

# The Suffering of God's Servants in the Psalms.

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Suffering is the human experience. In the midst of life we are in the midst of death – and suffering, even though modern society, too often with our acquiescence, seeks to numb the feeling with the narcotic of pleasures of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. Suffering is our experience, which it is foolish to deny. We suffer as individuals and as groups. Suffering is the human experience and all are touched by it sooner or later. But how are God's people to respond to suffering? It is from the Scriptures that we get our answers. The psalms, because they more than any other section of Scripture express the deepest feelings of the heart, give pertinent direction on the topic.

Suffering is reflected particularly in the lament or complaint type psalms. These are of two types, those of the people or group, and those of the individual. Each type reveals something of the nature of suffering which God's people may experience and appropriate responses to it. The database is extensive, as the lament is the most common type of psalm, and our examination of this database must be selective. Access to it may be profitably gained by considering some representative psalms and analysing their messages concerning suffering.

## *Physical Affliction for Sin*

In Psalm 32 the psalmist reflects on his past suffering and seeks to draw lessons from it for others. Hence it is a good place to start if we also wish to learn lessons about suffering and how we should respond to it (or avoid it, as the psalmist seeks to inculcate into his listeners).

First, the suffering of the believer may be physical. In this case the psalmist records that “my bones wasted away” (v. 3), “my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer” (v. 4). This suffering was severe and chronic for it was accompanied by “groaning all day long” (v.3). Yet how easy it is, when all is well, to quickly read over these words and not consider the real condition of the sufferer. This was no Sunday school picnic, no stroll in the park, no short ailment soon passing with the help of appropriate medication. This appears to have felt like, even if it is not to be identified with, ongoing rheumatic or arthritic pain accompanied by the symptoms of Chronic

Fatigue Syndrome. God's people could suffer physically – and suffer severely.

This suffering was not merely something that happened in the natural course of life. This was not part of the natural aging process. Again, this suffering was not due to poor lifestyle choices – overeating, lack of exercise. The suffering was inflicted by Yahweh, by the LORD himself. The psalmist recognizes this and acknowledges that “day and night your hand was heavy upon me” (v. 4).

But why would Yahweh afflict one of his own? It was due to sin in the life of the psalmist, or rather due to unconfessed sin. It was only by confession that the sufferer's problem was to be dealt with – the root problem was not the suffering, which was merely a symptom of the greater malady. The basic problem was estrangement from Yahweh, with unforgiven sin being a barrier between him and Yahweh's favour. Hence the psalmist recalls, “I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD” – and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” (v. 5) The psalmist had sinned against his God. He had remained silent about this (v. 3), stubbornly and petulantly clinging to his rebellious autonomy, when he should have immediately sued for the forgiveness and the peace freely offered to rebels such as he was.

Psalm 32 reveals that God's people could suffer physically, and that such suffering could come from the LORD's hand as a chastisement for sin unconfessed. Later we will consider whether the Lord may deal this way with his own still.

Psalm 38 records the cry of one in the midst of God's dealing with him. The principles revealed in Psalm 32 are evident in this psalm also. This psalmist also suffers physically. He complains, “[T]here is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness” (v. 3); “my wounds fester and are loathsome” (v. 5); “[m]y back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body” (v. 7). More generally he mourns that “I am feeble and utterly crushed” (v. 8); “[m]y heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes” (v. 10); “my pains are ever with me” (v. 17). We probably should not try to diagnose the problem, for the description may be coloured by the poetic license of hyperbole. Nevertheless there is no doubt that the sickness is severe, all encompassing, and affects the body both

externally and internally. As Cragie comments “At first sight, it appears that the patient has nearly every disease in the book...”<sup>1</sup>

As in Psalm 32 it is Yahweh who is seen to cause the affliction. “O LORD, do not rebuke me in *your* anger, or discipline me in *your* wrath. For *your* arrows have pierced me, and *your* hand has come down upon me. Because of *your* wrath there is no health in my body.” (vv. 1-3a)<sup>2</sup> As in the previous psalm the suffering is presented as due to sin.<sup>3</sup> The writer acknowledges that his predicament is “because of my sin” (v. 3); “because of my sinful folly” (v. 5); that “[m]y guilt has overwhelmed me” (v. 4); and that “I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin” (v. 18) As in Psalm 32 he sees confession as the route to a restored relationship with his God and the removal of the suffering with which the LORD is chastising him (v. 18)

### *Emotional Suffering*

Yet Psalm 38 reveals more of the suffering which can afflict one of God’s children. Beyond the physical is the emotional. The loss of relationships, at a time when the support of others is of high importance, is a cruel blow. So this sufferer grieves that “[m]y friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbours stay far away” (v. 11). Added to this is the hostility of enemies, enemies without cause, in fact against cause, for they “repay my good with evil” and “slander me when I pursue what is good” (v. 20). The psalmist has emotional suffering added to the physical.

