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Theme: **Christian Response to Suffering**

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# EDITORIAL

We inhabit a world deeply disfigured by pain, suffering, and manifold forms of brokenness. In such a context, theology's task is to speak truthfully about God and render a faithful account of Christian hope, making both demands more urgent. The duty of critical theological reflection cannot remain abstracted from lived realities; rather, it must engage suffering as an existential and ecclesial horizon within which faith is tested, refined, and embodied. As editors, we have repeatedly wrestled with the tension between academic inquiry and the practical, often messy realities of faith communities, particularly in seasons marked by affliction.

This issue of MITJ, comprising eleven scholarly articles under the theme "Christian Response to Suffering," seeks to engage this intersection with intentional depth. Drawing from diverse disciplines such as the Old Testament, New Testament, Theology, Missiology, and Pastoral Theology, and their contributions collectively invite readers to re-examine foundational doctrines and their practical ramifications in contexts of distress and marginalization.

We are pleased to open this issue with a substantive contribution by Dr. Saji K. Lukos, who explores the theological significance of suffering in Christian leadership. Engaging the THEOLOGIA CRUCIS as witnessed in the patristic tradition, he argues that authentic leadership is marked by sacrificial obedience and cruciform fidelity. Grounded in the promise of resurrection, his study calls leaders to anchor hope not in pragmatic success but in eschatological assurance.

Joel Joseph, in the subsequent article, offers an exegetical and theological reading of Jeremiah 38, presenting the prophet as a paradigm of faithful witness amid adversity. In contexts marked by persecution, instability, and fragmentation, Jeremiah's experience summons Christian communities from isolated lament toward communal testimony, prophetic courage, and resilient hope.

Engaging the thought of Origen and John Chrysostom, Dr. Sambhav Ajitsing Winget examines patristic interpretations of human suffering. He demonstrates how both theologians construe suffering as pedagogical and redemptive, oriented toward spiritual maturation and communion with God, while also providing enduring pastoral resources for ministering to the afflicted.

Dr. Balu Savarikannu presents an exegetical study of Isaiah 43:14–28 within the exilic setting, underscoring Yahweh's promise of restoration when hope appeared extinguished. He traces the theological movement from historical deliverance to renewal from sin-induced alienation and articulates its significance for the contemporary Indian context. Dr. Ahish Kumar analyzes Paul's honour and shame rhetoric in Romans 1, arguing that Paul reconfigures honour around Christ rather than inherited status. Such a reading bears particular relevance in socio-cultural contexts where suffering is exacerbated by exclusion, marginalization, and systemic injustice, offering a Christologically grounded reconstitution of dignity.

Adopting a Spirit-Christological framework, Sashikant Nayak investigates the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel narratives. He demonstrates how the Spirit's empowering presence undergirds Christ's obedience and mission, even amid suffering. From this foundation, Nayak derives practical implications, exhorting believers toward wholehearted submission to the Spirit, who sustains, equips, and fortifies Christians to remain steadfast as authentic disciples and faithful ministers in adverse circumstances.

Shaik Asha engages Psalms 22 and 88 to articulate a theology of lament as integral to the Christian response to suffering. These psalms model radical honesty before God while simultaneously sustaining covenantal trust. Asha contends that lament not only legitimizes anguish but also creates space for hope, praise, and communal solidarity, offering resources for personal devotion. Kailengou Kipgen explores the Petrine theology of participation in Christ's sufferings, presenting affliction as intrinsic to discipleship

rather than anomalous to it. In this light, suffering becomes a means of honouring God and embodying hope, particularly for marginalized Christian communities.

Prince Thomas provides a historical survey of Christian responses to suffering, tracing developments from early martyrdom to contemporary forms of social engagement. He argues that across changing contexts, the Church has persistently interpreted suffering as a catalyst for deepened faith, communal cohesion, and transformative action. Stanly Johnson advances a New Testament theology of redemptive suffering rooted in Christ's death and resurrection. Engaging key texts such as Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 1, and 1 Peter, he demonstrates how the New Testament holds together lament and hope, interpreting suffering through union with Christ and eschatological anticipation.

Finally, Kumar Bardewa approaches suffering from the perspective of pastoral counselling in the Nepalese context. He contends that a theologically robust appropriation of the cross and resurrection offers both consolation and formative growth, and he outlines implications for pastoral practice within a defined counselling framework.

As readers engage this issue, it is our hope that these contributions will do more than furnish conceptual answers. Rather, we pray they will provoke deeper theological reflection, more fervent prayer, and more faithful action in communities called to witness amid suffering. We extend our sincere gratitude to the contributors from various seminaries, including the faculty of MITS, for their scholarly labour. We also express appreciation to our readers who journey with us in this shared theological endeavour. We remain indebted to our President, Dr. Saji K. Lukos, Chief Functionary Rev. P. D. Joseph, and Principal Dr. Hruda Ranjan Lohara for their encouragement and guidance throughout the preparation of this volume.

**Shashikant Nayak, MTh**
Editor, MITJ

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# 1

## SUFFERING IN LEADERSHIP: A MISSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

**Dr. Saji K. Lukos***

**Abstract:** This article explores the biblical, theological, and historical dimensions of suffering in missional leadership, emphasizing its transformative and redemptive role in shaping authentic leaders aligned with Christ's example. It highlights how suffering, when embraced in obedience, deepens character, fosters resilience, and advances God's mission through humility and sacrificial service. Ultimately, the article challenges leaders to reframe suffering not as a sign of weakness or failure but as a vital component of faithful obedience and participation in the Missio Dei.

### Introduction

Suffering is often perceived as an inherent and inescapable aspect of authentic leadership, especially within missional contexts where leaders are called to serve in environments that are complex, cross-cultural, and sometimes hostile to the Gospel. Far from being merely an unfortunate consequence of ministry, suffering has historically been woven into the fabric of faithful leadership, shaping character, deepening faith, and affirming credibility in the eyes of those served. From the prophets of Israel, who endured rejection and persecution, to the apostles of the early church, who faced imprisonment and death, suffering has consistently played a pivotal role in the development of resilient and authentic leadership.

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Likewise, early Christian martyrs exemplify how suffering can serve as a powerful testimony to faithfulness and devotion to Christ's mission.

A missional perspective invites us to understand leadership not simply as authority or power, but as participation in the *Missio Dei*—the ongoing mission of God to redeem and restore all creation. Within this divine mission, suffering takes on a transformative, redemptive, and even strategic function. It is through suffering that leaders often find their character refined, their credibility strengthened, and their capacity to witness to the Gospel deepened. The biblical narrative, theological reflections, and historical examples collectively affirm that suffering, when embraced in obedience, aligns leaders more closely with Christ and advances the purposes of God in the world.

This article aims to explore the multifaceted nature of suffering in leadership from biblical, theological, historical, and practical missional perspectives. By integrating quotations and references throughout, it seeks to reframe suffering not as a sign of failure or weakness but as an essential component of faithful obedience—an integral part of participating in God's redemptive work. In doing so, it challenges leaders to view suffering not as an obstacle to overcome but as a vital element of their calling to serve in accordance with the heart and mission of God.

## Biblical Foundations of Suffering in Missional Leadership

### *The Pattern of the Suffering Servant*

The Old Testament, particularly through the Servant Songs of Isaiah, anticipates a model of leadership rooted in humility, pain, and service. These songs depict a servant who endures rejection, disdain, and suffering on behalf of others. Isaiah describes this servant as "despised and rejected by mankind,"[1] emphasizing the depth of his rejection and the familiarity with pain. This portrayal challenges conventional notions of leadership that often equate power with control and success with outward triumph.

This anticipatory image finds its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus Christ. His leadership was marked by sacrificial obedience—he willingly endured rejection, pain, and suffering for the sake of others. The New Testament explicitly connects Jesus' suffering to the redemptive purpose of salvation. It states, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,"[2] emphasizing that Christ's suffering was not pointless but served a divine purpose: the healing and salvation of humanity.

In this biblical understanding, leadership within God's mission is modelled on this pattern of redemptive suffering. It emphasizes humility, service, and sacrifice over triumphalism and dominance. Leaders are called to follow the example of Christ and the Servant of Isaiah, bearing burdens and enduring hardship for the sake of others. This approach to leadership transforms the understanding of power, shifting it from control and conquest to self-giving love and sacrificial service, which ultimately reveals the heart of God's mission in the world.

***The Leadership of Jesus***

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ serve as a profound example illustrating that suffering is not merely an incidental or peripheral aspect of missional leadership but is actually central to it. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrated that true greatness is not measured by personal power, status, or comfort, but by humility and service to others. His teachings consistently flipped conventional notions of leadership on their head, emphasizing that those who seek to lead must first become servants. Jesus explicitly taught this principle when He said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,"[3] highlighting that greatness in the kingdom of God is rooted in sacrificial service rather than dominance or privilege.

Jesus' own life culminated in the ultimate act of self-giving—His death on the cross. This act of suffering was not an unfortunate accident or a sign of weakness, but a deliberate act of love and obedience. The Apostle Paul reflected on this paradoxical nature of

the cross, describing it as "the power of God"[4] for those who are being saved, even though it appears foolishness or weakness to the worldly wise. The cross, therefore, embodies the divine paradox that what appears to be defeat—suffering, death, and shame—actually becomes the means of divine victory and salvation.

As Christopher J. H. Wright points out, the significance of the cross extends beyond its role as the instrument of salvation; it also serves as the model for mission.[5] The cross exemplifies the kind of sacrificial love, humility, and self-denial that should characterize those who pursue God's mission in the world. Missional leaders are called not to seek comfort or personal gain but to embrace suffering as an integral part of their calling. They see suffering not as a sign of failure or defeat but as participation in Christ's own self-giving love. In this way, suffering becomes a vital element of authentic leadership, shaping character and faithfulness in service to others and to God's mission.

## Theological Perspectives on Suffering and Mission

### *Participation in the Missio Dei*

The concept that "the church does not have a mission; rather, God's mission has a church"[6] shifts the perspective from viewing the church as the initiator to recognizing that the church is called to participate in God's ongoing mission. This divine mission originates from God's own purpose and activity in the world, and the church's role is to join in that divine initiative rather than invent or control it. Leaders within the church are thus seen as servants or partners in this divine work, called to align their efforts with God's larger purpose.

Since God's mission reaches its fulfillment in the suffering and death of Christ, participation in this mission inevitably involves a degree of suffering. The suffering of Christ is central to God's redemptive plan, and those who follow him are called to share in that journey. This means that engaging in mission is not always easy or comfortable; it involves vulnerability, rejection, and sometimes

hardship. It is a participation that echoes Christ's own experience on the cross.

David Bosch emphasizes this by stating, "Mission in the way of Christ is mission in suffering, in rejection, and in vulnerability."[7] This highlights that true missional engagement is marked by humility and a willingness to stand in contrast to worldly models of power, which often rely on strength, control, and dominance. Instead, missional leadership is cruciform—shaped by the cross of Christ. It embodies self-sacrifice, humility, and love, reflecting Christ's example of serving others even at personal cost. Such leadership is characterized by a willingness to embrace vulnerability as a necessary part of participating in God's mission, trusting that through this suffering and vulnerability, God's redemptive work is carried out in the world.

***Suffering as Formation***

Suffering is often viewed as a challenging and painful experience, but within the Christian faith, it is also understood as a vital process that shapes and refines a person's character. The Apostle Peter offers reassurance to believers facing hardship by affirming that, "After you have suffered a little while, [God] will himself restore you and make you strong."[8] This promise highlights that suffering is temporary and purposeful; it serves a divine purpose in preparing believers for greater strength and resilience. Rather than being an end in itself, suffering acts as a transformative period in which God's restorative power can work within individuals to renew and fortify their faith and character.

The early church father John Chrysostom further emphasized the refining nature of suffering, likening it to fire that purifies gold. He asserted that suffering molds leaders and believers alike, shaping them into more courageous and steadfast individuals. Chrysostom believed that nothing instills spiritual bravery more effectively than enduring suffering bravely and with faith. "Nothing makes the soul so courageous as suffering bravely borne,"[9] he declared, recognizing that through perseverance in hardship, believers develop a resilience

and depth of character that cannot be cultivated through comfort alone.

In the context of missions—particularly in regions where Christians face persecution—these principles are vividly demonstrated. Leaders and believers in such environments often testify that suffering does not weaken their faith; rather, it deepens their prayer life, dependence on God, and humility. The hardships they endure become catalysts for spiritual growth, drawing them closer to God and fostering a reliance on His strength rather than their own. Far from eroding faith, suffering in these contexts often serves to strengthen it, transforming superficial belief into a profound trust rooted in experience and perseverance. These dynamic underscores the paradox that, in God's economy, suffering—though painful—can be a powerful tool for spiritual refinement and maturity.

***The Theology of the Cross***

The concept of *theologia crucis*, or the theology of the cross, was articulated by Martin Luther as a way to understand how God reveals Himself most authentically. Luther contrasted this with a "theology of glory," which seeks divine truth through visible signs of success, power, and triumph. According to Luther, God's true nature and His ultimate revelation are found precisely in suffering, weakness, and humility—embodying the crucifixion of Christ.[10] This perspective invites believers and leaders to see God's presence not in outward achievements but in the places of hardship and vulnerability.

Applying this to missional leadership, those influenced by the theology of the cross tend to reject traditional success metrics such as the size of a congregation, the amount of funds raised, or the visibility of their ministry as the primary indicators of effectiveness. Instead, they measure faithfulness based on perseverance through difficult circumstances, integrity in their calling, and unwavering commitment to God's mission—even when such efforts do not lead to immediate or measurable success. This approach encourages leaders to remain committed to their calling regardless of external

validation, trusting that true impact is often revealed through perseverance, humility, and fidelity in the face of adversity. Ultimately, it shifts the focus from superficial success to a deeper understanding of faithful service rooted in the example of Christ's suffering and self-giving love.

## Historical Witness: Suffering as Missional Catalyst

### *The Early Church*

Persecution served as a catalyst rather than an obstacle for the early Christian church, fueling its growth and strengthening its identity. Tertullian's famous assertion that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church"[11] encapsulates the idea that the suffering and sacrifice of believers often inspired others to join the faith rather than deter them. Rather than diminishing the community, persecution highlighted the depth of devotion among Christians and demonstrated their unwavering commitment to Christ, attracting curious onlookers and converts who admired their resilience amidst adversity. In this environment, the church's message of hope and eternal life resonated more profoundly, spreading rapidly across regions despite, or perhaps because of, the hostility they faced from imperial authorities.

Leaders like Ignatius of Antioch exemplified this mindset by embracing suffering as a participation in Christ's passion. On his way to martyrdom, Ignatius expressed a willingness to become "food for the wild beasts,"[12] viewing his death not as a defeat but as a divine opportunity to unite more fully with Christ. This attitude of sacrificial fidelity inspired early Christians to remain steadfast under persecution, fostering a sense of spiritual solidarity and purpose. The expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries was driven more by this resilient faith and unwavering commitment than by political influence or societal power. The church's ability to thrive under persecution exemplifies how genuine faith, rooted in perseverance and a deep sense of calling, can catalyze profound growth even in the face of severe opposition.

### *Modern Mission Movements*

Throughout history, missionaries like William Carey exemplify unwavering commitment in the face of profound adversity. Carey dedicated years to translating the Bible and establishing educational institutions in India, often enduring relentless discouragement, debilitating illness, and personal loss. The death of his child deeply affected him, and his wife experienced a mental breakdown, yet he persisted in his mission.[13] His resilience demonstrates that true calling often requires perseverance through suffering, highlighting that setbacks and hardships do not diminish one's purpose but rather can serve to strengthen resolve and deepen conviction. Carey's life underscores the reality that enduring suffering is an integral part of fulfilling a higher purpose and faithfully pursuing one's calling in challenging circumstances.

Similarly, Jim Elliot's life and words continue to inspire many. Elliot, who was martyred while reaching out to the Huaorani people in Ecuador, famously wrote that "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."[14] His willingness to sacrifice his life reflects a profound understanding that suffering and loss in service of a divine calling are not signs of failure but confirmations of the authenticity of that calling. These leaders illustrate that suffering does not invalidate one's purpose; instead, it often affirms it. Their lives demonstrate that true commitment to a higher calling involves embracing hardship, trusting that the sacrifices made are meaningful in the context of eternal gains beyond worldly possessions.

## Dimensions of Suffering in Contemporary Missional Leadership

### *Cultural Isolation*

Cross-cultural leaders frequently grapple with loneliness and a sense of misunderstanding as they navigate diverse cultural landscapes, often feeling isolated in their experiences and perceptions. Cultural displacement can contribute to identity strain, as they struggle to reconcile their own cultural roots with the new environment, leading

to feelings of dislocation and internal conflict. However, this marginality can also serve as a catalyst for developing heightened empathy and contextual sensitivity, as these leaders become more attuned to the nuances of different cultural perspectives. Their **first-hand** experiences of dislocation and adaptation can deepen their understanding of others' struggles, fostering greater compassion and enhancing their ability to lead with cultural awareness and inclusivity.

***Institutional Pressures***

Leaders within mission agencies, theological institutions, and church networks often face an array of formidable challenges that can take a toll on their well-being. They are frequently subjected to criticism from various stakeholders, including congregations, donors, and the broader community, which can undermine their confidence and sense of purpose. Financial strain is another persistent concern, as they strive to secure funding for their programs and initiatives amidst economic uncertainties, often working with limited resources. Additionally, these leaders are burdened with unrealistic expectations to effectively manage growth, foster spiritual development, and fulfill ambitious visions, all while navigating complex organizational dynamics. The cumulative pressure from these demands often leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout, leaving leaders feeling overwhelmed, disconnected, and at risk of losing their passion and effectiveness in their vital roles.

***Persecution and Risk***

In numerous regions worldwide, Christian leaders endure relentless persecution, facing surveillance, imprisonment, or violence simply for practicing their faith and leading their communities. Global monitoring organizations report that thousands of these individuals encounter hostility each year, highlighting the widespread and persistent nature of religious persecution. These harsh realities underscore the urgent need for a robust theology of suffering—one that affirms the faithfulness of believers amidst adversity, offers

hope and resilience, and articulates a profound understanding of suffering as a part of the Christian journey. Such a theology not only provides spiritual sustenance but also empowers believers to persevere with courage and conviction, reinforcing the transformative power of faith in the face of oppression.

## Missional Meanings of Suffering

### *Suffering as Witness*

When leaders face suffering with unwavering integrity, they exemplify a credible witness to their faith and principles, demonstrating that their commitment surpasses personal comfort or vindication. The Apostle Peter emphasizes that enduring suffering for doing good is commendable before God, highlighting that such perseverance reflects genuine righteousness and trust in divine justice. [15] This non-retaliatory endurance serves as a powerful testimony to the transformative power of Christ within them, showcasing a love and patience that transcend natural human responses. By choosing to suffer without retaliation, leaders embody Christ's teachings of forgiveness and humility, thereby inspiring others and affirming that true strength lies in faithfulness to God's truth amid adversity.

### *Suffering as Solidarity*

Missional leadership embodies a deep identification with the marginalized, recognizing that true leadership is rooted in serving others and sharing in their struggles. Jesus' ministry exemplifies this approach, as He proclaimed good news to the poor and liberation for the oppressed, demonstrating a profound commitment to justice and compassion.[16] Leaders who follow this model intentionally enter spaces of pain and suffering, not to overlook or fix from a distance, but to participate authentically in God's compassionate presence. By doing so, they embody Christ's love and justice, bringing hope and healing to those who are often overlooked or oppressed, and fostering a transformative movement that aligns leadership with the divine call to serve the vulnerable and marginalized.

### *Suffering as Dependence*

Paul's "thorn in the flesh" highlights the paradox that human weakness can serve as a conduit for divine empowerment. Rather than hindering him, his struggles became a means through which God's grace was demonstrated and perfected. The assurance that "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"[17] underscores a profound truth: divine strength is most fully revealed when human limitations are acknowledged. For missional leaders, this principle is vital; recognizing and embracing their weaknesses invites God's strength into their lives and ministries. It shifts the focus from self-reliance to reliance on divine power, enabling leaders to persevere, serve, and lead with humility, trusting that God's grace will sustain and empower them in the face of challenges. This understanding transforms weakness from a liability into a channel for divine effectiveness in fulfilling God's mission.

## Pastoral and Practical Implications

### *Cultivating Resilient Spirituality*

Deep prayer life, scriptural meditation, community accountability, and spiritual disciplines are vital practices that sustain leaders amid suffering by anchoring them in divine strength and guidance. A deep prayer life fosters intimate communication with God, providing comfort, clarity, and resilience during challenging times. Scriptural meditation allows leaders to internalize God's promises and wisdom, reinforcing their faith and perspective amidst adversity. Community accountability offers vital support and encouragement, ensuring leaders remain grounded and responsible, while also sharing burdens within a faithful fellowship. Together, these spiritual disciplines create a resilient spiritual foundation, empowering leaders to endure suffering with hope, perseverance, and unwavering trust in God's sovereignty and grace.

### *Reframing Success*

Missional success should be redefined as faithfulness, emphasizing unwavering commitment to God's calling rather than merely achieving measurable results. Mother Teresa's poignant words, "God has not called me to be successful; He has called me to be faithful,"[18] highlight the importance of fidelity over accolades. True faithfulness involves consistently embodying Christ's love, serving others with humility, and remaining steadfast in obedience regardless of external outcomes. In the kingdom of God, obedience and devotion take precedence over worldly metrics of success, reminding believers that the ultimate goal is to remain faithful to God's purpose, trusting that He will honor our faithfulness in ways beyond human understanding.

### *Developing Support Systems*

Healthy mission leadership thrives on the foundation of peer networks, which foster shared learning, accountability, and mutual support among leaders facing similar challenges. Mentoring relationships provide personalized guidance, wisdom, and encouragement, helping leaders navigate complex decisions and personal growth. Organizational care structures ensure that the well-being of leaders is prioritized through supportive policies, resources, and a culture that values mental and emotional health. Conversely, isolation intensifies suffering by depriving leaders of connection and support, often leading to burnout, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed. In contrast, community acts as a vital buffer, offering empathy, solidarity, and collective resilience that can sustain leaders through difficulties and enhance their capacity to serve effectively**.**

## Conclusion

Missional leaders are called to embrace a theology of the cross, recognizing that suffering is an integral part of participating in Christ's mission and not a mere accident or meaningless pain. Rooted in the pattern of Christ's sacrificial love, affirmed by apostolic witness, and demonstrated throughout church history, suffering shapes leaders into vessels of redemptive grace, allowing them to embody Christ's self-giving love in their leadership. By

interpreting suffering as participation in Christ's mission, leaders can find purpose and divine intimacy even in hardship, seeing it as an opportunity to reflect Christ's humility and surrender.

Missional leaders must therefore:

1. Embrace a theology of the cross.
2. Interpret suffering as participation in Christ's mission.
3. Cultivate resilience through spiritual formation.
4. Anchor their hope in the promise of resurrection.

In this way, suffering becomes a profound means by which God advances His redemptive purposes in the world, transforming pain into power and weakness into witness.

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[1] Isaiah 53:3 (NIV).

[2] Isaiah 53:4 (NIV).

[3] Mark 10:43 (NIV).

[4] 1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV).

[5] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 523.

[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 56.

[7] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 484.

[8] 1 Peter 5:10 (NIV).

[9] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, Homily 5.

[10] Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Thesis 20.

[11] Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 50.

[12] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 4.

[13] Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham: New Hope, 1991).

[14] Jim Elliot, *The Journals of Jim Elliot* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1978), 174.

[15] 1 Peter 2:20 (NIV).

[16] Luke 4:18 (NIV).

[17] 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV).

[18] Mother Teresa, A *Simple Path* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 19.

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# 2

## FROM WEEPING TO WITNESS: A HOLISTIC CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING IN THE LIGHT OF JEREMIAH 38

**Dr. Joel Joseph***

**Abstract:** Jeremiah 38 presents one of the most gripping narratives of a prophet suffering in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet, faithful to his divine mandate, is cast into a cistern—an act that reflects both the political tensions of Judah's final days and the social dynamics of resisting prophetic truth. This article offers a theologically grounded, intracultural and missional reading of Jeremiah's suffering in the cistern, drawing implications for contemporary Christian witness in contexts of Persecution, oppression, marginalization, and communal conflict. This paper explores the narrative of Ebed-Melech in Jeremiah 38:7-13 from an intercultural and intracultural perspective. As a Cushite eunuch in the court of King Zedekiah, Ebed-Melech's intervention in saving Jeremiah from the cistern highlights that God will cause His deliverance for His people as Christians respond to weeping like situation and Jeremiah is considered as a weeping prophet within biblical narratives.

### Introduction

The story of Jeremiah being thrown into the cistern (Jer 38:1–13) captures the prophet's life-long journey from lament to steadfast witness. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, not because

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of emotional fragility but because his ministry demanded costly faithfulness in the face of political power, religious stagnation, and communal rejection.

