

# **A Defense of Suffering in the Life of a Christian**

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## **I. Introduction**

The term Apologetics means “to speak forth a rational account of the faith and how we live our lives” (Class notes). For the Christian, this is a Biblical mandate for the believer to be prepared for as 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:15 states.

“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

As James Sire declares in his book, Why should anyone believe anything at all:

“If God is both good and omnipotent, why is there so much evil, expressed in the suffering of so many people throughout the world? If God exists, God is either not completely good or not completely powerful. This I believe is the toughest question thoughtful Christians ever have to answer” (Sire, 181).

As one considers the two quotes above, it becomes clear that one rational place for every Christian to begin forming a response to those around us regarding the suffering that exists in this world would to first gain the ability to rationally evaluate the suffering and pain as it impacts our lives and the lives of other believers. Many Christians face a difficult task when called on to clearly and rationally provide an account of the continuing pain and suffering that are encountered in the life of a believer. In fact, there are those Christian ministers who have abandoned this task and instead now support a message that promotes the physical health and material benefits of following Christ. When even Jesus Himself taught His disciples:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Through this paper this writer will present a reasonable defense for the reality of Christian suffering in this present world. Three distinct Christian examples that have faced hardship will be provided as examples of believers that found faith and hope in the gospel message and were strengthened through the counsel of scripture, community of believers and the

act of worship. Next scripture will be explored and seven principles will be established that present a scriptural rationale for the ability of the Christian to endure, grow in faith through and even defend the presence of suffering in their lives. Following this, five uses of suffering in the lives of Christians will be shared. Next this writer will include six suggestions on how a believer should not utilize the apologetics presented in this paper when other Christians are suffering and three suggestions that will make the greatest use of this apologetic of suffering. In conclusion a brief personal response to the importance of both this apologetic of suffering and its use will be provided.

## **II. Examples**

In the book titled, Battling Prostrate Cancer: Getting from “why me” to “what next” Dr. McMickle suggests that those who are diagnosed with cancer may start with the question “why me?” and with other words of self pity, but this is not where they should remain for long. If they are Christians and believe in the words of Romans 8:28,

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

they should be encouraged to look past the initial cry of self pity, fear and shock and look forward to what a gracious God can accomplish through this situation (McMickle, 13).

There are three types of Christian individuals who come to mind as examples of those who have retained their faith in times of severe hardship and suffering. These individuals made the transition from suffering to seeking what good things God held for their future. The first are missionaries beginning with Paul and Silas, who after experiencing the pain of being flogged and thrown into jail unjustly, are seen worshipping and praising God.

“After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:23-25).

To many this would seem to be an odd response to the pain and suffering that these Christians were encountering in their lives. However, these missionaries did not become angry with God or the people who they had come to share the gospel with; in fact they did not seem surprised they were involved in such suffering.

Another example of a missionary who found the ability to continue in faith through times of suffering was Adoniram Judson who served as a Baptist missionary to Burma. In a letter written to his first wife’s mother after the death of both his wife and two year old daughter only months apart in 1827, he wrote:

“What remains for me, but to hold myself in readiness to follow the dear departed to that blessed world, where my best friends, my kindred dwell, where God, my Savior reigns” (Thompson, 167).

Later in 1845, Judson still on the mission field lost his second wife Sarah and wrote these words:

“I could not help abandoning myself to heartbreaking sorrow. But the promises of the Gospel came to my aid, and faith stretched her view to the bright world of eternal life, and anticipated a happy meeting with those beloved beings, whose bodies are moldering at Amherst and St. Helena” (Thompson, 362).

Adoniram Judson was a man in grief, but was able to draw strength from knowing God had a plan for his future and that God had called Adoniram to serve Him in Burma during that time. Even in the face of suffering and hardship this missionary continued the work of the Gospel and drew near to God for comfort and hope. The acts of faith, endurance and worship as demonstrated here are a source of comfort for the Christian who may face suffering in life of their duties.

A second group that comes to mind is the Christian slaves of the southern United States. While singing groups such as the Jubilees introduced scores of spirituals like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Steal away” to post slavery America (Ward, 377), one should not forget the dark and painful crucible in which these “slave songs” were forged. One such song reminds this writer of the pain that Adoniram Judson spoke of and the hope that he clung to.

**‘Poor Rosy’**

Poor Rosy poor gal; Poor Rosy, Poor gal;  
Rosy break my poor heart, Heav’n shall be my home.  
I cannot stay in hell one day, Heav’n shall be my home;  
I’ll sing and pray my soul away, Heav’n shall be my home.

