

THEOLOGY

One Bite at a Time



The Suffering of The Father

A Theology of God-Centered Suffering

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INTRODUCTION

Suffering – Is it “Man-centered” or “God-centered?”

Suffering is certainly about people, but as students of the Bible we too often study and develop doctrines which explain suffering from the human perspective. Thus we tend to regard suffering as a necessary evil which God permits and/or dispenses as a result of a fallen creation.

But the Bible also presents a parallel perspective – suffering is “God-centered,” which implies that suffering must be more than a response and result of sinful men. It must also teach us about the very nature and personality of God apart from and transcendent from the Creation.

This paper will examine Biblical suffering as being revelatory of God’s divine nature. It will take the position that the Bible is less a revelation about mankind as it is a revelation of God. We will assert that suffering is a vital characteristic of God’s personhood and makeup. The subject will be researched from the perspective of the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

Can God suffer? Does God suffer and if so; how does He suffer and why? This essay will also look at suffering as being “Providential” – with respect to His children and the Trinity itself. Research will draw upon the Biblical witness including two specific studies in Hosea and Isaiah. The early Church fathers, Orthodox Christian theologians and commentaries will also be consulted and presented to support the conclusions drawn.

By trying to better understand suffering from God’s perspective as revealed in Scripture and the accepted doctrines of the Christian Church about the nature of God, it is hoped that a deeper and more complete theology of suffering will emerge.

THE IMPASSIBILITY OF YAHWEH

Can God suffer? Does God Suffer? These questions go to the heart of the Doctrine of the “Impassibility of God.” The Greek word “*apathes*” describes a god without pain or pleasure.¹ Greek philosophy and many Eastern religions view God as transcendent and dispassionate. They hold that God is distant and immune from the winds of emotion that sway and motivate the hearts and deeds of humans. Many Christians also view God in this way.

For some Christians the suggestion that God can experience pain or pleasure might imply that God can also be affected by emotions such as love, hate, pain and suffering. This could then give rise to the idea that He is changeable or capricious. This “changeable god” is not the God of the Bible who endures (Ps 102:25-27) and remains the same (Jas 1:7).

In order to counter this anti-biblical concept of a “mutable god” (exemplified in Process Theology²), the early church fathers developed the Doctrine of Impassibility which affirms that “*God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation.*”³ The fact that Jesus (i.e. the incarnate God) truly suffered was never in dispute, but many in the early church held that God the Father did not suffer.⁴

¹ Wilhelm Michaelis, *The Theological Dictionary of The New Testament*, Vol. 5, ed. G. Freeprich and G. Kittel, (Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1994) 906-907

² The concept of a “mutable god” is culminated in Process Theology. Divine immutability is denied by Process Theology which holds that God is involved in his creation and that he suffers along with us. The heresy in this theology is that the “Process God” changes as he interacts with creation – i.e. God has potential which he has not yet realized. This is in direct conflict with the Orthodox Biblical God who is immutable. For an excellent discussion of Process Theology see John Feinberg, - *No One Like Him – Foundations of Evangelical Theology* Crossways Books, 2001: p 67-68

³ G.R. Lewis, “*The impassibility of God,*” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Book House, 1984: p 598

⁴ Glenn Penner, *In the Shadow of The Cross*, (Bartlesville OK, Living Sacrifice Books, 2004) 88

Author Glenn Penner states that theologians such as Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Arminius and Wesley all affirmed this doctrine regarding God's inability to feel emotion or suffer pain. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD dismissed doctrines which claimed that God is "passible," calling them "vain babblings."⁵

The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) affirmed that God is, "...without body, parts, or passions, immutable..." Yet later in the same paragraph the WCF affirms that God is "... most loving, gracious, merciful and longsuffering..."⁶

The WCF long affirmed by so many in the Church may, on the surface, appear to be self-contradictory and contrary to Scripture. This, because many Old Testament texts clearly state that God loves, hates, he can be angry and that He suffers. How then can God be impassible (without passion) and still be the God of Scripture? Why did the Early Church and so many great theologians hold so tenaciously to this teaching?

Penner sheds needed light on the dilemma. He states that the early church had good reasons for their position. Penner cites John Stott to explain their motivations; "*They (the church fathers) were wanting, above all else to safeguard the truths that God is perfect (nothing can be added to or subtracted from Him), and that God is changeless (nothing can disturb Him).*"⁷ Faced with the heresy that God could be mutable, the Patriarchs' concern when ascribing emotions to the God of the Bible is understandable.

⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith (WFC) – Chapter 2, Article #1

⁷ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Intervarsity Press, 1986) 330.

However, understanding the motivations of the Patriarchs does not solve the problem that the OT has many texts that speak of the emotions and sufferings of Yahweh. How then do those who affirm the impassibility of God such as the WCF explain Biblical texts which speak of a God who feels? Their answer is “anthropomorphic expressions,” in other words – figurative language.⁸

According to this teaching those passages of the Bible which speak of emotion and suffering are to be interpreted as literary devices which use human characteristics to describe the indescribable. “*The Lord is my shepherd*” (Ps 23:1) “*As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you*” (Isa 66:13), *I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by the arms*” (Hos 11:3).

Certainly humans do not have the capacity to fully describe the attributes of God; however, the use of figurative language must never be regarded as less valid simply because it is “figurative.” In looking at some of the Scriptures listed above, G.R. Lewis puts it nicely; “*All of these anthropomorphic expressions are figurative, but the figures of speech illustrate a nonfigurative point. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not without feeling, not without the capability of loving and feeling the hurt of love spurned.*”⁹ From this we are brought to the conclusion that in some way God feels and He does suffer. He is, in a word “passible.” But does this suggest that God is mutable?

Penner rightly points out that resolving this paradox of passibility and immutability is essential for developing a Biblical view of God. He suggests that what is needed concerning the Doctrine of Impassibility is to redefine and clarify our terms.