For Christian communities worldwide—especially those wrestling with persecution, displacement, socio-political instability, and internal fragmentation—Jeremiah becomes an indispensable companion. His struggle invites believers to move from personal weeping to communal witness, from silence to prophetic courage, and from despair to resilient hope.

**Historical and Literary Context of Jeremiah 38**

Chapter 38 poses one major problem, namely, the relationship between the events recorded here and those narrated in 37:11-21. The two accounts have a great deal in common. In both narratives the prophet is arrested, referred, to the state officials (*Sarim*, 37:14, 15; 38: 1-4) on a charge of treason and imprisoned in an underground cistern (*bor*) where conditions were appalling (37:17; 38:14). [1] The narrative unfolds during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (ca. 588–586 BCE). King Zedekiah is weak, afraid of both the political elites and the Babylonian threat. Jeremiah's message—that surrender to Babylon is the only path to life (Jer 38:2)—is deemed treasonous. Jeremiah 37–44 is in chronological order. Thus, the events in Jeremiah 38 take place near the end of the long Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (588–586 BC) and provide additional theological context for understanding the capture and destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 39.[2] The royal officials, driven by political realism, interpret Jeremiah's prophetic counsel as demoralizing and dangerous. The verb *be handed over* supported by the infinitive absolute in 37:1-21 the substance of it is found in several times (21:7; 34:2, 22; 37:8; etc.). [3] In 597 BCE, Jerusalem surrendered and Jehoiachin and other Jerusalem officials were captured and deported to Babylon. The mantle of national leadership fell on Zedekiah, Josiah's son. Unfortunately, he refused to learn from history. Submission to the Babylon is proposed as a theological judgement: God has legitimated Babylon. Resistance to

Babylon is not only poor politics, but also disobedience to Yahweh.[4] When the siege was temporarily lifted at the approach of the Africans (Egyptians), the nobles and the false prophets interpreted it as a sign of peace for Jerusalem. However, Jeremiah interpreted it as God's judgement and still counselled submission, because the lifting of the siege was temporary. Jeremiah is accused of weakening the hands of the soldiers (Jer 38:4), echoing how prophets often become scapegoats during national crises. His message disrupts militaristic nationalism and false theological assurances of divine intervention (cf. Jer 7:4; 23:16–17). Thrown into a cistern of mud with no water (Jer 38:6), Jeremiah faces certain death. 38: 9 The sentence is complex in Hebrew. The MT "and he has died," if it is not to be emended, may suggest that he was as good as dead. The state officials may have intended to starve him to death if he did not die of exposure or suffocate in the mud first.[5] His rescue by Ebed-Melek, a foreigner and court official from Cush, becomes a surprising theological reversal, demonstrating how God often uses unexpected agents on the margins of society.

## An Intercultural Reading: Jeremiah's Suffering Across Cultures

Intercultural hermeneutics seeks to read Scripture in conversation with multiple cultural contexts, acknowledging that suffering takes distinct shapes across societies.

### *Jeremiah and Cultures of Honor-Shame*

In honor-shame cultures, public humiliation becomes a weapon. Being lowered into a cistern is a symbolic shaming. Miller emphasizes that Jeremiah's suffering embodies the message he preaches—judgment, hope, and costly obedience.[6] The Judean officials (הַשָּׂרִים, ha-śārîm) seek to silence Jeremiah, while the Cushite rescues him. Though then he was shut up in prison, yet the word of God could not be bound, as Paul says, who gloried in the fact, that though he was in chains, yet the truth spread far and wide. (2 Timothy 2:9.) Such was the case as to Jeremiah; though he was retained as a prisoner, he yet ceased not to discharge his office; But

the four princes mentioned here watched him, even Shephatiah, Gadaliah, Jucal, and Pashur. Then the four princes he names, having insidiously watched what he said, immediately made a commotion. Now the princes add, Die let this man, because in this manner, or therefore, that is, on account of his bad counsel, he weakens the hands of the men of war, etc. In John Calvin's lecture 147, 148 he deals the attitude of Zedekiah who doubtlessly knew that wrong was done to the holy Prophet; as he had not threatened the people from ill-will or a hostile mind; and he was thus conscious that he had to do with God rather than with a mortal man. However this may have been, he knew that Jeremiah was not an enemy to the public safety according to the charge brought by the princes. He might then have wished to deliver the Prophet from their hands, but he submitted to their fury; for he was divested of all regal power, and was become, as it were, a slave to his own counselors, on whom depended the government of the kingdom. He operates within the royal system but subverts it by exposing the officials' injustice. He speaks to King Zedekiah directly, a privilege that demonstrates his unique position in court dynamics.[7] Similarly, believers in many cultures face loss of honor, family ties, or reputation when they stand for truth. Jeremiah teaches believers that faithfulness is often costly but never unnoticed by God. Fretheim notes that the cistern narrative portrays suffering not as divine abandonment but as the crucible in which Jeremiah's vocation is intensified.[8]

***Ebed-Melech, the "Other"***

Ebed-Melek embodies the intercultural reality that God works through the "other." Ebed-Melech stands as a paradoxical figure in Jeremiah 38, embodying both marginality and agency in the royal court of Judah. Hill provides a close literary reading showing Ebed-Melech as a model of intercultural compassion and divine justice.[9] As a Cushite eunuch, he belongs to at least two categories of social exclusion:

Ethnic Otherness – He is a foreigner (הַכּוּשִׁי, ha-Kūšî), likely from the Kingdom of Cush (modern Sudan/Ethiopia). Cushites were often

depicted as outsiders in Israelite society, despite occasional favorable portrayals (e.g., Moses' Cushite wife in Num. 12:1, the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:27).

Gendered and Social Ambiguity – As a *saris* (סָרִיס, "eunuch"), he was likely castrated, placing him outside traditional familial and power structures. Eunuchs were often seen as loyal, but voiceless, functioning as palace intermediaries rather than political actors.

Despite these layers of marginality, Ebed-Melech disrupts expectations by actively challenging power and intervening on behalf of Jeremiah. Brueggemann calls Ebed-Melech "an unexpected agent of Yahweh's rescuing work," underscoring God's use of outsiders in mission.[10] His actions break from the subaltern stereotype of passivity, demonstrating moral courage and strategic agency.

## From Weeping to Witness: Practical and Missional Implications for Today

### *Recover the Prophetic Voice:*

Jürgen Moltmann, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, argues that Christian hope does not arise after suffering it arises within suffering. He argues that Christian hope emerges from within the experience of suffering, not outside it. He argues that Christian hope arises "within suffering, not apart from it, [11] grounding the church's prophetic mission in God's eschatological future.[12] As Christopher Wright notes, Jeremiah's ministry "was shaped by suffering into a witness that confronted kings and comforted exiles." The pit prepares Jeremiah for later prophetic tasks especially the courageous interactions with Zedekiah in chapters 38–39. Emerging from the cistern, his voice is not weakened but weaponized for mission.[13]

God's promises break into present history as transformative hope.[14] He insists that suffering is the very soil where hope becomes real, eschatological hope as basis for mission.[15]

### *Stand With Those in the Cistern*

A holistic Christian response includes: advocacy for the persecuted, pastoral care for the wounded, psychological and spiritual support for the isolated, and confronting systems that produce cisterns. Clements notes that the spotlight shifts to Ebed-Melech, whose actions reveal "the surprising presence of faith outside Israel's leadership."[16] The Cushite becomes an early symbol of Gentile participation in God's mission—a preview of the nations who will one day come to Zion (Isa 56:3–7; Zech 8:20–23). Ben Zvi analyzes the social dynamics of the court and highlights how Ebed-Melech disrupts the expected power structures for divine mission.[17] Like Ebed-Melek, those often dismissed by society—women, migrants, Dalits, tribal communities, ethnic minorities—are often God's chosen vessels for renewal. A missional church must elevate these voices.

### *Lessons from Jeremiah and the Cushite: A Missional Framework for Today*

*Suffer Faithfully — Suffering Shapes Witness*

Jeremiah emerges from the cistern not defeated but deepened. His suffering becomes the furnace in which his prophetic identity is refined. Mission in the Bible is never an escape from hardship; it is often the place where God forms His witnesses. As with Jeremiah, true mission does not collapse under pressure but is purified by it. Duggan argues that Jeremiah's endurance under persecution offers a theological pattern for Christian mission in hostile contexts.[18]

Jesus Himself taught that suffering is integral to discipleship:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross (Matt 16:24). In this world you will have trouble. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33). Paul reinforces the same pattern. For him, suffering is not an interruption to mission but part of its fabric: We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed… always carrying around the death of Jesus (2 Cor 4:8–10).

Jeremiah's endurance anticipates this New Testament theology: mission births credibility in the crucible of suffering.

*Speak Prophetically — Truth Is Not Negotiable*

Jeremiah's post-cistern ministry is marked by fearless truth-telling. Though humiliated and nearly executed, he does not soften the message when Zedekiah summons him again (Jer 38:14–23). The prophet shows that mission without truth is mere activism, but truth without courage is silence. Jesus' own ministry follows this same prophetic trajectory:

He spoke boldly before Herod (Luke 13:32), before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:61–62), and before Pilate (John 18:37: For this purpose, I came into the world—to bear witness to the truth).

Paul likewise declared, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Christian mission today must rediscover this non-negotiable commitment to truth, especially in times of cultural and political pressure.

*Welcome the Outsider — Mission Includes Unexpected Partners*

Ebed-Melech the Cushite, an African foreigner and a eunuch, becomes the unlikely instrument of God's saving action. While the Judean officials embody corruption and cowardice, the outsider embodies faith and justice. Goldingay provides a theological reflection on Ebed-Melech's courage, faith, and trust in God, underscoring his missional significance.[19] This underscores a crucial missional principle: God often uses those outside our categories to advance His mission. Birch argues that Ebed-Melech functions as a prototype of missional advocacy and justice in the Hebrew Bible.[20]

Holladay notes the narrative emphasis on outsider agency and the theology of divine deliverance working through marginalized persons.[21] Baden shows how foreigners in the Old Testament serve as God's instruments of justice, a pattern exemplified by Ebed-Melech.[22] Mission expands, rather than contracts, when we embrace unlikely partners.

*Embody Hope Within Suffering*

Jeremiah does not wait for deliverance to proclaim hope; he speaks hope while still in danger. Stulman treats Jeremiah as a model of resilient hope within trauma and shows how the narrative fosters a missional ethic of solidarity.[23]

Jeremiah's quiet, resilient hope in the cistern—and God's later promise to Ebed-Melech (Jer 39:15–18)—show that God's faithfulness is revealed not through escape from suffering, but through His presence within it.

*Serve with Compassion and Courage*

Ebed-Melech models mission that is both bold and tender. He risks his position and possibly his life to challenge the king and intervene for the prophet (Jer 38:7–13). Carroll observes the contrast between the corrupt Judean officials and the moral clarity of Ebed-Melech, suggesting the outsider becomes God's surprising instrument of mission.[24] Yet he also acts with remarkable gentleness—using rags and old clothes so that Jeremiah's frail body is not injured (v. 12). This combination is deeply biblical: Jesus was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The Good Samaritan exemplifies compassion combined with costly courage (Luke 10:33–35).

Mission today must be marked by this same tender strength—willing to confront injustice, yet careful to restore the wounded with gentleness (Gal 6:1).

**Conclusion**

Jeremiah's descent into the cistern portrays the painful cost of prophetic obedience. Yet, in this moment of despair, God orchestrates a surprising deliverance through a foreigner, revealing that divine sovereignty transcends human boundaries. For the global church, Jeremiah 38 serves as a theological compass—guiding Christians from personal sorrow to communal witness, from weeping to mission.

In a fractured world, Jeremiah calls us to hold together lament and

hope, truth and compassion, suffering and bold witness. Such a holistic Christian response not only honors the biblical narrative but also strengthens the church's voice in the intercultural and intracultural contexts of our time.

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# 3

# INTERPRETATIONS OF HUMAN SUFFERING IN THE WRITINGS OF ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA AND JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

**Dr. Sambhav Ajitsingh Winget***

**Abstract:** This article explores the interpretations of human suffering in the writings of the Church Fathers Origen of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. It examines their theological perspectives, highlighting how Origen viewed suffering as a means of spiritual growth and purification, while Chrysostom emphasized endurance, humility, and participation in Christ's Passion. The analysis also considers their responses to social suffering and critiques of their approaches, offering insights into their enduring influence on Christian understandings of suffering. Thus, the article underscores the transformative and redemptive potential of suffering within the Christian spiritual tradition.

## Introduction

The Church Fathers were early Christian scholars and writers who played an important role in forming our understanding of suffering from both a theological and spiritual sense. All of their writings from the 2nd through the 5th centuries share a common goal the belief that suffering can be an important means of personal growth, transformation, and salvation. The Church Fathers generally believed that pain and suffering are created parts of God's creation

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resulting from the fall of mankind through sin, and therefore, man must endure them. This belief is also rooted deeply in their understanding that there is some level of purpose or reason for Mankind suffering, even though it can be painful. They believed that the suffering could assist in purifying their souls, strengthen their faith, and promote their spiritual growth, among other things.

The beliefs of the Church Fathers were shaped by their own lives where they experienced both persecution and death as martyrs through the lives they led, thus leading to a much deeper understanding of the complexities of human suffering. They also expressed opinions that human suffering could be tied to or related to the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and that Jesus by enduring pain and suffering allowed believers to also share in the redemptive work of Christ, thereby uniting their suffering with Him.

However, the work of Origen and John Chrysostom has made important contributions to our understanding of both the nature and function of suffering. Both provide insights into the theological reflection on suffering; Origen emphasizes that suffering can help us grow spiritually, while Chrysostom teaches that we should strengthen our will to bear our suffering and remain humble during those times. As a result of these teachings, we understand suffering to be an integral part of Christian life, and will ultimately result in our spiritual transformation and unification with God.

**Origen of Alexandria**

Origen was one of the most influential early Christian Writers in Alexandria. His extensive theological writings influenced many philosophical arguments on the nature of salvation and suffering and contributed greatly to his role within the early Christian movement. Although his ideas were heavily influenced by platonic philosophy (which focused on the existence of a spiritual realm beyond the physical world), he saw the creation and the suffering it produces as a part of the fallen state of the universe. He viewed the existence of suffering as a result of the separation of humanity from the perfect goodness of God through the corruption created by sin.[1] In Origen's

thinking, suffering is evidence of the fallen state of the world and also is a sign of the necessary spiritual purification to return to God.

Despite acknowledging suffering as an unavoidable part of human existence, Origen maintained a profoundly optimistic perspective on its potential for redemptive purpose. He argued that suffering is not solely punitive but can be harnessed as a means of spiritual growth and development. In his writings, he emphasized that enduring suffering with faith and patience allows the soul to attain a deeper understanding of divine truths and facilitates its ascent toward union with God. This aligns with his broader theological concept that the soul's journey involves purification through trials, ultimately leading to its elevation back toward its divine origin. Origen famously stated, "The soul is saved through suffering," underscoring his conviction that suffering plays a crucial role in the process of salvation.[2] This statement encapsulates his belief that hardship is an essential part of spiritual development. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, many early Greek Church fathers, including figures like Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Athanasius, emphasized the idea that suffering has an important role in spiritual development, highlighting its significance in their teachings on salvation.

Although Origen acknowledged suffering as part of being human, he believed that suffering has the ability to be redeemed through a positive outlook on life. He argued that suffering can be used for the purpose of Spiritual Growth and Development and can also give someone the strength to endure difficulties in life, thereby providing them with a greater understanding of God's Divine Truths. This belief is in line with Origen's overall Theological Concept that the Soul will Purified by Trials on the way Back to Heaven. He stated, "The soul will be saved from suffering."[3] This quote clearly indicates his belief in the essential role of suffering in the Salvation of Souls. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that this notion is found in many early Church Fathers' writings, including those written by Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Athanasius, and the teachings of these men all emphasize the

importance of suffering in Spiritual Growth and Development.

***Origen's Understanding of Suffering:***

Origen was instrumental in establishing a foundation for Christian thinking; his ideas about how one can use pain/suffering to develop spiritually were paramount to his theology and would later serve as a great influence on subsequent Christian traditions.

*Inherent to the Human Condition*

According to Origen perspective suffering was part of the human condition. In Against Celsus, Origen writes: "Souls that descend from heaven to the earth must naturally go through the trials and tribulations of this world."[4] Therefore, even then, Origen believed that while we go through trials and tribulations, we are under the supreme authority of Jesus Christ and not under the control of the devil.

Origen viewed suffering as inevitable due to Adam and Eve's original sin. Because of sin we have been separated from God. This is evident from Genesis 3 and how the fall of mankind was the cause of suffering. Tertullian, a Christian theologian, once said "the world is a place of suffering and all humanity suffers."[5]

According to Origen, none is excluded from suffering due to their humanity. Origen used the phrase "the human condition" to describe suffering so that he could convey to the world that every person on earth will experience some form of suffering during their lifetime.

*Opportunity for Spiritual Growth*

As a religious thinker of the third century, Origen taught that there are many lessons to learn from the experience of suffering and how it can lead a person to become stronger in their faith or spiritual growth.[6] He believed that God uses suffering to help people grow spiritually, and through suffering, their souls will be changed and become better.

In his writings in the early Christian Church, Origen spoke of

suffering as a way for God to educate and refine a person's soul. He wrote, "The soul becomes purified through suffering, and through suffering, becomes more perfected than it was before." Through these statements, he provided insight into how the suffering of believers could be a means of transforming their lives for the better.

This understanding of suffering can also be found in the writings of another early Church Father, Irenaeus. In his writings, Irenaeus echoed many similar thoughts about the benefits of suffering, when he stated, "By the sufferings we endure we are purged and become better than we were."[7] My understanding of Irenaeus's view is directly aligned with Origen's view that suffering can produce transformative benefits for human beings.

*Path to Union with God*

The theology surrounding suffering held by Origen presents the idea that when a person has faith in God and endures the trials of their life, they move closer to the possibility of being "one" with God. In his text, "The Principles," Origen states, "For the soul of man, who has attained to unite himself with God, cannot be troubled by the afflictions of the body."[8] This conveys the belief that the souls that are connected to God have knowledge of their own spiritual existence and therefore are not affected by the pain and suffering.

Similar ideas were expressed by a Christian mystic, Evagrius of Pontus, who stated: "A man whose soul is united with God is not disturbed by passions; he suffers no pain or sadness."[9] Evagrius emphasized the belief that connecting oneself to God transcends suffering and resonates with Origen's theology of suffering.

***Criticisms and Challenges***

Origen's theology of suffering has influenced the broader Christian traditions, while at the same time it has faced criticism and challenges. One of the main criticisms that Origen has suffered from is that his emphasis on suffering being transformative in nature can be taken as a masochistic or sadistic approach to suffering. This criticism has been made by Henri Crouzel, who states that "the

theology of suffering of Origen is marked by a munificence which could be construed as a form of masochism."[10]

Henri's criticism fails to see the broader context and subtleties in Origen's writings regarding suffering. Origen's views of suffering as a vehicle for one's spiritual development are more about bringing to light the fact that suffering can exist as a conduit for spiritual improvement. The view expressed in the writings of Rowan Greer echo this idea that "the theology of suffering of Origen is not a form of masochism, but rather demonstrates that suffering is a way to achieve spiritual improvement."[11]

The theology that Origen created around suffering is one of many topics that have greatly influenced how Christianity approaches suffering. Origen's belief that suffering is an intrinsic part of our relationship with God, a means of achieving the spiritual development needed to achieve ultimate union with Him and a way of uniting oneself towards the divine creator through suffering has given rise to an extensive and varied perspective on suffering. In summary, the nuances of Origen's thought create a much deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the role of suffering in the human experience than many have considered when examining this important aspect of Christianity.

**John Chrysostom**

John Chrysostom, who was Archbishop of Constantinople, wrote about suffering in his letters. In many of his writings, he used suffering as a means of showing humanity's condition; he viewed suffering as an essential part of the sinfulness of humanity.[12]

In contrast, he viewed suffering as an opportunity for God's spirit to work through people by providing the opportunity for people to experience deeper relationships with their Creator. John Chrysostom wrote that through suffering, people are better able to understand the fact that they are made to die and experience suffering ultimately leads to a greater understanding of one's own mortality and the temporary nature of life on earth.[13] According to John Chrysostom,

suffering is not meaningless or evil; he believed suffering is an opportunity for spiritual advancement and for communion with Jesus Christ. Thus, when applying faith and gratitude to one's suffering, one can attain greater reward than if they had not suffered at all.

***Chrysostom's Understanding of Suffering:***

Chrysostom lived in a time of great social upheaval, political corruption, and many struggles within the Church. As a result of this circumstance, he was very critical of wealth, corruption and the loosening of morals, which led him into conflict with the imperial government and church hierarchy, resulting in his removal from office and subsequent exile.[14] The Trials Chrysostom endured changed his beliefs about how God works through suffering, defining suffering by using the believer's spiritual life as a vehicle for transformation. Unlike some theologians who seek to ask the question about why righteous people suffer, Chrysostom chooses to focus on how the righteous suffer; or how suffering affects the way a person relates to God. This means that for Chrysostom, suffering can be viewed as a means for purification, humility, and communion with God. Suffering accepted in faith and humility is viewed in Chrysostom's theology as an instrument for the work of sanctification by God.

He was of course speaking of how his dying words (as reported by Palladius in his dialogue regarding The Life of John Chrysostom) represent that perspective and so he has been quoted as saying, "Glory Be to God for Everything" (Palladius, 4$^{th}$ Century).[15] This quote encapsulates the totality of His understanding, namely that suffering is not necessarily a negative experience, but rather an aspect of God's plan for human beings to go through and to accept as a form of worship, and to accept and be thankful for this ultimately. His understanding of responding to suffering as a Christian should be that the human being should glorify God in every situation, whether it is a physical or spiritual hardship or challenge and to have complete faith in God's grace and mercy in

all circumstances (i.e., all of creation).[16] Wilmot may have shown an expression of a pastoral concern; however, he also expressed the deep theological conviction, that by living and accepting suffering in a right way, the human being would be able to live more fully in God's Presence (i.e., enjoy a Fuller Life.)

*Suffering as Spiritual Medicine*

Chrysostom demonstrates through his numerous references and allusions, stating that God uses suffering as a means of correcting and healing rather than punishing or abandoning His children. For example, Chrysostom writes in his Homilies on Hebrews, "The metaphor of suffering can be viewed by Chrysostom as the means by which God heals believers via His loving care and correction, respectively. The suffering itself demonstrates the believer's character; the suffering represents a therapeutic process by which God heals the believer's relationship with Christ. An example of this statement is found in Homily VI on Hebrews." [17] Thus, according to Chrysostom, God does not abandon or punish those whom He loves; He heals them by demonstrating to them His love for their neighbour and His desire to save them. However, the suffering itself is indicative of God's intention to cause His followers to grow closer to Christ.

Chrysostom goes on to explain this compassionate attitude towards suffering with the example of a healer, who causes suffering to the patient by cutting him and/or burning him, simply because of the inevitable suffering that method of healing causes. In this way, Chrysostom argues: "The physician cuts, burns, and causes pain not because he hates the sick man, but because he desires his health."[18] With this example, Chrysostom paints a hopeful image of suffering by saying that it is something that God is causing to happen, for the sanctification of believers, and hence, by no means a sign of neglect by God, which would be a disturbing concept within a divinely governed world.

*Suffering and participation in Christ*

Chrysostom finds a profoundly theological meaning in suffering as it brings the believer into a closer union with the passion of Christ. Chrysostom makes it abundantly clear that to suffer with Christ is not something to be ashamed of but something to boast about as it is the way to crowns. In his homily on Romans 8:17, Chrysostom explains: "To suffer with Christ is not a disgrace but a glory; it is the way to crowns".[19] This reveals his strong persuasion that to suffer, to suffer unjustly, is a crucial element of Christian living that makes the believer a sufferer with Christ.

Chrysostom rejects the worldly notion that prosperity signifies divine favour and virtue, instead asserting that suffering and endurance amid injustice are more indicative of moral and spiritual strength. As he states in Homily XI on Philippians, "Nothing so demonstrates a man's virtue as suffering unjustly and bearing it nobly," thus framing suffering as a crucial means of conforming to Christ's likeness.[20] For Chrysostom, suffering is not merely a passive experience but an active shaping process that moulds the believer into the image of Christ, fostering humility, patience, and divine conformity. This understanding aligns with his broader theological emphasis on Christian suffering as a participation in Christ's passion, whereby the believer's suffering becomes a sacramental and transformative union with the Saviour's redemptive sacrifice.

