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# The Developing Rôle of Suffering in Salvation History

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## Introduction

The thesis to be advanced in this paper is that an accurate understanding and profitable appreciation of the place of suffering in the lives of God's people must be tempered by an awareness that the rôle of suffering has developed and matured in the unfolding of salvation history.

Before attempting to demonstrate the validity of this thesis, it is essential to articulate some principles of revelation that are fundamental to a biblically correct approach to the subject of suffering. These foundational principles in whose light suffering (as well as its correlates, healing and comfort) must be seen are:

Mankind and all nature have fallen from their original Edenic, ideal state.

All conditions of human life are thus abnormal in respect to that ideal.

God is sovereign.

His providential care can be seen generally in human history and more particularly in the history of His people.

Fallen man is desperately in need of salvation.

Salvation requires suffering—a vicarious and substitutionary suffering.

Salvation's ultimate realization is eschatological.

A new heaven and a new earth—in which nature itself will be redeemed—is the ideal to which healing and comfort have final reference.

Suffering is not in itself a moral evil.

## Suffering a material evil, not a moral evil

The Bible does not approach the subject of evil philosophically in order to justify God to man. Rather, evil's beginning is connected with the fall. The fall was caused by sin, and sin in turn was the cause of suffering. The first sufferings were mental. Adam and Eve experienced shame and fear as a direct result of their disobedience. This suffering can be seen as an immediate consequence of sin itself, occurring even before the curse (Gen. 3:16–19).

Underlying that curse was the specific consequence of disobedience which God had articulated when He forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That consequence was death—both an immediate spiritual death ('for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die' (Gen. 2:17) and eventually physical death ('till you return

to the ground ... and to dust you shall return' (Gen. 3:19). The curse itself is three-fold: pain (or sorrow), toil and death.

God's justice in this incident is tempered by His grace. We see this grace first in the very way in which God sought and interrogated Adam after the fall, and next in His cursing of the tempter, and His promise about the woman's seed.<sup>1</sup> Suffering is thus 1. in its very nature a consequence of the act of disobedience itself; 2. a result of God's judicial act; and 3. a condition tempered by God's grace. It is a condition providing opportunity for a manifestation of grace that was not needed and would not have been possible in the Edenic state. Thus suffering, in the light of available grace, can, from its inception, be seen, at least retrospectively, as a gift that can make men mindful of their Creator and drive them back to Him.

Suffering, insofar as it originated in the fall, is the result of a moral evil. In itself, however, it is not a moral evil. But from a human perspective, it is an evil in the sense of being a material or physical evil. Since suffering as a physical evil is not *eo ipso* a moral evil, God is frequently seen in Scripture as the ultimate cause of physical evil, as it is manifested in suffering or disaster. This is particularly true of suffering which is sent for its penal effects, not only in God's curse upon Adam and Eve and their descendants, but also in His punishment of individuals and nations (both Israel and the Gentiles) throughout the Old Testament. Although suffering as a physical evil is the result of sin ultimately and sometimes proximately (e.g. when God sends suffering for correction or punishment, or when the suffering is the direct consequence of man's violating God's basic laws governing nature and man's place within it), nevertheless, it must be stressed that suffering is not seen in the Bible itself to be itself a moral evil or sin.

That suffering cannot be viewed as inherently and essentially evil is central to the gospel itself. This is the gospel, the good news, that 'Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit'.<sup>2</sup> The word translated 'died' is *epathen*, a form of *pascho*, a verb whose basic meaning is to experience something or to suffer. In the New Testament the word often is used to refer to Christ's sufferings, or to His death, or to both. It is thus a word that describes His passion in the broadest sense.

It could be objected that the fact that suffering is an essential part of the atonement does not argue against its being an evil in and of itself. Christ bore our sins. We still sin. He bore our suffering. We still suffer. Both are evil. The objection can be answered in several ways. One way is to refer to the essential difference between sin and suffering in Christ's instructions to his followers. While the Christian's sins are forgiven—through repentance, conversion, forgiveness—and he is enjoined to be holy, the Christian is never told to repent, confess and ask forgiveness for his suffering; rather, he is assured that he will suffer as a Christian. Indeed it

appears that the holier a Christian is in his walk, the more likely he is to encounter certain types of suffering. Further, it is demonstrable from experience that while sin always separates us from God, suffering, even if it results from sin, often brings us closer to God and thus deepens our fellowship with Him.

Christ's mission, as presented in the New Testament, is first and foremost soteriological in theme and emphasis, and His sufferings are an essential part of the atonement. Old Testament prophecies are seen in terms of a suffering (*i.e.* dying) Messiah. Peter writes that the prophets had made careful search concerning the time and circumstances of 'the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow'.<sup>3</sup> The synoptic gospels specify that it was after Peter's confession that Jesus was 'the Christ, the Son of the living God,' that Christ 'began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and scribes and be killed, and be raised up on the third day'.<sup>4</sup> Before His crucifixion Jesus frequently referred to His impending death and resurrection.

