

SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF CHRISTIANS: A BLESSING OR CURSE?

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ABSTRACT

Human beings' efforts, geared toward the pursuit of happiness and elimination of suffering and pain in the world often appear to be a mirage in the midst of suffering. We are daily buffeted by different shades of sufferings which sometimes defile explanations. In the midst of excruciating suffering, some have questioned the existence of a just and benevolent God. If God truly exist, does God have the power to eliminate suffering or is God incapable of eliminating suffering, or does God take joy in the suffering of humankind? Prosperity preachers cash in on the psyche of their adherents to postulate that good people do not suffer. Suffering, they believe is a curse, which comes from the devil. This work rejects the views of prosperity preachers on suffering. It affirms the reality of suffering as part of human existence. Both good and evil people suffer. This work uses the suffering of Job and Jesus Christ, the suffering servant of God to confirm that good and just people suffer. The work uses qualitative research method that deals with non-numerical data, which is based on analyses of texts, videos and audios as well as the experiences of those who have suffered as human beings.

Keywords: Suffering, Faith, Christ, Prosperity preachers.

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Introduction

Suffering comes from in different shades and modes. Suffering abounds in every facet of life. We wear suffering like cloths. As such, anyone without suffering is not a “normal” person. Suffering is the gamut of human existence and can only end in death. Our lives on earth are full of joy and sorrow, sweet and sad moments, suffering that will inexorably end in the grave. If all must die and go down to the pit of death, then, suffering is for all persons. Who is the son or daughter of a woman who will not die? At the moment the whole world is feeling the devastating effects of Covid-19 pandemic and monkey pox epidemics.

This work raises some research questions: What is the place of suffering in the life of Christians? What are the different types of suffering that Christians might go through? Who or what is responsible for suffering in the life of Christians? Are there specific sufferings meant for Christians only? What of those who are non-Christians, but they progress, does it mean that God favours also non-Christians? Can we eliminate suffering in the world? These questions are clearly handled in the work, which maintains that suffering is part of human life.

Understanding Suffering

Suffering comes from the Latin verb *sufferre* which could mean “to undergo” or “to bear up” and the Greek infinitive verb *pascho* meaning “to endure” and could also mean to bear what is not palatable, that is, “the experience of bearing a condition that is harsh or unpleasant. It is what a person feels as the result of pain, deprivation, distress, or loss.”²The individual would not want it, but the situation does not allow the person to escape from the pain caused by the suffering. It has other synonymous words like “adversity, affliction, anguish, anxiety, difficulty, grief, hardship,

²Holloman, W. H. Ed. *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Pub. 2005), 521.

misery, pain, pangs, pressure, sickness, temptation, torment, trial, tribulation, and trouble.”³

In life, there are different types of sufferings. These include, physical suffering (Job 14:22), metaphysical or spiritual suffering (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46); mental and emotional suffering and interpersonal suffering. There are sufferings caused by hardship and deprivation of basic human necessities like homes, clothes, food, water, etc. Some forms of suffering are caused by natural disaster and terrorism, where families and their means of livelihood are destroyed overnight. Others come through hurtful words, frustration and toil, headache and sorrow from knowledge of life’s realities. “Inner suffering can include shame, fear, grief, sorrow, groaning, and inner restlessness (Job 9:28; Ps. 32:3-4; Jer. 45:3).”⁴ When suffering is taken up in its entirety, one can only say that we suffer at different degrees. Therefore, it is not possible to live a life free from suffering and pain. These are the ingredients of human existence.

Denial of Suffering

It is unfortunate that some Church ministers propound the erroneous view that prayer alone is the key to everything. Once you are sick, the next thing is to call a man or woman of God to pray for you or to rush the sick person to a prayer house or prayer ministry where the so-called man or woman of God would prophesy that the sickness is emanating from spiritual attacks or as a result of ancestral curse.⁵ There are numerous cases of people dying inside prayer houses where they went in search of healing. Scripture enjoins us to call the physician when we are sick because there are times healing

³Ibid. 524

⁴Holloman, 524.

