

What It Means When People Suffer: A Biblical Survey

“What should we do when suffering comes?” is a universal question. It is our prayer that through your use of this survey the Lord will impress great truths from the Bible upon the hearts and minds of many who suffer.

The materials are divided into two basic sections. The first enumerates the biblical principles related to suffering; the second suggests how to apply those principles.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES RELATED TO SUFFERING

After each of the principles there are letters indicating to whom it applies:

G = General **B** = Believers **U** = Unbelievers.

1. Suffering is not always caused by sin nor does it necessarily indicate lack of spirituality (I Cor. 4:9-14; John 9:1-3; II Cor. 11:22-31). **G**
2. However, the ultimate source of suffering is linked with sin, evil, and the curse of God (Gen. 3:14-19; I Cor 15:51-55; Rom.8:20-23). **G**
3. Removal of suffering is linked with redemption (Gen.3:21 - c.f. context of curse prior to this verse) and the ultimate triumph of righteousness (II Pet. 3:5-7, 10; Rev.21:1, 4 and 22:2, 3). **G**
4. Suffering and evil occur in the broader context of God's providence (Gen. 50:20; Job 1:12; 2:6). It is not fate or bad luck. **G**
5. Suffering can be negative or positive, depending on how you respond (Gen. 50:20; Job). Satan wants to turn us aside (I Pet. 5:8, 9); God wants suffering to strengthen us (Job). **G**
6. Suffering is to be anticipated in the light of God's character (I Pet.4:19; Job 23:10-13, 14; I Cor. 10:13; Isa. 55:9; Eccl. 11:5) so we will not fall prey to despair (II Cor. 4:8; Rom. 8:28-32, 37-39). **G**
7. Suffering indicates the vulnerability of our present state and the need for redemption (II Cor. 5:1-5; Phil. 3:21). This points out that our greatest need is not just salvation of the body, but of the soul which continues past the grave (I Pet. 1:6, 9, 24). **G**
8. Suffering tests where our real point of hope is (I Pet.1:6, 13) and reveals the intent of our hearts (Job's wife, Job 2:9; Ps.11:5, 17:1-5) because it makes us reflect on the real meaning of life (see the Psalms). **G**
9. Suffering is used to increase our awareness of the sustaining power of God to whom we owe our sustenance (Ps. 68:19; II Cor 12:9, 10), and it draws us closer to Him (Job 23:5, 7, 10) because He cares for us (I Pet. 5:7). **G**
10. God uses suffering to gain the praises of both good and evil humans (I Pet.1:6, 7; John 9:1-3; 11:4; Rev. 11:13). **G**
11. God uses suffering to refine, perfect, strengthen, and keep us from falling (Ps. 66:8, 9; Heb. 2:10; 12:10). **B**
12. Suffering allows the life of Christ to be manifested in our mortal flesh (II Cor. 4:7-11) bankrupting us, making us dependent on God (II Cor. 12:9; Ps.14:6). **B**