In Luke's account, the resurrected Christ, on the road to Emmaus, fell into step with two of His disciples who did not recognize Him and, after hearing their account of His crucifixion, asked, 'Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?'<sup>5</sup> And shortly before His ascension, He appeared to more of His disciples and 'opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead on the third day"'<sup>6</sup>

The kerygma of apostolic evangelism in the Acts of the Apostles focuses in great part on Christ's suffering as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. For example, Peter's second sermon includes the assertion that the recent death of Christ is how God fulfilled what he had 'announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer'.<sup>7</sup> We are told that it was Paul's custom, when he arrived in a town, to go to the local synagogue and reason from the Scriptures, 'explaining and giving evidence that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead'.<sup>8</sup> In his defence before Agrippa, Paul maintained that in preaching the gospel he was 'stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was to take place; that the Christ was to suffer and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles'.<sup>9</sup>

Since there is such emphasis on the necessity that Christ suffer and die, it is reasonable to ask why the New Testament insists on such a necessity. Christ's death is shown to be a sacrifice involving the shedding of blood. Christ spoke of His blood as the 'blood of the covenant'.<sup>10</sup> In John's gospel, John the Baptist, when he first saw Christ, proclaimed 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'.<sup>11</sup> Paul insists on the sacrificial nature of Christ's passion, referring to Him as 'our passover'.<sup>12</sup> In Isaiah 53:10-11 the Suffering Servant is described as One whom the

Lord was pleased to crush and put to grief, and who rendered Himself as a guilt offering. The atonement in the New Testament is thus viewed as vicarious, representative, and substitutionary, and was an event in which our Lord's physical sufferings, however extreme, were clearly minor when compared to His spiritual anguish. His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane before His arrest and His cry from the cross—'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'<sup>13</sup>—seem best explained by such statements as that of Paul: 'God made Him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf'.<sup>14</sup> It was the defilement of His essential purity, the wrath of God against sin which was visited upon Him and His consequent separation from the Father that caused His supreme suffering.

### **The issue of the moral neutrality of suffering clouded by the Mosaic covenant**

It should be clear from the disciples' failure to associate the Messiah with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, that the messianic expectations of our Lord's time were discordant with the prophetic disclosures that became clear after His resurrection. Aside from the apparently spectacular contradiction between a messianic king and a suffering servant, suffering, as popularly conceived at the time of Christ, would appear to preclude the Holy One of God from being sorely afflicted, since suffering was viewed as resulting from sin. This assumed connexion between sin and suffering is illustrated by the disciples' question when they encountered the man born blind: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind?'<sup>15</sup> This attitude probably resulted from two closely-related causes: 1. The sentiment so commonly held by people of diverse cultures that those who prosper and are healthy are favoured by God or the gods and that those who are afflicted with deprivations, disabilities and disease are recipients of divine displeasure. 2. The blessings and curses attached to the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant.

The Mosaic covenant was, like other covenants of Scripture, a sovereign dispensation of God's grace. It was, however, distinct in that it was a covenant with the Children of Israel that had reference to their occupation and continued possession of the Promised Land as well as their sustained happiness and prosperity in it. Their well-being depended upon their obedience to God's commandments. Violation of God's law, when caused by ignorance or weakness, was not a violation of the covenant. God had ordained sacrifices for such offences. Nor did the sins of which they repented vitiate the relationship. Rather (as is evident from Leviticus 26) holding God's statutes in contempt and despising His commandments,<sup>16</sup> coupled with ignoring His corrections,<sup>17</sup> precipitated God's wrath.

As early as Exodus 15:25–26 God promised blessings to the people if they obeyed Him. Then in Exodus 23 comes the clear statement:

But you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst. There shall be no

one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfil the number of your days.<sup>18</sup>

Later the covenant is spelled out in greater detail, taking the form of an ancient Near-Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty, which ended with blessings that were promised if the weaker party was faithful and curses invoked if he was not. In Leviticus 26 blessings are enumerated<sup>19</sup> and the curses are given in chilling detail: sudden terror, consumption, fever, conquest by enemies, drought, plague, wild beasts, the sword, pestilence, famine, cannibalism, desolation of the land, and exile.<sup>20</sup> Again, this time in Deuteronomy, blessings for obedience are promised,<sup>21</sup> followed by warnings;<sup>22</sup> then more blessings,<sup>23</sup> including the promise of prosperity and the removal of sickness.<sup>24</sup> A little further on there are warnings and reminders of God's former care for His people.<sup>25</sup> Finally, in Deuteronomy 28 is the last detailed list of covenantal blessings (2-14) and the longest list of curses if God's love and law are flouted: curses which run a horrendous gamut from horrible diseases to cannibalism, to exile and being auctioned as slaves where there are no buyers.<sup>26</sup> Such is the range of suffering and affliction with which the corporate body of God's people is cursed if they despise His commandments and thus violate His covenant with them. The blessings, on the other hand, promise a condition as near to that of Eden as anything held out to man since the fall and before the *eschaton*. Mingled in with and following the curses in Leviticus 26 is the gracious promise that God will never entirely forsake His people. In the midst of their misery, if they will repent, He will receive them back and bless them: confession and humbling of their uncircumcised hearts will lead to their restoration to the land and to His favour. Also in Deuteronomy, after listing the miseries that their disobedience will bring upon them, God promises that He will have compassion on them 'if you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul ...' and He will '... circumcise your heart ... to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul'.<sup>27</sup>

These three strands—blessings for loving and obeying God, curses or judgments for spurning Him, and His promise of wooing towards restoration of blessings and fellowship—are woven into the very warp and woof of post-Pentateuchal Old Testament writings. We encounter them, for example, in Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple (2 Chr. 6), in the warnings and pleas of the prophets, and in numerous Psalms. They indeed undergird every effort at revival in the Old Testament.