Got hard trail in my way, Heav’n shall be my home.  
O when I talk, I talk, wid God, Heav’n shall be my home.  
I dunno what de people want of me, Heav’n shall be my home  
(Allen, 7).

The contrast of deep pain and bright hope make this worship both rich and beautiful. The Christian can be encouraged through the example of fellow believers who have suffered unfairly but yet found a way to endure in faith and worship God in spite of the harsh nature of their suffering.

Finally, we can turn to Jesus as He prayed on the cross. No greater moment of suffering will ever be repeated in all of history and yet in His final moments Jesus extended the gospel message to others in need and prayed earnestly to His father. The crucifixion is a worship service in which the Gospel is proclaimed, prayers are offered and the altar is tended to. In spite of His suffering Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) and "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This certainly should set an example for those who get so involved in the trials and suffering of their life that they forget the responsibility God gives us to continually care for the needs of those around us.

### **III. Seven principles by which Christians suffer**

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

For the believer, the task of being transformed onto the image of Christ has begun. In fact, “much of the New Testament is taken up with instructing believers in various churches on how they should grow in likeness to Christ” (Grudem, 749). The Christian that suffers therefore is not doing so to simply pay for their sinful acts as Romans 8:1 states, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The Christian who suffers is actually sharing in the suffering of Christ (Erickson, 954). Jesus told the disciples they would drink the cup that Jesus drank and be baptized with the same baptism as He was (Mark 10:39). Following are seven distinct ways Christians can be seen to suffer as they follow the Biblical example and teaching of Jesus.

#### **A. Through truly following Jesus**

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:23-26).

“The members of a body must be conformed to the will of the head in respect to His will and glory” (Wallace, 1136). The Bible clearly condemns the double-minded man (James 1:8) and promotes the singular task of the Christian as a committed follower who considers the suffering of their lives as a cross that is taken on as they follow Jesus.

“The leader who is going nowhere will take hits from all sides. The leader who sets a direction will at least know what direction the arrows will be coming from” (McNeal, 157).

## **B. Through Sharing in the sufferings of Jesus**

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29).

"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:15-18).

The suffering that Christ faced was fully sufficient to set all people free and was complete in its task (Hebrews 10:14). We, however, are able to experience fellowship with Jesus as we suffer the continuing anger and rage of this world against our Savior (Colossians 1:24).

We walk in the very footsteps of our redeemer as we share in His suffering and pain.

## **C. Through testing our commitment to Christ**

"...Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.' But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:19-22).

"And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38-39).

"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

As we accept the counsel of Jesus and follow His calling, we demonstrate to others and ourselves our level of commitment as we follow Him. Remaining faithful to Christ during times of suffering is a powerful testimony to others.

## **D. Through the strengthening of our faith**

"...count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).

When Paul's physical ailment was not removed he heard God say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul responded to this by stating, "for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9). This ongoing suffering became a rally point for Paul's dependence upon God and grew his faith.

#### **E. Through Conforming to the image of Christ**

"But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you" (1 Peter 5:10-11).

"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29).

The Christian who truly follows Jesus is pledged to a career or vocation of suffering (Wallace, 1137). As the Christian follows Jesus on the way to the cross, they are made more like Jesus through the trials and insults that the world sends, not to the believer, but to the image of Jesus as He is present in the believer to this world.

#### **F. Through finding a greater joy**

"So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

"That He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:11-15).

"My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure" (James 5:10-11).

James 1:2 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." The scripture above demonstrates where this joy is derived from. There is a greater joy

when the Christian is placed in the same category of ridicule as their savior. It is a blessing to endure as one who holds onto truth, but more than that the Christian has the ability through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to go where Christ went and suffer for His sake. In this pain the Christian finds absolute joy.

#### **G. Through accomplishing God's purposes**

"Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:11-13).

"For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Timothy 1:12).

"He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (Hebrews 5:8-9).

Paul made the statement, "if we endure then we shall also reign with Him" (2 Timothy 2:12). Although we often face trials, we are given the resources to bear up under these sufferings and for those that suffer with Christ, a wonderful future lies ahead.

#### **IV. Five practical outcomes of Christian suffering**

A logical defense must involve practical outcomes, therefore five general categories will now be briefly considered. Charles Stanley writes in his book, How to Handle Adversity, "Adversity removes the cloak of what we are supposed to be to reveal the truth of who we are" (Stanley, 102). Unlike Jesus, we are in contention with an old (and now powerless) nature that attempts to bring us back to who we were prior to our conversion through Christ. We are given the opportunity as we face hardship to examine who we are supposed to be as disciples and cling

to our defense. These outcomes do not reflect the sufferings of Jesus; they reflect the hardship of change from who we were to who we are now called to be.