⁵Chukwu Donatus O. *Healing the Family Root: An Emerging Trend in Nigeria’s Christianity, Religion and The Media: Religious Conflicts and Dialogue Initiatives in Nigeria*. Vol.5. Isidore U. Nwanaju & Simon O. Anyanwu (Eds.) (Abakaliki: Ginika Graphics and Prints, 2018), 194.

lies in the hands of physicians. Therefore, give the physician the honour due to him (Sir. 38:1-15).

Some of the ministers simply pray for you and claim that you are healed. Hence, you hear, “receive your healing in Jesus’ name.” There is this anecdotal tale of lady who tested positive for HIV visited a prayer ministry for prayer and counseling, the pastor urged her to throw away her antiretroviral drugs. She was advised to have faith because “what God cannot do, does not exist.” She believed the pastor and stopped taking her medications. The pastor prayed for her at several prayer sessions. She vomited during one of their prayer sections. The pastor claimed that she has vomited out the HIV/AIDS virus. Without any medical laboratory test, she was certified healed by her pastor. Few months later, her case became worse than ever. Her situation can be likened to that possessed person who was attacked by the seven demons. “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, I will return to my house from which I came. When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits, more wicked than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first” (Matt. 12:43-45). By stopping her antiretroviral medication, the viral load in her body quadrupled and eventually claimed her life. Sadly, the pastor at the center of this tale continues to misinform and mislead gullible and hapless adherents.

Another disingenuous and worrisome claim by many “men and women of God” is the use of biblical texts as clichés to deny the facticity of suffering. Some of these clichés, amongst others include: “He has carried away all our afflictions and infirmities” (Isa. 53:4; Matt. 8:17) “He is our healer” (1 Pet. 2:21-24). Although these texts are Scriptural, but what are their exegetical meanings? Do the texts mean we will never suffer again? Certainly no!! But why understand them literarily? These biblical texts no doubt mean that Christ completed and perfected our healing on the cross. But we have to

work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. We are to carry our daily cross and follow Him. It is only when we suffer that God becomes our healer, without suffering God cannot be our healer. He carried away our afflictions and infirmities so that we can learn from Him. Hence, “carry your cross and follow me.” It does not mean, follow me when things are good, but follow me in good and bad times. It is because of those who avoid suffering that the aphorism that many follow Christ to His glory but will not follow him to the Golgotha holds true. They forget that there can be no Easter Glory without the suffering, crucifixion and death of Christ on Good Friday.

Scriptural Affirmation of Suffering

Scripture is awash with the reality of suffering. We suffer through the feeling of pains, hunger and sorrow in the midst of hardship. Scripture most often speaks of physical suffering (Job 14:22; Rev. 21:4). However, the Bible recognizes other aspects of human suffering. Suffering can be spiritual (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46), mental and emotional (Isa. 13:8; Jer. 4:19; 2 Cor. 11:28), and interpersonal (Ps. 441:9; 2 Cor. 2:1-4).⁶ These realities notwithstanding, those who affirm the reality of suffering often appear to be unpopular. One of the expressions that most people do not want to hear is “we are bound to suffer.” Many abhor the expression “suffering and pain are part and parcel of life.” The popular slogan amongst many Nigerian Christians is, “It is not my portion to suffer!” “Suffering is not for a child of God!” Apostle Johnson Suleman succinctly observed that “If you are suffering, check your offering, if things are TIGHT, check your TITHE.”⁷ These clichés reduce suffering to the absurd and point towards the rejection of the reality of suffering in the world. No one want to suffer, but that is not the reality of life. People fail to know that the world is not a bed of roses. Even creation itself is suffering. “Creation suffers in ways that may be compared to

⁶Holloman, 521.