Israel is to love God for His own sake. His compassion and forgiveness towards His people are stressed throughout the Old Testament. But His jealousy is also stressed. He will not permit His people to go whoring after other gods, whether those gods are graven images or simply the good things of this world sought and enjoyed for their own sakes without reference to Him from whom all blessings flow. This concern is especially evident in Deuteronomy<sup>28</sup> and throughout Hosea, and it is found generally

throughout Old Testament Scripture.

Prosperity (peace, health, fertility, wealth) is promised for obedience to God's commands—that is the substance of the blessings, as we have seen. But prosperity is also a snare. In Deuteronomy 8 God warns Israel that when they wax fat in the land flowing with milk and honey, they may become proud and forget Him who brought them out of Egypt and attribute their material successes to their own devices.<sup>29</sup> And in chapter 11 the Lord promises that if they listen obediently to His commands 'to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all you hearts and all your soul,' then He will lavish blessings upon them. But 'beware, lest your hearts be deceived and you turn away and serve other gods and worship them'.<sup>30</sup>

The curses in the Mosaic covenant seem less like warnings than like prophecy, for Israel had shown herself to be rebellious and stubborn immediately after the exodus, even before the giving of the Mosaic covenant. As God said through Isaiah, 'I knew that you would deal very treacherously; and you have been called a rebel from birth'.<sup>31</sup> But in spite of her obstinacy and disobedience, idolatry and spurning of Him, He, in His long suffering and patience, allowed her to retain possession of the land for a long time before having her led away into captivity.

Two matters are now to be stressed: first, the corporate nature of the Mosaic covenant, and secondly, its temporal manifestations. The covenant was made with the nation, not with individuals. When Israel was promised blessings, it was to the nation, not to individuals. When curses were extended, it was to the nation, not to individuals. When apostasy ripened in the land, it was a national apostasy, not disparate, individual occurrences of it. Apostasy reflected the attitude of the nation and her leaders.

While the Old Testament clearly shows individual fellowship with God and His working in the lives of individuals, to separate the individual from his national identity is to misunderstand the nature of the uniquely theocratic relationship of God with His people in the old covenant, and to do violence to the relationship. The blessings and the curses are couched in temporal and earthly terms. While there is much disagreement over the extent to which these highly-material promises and warnings are to be emphasized, compared with spiritual benefits or deprivations (and their eschatological implications), it seems beyond dispute that God chose to reward the faithful then with material blessings in order to make His fatherly love obvious.

From a recognition of the corporate and temporal aspects of the Mosaic covenant, the following observations seem reasonable. The corporate nature of the covenant and of the enjoyment of its blessings and dread of its curses give both its positive and negative features a quality distinct from that inherent in any prosperity and suffering that do not have as their readily identifiable and ultimate cause a covenantal relationship contingent upon covenantal faithfulness. Further, since the most spectacular and concrete aspects of the covenant are material, the suffering that is a conse-

quence of violating the covenant is thus so explicable as to leave room for no mystery or subtlety. Suffering that results from the curses attached to the Mosaic covenant must be, in its essence if not in its manifestations, categorically different from all other suffering within the realm of human experience. Those who seek to apply the blessings and the curses of the Mosaic covenant in a material sense to God's people today seriously err. Whether one spiritualizes the temporal blessings and curses guaranteed to Israel in the Mosaic covenant and applies them—thus spiritualized—for a future millennial kingdom, these temporal blessings and curses clearly do not apply to the church today.

### **The Mosaic Covenant and New Testament revelation contrasted**

Woven into the very fabric of the Old Testament, along with the threads of blessing, judgment and revival, is the messianic promise: the promise of a Redeemer. Although typically anticipated in His power and glory, He was ultimately revealed to be the Suffering Servant of God, and His people were to be His body. On this side of the Cross it becomes evident that the people of God are no longer those to whom are promised the temporal blessings attached to the land. Rather, they are the body of the Crucified One, the body of the Suffering Servant, the body of that Christ who by His blood purchased the redemption of His people.

While God's people under the Mosaic covenant were promised temporal blessings, God's people who are the body of Christ are promised 'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ'.<sup>32</sup> And while the Mosaic covenant promised prosperity for obedience, Christ promised persecution in particular and suffering in general.

Commenting on the statement that a slave is not greater than his master, Christ says, 'If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you'.<sup>33</sup> He had emphasized that

a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household.<sup>34</sup>

And he assured them that they 'will be hated by all on account of My name'.<sup>35</sup> When Peter had said that he had left everything for Christ's sake, he was told that he would receive a hundred times as much as he had given up, 'along with persecutions; and in the world to come, eternal life'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it is a special sign of blessedness when the Christian is persecuted for righteousness' sake, for 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>37</sup> When Paul, shortly after his conversion, was in Damascus, Christ appeared to a certain Ananias in a vision and said concerning Paul, 'I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake'.<sup>38</sup> Paul and Barnabas are



recorded in the Acts of the Apostles as encouraging believers in various cities, saying, 'through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God'.<sup>39</sup>

In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul comments that he had sent Timothy

to strengthen and encourage you in your faith; so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction.<sup>40</sup>

