

## Peter's Epistles #4

### Categories of Suffering

(also available on-line at [www.ICHTHYS.com](http://www.ICHTHYS.com))

by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill

**Suffering:** Peter wrote his two letters to believers living in Asia Minor during the first century A.D. At the time, these early Christians were undergoing severe hardships, and the suffering they were experiencing was beginning to impede their spiritual growth. In his first letter, Peter is primarily concerned with this problem of suffering. In fact, he uses the Greek word *pascho* (the verb meaning "to suffer") more in this one short letter than the apostle Paul does in all of his epistles put together. Hardships, setbacks, disappointments, illnesses, and all the various and sundry forms of suffering can, quite understandably, be a stumbling block to faith.

We believers say that we have been delivered from God's wrath, that we have been forgiven all our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ, and that we are now God's children. Why then can life be so difficult at times? Why is there sometimes so much pain? Without biblical answers to such questions, intense suffering will inevitably put tremendous pressure on a believer's faith, tempting him to doubt God. But God has provided us with truth to combat this doubt, the truth of His Word. With the truth contained in the Bible, God has given us the means to protect our faith, understand the suffering that comes our way, and endure it with the result that God is glorified, and we grow spiritually. Peter's objective in writing 1<sup>st</sup> Peter is to give these hard-pressed early believers the critical information and encouragement they need to pass the suffering test, information that is just as crucial for us to master today as it was for them nearly two thousand years ago.

**Categories of Suffering:** It will be helpful for our purposes to categorize the causes of suffering from the biblical point of view. The most ubiquitous form of suffering we may term *general human suffering*. By God's design, the physical universe operates in certain predictable patterns which are commonly called *natural laws*. Similarly, in the human realm, God has ordained a system of normal human behavior, implanted in the conscience of all people (Rm.2:14-15). We may label as *human law* the attempts of mankind to codify these principles.

If we should decide to ignore the consequences of either category of law (natural or human), suffering would result. For example, we might chose to ignore the law of gravity and jump out of a second-story window, or we might decide to take home a television set without paying for it first. While we might possibly avoid negative consequences in both examples, it is clear that repeated flouting of natural and human law will inevitably bring suffering. Often times, of course, it is impossible not to run afoul of natural and human law. For example, on the natural side, all of us will encounter some sort of disease in our lives, while on the human side, even compliance with the law can often be painful (e.g. paying income tax). In extreme situations, such suffering can be intense (consider the victims of natural disasters, or political persecutions

undertaken in the name of law and order). The point is that the normal operation of the physical universe and human history produce suffering in the natural course of things. We all understand that this is so and can often discern specific natural or political causes for individual cases of suffering.

**The Origin of General Human Suffering:** As believers in God, and in the perfection and goodness of God, we may well ask why there is pain and suffering *at all*, why political persecution and natural disaster? The short answer to this question is that suffering originated from evil, and evil originated from God's creatures, not from God. While we shall have cause to study the pertinent teachings elsewhere (see The Satanic Rebellion series), a few words about the origin of suffering are in order here.

God's original creation of the universe included a category of exceptional creatures called angels. Superior to mankind in ability, they were also endowed with free will. One particularly gifted angel whom God had placed in a position of great authority took it into his heart to rebel against God and attempted to replace Him as ruler of the universe (Is.14:12-21; Ezek.28:12-19). The Bible gives few details on the precise course which this revolt originally took, but we know that God's future triumph over Satan and the angels who chose to follow him is certain (Lk.10:18; Rm.16:20; Rv.20:10).

Obviously, as an omnipotent being, infinite God would have had no trouble subduing one of his own, finite creatures. Instead of doing so immediately, however, God apparently decided to demonstrate to Satan and to all the angels that Satan and his followers had truly been free to choose, and that, therefore, the fact that God had created Satan did not make God responsible for the evil which Satan chose to do. To prove this, God created man, a creature far inferior to the angels in ability, but possessed of the same free will. Faced with the ultimate contest which would decide his fate, Satan realized that his only hope of avoiding condemnation lay in thwarting this divine demonstration of creature free will. Otherwise, a human choice *for* God would prove beyond all doubt that Satan had indeed also been responsible for his own actions. Satan therefore sought to alienate man from God by corrupting our original parents (Gen.3), but God provided a solution for man: though man had used his free will to disobey God and had thus fallen into sin, God gave man another opportunity. God gave man the chance to use his free will in obedience to God by submitting to God through faith in the coming Savior (foreshadowed by the "coats of skin" of Gen.3:21 which represent, by the animal sacrifice through which they were provided, Christ's death on the cross).