#### **A. To examine sin in our lives**

“For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 11:29-30).

Paul is talking about many of the Corinthians who were sick and dying because of their unrecognized sinfulness. We need to examine our lives and confess our sins; without doing this we may suffer pain and grief.

"Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Romans 13:2).

Suffering can also come as a result of breaking the law, which is sin. However, we can learn from the example of Job's misguided friends that we must be careful not to conclude that we can measure the sinfulness of a person by the degree of his or her suffering. All suffering is a result of sin; had Adam not sinned, there would not be suffering in the world, but it is important to know that not all suffering is a direct result of personal sin.

#### **B. To bring maturity to our faith**

The Bible teaches us that suffering, for the Christian, is a training tool. God lovingly and faithfully transforms the pain of suffering into an instrument that develops personal righteousness, maturity and faith in God in the life of the believer.

“And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son’” (Hebrews 12:5-6).

The word "punishes" in this verse is the Greek word *paideia*, which means: to bring up; educate or train a child (the underlying root *pais* means boy). By implication this describes not punishment but literally can also be translated "To be together with a child" (Furst, 775). God will use the suffering and pain in the lives of His people as a means to draw close to them as He trains and educates His children.

### **1) To develop a capacity and sympathy for comforting others**

"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 have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows" (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

One thing we can be taught by God as we suffer is how to minister to one another. We simply cannot help those in need unless we have felt need ourselves. In the midst of the suffering of others, we must see an opportunity to minister in His name.

### **2) To keep pride at bay**

"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

The Apostle Paul saw his thorn in the flesh as an instrument of God to help him maintain a spirit of humility and dependence on God. Suffering causes all believers to depend on the strength of the Lord and matures our faith through displaying our need for each other and God.

### **3) To keep us from becoming self-reliant**

#### **a.) Individually**

"Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

As individuals we often only realize our dependence on God and others when He takes away everything that we think we can depend on. When we suffer it brings about continued dependence on the grace and love of the Christian community and God. Suffering causes us as individuals to walk in God's ability, power and provision rather than on our own. It causes us to turn from our resources to His resources. "Only the radical activity of God can overcome our alienation, condemnation, enslavement, and depravity" (Grenz, 275). We were "designed for community and intended to reflect the character of the triune creator" (Grenz, 275). Reliance on God and the body of Christ as found in the community of believers can come when we as individuals face trials and suffer pain.

### **b.) Corporately**

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:12-13).

In the western world today, suffering has largely been ignored as the logical outcome for a group of believers who are moving in the power and provision of Jesus Christ. But early Christian believers were assured that if God was real in their lives, they would be rejected in the same way that Jesus had been.

Godliness is not compatible with the world and is therefore, to be scorned by any society that seeks to achieve its own ends at any cost. Christians are not to live isolated or self supporting lives, but are called to community. Suffering can be faced by God's people corporately as they seek to build communities that correct the way the world operates, changing every man for himself, to every believer for God and the good of the greater Christian community.

## **V. Presenting this defense to others**

In his book, The Work of the Pastor, Victor Lehman describes the role of a Pastor as one of a “Good Shepherd” (John 10:11) or one who lays down his life for the sheep (Lehman, 32). In the present environment of busy and sometimes disconnected lives, the Pastor and the Church need to follow the guidance of Paul’s teaching in Galatians 6:2, “Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ.” This kind of care calls for Pastors and Christian leaders who can offer a Biblical apologetic of suffering to believers who are in grief.

This should drive a Christian to take seriously two things. First, the ability to be conscious of exploring the suffering and pain within his or her own life and ministry and secondly to pray and prepare to encourage those who are suffering. This personal action and situational awareness form the first steps to providing an environment where worship can take place.

### **A. Six ways not to present this defense**

Prior to discussing specific ways to encourage the use of this apologetic, it is appropriate to discuss six applications that may discourage Christians who are in the midst of suffering. The first is talking versus listening. Many times the care-giver will wish to say something to make the pain go away. Providing good Christian counsel means offering the sacrifice of listening to those in need.

“Anyone with a friend who can sit with them and listen without judging, blaming, giving advice, interpreting, approving, or disapproving, who just listens and understands, is very fortunate” (Miller, 53).