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul had several words on suffering for his young disciple. He urges Timothy to join with him in 'suffering for the gospel according to the power of God',<sup>41</sup> to 'suffer hardship with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus'.<sup>42</sup> Paul writes to the Philippians that 'to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake'.<sup>43</sup> The verb here translated 'granted' is a form of *charidzomai*, a word that means to bestow graciously and is related to *charis* (grace), *charisma* (gift), *chara* (joy), and *chairō*, the verb used by the Evangelists when they relate Jesus' urging His disciples to rejoice when they are persecuted. These sufferings, then, are a gift of grace, a privilege, and a joy. They are not the exclusive privilege of the select few, but of anyone who follows Christ in the manner Paul describes elsewhere when he writes to Timothy, 'And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'.<sup>44</sup>

The persecution that is a consequence of living a godly life is a response to spreading the gospel not only by word but by deed as well. This is particularly stressed in 1 Peter where we are told that

if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favour with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.<sup>45</sup>

This example then is Christ's passivity under abuse:

who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.<sup>46</sup>

In the passage just quoted, Peter was obviously drawing from Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant in chapter 53, especially verses 7 and 9. Since the Suffering Servant, who is now the glorified Lord, has promised suffering in this world to His body the church, it is reasonable to associate the present suffering of the body with that of the Servant. That is the apparent thrust of Colossians 1:24: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for

your sake, and in my flesh I do share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's affliction.' It is essential, of course, to understand that 'what is lacking'—*husteremata*—cannot refer to our Lord's propitiatory, vicarious and redemptive suffering. Scripture is clear on that.<sup>47</sup> This was a major exegetical point with the Reformers, especially Calvin, and with the Puritans. But the verse does clearly point to a twofold *koinonia* of suffering. The first has reference to Christ's being our High Priest who can 'sympathize (*sumpathesai*) with our weaknesses'<sup>48</sup> in respect to their variety. The second has reference to our Head being afflicted when His body is afflicted.

The fellowship between Christ and His church is the emphasis of Paul's seraphic outpouring of mystical emotion and joy in his letter to the Philippians '...that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death'.<sup>49</sup> There is a sense in which the Christian participates in Christ's suffering by being a participant in the sufferings of the church, the body with which Christ also suffers. When our Lord appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, He asked, 'Why are you persecuting Me?'<sup>50</sup> Paul, of course, had been persecuting members of Christ's body. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: 'And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it ... Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it'.<sup>51</sup>

The absolutely essential difference between the corporate suffering of God's people under the Mosaic covenant and the corporate suffering of Christ's body, which is the church, is made even more striking when one compares the evidence for need of revival under the old with that under the new covenant. For example, Solomon prays, 'When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain ... whatever plague or whatever sickness there is ...',<sup>52</sup> then the people shall know they have sinned and must call upon the Lord. But when the Lord speaks to the church in Laodicea, which is desperately in need of revival, He says,

you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing', and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.<sup>53</sup>

He goes on to say: 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent'.<sup>54</sup> This last sentence applies to God's people at all times, and it applies both corporately and individually, whether before, during or after the Mosaic covenant's applicability.

Its corporate aspect is probably more appropriately stressed in the cases of the children of Israel than in the case of the church, although its individual aspect is applicable at all times. In Deuteronomy 8:5, in the midst of the Mosaic covenant, after reminding the people of the Lord's humbling and testing of them during their forty years in the wilderness, as well as of

His gracious provision for them, Moses says, 'Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.' The discipline that the Lord imposes on His children can take the form of punishment or training, on either a corporate or an individual level. We should distinguish the two types of discipline to which God subjects His people: first, punishment, when an offence precipitates the discipline; and secondly, testing and training, when the discipline is not in response to an offence. This is simply a distinction for convenience because the discipline that is punishment involves the training of the one disciplined, since both the Hebrew and Greek words translated as 'discipline' and 'instruction' irrespective of any punitive aspect.

### **The 'mystery' of suffering**

As soon as one begins to consider discipline (whether corporate or individual) as testing and training—in other words as not clearly precipitated by sin—problems arise. These problems combine to create the tangled web called the 'mystery' of suffering. To illustrate this, consider suffering experienced by the Israelites while under the Mosaic covenant. I asserted above that the suffering that results from violation of the covenant is so explicable as to leave room for no mystery or subtlety. That is true in regard to corporate suffering under that dispensation directly attributable to violation of the covenant. Nevertheless, problems arise: God's judgment of apostasy was often withheld. The exceedingly wicked—particularly the rulers—within Israel often prospered individually. The righteous were often afflicted by the wicked within Israel, God's judgment was still withheld. When it came, both the wicked and the righteous were swept away by affliction.

Considerable consternation arises over this in some of the Psalms. For example, in Psalm 44 this theme is mingled with pleas that God would restore His blessing to those who still are faithful and have not broken the covenant. Quite distinct from this suffering through covenantal curses is the suffering that results from God's testing and training of His people. Since this may be corporate or individual, specific instances of it, when viewed through the grid of covenantal cause-and-effect, could give rise to judgmental misassessments. Even in the nearly-ideal atmosphere of the Promised Land during times of corporate faithfulness, God's people individually were still sinners who could benefit from discipline. And even in the absence of specific offences, discipline as testing and training is specific throughout Scripture as salubrious.

Thus we can safely assume that even under the best of circumstances God's discipline (as testing and training) was experienced, sometimes corporately, something individually, by God's people. Reactions to such suffering, however, were frequently tempered by the two matters already mentioned: the natural proclivity to see God's disfavour in the suffering of others and the awareness of the promised blessings and curses of the

Mosaic covenant.