It is true that with the lament or complaint of the individual, of which Psalm 38 is an example, the suffering in the first instance need not be caused by an enemy. But the enemy is an added source of anguish. Evidence of such suffering afflicted by others is prominent in the psalms. The enemy role is not insignificant, as is evident in this psalm. What the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter C. Cragie, *Psalms 1-50* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), p. 303.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added. The second person singular masculine pronominal suffix (ך) is explicit in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Cragie suggests that the suffering may not be due to sin, and that the psalmist may have been mistaken in this attribution of cause. “[H]e spoke and prayed from the depth of physical and mental despair, a situation within which it was easy for the theological perspectives to go haywire.” (*Psalms 1-50*, p. 303) This is a valuable insight encouraging us to read in the context of genuine suffering with all its attendant psychological effects. On the other hand, while it is true that not all specific sufferings are due directly to specific sin, the Old Testament testimony is that they may be, as in Psalm 32. There is no reason to believe that the psalmist got it wrong here.

enemy often does is add to, aid, advance or rejoice in the discomfort of the sufferer. A concrete example of how this might happen is found in the case of Hannah, who suffers emotionally because of her childlessness. Peninah, while obviously not the cause of Hannah's suffering, adds to her distress by her provocations (1 Sam. 1:5-7). And in this case too it appears that the opponents are not the initiators of the psalmist's difficulties but rather taking advantage of his weakened state to do him harm.

But above all there is the emotional suffering of estrangement from Yahweh himself. Believers professed that it was possible to lose all earthly support, and yet to be able to strengthen one's heart. The Asaphite psalmist confesses, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psa. 73:25-26). From the Davidic collection we hear the declaration: "Though my father and my mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (Psa. 27:10).<sup>4</sup> To lose the relationship with Yahweh was the ultimate tragedy. But the complainant of Psalm 38 feels this threatening. For it is *Yahweh's* rebuke, discipline and wrath which he experiences. Hence his plea, "O LORD do not forsake me, be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior" (vv. 21-22). We hear, then, the pain which the psalmist must endure was not just that of the blows inflicted, severe which they undoubtedly were. We hear the emotional distress caused by the disfavour of the One who inflicted them. Yahweh who did this was claimed as "my God...my Savior." Estrangement from Him was the worst blow of all.

Finally we see that the suffering, as is the case with Psalm 32, is dealt with within the relationship with God. We should not think that this was an automatic response nor that those of the ancient church were not tempted, in their distress, to abandon God. Already we have seen in Psalm 32, the predisposition to cling to rebellion and not seek to rectify a marred relationship with God. Within the Psalter itself we read the confession of one who complained, "All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning" (Psa. 73:14) admitting, "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold" (v. 2), reflected more clearly in his near-apostatising thought, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence" (v. 3). With feminine directness Job's wife had only articulated what others obviously

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<sup>4</sup> Even if this is translated as "May the LORD receive me" (cf. *NIVSB* note) it shows that the primary and most supportive relationship in the believer's life was that with Yahweh.

thought (Job 2:9). Yet this was not the way to deal with suffering. For God is the one who afflicted and He was the one who could be prevailed upon to remove his stroke. Such was the faith of the author of Psalm 38.

### *The Suffering of Facing Death*

Psalm 6, the first of the so-called Penitential Psalms<sup>5</sup>, reflects a number of the themes seen in Psalms 32 and 38. That the psalmist suffers physically is evident. He complains, “I am faint...my bones are in agony” (v. 2); “I am worn out from groaning” (v. 6). The “groaning” of this last complaint suggests the addition of emotional suffering, confirmed by his words, “all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow...” (vv. 6-7); the total misery summed by, “My soul is in anguish” (v.3)<sup>6</sup>. His suffering had been of no short duration as he cried, “How long, O LORD, how long?” (v. 3)