⁸ Glenn Penner, *In the Shadow of The Cross*, (Bartlesville OK, Living Sacrifice Books, 2004) 90.

⁹ G.R. Lewis: “*The impassibility of God,*” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 598

Penner calls for a clarified definition – a definition that upholds the fundamental belief affirming the immutability of God while at the same time acknowledging OT citations which clearly articulate that God can and does suffer.¹⁰ The operative word for the WCF is “passions” which appears to be employed by the WCF in the pejorative sense. Specifically passions are considered to be negative. An appropriate clarification to the text might be to modify the wording to read the “*passions of mankind.*” Thus the Confession would state that God is “without body, parts or *the passions of mankind...*” Rendered in this manner the words of patriarchs such as Origen and Irenaeus would take on greater clarity. “*We maintain that God is altogether impassible and is to be regarded as wholly free from all [human] affectation of this kind*” (Origen).¹¹ “*For the Father of all is at a vast distance from those dispositions and passions that operate among men*” (Irenaeus).¹² The Dictionary of Early Church Beliefs states “By the ‘impassibility of God’ the early Christians meant that God is not affected by *human* passions” (emphasis mine). Notice how David Bercot clarifies the concept by emphasizing “human passions” and not confusing them with the passions of God.¹³

Wayne Grudem is another voice who responds to those who hold that Yahweh is devoid of emotion; “The Doctrine of Impassibility goes beyond what we have affirmed in our definition about God’s unchangeableness. It [WCF] affirms that God does not even feel emotions or passion.” Grudem continues; “His passions are ours to imitate for all eternity as we, like our creator hate sin and delight in righteousness.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Penner, *In the Shadow of The Cross* (Bartlesville OK, Living Sacrifice Books 2004) 88.

¹¹ David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Hendrickson Co, 1998) 313.

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Intervarsity Press, 1994) 165.

If by studying the OT and NT texts it is concluded that Yahweh has emotions and does indeed suffer then this conclusion must be qualified by stating, like Penner and Bercot that the passions and sufferings of God are not like those of mankind. This raises the next logical question of how then do the passions and sufferings of God differ from humans?

A Matter of Control & Precision

“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven - and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things and in Him all things consist” (Col 1:15-17).

When humans think of emotion and suffering we immediately think of things which are out of our control. Our hearts are desperately wicked (Jer 17:9), we can be given over to our lusts (Ps 81:12) and we can forget and ignore God (Hos 13:6).

But we can not assume that because humans cannot always control their emotions, God also shares our predicament. Paul states that God (through Christ) holds all things together, even at the most elemental levels (Col 1:17). Further, this control must not be thought of as speaking merely of the physical universe – it must include the spiritual and emotional universe as well.

The “Anthropic Principle” posits there is a cosmic balancing act in play which permits the physical universe and mankind to exist. This balancing act suggests that every molecule and atom is controlled with exquisite skill and design on a colossal scale.¹⁵ The Apostle Paul confirms this skillful control is a conscious, deliberate and ongoing effort by God (Col 1:15-17) (Acts 17:24). The power and intelligence to exercise this kind of profound control requires that God must control His own emotions, pain and even His suffering completely.

¹⁵ Chuck Missler, *Cosmic Codes*, (Koinonia House, 1999) 31, 199, 281.

“Just as God perfectly uses His intellectual and volitional powers, He perfectly uses His emotional powers.”¹⁶ G.R. Lewis concludes that God is not out of control, unbalanced or subject to His passions. Yahweh cannot be overcome or changed by emotion or suffering, though He does experience these things in a most profound manner (Hos 11:8) (Rom 8:26).

Conclusion

By researching the Biblical texts which speak of the suffering of God,¹⁷ and by seeking to better understand and define the Doctrine of Impassibility, it can be proposed that Yahweh personally experiences emotion, pain and suffering. But His experience of emotion and suffering are of a unique kind – completely different than humans. This proposition should stipulate that God perfectly controls His emotions and suffering. He also controls the timing and intensity of His suffering as He sees fit to accomplish His purposes in whatsoever He wills. (Is 46:9-11)

¹⁶ G.R. Lewis, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p 599

¹⁷ See treatment of selected Biblical texts dealing with Hosea and Isaiah in this paper.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

The Biblical witness holds that God provides for and directs the universe. It is God who made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24), and because of this it is evident that God gives life, and breath, and all things (v: 25). When Paul says God gives life and breath he does not limit God to providing just the physical necessities of daily living. Paul asserts that in God “*we live and move and have our “being.”*” (v: 28) ¹⁸

Peter says that God gives everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3). It follows that God’s provision and direction must include the spiritual and emotional aspects of life as well. God provides virtue, knowledge, self-control, kindness and love which we are commanded to add to our character with the ultimate goal of partaking in His Divine nature (v:3-7).

But there is more. Paul states that God directs (or governs) the activities of mankind – He sets limits on man and has determined how, when and where they live (Acts: 17:26). Ultimately everything experienced by all beings in the universe is a direct result of the providence of God.

If Scripture is to be taken seriously regarding the government of God directing every aspect of the universe, then it must be conceded that suffering would also fall under the providence of God. God provides suffering and He directs suffering – enduring it for a season. And He does this with purpose (Judg 2: 21-23) (Rom 9:22-24).

¹⁸ John Feinberg. *No One Like Him*, (Wheaton Ill, , Crossways: 2001) 564. Feinberg points out that in Acts 17:24-28 God is the sustainer and the “glue” that holds people and creation together. Building upon Feinberg’s point, it is reasonable to assert that this process of continuous preservation (i.e. providence), must include those aspects of our existence and His which at times are unpleasant and even dangerous, i.e. suffering.