### **Some misapplications of the Mosaic covenant**

Extreme care must be taken when assessing the cause of specific instances of suffering, whether corporate or individual, for the two reasons just mentioned. In regard to the second of these, for example, is it theologically correct to apply a text such as 2 Chronicles 15:2 ('The Lord is with you, while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you.') as John Owen does to England?<sup>55</sup> Granted: in the covenant of grace, God's dealings with His people were essentially the same in the seventeenth century AD as in the seventeenth century BC. But surely His covenantal relationship with the corporate body of His people under the Mosaic covenant differs from His relationship with seventeenth century England.

In other words, can one apply the following statement to both nations, as Owen does?

The presence of God with a people, in special providential dispensations for their good, depends on their obediential presence with him in national administrations to his glory: 'The Lord is with you, while ye be with him.'

But surely not to England as to Israel. At the most the latter can be paradigmatic for the former. But even as a paradigm, it must be treated most circumspectly. Peter Craige, for example, in the introduction to his commentary on Deuteronomy, when discussing the blessing and curses, writes that

God has total control of all facts that might afflict the well-being of Israel. If his people were obedient, he had the power to grant blessing ... But if Israel were disobedient, there was no sphere of life in which Israel could escape God ...<sup>56</sup>

Thus far, so good. But Craige, in the next paragraph, writes that the sad history of Israel serves

as a paradigm of the nature of man. Granted the highest possible privilege, an intimate relationship with God, man nevertheless goes his own way, forgetful of that high calling until he brings upon himself the curse of God.

Now Craige has begun to tread into dangerous territory. He continues:

The curse of God is not something inflicted with vindictive pleasure, *rather, it appears to be the inevitable outcome of life that is lived regardless of God, by rejecting a relationship with God whose essence is love* (my emphasis).

When such reasoning is applied to nations, we have not only bad theology, but bad historiography. When it is applied to individuals, it may well be both theologically inaccurate and cruel. The blessing and the curses of the Mosaic covenant were not simply God's formal articulation of cause-and-effect in divinely ordained natural laws.

### **Some New Testament clarification**

Care must be taken in assessing the cause of specific instances of suffering, because of our proclivity to attribute the sufferings of others to God's disfavour. Commenting on John 9:1–12, J.C. Ryle writes that there

are few notions that men seem to cling to so naturally as the notion that bodily sufferings, and all afflictions, are the direct consequence of sin, and that a displeased or afflicted person must necessarily be a very wicked man.<sup>57</sup>

On the same passage Calvin observes that

since Scripture declares that all the trouble to which the human race is liable comes from sin, whenever we see anyone in a bad state, we cannot stop the thought at once coming to our minds that the distresses which press upon him are punishment inflicted by God's hand.<sup>58</sup>

The passage in question involves the man born blind. His condition had prompted the disciples to ask the Lord whose sin had caused the blindness. A passage with a somewhat similar message is Luke 13:1–5 involving Pilate's slaughter of some Galileans and the death of eighteen individuals on whom the tower in Siloam fell. On this passage Calvin remarks:

The chief value of this passage springs from the fact that we suffer from the almost inborn disease of being overstrict and severe critics of others while approving of our own sins ... Christ does not forbid believers to look carefully at God's judgments, but He tells them the right way to go about it—they must begin at their own sins.<sup>59</sup>

In regard to Calvin's assertion that in times of affliction Christians should look first at their own sin, it is significantly revelatory of the flabbiness of contemporary evangelical teaching on suffering that it is only within the last century or less that the teaching has fallen into desuetude that suffering is a most salubrious impetus for self-examination and motivation for mortification. The salutary effect of affliction is especially evident when considering God's paternal discipline of His children, whether before or after the Cross. Often, however, it is difficult for those being disciplined and impossible for those reading about it or otherwise observing it to know whether the discipline is punishment or simply testing and training. This holds true at all times, whether living under the Mosaic covenant or not, although under the Mosaic covenant corporate apostasy brought

about the most severe penalties. But even these were part of God's refining process.

### **The Problem of the suffering of the righteous in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament there are two causes for the suffering of God's people: first, punishment owing to sin, and secondly, testing and training. Both of these can be either corporate or individual. It should be noted that we are considering only the suffering of God's people, not suffering generally. The Bible has very little to say directly about the suffering of humanity at large. Furthermore, God's people, of course, suffer in a wide variety of ways simply as a consequence of being part of fallen humanity in a fallen world. The more one recognizes and emphasizes God's sovereignty, the more one then sees all the suffering of God's people, both corporately and individually, as God's punishment, testing and training.

Numerous times in the Old Testament the faithfulness of God and the unfaithfulness of His people are illustrated. Scores of references can easily be assembled to passages that describe God's punishment of His people for covenantal unfaithfulness. Except for occasional periods of corporate faithfulness, God's wrath is either visited upon His people for their unfaithfulness or held in abeyance, giving the people every opportunity to repent. And mingled in with this, and coming even before the Mosaic covenant, are numerous instances of God's testing and training of individuals of the children of Israel as a whole.

On an individual level we see much discipline in the Old Testament through individual affliction, whether for punishment or testing and training. In Psalm 119:67 ('Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Thy word'), the discipline is recognized as penal. But verses 71 and 75 are perhaps ambiguous concerning the cause: 'It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Thy statutes.' 'I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me.' Similar in its aetiological ambiguity is Psalm 95:12: 'Blessed is the man whom Thou dost chasten, O Lord, and dost teach out of Thy law.' The Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and the prophetic books, is replete with examples.