⁷<https://www.facebook.com/1797935870482518/posts/pfbid0fNqfn3qXgVsY1hNCYGPZ8rVMkVdSQEdbkHHxxaUwLMQb5ZvW9q1f4czsivUaacTKI/>

childbirth, because it cannot break the bonds of corruption until released by God in Christ (Rom. 8:21-22). All people suffer with creation, even the children of God (Rom. 8:23-25). Thus, God's people should expect suffering (Job 5:7; Mk. 10:30; Jn. 15:20; Phil. 1:29; 1 Thess. 3:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:12).⁸

In the Old Testament, there are several accounts of just and holy people who experienced severe suffering. They include, Abel (Gen. 4:8), Abraham (Gen. 22), Joseph (Gen. 39:1-40), Jeremiah (Jer. 15:18; 17:18), Daniel and his associates (Dan. 3:8-23). Leon-Dufour encapsulated the sufferings of these holy people when he opined:

Bruised by suffering but carried on by their faith, prophets and wise men gradually entered 'into the mystery' (Ps. 73:17). They discovered the purifying value of suffering, like that of the fire which separates metal from its dross (Jer. 9:6; Ps 65:10); its value, like that of fatherly correction (Deut. 8:5; Proverbs 3:11ff; 2 Chr. 32:26, 31); and finally, they see in the swiftness of the punishment an effect, so to speak, of the divine good will (2 Mac. 6:12-17; 7:31-38). They learn to receive from suffering the revelation of a divine plan which confounds us (Job 42:1-6); cf. 38:2).⁹

Leon-Dufour goes further to state, "By faith in the plan of God, suffering become a very high test, which God reserves to the servants of whom He is proud – Abraham (Gen. 22), Job (1:11; 2:5), and Tobit (Tobit 12:13) – in order to teach them what He is worth and what man can suffer for Him."¹⁰ These instances are pointers to the fact that just people suffer as well. No one is immune from suffering and pain. Guided by God, the Hebrew sages searched for

⁸ Ibid, 522.

⁹ Leon-Dufour, X. Ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 2nd Ed. (London: St. Paul Publishers), 588.

¹⁰ Ibid.

some insight into the mystery of both mental and physical pain ... suffering, if well accepted, may open our eyes to the real values of life and lead to repentance.¹¹

In the New Testament, we are confronted with the excruciating suffering of Jesus Christ. He suffered from the ‘incredulous and perverse’ crowd (Matt. 17:17), which is like a ‘brood of vipers’ (Matt. 12:34; 23:33); and he suffered rejection by his own, who ‘did not know Him’ (Jn. 1:11). He weeps before Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41; cf. Matt. 23:37); He is ‘troubled’ at the thought of His passion (Jn. 12:27). His suffering then becomes a moral distress, an ‘agony,’ a combat in anguish and fear (Mk. 14:33ff; Lk. 22:44). The passion concentrates on all possible human suffering, from betrayal to seeming abandonment by God (Matt. 27:27). This culmination coincides with the great redemptive suffering of Christ, the expiatory gift of His life (Matt. 20:28), for which He was sent into the world according to the eternal plan of the Father (Acts. 3:7-8).¹² The Lord suffered and left us an example to follow (Ps. 22:1-21; Isa. 52:13-53:12; Matt. 26:47-27:50; 1 Pet. 4:1).

Christ redeemed us through suffering, but suffering did not end with his death. The apostles also suffered terribly even after Christ’s resurrection and ascension. “The apostles shared in their Lord’s suffering from the first persecutions of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles particularly records the suffering of Peter and John (Acts 4:1-12), Peter and James, the brother of John (12:1-5), and Paul (9:16; 13:50; 14:19; 2 Cor. 1:8; 11:23-28; 12:10; Phil. 3:8, 10; Col. 1:24; 1 Thess. 2:2; 2 Tim. 1:11-12; 2:3, 9; 3:10-11). All believers are warned that they will suffer for Christ (e.g., Matt. 5:10-11; 24:9; Rom. 8:17; Phil. 1:29; 1 Pet. 4:13).¹³

¹¹ New Saint Joseph Sunday Missal: 1985, 1351.

¹² Leon-Dufour, X. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 589.