What does all this have to do with *general human suffering*? When God created man, He created them male and female (Gen.1:27), He created them perfect, and He placed them in a perfect place: the Garden of Eden (from the Hebrew *gan-'aden*, meaning "garden of pleasure [or delight]", Gen.2:8). In this perfect place, and in this condition of perfection, man knew no suffering, just as in the new paradise to come, suffering will once again be absent (Rev.21.4). As a result of the fall of man in Genesis chapter 3, however, all mankind is subject to general human suffering in this life. God had warned Adam and Eve that eating from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would produce their death (immediate spiritual death, or alienation

from God, and eventual physical deterioration, death, and eternal condemnation: Gen.2:17). In addition, they were thrown out of the perfect paradise of Eden (Gen.3:22-24), and a new element was introduced into their lives: suffering. "Pain" is prophesied for Eve (Gen.3:16) and "toil" for Adam, but both words come from the same Hebrew root: *'atsab*, which means to feel hurt, pain, and grief. Thus Adam and Eve left all of us, their descendants, a legacy of *general human suffering*. But while our relationship to our first parents has brought us suffering and death, the new relationship which God offers us with Himself through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, brings us joy and eternal life, for while "in Adam all die, in Christ shall all be made alive" (1Cor.15:22).

In the midst of pronouncing judgment upon Adam and Eve, God also provided them with His promise of hope, telling them (Gen.3:15) that the Seed of the Woman (i.e. Christ) would one day crush the serpent's head (i.e. Satan). This victory came at the cross, so that all we who have put our faith in Christ now look forward with certainty to the future day when these bodies of pain will be resurrected as bodies of perfection (2Cor.5:1-10). Then we shall live forever with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ in the *new paradise*, the new Jerusalem (Rev.21-22).

**The Suffering of Believers:** As believers, we live in phase II of God's plan (*time*; see lesson #3). Phase I (*salvation*) ended when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior, and phase III (*eternity*) has yet to begin for those of us still present on the earth. Though our hearts have changed in obedience to Christ, our bodies are exactly the same as they were before salvation, and we still inhabit the same imperfect world as we did before we believed. Consequently, we are still subject to the *general human suffering* that has plagued mankind since the fall of Adam and Eve. There are some very important differences between this first category of suffering and the *suffering of believers*, however.

First of all, our suffering will come to an end. We have certain knowledge through faith that we shall eventually be liberated from the pain and tears of this life, and, like the creation itself, we eagerly anticipate this liberation, knowing that the hardships of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the wondrous glories of heaven to come (Rom.8:18-23).

Secondly, we know that whatever suffering we are called upon to endure, it is all part of God's plan for our lives, and that the end result, even of painful suffering, will be for our good according to the wisdom and mercy of our heavenly Father (Rom.8:28).

It is critical, however, to distinguish between the two types of specific suffering which are unique to believers in order to avoid the shipwreck of our faith. The believers to whom Peter wrote were having trouble making this distinction between the two types of the *suffering of believers*, namely:

(1) *undeserved suffering* and

(2) *divine discipline*.

**Undeserved suffering:** This term simply means hardship that God allows to come the believer's way to test, temper, and train the believer (and to glorify God as well; cf. the case of Job). When beset by such suffering, believers are often tempted to draw the erroneous conclusion that either God isn't concerned about them, or else that God is punishing them. Hardship in the Christian life, however, does *not* necessarily mean that God is displeased. As we shall see in later lessons, spiritual growth is in fact impossible without some opposition in life whereby God can demonstrate His faithfulness to us in hard times, and whereby we in turn can demonstrate our trust in Him in spite of adverse circumstances.

As Christians, it is absolutely essential that we be objective when difficulties come our way and remember that since our heavenly Father loves us so much that He gave His only Son to die for us, He will surely help us through our other difficulties as well (Rm.5:8-9). If we have done nothing wrong, it is imperative that we not open up our mental "closets" to see what long-past sins may be responsible for our current suffering. God deals with us in forgiveness and grace. Sins committed long ago, confessed long ago, forgiven long ago, and dealt with by God long ago are *not* the cause of our current problems. We must avoid misplaced and superfluous feelings of *guilt*, or else these have the potential to wreak havoc on our spiritual lives. Part of Peter's purpose in writing 1<sup>st</sup> Peter was to dispel confusion on this point which was threatening the spiritual growth of the believers in Asia Minor.

**Divine Discipline:** True, we are not perfect beings. That is why we needed a perfect savior, Jesus Christ, to die in our place. By His blood we have been redeemed (1Pet.1:18), bought out of the power of sin. But since we still inhabit imperfect bodies (Rm.7), and still live in an imperfect world (Jn.17:15), regrettably, it is beyond our ability to be completely sinless after becoming believers (1Jn.1:10), though we are indeed charged with pursuing sanctification (Heb.12:14).

Because of His righteous character, God must address the sin which believers commit, but he deals with us as a loving Father. When our children do wrong, if we truly love them, we discipline them – not to sate our anger, but to correct their behavior for their own good. The way God deals with us when we sin is very similar. In Hebrews chapter twelve, we are told that God disciplines "those He loves" (v.6), and that *all* who are truly children of God are disciplined by Him (v.8). God's purpose in disciplining us is not to crush us, nor to destroy us, nor to pour out His wrath upon us, but to correct us, to train us, and to make us the kind of Christians He wants us to be (vv.10-11).