Unlike Psalms 32 and 38, sin is not mentioned. Should it be taken as implied? Clearly the biblical witness is that the suffering of God’s people is not always because of their sin. In Psalms 7 and 17 the complainants suffer, yet in both cases there are protestations of innocence: “Give ear to my prayer – it does not rise from deceitful lips...Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing; I have resolved that my mouth will not sin” (17:1b, 3; cf. 7:3-5). But in these cases the suffering is at the hand of enemies rather than due to sickness inflicted by Yahweh. Maybe the lack of protestation of innocence in Psalm 6 is a signal that there is a consciousness of guilt. So, though we cannot be sure that the suffering of Psalm 6 is due to sin (for the case may be Job-like), in the light of similar Psalms it is not unreasonable to conclude that it probably is.

Psalm 6 makes explicit a further aspect of suffering that might come to God’s people – the agony of facing death. This problem is alluded to in Psalm 38: “For I am about to fall...” (v. 17), where “fall” is an alternative term for “die” (cf. Psa. 13:3-4; 87:2). More explicitly here the psalmist reminds God that “[n]o one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?” (v. 5). In the context of his plea, this reminder may

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<sup>5</sup> The Penitential Psalms are those which, according to tradition, David composed after being confronted by Nathan concerning his affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). They are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the soul is “[n]ot a spiritual aspect in distinction from the physical, nor the psalmist’s ‘inner’ being in distinction from his ‘outer’ being, but his very self as a living, conscious personal being.” (*NIVSB*, p. 784)

merely be seen as presenting the case of loss for Yahweh should he die, an arguing of the case for his reprieve on the grounds of Yahweh's self-interest.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand it also seems to reflect a personal concern in the face of death. For the psalmists death appears to be a problem. "For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care." (Psa. 88:3-5). "Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more"(Psa. 39:13).

Such sentiments seem strange to our ears. Why is death a problem, since all must die, a fact the ancients could not deny? The patriarchs apparently faced death with equanimity (Gen. 47:30; 49:33; cf. 15:15; 25:8), as did David (1 Kgs 2:2, 10). It may be true that little had been revealed to the psalmists concerning the post-mortem state. But this does not seem to explain their attitude to it that differed from that of other believers.

Part of the answer may be that what the psalmists recoil from is not so much from death itself but from a premature death. Of Abraham it was recalled that he "breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years..." (Gen. 25:7). Similarly Job (Job 42:17). By way of contrast are the words of Psalm 102: "In the course of my life he broke my strength; he cut short my days. So I said: 'Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of my days...'" (vv. 23-24a). A full period of life of fellowship with and praise of God was what the psalmists desired. The possibility of this being cut short was a threat, and a cause of suffering.

Another reason for the evident negativity towards death may have been because it was in the context of judgement. "You rebuke and discipline men for their sin... Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more" (Psa. 39:11, 13). So also here in Psalm 6: "O LORD do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath." The deaths of the patriarchs and of David occurred when they were in harmony with their God and not under his wrath. What being under God's wrath may

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<sup>7</sup> On the praiselessness of death Brueggemann writes: "If Yahweh allows the death of the speaker, Yahweh will lose a witness to Yahweh's  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$  There will be no speech on earth, among the living, of Yahweh's steadfast love or faithfulness or wonders or saving help." (Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament – Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 398); cf. Psa. 30:10; 88:6-12; 115:17.

have meant in the psalmists' understanding in terms of post-mortem existence we cannot be sure. We can be sure that it is in these contexts that the fear of death is expressed. Hence it is fair to conclude that not all death was to be feared. As well as prematurity of death, that which came as a result of God's punishment for sin was the type of death, the contemplation of which caused suffering and the plea for relief.<sup>8</sup>

### *Alleviation of Suffering*

A psalm like Psalm 6 points to another aspect of suffering in the Old Testament. Usually the suffering was not unrelieved. Often in the psalms of complaint there is a change of tone within the psalm. The first section of the psalm outlines the complaint, the suffering, and pleads for its removal. But often these psalms end on a positive note. In Psalm 6 this change of tone comes at verse 8. "Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping." So within the psalm it can be seen that the prayer was answered in some way.