It seems, though, that most of the examples of edificatory suffering given in the Old Testament were recognized as being the direct and obvious result of sin or disobedience and were thus instances of instructive punishment. This seems particularly to be illustrated by those less common and thus striking instances of frustration when individuals were sorely afflicted and could find no 'justification' for it, no specific sin or sins with which God was dealing. Thus, most spectacularly, was the case of Job.

Job's response to his first bout of affliction—the loss of his children and

his property—was positive. But when God allowed Satan to afflict his body, his response soon became negative. In the end, however, we find that Job learned through his suffering, and that God was not simply teaching Satan a lesson through the sufferings of His victim, Job, but rather that He was teaching both of them different lessons through the suffering of His child, Job. In chapters 38–41 God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind. The thrust of God’s message is His own infinite knowledge and unlimited power and majesty contrasted with the subject of Job’s sufferings. And Job’s response is the simple but movingly profound statement, ‘Now my eye sees Thee; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.’

Throughout his afflictions, Job’s friends had spoken to him in a way that God condemns and the reader condemns. The reader condemns their assessment because he is privy to that of which Job and his friends are ignorant, namely God’s purposes. We, after all, have the benefit of overhearing the conversations of God and Satan. Job’s friends have not this advantage and if we had not been told about God’s purposes, we would not find ourselves disagreeing so heartily with Job’s friends. Their assessment is, after all, fairly sound. It is basically of two different slants: 1. God is punishing you for your sins. 2. God is causing you to grow through this; He is refining you by it. The second of these is essentially correct, but is flat and meaningless in the mouth of the sanctimonious speaker. The first of these is a very strong sentiment in all cultures: God rewards good people with health and wealth; He visits the wicked with suffering. This attitude is reinforced by aspects of the Mosaic covenant that put into highly material and temporal terms God’s pleasure and displeasure. Regardless of whether we are considering the parts of scripture dealing with the time before the Mosaic covenant, or the vast majority of the Old Testament writings dealing with the period after the giving of the Mosaic covenant, it seems that most examples of suffering given in the Old Testament were recognized as being caused by sin. Thus the frustration of Job.

Consider also the case of the sons of Korah, who enumerate the afflictions of the people and then say:

All of this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten Thee, and we have not dealt falsely with Thy covenant. Our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Thy way. Yet Thou has crushed us in a place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death.<sup>60</sup>

It is in instances such as these that the Old Testament begins to develop a mystery of suffering when what seemed ordained as a fixed cause-and-effect relationship was no longer so clear: for the righteous did suffer and seemed to suffer sometimes without explanation. This unexplained suffering required the sufferer to wait in the darkness with Job and Habakkuk until he could say with the latter:

## The Developing Role of Suffering in Salvation History

Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hind's feet, and makes me walk on my high places.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, in preparation for the revelation of the Suffering Servant, their as yet unknown and unrevealed Redeemer, were His people slowly weaned from the temporal to the eternal, from the material to the spiritual. Here the experience of Asaph in Psalm 73 is richly instructive. When Asaph viewed the prosperity of the wicked and contemplated his own affliction, he nearly thought, 'Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence'.<sup>62</sup> But he held himself back from such profanity, went into the sanctuary of God and there caught a glimpse of the Eternal that enabled him finally to say,

Whom have I in heaven but Thee: and beside Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.<sup>63</sup>

This newly-discovered mystery of suffering shall become increasingly unveiled as God's people begin to see their Redeemer in His redemptive suffering, when the Holy Spirit reveals in His word that Christ, although being God's own Son, learned obedience from the things which he suffered.<sup>64</sup>

A particularly trying category of the suffering of the righteousness in the Old Testament devoid of any mysterious quality respecting its proximate or ultimate cause, was the persecution of the godly during times of apostasy. The physical sufferings, especially of the prophets were relatively minor in comparison with their emotional anguish; for they were abused by their fellow Jews to whom they were bearing the alternate message of God's wrath and His mercy.

### **Old and New Testament reactions in suffering contrasted**

When the righteous were persecuted in the Old Testament, there is no indication that they rejoiced in their suffering, rejoicing that they were counted worthy of suffering for God's sake, or that God had revealed to them that they should thus react. In spite of the similarities between the edificatory suffering of God's people before and after the Cross, there is an important underlying difference. Even at its deepest level of spiritual understanding, such as in Habakkuk and Psalm 73, the attitude toward suffering is tempered by a yearning for the ultimate vindication, the vindication of God's people before the ungodly. This desire for vindication is often accompanied by a desire for vengeance and is essentially temporal. In the



New Testament the rare instances of it are eschatological. In the Old Testament, however, this desire for vindication, although often corporate is sometimes individual. The Jew reading the Psalm, 'But for Thy sake we were killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered', could go on to agree heartily with the plea

Arouse Thyself, why dost Thou hide Thy face, and forget our affliction and our oppression? For our soul has sunk down into the dust; our body cleaves to the earth. Rise up, be our help, and redeem us for the sake of Thy lovingkindness.<sup>65</sup>

Before the Cross, however, could any of God's people have fully understood and assented to Paul's use of Psalm 44:22 in the context of Romans 8?