13. Suffering teaches us humility (II Cor.12:7), imparting the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-11), for God is more concerned with character than with comfort (Rom. 5:3, 4; Heb. 12:10,11). Thus, the greatest good of the Christian life is not absence of pain but Christ-likeness (II Cor. 4:8-10; Rom. 8:28,29). **B**
14. Suffering can be a chastisement from God for sin and rebellion (Ps.107:17; Isa. 24:5,6; Acts 5:1-11; I Cor. 11:29, 30). **G**
15. Suffering is the only means in which moral evil enters into consciousness of God (God — Isa. 63:9; Christ — Luke 9:22; 17:25; 24:26, 46; Matt. 16:21; Heb. 2:10). **G**
16. Obedience and self-control is learned from suffering (Heb. 5:8) along with patience (Rom. 5:1-5) and refinement (James 1:2-8; Prov. 17:3), conforming us to His death (Phil. 3:10; 2:1-11). **B**
17. Voluntary suffering is one way to demonstrate the love of God (II Cor .8:1, 2, 9). **B**
18. Suffering may be due to our personal failure or our failure to employ our God-given resources in accord with wisdom (Prov. 19:16; 13:20; 11:24; 22:3; 27:12; Job 21). **G**
19. Temporary suffering may be due to those over us who are negligent (Num.14:31-33), but on an ultimate basis we stand as individuals (Ezek.18:10 and broad context). **G**
20. Suffering or pain is an indicator of or deterrent to continual bodily harm (Ps.139). **G**
21. Suffering is part of the righteous struggle against sin (Heb.12:4-13) and evil men (Ps. 27:12 and 37:14,15; I Pet. 2:18; II Tim. 3:1-13; Heb.11:36-40). See — suffering for righteousness' sake, I Pet.3:14; for His sake, Phil.1:29; for the kingdom of God, II Thes.1:5; for the gospel, I Tim. 2:9; for injustice, I Pet. 2:19; as Christians, I Pet. 4:16; for the name of Christ, Acts 5:41. This indicates how the righteous become sharers in Christ's suffering (II Cor. 1:5; I Pet. 4:13) as sons (I Pet. 5:8; Heb.11:36-38). **B**
22. Satan uses suffering to cast aspersions on the character of God and His saints (Job 1,2). **G**
23. Suffering serves as a preliminary warning of the judgment to come to unbelievers (Luke 16; Rev. 20:10-15; II Kings 15:5). **U**
24. Satan uses suffering as an obstacle to evangelizing (Eph. 6:16-20; II Tim. 4:1-8, 15-17; II Cor. 4:7-18). **B**
25. Endurance of suffering is given as a cause for reward (II Cor. 4:17; II Tim. 2:12). **B**
26. Suffering demonstrates the total commitment to Christ that we need in all that we do or say (II Cor.4) and demonstrates the need for the grace of God to sustain us. **B**
27. Suffering forces community and the administration of our gifts for the common good (I Pet. 4:12; I Cor. 12; Phil. 4:12-15). **B**
28. Suffering indicates that real faith can survive both calamity and prosperity (Job 42:7-17). **B**
29. Suffering teaches us that sustenance for our lives is not found totally in our physical life but in the working of God upon the heart. **B**
30. Suffering binds Christians together into a common or joint purpose (Rev. 1:9). **B**
31. Suffering produces discernment and knowledge and teaches us His statutes (Ps. 119:66,67,71). **B**
32. Through suffering, God is able to obtain a broken and contrite spirit which He desires (Ps. 51:16, 17; Ps. 32). **G**
33. Suffering causes us to discipline our minds by making us focus our hope on the grace to be revealed at the revelation of Jesus Christ (I Pet. 1:6, 13 and 2:5). **G**

34. Suffering can be used as a nullifier to the counsel of the nations and the frustration of their plans (Rev.17, 18; Ps. 33:10). **U**
35. God uses suffering to humble us so He can exalt us at the proper time (I Pet. 5:6, 7 and broad context). **B**
36. Suffering teaches us to number our days so we can present to God a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:7-12). **B**
37. Because ultimate judgment is not yet final, current suffering must be viewed as a necessary complement to this life (I Pet. 5:10; Phil. 3:20,21). **G**
38. Suffering, as a complement to evil, will be the wages of the ungodly for their rebellion (II Pet. 2:13 and 3:7). Therefore, suffering serves as a warning to the ungodly. **U**
39. Suffering is valuable to godliness when coupled with contentment (I Tim. 6:6). **B**
40. Suffering is sometimes necessary to win the lost (II Tim. 2:8-10 and 4:5, 6; II Cor. 1:1-11). **B**
41. Sufferings of the righteous strengthen and allow one to comfort others who are weak or are suffering (Phil. 1:12-14, 20 and 2:17; II Cor. 1:3-11 and 7:6, 7; Heb. 2:18). **B**
42. Suffering is temporary and in light of its momentary affliction is nothing compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:8). **B**
43. Since righteousness does not exempt us from suffering, this should teach us that there is a warfare occurring on a much higher plane, which, until complete, will allow suffering to continue. **G**
44. God desires truth in our innermost being, and one way He does it is through suffering (Ps. 51:6 and 119:17). **B**
45. The equity for suffering will be found in the next life (Ps. 58:10, 11; Luke 16:19-31, esp. vs. 25; I Pet. 2:12). **B**
46. Suffering is always coupled with a greater source of grace (II Tim. 1:7, 8 and 4:16-18; I Pet. 4:14; II Pet. 1:3; I Cor. 10:13). **B**
47. Suffering can lead to repentance of sin (Ps. 32; II Cor. 7:5-11). **G**
48. Suffering teaches us as humans that we are frail and weak, dependent for hope on someone greater (Ps. 14:6 and 11:1). **G**
49. Suffering of the righteous (vengeance) will be a main cause for the judgment of the wicked (Ps. 12:5; Rev. 6:9-11). **U**
50. Suffering teaches us to give thanks in times of sorrow (II Cor. 1:11). **B**
51. Suffering increases faith (Gen. 22; Ps. 46:10; Jer. 29:11). **B**
52. Suffering allows God to manifest His care (Ps. 56:8). **B**
53. Suffering stretches our hope (Job 13:14-15). **B**
54. When suffering seems to have no meaning in the physical realm it does have meaning in the spiritual realm (Job 1-3). Remember, Job did not know the cause or the reason for his sufferings. **G**