What brought about this change? We cannot be sure. Brueggemann wrestles with the issue:

Clearly there was some kind of action or transaction in the unspoken space of the poem between the two elements.... It was possible that this was an "inward, spiritual" experience. More likely it was an outward, visible act by some member of the community, mediating the fresh move of Yahweh to the speaker.... Whatever it was it must have had a profound emotional, as well as theological, impact on the complainer, for a whole new world of trust and gratitude is entered into in that moment.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Finally a further clue to the psalmists' concern in the face of death may be that it could be at the hands of enemies. An unnatural death, not avoiding or being shielded from violence at the time of death; was seen as negative. Hence David charged Solomon to punish Joab, "[D]o not let his gray head go down to the grave in peace" (1 Kgs 2:6). Provan comments: "That is, do not let him die a peaceful and natural death in old age." (Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Henrikson Publishers, 1995), p. 35). Also note that the mention of "gray head" in this context of punishment confirms the concept of premature death as being something abnormal and negative.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), p.57.

Though there is little evidence to go on, there is some support for the idea that, in some cases, an appropriate member of the covenant community indicated to the complainant that the prayer had been heard, and that this marked the turning point in mood, later reflected in the psalms. This evidence comes from the case of Hannah recorded in 1 Samuel 1. There is no doubt that Hannah suffered, being distressed by her childlessness. Her distress was aggravated by the taunts of her “enemy.” She sought the LORD’s intervention and vowed a sacrificial response if she was answered. In all this the tone and situation of the complaint psalms is reflected. Yet we see that later it could be said, “her face was no longer downcast” (v.18). What brought this change of mood, a change reminiscent of the development from despair to hope reflected in the complaint psalms? It was a word from a “member of the community, mediating the fresh move of Yahweh to the speaker.” Eli the high priest had pronounced “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (v.17). Yet whether this was the case in every change of mood in the complaint psalms we cannot be sure. The mood change may well have been a recognition of the general promises of God for the particular case. What can be said with certainty is that often there was an expressed confidence that the prayer was heard and that the suffering was relieved or was to be so. “For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psa. 30:5).

### *Cries of the Suffering for Judgement on Those Causing Suffering*

In Psalm 6 the fate of the enemies of the psalmist is spoken of. “All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace” (v. 10). This highlights another aspect of suffering in the Psalms – the negative attitude of the sufferers towards their enemies. Often, rather than being in the form of prediction, this attitude expresses itself in a prayer for evil to befall the enemies, for Yahweh’s execution of judgement upon them. Hence the final verse in Psalm 6 can be understood and translated, “Let all my enemies be ashamed and greatly troubled; let them turn back *and* be ashamed suddenly.”<sup>10</sup> Suffering can bring forth imprecations from the lips of the sufferers.

Clearer and fuller imprecations are seen in other psalms. In Psalm 58 the sufferer cries:

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<sup>10</sup> *New King James Version*, cf. *The New Jerusalem Bible*, and Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1-50* (Garden City, New York; Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), p. 37.  
*Vox Reformata*, 67

- <sup>6</sup> Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;  
tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions!  
<sup>7</sup> Let them vanish like water that flows away;  
when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted.  
<sup>8</sup> Like a slug melting away as it moves along,  
like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun.

Also in Psalm 59:

- <sup>11</sup> But do not kill them, O Lord our shield,  
or my people will forget.  
In your might make them wander about,  
and bring them down.  
<sup>12</sup> For the sins of their mouths,  
for the words of their lips,  
let them be caught in their pride.  
For the curses and lies they utter,  
<sup>13</sup> consume them in wrath,  
consume them till they are no more.  
Then it will be known to the ends of the earth  
that God rules over Jacob.

Much has been written on the topic of the imprecations in the psalms and various conclusions drawn. Many consider the desires expressed as unworthy of a true child of God, as well as being inconsistent with the teaching of the New Testament. How are such suffering cries to be understood?<sup>11</sup>

These cries of the suffering ones are more than cries for personal vengeance. Often these reflect an explicit concern for God's honour, not just the comfort of the sufferer. "Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, *for they have rebelled against you*" (Psalm 5:10).<sup>12</sup> A similar concern is expressed in Psalm 139:

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner's discussion on the "Cries for Vengeance" gives helpful direction in answering these questions, although he believes that the Imprecatory Psalms are **not** to be sung by Christians today. The following section depends, to a large extent, on Kidner's analysis; see Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms*, (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), pp. 25-32.

<sup>12</sup> Emphasis added.