Wayne Grudem defines God's providence as follows;

“God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.”¹⁹

With the Biblical witness as our final authority and the doctrine of the Providence of God summarized above, this section will present two propositions about God's Providence as it relates to suffering; 1) God provides suffering and 2) God directs suffering. These propositions will be explored making the following assertions:

- God provides for and directs His own personal suffering
- God provides for and directs the suffering of His Son
- God provides for and directs the suffering of the Holy Spirit
- God provides for and directs the suffering of His chosen people – His children

Taken in turn, our goal will be to research, develop and then to affirm or deny each of the above assertions. These affirmations and denials will hopefully be made to such a degree that the conclusions drawn, concerning the providence of God, will become an integral part of a developed and thoughtful Theology of suffering.

¹⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Intervarsity Press, 994) 315

God provides for and directs His personal suffering.

We have concluded that God can and does suffer.²⁰ But this is with the stipulation that, unlike humans, the suffering and passions of God are under His control. Yahweh is not like men (Hos 11:9). His passions do not rule his actions, He rules them. He does this with purpose and deliberation to benefit His children and satisfy His covenantal and volitional nature (Jer 31:31-34).

One example of Divine suffering with purpose can be deduced from what Walter Kaiser calls the triad of the “The Tabernacling God.”²¹ In this three part formulation of Ex 29:43-46 we see Yahweh making a declarative promise concerning His people.

*“I will be your God
You will be My people
I will tabernacle (dwell) in the midst of you.”*

Yahweh’s desire is to dwell among His people. He does this knowing that His children are fallen and will provoke Him (Ex 23:20-21). He knows they will cause His heart to recoil (Hos 11:8b), and thus He will withdraw from them (5: 5, 15a). Their rebellion provoked Him to afflict them many times in their history, even up to the present day (cf. Judg 2:14-15, 3:7-8). God does this knowing that through their afflictions (i.e. training), His children will benefit greatly – they will earnestly seek Him (Hos 5:15b), they will be revived and live (i.e. dwell) in His sight (6:1-2).

With perfect choice and control, God placed Himself in vulnerable situations by loving and living among sinful people. Yahweh provided the context and the mechanism for His own suffering and He did this as the Sovereign God of the universe. There are other examples in Scripture which demonstrate how God provides for and directs His own suffering.

²⁰ For an excellent presentation of the suffering God see “*God as Sufferer*” p: Glenn Penner, *Shadow of the Cross*, (Bartlesville Ok, Living Sacrifice Books 2004) 85-99. Also see the “Impassibility of Yahweh” and studies in Hoses in this paper for an additional defense of this position.

²¹ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1978) 119

Repeatedly God, of His own volition, entered into covenants and endured situations which caused Him to emote in various ways. He became angry, (Judg 3:8) and He was moved to pity (2:18). Of course God could extricate Himself at any time by righteously destroying the guilty and starting over again, but He graciously chose not to. Here is seen the profoundly imminent God of the Bible who “chooses to suffer.”²²

God provides for and directs the suffering of His Son.

The very heart of the Christian faith centers on the God/Man who suffers. Without the Son we have no creation (Col 1:15-17), and without the incarnation of God we have no Kinsman-redeemer (Phil 2:5-7). Without the life of Jesus and His personal involvement with human suffering we cannot know God (Jn 17:1-26). Without His work on the Cross we cannot obtain redemption (Gal 3:13) and without the resurrection we cannot hope for eternal life (Rom 6:5-9) (1 Cor 15:13-18) (Phil 3:10-11).

Luke makes it clear that the human sacrifice of Jesus was necessary, (Lk 9:22, 13:33, 17:25, 24:7, 24:44). The author of Hebrews shows the necessity of a human sacrifice, because “*it was not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.*” (Heb 10:4). The sacrifices of the Law were good, (10:1) but they were only a shadow of something better (10:14).

God did not desire religious sacrifices and offerings which were temporal (10:5). In His providence, God prepared a body (10:5), directing that it was only by the sacrifice of righteous blood for sin that we can boldly “*enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus*” (10:19).

Only the Father could ordain the suffering of the Son to be a necessity, and it was only the Father who could provide for and direct the events leading up to that suffering in order to accomplish His will (Eph 1:11).

²² Glenn Penner, *Shadow of the Cross*, (Bartlesville Ok, Living Sacrifice Books, 2004) 89

“Oh foolish ones and slow of heart to believe in all the prophets. Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (Lk 24:25-26)

Jesus pointed to the Providence of God when He taught the disciples on the road to Emmaus that day. Beginning with Moses, our Lord showed the plan of God, detailing how God provided for and then directed the sufferings of His Son the Christ. The Gospel of Luke does not specify which OT texts Jesus presented to Cleopas and his fellow disciples, but we do see that Jesus expounded from *“all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”* (Lk 24:27).

God’s providential care with respect to the suffering of His Son is undeniable in Scripture. Everything that is the Son speaks of God’s Providence. Every detail of His existence before and after the incarnation was deliberately planned and guided by the providence of God. This is especially true of Christ’s suffering and sacrifice.

God provides for and directs the suffering of The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the “Vicar of Christ,” – *“The Vicar of the Lord through whom discipline is carried out to perfection”* (Tertullian A.D. 160-225). In this we concur with Tertullian. By naming Him the Vicar of Christ, the Holy Spirit is said to be the day-to-day substitute and manifestation of the Father and the Son on earth.²³ As the earthly substitute of Christ the Holy Spirit is truly Immanuel *“God with us.”* As such the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the suffering of every believer.

²³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Intersivarsity Press, (1994 p: 634). Grudem states “The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest the active presence of God in the world, and especially the Church.” The concept of Christ’s “substitute” or the Spirit being a “manifestation” should not be misunderstood to mean that the Holy Spirit is any thing other than a distinct person of the Trinity being fully God. 232

The Holy Spirit is the Paraclete, the one who comes along side and dwells among His children as helper and comforter forever (Rom 8:16-17) (Jn 14:16-17). The Holy Spirit brings to mind the teachings of Christ (Jn 14:26); He prays for those who cannot pray for themselves (Rom 8:26); God's Spirit directs His people into and through suffering with purpose (Acts 20: 1-23, 16: 6-10).