¹³ Holloman, W. H. Ed. *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology*, 522.

Suffering cut across cultural, social and religious divide. Believers and non-believers suffer. Good and evil people suffer. But there are differences between believers and unbelievers.

Unbelievers suffer by reaping what they sow (Job 15:29; Gal. 6:7-8), and they will suffer eternal punishment if they die in unbelief (Ps. 1:6; Prov. 10:16; 12:21; Matt. 25:41-46; Jn. 3:18; Rev. 20:11-15).” Believers are to suffer only for the sake of the gospel and for what is right (1 Pet. 3:17). Therefore, “the Christian’s response to suffering should be far different from other humans when they endure trouble: first, believers should recognize God’s response to their suffering: He is always with them (Ps. 23:4; Isa. 43:2); He always provides refuge and help (Ps. 46:1); He comforts them (Isa. 40:1-2; 49:13; 2 Cor. 1:3-5); He shares their pain (Isa. 63:9); and He turns it to blessing and reward (Matt. 5:10-12); 1 Pet. 2:19-20). Second, they should respond by ... accepting suffering as part of God’s purpose (Gen. 50:20; Job 1:6-2:10; Rom. 8:28; 1 Pet. 4:19). Believers can expect God’s blessing and reward when they respond obediently to their own suffering.¹⁴

It inexorably follows that, “if ‘we suffer with Him,’ it is ‘in order to be glorified with Him also’ (Rom. 8:17). If ‘we carry everywhere and always in our body the sufferings of the death of Jesus’ it is ‘in order that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body’ (2 Cor. 4:10). ‘The grace of God which has been given to us is not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for Him’ (Phil. 1:29; cf. Acts 9:16; 2 Cor. 11:23-27). From suffering borne with Christ, there comes not only ‘the eternal weight of glory prepared beyond all measure’

¹⁴Ibid. 523 – 524.

(2 Cor. 4:17; cf. Acts 14:21) after death, but joy even today” (2 Cor. 7:4; cf. 1:5, 7).¹⁵

St. Paul, combines suffering with hope (Rom. 5:3-5) and my grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor. 12:8-10). The letter of James says; consider your trial as joy (James 1:2-4). The First letter of Peter wants all to “rejoice in so far as you are sharing in Christ’s suffering, so that you may always be glad ...” (1 Peter 4:13-14). Peter insists that we are blessed when we accept suffering. Job was happy in his trials. John was imprisoned in the Island of Patmos but he was still happy (Rev. 1:9). We cannot do without suffering.

The Reality of Suffering

Suffering and pain are two realities that are undeniable. Everyone suffers. Suffering is like clothes, everyone wears theirs. God’s people experience suffering. In fact, everybody should expect suffering. It will certainly come. Suffering, just like death is not illusory. It is a reality, that is, undeniable no matter what the opposers seem to be saying. Those who lost their loved ones cannot deny the pains they go through. Those who are hospitalized and are fed artificially or amputated because of accident or diabetes cannot claim not to know the meaning of suffering. All we can do is to accept the reality of suffering in human lives. Therefore, St. Paul says, “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities for the sake of Christ” (2 Cor. 12:10). This does not promote suffering but sees its reality. Hence, “The Christian is certainly not a Stoic in order to sing of the ‘the majesty of human suffering,’ but a disciple of the ‘head of our faith’ who ‘in place of the joy which was set before Him suffered the cross’ (Heb. 12:2).

Christianity understands suffering through the prism and in relation to Jesus Christ¹⁶ Thus, if we must see suffering in the light of Jesus Christ, why then are the new generation pastors, men and women of

¹⁵Leon-Dufour, X. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 590.

¹⁶Leon-Dufour, X. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 586 – 587.