*Suffering and Divine Providence*

John Chrysostom strongly refutes the notion that suffering signifies God's absence or indifference. Instead, he advocates that divine providence is often most active precisely in circumstances where it is least apparent.[21] In his homilies on Job, Chrysostom emphasizes that the righteous can endure intense suffering without being abandoned by God, highlighting that God's perspective encompasses the end from the beginning.[22] Humans tend to judge events based on immediate pain, but God guides all occurrences toward eternal good.[23] Apparent loss or hardship may conceal a greater spiritual benefit that is not immediately visible.[24] This

perspective fosters a trusting attitude toward divine providence, leading Chrysostom to counsel believers not to focus on questioning why suffering occurs but rather on how they respond to it; the moral and spiritual response is of greater significance than understanding its cause.[25]

*Social Suffering*

Chrysostom is particularly renowned for his keen awareness of social suffering namely, poverty, exploitation, and inequality and he emphasizes that addressing these issues is integral to Christian life. While he encourages the poor to find dignity and hope in Christ, he is especially forceful in his critique of the wealthy, whom he often identifies as the primary cause of unnecessary suffering through greed and neglect.[26] He insists that hoarding wealth while others go hungry constitutes a form of violence that cannot be justified within the Christian moral framework.[27] Moreover, Chrysostom condemns indifference to the plight of the impoverished, asserting that such apathy is incompatible with genuine faith and the call to love one's neighbour. [28] He underscores that almsgiving is not merely a voluntary act of charity but a moral obligation rooted in justice an essential component of living out the Christian commandment to love.[29] In this light, Chrysostom refuses to spiritualize suffering in a way that excuses social injustice; he recognizes that suffering caused by greed and neglect is a grievous sin rather than a redemptive trial. Consequently, Christians are called not only to endure suffering faithfully but also to actively work to alleviate the suffering of others, embodying the justice and compassion central to the Gospel.[30]

Despite John Chrysostom's strong emphasis on the value of suffering as a means of spiritual growth, he never glorifies pain for its own sake but approaches it with a deeply pastoral sensitivity. He offers comfort to the grieving, the sick, and the oppressed, recognizing the emotional weight of their struggles and encouraging practices such as lament, prayer, and mutual support to sustain them in their trials. Crucially, his consolation remains rooted in hope: he

teaches that suffering is temporary and that ultimate glory is eternal, emphasizing that earthly loss is surpassed by heavenly reward. He reassures believers that God's justice will ultimately prevail, providing an eschatological horizon that prevents despair and anchors suffering within the promise of resurrection and eternal life. This perspective offers a pastoral framework that affirms the reality of suffering while directing the faithful toward the hope of divine fulfilment in the age to come.

### *Criticisms and Challenges*

Chrysostom's theology of suffering is inextricably bound to his thought on the providence of God and moral pedagogy, yet it is also subject to considerable academic debate. Chrysostom argued that suffering is equated with spiritual purification or a sharing in the passion of Christ. There is a view, however, that his topology of suffering tended to reduce the actuality of human suffering to its spiritual intent, pointing towards a spiritual form of stoicism which failed to account for the notion of social justice or the mitigation of suffering. Second, Chrysostom's topology is based on a presumed moral universe in which there is a direct correlation between suffering and justice. In these respects, his topology of suffering tends towards questions of the problem of suffering in terms of the innocence of sufferers or the meaning of the senselessness of the suffering of the oppressed, specifically the problem of theodicy in the context of unjust suffering. Chrysostom's topology of suffering tends to be subject to the problem of the specific suffering of the oppressed which seems to conflict with the message of a compassionate divine providence.

## Conclusion

The Church Fathers' understanding of suffering provides valuable insights for Christians today. Their writings demonstrate that suffering is an inherent part of the human condition, resulting from sin and human rebellion against God. However, they also believed that suffering could be redemptive, leading to spiritual growth and ultimately, union with God. The understanding of suffering is rooted

in the Christian doctrine of the Fall, which teaches that human sin and rebellion against God have resulted in suffering and death. However, it is also rooted in the Christian doctrine of redemption, which teaches that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, individuals can attain spiritual growth and ultimately, union with God. The understanding of suffering also has implications for Christian practice and piety.

It suggests that Christians should approach suffering with a sense of hope and anticipation, knowing that it can be a means of spiritual growth and ultimately, union with God. It also suggests that Christians should offer comfort and guidance to those who are suffering, drawing on the rich theological and spiritual resources of the Church Fathers. Origen and John Chrysostom, offer valuable insights into the Christian understanding of suffering. Their writings demonstrate that suffering is an inherent part of the human condition, resulting from sin and human rebellion against God. However, they also believed that suffering could be redemptive, leading to spiritual growth and ultimately, union with God. Their understanding of suffering was shaped by their historical context, philosophical influences, and personal experiences. Despite their differences, they shared a common concern for the spiritual welfare of their readers and a desire to provide comfort and guidance in times of suffering.

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[2] Origen, *De Principiis*, 155.

[3] Origen, *De Principiis,* 145.

[4] Origen, *Against Celsus*, Translated by H. C. Puech (London: A. R. Mowbray, 2002), 123

[5] Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Translated by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), 345.

[6] Origen, *On the Principles*, Translated by G. W. Butterworth (London: A. R. Mowbray, 2002), 145.

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[20] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philippians*, Translated by William Ward, in "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers", Series 11, Vol. 11. (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894).

[21] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Job*, in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 9, 123.

[22] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Job*, 125.

[23] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Job*, 127.

[24] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Job*, 130.

[25] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Job*, 132.

[26] John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, in "Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew", 50.

[27] Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 56.
[28] Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 56.
[29] John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 3.
[30] Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 5.

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# 4

## THE MESSAGE OF HOPE IN SUFFERING: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF ISAIAH 43:14–28

**Dr. Balu Savarikannu***

### The Text in Context

Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55) offers hope to the suffering people in the Babylonian exile. The prophet creatively blends the themes of creation and redemption to offer hope to the hopeless. He does so because the redemption theme seemed irrelevant to the people in exile. Hence, he portrays God as the sovereign creator who can create, de-create, and recreate lives. The message of Isaiah is that God would redeem the people through their suffering.

As for the message of Deutero–Isaiah, the first part, chapters 40–48, projects that Yahweh can and will deliver His people from the Babylonians. The second part, chapters 49–55, affirms that Yahweh can restore His people from the alienation resulting from sin. According to John J. Oswalt, the exile to Babylon brought a huge change in the lives of the Israelites. Their privileged status as a chosen race and rulers of the world was buried in the wake of the exile. The people in exile gave up hope of returning home because, during various exiles, there were hardly any reports of exiles returning to their home country. In these critical circumstances, the prophet encourages Israel not to give up their hope because Yahweh can do a new thing. The prophet assures them that, despite their rebellion against God, Yahweh is going to take them home because of God's covenant loyalty (for your sake…for My Sake).[1] In his polemics against idolatry, the prophet argues that no other king or

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god will stand before the mighty power of Yahweh, who controls everything.

Regarding the theology of the book of Isaiah, the prophet, like the other prophets of Yahweh, addresses the tension between God's roles as a just judge and a gracious deliverer.[2] The Holy God punishes the wicked and restores His people through His covenant faithfulness. Sin has its consequences, yet grace overrules sin. The Israelites went into exile because of their sins against Yahweh. Yet Yahweh, in His grace, restored His people despite their sins. Isaiah 43:14–28 is one such passage in which Yahweh demonstrates His sovereign power over the nations, using anyone, even the Persian king Cyrus, to overthrow the Babylonians and rescue Israel, who had sinned against Him (Isa 45:1). He is sovereign over all nations.

A brief note on the unity of the book of Isaiah is appropriate here, so that the pericope under study is well understood in the light of Isaiah as a whole. Recent scholarship regards the book of Isaiah as a unified whole. Benjamin D. Sommer, for example, identifies Deutero–Isaiah's allusions to First Isaiah (Isa 1–39).[3] He repeatedly argues that these allusions are not confined to particular vocabularies and themes. He strengthens the case for Deutero–Isaiah's allusions to earlier materials and implies that the prophet was creative in his speech and writings, affirming not only the authenticity of the prophetic office but also God's doings in both the past and the future. Further, H. G. M. Williamson argues that there is a literary wholeness in the book of Isaiah, even if it were composed of redactional layers.[4] Williamson makes a valid point that one could see the book as a unified whole despite its literary differences. Many try to situate the book in its possible historical context. While reconstructing the very historicity of the Bible may be a fruitful attempt, it is not a pursuit that is perfectly possible. The meaning of the text lies in the text itself. The Scripture in its entirety has been given to the believing community as God's Word, and it was well received.

Isaiah 43:14–28 highlights God's grace. For the sake of His People, God will march Himself to Babylon to bring down their powers (v

14). In addition, this passage is distinctive because Israel is told not to recall former things (vv 18–19). It is surprising that Israel is told not to remember her past history, which is central to her faith.[5] In this passage, verses 14–15 are theologically significant because two major themes, God's creation and God's redemption, come together to support His new act of deliverance. Verses 16–21 challenge Israel to turn away from their preoccupation with the past acts of God and believe in God's fresh and creative acts at present.[6] The following unit, Isaiah 43:22–28, vividly portrays that Jacob–Israel is not a worthy recipient of God's redemption, thereby highlighting God's grace.

**Literary Structure**

Meaning can be conveyed through literary structure. The Hebrew writings employ various literary structures, one of which is the chiastic structure. In this chiastic structure, the outer parallels lead to the crux of the passage. The passage under study seems to exhibit such a chiasm. Before we look at the possible chiastic structure, let us see what scholars have said about the literary structure of the passage.

Many divide Isaiah 43:14–28 into three parts: God's trial speech outlining His plan to destroy the Babylonians and restore Israel (vv 14–15), His making of something new for Israel in the light of former things (vv 16–21), and His trial speech reasoning out the exile (vv 22–28).[7] However, John Goldingay divides the pericope into two rubrics: Yahweh will defeat Babylon and open up a new future (vv 14–21) and Jacob–Israel's failure in her service to God (vv 22–28).[8] John L. McKenzie also divides the pericope into two sections: verses 14–21 as a poetic expression of God's promise and verses 22–28 as God's trial speech about Israel's ungratefulness.[9] Not everyone agrees that verses 14–28 form one unity. Gary V. Smith places verses 14–15 within Isaiah 43:8–15, which talks about Israel being a witness to one true God. For him, verses 14–15 describe God's act of destroying Babylon. He then sees verses 16–21 as one section describing how God's new act of deliverance transforms life, and verses 22–28 as condemning Israel's

burdensome worship.[10]

Some scholars propose a different structure. Christopher R. Seitz divides Isaiah 43 into four units: verses 1–7, 8–15, 16–21, and 22–28. While many scholars see verse 14 as the start of a new unit because of its messenger formula, Seitz reads verses 14–15 as the culmination of God's trial speech in verses 8–13.[11] Brevard S. Childs identifies structural unity in verses 14–21, which emphasise God's grace (vv 14–15) and God's new act that transcends His former acts (vv 16–21). In addition, Isaiah 43:22–28 is the only trial speech in which God stands against Israel. The intense polemics in these verses require an active response to God's grace.[12] Westermann, though he places Isaiah 43:14–15 within the trial speech in Isaiah 43:8–15, doubts whether verses 14–15 rightly fit within it. However, he sees verse 14a as corresponding to verse 3a, so he places verses 14 and 15 within the unity of verses 8–15.[13] John D. Watts sees Isaiah 43:14–21 as part of a larger unit, Isaiah 42:13–43:21, which highlights God's act of sending His servant to rescue Israel. He places verses 22–28 within 43:22–44:23, which evokes Israel's response to remember her state before God.[14]

The threefold structure (vv 14–15, 16–21, and 22–28) highlights God's gracious nature and His creative acts, all set against human sinfulness. The outline of Isaiah 43:14–21 may be put this way:

1. Yahweh the Holy God Purposes to Redeem His People (vv 14–15)
2. Restoration of Israel Explained in the Light of Former Deliverance (vv 16–21)
3. Israel's Failure before the Holy God (vv 22–28)

In addition, a literary observation of how all the verses in the passage move towards the central message will be helpful. The central message of the pericope is the new exodus (from Babylon to Palestine), which is God's new thing for His people (vv 18–21). The surrounding materials depict God's holy nature and His miraculous deeds in contrast to the Israelites' sins against God. For example, God's holiness is set in contrast to holy officials sinning against God (cf. v 14a, v 28a). God's sending to Babylon for Israel's sake

and His forgiving of Israel's sins for His sake correspond to each other (v 14b, v 25). God's act of making a way in the wilderness and the army's defeat stand in contrast to the Israelites' disloyalty to Him (vv 16–17, vv 22–24). Finally, all of this leads to the central message: that God will make a new thing for Israel despite Israel's sin, thus focusing on the covenant faithfulness of God. The following structure is a synthesis of what is said above:

The LORD, your redeemer, *the Holy One of Israel*, the Creator of Israel, your King (vv 14a, 15)

I sent…to Babylon *for your sake* (v 14b)

I make a *way* and gather strong and mighty who will be extinguished like a wick (vv 16–17)

**Do not remember the past; I am making *a new thing*; my people will recount my praise (vv 18–21)**

You did not honor me but *wearied* me (vv 22–24)

I am He the One who wipes out your sins *for my sake* (v 25)

Your forefathers sinned and I punished *holy officials* (vv 27–28)

**The Message of Hope: The Lord as the Creative-Redeemer**

***Yahweh the Holy God Redeems His People (vv 14–15)***

Verses 14–15 highlight God's characteristics, including His kinsman relationship with Israel, His creation of Israel, and His Kingship. They describe the fall of Babylon through God's intervention on Israel's behalf. [15] 1 Verse 14 is a prophetic messenger formula, indicating that for the sake of His people God marched Himself to Babylon so that the valor and pride of the Babylonians would fall. Babylon's power was once used by God to punish Judah (Jer. 25:9), and now Babylon is going to fall by Cyrus, the Persian emperor whom God now uses (Isa 45:1). All this shows that God is the sole authority over the governments in the world. "If Israel is a blessing to the nations, Cyrus is a blessing to Israel—and

all because God is always out to save, always out to bless."[16] As some have observed, verses 14–15 are connected to the previous verses. For example, verse 14a corresponds to verse 3, where Yahweh is described as redeemer and Holy One.[17]

The epithet "thus says the LORD" expresses God's greatness and goodness. As redeemer, God will act on Israel's behalf and deliver her from the Babylonian clutches. As the Holy One of Israel, Yahweh is the incomparable God. He is the one and only God with a special relationship with Israel. The particle לְמַעַנְכֶם (*lemankem*) shows that Babylon's fall meant Israel's rise.[18] Does God's saving activity "for Israel's sake" contradict His forgiving of Israel "for His sake" in verse 25? The liberation of Jacob–Israel is to restore them, but it serves to glorify God, not Israel. Blessings benefit humans but are meant to glorify God. Hence there is no discrepancy between "for your sake" and "for my sake." Whom does God send to Babylon? An object is missing in the text; however, it is not needed, because the absence of the object intensifies the fact that God Himself is marching towards Babylon to break down the Babylonians' might. The demise of the entire Babylonian rule is a major defeat for the Babylonian gods; hence the progress of Cyrus' campaign shows that Yahweh alone is God. The idea is that God will bring down the bars so that the Babylonians' ships, in which the Chaldeans rejoice, will tumble. In Isaiah 2:16, the phrase "ships of Tarshish" is used metaphorically for pride that will be humbled on the Day of the Lord. Hence the term "in the ships they joyously shout" conveys the pride of the Chaldeans.[19] In verse 15, Yahweh reveals Himself as the only, true, almighty God. The expressions "the Holy One of Israel" and "your Holy One" connote God's covenantal relationship with His people. God, as the creator of Israel, continues to care for His people and all His creations. The expressions "your redeemer" and "your king" share God's liberative act as an able king.[20] It is interesting to notice that God's covenantal name, YHWH, is said in parallel to "the creator of Israel," and God as Israel's holy God is said in parallel to God being king over Israel. This points to Israel's new birth under God's covenant and God's holiness related to His sovereign rule.

***Restoration of Israel Explained in the Light of Former Deliverance (vv 16–21)***

Verses 16–21 are salvation oracles. A new messenger formula in verse 16 introduces the second unit. Repeated Exodus language appears in verses 16 and 17, where Yahweh is described by a series of participial clauses that point to God's act in the Exodus event (Ex. 6:6). The act of creation and the act of redemption merge.[21] In verse 16, God making a way in the Exodus is not a simple act; rather, His making a path in mighty waters is a miraculous event. Making a way in the sea could refer to God making a way in the Red Sea for the Israelites, and His gathering of the strong and mighty, who were destroyed, could correspond to His miraculous deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian armies (Ex. 15). However, these descriptions may not be confined to the Exodus event alone. Apart from the Exodus motifs, the underlying message is that God is sovereign over the forces of nature. Verse 17 is difficult to understand. If God leads out chariot and horse and the strong and mighty, why are they then extinguished like flax? The Septuagint reads the verse: "The One who leads out chariot and horse and mighty crowd, but they were laid down and they will not raise up, they are extinguished as a linen they are quenched." The verse may be understood as God being the cause of guiding the army for His cause. No powerful army could stand before God. It extinguishes like flax because God is strong and He is the everlasting God. Such an image points to how easily Yahweh defeats His enemies.

In verse 18, an exhortation is given not to remember the former things or give attention to things of the past. It is an exhortation, not a strong command, because of the light negative particle אַל(*al*), in contrast to לֹא(*lo*). The encouragement not to recall the past is given in the light of what God is doing something new here and now. What is interesting about this encouragement to forget the past events is that the preceding verses recall past events to highlight God's power. Thus, God is not limited to the past. One is not to have a fixed understanding of who God is based on what He did in the past. The reason for not recalling the former things is stated in

verse 19. The verse is emphatic with the particle הִנְנִי (*hineni*, "behold"). Instead of remembering things of the past, the people are commanded to look unto God. God making a way in the wilderness is the thing of the past, but now He could even set up rivers in deserts! (v 20). God is not formulaic in His function; rather, He is creative in executing His plans. He is sovereign and creative. He can do anything as He purports to do. Indeed, God's doing in a new environment is an immediate thing to watch. The people do not need to wait long to see God's new thing in their lives. It is already taking place. The rhetorical question, "Have you not not known?" adds more emphasis to God's enigmatic doing in the midst of peoples, who could not perceive what God is doing at the moment. It means that God is doing things beyond what the people could understand. God's transformative acts are beyond human comprehension.

The idea that a god would do a new thing was uncommon in the ancient world, as most gods were personifications of the world–system. Some Babylonian gods represented various seasons. When the spring god came, the autumn god died. However, Yahweh is not such a god. He Himself created the entire universe.[22] There are many opinions about what the former things and the uniqueness of the new thing mean in verses 18–19. At the outset, the former things can be seen in the light of verse 27, where it is said that the Israelite forefathers sinned against God. Thus, the former things could refer to the time of Israel's sinfulness and its consequences. However, many agree that the former things refer to God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, and the new thing might refer to God's deliverance of Israel from the Babylonian kingdom. How are the former things and the new thing related? According to Westermann, the new thing that God is about to do corresponds to the former one in at least two aspects. One, it is the same God who delivers His people. Two, the new deliverance becomes a historical reality through a new journey through the wilderness.[23] Why would the prophet say to his hearers to forget the former things? Westermann prefers to place the salvation oracle within a community lament, where God's present doing is mourned alongside His great deliverance in the past. Therefore, God tells us

not to mourn about the loss of former glory but to focus on the future thing that God is about to do.[24] However, the prophet may caution the audience not to fall into the tendency to put God in a box and to forget God's ability to do new things in new contexts. Instead of remembering God's character and nature from past deliverances, the Judahites glorified the event that had occurred. They forgot the truth that God, in His power, faithfulness, and love, will act in new situations in new ways. Hence, the prophet calls Jacob–Israel to have a new perception of God, who will do a new thing in order to restore them to Him.[25] Perhaps the people held a static idea of Yahweh (as the God who had done great things in the past) because of their influence in idol worship (usually, an idol is worshipped for some benefit in the past).

How is the latter deliverance better than the former? Wasn't the project of building the temple under Nehemiah's leadership mocked and criticised in comparison with its former glory? However, the deliverance from exile is a new thing, because this act of deliverance is no longer a power encounter as it was in Egypt, where God used Moses and Aaron to display His mighty power over the Egyptian kings and gods. There, Pharaoh could not withstand the glorious acts of God. Here, God uses Cyrus, a pagan emperor, as His instrument to bring down Babylonian rule and to restore Israel to her glory. Earlier, He used a pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, to punish His people; now He is using another pagan king to save His people. Judgment could come from an enemy, but redemption from a king who does not know Yahweh is something new. God is sovereign to exercise His power through any medium. Thus God shows Himself to be the God of the nations, not just to Israel, and in control over the affairs of the world.

The second exodus is a new thing because, by using a pagan emperor, He redeems His people, thus showing His sovereignty over the universe. In addition, the new exodus becomes like a paradise: wild beasts honour God, and jackals and young ostriches sing praises to God. Perhaps animals and birds praise God because they, too, quenched their thirst with the water that God provided for

His people. Though God provided water for His people, His provision is meant for all His creations. Humans are the pinnacle of God's creation, but this privilege includes God's care for His creations. Human resources should cater to nature, animals, and birds, not just to humans alone. God giving water in the wilderness may be a past thing, but it also aids the present need. When His people return from Babylon to Palestine, they will walk through the deserts and will need God's provision to live. God will meet their needs beyond measure. God's people are His chosen ones. The focus is not on the chosen ones, but on the One who chooses. He is sovereign to choose anyone for any purpose. God chose His people and formed them for Him so that they could fulfil His purposes. An election is more of a responsibility than a privilege.

Verse 21 puts the chosen people in a more favourable light, qualifying them as God forming them for Him. They will announce His qualities. The question still remains. Is this how it turned out? Probably the prophetic expression of God making a new way can be seen as a poetic, highly exaggerated account of the restoration of Israel. However, the new thing can also be seen as something spiritual that God is going to make the Israelites into true worshippers. Being formed is meant for a particular purpose. Hence, Yahweh formed Israel so that they would declare His praises. However, the new thing is not a final event. The purpose of the new exodus is the praises of the redeemed. Thus, history continues.[26]

### *Israel's Failure before the Holy God Yet He forgives Israel's Sins (vv 22–28)*

Westermann rightly observes that Isaiah 43:22–28 and 50:1–3 are the only trial speeches in which God opposes Israel. In the trial court, Yahweh faces a challenge: "How could you deliver Jacob to destruction when we served you?" God responds to the accusation that, in all her offerings and sacrifices, Israel did not serve Him but made Him serve.[27] Verses 22–24 speak of Israel's failure to worship Yahweh. Instead, they made Yahweh weary. In verses 20–21, it was expected that God's chosen people, whom God formed for Himself, would publicly praise Him and proclaim His qualities. However, in

verse 22, God laments, "You did not…" This means that the people did not live up to God's expectations. Earlier, God did things beyond people's expectations, but now they have wearied God through their negligence in living as God's people. Verse 22 begins with an adversative and a strong negative particle, thus meaning "But not…" This clearly contrasts with the previous unit (vv 14–21), where God's actions are positive and affirmative. Jacob not calling God and Israel growing weary of God are said in parallel lines, thus Jacob–Israel did not seek God in the first place, and they did not announce Yahweh to others. The chosen people whom God formed for Himself are said in their names not as God's people (O Jacob, O Israel), thus they are distanced because they neglected their God. God's lament, וְלֹא־אֹתִי, implies that Jacob–Israel sought other gods, and the people were fascinated by them. The verb, יָגַעְתָּ, conveys toiling, labouring, or suffering, and this points to how the people lost their hope in Yahweh because of the exile.

Verse 23 is very graphic, with a fourfold "Not"s. Twice, Jacob–Israel is accused of not giving due worship to Yahweh, and twice Yahweh defends Himself, saying He did not make the people serve or become weary of Him. Hence, God is not responsible for the people's transgression. He did all beyond the people's perceptions. All that was required of them was to declare His praises. Even animals and birds glorify God. However, Jacob–Israel, the chosen people, did not give due recognition to Yahweh or honour Him with offerings. God laments that Jacob–Israel deserted Him. God is not helpless in the people's waywardness, but it shows God's deep love for His people.

The mention of specific offerings, עֹלֹתֶיךָ הִשֵּׁ, וּזְבָחֶיךָ, implies that the people offered costly offerings to other gods but showed no regard for Yahweh. This is a serious violation of God's commandment, "You shall not have any other gods before Me." The people did not offer sacrifices to Yahweh, not even alongside other gods, though this too would be an act of idolatrous worship. They totally neglected Yahweh and honoured other gods. While the people did not offer sacrifices (plural), God did not make the people weary of

Him with any offering (singular). Other gods require sacrifices and rituals, but Yahweh did not in the first place. Worshipping Yahweh with an offering is an act of gratitude rather than an obligation. Yahweh seeks a sincere relationship with His people.