These attributes of the Holy Spirit are evident in the Bible. But a question remains. Is there direct Scriptural evidence which affirms that the Holy Spirit can and in fact does experience suffering? Yes, there are indeed passages in both Testaments which speak directly to this. The Holy Spirit can be grieved (Isa 63:10) (Eph 4:30), He groans deeply on our behalf (Rom 8:26), He can also be insulted or outraged (Heb 10:29).

These texts in and of themselves should be sufficient to establish and promote the doctrine that the Holy Spirit has emotions and that He can suffer in the same manner as the Father and the Son. But there may remain a reluctance to concede the Holy Spirit can suffer.

Yet without Scriptural evidence demonstrating the Holy Spirit is impassive or a vague impersonal force, it is reasonable to assert that the writings of Isaiah, Paul and the author of Hebrews are indeed sufficient. They are in fact authoritative – enough so as to adopt a doctrine affirming the Holy Spirit can suffer.²⁴

In addition to the Scriptural evidence, the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity as taught in Orthodox Christianity may lend support to the assertion that the Holy Spirit can suffer. From what we read in Scripture concerning the passibility and suffering of the Father and Son, it is reasonable to conclude that the third person of the Godhead must also experience godly emotions, including the ability to suffer like the Father and the Son. This is not to say that the suffering of the Holy Spirit is simply a result of His association with the Father and the Son. Rather it is to affirm the Holy Spirit participates in and experiences suffering as a distinct person.

²⁴ Isaiah 63: 7-9 is explored in this paper as an example of how the Holy Spirit suffers in light of His being a part of the Trinity.

Cornelius Van Til approaches discussions of the Trinity by distinguishing between the “ontological Trinity” and the “economical Trinity.” The economical Trinity describes distinct persons within the Godhead in so far as those distinctions detail the works of God, (i.e. The Father creates, the Son saves, and the Holy Spirit is active in the ongoing work of salvation). But these distinctions, employed for purposes of illustration, must not be allowed to diminish or cloud the being, unity and co-substantial nature and essence of the Godhead.

Van Til instructs that when students of the Bible define the nature of Trinity they must acknowledge that what is said about one person of the Trinity must be said of all. Van Til also affirms that the Son and the Spirit are not derivative from the Father, they are co-equal.

Using Van Til as a base it follows that from an ontological perspective it would be inappropriate to attribute characteristics such as suffering to one person of the Trinity while denying or ignoring those same attributes in another person of the Trinity.²⁵

A contrarian view to the “suffering Holy Spirit” may imply a detached and aloof persona. This compartmentalizing is foreign to Orthodox teaching which affirms a Godhead who shares the same substance and unity of mind. The contrarian view would impose a kind of schizophrenia on the Trinity, where one member is radically different from the other two. This is more Freudian than Biblical and not supported in Scripture or Orthodox apologetics.

Another contrarian perspective to a suffering Holy Spirit would be to ascribe only “good” or “joyful” emotions to the Holy Spirit while rejecting or ignoring the possibility that He can suffer pain. This view would require altering a clear reading of the texts in Isaiah, Romans, Ephesians and Hebrews. Here the burden of proof clearly rests upon the one making the contrarian case by offering up supporting Scripture and or accepted Church teaching that would show the Holy Spirit to be distant and without feelings.

²⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, (P & R Publishing Co, Phillipsburg, NJ, 1976) 68.

With the evidence of the Scriptures cited above and accepted doctrines of the Trinity as foundational, why then are there still lingering doubts or uneasiness that remains when we try to think of the Holy Spirit as a person – much less a person who can suffer?

One explanation may be that believers just do not give much thought to the Holy Spirit. J.I. Packer explores this problem of ignoring the unique personhood of the Holy Spirit. In his book *Knowing God*, Packer writes;

“The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the Cinderella of Christian doctrines. Comparatively few seem to be interested in it... Some talk of the Spirit of Christ in the way that one would talk about the spirit of Christmas – as a vague cultural pressure making for bonhomie and religiosity. Some think of the Spirit as inspiring the moral convictions of unbelievers like Gandhi... But most, perhaps, do not think of the Holy Spirit at all, and have no positive ideas of any sort about what he does. They are for practical purposes in the same position as the disciples whom Paul met at Ephesus – ‘*We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit*’ (Acts 19:2).

It is an extraordinary thing that those who profess to care so much about Christ should know and care so little about the Holy Spirit. Christians are aware of the difference it would make if, after all, it transpired that there had never been an incarnation or atonement. They know that then they would be lost, for they would have no Savior. But many Christians have really no idea what difference it would make if there was no Holy Spirit in the world. Whether in that case they, or the church, would suffer in any way, they just do not know... Is it not a hollow fraud to say that we honor Christ when we ignore, and by ignoring dishonor, the One whom Christ sent to us as his deputy, to take his place and care for us on his behalf? Ought we not to concern ourselves more about the Holy Spirit than we do? “ - *J.I. Packer*²⁶

In concluding this treatment of the Holy Spirit, it should be restated and stressed that the suffering of the Holy Spirit is not like that of human kind. The Trinity chooses to suffer and does so with absolute control and purpose.²⁷

²⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, (IVP Books, Downers Grove, Ill, 1973) 68.

²⁷ Glenn Penner, in ascribing the idea of “choice” to the suffering of God makes an excellent point that this writer believes should be applied to the Trinity as a whole (*Shadow of the Cross* 89).

God provides for and directs the suffering of His children

“Accept as a blessing all the things that befall you.

For nothing comes to pass apart from God” - Didache (A.D. 80-140)²⁸

It is one thing to admit that evil exists and that Christians suffer along with the rest of humanity, but it is quite another thing to boldly claim that the suffering of God’s children is the direct result of His providence. Yet this is precisely what the Bible claims to be true.