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Consider how jarring it would be if Paul had continued the quotation 'Arouse forever'. But he says something utterly different:

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>66</sup>

Even the most spiritually sensitive and mature in the Old Testament (*e.g.* those such as Asaph and Habakkuk under the Mosaic covenant, and the patriarchs before), would not have seen tribulations as experiences in which they should exult.

Our understanding of the experience of the Old Testament saints must be informed by what the New Testament says specifically about their experience. Hebrews 11 is, of course, a *sine qua non* for our appreciation of their other-worldliness and knowledge of immortality. There, for example, we learn that Abraham 'was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God'.<sup>67</sup> Isaac and Jacob are called fellow-heirs of the same promise with Abraham.<sup>68</sup> These 'died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth'.<sup>69</sup> They desired 'a better country, that is a heavenly one'.<sup>70</sup> These statements surely point to the patriarchs' awareness of life after death. Calvin, in support of an argument for their having knowledge of immortality, maintains that their lot here was uniformly

quite miserable. He seems greatly to have overstated his case. Speaking of Abraham, he says:

In short, throughout his life he was so tossed and troubled that if anyone wished to paint a picture of a calamitous life, he could find no model more appropriate than Abraham's!

'Isaac is afflicted by lesser ills, but has scarcely even the least taste of sweetness.' 'As for Jacob, he is a notable example of nothing but extreme unhappiness.'<sup>71</sup>

Irrespective of whether Calvin exaggerates in his assessment of the patriarchs' woes, his perspective is surely accurate insofar as it depicts men little ensnared by the quest for temporal rewards and comforts. It also, for the most part, describes men who did not seem to have achieved any satisfaction from their afflictions. Take the case of Jacob. Calvin, in this context, does not mention among Jacob's afflictions his wrestling at Peniel, an experience that affected his character by reducing him to a more submissive and dependent position. In any event, late in life and owing to his many afflictions, his words to Pharaoh are exceedingly bleak:

The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning.<sup>72</sup>

Calvin uses the tone of Jacob's statement as further evidence that he had his eyes on a heavenly home. I should like to stress that the pessimism of Jacob's statement equally well demonstrates that he lacked the kind of job that is present in the character of New Testament saints who have grown under affliction. Can we reasonably see a statement of similar tone issuing from a Paul, a Peter, a John or from any other New Testament saint? It was not until in His incarnation the Eternal Word became the Christ who was then the Suffering Servant, that even those in closest communion with God could grasp fully that as co-heirs with the long-awaited Messiah they were to share His sufferings, and that suffering with Him is a prerequisite to sharing His glory.

### **The weaning from the material to the spiritual**

If my assessment of the differences between suffering under the old covenant and under the new is correct, then it follows that when using the Old Testament one must be circumspect while seeking to draw from the examples of suffering found there specific and final guidance for response to affliction or general truths elucidating the place of suffering in the lives of God's people. The differences between the Old and the New Testament should not, however, vitiate the Old for instructive purposes. God has not changed. Nor has man. But the rôle of suffering has changed—rather, has

developed and matured—in the light of cumulative revelation and the unfolding of salvation history.

Paul writes, 'But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons'.<sup>73</sup> By God's design the time was ripe for Him to bring His people out of spiritual infancy to maturity. This He did in part by cutting the remaining strings that tied the spiritual to the temporal. It was not an instantaneous event. In retrospect and with the advantage of New Testament revelation, we can see the weaning process throughout Old Testament history. The changing, maturing rôle of suffering is a part of this development. The crucial difference between suffering in the Old Testament and suffering since the Cross hinges on the sufferings of Christ and His people's fellowship with Him in suffering. Once seen through the grid of God's eternal plan manifested in His Suffering Servant's humiliation, death, resurrection and glorification, suffering should never again be the same in the understanding, appreciation and experience of God's people.

### **The deepened ministry of the Holy Spirit as Comforter and Sanctifier**

The Holy Spirit is clearly revealed in the New Testament as the Comforter and Sanctifier. Although we can see in the Old Testament the works of the Holy Spirit as revealed and explained in the New Testament, it is hardly correct to assert, without qualification, that the Holy Spirit did exactly the same work in the lives of believers in the Old Testament as in the New. Since in a certain sense the Old Testament was a period of spiritual infancy (as described in Galatians), and the Holy Spirit was not given in full measure before Pentecost, the stark reality of God's salvatory intervention in human history in the Person of His Son marks a climax, a pivotal point in God's dealing with mankind, enabling us to see, on this side of the Cross, that what came before it was propaedeutic to what reached fulfilment in it. The Holy Spirit surely works in the lives of God's people in a manner commensurate with their understanding. The Holy Spirit floodlights Christ. Before the Cross the Saviour was not known in the fullness of the revelation of His redemptive sufferings. Thus the Holy Spirit's ministry of bringing God's people into a fellowship of Christ's suffering, based on their knowledge of Him and the power of His resurrection, preparatory to being made conformable to His death, cannot have been the same before the Cross as after.

That is not to say that Old Testament saints were retarded in their relationship to God—both potential and realized—in their commitment to Him, closeness of walk with Him, and holiness of life and character. But since the Holy Spirit as Comforter and Sanctifier ministers to God's people in and through their sufferings, His ministry in and through their suf-

ferings must be affected by their understanding of suffering. Thus His ministry of Comforter and Sanctifier must hinge upon God's people's understanding of the nature of suffering in God's purposes as manifested in the redemptive suffering of His Son to whom the Holy Spirit ministered as the Comforter and Sustainer in the midst of His suffering.