God laments further in verse 24 that the people did not buy Him an aromatic cane with their money and satisfy Him with fat offerings. God chose the people. He formed them for His own. However, the people did not open their purses to spend on God's cause. They could spend their hard–earned money to buy aromatic reeds for other gods, but not for their God, Yahweh. God gave His people water in the wilderness and made them drink. However, the people did not make God drink with the fat of their offerings. This means that the people were totally ungrateful for God's love for them. Indeed, they made God serve with their sins. God, the redeemer, the Holy One, the king, was reduced to an enslaved person! They caused Him to be weary of their iniquities. The people grew weary of Yahweh. However, Yahweh did not cause them to be weary of Him. Rather, the people made God weary with their iniquities. The people, who were expected to declare His praises, made God serve them and be weary. Earlier, God was very excited about creating something new for them. However, the people made God weary.

In Isaiah 40:27–31, Yahweh's strength empowers Jacob–Israel, who is weary, but here the Israelites weary Him in their offerings and sacrifices. The issue is idolatry. They did call gods, but not Yahweh, or they did not call Yahweh faithfully. Israel served Yahweh superficially. Yahwism became a mere political and religious identity for them. Kolle writes: "Israel did not invoke God so seriously and truly that she could believe really to have wearied herself for or with God." [28] Jacob–Israel should have brought offerings and sacrifices to honour God, but they did not. God did not want a wearisome religiosity but a faithful covenant relationship that demands true worship of Yahweh. Verse 24b claims that Israel's sins and iniquities led to the exile, and this proves that all their religious activities were superficial. While God did not burden Israel with worship requirements, Israel burdens God with her sins.

Through her sins, Israel made God her servant.

In verses 25–28, God declares that for His glory, He forgives Israel's sins. God witnesses that not only this generation but also the early generations sinned against Him. God will erase the people's sins and will not remember them. The sins of Israel are "heinous and terrible, but they were also reversible."[29] The forgiveness of sins is not merely erasing the sin report but also giving a new spirit (Isa. 44:1–5).[30] After many "Not" verses, 25 shifts attention to God's being and His forgiveness of the peoples' sins. The double occurrence of the personal pronoun, אָנֹכִי, points to God's presence with His people as well as His act of forgiveness. After many occurrences of "you (did not)," the double assurance of God's forgiveness highlights God's grace. This is also a new thing because God is wiping out the people's transgressions for Himself. Earlier, He marched towards Babylon for Israel's sake, and now He is clearing off all their crimes. The people do not need to remember the past because God will not remember all their sins. Interestingly, God not remembering the people's sins is set against the people not doing what they should have done! This forgiveness of sins makes the return from exile possible. In verse 26, God gives His people an opportunity to prove themselves right. God's severe command to make known any issues and disputes together shows that He is ready for a healthy debate. Such forensic language shows that God wants His people to realise their sins and come to Him, who alone can wipe them away. The people are told to recount and argue their case so they may be proven right. They were encouraged not to remember former things in the light of God's new doing in the present times. However, they can now recount past events and see whether they can prove their case. However, the courtroom language and forensic context should not diminish God's familial bond of love with His people. God's covenant with His people is beyond a political treaty. It was God's unilateral covenant filled with His grace (Genesis 15, 17). In His polemics against Israel's misdeeds, God implies that the people cannot win their case. The only option left for them is to seek God's forgiveness. God is ready to forgive them! It seems that the opposite party has nothing to say,

and God resumes His speech in verse 27. God reminds the people that they are no different from their forefathers and interpreters. The Israelite forefathers were already guilty of their sins against God. That the guilt of ancestors and posterity together calls for punishment. Recounting the past will not help because their ancestors and interpreters of the law were guilty before God. The only solution is to behold God, who is in their midst. The forefathers could be Jacob or others. The interpreters might be false prophets and false priests. Hence, the people's past is not worthy of remembrance; they should seek God, who is doing new things at the moment. In verse 28, God reasons out why He gave Israel up to the exile. The punishment that God inflicted on the holy officials was a curse, and the taunts applied to Jacob–Israel as a whole. God has waged war against His own people because of their sins. The taunts of the nations to Israel's fall are no reason for complaint but are due to Israel's sins against God. The people who were to announce God's praises were subjected to other people's reproach.

**Relevance to Indian Context**

The people of Judah suffered in the Babylonian exile, having lost their homeland, families, and their place of worship. The exile devastated them so deeply that they had no hope of deliverance. They thought that God's deliverance of their ancestors from Egyptian bondage was something to be remembered. Isaiah 43:14–28 affirms Yahweh's new act of delivering Israel from exile. Yahweh, the God who mightily delivered His people from Egyptian bondage, will once again act on His people's behalf. This new exodus will be far more glorious than the former, so that His people will declare His praise. This new act of deliverance is for His people's sake, as He is faithful to His covenant with them, and for His glory, as many nations will seek Him. Israel's complaint that their God had abandoned them has no ground, given their sins and transgressions that led to exile. The entire pericope, Isaiah 43:14–28, highlights God's new act of deliverance as His gracious provision even amid the people's willful transgressions against God.

Freedom of religion is assured in the Indian Constitution. However,

the reality is striking. Religious minorities fear exercising their faith openly and are being targeted by religious extremists. Christians in India face intense persecution, including systemic discrimination, violence, and anti-conversion laws. The persecution of Christians in India remains intense. Religious nationalists argue that to be an Indian is to be Hindu. About 12 states in the country have enacted anti-conversion laws, which are used to target Christian and other religious minorities. According to Open Doors International, India is the 12th nation that threatens Christians.[31]

Also, communal violence is on the rise. Thousands of Christians in Manipur state remain displaced after the 2023 violence, which killed several hundred people and left tens of thousands displaced. The Hindu-majority Meitei and the largely Christian Kuki communities, which had lived peacefully for many years, fought over the Meiteis' status as "scheduled tribes." Tensions have not been resolved even after three years. The blame game is still ongoing. Some blame the ruling government for aggravating the violence. For many people in India, Manipur's misfortune might seem irrelevant. However, it has national implications.[32] The voices of minorities are suppressed.

Judah's suffering in the Babylonian exile may be appropriated to the suffering context in India. The feeling of alienation is still there among the minorities in India. The hope that God is doing a new thing in a new situation is a timely message for the suffering people in India.

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[14] Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, 121–146.

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[16] Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. "For Your Sake, For My Sake," *CTJ* 39 (2004) 393.

[17] Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 125.

[18] Koole, *Isaiah III*, 318.

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[20] Koole, *Isaiah III*, 322.

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[22] Oswalt, "The God of the Newness," 386–387.

[23] Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 127.

[24] Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 127–128.

[25] Oswalt, "The God of Newness," 387.

[26] Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 129.

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[28] Koole, *Isaiah III*, 342.

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# 5

# PAUL'S USE OF HONOUR AND SHAME LANGUAGE IN DEPICTING JESUS: A READING OF ROMANS 1 IN THE CONTEXT OF SUFFERING IN INDIA

**Dr. Ashish Kumar***

## Introduction

One must not underestimate the importance of Paul's opening statement of Jesus Christ in Romans 1. After introducing himself, Paul says about Jesus in these words, "who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace…" (Romans 1:2-5). These words subtly lay the foundation for Christology for the rest of the chapters. The goal here is to explore the portrayal of Jesus in these words of Paul and see how these words form the context of Chapter 1. Paul described Jesus as 1) Descendant of David, 2) Son of God 3) Resurrected one and, 4) Giver of grace. The portrayal of Jesus will be analyzed in the paragraphs below from the perspective of honour and shame.

The concepts of honour and shame were central to the Mediterranean society. Honour and shame codes shaped the domain of identity, morality, and social relations. The society pursued the attainment of honour and sought to avoid anything considered shameful. The values of honour and shame are also reflected in Paul's epistle to the Romans. As the scope of this article is limited, the analysis will focus on the opening remarks of Paul about Jesus

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in Romans 1 from the perspective of honour and shame.

The honour–shame reading of Romans 1 resonates with the Indian socio-cultural context, where suffering is often intensified by inherited status, social exclusion, religious marginalization, and systemic injustice.

**Jesus, the Son of David**

The titles of person generally have an honorific role to play in a narrative. The epistle of Paul also carries forward this observation. In the opening words, Paul introduces himself and then proceeds to introduce Jesus using honorific titles. The current section will focus on the title "Son of David" through which Paul asserts the honour of Jesus (1:3). By using this title Paul invokes the cultural framework of ascribed honour. Ascribed honour is a kind of honour that comes from birth and lineage and not from personal merit. In the ancient Mediterranean society, the family of a person determined one's honour. If one was born in a reputed family, he/she shared the honour of the father or household.[1] For example, the son of a wealthy man acquires the father's wealth by simply being his son. Similarly, a son of an honourable man gains honour, which derives from his birth into the family. Malina calls this "ascribed honour." Ascribed honour is hereditary and is confirmed by factors such as ethnicity, family reputation, parents' wealth, gender, etc. In the words of Malina, "Being born into an honorable family makes one honorable…"[2]

In Jewish thought, David was the ideal king, the chosen one of God, whose dynasty carried a sacred promise of divine favour and authority (2 Samuel 7:12–16). To be identified as David's descendant was to participate in that cherished royal honour. Thus, Paul affirms that Jesus belongs to Israel's royal and honourable lineage. The title "Son of David" heightens Jesus' honour, particularly in contrast to the shameful circumstances of his crucifixion which is usually associated with humiliation, rejection, and a curse. Interestingly, Paul links the title "Son of David" with "flesh." Usually "flesh" in Pauline theology is negatively portrayed;

here, it appears that the negative aspect is missing here. Jackson Wu evaluates this aspect of flesh in the context of the law. He opines that "flesh" does not limit a person's value or character.

Paul's claim of Jesus' belonging to the royal lineage of David functions as a powerful assertion of honour which is rooted in purity and legitimacy. As Jayson Georges asserts, "The first source of honor is purity and cleanliness. This cleanliness is not physical hygiene, but the cultural evaluation of peoples' appropriateness and acceptability." [3] Racial purity and traceable genealogical lineage were cherished and celebrated in ancient society. These were indicators of a person's honour and were considered as cultural markers of "cleanliness and purity." Anyone who belonged to a recognised and honoured lineage could naturally have a claim of status in the eyes of society. Georges' argument confirms that Paul's assertion of Jesus as a descendant of David is not a mere genealogical detail but a conscious claim to honour. Therefore, the title "Son of David" has an honorific function that roots Jesus in human history firmly within the covenantal promise.

Further, Paul by asserting Jesus as the Son of David situates him within covenant theology as the rightful heir and bearer of divine promises through David. The placement of Jesus in the covenant of God is an indicator of Jesus' honoured status. In the first century, David's royal lineage and covenant standing carried immense symbolic value. Paul, being well aware of the cultural significance, used this title to affirm Jesus' legitimacy. Crucifixion, to a certain extent, is connected to shame as evident in Romans 1:16.[4] However, David's legacy and lineage were publicly acknowledged with pride. By asserting Jesus as a David's descendant, Paul reasserts Jesus' honour using royal lineage and as the rightful heir of the covenantal promise. Thus, in this context, Jesus' Davidic lineage functions as a declaration of ascribed honour. This ascribed honour is connected to Jesus' cultural purity, social legitimacy, and inheritance of divine promise.

In the Indian context, caste system functions as a contemporary form of ascribed honour. A person inherits the honour by virtue of being born in an upper caste family. Such an honour is an ascribed honour and not achieved honour. While the unfortunate ones who are born in a lower caste or Dalit family or born in an Adivasi family are victimized and undergo suffering. They carry stigma of being born in such family for the entire life. In the India context birth of a person in a certain family determines the social acceptability. The honour/stigma is affixed usually in the surname that will identify their caste and ultimately their social acceptability. In the context of ancient Israel, David lineage functioned as honourable lineage. In the Indian context the caste lineage shapes the honour/shame.

In the ancient Israel, it was widely believed that the Messiah would come from the lineage of David. Douglas J. Moo links the title "Son of David" directly with messiahship, claiming that it is "a clear allusion to the messianic stature of the Son." [5] This further intensifies the honour of Jesus who was claimed to be the Messiah. The Davidic lineage of Jesus was infact a claim to Messiahship. In the framework of honour and shame, messiahship represents the highest form of public honour as it indicates the fulfilment of the promises of God in the Messiah who is Jesus. By identifying Jesus as the Son of David, Paul presents him not merely as a biological descendant but as the promised Messiah who fulfills Israel's hopes. This designation publicly affirms Jesus' validity and honour by grounding his identity in God's redemptive purposes. In the context where family lineage validated status, Jesus' Davidic messiahship establishes him as the rightful bearer of divine honour, confirming Jesus' exalted standing as God's anointed king.

In may be noted that Paul primary interest in the opening paragraph of Romans 1 is to locate the true honour of Jesus in the person of Jesus himself. Although, he is traced to the Davidic lineage, Paul reorients honour away from the birth-based value system and identifies honour in the Messiahship based upon the mission of Jesus. A system that relies on birth-based value induces enduring

suffering and shame as honour is not based upon who they are but in the social domain in which they are born. Paul's depiction of Jesus offers a Christological critique of birth-based honour system. Though, Jesus is traced as a descendant of David, Paul moves beyond birth-based system of honour to the person of Jesus, his messiahship, resurrection and his role as a mediator of grace. This confronts the sociological suffering caused by birth-based value system and restores dignity not rooted in birth but in the person.

The above observation is evident through Paul's linking the term "Son of David" with "flesh." Although "flesh" (ΣΑΡΧ) in Pauline theology is often associated with human weakness and sin. Here, in this context, "flesh" does not carry a negative connotation. Instead, "flesh" is symbolically used here to affirm Jesus as true human. The same intent is also true when Paul uses the term "Son of David." By linking Jesus as the "Son of David" with the term "flesh," Paul emphasizes Jesus' real participation in human ancestry. In an honour and shame framework, such existence is used to establish social acceptability, not limited to birth but in the person.

Jackson Wu's observation clarifies the above usage, Wu while evaluating the term "flesh" in the introductory remarks of Epistle to the Romans, situates it within the context of the Law (*Torah*) and social valuation. According to Wu the use of the term "flesh" does not limit a person's value or character. The term "flesh" in this context signifies human existence under the law.[6] When Wu's observation is applied to Jesus, it becomes evident that Paul used "flesh" to affirm Jesus' humanity and rightful standing within Israel's covenantal structure. "Flesh" in this context is not an indicator of shame, rather a subtle marker of Jesus' honour grounded in Jesus' real lived human existence. The term 'flesh' doesn't imply moral corruption, it rather highlights the essential truth that Jesus truly entered human history as a physical being.

**Jesus, the Son of God**

In Romans 1, Paul presents Jesus as the "Son of God" in the introductory remarks. As noted in the above section, Paul intends to

establish the honour of Jesus using the title. In this case, the title "Son of God" functions to claim the honour of Jesus in Pauline Christology. Trevor J. Burke refers to this as Son-Christology of Paul.[7] In the ancient Mediterranean world, sonship represented not just belongingness to a family but it also functioned as a symbol of status and reputation, thereby indicating the shared identity of the person in the family. To attribute Jesus as "Son of God" was to publicly credit him with God's honour and authority. As David A. deSilva argues in the context of Epistle to the Hebrews, the declaration of Jesus as "Son of God" is similar to the acknowledgement of grant of honour from God himself.[8] Thus, in Romans 1, Jesus' honour is not a social phenomenon, as in the case of Roman emperor veneration; rather this honour is bestowed upon Jesus by the most authoritative source—God the Father.

The double claim of Jesus as both "Son of David" (royal, ascribed honour) and "Son of God" (divine, ascribed honour) demonstrates Paul's theological strategy to reaffirm Jesus' honour in the eyes of both Jewish and Gentile audiences. This understanding is further strengthened by Jerome H. Neyrey's observation that "Jesus enjoys maximum ascribed honor from the most honourable being in the universe, namely, God."[9] Within the honour and shame paradigm, ascribed honour is considered superior to achieved honour. Ascribed honour rests on origin and lineage, while the achieved honour is based on performance. This implies that family belonging was considered far more important than personal achievement. This implies that Jesus being the Son of God was the highest form of ascribed honour, that affirmed his unique status and legitimacy. A similar claim of the highest form of ascribed honour is also seen in 2 Peter 1:17, where Jesus "received honour and glory from God the Father." By being the Son of God, Jesus participates in and reflects the glory of God.

The Roman empire used the title "Son of God" politically to establish the emperor veneration. The emperor veneration was not just for the honour of the emperor but to establish the legitimacy of the reign itself.[10] After the deification of Julius Caesar, his successor

Augustus was hailed as *divi filius*—the son of a god. Placing Augustus under the lineage of divine was to validate the reign of Augustus and to strengthen Roman imperial system. Within this context, Paul's use of the title "Son of God" in Romans 1 should not be considered mere neutral or theological. It presents a counter claim to emperor-veneration ideology. Paul, by attributing this title to Jesus, confronts the emperor's ascribed honour. Paul also attempts to locates divine honour with Jesus away from Rome's political patrons.

In the Roman imperial context, divine validation functioned to legitimize the imperial authority. Emperor veneration was used as a political mechanism to suppress the marginalized others. Honour was centralized and obtained on affiliation to imperial systems. In the Indian context too, honour is claimed in the name of divine sanction through national identity and religious affiliation. The religious minorities are forced to undergo systemic suffering and persecution in the name of divine authorization. Suffering of the religious minorities is not accident but intentional act of marginalization, exclusion and attempt to silence those who do not conform to the dominant narrative as in the case of Roman imperial system.

Paul, by using this title "Son of God" for Jesus, elevates him above the claims of all rivals, including that of the Roman emperor Caesar. Roman imperialism claimed this title for political propaganda and to secure loyalty from public. Also, emperor's divine sonship was enforced by the imperial system. However, in the case of Jesus the claim of divine sonship functioned differently and aimed to validate Jesus' earthly mission. Jesus' claim to divine sonship was a bottom-up approach, where people bore witness to the divine sonship of Jesus. Paul himself was a witness to the resurrected Jesus along with many other eye witnesses.[11] Thus, Jesus' sonship was acknowledged by eyewitnesses who believed that Jesus was vindicated by God himself through the resurrection. Paul therefore by using the title "Son of God" honours Jesus as the bearer of divine glory. Jesus is the Son of God who surpasses the honour of all earthly authorities.

Believers therefore are no longer owed to the emperor who claims divine status, but to Jesus, the true Son of God. In an honour and shame culture, such a claim constitutes a repositioning of honour, acknowledging that true honour does not belong to Caesar, but to Christ.

The Roman imperial claim of "son of god" was enforced through structure of dominance and coercion. While, Jesus' claim of divine sonship was through humility, suffering and vindication by God through resurrection. Paul's Christology functions as a counter narrative to dominant political system that attempts to enforce conformity through induced suffering. In the Indian context, those under systemic suffering because of being religious minorities and marginalized castes find a hope in Christ who himself because a victim for similar reasons. Paul therefore relocates honour away from political oppressive rulers to crucified Christ who was vindicated by God. For those who suffer under system that demands conformity, Paul's Christology offers theological basis of hope and restoration of honour. Paul Christology powerfully speaks to contemporary Indian experience of suffering of religious minorities by affirming that divine honours rests with those who are suffering and marginalized rather than the dominant power structures.

**Jesus, the Resurrected One**

The most important reference in relation to the shame associated with Jesus and his gospel appears in Romans 1:16 where Paul defends that he is not ashamed of the gospel. This defence raises a question of what could be the reason that forced Paul to say this. In the Greco-Roman world, the cross was regarded with "shame" (cf Heb 12:2).[12] Both the cross and activities associated with trial, humiliation, and public stripping led to the loss of honour for the victim. However, the shame in the eyes of human has been converted into glory in the heavenly eyes. For Paul, the pain and shame of the cross is seen as glory and honour in God's eyes. This is especially true in the case of resurrection (1:4). God's honour is restored through Jesus' resurrection and through the resurrected

Christ, God's righteousness is vindicated, and His glory restored. (Rom. 3:25–26).[13] Jesus, by His divine sonship already possessed honour; yet through His obedience unto death and His resurrection from the dead, His honour is publicly vindicated and elevated. Here, Paul presents a movement from ascribed honour ("Son of God") to achieved honour ("Resurrection"). The honour of Jesus is derived from the faithful completion of earthly mission and steadfast obedience even unto death. The resurrection of Jesus serves as the vindication of his honour. The resurrection of Jesus therefore functions as a divine proclamation of honour, thereby confirming honourable status to Jesus before the creation.

The reversal of honour for Jesus speaks powerfully to the contemporary India socio-cultural context of suffering frequently accompanied with shame and exclusion. In India, people suffer under poverty, caste-based violence, gender-based discrimination, and violence, and continually bear the shame and stigma of marginalization. Such suffering not only inflicts pain upon the individual but also erodes dignity and honour. Paul's Christology includes the restoration of the honour of Jesus, who underwent the ultimate form of shame and suffering on the cross. This event redefines honour. Honour then is not through societal approval or inherited status but through God's act of vindication. The resurrection story of Jesus stands as a testimony that God aligns divine honour not with the dominant powers but with those who are suffering, enduring rejection and pain.

Thus, for Paul, the gospel is a story of exaltation, a story of the restoration of Jesus' honour, and a narrative of his enthronement. Paul apparently makes it evident that the gospel of Jesus remains a gospel of shame for outsiders (Jews and Romans), but for him and also for believers, it is not something to be ashamed of, for God has reversed shame into splendour, pain into plenty, and trial into triumph. The Gospel proclaimed by Paul does not deny the reality of suffering and pain but reframes it within the horizon of hope. Shame induced by human system is not final but divine justice overturns human systems that legitimize suffering and shame.

**Jesus, the Giver of Grace**

According to David A. deSilva, grace can be understood within the Greco-Roman system of patronage. [14] In the ancient world, grace (χάρις) was not merely an abstract spiritual notion but a socially embedded act of benefaction. A person [15] who bestowed material benefits, protection, peace, or prosperity upon individuals or cities was called a patron and his beneficial actions were considered acts of grace. Such acts of benefaction conferred honour both upon the giver and the recipient. The giver was accorded honour because of his generosity and thus giver enjoyed the enhanced status. While the recipients of grace enjoyed the elevation of status through their association with the powerful patron.

In this background of the patron and the beneficiary, grace was not a unilateral function. The act of grace created a moral obligation on the part of the recipient. The response of the beneficiary usually was to enhance the patron's honour through loyalty, public gratitude, praise and other public acts of acknowledgement. On one occasion, Julius Caesar out of goodwill and grace abolished direct taxes for the cities of Asia. In response to this act of grace, the cities of Asia erected monuments of Julius Caesar in honour of him. [16] This incident portrays the grace-honour economy and how the beneficiary were morally obliged to enhance the honour of the patron. However, if a beneficiary failed to provide an appropriate response in the form of honour, he/she would bring upon oneself the shame of being ungrateful and disrespectful.

Paul's interpretation of grace in Romans 1 can be interpreted against this background of patronage. Paul deliberately draws upon familiar Greco-Roman social structures in order to make the notion of grace explicit. Grace here is not presented as an abstract theological concept but as a concrete act of divine benefaction mediated through Jesus Christ. In Romans 1, Jesus Christ is portrayed as the divinely appointed patron through whom grace is granted to the community. The grant of favour in the form of grace is not on the basis of a person's worth, status, or prior honour. The favourable act is a

generous gift initiated solely by God. Thus, through the grace of Jesus Christ, God subdues the shame of sin, and embraces the marginalized and incorporates them into a new community. The act of grace therefore can be considered as an achieved honour. This honour is due to the association of the beneficiary with the patron. This honour is not inherited nor earned, but achieved through relationship with Christ as the supreme benefactor.

Further, as in the case of the Greco-Roman system of patronage where acts of grace naturally expected a response, Paul in Romans 1 clarifies that divine grace too calls for an appropriate response. Divine grace does not eliminate the obligation on the part of the recipient; rather, it redefines it. The expected response from the recipient is not material repayment but to live a life shaped by allegiance, obedience, and public honouring of Jesus Christ. This response takes concrete form in faithful living, proclamation of the gospel, and obedience that reflects loyalty to the benefactor. Earlier, before the receiving of grace, people were dishonoured by sin and therefore excluded; however, through the grace of Christ, they are now incorporated into a new honourable identity. In response to this grace, people are expected to live a life honouring God. However, the later part of Romans 1 will demonstrate that humans failed to provide an appropriate response to grace and did not honour God who provided grace through Christ.

**Conclusion**

The above paragraphs have demonstrated that Paul's portrayal of Jesus in Romans 1 is embedded in the honour and shame framework of the first-century Mediterranean world. Through the honorific portrayal of Jesus, Paul carefully lays a Christological foundation for the rest of the epistle. Paul introduces Jesus as the descendant of David, Son of God, resurrected Lord, and giver of grace. Through these portrayals Paul affirms Jesus' legitimacy, authority, and honourable status. The title "Son of David" establishes Jesus' royal honour tracing his lineage to the Davidic dynasty. Further, this title demonstrates Jesus' Messiahship and him being the rightful heir of

the covenantal promise. The Son of David is connected to the term "flesh" to establish Jesus' genuine humanity, highlighting his participation in human history.