God’s children suffer – this much is evident in Biblical history and this present age. However two important questions must be raised in any discussion of God’s providence with respect to suffering; (1) Does the Bible affirm that God does more than just “allow” His children to suffer, or does He actually impose suffering upon those He loves? (2) Is there a specific kind, nature or character to the suffering that God provides for His children?

The Bible contains many passages which affirm that God deliberately puts His children in harm’s way according to His providential care. God’s imposition of suffering can include loss of personal property and family (Job 1:13-22), unjust shame and rejection (Hos 1:2, 3:1) (Isa 53:3) and displacement to foreign countries and pagan cultures (Gen 12: 1-8) (Daniel 1:1-8). These are all vivid examples of God’s providence. Relocation for example often involved forced slavery or captivity such as Joseph (Gen 45: 7-8), Esther (4: 13-14) and the captive Israelite girl who witnessed to Naaham (2 Kings 5:2).

²⁸ David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, Hendrickson Co, (1998: p:629)

In such cases of captivity and relocation of the innocent, God's providential use of suffering resulted in great blessing for His people and His ultimate glory. It is through examples such as these that we can affirm that Yahweh can and does impose suffering upon His children.

Josef Ton makes this observation;

“When one becomes aware of the fact that sufferings may come from the hand of a loving God and that they [sufferings] can be His instruments in one's life, it then becomes easier to accept sufferings and to go through them. However, there are some Old Testament authors who venture even beyond this realization. They do not stop at merely seeing suffering as an instrument of God *acting in the one who suffers* [to their benefit]. They come to see suffering as an instrument by which the one who suffers *carries out* God's purposes *in other people, in history, or even above history in the spiritual realm*. When one comes to see that even God Himself is involved in this kind of suffering, one has reached the pinnacle of understanding.”²⁹

Is there a specific kind or type of suffering that God provides to His children? In this discussion we start with the pre-supposition that suffering in and of itself is intrinsically bad. This being said it is also to be affirmed that suffering when controlled and used as a tool in the hands of a loving and perfect God will ultimately work to the benefit of the believer, the creation in general and to God's glory (Rom 8:28).

The Apostle Paul goes to great length in describing the nature and kind of suffering the Church will have to endure, calling them the “*sufferings of Christ*” (2 Cor 1: 5). Paul identifies a specific kind of suffering – not just suffering in the abstract. The sufferings of Christ are godly sufferings that bring salvation. This kind of suffering also gives comfort in trouble (v:3-4).

Suffering makes believers “partners” with Christ. According to Paul, suffering is the mechanism by which Jesus consoles His people. His sufferings enable them to console brothers and sisters who are then in-turn empowered to console others – and so on (v:5-7).

²⁹ Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*, (Romanian Missionary Society, Wheaton, Ill, 1997) 142

Christ gives us the power to endure the same type of suffering that Paul had to endure (v:6b). Though his sufferings were great, Paul does not suggest that believers should avoid the sufferings of Christ, rather he hopes that we will share his pain and remain steadfast (v:7a). Paul's hope is rooted in his familiarity with this kind of suffering – which Christians are to partake of and share (v: 7b), even to the sharing of death (Rom 6:3-22).

In commenting on Romans 6:3-22, Josef Ton stresses the idea of being joint heirs in suffering with Christ, and that this involves much more than Christ simply dying. Ton speaks of Christ being “contemporaneous” with us.³⁰ That is to say that Christ suffers with His Church in real time and space. This makes perfect sense if one is to take as normative what the New Testament says of the sufferings of Christ being applied to the modern church.

Paul states that the sufferings of Christ are effective for “salvation” (2 Cor 1:5). But does this mean that our contemporary suffering somehow adds to the work of Jesus on the cross? The answer is no. Josef Ton distinguishes between the salvific sufferings on the Cross and the “sufferings of Christ” which we are to share. “Therefore these sufferings or afflictions of Christ that are contemporary with us and in which we are called to participate, must be completely dissociated from what happened on Calvary.”³¹

The sufferings of Christ which Christians are called upon to share can no doubt be devastating. But these are sufferings from which believers are not to shrink; rather we are to recognize these sufferings as coming from God, enduring them with “joy.” (James 1:1)

³⁰ Ibid., 142

³¹ Ibid., 142

A “joyful” attitude toward suffering does not mean that God’s children should look forward to or cause adversity to occur. As Jerry Bridges points out, “this does not mean that we should not use all legitimate means at our disposal to minimize the effects of adversity, [nor should we rejoice in the suffering of others]. It means we must accept adversity from God’s hand and learn whatever He might be teaching us.”³²

Biblical joy is neither childish nor mere happiness. Biblical joy is the mature recognition and trust that God is in perfect control. Bridges concludes; “Every adversity that comes across our path, whether large or small is intended to help us grow in some way. If it were not beneficial God would not allow it or send it... God does not delight in our sufferings. He brings only that which is necessary, but He does not shrink from that which will help us grow.”³³

If we are to reach the “pinnacle of understanding” regarding God’s use of suffering in our lives, then we must bring our misconceptions of suffering into line with the Biblical view which affirms that God uses and imposes adversity and suffering upon His children for their benefit. This, while also affirming that God does so lovingly with divine precision and purpose.

³² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, , Colorado Springs, CO, Navpress 1992) 177-178

³³ Ibid p: 177

Conclusion;

In developing a coherent Theology of Suffering, the Providence of God must be explored and conclusions drawn. Using the Bible as our authority we are compelled to face teachings which are difficult to hear. But hear them we must. Scripture states that God is sovereign and He is providential – providing and directing all things.

With respect to suffering, the Scriptures offer convincing witness that God both provides and controls suffering in order to accomplish His will. This does not negate other kinds of suffering or evil which results from human sin or satanic activity. Nor does it address suffering caused by natural disasters. These are not dealt treated in this paper.