55. Suffering is used to break the will of the rebellious (Rev. 11:13). Pain plants the flag of reality in the fortress of a rebel heart. C.S. Lewis said: "God whispers in our pleasure but shouts in our pain." **G**
56. When suffering remains unanswered, it does not mean God has forgotten, only that resolution must wait for the life to come (Ps. 9:12,18). **G**
57. Suffering is not a cause for being ashamed (II Tim. 1:12). **B**

THE PRINCIPLES LOGICALLY APPLIED

As we approach the subject of suffering within the Scriptures, the complete "why" of suffering is never found. Instead, we must rest on the character of God (Deut. 29:29; Isa. 55:8,9) and trust that all suffering takes place within the appointed boundaries of God. This does not mean that we are not to pursue the subject, only that we are to bow to the truth which God has given us, with the amount of explanation He has revealed.

As we enter the realm of suffering, we are immediately caught by a foundational principle that human suffering cannot be understood in purely human or naturalistic terms. Rather, it must encompass the heavenly counterpart, the spiritual realm. From the physical plane, we suppose God is trapped in inconsistency; how can a holy God allow evil and any complement of it? Here we must bow to mystery, but not to mystery without direction. For in the question of evil, which poses the greatest threat to God and His character — especially His holiness — we find that He has given us some guidelines to allow us to rest in His revealed character.

1. God's ultimate glory is found in His triumph over all evil and sin and any of its counterparts, such as suffering and wickedness (Rev. 21:1-5).
2. In His triumph, He reveals that suffering is intricately linked with Satan, evil, and the fall (death), and the curse of God upon the earth (Rev. 20:10-15; 21:1-5; 22:1-5; Gen. 3:14-19,21; II Pet. 3:5-7, 10; I Cor. 15:51-55; Rom. 8:20-23).
3. He allows evil and suffering only to occur within the broad context of His providence, for God never relinquishes control of his omnipotent rule, which gives hope to those who suffer.
4. With the entrance of sin and suffering into the world, not all subsequent suffering is due to immediate sin or wrongdoing or serves as an act of punishment, for in the book of Job, the dialogue in heaven established Job's innocence before God (Job 1:7,8).
5. This means that suffering is a natural counterpart to life within a fallen world. In the end, God will create a new heaven and earth where there will be no tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain; for the first heaven and earth will have passed away with the removal of all the ungodly — including Satan and his demon host — and upon the new heaven and earth we will find the godly.
6. This enlightens us to five facts:
 - a. God's ultimate justice transcends the earthly and temporal.
 - b. God uses that which opposes His character to glorify Himself (Prov. 16:4).
 - c. Time, which allows for the existence of sin and evil, poses no threat to God's character as long as victory and equity are assured.
 - d. The ultimate answer to suffering rests in the justice, wisdom, and knowledge of a transcendent God.
 - e. Suffering remains because mortality has not put on immortality (I Cor. 15:51-55).