Secondly, the title "Son of God" is yet another honorific title that elevates Jesus' honour as one who is divinely ordained. The divine honour thereby grants Jesus the highest form of ascribed honour. Thirdly, Roman imperial ideology claimed the title of divine sonship for political propaganda and the validation of their reign. Unlike Roman Imperial ideology, Paul presents Jesus as the true Son of God whose honour is truly derived from the divine and also publicly vindicated through the resurrection. The resurrection event functions as God's firm vindication of Jesus that reverses the shame and humiliation of the cross into honour, glory, and enthronement. Ultimately, Jesus is portrayed as the giver of grace. Grace here needs to be understood in the background of the Greco-Roman patronage system. Paul presents Jesus as the supreme benefactor and the believing community as the beneficiary. In this background of patronage, the act of grace demands an appropriate response towards the patron. The introductory remarks of Paul in Romans 1 about Jesus portray Jesus in honorific terms both in terms of achieved honour and ascribed honour. Both titles of Jesus, "Son of David" and "Son of God" fall under the ascribed honour category, while the "Resurrection event" and "Grace" fall under the achieved honour of Jesus.

Paul's depiction of Jesus powerfully speaks to the contemporary Indian context of suffering, often intertwined with shame and exclusion. The dominant power structures induce suffering through caste/birth-based systems, gender discrimination, religious marginalization, and economic exclusion. The induced suffering is often legitimized in the name of divine sanction, thereby dehumanizing the vulnerable. Paul's Christology relocates honour away from a birth-based system to the worth of the person. Paul challenges the dominant narrative that normalizes suffering and shame. Paul proposes a reversal of honour through divine intervention, where divine honour lies not with the dominant but

with those who are suffering and in pain.

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[1] Trevor J Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Downers Grove (Ill.): Intervarsity Press, 2006), 153.

[2] Bruce J Malina, *The New Testament World Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 33.

[3] Jayson Georges, "From Shame to Honor: A Theological Reading of Romans for Honor-Shame Contexts," *Missiology: An International Review* 38, no. 3 (July 2010): 297.

[4] See section 1.4

[5] Douglas J Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 46.

[6] Jackson Wu, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019), 138.

[7] Trevor J Burke, *Adopted into God's Family*, 102-107.

[8] David Arthur deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 230.

[9] Jerome H Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative," *Semeia* 68, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 124.

[10] In the imperial cult, the emperor being Son of God received worship. See Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39.

[11] The Apostle Paul affirms that Jesus appeared to him "last of all, as to one untimely born" following His resurrection, affirming Paul's role as a bona fide witness of the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:8). His first-hand testimony about resurrected Jesus is recorded in Acts 9:1–19, 22:6–16, and 26:12–23.

[12] Jerome H Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross": 113.

[13] Mark T Finney explains about restoration of God's honour in the context of resurrection commenting, "the crucified Christ, though cursed by the OT law and denounced by the world, is, through the resurrection, granted superlative honour as the one true Son of God." See Mark T Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World* (Bloomsbury

Publishing, 2011), 90.

[14] David Arthur Desilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 102ff.

[15] Patron is usually in benefactor and a powerful figure such as the Roman Emperor.

[16] Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, Missouri: Clayton Publishing House, INC., 1982), 213.

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# 6

## A SPIRIT-CHRISTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

**Shashikant Nayak***

**Abstract:** This article examines the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry within the context of Christian suffering. The purpose of this theme is to demonstrate how the Spirit-Christological Approach provides a robust framework for understanding the Spirit's work among suffering Christians. It argues that highlighting Jesus' humanity offers a perspective for understanding how Jesus, as a man, experiences and endures suffering. The article also suggests that Jesus' Spirit-empowered life exemplifies the highest standard of Christian living, inspiring us to follow his example in our own faith journeys. The implications of this approach are broad, influencing Christian living, worship, and witness during times of hardship.

**Keywords:** Spirit-Christology, Humanity of Jesus, Holy Spirit, God, Theology, Suffering.

### Introduction

Pain and suffering are one of the universals of existence. Humans – believers and unbelievers alike – encounter pain, suffering, oppression, and chaos in life, which is unavoidable in a fallen world. Whether physical pain or mental anguish, suffering is a part of the human condition for everyone. As a corollary, there is always a tendency to ask these questions. Where is God in our suffering?

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Why does God let it happen? These are questions that have been as old as human tragedy. They echo when we face tragedy as individuals, families, or the church as a whole. Whether we are directly impacted by the tragedy or indirectly affected by another's devastation, questions are not new, and these questions have troubled theologians, philosophers, and ordinary people from the beginning of time.

This article does not attempt to address the philosophical argument concerning God in the midst of suffering; nonetheless, it focuses particularly on the Spirit-Christological approach to suffering and highlights the key lessons that seek to encourage and challenge suffering Christians.

## A Synopsis of Spirit Christology

Spirit Christology is Spirit-oriented Christology that focuses on the role of the Holy Spirit in Christology Proper.[1] The starting point of theological reflection is the humanity of Jesus Christ, which gives sufficient space for the Holy Spirit to understand the identity and mission of Christ. Traditionally, Logos-oriented Christology was prevalent in understanding the identity of Jesus, which focused on the two natures (divinity and humanity) of Jesus. However, over the past few decades, Spirit Christology, which recognizes an essential role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and his salvific work, has gained momentum due to the rise of the "Pentecostal renaissance" in general and the interest in "Spirit Christology" in particular.[2]

In this article, Spirit Christology is used as an approach to explore the life of Jesus through the Gospel accounts and to see how the Holy Spirit helps and works with Jesus during his early life and ministry. And eventually, the practical implications will be drawn for the suffering Christians.

## The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and Ministry

The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry is evidenced throughout the Gospels. The mutual relationship between Christ and the Spirit is evident, particularly in the Gospels and also in the rest

of the New Testament.[3] As Dermot A. Lane contends that "[t]here is a sequence of Spirit-moments and Spirit-movements in the life of Jesus which echo the action of the breath of God in history and creation in the Hebrew Scriptures."[4] The role of the Holy Spirit is involved even in the incarnation, and thus, Jesus' human existence is completely the work of the Spirit.[5]

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Jesus*

Evangelist Matthew identifies the Holy Spirit as the agent in Jesus' virginal conception and birth, and Luke opens his birth narratives by witnessing the Spirit work.[6] Allan Coppedge argues that Matthew and Luke clearly state that "all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the coming of [the] Messiah to fulfill God's purposes in history through Israel."[7] Matthew makes it clear that God sends an angel to let Joseph know that the conception of Jesus is through the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20-23).[8] In Luke, the angel declares God's presence will be with Mary, and that her conception will be possible through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35, 67).[9] Here, Coppedge sees this divine presence as the presence of all three persons of the "Trinity" who were with Mary.[10] In Matthew and Luke, the reflection and belief in the Spirit's involvement in the resurrection designates Jesus as the Son of God (Rom. 1:4), seen as an active operative work from the very beginning of his life, even from his conception.[11] Subsequently, Mary's conception of Jesus was by the power of the Spirit (Luke 1:35-36; Matt. 1:18-20).[12]

### *The Role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' baptism*

At Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, the Spirit and the Father testify to Jesus' identity when a voice from heaven declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22, 4:1, John 1:32-34).[13] Recorded by all four Gospels, this event strongly affirms Jesus' relationship with both the Spirit and Father.[14] Here, the Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism and remains with him, not implying "adoptionism," but affirming the Son's life in the Spirit.[15] This descent reveals the Spirit as the power source behind Jesus' ministry,[16] symbolizing the Spirit's

endowment of Jesus for his mission, as Grenz notes.[17]

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' wilderness experience*

After the Spirit's descent, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness (Matt. 4:11; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). Luke 4:1 and 4:14 emphasize Jesus as the anointed one empowered by the Spirit.[18] The wilderness narrative demonstrates Jesus' trust, obedience, and faithfulness to the Father's will through the Spirit.[19] As Coppedge notes, these references to faith, obedience, and faithfulness are framed by reference to the Spirit, showing that Jesus fulfils God's will as God enables his mission through the Spirit (Luke 4:1-14).[20] This does not imply that the Spirit is the source of Jesus' moral resolve; rather, Jesus' faithfulness reveals him as the bearer of the Spirit, as Menzies observes.[21]

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' Nazareth Manifesto*

The wilderness narrative concludes with Jesus returning in "the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14) and beginning his ministry at Nazareth, where he reads Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke 4:18). This passage affirms the Messiah's mission and highlights Jesus' dependence on the Spirit;[22] declaring his intention to serve the Father through life in the Spirit, as Coppedge notes.[23] The Nazareth Manifesto frames Jesus' Spirit-led ministry of preaching and teaching (Luke 4:15, 44) and culminates in Jesus' declaration that the Scripture is fulfilled in their hearing (Luke 4:21); announcing the arrival of the Spirit-anointed Messiah who inaugurates a liberating ministry.[24] Jesus remains filled with and rejoices in the Spirit (Luke 3:22, 10:21) when his disciples return from their mission field.[25]

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' Ministry*

Filled with the Spirit, Jesus' ministry operated through the Spirit's power, evident in healing (Luke 4:18), exorcisms (Matt. 12:28; Mark 3:20-30; Luke 11:20), and other miracles.[26] In Matthew 13:28, as noted by Clause Issler and G. R. Beasley-Murray, Jesus explains that his exorcisms are accomplished not by evil power but through

the Holy Spirit.[27] Luke 5:17b and Mark 5:30 likewise show that the Lord's power was present to heal the sick.[28] John Nolland explains that the "power" *dynamics* in Luke 5:17b refer back to Luke 4:14, indicating that through the Spirit's descent, Jesus becomes the repository of God's healing power (Luke 6:19; 8:44).[29]

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' Crucifixion*

Hebrews 9:14 highlights that Christ "through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God." William Lane explicates that this means Jesus was divinely empowered and sustained by the Holy Spirit in his self-offering.[30] Thus, Jesus endured the suffering on the cross through the active presence of the Spirit.

The Spirit unites Jesus with the Father throughout his early life and sustains their unity even in Jesus' cry of abandonment and the Father's surrender of the Son (Rom. 8:32).[31] Henry L. Novello argues that while Jesus truly experiences abandonment as the sin-bearer, the Father's silence should be understood positively – not as absence, but as participation in the unfathomable unity of love for the sake of new creation.[32] Therefore, although the Father and Son experience mutual forsakenness on the cross, the Spirit preserves their unity of love.[33] As D. Lyle Dabney observes, "the Spirit of the Cross is the presence of God with the Son in the absence of the Father."[34]

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' resurrection and exultation*

The New Testament consistently testifies that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10, Rom. 8:11, 1 Cor. 15:15). Moltmann interprets the resurrection from a pneumatic-Trinitarian perspective, distinguishing between God's act of "raising" Jesus and Christ's own act of "resurrection," both occurring through the Holy Spirit.[35] Paul likewise emphasizes that Jesus was raised by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11).[36]

Pauline texts further describe the close relationship between Christ and the Spirit, refering to the Spirit as the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9), the "Spirit of his Son" (Gal. 4:6), and "the Spirit of Jesus

Christ" (Phil. 1:19).[37] Max Turner persuasively argues that the Spirit proceeds from Christ as from the Father, forming the basis of Paul's christ-mysicism, [38] which Gordon Fee describes as "God's empowering presence."[39] Through the resurrection, Christ becomes the sender of the Spirit (John 16:7; 20:22), [40] marking not an ontological but a functional transition, since Jesus remains the Spirit-bearer even prior to the resurrection.

The resurrection is inseparable from Christ's exaltation. Paul links Jesus' Sonship and lordship directly to the resurrection, in which Jesus is powerfully declared to be the Son of God (Rom. 1:4; Acts 13:33-34).[41] Exalted at God's right hand, Christ becomes Lord of the Spirit and the one who baptizes the church with the Spirit (Acts 2:33), with all powers subjected to him (Phil. 2:9:9; 1 Pet. 3:26).[42] Consequently, the Spirit is sent jointly by both the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 15:26).[43]

In summary, the New Testament portrays a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between Christ and the Spirit. Jesus' identity and mission are consistently shaped by his dependence on the Father through the Spirit, who empowers his life, ministry, resurrection, and exaltation. [44] As Grenz observes, from conception to resurrection, the Spirit actively guided and empowered Jesus in the fulfillment of his messianic mission.[45]

**Spirit Christology as a model for suffering Christians**

Spirit Christology provides a framework for the exemplary life God intends Christians to live. Believers are called to follow the footsteps of Jesus, even amid suffering and trial, since he embodied the ideal human life. Through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the Christian community is drawn toward God and empowered to live faithfully in Christian living, ministry, and ethical practice. Moreover, reflecting on Jesus' Spirit-filled life may also lead non-believers to recognize him as the true epitome of authentic humanity.

### *Spirit Christology as a model for Christian living in adversity*

In the Christian faith journey, suffering is inevitable, yet Spirit Christology offers a distinctive way of understanding and engaging with it. Although Christians experience the same psychological and emotional struggles as others, as Blaise Pascal rightly states, "suffering is the natural state of Christians."[46] Rather than being meaningless, suffering becomes a formative space that reveals human feebleness and cultivates humility, dependence, and submission to God. Jesus experienced suffering in the highest form on the cross and achieved victory over sin and death through it. Thus, believers are called to take up their own cross as part of the process of sanctification.

Jesus' Spirit-filled life provides a model for believers, particularly in his obedience on the cross, marked by total submission to the Father and complete dependence on the Spirit. His life in the Spirit demonstrates how the Holy Spirit works within believers, enabling them to live Spirit-directed lives even amid opposition and adversity.

Spirit Christology emphasizes the genuine humanity of Jesus, presenting a Christ with whom human beings can readily identify. In times of suffering, believers need a God who is approachable and immanent, one who understands human pain personally. Hebrews 2:17 affirms this by stating that Jesus "had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect," enabling him to become a merciful and faithful high priest. Jesus' participation in human suffering allows believers to relate to him as one who overcame suffering, while the evident work of the Spirit in his human life offers hope to those in distress, assuring them that the same Spirit continues to work in their lives amid suffering. Thus, in Christian living, suffering becomes a participation in walking with Christ and is therefore redemptive and transformative.

### *Spirit Christology as a model for ministerial life in adversity*

Periods of turmoil often make continued engagement in Christian

ministry especially difficult. Spirit Christology, however, enables believers to see Jesus' Spirit-filled life as a model for enduring such challenges. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus lived faithfully within the fallen human condition and was conserved from sin, temptation, and disobedience. Through the Spirit, he lived in filial communication with the Father. As Myk Habes observes, when Jesus calls his disciples, he invites them into this same filial relationship with the Father in the Holy Spirit.[47] Understanding this calling gives meaning and direction to Christian life, as the Spirit actively empowers believers to follow Christ. As Varughese John summarizes Kierkegaard, it is the Spirit who enables disciples to live out faith, hope, and love.[48]

By emphasizing the genuine humanity of Jesus, Spirit Christology renders the incarnation concrete and meaningful, giving depth to the confession of *Immanuel*, "God is with us." As Habets notes, Jesus is able to identify compassionately with human weakness, suffering, and affliction, having himself experienced the power of sin.[49] This understanding encourages believers to approach Christ with confidence, follow him sincerely, and experience his presence personally. Moreover, reflecting on Jesus' role as the enduring high priest (Heb. 2:17) shapes Christian prayer and spiritual formation. Christ's ongoing intercession on behalf of humanity, combined with his full participation in human weakness yet without sin, inspires believers to cultivate a deeper prayer life and spiritual dependence on God.[50] Learning from Jesus' prayerful life sustaians belevers spiritually and equips them for faithful ministry amid adversity.

Finally, Jesus' Spirit-directed life reveals the true meaning of human existence and discipleship within a Trinitarian framework.[51] Believers are called to follow Jesus as he followed the Father through the power of the Spirit. Christ provides all that is necessary for discipleship and ministry by sending the Holy Spirit, who leads, guides, fills, and empowers believers to take up their cross daily.[52] Through the transforming work of the Spirit, believers are shaped into the image of God and enabled to remain faithful disciples of Christ even in the most difficult circumstances.

### *Spirit Christology as a model for Ethical life in adversity*

The possibility of living a Christian ethical life amid suffering and persecution likewise depends upon the empowering presence of God. In this regard, Jesus' complete submission to the Father and total dependence on the Holy Spirit serve as the definitive model for believers. Varughese argues that the ethical demands of Christianity are so elevated that they exceed human capacity.[53] He maintains that recognizing the inherent human inability to fulfill God's moral requirements shifts moral epistemic agency away from the individual and toward God, particularly through the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work.[54] Within this classical theological framework, ethical life is therefore understood not as a human achievement but as a form of divine enablement. This understanding is further reinforced by the Johannine emphasis on Jesus' "I am" sayings, which present Christian life as derived from Christ rather than as an innate capacity of the disciple. Moreover, John's portrayal of Jesus as the Spirit-baptizer highlights that ethical living is empowered by the Spirit, enabling believers to live a Spirit-filled life rather than one governed by the flesh.[55]

As the Johannine perspective suggests, the practice of Christian ethics is not only impractical from a purely human standpoint but becomes even more challenging in contexts of persecution and humiliation. It is only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that believers are able to meet such demanding ethical standards. Jesus, described as the "life-giver" (John 10:10; 20:31), imparts life that is expressed through love for others (John 15:1-17), including love for one's enemies (Matt. 5:44).[56] This teaching is embodied in Jesus' own actions, most notably when he prays for the forgiveness of those who mocked, tortured, and crucified him. Such an example encourages suffering Christians to rely upon the Spirit and ot pattern their lives after Christ.

Consequently, Jesus stands as the supreme ethical model for Christian living, not only because of his exemplary life but also because he grants believers the power necessary to live morally. As

the most complete revelation of God and the perfect embodiment of true humanity, Jesus demonstrates a dynamic and authoritative model of ethical life.[57] For this reason, Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to adopt the mindset and conduct of Christ (Phil. 2:5; 1 Thess. 1:6).[58] Despite facing intense temptation in the wilderness and enduring suffering unto death, Jesus remained without sin due to his unwavering obedience and complete submission to the Father through the Holy Spirit.[59] His sinless life, therefore, provides a compelling model for believers, affirming that a holy life, both personal and social, is possible, but through the enabling work of the Holy Spirit.

**Conclusion**

From the foregoing discussion, it is observed that Spirit Christology provides a significant framework for shaping life, ministerial engagement, and ethical practice. Jesus' Spirit-filled life serves as a compelling model for believers seeking conformity to Christ through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. A deeper and more robust understanding of the Spirit's active presence in the concrete realities of human life, especially in times of hardship and trial, profoundly influences worship, daily conduct, and communal relationships. Consequently, wholehearted submission to the Holy Spirit is essential, as such surrender enables believers to be empowered in every aspect of life, equipping them to remain steadfast as authentic human beings, faithful Christians, and committed ministers, even amid adverse circumstances.

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# 7

# HONEST BEFORE GOD: THE PSALMS OF LAMENT AND THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

**Shaik Asha**[*]

**Abstract:** This article explores biblical lament in the Psalms as an act of covenant faith rather than weak belief, emphasizing honest prayer amid suffering. It defines lament, outlines its theological importance, structure, and roots in Israel's covenant identity, and highlights its neglect in contemporary Christian worship. Through Psalms 22 and 88, it demonstrates both hopeful and unresolved lament as faithful responses to God. The study calls for the recovery of lament as an essential Christian practice for pastoral care, theological honesty, and prophetic witness.

## Introduction

The issue of suffering is discussed at various stages and in various contexts of the Old Testament. Suffering is a part of human life and it is unavoidable and across every society, epoch, religion and human discipline, there have been and continue to be repeated efforts at describing and making sense of human suffering. Yet the Old Testament offers a distinctive response that lament in the Old Testament is not a sign of weakness but as an act of faith. Far from signalling weak or deficient faith, lament in the Old Testament express covenant trust, providing a model for Christians to respond to suffering honestly, faithfully, and theologically. The Psalms in

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particular, are filled with works of lament, cries of disorientation, alienation, hurt, suffering and death. This article explores the theology of lament in the Old Testament with primary focus on the selected Psalms.

**Definition of the word Lament**

The definition of lament reveals that it is "to express sorrow, regret, or unhappiness about something,"[1] or a formal expression of sorrow or mourning, especially in verse or song and an elegy or dirge.[2] However, biblical lament is much more than this. It is not just an expression of deep emotion, it is this expression to a specific person, God. It is not just a formal expression of sorrow, but it also calls out to God for action. And finally, biblical lament contains an unexpected element that differs radically from "sorrow, regret, or unhappiness" it contains sometimes exuberant praise to God. Lament is found throughout the Old Testament, paradigmatically in the Psalms, and these passages of lament are referenced extensively in the New Testament.

Unfortunately, lament as a Christian practice to guide us through suffering is not always recognized and taught in contemporary Christian settings in the Western world. The psalms most often read in congregations are those that offer praise and thanksgiving to God, those expressing distress are underrepresented in public worship. A recent study of contemporary hymnals concluded that only about four percent of hymns reflect the kind of lament modelled in the psalms.[3] It says one fourth of psalms in the hymnal of Israel that are laments.

**The Importance of Lament**

John Calvin stated that "the Psalms are the mirror of the soul"[4] and in that image, lament occupies a major portion. More than one third of the Psalms are psalms of lament, forty-two are individual laments while sixteen are corporate laments.[5] R.W.L. Moberly writes that "the predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something

marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith. Moreover, they show that the experience of anguish in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.[6]

This recognition is foundational to the Christian walk, and the Christian faith as a whole. A constant throughout the Psalms, the Prophets and other biblical literature is the expression of helplessness, of feeling abandoned, pouring out both body and spirit in grief and sharing one's most intimate feelings of loss, pain.[7] The lament psalms follow a theme that is found all over scripture, that once things were good, things were as they were supposed to be according to God's creative intent, and now they are not. This movement from orientation to disorientation creates the theological necessity for lament.[8]

### *Israel's Identity and the Necessity of Lament*

The importance given to lament in the Psalms arises directly from Israel's identity as a covenant community before God. As a nation that was surrounded by hostile, pagan nations in a fallen world, Israel faced immeasurable threats from enemies and foes, as well as internal threats from illness, injustice and even the threat of one's own negative emotions.[9] Patrick Miller argued that "the vagueness of identity of the "hostile other" affords flexibility to the complainant for a multitude of threats,"[10] allowing the lament form to address diverse sources of suffering whether external enemies, internal guilt, silence of God, or physical affliction.

Critically, the psalmist always directs laments toward God, not away from God. It reveals that lament functions as covenant language. The Israelites recognized that God is sovereign over all creation, including their suffering, and that He is a God who makes and keeps covenants.[11] The covenant that God has made with Israel is that they will be redeemed, they will be saved in the end. Therefore, even in the midst of present suffering that seems to contradict God's promises, the psalmist believed in God's covenant faithfulness. Lament became a prayer which holds in tension both

the reality of present suffering and the confidence in God's covenantal commitment to deliverance.

