is unimaginable suffering going on even now, and so many of the sufferers want to cry out, “That's not fair! I didn't do anything! Why the entire nation?”

Answering such a question is impossible. I can only ask another question, to offer some perspective. On the days when absolutely nothing bad is happening, when life is all good, and yet you are deeply aware of sin in your life, why is that fair? Why do we only look at the unfairness of evil? Sin against a holy God demands judgment, yet it does not always come. One can readily think of many traffic laws broken, with no ticket. But when the “unfair” ticket arrives, how we scream for justice.

A trivial example perhaps, but a beginning in understanding. Our God has blessed this planet with so much. And He has received so little in return. We should indeed expect gradually for the blessings to recede over time, until finally judgment falls on all but the redeemed in Christ. And those redeemed must remember that even in their case sin has not been overlooked! Rather, the payment was made by Christ. Justice was served.

Let us come to the New Covenant, and talk of the church age, the age of grace and deliverance and salvation... but still an age of suffering. Has anything changed? It would seem that suffering for God's people is still

1. being instigated by Satan, the accuser,
2. often being carried out by evil men,
3. used by God, the Father, and
4. very useful for our perfection.

We must of course begin with Jesus. A category of suffering totally isolated from us? We want to think so. But though His suffering brought our salvation initially, we are told by Peter that in fact He set an example for us, and that we are to follow in His train. Our sufferings will not atone for sin, but they will, when offered properly, bring sinners to the atonement.

Jesus was made perfect through suffering. Note, He was never imperfect. But He was forever being made perfect by the things He suffered. And so are you. And so am I. No suffering means no perfection.

Paul brings yet another item to the table. He suggests that there is a “quota” for suffering in every generation. We can easily see that God’s true people have suffered since the days of Jesus. Follow the blood to follow the church. In every generation some have been called upon to suffer great punishment to fill up the measure, to make up for those, it would seem, that do not suffer at all, or very little. There is a cup for my generation. It will be filled. Question is, will my own sufferings be measured in that cup, or will I just expect others to drink my portion of that cup for me?

Let’s now look specifically at some of the New Testament passages that deal with suffering. You’ll need your Bible to follow along.

First recall that the KJV uses the old English word “suffer” that means merely “allow” that is not part of this discussion.

Next, let’s go to the passages that predict and/or discuss the **sufferings of Jesus**:

(Foretold by Jesus) Matthew 16:21, Mark 8:31, Luke 9:22, 17:25, 24:46, (Foretold by the prophets) Acts 3:18. (Jesus’ means of perfection) Hebrews 2:10, 5:8 (I Peter 2:21) Jesus our example.

Then there is the most prevalent suffering theme in the New Testament, namely, our **suffering persecution with Jesus**, following in His steps:

(A privilege) Acts 5:41, Philippians 1:29,. (A promise, and a Prerequisite for reigning with Jesus) Romans 8:17, I Thessalonians 3:4, II Timothy 2:12 , 3:12 , Revelation 2:10 . (Paul told how much he will suffer.) Acts 9:16. (Apostles suffering.) I Cor 4:12 (Believers suffering.) II Cor 1:6, II Thessalonians 1:5. (Paul suffers persecution) Gal 5:11. Philippians 3:8 , II Timothy 1:12 (Persecution for the cross) Gal 6:12, I Tim 4:10 labor and suffer pers. (A choice) Hebrews 11:25

(vs suffering for our own sins) I Pet 2:19, 20, I Pet 3:14, 17, I Peter 4:1 I Pet 4:13. I Peter 4:15-19. I Peter 5:10.

Chastisement: Cannot be chosen. It is coming! Hebrews 12.

Testing/Temptation: James 1:2-4, 12-15.

General. James 5: 10-11, 13

Eternal. Jude 7. Revelation 20:10-15.

The glory of God. John 9. Blind man. You will either be healed, or so filled with grace that people will marvel. Paul's thorn in the flesh was of the latter. The blind man was of the former.

Conclusion:

One size does not fit all in this area of suffering. There is a long list of reasons why people suffer. There are also seasons of suffering set by the Father, not by our own sense of right and wrong. Some suffer short seasons, some all their life, as it pleases the Father, Who does all things well. When Jesus was here He showed exactly how the Father feels about human suffering. One day He will alleviate all of it. Until then, we pray. We ask, Lord, why me? Not in that angry bitter voice, but in sincere questioning we ask Him what He wants out of this suffering. Immediate deliverance to show His power? Deliverance later to show His grace? Lessons learned? Growth and perfection? A sharing in the cross of Jesus Christ? All I know for sure is that most suffering is not obvious in its source or duration, but all of it has a purpose, and God knows what that purpose is. If we cling to Him He will let us know His secret thoughts about it. Meanwhile we endure.