A second barrier can come when a Christian simply assigns a scripture verse to the face of a problem. Romans 8:28, while a noteworthy and useful scripture, may not be received well

by a believer who is hurting. Scripture is a sharp tool and must be used to heal rather than to wound. It should not be carelessly slung around as a magic wand, but rather gently used to guide and support those in need. Likewise empty slogans such as “we are all going to die,” are better suited for far more empty moments of life as they do not meet the heartache where it is.

Some Christians try to identify too much with everyone who suffers and this can become a detriment as well. Often people do not want to hear about what makes us alike because they are in the midst of their own grief. Misery does not want company; what is needed is someone to share our burdens, not our feelings. There is a difference between “I know how you feel” and “I really feel for you.” The former identifies with the sufferer and the latter shows that we care (Feinberg, 42).

Finally, encouraging people to change their view of the situation so that everything appears fine can also discourage those who are suffering. The expectation for ‘joy’ or ‘happiness’ in times of suffering to bring others encouragement will not work. Even if we can explain pain away for people, the heart still hurts. With these methods removed, the care-giver’s task still remains the same; to defend suffering while encouraging those who suffer to enter into the presence of God so they can be encouraged in their faith.

### **B. Three ways to present this defense**

There are three ways in which this writer believes a Christian can bring encouragement to brothers and sisters who are suffering. First and foremost is the “Tool of Faith” (McMickle, 56). This tool allows those suffering to see their present life as a steep uphill journey with pitfalls on every side. However there is the encouragement for us to just ‘hold on.’

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do

everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles” (Philippians 4:12-14).

This passage can be an encouragement to care-givers as they “share in the troubles” of others and offer the ‘tool of faith’ that says, God will give you the strength to continue. Let us ask Him for that strength for you. Faith can help Christians who suffer to navigate the valley they are in and give them the courage to continue on their journey as they suffer. It is possible for those who are suffering to offer their faith as an act of worship to God, if they remember it and cling to their faith in the father to see them through.

A second resource for a care-giver is to have regard for the changeable circumstances of life. The circumstances of life can change so drastically and sometimes those who are suffering need something to hold onto. Dr. Robert Webber in his book, Worship Old and New, spends some time examining the services of the Christian Year (Webber, 217); he highlights the weekly and daily cycle of time as observed by early Jews and Christians. When a person is in absolute grief or pain, minutes can seem like hours and time can begin to slow. This may be a setting to introduce the marking of time with prayer. Let the suffering know that you will be praying for them three times a day following the pattern of Daniel (Daniel 6:10) and perhaps invite them to join you during these times to say a prayer. This would be another opportunity to share the burden with them and encourage those who are suffering to worship together in prayer.

Thirdly, the care-giver can encourage those who suffer through encouraging Christian brothers and sisters to remember the ‘Roots of their Faith.’ Dr. McMickle shares the story of an old oak tree that inspired him as he faced prostate cancer. The tree had faced howling winds and had its leaves ripped away, but it still stood because its roots were deep and well established (McMickle, 62). Listening to someone’s faith story is imperative to the care-giver and can become another tool for implementing this apologetic in times of suffering. The hurting person

may desire to hear a reading from the liturgy, an old hymn that he/she so loved many years ago or a favorite passage read for them. Perhaps the individual would find comfort in receiving communion to help support them in this time of trial. These are all means of worship that will reconnect them with their roots of faith and help to sustain them through providing a means of connecting to God and the Christian community during a time of suffering. Helping those that hurt respond to God brings hope to those that are suffering at a deep level where their hearts can be comforted by the presence of the creator Himself. “God ministers to us in worship and calls us to minister to each other” (Webber, 255).

## **VI. Conclusion**

As Kreeft and Tacelli state, “Apologetics defends orthodox Christianity” (Kreeft, 22). It has been this writer’s intention through this work to provide a reasonable defense for the various forms of suffering that are part of the Christian life. Of the two reasons for doing apologetics which are “to convince unbelievers and instruct and build up believers” (Kreeft, 22), this work is definitely directed to fulfilling the latter purpose.

Through the examination of texts such as, Truth is Stranger Than it Used to be and Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?, this writer was impressed with the additional need for relevant guidelines to be included for the application and utilization of any apologetic. Presenting information only in building such a defense of the faith renders the work only partially complete. Thus a sound defense of any aspect of the Christian faith requires some content to guide its application and both these tasks have been attempted here.

Personally I have been greatly encouraged through the writing of this paper. I have been deeply touched to see so clearly the benefit of my present sufferings in this world. As I seek a

deeper faith that grows in the holiness of Christ and continually shows more of His beauty and character through my life, I can also rejoice in what has been and will be provided for me and all who are His when Jesus returns. As 1 John 3:2-3 states:

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”

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