**The Form and Structure of the Lament**

The lament psalms express deep anguish and cry to God when everything else fails. The psalmist accuses God of failing to protect him or to prevent tragedy. These outcries reveal the fallen state of creation and generally verbalize one of the following themes:[12]

1. Personal Suffering (Ps 6:2-7; 22:14-17; 102:6-7)
2. Communal Suffering (Ps 44:11-25; 79:10-11)
3. Oppressive Enemies (Ps 25:19; 17:11-12; 10:8-10)
4. Nature and Death (Ps 42:7, 88:3-7)

Intriguingly, the lament psalms lack specificity although they seem to describe particular struggles. These psalmists use language that is "embracing rather than limiting" Because they embrace worshippers, these psalms function as ideal "set prayers written for worshipers to use for typical distresses." These prayers are best understood when read liturgically rather than as autobiographical pictures of individual psalmists.[13]

Additionally, lament psalms follow an identifiable structure, which is not always present in laments outside the psalter. Most lament psalms contain some variation of the following elements, and often not in this order:[14]

- **Invocation and Plea to God for help** this addresses Yahweh as the covenant God who intervened for Israel (Ps. 4:1; 12:1; 13:1; 17:1), beyond a casual "Dear God."
- **Lament** is the focus of the psalm, voicing the problem and naming what (or who) the psalmist believes to be the cause. The psalmist often uses colourful, emotional language when describing the problem and often shows ways in which a larger problem has a personal effect (Ps. 6:2-7; 22:14-17, 102:6-7).[15]
- **Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence** is more than the psalmist's reason for God to respond. The psalmist may feel that, because of his faithfulness to God, the suffering seems

unjustified (the book of Job is a prime example of this assertion).[16]

- **Curse of enemies (imprecation)**, this language continues the psalmist's use of emotional, colourful language as in the lament section. Enemies feature prominently in laments, and the entire psalter, and psalmists depict them as those who oppose God's people and by extension God Himself.[17] Strikingly, God is the primary subject of the Psalms, "but enemies are established in solid second place."[18]
- **Confidence in God's response** recalls the God's past deeds and gives the psalmist confidence that God will respond similarly in the future (affirming trust).
- **Hymn or blessing** ends in praise or vowed praise, as the psalmist realizes what God can and will do for him, it leads him to praise God."[19]

**The Neglect of Lament in Contemporary Christianity**

The empirical evidence reveals a troubling disconnect between biblical and contemporary worship. While approximately 40% of the Psalter consists of lament, Glenn Pemberton's analysis demonstrates that only 4% of contemporary hymns incorporate lament themes.[20] According to the CCLI[21] database, which tracks the most frequently used worship songs in churches globally, the database reveals that among the top 100 songs, lament is virtually absent.[22]

Walter Brueggemann's seminal article, "The Costly Loss of Lament," explained why losing lament hurts the church in three important ways.[23]

- Theologically, the absence of lament shortens the biblical portrayal of God, reducing divine-human encounter to unidirectional praise while eliminating the dialogical, even confrontational, relationship modelled throughout Scripture. When churches eliminate lament, they implicitly teach that God cannot handle human honesty, fundamentally distorting biblical covenant theology.[24]

- Pastorally, this silence abandons suffering believers to an impossible choice to suppress their authentic experience or conclude their anguish disqualifies them from faith. Brueggemann observes that without lament, the church renders the suffering voiceless, creating what researchers' term "toxic positivity" which is mandatory optimism that constitutes spiritual bypassing.[25] Believers either internalize shame for their struggles or distance themselves from communities that cannot acknowledge suffering honestly.
- Prophetically, when lament disappears, the church loses its ability to challenge injustice. Lament gives people language to name what is wrong in the world and call on God to act. It refuses to accept suffering as normal or acceptable. When churches stop lamenting, they lose their prophetic voice and their ability to speak out against evil and injustice in society.[26]

### *The Consequences of Negligence*

The marginalization of lament generates three primary dysfunctions in contemporary Christian life.

*First, suffering believers experience ecclesial voicelessness.* When worship includes only songs of joy and victory, people going through difficult times feel excluded. The unspoken message is clear that "Your pain has no place here." This creates a "culture of pretense" where people hide their struggles and pretend everything is fine. A person experiencing depression, grief, or anger enters church and encounters only celebration creating painful cognitive dissonance.[27] Many people simply stop attending during their hardest seasons, precisely when they most need community support.

*Second, without lament, Christianity offers only inadequate responses to suffering.* Theodicy attempts rational explanation, "God allowed this to teach you something," or "This happened because of sin." While sometimes helpful, such explanations often feel hollow. Passive acceptance counsels, "Just accept God's will don't question Him." While submission has its place, this approach

silences honest pain. Biblical lament offers a crucial third way is **faithful protest**, bringing complaints directly to God while maintaining relationship with Him and refusing to pretend everything is acceptable. This holds two truths together that God is good, and we experience real suffering, without resolving the tension prematurely.[28]

*Third, cultural and theological factors intensify lament's neglect.* Western culture prizes self-sufficiency and emotional control, lament's vulnerability contradicts these values. Consumer mentality expects worship to deliver immediate positive emotions and comfort. Lament, which sits with pain without quick resolution, frustrates these expectations. [29] Additionally, Some Christians emphasize Christ's victory so much that they forget we still live in a broken world. They treat ongoing struggle as denying Christ's power, rather than recognizing that we live between resurrection and redemption. This suggests that continued suffering is always due to lack of faith.

**Honest before God: The voice of Lament in Psalm 22 and 88**

To understand what "honest before God" means concretely, we must examine the specific lament psalms. Psalms 22 and 88 provide the contrasting but complementary examples. Psalm 22 shows a complete lament that moves from despair to hope, while Psalm 88 remains in darkness without resolution.

***From Abandonment to Hope: Psalm 22***

Psalm 22 begins with a clear plea for deliverance from suffering and hostility: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v.1). the psalmist calls out "my God" even while asking why God has abandoned him. He experiences God as both absent and present, distant yet still someone he can address.[30] This opening becomes especially significant for Christians because Jesus quoted these exact words while dying on the cross (Matthew 27:46), showing that even God's Son used lament's language in His deepest suffering.

The psalmist describes God's distance (vv.1-2). This is direct

accusation that he's holding God responsible for the silence. The psalmist doesn't soften it or make excuses, he states the painful reality.[31] Then he turns to the self-description (v.6), where it talks about complete dehumanization, the psalmist feels he's lost even his humanity. The physical suffering gets detailed attention: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me" (vv.14-15). The honest description of suffering.

But throughout the lament, the psalmist weaves in memories of God's faithfulness. He recalls Israel's history (v.4). He remembers his personal experience (v.9). These memories do not deny present pain; they are the foundation for his petition. Because God acted before, the psalmist has grounds to demand God act now: "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help" (v. 11).[32]

In v.22, without describing any change in circumstances, the psalm turns from complaint to praise. The final verses (22-31) express thanksgiving which shows lament's pattern that honest suffering brought to God brings hope, not by denying the pain, but by trusting the covenant God. For Christians this pattern takes on deeper meaning that Jesus suffering on the cross (the abandonment cry) was followed by resurrection (the vindication).

***The Darkest Psalm: Psalm 88***

The superscript of Psalm 88 is "A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite." Psalm 88 begins with a clear invocation: "O Lord, God of my salvation" (Ps 88:1a). This invocation expresses the psalmist's understanding that he calls to a God who can deliver him from his suffering.[33] The language used in the invocation also expresses the psalmist's confidence in God. The psalm then transitions into a plea to God for help by stating: "when, at night, I cry out in your presence, let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry" (Ps 88:1b-2)

This psalm is unique among laments in that it does not have a praise

section. the invocation and plea to God for help, the psalmist spends the rest of the psalm describing his situation and wondering at God's absence during his trials (Ps 88:3-18). Still this psalm shows evidence of a relationship between God and the psalmist, and the psalm reveals the psalmist's desire to praise God.

Psalm 88 is considered the darkest psalm of Biblical psalms. Yet, this psalm's power lies in its very existence. It proves that, no matter how low a person gets, how absent God seems to be, or how alone a person may feel, prayer to God remains possible.[34] However, one of the author's complaints is that "You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me; my companions are in darkness" (Ps 88:18). He discovers that in his darkest moment his closest companions abandon him.[35]

Although this psalm has no praise section and offers no real hope, the text shows the author clinging to God, in the very face of death. God may be absent, and here even treated as an enemy, but the author still feels that his only hope is in God.

Psalm 22 and 88 define the boundaries of honest prayer before God. Psalm 22 shows that lament can lead from abandonment to hope whereas psalm 88 shows that sometimes lament remains in darkness and that' still a faithful prayer. Finally, it means to be "honest before God" bringing all of life, including its darkest moments into conversation with the God who created us, loves us and ultimately redeem us.

**The Christian Response: Recovering Lament as Christian Practice**

Recognizing both laments importance and contemporary neglect creates an urgent need for recovery. How can today's Christians reclaim this practice? The recovery requires both theological understanding and practical implementation. Christians must understand that Jesus' death validates rather than eliminates lament. When Jesus cried "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from the cross, He demonstrated that even the sinless Son of God

uses lament's language. It shows that honest suffering brought before God leads to deliverance.[36] Lament also differs from false positivity. Lament acknowledges ongoing suffering while trusting God's redemption.

Practically speaking, churches must intentionally include lament psalms in regular worship, not just for funerals or on Good Friday. Worship leaders must introduce lament texts and explain how expressing struggle to God demonstrates faith rather than doubting it. Christian community should create a space for honest suffering without pressure for quick resolution.

Worship song writers should write contemporary lament songs expressing struggle, divine absence, and desperate petition alongside praise. Such songs provide language for suffering believers and normalize lament in congregational worship.

When churches recover lament, they recover biblical realism about suffering, theological honesty about the gap between promise and experience and presenting lament not as concession to weak faith but as covenant relationship, not as problem to solve but as practice to cultivate.

**Conclusion**

Pain and suffering are a part of life. The laments offer hope that the faithful can approach God and that He will hear and respond. The laments offer ways to praise God during suffering and ways to support those who suffer. The power of the laments lies in the evidence of a relationship between God and His people, a relationship that shows God's interest in what affects His people. The psalms also suggest that the only answer to suffering is not found through human means, but through continual reliance on God. Contemporary Christianity's neglect of lament has left suffering believers voiceless, presented an incomplete picture of God, and eliminated the church's prophetic capacity to challenge injustice. Recovering lament as Christian practice requires recognizing that the cross validates honest suffering, creating space for lament in

worship, and encouraging communities where believers can voice pain without shame. Throughout these texts, lament represents not the absence of faith but faith's honest voice which brings all of life, including its darkest moments. Practitioners of Contemporary Christian world would benefit from adding laments into their worship services, not only because they are used in the biblical worship of the Old and New Testaments, but also because they offer contemporary Christians valuable tools for dealing with their own suffering and the suffering in the world around them.

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# 8

## PARTICIPATING IN CHRIST THROUGH SUFFERING: THE PETRINE RESPONSE TO CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

**Kailengou Kipgen**[*]

**Abstract:** This paper examines the Petrine perspective of suffering in the First Epistle and explains how Christians should respond to hardship, persecution, and pain. In First Peter, the author teaches that Christian suffering can lead to glorifying God, allowing believers to participate in Christ's suffering. Peter also encourages Christians to face challenges with hope and faith, making suffering a vital part of discipleship. Subsequently, Peter interprets suffering as a way for believers to honour God and join in Christ's suffering, rather than seeing it as something strange. In so doing, this study employs socio-rhetorical exegesis and liberationist hermeneutics to depict how 1 Peter interprets suffering as participation in Christ, offering a theology of endurance for marginalized Indian Christians. Consequently, it highlights the value of keeping faith, finding joy in difficult times, and honoring God through endurance.

**Keywords:** suffering, Petrine, verbal and physical abuse, Christocentric suffering, hope, glory, subversion, resistance, official persecution, unofficial persecution, minority Christians in India, honor-shame, marginalization

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## Introduction

In First Peter, suffering is a rhetorical and theological strategy that reevaluates marginalization as participation in Christ. According to the Bible Concordance resources, the term "suffering" appears approximately 104 times in the New Testament.[1] In First Peter, it appears 16 times, with six references[2] to Christ's suffering and 10 references[3] to the suffering of believers.[4] Besides, the epistle is packed with suffering language: "trials (1:6), testing (1:7; 4:12), suffering (1:11; 2:19, 21, 23; 3:14,17; 4:1,13,15-16,19; 5:1, 9, 10), being beaten (2:20), the tree as an instrument of execution (2:24), intimidation (3:14), slander (3:16), fiery ordeal (4:12), vilification (4:14), and judgment (4:17)."[5] The frequent references to suffering in 1 Peter have led James H. Burtness to designate it as the "Epistle of Suffering."[6] The precise nature of this suffering remains a subject of scholarly debate. Scholars dispute whether Peter refers to state-sponsored (official) persecution or to informal hostilities (unofficial) within a society marked by distrust. While understanding the Petrine perspective of suffering, this essay examines the historical context of persecution, the socio-rhetorical setting of the Petrine community, and the theological interpretation of suffering as joy, testimony, and glory, to understand these conflicts. In addition, the study investigates how suffering in Peter correlates with the experiences of Christians in India, whose history of political violence and verbal abuse mirrors that of the Petrine community.

## Review of Scholarship

Petrine scholars hold various views regarding the nature of suffering in 1 Peter: whether it represents state-sponsored persecution or informal, localized hostility. The primary concern for most scholars is whether the Petrine community was experiencing official or unofficial persecution. Paul J. Achtemeier identifies three possible forms of persecution: general official persecution, local official persecution, and local unofficial persecution.[7] Early interpreters, including William M. Ramsay,[8] linked the epistle to imperial aggression (general-official persecution) during Nero's reign and

described Christian suffering as legally sanctioned. According to this theory, the Roman government was "absolutely hostile, raging against them, seeking them out for destruction," [9] as Ramsay describes. This perspective remained dominant until Edward G. Selwyn [10] challenged its historical basis, attributing the suffering instead to social ostracism and communal marginalization. Achtemeier opines that the suffering of the Petrine community is due to grassroots factors rather than to imperial edicts. [11] This unofficial model is supported by Wayne Grudem, [12] J. Ramsey Michaels, [13] and Karen H. Jobes, [14] who emphasize verbal abuse, honor-shame dynamics, and the absence of juridical language. Scholars such as Witherington III, [15] Campbell, [16] and Le Roux [17] employed socio-rhetorical, liberationist, and gender-critical readings to study the nature of suffering. Consequently, they interpret suffering as affliction, a context for identity formation, ethical resistance, and theological subversion. The following analysis, which focuses on how 1 Peter reinterprets suffering to shape communal identity, is based on this trajectory.

## Locating Suffering: Historical and Theological Contexts of the Petrine Community

To understand the Petrine perspective on suffering, it is essential to examine the historical and social context in which the Petrine community experienced hardship. As mentioned above, scholars generally identify three possible contexts of persecution: general official persecution (60-64 CE; Nero), local official persecution (90-95 CE; Domitian), and local unofficial persecution (97-117 CE; Trajan). [18] Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Petrine scholarship favoured the first view, associating 1 Peter with Neronian persecution. In contrast, most contemporary scholars situate the letter within the context of local, unofficial persecution. [19]

While the evidence for Nero's empire-wide persecution is discredited by several contemporary scholars, several clues, such as the "fiery ordeal" (4:12), the use of "Babylon" as a hidden transcript for Rome (5:13), and the call to submit to rulers (2:13-17), connote

that 1 Peter was written against the backdrop of official hostility. In addition, patristic testimony connects Peter's martyrdom with Nero's reign (Clement of Rome, 1 Clem. 5:4–7; Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 2.25.5). Assuming that 1 Peter was written in Rome before Peter's martyrdom, the context of Nero's hostility appears historically plausible. The author designates the readers as *paroikoi* and *parepidēmoi*, terms translated as 'sojourners' and 'exiles' (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11). As Jobes points out, the term *parepidēmos* in the first century was used "to designate someone who did not hold citizenship in the place where he resided and was therefore viewed as a foreigner."[20] This terminology highlights the exclusion and absence of social integration that these individuals faced in Greco-Roman society. Therefore, the suffering of the Petrine community occurred within the context of the diaspora.

## The Anatomy of Hostility: A Tripartite Analysis of Petrine Suffering

To clarify the multi-layered nature of suffering in the Petrine Community, this section brings together the three leading causes of suffering in 1 Peter: religious, political, and social. Comparing these factors helps clarify the complex nature of suffering. This tripartite approach offers a deeper understanding of hostility within the Petrine community, in contrast to Travis B. Williams' model,[21] which focuses on suffering as due to behavioural and legal factors. Each dimension reflects a different yet related source of marginalization, revealing how suffering was embedded in both civic life and theological identity.

### *Religious Hostility: Faith as Sedition*

One of the main causes of persecution was religious nonconformity. In the Greco-Roman world, Judaism was viewed as a foreign and suspicious religion (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4–5). Christianity, identified as an extension of Judaism, consequently inherited this negative perception. Robert L. Wilken notes that Jews were seen as outsiders whose customs originated from a profane origin.[22] Therefore, to them, Christianity was perceived as having Jewish

origins. Christians' refusal to participate in the imperial cult intensified their alienation from Roman society. According to Livingston, individuals commonly expressed their loyalty to the Roman Empire through participation in the imperial cult. [23] However, imperial worship became a significant threat to the Christians as it was considered blasphemy. The Christians' refusal to worship the emperor was considered an "act of sedition, a capital offence."[24] 1 Peter reflects this tension. For instance, Peter reveals that one of the reasons the outsiders persecuted the Petrine community was that they refused to participate in lawless idolatries (1 Pet 4:3). In 1 Pet 4:16, suffering "as a Christian" is reframed as a cause for glorifying God rather than shame. Thus, the texts suggest that religious identity itself became a site of conflict, where fidelity to Christ was perceived as a form of civic betrayal.

***Political Hostility: Hidden Transcript and Imperial Critique***

Peter uses a metaphor to describe political hostility. His usage of animal imagery, 'roaring lion' seeking to devour (1 Pet 5:8-9), has been traditionally interpreted as a reference to Satan. Here, Peter personifies the Petrine community's opponent as a single "opponent," clearly identified as "the devil."[25] While the term "the devil" is used to portray Satan throughout the New Testament, it functions as a "hidden transcript" to designate Nero, the opponent of the Petrine community. The use of lion imagery here connotes the ancient Roman persecution. Similarly, Boris A. Paschke suggests that the lion metaphor in 1 Pet 5:8 should be understood in the context of Roman *ad bestias* executions. He reasons that this will answer what "swallowed by the devil" means in the context of the Petrine community. [26] Evidence from historians such as Suetonius (*Cal.* 27.3), Cassius Dio (*Roman History* 59.10.3), and Seneca (*Clem.* 1.25.1) supports the plausibility of such persecutions during Peter's lifetime. This reading aligns with Jobes' view that satanic powers operate through imperial systems. [27] The use of hidden transcripts implies that political suffering had theological significance and was not just incidental.

### *Social Hostility: Conversion and Honor-Shame Reversal*

Social hostility emerged from the community's withdrawal from former cultural practices. Travis B. Williams and David Horrell comment, "Part of the problem stemmed from the social reorientation that took place upon the readers' conversion."[28] In other words, the social status of the Petrine community had changed at the time of their conversion, which was met with disapproval from outsiders. In honor-shame cultures, withdrawal was regarded as deviant behaviour, leading to a shift in status from honor to shame. Their social status of honor has now reversed into shame because of their faith in Christ. In 1 Pet 4:3–4, the text addresses the phenomenon of believers encountering criticism for abandoning their previous lifestyles. Achtemeier describes dual threats encountered by the Petrine community: internal fragmentation and external hostility.[29] 1 Peter 2:18–3:7's household codes serve as a theological strategy to strengthen social cohesiveness and deal with outside influences. Peter presents social suffering as evidence of divine order by arguing for submission to human institutions.

Peter reinterprets these conflicts—religious, political, and social—as Christians' participation in Christ rather than as defeat. The following section will examine how these hostilities are embodied in the community's lived experience.

### Embodied Suffering: Verbal and Physical Hostility in 1 Peter

The Petrine community faced a constellation of hostilities, both verbal and physical. In 1 Pet 1:6, Peter affirms that the community was "distressed by various trials" (*peirasmoi*). He depicted their suffering as *peirasmoi* (plural). The term *peirasmos* is often translated as "temptation."[30] Nevertheless, it can also refer to an outside trial or test of some kind that involves examination.[31] The latter nuance best fits the context of the Petrine community, because their suffering was persecution from the outsiders. The use of plural framing indicates that suffering manifested in diverse forms and was deeply integrated into the community's social and theological context. This section explores two primary expressions of that

suffering: verbal assault and physical abuse.

### *Verbal Assault*

The Petrine community frequently experienced verbal abuse as a form of hostility. According to J.H. Elliott, Christians faced "persistent slander and verbal abuse" in an effort to discredit them in public.[32] Charges of incest, cannibalism, and political subversion were among them; these accusations represented both miscommunication and intentional defamation.[33] Peter addresses these accusations by employing a theological framework. In 1 Pet 2:12, believers are labelled as evildoers but are instructed to maintain honourable conduct, enabling their accusers to glorify God on the day of visitation ultimately. In 2:15, exemplary behaviour is identified as a strategy to silence the ignorance of uninformed individuals. Subsequently, in 3:19, Peter urges the community to respond to an insult with a blessing. Similarly, Jesus teaches his disciples in Matt 5:11; Luke 6:22. Verbal abuse is further linked to Christological participation in 4:14 through the use of *oneidizo* (revile): "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed." Michaels notes that ridicule in 1 Peter is theological rather than just social.[34] It indicates eschatological hope and the believer's alignment with Christ. As a result, verbal abuse turns shame into a witness and becomes a cruciform badge of identity.

### *Physical Abuse*

Physical abuse constituted a more direct and embodied form of suffering, especially among enslaved believers, although verbal hostility was widespread in the Petrine community. Peter urges those who "do what is right and suffer for it" in 1 Pet 2:20 to put up with such treatment. Physical abuse was a reality, particularly for enslaved people under Roman rule, as this exhortation is placed within the framework of the household codes (2:18–25). *Kolaphizomenoi*, which means "being beaten" in Greek, refers to physical punishment, which was a prevalent aspect of Greco-Roman slavery. Williams observes that this group "be subject to the violent treatment of their unbelieving masters,"[35] stressing the vulnerability

of Christian slaves within pagan households. Historical sources reinforce this view: Aristotle depicts slaves as mere objects (Aristotle, *The Politics,* 1.2.4-6). Similarly, Keith R. Bradley observes, "Any Roman slave, as a matter of course, could become the object of physical abuse or injury at any time."[36] Such abuse was not only legal, but also culturally normalised,[37] leaving enslaved Christians doubly marginalized—by status and by faith. Peter's answer, however, is theological rather than merely descriptive. As he connects unjust suffering to divine favor and portrays endurance as a participation in Christ's own suffering, Peter reinterprets physical abuse as a place of spiritual vocation (2:21–24). Thus, suffering is not a sign of desertion, but believers' participation in Christ's suffering.

## Theological Reframing of Suffering in 1 Peter

Having examined the forms of suffering within the Petrine community, this section shifts to discuss how Peter reinterprets their suffering theologically. He portrays suffering as a Christocentric vocation—an invitation to partake in Christ's life, death, and vindication—instead of viewing it as evil. Peter offers a new perspective on suffering through four interconnected themes: suffering as universal, a call to suffer for good, finding joy amid suffering, and glorifying God through suffering.

### *Suffering as a Universal Reality*

In 1 Peter, suffering is presented not as something strange in Christianity. The author urges believers not to be shocked by the "fiery ordeal" that puts them to the test (1 Pet 4:12). The imperative "do not be surprised" (*mē xenizesthe*) is explained by the phrase "as though some strange things were happening to you,"[38] indicating that suffering is an inherent part of the discipleship experience. Subsequently, this theme is reinforced in 1 Pet 5:9, where he reminds his readers that Christians in the other part experienced the same suffering is experienced by other Christians. There are two main theological points here. First, suffering brings the global church together, uniting believers through shared struggles. [39]

Second, it strengthens hope for the future by placing current hardships in the bigger story of God's testing and refining. As Davids explains,[40] Peter is saying a similar rejection and abuse is happening in many Christian communities.

### *Suffering for Good: Christ as the Paradigm*

Peter tells his readers they should suffer for doing good, not for doing wrong. In 1 Pet 3:14 and 3:17, he compares suffering "for the sake of righteousness" with suffering for sin, and says that suffering for righteousness matches God's will. Achtemeier argues that Peter wants any criticism to come from following Christian values, not from breaking social norms.[41] Peter also points to Christ as the model for this calling. In 1 Pet 3:18, Christ suffers "once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous," to bring people to God. His suffering is active and has a purpose: bearing witness (3:19–20), being vindicated through resurrection (3:21), and rising to glory (3:22). This story about Christ shows that suffering can lead to God's favor and future reward. In Greco-Roman society, where honor and shame were important, suffering for good reasons could turn public shame into spiritual honor.

### *Rejoicing in Suffering: The Already and Not Yet*

Peter draws a paradoxical connection between suffering and joy. In 1 Peter 4:13, he writes, "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing," showing that present suffering is linked to future exaltation. Believers find joy not in the pain itself, but in sharing in Christ's suffering.[42] The repeated use of the terms *pathema* and *pascho* throughout the letter connects the community's suffering to the crucifixion, indicating that their trials mirror Christ's redemptive suffering (1 Pet 1:11; 3:18; 4:1). According to K. M. Hockey, rejoicing in 1 Peter occurs in two distinct ways: present joy in sharing Christ's sufferings and future joy when his glory is revealed.[43] This framework places suffering in a redemptive story, suggesting that enduring hardship now will lead to future vindication. In this view, joy means being spiritually united with Christ, not ignoring pain.

### *Glorifying God Through Suffering*

As he wraps up his theological reinterpretation, Peter claims that God can be exalted through suffering. "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God," he writes in 1 Pet 4:16. Suffering for Christ turns disgrace into doxology, in contrast to 4:15, where suffering for sin results in shame.[44] While some argue "to suffer as a Christian" refers to upholding Christian values,[45] Jobes contends it means living consistently with the gospel in word and deed.[46] Michaels argues that being labelled a "Christian" was not yet a punishable offence, then.[47] This argument is best supported by the letter of Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, to Trajan, the emperor, written in 110 CE: "whether the very profession of the name [of Christian] is to be punished, or only the disgraceful practices which go along with the name" (Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96). Thus, Peter's exhortation reframes a derogatory label into a theological identity. In this way, Peter transforms cultural shame into spiritual honor by using the suffering of believers as a public testament to God's glory. More than just consolation, Peter's perspective on suffering offers a fresh perspective on adversity as a calling. Peter redefines suffering as participation, witness, and glory by relating it to the life of Christ. This focus on Christ helps people see suffering not as defeat, but as a form of resistance and hope for the future—a message that still speaks to marginalized groups today. While Peter encourages respect for authorities (2:13–17), he also promotes a way of living that challenges Roman values through humility, non-retaliation, and unity (3:8–9).[48] When facing opposition (1 Pet 5:8-9), Peter tells the community to "stand firm in the faith," showing a quiet resistance based on Christ's example.[49] This vision invites communities facing ongoing hostility to reflect on their own situations.