What is affirmed in this section is that the Biblical witness makes a convincing case for a providential God who provides for and directs the suffering of His own person, His Son, His Holy Spirit and His children.

Hosea and the Suffering of God

There are few places in the Bible that so powerfully mingle the love of God with the suffering of God as does the book of Hosea.

“In no prophet is the love of God more clearly demarcated and illustrated than in Hosea. His marital experience was the key to both his ministry and his theology. It was a picture of the holiness of God righteously standing firm while the heart of God tenderly loved that which was utterly abhorrent.” Walter Kaiser ³⁴

God shows a part of His character that is remarkable – even shocking. He commands Hosea to “*go take a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry*” (Hos. 1:2). God instructs the prophet to intentionally put himself in a position that is guaranteed to cause the prophet pain, suffering and shame in a manner which demonstrates and exemplifies the pain and suffering that God experiences when those He loves are unfaithful (3:1b).

God uses the institution of marriage in a way that cannot be ignored or misinterpreted. All attempts to anthropomorphize the sufferings of God in Hosea fall short. With this book of Scripture there is no mistaking God’s expression of love and suffering on the most intimate level – i.e. that of husband and wife.

The motif of God being a husband to Israel is not isolated only in Hosea. “*For your Maker is your husband*” (Isaiah 54:5), and “*My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them*” (Jeremiah 31:32b). In Isaiah and Jeremiah the Hebrew word rendered as husband is “*bā ʾāl*” (master), whereas in Hosea the word is “*Ishi*” (husband) denoting affection and intimacy. “*In that day says the Lord you will call Me, My Husband (Ishi), and no longer call me, My Master (bā ʾāl)*” (Hos 2:16).

³⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1978) 197.

The use of the Hebrew word “bā ʾāl” in Isaiah and Jeremiah does not imply a “master / servant” relationship because they are presented in the context of the marital covenant.³⁵ What we see in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea is covenantal “loyal love” exemplifying the faithfulness and devotion of God for His people.

God accepts Israel’s view of her restored position as His wife – He is her Husband (Ishi) (2:16). This restored relationship which God initiated committed both parties to each other emotionally – “for better or worse.” God betroths Himself to her “*I will betroth you to Me forever, Yes I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness*” (2:19).

God bound Himself with an everlasting promise knowing full well that His betrothed would cause Him pain. In 2:19 it is important to note that the betrayal had already occurred, yet God was still faithful in carrying out His plan for her restoration. The love which God describes in His betrothal address is a love that comes at a terrible price i.e. “the suffering of God”.

But God’s suffering has purpose – the salvation of those He chooses to glorify, coupled with His desire to live (dwell) among His people (Ex 29:45-46).

The pain generated by an unfaithful spouse is one of agony. It has been described as a tearing and rending of the heart by those who have experienced it. God says that His heart “*churns*” or “recoiled” within Him (11:8b).³⁶

³⁵ Marvin Wilson demonstrates that Isaiah 54:5 and Jeremiah 31:32 are in the context of a bridegroom and his bride – not a master and slave. Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, Eerdmans, (1989: p: 203)

³⁶ 11:8b – in place of “churns” (NKJV), Kaiser prefers the words “recoiled within Him” to describe Yahweh’s reluctance to give up the northern tribes, saying God’s compassions were deeply stirred. In either case the emphasis focuses on the fact that God is experiencing great discomfort. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 197

From a human perspective God would be justified in abandoning her, but God refuses to do this. *“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?”* (11:8a), *“For I am God and not like a man”* (11:9). Under Jewish custom a spurned or betrayed husband would be justified, even expected to leave an unfaithful and shameful wife (cf Mt 1:19, 5:31-32). But as it is written in Hosea, God is not like a man.

God is providential – He provides and He directs. Israel by herself was unable to see that her very existence was in jeopardy (Hos 7:9). She turned away from the knowledge of God and so she would perish (4:6). But God provided the wilderness experience for her instruction (2:14). He put her in a land far away from the trappings of the world which so easily lured her and cast her into slavery. In the wilderness God made her separate (holy). He even took it upon Himself to share in her suffering with an act of self-sanctification. God held to her and to her alone, *“... so too will I be with you”* (3:3). He chose to “allure” and comfort her in the wilderness (2:14). He provided for her until she acknowledged her sin and earnestly sought Him (5:15).

The Bible reveals that it is only through privation, pain and suffering that Israel would eventually come to know Yahweh as her true provider and recognize His loyal love for her. *“And you shall know the Lord”* (2:20b). God provided the necessary suffering – *“The Valley of Achor (i.e. ‘valley of trouble’) as her door to hope”* (2:15) (cf Josh 7:24-26, Isa 65:10).

God loves and He is patient – He suffers long and willingly endures the pain of her disloyalty, knowing eventually His people will be restored by His grace (Hos 14:4-9). In that day Israel will be revived (14:7) and have nothing more to do with false gods and idols (14:8a). This is the goal that God will achieve concerning His people.

God does this at a great price to Himself. He endured the rejection of an unfaithful “wife and children” who unjustly rebelled against His love and provision (4:6).

The idea that the God of the universe would condescend to love that which is unlovable and to do so at great personal pain is staggering. Love without risk is not love. God knowingly walks this path in gracious acts that give life to those who do not deserve it.

It is evident in the Book of Hosea that Yahweh is not the impassible and distant God of the Greek “*apathes*.” The personal God of the Bible is intimately involved with His creation moment by moment with an intense “*brooding*” concern (Gen. 1:2).

The use of the marriage motif described in Hosea corresponds perfectly with Christ and His Church. God the Son is shown to be the loving provider and redeemer (Phil 4:19, Col 1:14). Christ gives Himself for that which is at first abhorrent and then through the purifying power of His word sanctifies, washes and makes her holy (Eph 5:26).