How then should we face the problem of personal sin and the divine discipline it brings on? First of all, as we continue to grow spiritually and learn the truths of God's Word, we develop a clearer sense of just what is sinful and what is not sinful. If we do sin, 1<sup>st</sup> John chapter one gives us the crucial mechanics by which we must correct the situation and get back into fellowship with God. In verse 8, John tells us that we all "have sin" (i.e., we have a sinful nature, and are thus predisposed to sin; cf. Eccl.7:20), but in verse 9 we find that "if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness". Now the Greek

word for "confess" is *homologeō*, and it simply means to "admit". Therefore if, when we do sin, we then admit our sin to God (in simple prayer), then the Bible tells us here that God forgives us that sin, and that, furthermore, He cleanses us not only from that sin, but from "all unrighteousness" into which we may have fallen.

Should we then feel guilty about our sins? While it is certainly understandable that we might well feel sorry about sinning, and are surely sorry about the pain which divine discipline has brought us, we must never forget that Christ is the issue here, for it is He who bore our true guilt on the cross (1Pet.2:24). God does expect a contrite spirit on a part (i.e., an honest and legitimate confession which recognizes as sinful the sin we confess; cf. Ps.51:17; Is.57:15-16; 66:2). However, it is imperative that we understand that the issue to God is not our emotions, but Christ's work on the cross.

In fact, if we undertake *to make ourselves* suffer emotionally for our sins, or in any other way *afflict ourselves* as some sort of penance for our sins, we will not be forgiven for all our troubles (cf. Esau and Judas). The only Person who was good enough to suffer for our sins was Jesus Christ, and it is only the work of Jesus Christ which God the Father finds acceptable. Our feeling sorry or guilty therefore not only will not clear our case before God, but we also run the risk of insulting Him. For when we manufacture excessive, self-imposed guilt and emotional self-torment it is as if we are saying "what Christ did wasn't good enough; I have to help God by contributing my penance too".

**The Proper Attitude to Sin:** David's attitude in Psalm 51 is the correct approach for the believer who has sinned. David is hurting badly under the pain of divine discipline, so he acknowledges (admits, confesses) his sin to God (not to another person) and asks God for restoration. David is quite properly sorry for sinning, but he recognizes that the issue is God's character (v.4), and God's mercy (v.9), not his own feelings. God's attitude toward the believer who admits his sins in this [correct] fashion is found in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk.15). First, the son confesses his transgression against his father (v.21). Then, although the son was willing to accept some menial position on the family estate (vv.18-19), his father forgives him, welcoming him back with joy and thanksgiving (in spite of his transgression), and receives him back into all the benefits and privileges of a son (vv.22-24). In like manner, God, on the basis of Christ's death for our sins, will graciously forgive us and restore us no matter what we have done, no matter how terrible we feel, if we only we are willing to return to Him and simply admit our sins to Him.

### **Review:**

- *General Human Suffering:* This is the common legacy of the entire human race because of Adam and Eve's original disobedience to God, but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, a way has been provided for all mankind to reenter the Father's loving embrace by accepting His Son as their Savior. After believing in Christ, the Christian is not removed from this world, but left here to grow spiritually and glorify God.

- *Undeserved Suffering and Divine Discipline:* Our tenure in the devil's world inevitably entails not only some undeserved suffering for growth and blessing (and to glorify God), but also some suffering which results from sin and the divine discipline which follows sin. It is essential that the believer keep these two categories of suffering separate. Confession of sin (simple acknowledgment of disobedience given to God in private through prayer according to 1Jn.1:9) brings immediate forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration. Undeserved suffering, on the other hand, is a challenge to faith, and an opportunity to trust in God that He will deliver us from hardship, no matter how bleak the situation may seem to be.
- *The solution to undeserved suffering,* as we shall consider in later lessons, is to rest in the power and grace of God.
- *The solution to the suffering brought by divine discipline* is immediate confession of sin. As soon as a sin is confessed, it is forgiven, and the believer is completely cleansed. By confessing our sins to God, we admit our disobedience. And while it is only natural and proper that we should wish to avoid making the same mistakes again, the emotions of guilt and "feeling sorry" do not influence God. His policy is one of grace. That means that He forgives freely from His own goodness and for His own glory on the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross, not on the basis of any works which we might attempt to do as penance. Confession of sin is a *sine qua non* in the Christian way of life. All believers sin, therefore all must confess their sins as they commit them, for this is the only way to be forgiven and cleansed so that we can once again press forward with our primary mission in phase II of God's plan for us: *SPIRITUAL GROWTH!*

Let us therefore not allow unconfessed sin or inordinate guilt about past sin to stand in our way.