## Conclusion: Theological Implications for Contextual Suffering

This study explored how 1 Peter frames suffering—not as a mark of God's distance, but as a Christocentric calling. For the Petrine community, suffering becomes a means of participating in the

passion, endurance, and hope of Christ. Rather than leading to despair, it shapes their identity, invites joy, and points them toward the promise of eschatological vindication. Peter's reinterpretation of suffering also functions as a subtle resistance to the imperial ideology. By elevating humility, non-retaliation, and communal solidarity (3:8–9), the epistle subverts Roman honor-shame codes and reclaims dignity for the marginalized. The call to stand "firm in the faith" (5:9) becomes both spiritual and socio-political, forming a community that resists empire by embodying the cruciform path of Christ.

The Petrine response to suffering resonates with Christian minorities in India who face systemic hostility, social exclusion, and political marginalization. Suffering, when interpreted through the lens of Christ, becomes not defeat but vocation —a means of affirming one's identity, resisting injustice, and participating in the hope of glory. Peter's exhortation invites Indian Christians to endure suffering with joy, not because pain is celebrated, but because it signifies one's participation with Christ. This union anticipates future exaltation and glorifies God through faithful witness.

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# 9

## A HISTORICAL INQUIRY INTO THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

**Prince Thomas***

**Abstract:** This paper surveys the historical development of Christian responses to suffering, tracing this trajectory from early martyrdom to contemporary agencies that work to alleviate the suffering of Christian communities. It contends that Christians have consistently reinterpreted suffering as a catalyst for faith, communal solidarity, and active social engagement, adapting their approaches across the centuries to confront changing contexts while firmly upholding the core Christian values that empower believers to stand steadfast in the face of excruciating suffering.

### Introduction

Suffering has been a universal human experience which often raises questions about the existence of God and the nature of justice. In Christianity, the situation is no different; suffering has always been a constant companion of believers. However, what makes Christianity unique is the way Christians respond to suffering. When we glean through the pages of history, we clearly see Christians responding to suffering in diverse ways incorporating spiritual, theological, pastoral, and socio-political responses. In this paper the present writer makes an inquiry examining these responses historically, showing how interpretations of suffering have profoundly shaped the trajectory of Christian history thereby

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influencing the Christian presence in mission. By tracing this historical trajectory, the present writer attempts to highlight how suffering has not only tested faith but also catalyzed the growth of Christianity fostering a positivist outlook towards it that continues to influence contemporary Christian approach towards suffering.

**The Early Church (1st–4th Century)**

The early Christian movement existed as a minority community within the Roman Empire and therefore faced periods of intense persecution between the 1st and 4th centuries. It was because Christians were viewed as socially disruptive because they rejected emperor worship, idol worship, refused to pay divine tribute, avoided imperial military service, did not participate in idolatrous ceremonies, public festivals, games and maintained exclusive loyalty to their communities. They were also falsely accused of cannibalism, incest, abominations.[1] As a result, Christians were subjected to imprisonment, confiscation of property, exile, torture, and execution. Far from weakening the church, these persecutions strengthened Christian solidarity, Notable early martyrs included Stephen,[2] Peter and Paul were executed during the reign of Emperor Nero, especially after Christians were scapegoated for the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE.[3] The persecution during Nero's reign was severe and brutal, and this harsh treatment continued under Domitian.[4] By the early 4th century, these trials had become foundational to the memory and self-understanding of Christian communities.

In the face of persecution, the early church developed a distinctive response to suffering marked by communal care. They mobilized mutual support that provided food, shelter, financial assistance, and emotional encouragement to the suffering believers. These features can be seen exemplified in the following bible verses. The church prayed earnestly when peter was in prison (Acts 12:5), for you had compassion on the prisoners (Hebrews 10:34), you were not ashamed of my chains (2 Timothy 1:16), (Acts 5:41), Rejoice in suffering. Martyrdom accounts were also circulated in written and oral form, not to glorify death, but to reinforce courage, instill hope,

and present suffering as meaningful within the shared life of the community.[5] The early Christians thus responded positively to sufferings by cultivating patience, endurance, and solidarity, exemplifying that standing together in suffering strengthened their unity, transforming it into a shared experience that shaped the identity and growth of the early church.

### *Church Fathers and Their Response to Suffering*

Several early Church Fathers from the 2nd to 5th century developed influential interpretations of suffering that shaped Christian thought for centuries. Ignatius of Antioch viewed suffering especially martyrdom as the highest expression of union with Christ and urged believers to embrace it with courage and hope. He stated that through suffering he would find true freedom in Jesus Christ and rise again with Him. He added that he was God's wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts so that he might be offered as the pure bread of Christ.[6]

Polycarp of Smyrna emphasized faithfulness unto death, presenting suffering as a testimony that strengthened the broader Christian community. When Polycarp was asked to renounce his faith, he said, "For eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no evil. How could I curse my King who saved me?" It is believed that before his death, he thanked God for considering him worthy to join God's martyrs and share in the cup of Christ.[7] Tertullian, another prominent church father famously argued that "the blood of Christians is effective seed" interpreting suffering as a catalyst for evangelistic expansion.[8] Origen wanted to die as a martyr along with his father who became a Christian martyr.[9] He encouraged believers to understand suffering within a framework of spiritual discipline and purification, seeing trials as opportunities for moral transformation. Cyprian of Carthage highlighted the importance of communal unity during persecution and insisted that suffering revealed the authenticity of Christian faith. He even encouraged Christians to extend brotherly help to pagans during the plague.[10] Together, these Church Fathers shaped a rich and enduring tradition

that interpreted suffering not merely as misfortune but as a meaningful inevitable part of Christian life and witness.

## Early Middle Ages (4th–10th Century)

With the rise of Christianity as an imperially supported religion, the Church began to transform its compassion into organized social structures. Between the 5th and 10th centuries, monastic communities developed a distinctive approach to suffering, seeing hardship as spiritual discipline and a path to deeper communion with God. Christian monasticism developed in ways that set it apart sharply from all earlier expressions of ascetic practice or communal religious life. [11]

Through poverty, celibacy, devotion to prayer and fasting, study of scriptures, asceticism and self-denial, monks and nuns embraced suffering for holiness and inner transformation.[12] Throughout long periods of war and near anarchy, monasteries served as islands of peace and stability, providing refuge for those in distress. They offered hospitality to travelers, care for the sick, and support for the poor. Frequently, monasteries became sanctuaries for society's outcasts and a place of protection for the vulnerable, especially women and children.[13] These institutions exemplified the belief that serving the poor, the sick, and the marginalized was an expression of Christ's love in society. This era laid the foundation for Christian social welfare, making compassion a defining and visible aspect of the Church's public life. Thus, their approach to suffering was transformative and philanthropic in nature.

## Late Medieval Period (11th–15th Century)

### *Suffering in a Feudal and Plague-Stricken Society (11th–14th Century)*

During the High Medieval period, societal suffering intensified due to rigid feudal hierarchies, recurring famines, and the devastating waves of the Black Death that wiped out large segments of Europe's population.[14] The Italian humanist Petrarch calls this age as a time of 'darkness.'[15] In this environment, Christian institutions emerged

as centers of light rendering vital centers of care and relief. Monasteries, convents, and parish communities tended to the sick, the dying, the orphaned, and the poor, often risking their own lives in the process. The Franciscan Friars ministered to the needs of all kinds of people as they were able, especially to the lepers. They had no money but gave personal service and care.[16] During this period the church also introduced principles of Christian morality which improved the lot of the slaves, position of women, defended the family and in some way lessened and mitigated war.[17] Thus, the Church's role as a guardian of compassion during one of Europe's darkest eras alleviated suffering and reinforced its position as a central force for social and spiritual support in the times of suffering.

### *Pilgrimage as Collective Expressions of Suffering (12th–15th Century)*

From the 12th to the 15th century, pilgrimages to the shrines of saints emerged across many regions, and it was expected that every believer should undertake such a journey at least once in their lifetime. The most prominent pilgrimage destinations were Jerusalem, Rome, and Compostela in northern Spain.[18] Thus in this century, Christians increasingly retorted to such collective religious practices to make sense of suffering. Pilgrimages to holy sites particularly to the shrines of such saints or martyrs, reflecting from their life of suffering became an ideal response for them to respond in their times of crisis and affliction. These practices provided people with shared emotional and spiritual frameworks through which they could express grief, seek divine intervention, and reinforce communal solidarity. Thus, such collective expressions helped the medieval societies cope with widespread trauma, transforming suffering into a participatory religious experience that connected individuals with a larger spiritual narrative.

## Reformation and Early Modern Period (16th–19th Century)

### *Reconsidering the Meaning of Suffering (16th – 17th Century)*

During the Reformation, Christian thinkers reinterpreted suffering in light of new understandings of faith, authority, and community life, challenging the existing penitential views and placing greater emphasis on pastoral care. Martin Luther emphasized the theology of the cross, teaching that God reveals himself through suffering rather than through earthly glory, and human suffering drives believers to rely entirely on God's grace. For Luther, God is revealed precisely in His hiddenness behind the cross. The cross overturns the wisdom of the world, for God chooses to make Himself known through suffering. By contrast, any wisdom that seeks understanding apart from the cross is rejected by God.[19] Similarly, John Calvin highlighted God's sovereignty over suffering and presented it as a form of divine discipline intended to cultivate spiritual maturity. He presented predestination as a pastoral teaching intended to reassure believers, emphasizing that their salvation rested not on their own striving but solely on God's gracious initiative.[20] In these Reformation contexts, suffering was reframed as a pastoral and ethical concern, guiding believers in their spiritual growth, rather than as a mechanism for earning sacramental merit or indulgences, marking a significant shift in the Christian understanding and response to human suffering.

### *Enlightenment and Modernity (18th–19th Century)*

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Enlightenment ideas significantly influenced Christian engagement with human suffering, giving rise to organized humanitarian movements. Both secular and theological Learning received much impetus during this period. For instance, in 1702, Czar Peter promoted learning and insisted on the education of the clergy.[21] In addition to it, challenged by the protestant intellectuals, hundreds of universities, seminaries and monasteries took up theological learning.[22] August Hermann Francke who was instrumental in bringing the Pietist movement in Germany began school for poor children[23] Christians also became actively involved in anti-slavery campaigns, advocating for the emancipation of enslaved peoples, and in prison reform, working to improve conditions and promote rehabilitation.

The Moravian mission under Count Zinzendorf which emerged in this century offers a distinctive model of Christian engagement with suffering, rooted in compassion, solidarity, and sacrificial witness. Emerging from the 1727 Herrnhut revival, Moravians believed that authentic mission must mirror the suffering love of Christ, leading many to voluntarily embrace hardship, poverty, and even slavery-like conditions to reach marginalized communities. Their motto is "Our lamb has conquered let us follow him."[24] Their willingness to live among enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, endure the challenging situations and identify with the indigenous peoples reflected a theology in which suffering was not merely endured but transformed into a channel of redemptive presence. These efforts reflected a shift from exclusively spiritual responses to suffering toward practical, socially engaged action, exemplifying the Church's commitment to alleviating human suffering through both moral advocacy and concrete service.

## Modern and Contemporary Christian Responses

### *Theological Responses to Human Suffering in the Modern Age*

In the modern age, particularly during the 20th century, global crises such as the World Wars, widespread poverty, and social injustices prompted Christian thinkers to develop new theological interpretations of suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized the role of suffering in resisting injustice, portraying it as an active engagement with moral responsibility even at personal cost. For him, Christians are called to participate in God's suffering; it is not religious actions that make one a Christian, but sharing in God's suffering within the realities of secular life.[25] Similarly, Jurgen Moltmann introduced the concept of a suffering God who stands in solidarity with the oppressed, highlighting divine identification with human pain. For Moltmann, the theology of the cross is essentially the other side of the Christian theology of hope, whose starting point is the resurrection of the crucified Christ.[26] These responses shifted the understanding of suffering from merely a redemptive experience to one that also incorporated ethical action, empathy, and social

responsibility within the context that we represent.

### *Liberation and Dalit Theologies*

Liberation and Dalit theologies emerged as critical frameworks for understanding suffering through socio-political lenses. These movements assert that suffering arises from systemic oppression, whether through economic exploitation, caste discrimination, or political marginalization. Dalit theology affirms that the core of Dalit experience is pathos-deep suffering. It is within this pain that the sufferer encounters God, for in and through their pathos they recognize that God enters into human suffering. The New Testament describes this divine participation through the passion of Jesus, most powerfully symbolized in His crucifixion.[27] The Christian response in this context emphasizes justice, liberation, and empowerment of the oppressed, advocating concrete social and structural reforms. Within these theologies, Christ is seen as the liberator who identifies with the marginalized, providing both theological grounding and practical motivation for resisting oppression and transforming society in ways that alleviate suffering.

### *Feminist and Postcolonial Theologies*

Feminist and postcolonial Christian theologies reinterpret suffering from perspectives historically marginalized in traditional discourse. Feminist theology exposes and critiques women's suffering in patriarchal cultures, calling attention to gendered oppression within both society and church structures. As Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her, *"In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian* Origins, correctly points out that, the history of patriarchal oppression must not be allowed to cancel out the history of the life, struggles and liberation for women in biblical religion.[28] Postcolonial thinkers challenge historical misrepresentations of oppressed communities, emphasizing the agency and resilience of those who have suffered under colonial and cultural domination. They sometimes use the image of the slaughtered lamb to denote the sufferings of the victims of colonization. [29] Together, these approaches highlight that Christian engagement with suffering must

include empowerment, and restoration of dignity for groups whose experiences were previously silenced or overlooked.

## Global Christian Aid and Development Networks (20th–21st Century)

In the 20th and 21st centuries, Christian organizations expanded their humanitarian engagement on a global scale through the establishment of numerous NGOs and development networks. These institutions addressed a wide range of human suffering, including disaster relief, provision of healthcare, anti-trafficking initiatives, educational programs, and efforts toward poverty eradication. Rise in Christian Persecution is a major challenge the world is facing in our present times. This growing hostility has prompted both local and international efforts to provide support and protection for Christian community. In Indian context, Persecution relief headed by Dr Shibu Thomas works to help the persecuted churches in India.[30] ADF also works in giving legal support to the persecuted and falsely accused Christian brethren.[31] These agencies play a vital role in protecting the rights, safety, and dignity of persecuted Christians in India, providing practical, financial and legal assistance to the persecuted Christians.

## Conclusion

In the light of this paper, we see that the Christian response to suffering since time immemorial is not uniform. The church responded to suffering in diverse ways across different centuries. While suffering remains an inevitable companion in our Christian journey towards a destination devoid of suffering which is heaven, suffering consistently affirms God's presence, solidarity, and redemptive purpose in human pain. This historical inquiry demonstrates that Christians have not merely endured suffering but have continually reinterpreted it to nurture faith, hope, and transformative action in the world. Over the centuries, responses have ranged from martyrdom and monastic discipline to institutional charity and global humanitarian initiatives, reflecting adaptability to changing social and historical contexts. Ultimately, the legacy of

Christian engagement with suffering reveals a tradition committed not only to understanding human pain but also to alleviating it and promoting justice, compassion and communal harmony.

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# 10

## FROM LAMENT TO HOPE: A NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY OF REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

**Stanly Johnson***

**Abstract:** This article examines how the New Testament moves from lament to hope through a theology of redemptive suffering rooted in Christ's death and resurrection. It acknowledges the reality of pain while reinterpreting it through union with Christ. Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 1, and 1 Peter portray suffering as the context for divine comfort, spiritual refinement, and future glory. Jesus' own anguish validates lament, while resurrection hope sustains perseverance. Thus, suffering becomes a transformative means of conformity to Christ and eschatological expectation.

### Introduction

The problem of human suffering has occupied the attention of theologians, philosophers, and ordinary believers throughout history, yet the New Testament presents a distinctive and transformative vision of suffering that diverges radically from both ancient Greco-Roman stoicism and contemporary therapeutic culture. Rather than viewing suffering as merely an unfortunate interruption to human flourishing or a problem to be solved through philosophical detachment, the New Testament authors present suffering as a profound theological reality that can be redeemed and transformed through union with Christ. This transformation from lament to hope does not minimize the reality of pain, nor does it

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encourage a superficial optimism that ignores genuine anguish; instead, it reframes suffering within the narrative of Christ's death and resurrection, offering believers a theological framework that honors both grief and hope simultaneously. This article examines how three key New Testament texts, Romans 8, Second Corinthians 1, and First Peter articulate a theology of redemptive suffering that moves from honest lament to eschatological hope, mediated through participation in Christ's own suffering and vindication.

## The Foundation: Christ's Cross and Resurrection as the Paradigm of Redemptive Suffering

The entire New Testament theology of suffering is predicated upon the foundational events of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, which together establish the pattern by which Christian suffering is understood and endured. The cross demonstrates that suffering is not incompatible with divine purposes; indeed, God's greatest redemptive act occurred through the most profound suffering.[1] The crucifixion of Jesus represents not merely a tragic miscarriage of justice but the very means by which God accomplished salvation for humanity. This theological truth fundamentally alters how suffering is perceived within the Christian framework.

The resurrection, in turn, vindicates Jesus' suffering and provides the ultimate hope that suffering is not the final word.[2] Paul's theology consistently emphasizes that believers are united with Christ both in his death and in his resurrection, creating a participatory framework for understanding Christian suffering. In Romans 6:5, Paul writes that "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."[3] This union with Christ means that the pattern of Jesus' experience, suffering leading to glory becomes the pattern for Christian existence. N.T. Wright describes this as the "Christological redefinition" of suffering, whereby the cross becomes not merely an event to believe in but a pattern to participate in.[4]

The scandal of the cross cannot be underestimated in its ancient

context. Crucifixion was designed not merely to execute but to humiliate, to render the victim utterly shameful and cursed.[5] That the early Christians proclaimed a crucified messiah was, as Paul acknowledged, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). Yet this scandalous death becomes, in Christian theology, the very wisdom and power of God. The cross thereby redefines both suffering and glory, demonstrating that God's power is manifest not through domination but through self-giving love, and that glory comes not by avoiding suffering but by enduring it faithfully.

The resurrection does not erase the cross; rather, it transforms its meaning. The risen Christ still bears the marks of his wounds (John 20:27), indicating that resurrection does not mean the obliteration of suffering's reality but its redemption and transfiguration.[6] This pattern, suffering that leads to resurrection; death that leads to life becomes the lens through which New Testament authors interpret the suffering of believers. Christian suffering is thus understood as participation in Christ's own suffering, with the assured hope of participation in his resurrection glory.

**Present Suffering and Future Glory: Romans 8**

Romans 8 represents perhaps the most comprehensive New Testament treatment of the relationship between present suffering and future hope, situating individual Christian experience within the cosmic narrative of creation's redemption. Paul begins the chapter by declaring that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1), establishing the security of believers in Christ before addressing the reality of their present sufferings.[7] This order is significant: the assurance of salvation precedes and undergirds the discussion of suffering.

Paul explicitly addresses suffering in Romans 8:17-18, declaring that Christians are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." This passage establishes

several crucial theological principles. First, suffering is not incompatible with being heirs of God; rather, it is the expected path for those who share in Christ's sonship. Second, suffering is not merely endured but shared—believers participate in Christ's sufferings through union with him. Third, present suffering is explicitly connected to future glory, creating a temporal framework that places current affliction within an eschatological horizon.

The temporal comparison Paul makes is striking: present sufferings are "not worth comparing" with coming glory. This is not a minimization of present pain but rather an assertion about the overwhelming magnitude of future glory. Paul does not suggest that suffering is insignificant or easily dismissed; rather, he argues that the glory to be revealed is of such transcendent quality and quantity that present suffering, though genuinely painful, pales in comparison. Richard Hays emphasizes that this comparative framework does not invalidate present suffering but locates it within an eschatological narrative that redefines its ultimate meaning.[8]

Paul then expands his vision to include all of creation, writing that "the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" and that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19, 21). This cosmic perspective is crucial for understanding Paul's theology of suffering. Human suffering is not an isolated phenomenon but part of creation's universal groaning under the weight of sin and death. The entire created order has been subjected to futility and experiences labor pains, awaiting the final redemption.[9]

Significantly, Paul includes believers themselves in this groaning: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22-23).[10] Even those who possess the Spirit, the down payment and guarantee of future glory continue to groan

under present suffering. This groaning is not a sign of weak faith but an appropriate response to the "already but not yet" tension of Christian existence.[11] Believers live between Christ's resurrection and their own, between the inauguration and consummation of God's kingdom.

The metaphor of childbirth is particularly important in Paul's argument. Labor pains are intense and unavoidable, yet they are purposeful pains that lead to new life. They are not meaningless suffering but productive agony that results in birth.[12] This image reframes Christian suffering not as arbitrary or pointless but as the necessary precursor to the birth of new creation. The pain is real, but it is oriented toward hope. Dorothee Soelle, in her influential study of suffering, notes that this metaphor validates the intensity of pain while simultaneously asserting its teleological significance suffering that moves toward a goal rather than suffering as endless cycle.[13]

Paul concludes this section with his magnificent affirmation that nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).[14] This assurance provides the ultimate foundation for hope amid suffering. Whatever afflictions believers face whether "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword" (Rom. 8:35) none can sever them from God's love in Christ. Indeed, Paul declares that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).[15] Suffering is thus transformed from a threat to Christian faith into an occasion for demonstrating the invincibility of God's love.

**The God of All Comfort and the Fellowship of Suffering: II Corinthians 1**

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul develops a theology of suffering that emphasizes both the intensity of affliction and the corresponding consolation provided by God. Writing from personal experience of severe suffering, Paul articulates how suffering creates a fellowship among believers and reveals God's character as the source of comfort. The opening verses establish the theological framework:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).[16]

This passage introduces several key concepts. First, God is characterized fundamentally as compassionate and comforting not distant or indifferent to human suffering. Second, God's comfort is comprehensive ("all comfort," "all our troubles"), indicating that no suffering falls outside the scope of divine consolation. Third, suffering and comfort create a dynamic cycle: those who receive comfort from God are equipped to extend comfort to others. This establishes suffering not as a purely private experience but as something that binds believers together in a community of shared affliction and mutual consolation.[17]

Paul then describes the intensity of his own suffering in Asia, stating that he and his companions "were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8). This is a remarkable admission from the apostle. Paul does not present a stoic façade or suggest that mature Christians transcend the emotional impact of suffering. Instead, he honestly acknowledges that the suffering was overwhelming, beyond human capacity to bear, leading even to despair of life.[18] This transparency validates the experience of believers who find themselves similarly overwhelmed by affliction.

However, Paul immediately provides the theological interpretation of this extreme suffering: "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). The purpose of the suffering, Paul suggests, was to break any residual self-reliance and to drive him toward complete dependence on God. The specific reference to God "who raises the dead" is significant and it connects Paul's experience to the resurrection hope that undergirds all Christian theology.[19] When suffering brings believers to the point of death, it directs them to the God whose ultimate power is demonstrated in resurrection.

Paul further develops the communal dimension of suffering and comfort by noting that "our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort" (2 Cor. 1:7). The Greek word translated "share" (*κοινωνία*) denotes partnership or participation, suggesting a deep interconnection among believers in both suffering and consolation.[20] This creates a theology of solidarity in which Christians do not suffer in isolation but participate in one another's afflictions and encouragements.

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly connects his apostolic suffering to Christ's own suffering. In 2 Corinthians 4:10, he writes, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." This profound statement suggests that Christian suffering, particularly apostolic suffering manifests Christ's death while simultaneously revealing his life.[21] The pattern of death and resurrection that defined Christ's ministry becomes embodied in the experience of his followers.

The theology developed in 2 Corinthians 1 thus presents suffering as a means by which believers are driven toward deeper dependence on God, equipped to comfort others, united in fellowship with one another, and conformed to the pattern of Christ's own death and resurrection. Suffering is not explained away or spiritually bypassed but rather embraced as a reality through which God works to accomplish his purposes and reveal his character.