The self sacrifice of Christ for His Church is shown in that He chooses to endure her abuse and infidelity (Ro 5:8). The purpose of the suffering Son and Holy Spirit is the same as the Father – unification with His chosen people at the most intimate level. (Jn 17:21-23).

At the heart of God’s suffering in both the OT and NT is His loving-kindness or “*loyal love*” (*hesed*). This love helps explain why God is willing to choose a path of suffering. “*When Israel was a child, I loved him*” (11:1). “*I taught Ephraim to walk*” (11:3) “*I stooped and fed them*” (11:4b) “*My sympathy is stirred*” (11:8b). Here then is God’s motivation for choosing to suffer– His loyal love for His people.

Christians may be comfortable with the suffering servant of the NT. But at times it is difficult to see that the God of the OT suffers as well. Jesus Himself resolves this difficulty when He says, “*He who has seen me has seen the Father.*” (Jn 14:7-11). As believers come to see and know the sufferings of Christ they can also begin to see the sufferings of the Father.

Conclusion

What can be learned about God in the book of Hosea is His remarkable capacity for the most noble kind of suffering - a voluntary and deliberate act to suffer for the benefit of an undeserving, non-reciprocal love. God deliberately made Himself vulnerable – anticipating, directing and then enduring the suffering which was to come, and yet as a sovereign God, He chose to proceed with loving kindness.

Divine suffering as shown in Hosea is a continuing theme in Biblical history and is ongoing today in His continuing process of salvation. It is also the key to Christians today who find themselves in difficult relationships with family and friends. The example of showing divine loving-kindness with long-suffering for the sake of another even though that individual is undeserving and hurtful is at the heart of God's teaching.

Isaiah and the Suffering of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is defined by Christian Orthodoxy as Divine and as being a “person.”³⁷ But many modern theologians such as Karl Barth have been successful, (to a degree), in denying the personhood of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ The influence of Barth and others has resulted in many believers failing to regard the distinction of the Holy Spirit as a person. They tend to see Him only as the “Spirit of Christ” or an influencing force in the faith and actions of Christians. Because of this influence it has become uncomfortable if not alien for many Believers to think of the Holy Spirit as one who could suffer like the Father and the Son.

Isaiah 63: 7-16 is helpful in making critical comparisons and distinctions concerning the suffering of the Father and the suffering of the Holy Spirit. In his writings Isaiah mingles in parallel fashion the emotions and grief of the Father and the Spirit. This yields some intriguing insights concerning the attributes of the Trinity

God loved and pitied His children, (63:7-9) and in all of their afflictions, God Himself was afflicted (63:9). God put His Holy Spirit “within them” (63:11b). But when Israel rebelled, the Holy Spirit was grieved and so He turned against them as an enemy (63:10). It was then that Isaiah pleaded with God (and with His Holy Spirit) for mercy – appealing to the “zeal” and “yearning” of God’s heart.

“Where are your zeal and Your strength, the yearning of Your heart

and Your mercies toward me? Are they restrained?” (63:15).

³⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids MI, (1994 p 232-233). Grudem is very helpful in distinguishing the personhood of the Holy Spirit from the work of the Holy Spirit.

³⁸ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, Harper & Row, NY 1959, p139. Karl Barth saw the Holy Spirit only in light of His relationship to Jesus Christ and only as a motivating force within believers as they related to Christ. He did not speak of the Holy Spirit as a person distinct from Christ. “*We are not concerned in the Holy Spirit with something different from Him [Christ]. ..The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus Christ...The Holy Spirit is nothing else than a certain relation of the Word to man.*”

In this chapter it is difficult to draw distinct lines between the Father and the Holy Spirit. But this begs the question – are we supposed to make such distinctions? Isaiah clearly distinguishes between the Father and the Holy Spirit by naming them separately and attributing specific actions to them. Yet at the same time Isaiah weaves their motives, emotions and responses to Israel into a unity of purpose and intent.

This back and forth paralleling of the Father and His Spirit defies attempts to impose a clean systematic division regarding the suffering and emotions of the Father apart from the Holy Spirit – at what point are we speaking of the Father and or the Holy Spirit?

John S. Feinberg points out that Isaiah 61:1, 63:7, 10 make it hard to think the Holy Spirit is less than divine. Feinberg further states that while making distinctions between the Holy Spirit and Yahweh, these passages intimately link the two. “*So the Holy Spirit is somehow **both identical and distinct from the Lord***” (*emphasis mine*). It is compelling and intriguing that Feinberg would choose these passages in Isaiah, which speak so directly to the emotion and suffering of the Holy Spirit, when making observations about the Trinity.³⁹

Isaiah 63: 9-17 are clearly parallel attributions of emotion and suffering with respect to God and the Holy Spirit. In this way, Isaiah gives additional weight to the assertion that the Holy Spirit is a distinct / identical person of the Trinity who can and does suffer.

³⁹ John S Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, Cross Ways, Wheaton Ill, p 454

Final Conclusions

1. There appears to be compelling and sufficient evidence to affirm that the Triune God can and does experience emotions and suffering both in unity and as three distinct persons. Further, this emotion and suffering is a vital component of the character of God as it provides motivation for His actions.
2. God provides for and directs the suffering of the Trinity and His people with perfect control and intent, in order to accomplish His will.
3. The suffering of God does not conflict with the doctrines of impassibility and immutability when clear definitions of these terms are articulated. The emotions and suffering of God are not to be confused with the emotions and suffering of humans. God does not change. He is not subject to His emotions – they are subject to Him.
4. Evangelical / Fundamental teaching to the Laity regarding a God-Centered theology of suffering is seriously lacking. This lack of teaching renders many Christians – pastors and Laity alike, ill prepared to grapple with the conflict of human and personal suffering. The Bible is clear on this subject and sufficient information is available which could strengthen and encourage the Modern Church, but tragically this teaching is largely ignored.