On this side of the Cross, we know that we are called into a fellowship of suffering with Christ. It is this reality that gives to suffering its own comfort. How desperately Job in his suffering craved for someone who could stand between himself and God, a daysman, an umpire, an intermediary and reconciler.<sup>74</sup> His was clearly a Messianic yearning. How differently might Job have reacted to his sufferings, and acted in his sufferings, if he had known of the Intermediary as we have the privilege of knowing Him? Job craved for an umpire who would resolve the tension between Job and God, the tension caused by Job's inexplicable suffering. Had he known this Umpire as his Reconciler with God, not as One who would simply resolve the mystery of his suffering by arguing Job's case before God, but rather as the One who by His own suffering had already reconciled him with God and was now suffering with him and in him and was calling him into a fellowship of His sufferings, how differently could he have seen God's purposes and thus have been open to God's comfort in the midst of his afflictions! This is not to say that he would have been glib in his suffering. He may well have questioned, fought, protested, even rebelled, just as we sometimes do when we suffer, or when someone dear to us suffers. The mystery of his suffering, although it still would have been present for him, just as it is for us, would not have been nearly as enigmatic if it had been informed by the revelatory light of the Suffering Servant and the experimental reality of a fellowship of His sufferings.

In His temptations, sufferings and obedience, Christ was supported and comforted by the Holy Spirit. The same Paraclete who ministered to our Lord in His sufferings, our Saviour has given to us as our Paraclete. In a sermon on Philippians 2:1, Charles Spurgeon has said that

as the Holy Spirit is the Comforter, Christ is the comfort. The Holy Spirit consoles, but Christ is the consolation ... The Holy Spirit is the Physician, but Christ is the medicine. We are not consoled today by new revelations, but by the old revelation explained, enforced, and lit up with new splendour by the presence and power of the Holy Ghost the Comforter. If we give to the Holy Spirit the Greek name of Paraclete ... then our heart confers on our blessed Lord Jesus the title of the Paracletis. If the one be the Comforter, the other is the comfort.<sup>75</sup>

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NOTES

- 1 Gen. 3:14–15.
- 2 1 Pet. 3:18.
- 3 1 Pet. 1:10–11.
- 4 Mt. 16:21; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 9:22.
- 5 Lk. 24:26.
- 6 Lk. 24:45–46.
- 7 Acts 3:18.
- 8 Acts 17:3.
- 9 Acts 26:22–23.
- 10 Mk. 14:24.
- 11 Jn. 1:29; *cf.* 1 Pet. 1:19.
- 12 1 Cor. 5:7; *cf.* Eph. 5:2.
- 13 Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34.
- 14 2 Cor. 5:21; *cf.* Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:13.
- 15 Jn. 9:2.
- 16 Lev. 26:14, 15.
- 17 Lev. 26: 18, 21, 27.
- 18 Ex. 23:25, 26.
- 19 Lev. 26:4–13.
- 20 Lev. 26:16–39.
- 21 Deut. 6:10–11.
- 22 Deut. 5:12–16.
- 23 Deut. 7:13–26.
- 24 Deut. 7:13–15.
- 25 Deut. 8:11–20.
- 26 Deut. 8:20–68.
- 27 Lev. 26:30:2, 6.
- 28 Deut. 8:11, 31–32.
- 29 Deut. 8:11–17.
- 30 Deut. 11:13–16.
- 31 Isa. 48:8.
- 32 Eph. 1:3.
- 33 Jn. 15:20.
- 34 Mt. 10:24–25.
- 35 Mk. 13:13.
- 36 Mk. 10:28–30.
- 37 Mk. 5:10–12.
- 38 Acts 9:16.
- 39 Acts 14:2.
- 40 1 Thess. 3:2–4.
- 41 2 Tim. 1:8.
- 42 2 Tim. 4:5.
- 43 Phil. 1:29.
- 44 2 Tim. 3:12.
- 45 1 Pet. 2:20–21.
- 46 1 Pet. 2:22–23.
- 47 Isa. 53:4–6; Jn. 19:30; and Heb. 10:1–8, especially v. 14.
- 48 Heb. 4:15.
- 49 Phil. 3:10.
- 50 Acts 9:4–5; 22:7–8; and 26:14–15.
- 51 1 Cor. 12:26–27.
- 52 2 Chr. 6:26–28.

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- 53 Rev. 3:17.
- 54 Rev. 2:19.
- 55 *God's Presence with a People the Spring of their Prosperity*, vol. 8, pp. 431–452, Goold's edition.
- 56 p. 44, Eerdmans, 1976.
- 57 *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*.
- 58 Eerdmans, 1972.
- 59 *Commentary on a Harmony of the Gospels*, Eerdmans, 1972.
- 60 Ps. 44:17–19.
- 61 1 Heb. 3:17–19.
- 62 Ps. 73:13.
- 63 Ps. 73:25–26.
- 64 4 Heb. 5:8.
- 65 Ps. 44:22–26.
- 66 Rom. 8:35–39.
- 67 Heb. 11:10.
- 68 Heb. 11:9.
- 69 Heb. 11:13.
- 70 Heb. 11:16.
- 71 *Institutes* 2.10.11–12.
- 72 2 Gen. 47:9.
- 73 Gal. 4:4–5.
- 74 Job 9:33.
- 75 *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, p. 348.