**Suffering as Participation in Christ's Glory: I Peter**

The First Epistle of Peter addresses communities experiencing persecution and social marginalization, providing theological resources for understanding and enduring suffering in a hostile environment. Peter's approach emphasizes suffering as participation in Christ's sufferings, purification of faith, and anticipation of glory. The letter opens by reminding readers of "the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3), immediately establishing resurrection hope as the foundation for enduring trials.[22]

Peter acknowledges that his readers "have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" but immediately provides the theological purpose: "These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet. 1:6-7). The metaphor of refining fire suggests that suffering tests and purifies faith, burning away impurities and demonstrating its authenticity. This image transforms suffering from a destructive force into a purifying process that reveals the true quality of faith. [23]

Peter's most direct treatment of redemptive suffering appears in 1 Peter 4:12-13: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." Several elements here merit attention.[24] First, Peter warns against viewing suffering as abnormal or unexpected; for Christians in a fallen world, suffering is the norm rather than the exception. Second, suffering is explicitly framed as participation in Christ's sufferings; the Greek word *κοινωνέω* again emphasizes partnership and sharing. Third, present participation in Christ's sufferings connects directly to future joy at the revelation of his glory, maintaining the eschatological orientation found throughout New Testament theology of suffering.[25]

Peter develops this theme further: "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:14). Suffering "because of the name of Christ," that is, suffering specifically for Christian identity and testimony is pronounced blessed. The Spirit's presence during suffering is described as "the Spirit of glory," suggesting that even in the midst of affliction, believers experience a foretaste of the coming glory.[26]

Christ himself is presented as the paradigm for suffering believers. Peter writes extensively about Jesus' suffering in 1 Peter 2:21-24, explaining that "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example

that you should follow in his steps." The Greek word translated "example" (*ὑπογραμμός*) literally refers to a pattern or outline that students would trace over when learning to write.[27] Christ's suffering functions as an example for this purpose (*ἵνα*), so that believers would "follow in his steps." As Christ's disciples, believers are to suffer as he did, enduring every pain and insult received because of their allegiance to the Master.[28]

Significantly, Peter does not suggest that Christian suffering is redemptive in the same way Christ's was, instead Christ "bore our sins in his body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24) in a unique, atoning manner.[29] However, believers' suffering can be redemptive in a derivative sense: it conforms them to Christ, purifies their faith, provides opportunities for witness, and participates in the sufferings of Christ in a real though non-atoning way.

Peter's pastoral wisdom is evident in his balanced treatment of suffering. He acknowledges its painful reality while simultaneously providing theological resources for interpreting and enduring it. He neither minimizes suffering nor allows it to eclipse hope. The letter consistently maintains the tension between present affliction and future vindication, between the sufferings of this age and the glory to be revealed.

**The Role of Lament in New Testament Theology**

While the New Testament emphasizes hope and resurrection, it does not suppress honest expressions of grief and anguish. Jesus himself lamented, both over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44) and in Gethsemane, where he was "deeply distressed and troubled" and said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33-34).[30] On the cross, Jesus cried out the opening words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). This citation of a lament psalm by Jesus validates the practice of bringing raw, honest grief before God.[31]

The New Testament authors, particularly Paul, frequently express the emotional reality of suffering. As noted above, Paul admits to

despairing of life (2 Cor. 1:8) and describes his "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" over Israel's unbelief (Rom. 9:2). These expressions demonstrate that hope does not require the suppression of grief. Rather, Christian hope provides a framework within which honest lament can be expressed without leading to ultimate despair.[32]

The Book of Revelation, while ultimately presenting a vision of triumph and new creation, does not bypass lament. The souls under the altar cry out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev. 6:10).[33] This cry for justice acknowledges the reality of injustice and suffering while expressing confidence that God will ultimately vindicate the oppressed. The vision of new creation in Revelation 21-22 explicitly addresses the problem of suffering: God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).[34] This promise acknowledges that tears, mourning, crying, and pain are present realities that require divine intervention to overcome.

The New Testament's incorporation of lament prevents its theology of hope from becoming triumphalist or dismissive of genuine suffering. Lament is not the opposite of hope but rather its necessary precondition, one cannot genuinely hope for redemption without acknowledging the reality that requires redeeming. The movement from lament to hope is not a linear progression that leaves lament behind but rather a dynamic tension in which both coexist. Believers lament because they live in a fallen world where suffering is real; they hope because they trust in the God who has defeated death through Christ's resurrection and promises to make all things new.

**Theological Implications and Contemporary Application**

The New Testament theology of redemptive suffering presents several implications for contemporary Christian faith and practice. First, it provides a framework for understanding suffering that neither trivializes it nor allows it to become meaningless. Suffering

is real, painful, and often unjust, yet it can be integrated into a narrative of divine purpose and hope when understood through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection.[35]

Second, this theology challenges both shallow optimism and cynical despair. Against therapeutic approaches that promise suffering can be entirely eliminated through proper technique or positive thinking, the New Testament acknowledges suffering as an inevitable aspect of life in a fallen world. Against nihilistic or cynical worldviews that see suffering as proof of life's meaninglessness, the New Testament presents suffering as potentially redemptive when experienced in union with Christ.[36]

Third, the communal dimension of suffering emphasized particularly in 2 Corinthians points toward the church's role as a community of mutual consolation. Believers are not meant to suffer in isolation but to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), experiencing the comfort of God through the ministry of fellow believers. This has practical implications for how Christian communities respond to those experiencing affliction not with platitudes or easy answers but with presence, empathy, and tangible support.[37]

Fourth, the eschatological orientation of New Testament suffering theology maintains hope without requiring immediate resolution. The "already but not yet" framework allows believers to acknowledge that full redemption has not yet arrived while trusting that it certainly will. [38] This prevents both premature closure (pretending suffering has already been overcome) and hopeless resignation (assuming nothing will ever change).[39]

Fifth, the validation of lament provides permission for honest emotional expression before God. Contemporary Christian communities sometimes pressure believers toward constant positivity, inadvertently suggesting that expressions of grief or anguish indicate spiritual immaturity or weak faith. The New Testament model, by contrast, demonstrates that faith and lament are compatible, indeed that lament can be an expression of faith

insofar as it addresses grief to God rather than into the void.[40]

The New Testament's theology of suffering also speaks to the problem of theodicy, the question of how God's goodness and power can coexist with the reality of evil and suffering.[41] Rather than providing an abstract philosophical solution, the New Testament offers a narrative and personal response: God has not remained distant from suffering but has entered into it through the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. The Christian answer to suffering is not primarily a logical argument but the person of Christ, who suffered, died, and rose again.[42]

This theology also has implications for Christian mission and witness. When believers suffer faithfully, demonstrating hope amid affliction and extending forgiveness rather than seeking revenge, they bear witness to the reality of the resurrection and the truth of the gospel. Peter writes that believers should "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15).[43] The hope that persists through suffering becomes a powerful apologetic for the faith.

**Conclusion**

The New Testament presents a profound and multifaceted theology of suffering that moves from lament to hope through participation in Christ's death and resurrection. Romans 8 situates Christian suffering within the cosmic groaning of creation awaiting redemption, promising that present afflictions cannot compare with coming glory and that nothing can separate believers from God's love. Second Corinthians 1 emphasizes God's consolation amid intense suffering and the fellowship created among believers who share in both affliction and comfort. First Peter frames suffering as participation in Christ's sufferings that leads to participation in his glory, presenting Jesus' patient endurance as the pattern for believers facing persecution. Throughout these texts and others, the New Testament validates honest lament while grounding hope in the resurrection of Christ, creating a theological framework that honors both the reality of suffering and the certainty of redemption. This

theology offers contemporary believers neither cheap comfort nor hopeless despair but rather a robust vision of suffering transformed through union with the crucified and risen Lord, whose pattern of death-leading-to-life becomes the paradigm for Christian existence in a fallen yet redeemed world.

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[1] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, translated by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 205-207.

[2] N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 73-75.

[3] All biblical quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

[4] N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God…,* 88.

[5] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 44-46.

[6] Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 168-170.

[7] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 504-506.

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[9] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1030–1036.

[10] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 469–473.

[11] Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 508–514.

[12] J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 185-187.

[13] Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, translated by Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 148-150.

[14] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans…,* 544-553.

[15] Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 330–334.

[16] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 66.

[17] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians…,* 68-75.

[18] Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentary (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 122.

[19] Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 8-22.

[20] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 149.

[21] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians…,* 235.

[22] Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 75.

[23] Jobes, *1 Peter…,* 77.

[24] Jobes, *1 Peter…,* 275-290.

[25] Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 58–66; Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 64–71.

[26] Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter…,* 168-173.

[27] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 120.

[28] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*…, 120.

[29] Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 58–66.

[30] N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 501–507; 13. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 373–380.

[31] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1061–1065.

[32] Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians...*, 107-122; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 518–520.

[33] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 391–397.

[34] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation…,* 1040.

[35] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 118–21.

[36] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*…, 25–57.

[37] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 105–126.

[38] George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 557–63.

[39] Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 84–92.

[40] N. T. Wright affirms that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane functions as a lament—an honest cry of anguish directed to the Father. See, N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 170–73.

[41] Moltmann, *The Crucified God…,* 204-210.

[42] Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God…,* 88-92.

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# 11

## THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF PAIN AND SUFFERING: A PASTORAL COUNSELING APPROACH

**Kumar Bardewa**[*]

### Introduction

Sara (changed name) was a Christian who attended church for more than 25 years. In August 2023, her 13-year-old daughter Ruth (changed name) was hospitalized due to a severe problem in blood. Doctors told her that they can't save Ruth and she would have only a few days or hours to live. When Sara heard it and saw her daughter's suffering, she was emotionally wounded. Sara's relatives, friends, and well-wishers came to visit her at the hospital to comfort. Among them was a pastor who suggested that Sara and her husband to repent for the sins they had committed. He told her that God might be punishing them because of their hidden sin, and now he wants to reveal it through this situation. He put his hand upon Sara's head and led her for the prayer of repentance so that God might forgive her and heal Ruth. Sara tried to remember all her sins and asked for forgiveness, and prayed for not to punish her daughter. After a few hours, the doctors announced Ruth's death.

After her death, Sara experienced severe trauma and depression. She began to question: *Why did God allow this pain and suffering to Ruth? How can God plan for my young child to suffer and die because of my sins? Did I not repent? If God is almighty, why didn't*

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*he save her?* She asked those questions because the pastor who came to visit her in the hospital had said that Ruth's suffering was a punishment to Sara for her unseen sins. It disturbed her mentally. The repeated thought, 'my daughter died because of my sins,' made her feel guilt and shame, and she couldn't face the crowd (the people who came to visit her). She lost interest in going to church, praying and reading the Bible.

What might have influenced the pastor to describe Ruth's death as her parents' sin, and why did it shake Sara's faith and her spiritual life? I argue that it is a result of a limited and distorted view on the cross and resurrection of Christ in relation to Christian pain and suffering.

**Definition of Pain and Suffering**

Pain and suffering are related terms but carry distinctly different meanings. The first is a bodily sensation, but the second is the description of the total experience of any particular crisis or situation informed by the rational faculty of a person.[1] Pain is a psychic phenomenon of the body or bodily effect, whereas suffering is the psychological and spiritual condition of a person who interprets pain.[2] Pain is the perception of an experience and its impact on a person's mental life.[3] On the other hand, suffering is a response to a serious threat to one's personhood, those aspects of someone's life that vitally define them as a human person.[4]

**Views on Pain and Suffering**

Early philosophers viewed pain and suffering from both psychological and physical vintage point. Plato considered it as a punishment from gods to a person's sins or evil deeds, not only during his life on the earth but also after his death. In contrast, the Stoics and Epicureans explained human pain and suffering from a perspective of an art of living. For them, freeing oneself from anxiety, pursuing medical treatments, balancing human desires, and living a high-quality life are the means to overcome suffering. According to them, if a person can't follow it, pain and suffering

become intolerable to him. In such a situation, suicide is recommended. [5] The ancient Roman world believed pain and suffering were conditions of a defeated kingdom.[6]

Evolutionary perspective explains pain and suffering as the result of struggles for survival, in which, a stronger will dominate a weaker. Death, struggle, cruelty, brutality, and ruthlessness [7] are the key terms for them to explain the nature of human suffering.

For Frederick Nitze, human pain and suffering were necessary to transform humankind into a higher form of life. From existential school, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus claimed that there is no meaningful way to comprehend life's suffering, and that all human beings can do is create meaning in an absurd universe. [8] Emile Durkheim from sociological perspective described it as inherently social experiences that occur in both personal and community settings.[9]

From the Christian worldview, Wayne Hudson states that early Christians did not consider pain and suffering as "undesirable, meaningless or without value."[10] Instead, they believed it could foster a godly character in a believer. Peta Jones Pellach supports this idea by stating that suffering builds character, brings rewards in this world or in the world to come, and we have a responsibility to find meaning in suffering.[11] For Christian, it is unpleasant only for a while, but its results are lasting good.[12]

Reformers spiritualized human suffering by arguing that the sin of Adam caused damage to God's creation, and its reparation was needed. They pointed to the cross as a God-given solution to repair the damage.[13] But the liberation theologians put more emphasis on political, social, cultural, and economic injustices as the causes of human suffering, perpetuated by the world of the elite, which increases its intensity.[14]

**Biblical Understanding of Pain and Suffering**

The Bible portrays human suffering through themes such as social injustice, poverty, war, natural disasters, discipline, persecution,

illness, death, and bereavement, etc.[15] Genesis 3 explains the origin of suffering. After the fall, God told Eve that her pain(*itsabon*) in childbirth will be "very severe," indicating both physical and emotional suffering and the disruption of natural harmony. Her strong desire(*teshuqah*) for her husband suggests her vulnerability, and the phrase "he will rule over you" points to relational struggle and socio-cultural imbalance.

The ground was cursed, and humanity must survive through painful toil. The word "toil" parallels *itsabon*, connecting Eve's suffering with the universal human struggle for survival. Thorns and thistles symbolize the earth's diminished fertility due to sin, and humans must labor hard for food. The statement "for dust you are and to dust you will return" introduces mortality, showing that physical decay, psychological pain, illness, and relational dysfunction.[16]

But suffering can become part of God's purpose. Joseph's suffering preserved many lives (Gen. 50:20). Israel's slavery in Egypt became a path to a new identity and a revelation of God's power (Ex. 3:7–8; 14:21–22). Their 40-years wilderness journey taught them to depend on God (Deut. 8:2–3), and the Israelites' exile became a time of repentance and renewal (Jer. 29:13).

The New Testament concept of suffering is presented in various terms: chastisement or discipline (Hebrews 12:11), distress (Roman 8:35), endurance (James 1:12), grief (2 Corinthians 7:10), persecution (Matthew 5:10), plague (Revelation 15:1), tribulation (John 16:33), etc.[17] It offers a deeper understanding of human suffering through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. His suffering on the cross is central to Christian theology, symbolizing God's redemptive plan for humanity.

**The Cross and Resurrection: In the Context of Human Pain and Suffering**

In this section, I discuss the meaning and significance of the cross and resurrection in relation to human pain and suffering.

### *God's solidarity with human Pain and Suffering*

The theme of God's suffering in Christ reflects his identification and solidarity with the poor.[18] He chose the cross to demonstrate his empathy to humankind.

Jesus claimed oneness with God the Father (John 14:9), which indicates that when God the Son suffered, God the Father also suffered. The Father deeply loves his only begotten Son-Jesus (John 3:16, Matthew 3:17), and/therefore, Jesus' suffering and death are profoundly painful for the Father. Thus, through Christ's suffering, God exhibited his solidarity with humanity's suffering.

### *Restoration and relationship with God*

The cross and resurrection are God's eternal blessings prepared for humanity through his son Jesus.[19] Through the suffering of the son of God, humanity was brought back to the creator. The cross helped to re-establish a broken relationship with God and man, and with man to man (2 Cor 5:11–7:13); thus, pain and suffering is a means of restoration (Rev 21).[20]

### *The foundation of human Identity*

Before the fall, humans had a clear sense of selfhood. After the fall, this was lost, and the person lives in two negative forms of self: the needing-self and the rejected-self. The needing-self longs for belonging (affiliation), esteem, affection, and strength (affirmation).[21]

The rejected self carries rejection, shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and helplessness. Both dimensions strongly shape the fallen personality. Kirwan notes that the needing-self reflects the deep inner lack that can only be met through a restored relationship with God. The rejected self reflects the pain of withdrawn love, broken relationships, and abandonment. God's redemptive work in Christ restores true identity and heals this divided self.[22] David Lyall has similar thought who said that the cross and resurrection shape Christian identity[23]

### *Christian maturity*

The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the means of Christian growth. According to Crabb, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement has a practical application to Christians. He argues that we attain Christian maturity through the cross and suffering. The cross is a basis of redemption for human responsibility, guilt, sin, and the atoning work of Christ.[24] Peta Jones Pellach supports the idea that Christian suffering builds character and brings rewards either in this world or in the world to come.[25]

### *Display of God's grace*

Suffering exists on this earth for its purpose—the revelation of divine grace. Human beings could not endure the suffering and pain of the cross as their price of sin, so it is the grace of God that he sent his only son to die on the cross on behalf of humankind.[26] Thus, the cross is the source of grace to humanity in the time of suffering (2 Corinthians 12:9).

### *Self-revelation of God*

God reveals himself through the Cross, the centre of pain and suffering. It is God's way to make himself known to humanity.[27] The cross shows that Christ reveals himself through suffering. Truly knowing God begins by recognizing God's suffering in the world and in our own experiences.[28]

## The Research Method

### *The research*

For this paper, qualitative research was conducted among Nepali Christians. The timeline of the study was January 2024 to April 2025, and 50 participants were selected as the sample size. The inclusion criteria were: the Nepali Christians from any denomination or church, have personal experience with significant pain, suffering, or grief, whether due to personal loss, illness, or other life challenges. They should have received counseling from a pastor or a church leader.

They were asked the following questions:

1) As a Christian, how do you describe the situation when you experience pain and suffering?
2) Describe an experience where you sought comfort from your pastor or leader during pain, suffering, or loss, but their counsel did not provide the solace you hoped for.
3) According to your experience, how should we not counsel a Christian who is going through pain, suffering, or grief?

The research gives a gleam of the pastoral counseling scenario for dealing with pain and suffering. However, it is limited in size and/therefore, might not provide an actual representation of the larger population of Nepali Christians.

***Working framework***

I have applied Virginia Todd Holeman's "Metamodel of Integrative Counseling" as working framework for this paper.

The key concept behind Holeman's counseling approach is that "theology shapes who we are and how we live."[29] She also claims that theology influences not only the cognitive domain but also a person's day-to-day living, and/or a counselor needs to serve a person with theologically reflective counseling.[30] Therefore, this model can be an effective way to deal Christian pains and sufferings in light of Christ's death and resurrection.

For the metamodel of integrative counseling, Holeman presents four areas to be considered:

1) The *preparation* of the counselor—the degree to which counselors are theologically and therapeutically formed.
2) The *person* of the counselor—the ways that counselors embody their theological commitments through virtuous Christian character, walk the talk.
3) An awareness of the *presence* of the Holy Spirit.

4) The *counselor's practice (Skills)—how counselors work with clients therapeutically and ethically in session*.[31] According to her the process follows three steps:
   A. Attending to theological echoes in client's story
   B. Addressing salient theological themes
   C. Aligning areas of life to be more congruent with theological commitments.[32]

**Data Analysis**

***Perceptions on pain and suffering***

*1) God allows us to experience pain and suffering:* It is reported that the participants think pain and suffering can appear in the life of a Christian because God permits it.

*2) Parts of human life:* For the participants, pains and sufferings are a part of life. Because of their faith in Christ, they anticipated it more than others. Their common language was- "I must be prepared for suffering."

*3) Shared human experiences:* An interviewee said, "In painful situations, I shouldn't think that only I am suffering. Everyone suffers because we are sinners." This indicates, to some extend, the participants are conscious of humankind's fall, its effects, and the universality of human suffering.

*4) Lead to blessing and prosperity:* A participant said, "Job showed patience in the suffering and its ending was good. Therefore, pain and suffering will bring blessing in our lives."

It shows the participants believe suffering brings material blessing and prosperity to Christian life.

*5) It is a test from God:* Many participants explained pain and suffering in Christian life is a test from God. They think it keeps them patient, makes humble, and help them not to become restless.

*6) The punishment of sin:* Some participants said that pains and sufferings are the result of personal sin and weakness. One of them

said, “When I experience pain and suffering, I thought it might be my sin. I did not attend church regularly; therefore, God might have cursed me.”

***The Pastoral counselling experiences did not Solace the Participants***

*1) Empathy-less counseling:* The many respondents felt that their pastors or leaders could not enter into inner world and understand their feelings during the time of their sufferings.

*2) Insensitive comments:* The participants said that their pastors and leaders’ counseling did not comfort them because it did not include sensitivity to the situations. Thus, it became dismissive or hurtful instead of comforting.

*3) Counseling without spirituality:* The participants said that the counseling that did not balance spirituality and physical needs was not comforting to them. They stressed the pastors’ weak spiritual insight during counseling.

*4) Relating pain and suffering with personal mistakes:* The data explored that the counseling that included blame and mistakes for their painful situations did not comfort them. One of the participants said, “When I was continuously experiencing suffering, the pastor said that it is because of my sin.”

*5) Making it as a will and plan of God:* According to the participants, the counseling that simply pointing every painful situation towards God’s plan did not solace them. Phrases such as ‘Do not worry; this is the will of God’ or ‘it was God’s plan’ did not comfort them.

***What should be avoided in counseling when a person is going through pain, suffering, and grief?***

*1) Do not hurry to provide solutions:* According to the participants, quick advice or attempting to fix their pain and suffering very soon can easily make them feel dismissive.

*2) Avoid religious statements:* The participants suggested that simply quoting scripture or offering shallow spiritual advice without genuinely engaging with the person's pain can be unhelpful.

*3) Respect the person's grief process:* It is reported that respecting how each person processes grief is essential, whether they are doing it through crying, silence, or seeking solitude. Forcing a particular behavior or response can be damaging.

*4) Do not say Bichara:* The word "Bichara" is the Nepali term for saying "poor." It diminishes the value of a person's emotions, and presents a client as weak. The participants said that a counselor should avoid saying it during comforting.

**Discussion and Implication**

The data analysis shows the participants have developed limited, blurred and distorted views on pain and suffering. Some of their answers to the first question are not only cloudy also the misinterpreted views on pain and suffering. Their other responses that claim pain and suffering are the consequences of sin, and bring blessing and prosperity, are not always true. These understandings might help immediate relief, but they do not bring healing, comfort, or a sound mind. Instead, they raise theological struggles within a person who have experienced pain and suffering.

The data shows the participants received the counseling, but it added more pain instead of solace during their suffering. For them, the pastors and leaders failed to empathize with them in their suffering. In other words, they counseled without knowing what is going on in the hearts of the suffering people. It did not comfort them. It is also reported their words were insensitive. It shows that the pastors and leaders are unaware of what to say, and what not to say during the pain and suffering of a person.

A counselor should avoid using the word *Bichara,* but provide counseling with spiritual insight. He/she should not say 'it is a plan of God'. Instead, a pastor and leader should facilitate a theological conversation with a person who is going through pain and psycho-

educate so that during the pain and suffering he/she can experience God's solidarity in his/her situation, restoration to the relationship with God, achieving his/her Christian identity, the act of atonement, maturity, and display of God's grace.

If so, how should pastoral counseling should be presented? A pastoral can effectively help a person to experience healing, comfort, and growth during the hardship of life by facilitating reflective dialogue on the theology of the cross and the resurrection of Christ upon the counselee's present experiences of pain and suffering. The metamodel framework will be applied as follows:

***Theological preparation of a counsellor***

A counselor needs to have an explicit theological understanding of the cross and resurrection in the context of pain and suffering.

***The person of the counselor***

A counselor needs to demonstrate his/her the theological conviction of cross and resurrection in the context of pain and suffering through his/her practical life.

***An awareness of the presence of Holy Spirit***

Accept that a counselor is just a means, but the Holy Spirit is the one who works in the dialogue between a counselor and a counselee.

***The practice of the counselor***

Therapeutic process should be skillful. In the process, a counselor needs to follow three steps:

1) *Attending:* Practice listening and recognizing themes, questions, or insights in a person's story that are connected to theological matters. Be sensitive to his/her experiences, struggles, or questions that may resonate with deeper religious, spiritual, or moral themes.
2) *Addressing salient theological themes:* Address the counselee's theological and spiritual themes through a dialogical discourse

on the theology of the cross and resurrection in relation to their suffering.

3) *Align the life of the counselee with theological commitments:* Make sure the counselee's lifestyle, values, decisions, and actions are consistent with the theology of cross and resurrection in the context of pain and suffering.

**Conclusion**

Human suffering originated because of the fall of humankind, but it shouldn't be described as a curse or evil for a Christian. In Christ, pain and suffering can be blessed experiences. Not only a painful situation, but also death can be the honourable moment to a Christian if he/she rightly understands the theology of the cross and resurrection. Pastoral counseling can play a significant role in exploring the truth through theological dialogue between a counselor and counselee during counseling. Therefore, counselors need a broader and deeper theological understanding of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the context of human pain and suffering.

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