God promising “us” a life without suffering and pain, sorrows and agonies? According to Pastor David O. Oyedepo, “It is not your lot to be buffeted by the winds of life, neither is it your lot to be afflicted.”¹⁷ Oyedepo went further to insist that “suffering is not for those who are born again Christians.”¹⁸ Real Christians or “born again Christians,” he claims, “do not suffer.” He went further to falsely claim, “If you are born again, you are born again to reign again! You are not born again to suffer again, no! But if you are not born again, you are bound to suffer.”¹⁹

Some Pentecostal Christians and pastors maintain that the expression, “it is finished” (Jn. 19:30) means that our suffering and pains are finished on the cross. On the contrary, the expression, “It is finished” means that the salvific work is accomplished, not that human suffering is finished. “The Greek word (*tetelestai*) is the shout of victorious purpose. Jesus had completed His work, His mission, and His task.” What is the reason why Jesus died on the cross? “Salvation and reconciliation were now possible for man.”²⁰ Even when He carried our pains and nailed them to the cross (Matt. 8:17; 1 Pet. 2:24; cf. Isa. 53:4), those who follow Christ continued to suffer pains and death. “He carried our sins away,” means that Jesus died on the cross because of our sins. He bore our sins on the cross. He suffered for our sins. It does not mean that He suffered so that we may never suffer. We have to work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

The reality of suffering cannot be denied. Go to the roads leading to the farm or to the streets or to the schools or to the markets. What do you experience? Are they bed of roses? Look at our families. How many of them are feeding well? How many of our young people are gainfully employed? Our hospitals, psychiatric and

¹⁷David O. Oyedepo, *Exploring the Riches of Redemption* (Lagos: Dominion Publishing House, 2018), 11.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid. 6.

²⁰The Preacher’s Outline & Sermon Bible, *Thessalonians – Revelation*, Vol.3, New International Version (Hyderabad India: 2000), 1757.

orthopedic hospitals “are hopeful havens for suffering mankind. But they also constitute the signs that pain and misery form an integral part of the human condition.” We will hail the genius who could make it possible for humanity not to have the need for hospitals and physicians. “It would be wonderful, but it will never be realized. Pain and suffering, both physical and mental, and ultimately death, are going to remain with us.” To avoid pain and suffering, many Christians have been flocking around religious healers. With so many healing homes in Nigeria, one would expect that suffering and sickness would have been eliminated. But it seems to be the contrary, because the more they try to heal the sick, the more there are sick people around the corner.

Africans south of the Sahara Desert live near the equator with its attendant harsh climate of hot and dry season. Many people are artisans who long for the cool shades, but those who hired them do not give them the opportunity. Many trek long distances to farm and fetch drinking water. Many carry logs of wood on the head from the farm. Many people struggle for buses only to reach home very late. Within the context of struggling to reach home with your rickety car, security forces subjugate many people to various forms of indignities and humiliations. The Police and the Army at the ever-ubiquitous roadblocks/check points outdo each other in extorting money from hapless motorists. The Okada and Keke riders harass people mercilessly. These are our daily sufferings. Fela Anikulapo Kuti calls it “suffering and smiling”.

Many Pentecostal pastors promise their followers a world without suffering and pain. That is part of the reason why some of our youths do not want to suffer or endure any pain. Recall the popular slogan “it is not my portion to suffer.” The song, “*me I no go suffer*” makes the youths go frenzy. Should any normal human being boast of suffering? No. Suffering is only to be endured when it is inevitable. However, many Nigerian youths now refuse to learn trade but they want quick money. Life is thus, made easy through prayers and miraculous breakthrough, open door, sowing of seed, untying of