Summary - The Suffering Nature of God

“When Israel was child, I loved him...I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love.... My people are bent on backsliding from Me!... How can I give you up?... How can I hand you over and how can I make you like Admah (destroyed!)? ...My heart churns within Me!” (Hos. 11:1-9)

The thought of God being in a state of agony is a sobering one. It is a picture that is at first foreign to our senses. Yet, this is exactly the picture we see as God commands Hosea to take a wife who Hosea knows will betray him. God commands Hosea to love and be intimate with her, to have children by her and then suffer the agony of rejection, separation and finally betrayal. All this to teach Hosea, Israel and Christians about the nature of God!

As we read Hosea the suffering of God is at once made clear. We see pain turned into righteous anger as God experiences the arrogant ingratitude of His people. God gave Himself to Israel in love; He gave His children life, food, their very existence and offered Himself as the loving and forever faithful groom. God had the right to destroy Israel in His fierce anger, yet He chose not to. (Hos. 11:9). Rather He chose to “allure her” by bringing her into the wilderness and there to speak gently to her in order to instruct her. She was ignorant and God chose to teach her by her “valley experience” and finally to restore her. (Hos. 2:14).

The Old Testament reveals that God does indeed possess the capacity to suffer and the willing propensity to take upon Himself the agony and the risk of loving the unlovable - even with the certainty of His death. God gives up Himself for His love and this gives great comfort to those who recognize this attribute in the Father.

Summary - New Testament Parallels – God Does Not Change

...as Christ loved the Church (i.e. His Bride), in that He gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25b-27)

In Ephesians we see a similar pattern as we saw in Hosea. The “God-Man” who was without blemish, willingly put Himself in harms way. In doing so, He gave Himself up for an unclean and unfaithful Church. By doing so, He shared His “nature,” or to put it another way His “Logos” (or word) and washed her. In this way He cleanses His family. He nourishes His people and restores the intimacy and righteous order that was lost in the Garden. Notice that it is the Triune God who is the initiator. The cleansing of His Church is an ongoing process. He is the one who does the work and will see it through to completion. (Phil 1:6).

Summary - God’s Providence in Suffering

God’s providential care has been identified theologically as having two primary characteristics. The first is summarized in the statement that “God provides” and the second is that “God directs.” God provides suffering as a means to His glorification and the calling out, instruction and the “saving” of His people. It is disquieting to realize that suffering, illness and death may serve the purpose and plan of a loving God, but this fact is confirmed in Scripture, e.g. the man blinded from birth, “*that the works of God should be revealed in him.*” (Jn 9:3).

That God provides suffering is affirmed in Scripture. But His Spirit also uses suffering to direct events. The Holy Spirit acts as a dispatcher or conductor in determining the timing and means by which a destination or outcome is reached.

A Biblical example of the Holy Spirit's role as a conductor is found in Acts 16: 6-10. Paul was directed no less than three times by the Holy Spirit to refrain from preaching in Asia. It was God who directed Paul to travel to Europe (Macedonia) not Paul. Paul intended to go to Asia. The churches of Asia such as Antioch were already established and it can be assumed that the suffering of Paul would be less likely. But in Macedonia, Rome had already passed laws forbidding the establishment of new religions and so it was a certainty that Paul and the saints would endure much suffering in creating new churches. This is not the only example of God directing the suffering of His people.

In Matthew 23:34 it is shocking to read that Jesus would actually send His prophets and disciples to be persecuted and killed in order to convict the hypocritical Pharisees. Here, a deliberate act which caused great suffering was employed by Jesus to make His point.

This may appear extreme, but as I continue in thought I see God's use of persecution and suffering is never without purpose. Divine purpose in suffering was exemplified when Jesus went to great length to teach the Disciples that His persecution and death was not a tragedy but a triumph. The suffering of Jesus' life and crucifixion was a necessary and premeditated act (Lk 24:7, 25-26, 46). This speaks volumes about the nature of God.

A Personal Philosophy of Suffering

Hosea 2:14 teaches that the road to redemption and the restoration of fellowship with God lies through the “Valley of Achor” or trouble which God refers to as our “hope.” The “wilderness experience” is shown to be a vital and necessary tool that God uses to raise up and teach His children. The Bible also teaches that suffering prepares the heart of those who come to God while afflicting those who reject Him. In short, Suffering, as seen in Scripture, serves many purposes with respect to people. But suffering also tells a great deal about the nature of God.

Baptism of Fire - Uniting with His Suffering

How does all of this impact one’s view of persecution and suffering in this age? The answer lies with some key ideas. If anyone is to be a follower of Jesus, Paul states that they will undergo a process of becoming like Christ. We will share and become united, or “baptized” in His suffering, death, burial and His resurrection (Rom. 6: 1-11). This “baptism” is a uniting or joining with the Creator.

On a personally note, this is what I want and need most – to “touch the hand of God,” to know Him and to be in fellowship and to become more like Him. This baptism of fire painfully burns away sin, pride and imperfection. But at the same time it is a fire which tempers and purifies believers as gold is purified by fire. We must never forget that this painful and sometimes torturous process has great purpose. And because there is purpose there can also be endurance and great strength. This process or valley of trouble is not one that God forces His children to walk alone. God took that road Himself – the road of suffering and death before the foundation of the earth (Rev. 13:8).

Hard to Hear – Yet Comforting

The realization, that God is intimately involved with suffering – that He suffers and that He is both a provider and director of suffering is difficult to hear on one level. And yet on another level it is comforting to know that God's providence is universal. He is in total control of Himself and creation. It is also comforting to realize that there is purpose and deliberate intent in the suffering of the world and the saints of God. Finally it is both comforting and energizing to realize that the tribulations and suffering of the saints is being managed with great skill and precision by the one who has our ultimate good at heart (II Cor 1:1-11).

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