God's hands, prosperity and what have you. To achieve this, some sleep in churches in the name of waiting on God's favour or wanting God to come and solve all their problems. You see them carrying their Bibles around, wearing long ties and suits under the sun. These are pure religious acts but they do not solve physical problems and will not remove all the sufferings in the world.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The denial of suffering and hard work is so perverse in the society that no one wants to work hard to be successful. Most people want success without working for it. An instance can be made of a secondary school that invited a man of God to pray for the success its students in West African Examination Council exams. The man of God came with a bag of salt. He claimed that some students were possessed by evil spirit and that the success of the school depends on getting rid of the possessed students. The man of God poured salt all over the school premises, chanting his hocus-pocus. Students who bought the idea that some of them were possessed started fighting those believed to be the agents of the devil. Instead of studying for their exams, they focused more on prayers hoping for miracles. And at the end, the examination was a catastrophic outing. You can accept to be deceived, but it does not remove the reality of suffering. "After the victory of Easter, an illusion threatens Christians: death is no more, suffering is no more; and they run the risk of being shaken in their faith by the tragic realities of existence (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13). The resurrection does not abolish the instructions of the gospel; it confirms them. The message of the beatitudes, the insistence on the daily cross (Lk. 9:23) takes on all their urgency in the light of the destiny of the Lord. If the master, 'in order to enter into His glory' (Lk. 24:26), has known tribulations and persecutions, the disciples must follow the same way (Jn. 15:20; Matt. 10:24), then suffering is part of the cost of discipleship. The Messianic era is a time of trials (Matt. 24:8; Acts 14:22; 1 Tim. 4:1)."²¹

²¹Leon-Dufour, X. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 589.

Jesus encouraged his disciples not to be afraid of persecution when he said, “Do not be afraid of them; fear him who can kill both body and soul and put them into the hell fire” (Matt. 10:26, 28; 31). Persecution is inevitable. In 2 Tim. 3:12, we read “you are well aware that anyone who tries to live in devotion to Christ is certainly to be attacked.” Christians should be rest assured that one day the truth will be told. “The accusations, the talk, the dislikes, the cloaks, the disguise, and the secrets of all men shall be stripped and unveiled for all to see (Rom. 2:2, 6, 11, 16).”²²

The greatest problem of every good Christian is fear. Jesus knows that this is the worst possible enemy of any person who wants to preach the Good News in truth and justice. The fears include: losing one’s socio-political position or the respect of the superiors or losing one’s possessions or that of being ill-treated and even killed but the encouraging words of Jesus in the gospel, “Do not be afraid,” keeps one going. What can the enemies of the Gospel do? They can do much. These include: to insult you; to accuse you falsely or rightly or to beat you up or to detain you or to rob you or to use police to intimidate you and at last to kill you. Yes!!! But there is nothing more than these aforementioned maltreatments. St Paul asks “what can separate us from the love of God?” (Rom. 8:35-39). However, we are not to fear these persecutions. “We are not to fear the damage of our character and reputation by men. What is really in our hearts and lives – what we really are despite all our shortcomings and failures and sins – is known to God. God is going to deliver and vindicate us. God is going to restore our reputation and character and see to it that we ‘have the praise of God’ (1 Cor. 4:5). Therefore, we are not to fear persecutors.”²³

The epithet of John Knox says it all: “Here lies one who feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man.” The Christian witness is not afraid because they know that the judgement of

²²The Preacher’s Outline & Sermon Bible, Vol. 1, 230.

²³Ibid.

eternity will correct the judgement of time. The Christian preacher and teacher is the one who listens with reverence and who speaks with courage, because they know that whether they listen or speak, they are in the presence of God. We will conclude with the words of John A. Hardon on suffering:

Suffering is the disagreeable experience of soul that comes with the presence of evil or the privation of some good. Although commonly synonymous with pain, suffering is rather the reaction to pain, and in this sense, suffering is a decisive factor in Christian spirituality. Absolutely speaking, suffering is possible because we are creatures, but in the present order of providence, suffering is not only to expiate wrongdoing, but to enable the believer offer God a sacrifice of praise of his divine right over creatures, to unite oneself with Christ in his sufferings as an expression of love, and in the process to become more like Christ, who, having joy set before him, chose the Cross, and thus ‘to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His body, the church (Col. 1:24).²⁴

Suffering therefore, makes us Christ like, who suffered for the salvation of the world. Suffering humanizes us and prepares for the beatific vision of God at the end of our earthly life.

²⁴John Hardon, *Pocket Catholic Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 421.