- <sup>19</sup> If only you would slay the wicked, O God!  
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!  
<sup>20</sup> *They speak of you with evil intent;*  
*your adversaries misuse your name.*  
<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate *those who hate you*, O LORD,  
and abhor *those who rise up against you*?<sup>13</sup>

Connected with this is a concern for justice in Yahweh's kingdom. After Yahweh executes his judgement as called for by the sufferer a certain result is expected. "Then men will say, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth" (Psa. 58:11). "...[C]onsume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more. Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob (Psa. 59:13).

Also Psalm 79:

- <sup>10</sup> Why should the nations say,  
"Where is their God?"  
Before our eyes, make known among the nations  
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.  
<sup>11</sup> May the groans of the prisoners come before you;  
by the strength of your arm  
preserve those condemned to die.

Of course it is not general justice that is desired but justice to be executed in the case of the sufferers themselves. "Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High...bring to an end the violence of the wicked.... The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head" (Psa. 7:8b, 9b, 16). "Vindicate me in your righteousness, O LORD my God; do not let them gloat over me.... May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame and confusion; may all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame and disgrace" (Psa. 35: 24, 26). "Save me, O God, by your name; vindicate me by your might.... Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in your faithfulness destroy them" (Psa. 54:1, 8).

The tone of the imprecations, from plaintive to ferocious, is an indication of the measure of the deeds that have provoked them. Those who suffer at the hands of the enemies, not only suffer unjustly; the suffering inflicted is intense. This is seen in the accusations of Psalm 94:

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis added.  
*Vox Reformata*, 67

- <sup>4</sup> They pour out arrogant words;  
all the evildoers are full of boasting.
- <sup>5</sup> They crush your people, O LORD;  
they oppress your inheritance.
- <sup>6</sup> They slay the widow and the alien;  
they murder the fatherless.
- <sup>7</sup> They say, "The LORD does not see;  
the God of Jacob pays no heed."
- <sup>21</sup> They band together against the righteous  
and condemn the innocent to death.

Yet the words of imprecation need to be understood and interpreted in terms of their literary style. The language of these psalms is not literal. "Here we should notice," Kidner points out, "that invective has its own rhetoric, in which horror may be piled upon horror more to express the speaker's sense of outrage than to spell out the penalties he literally intends."<sup>14</sup> An example of this type of language is seen in Jer. 20:15-17:

Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you--a son!" May that man be like the towns the LORD overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.

In this way these expressions from the suffering in the psalms are intended to touch the emotions – the emotions of outrage against injustice in Yahweh's kingdom.

Finally Kidner gives another valuable insight into the nature of the imprecations in the psalms. He notes that "these maledictions...for all their appearance of implacability...are to be taken as conditional, as indeed the prophets' oracles were."<sup>15</sup> The principle is stated clearly in Jeremiah, where Yahweh is recorded as saying,

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or

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<sup>14</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 30.

kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jer. 8:7-10).

The principle is seen operating in the case of Jonah. "On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.".... When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." (Jon. 3:4, 10)

Sufferers wanted Yahweh to act against their enemies. They called for this because they had a concern for God's honour and for justice to be exercised in his kingdom. Connected with this, naturally, they sought personal vindication as they served him faithfully. They pleaded with Yahweh in extreme and emotion-stirring language that was commensurate with the evil of the enemies' deeds and the severity of suffering they caused. Implicit in the worldview within which these cries of the afflicted were uttered was the understanding that change of attitude and behaviour on the part of those who afflict would enable them to avoid Yahweh's judgments. But, in the face of the crisis of suffering and of the need to make the case before the Great Judge with utmost urgency, the expression of such conditionality was not made explicit, nor should it be expected. These were heart expressions of suffering, not the subsections of a legal code nor parts of an exhaustive treatise on justice in the Kingdom.

### **Continuing Relevance**

God's people today continue to experience hardships. We are not exempt from physical suffering and sickness, from emotional suffering nor the opposition of unbelievers and persecutors. Immediately we might think that the words of the psalms can be applied to our own cases. And this may be so. Yet the process by which we reach such a conclusion is important. It is not sufficient to say that the Old Testament people of God had a certain experience; we are the people of God still; therefore all their experiences may be legitimately ours. Such reasoning is inadequate because between the Old Testament saints and us are the great redemptive events of the coming of the Messiah. Clearly these have made a difference in the way at least parts of the Old Testament may be applied to God's people today. No longer are the ceremonial regulations binding on God's people. The work of Christ has manifested realities of which they were a shadow. Is there a similar change in the principles of suffering which are seen in the Old Testament and especially the Psalms? To seek to answer this question we

will look at what the New Testament says about the suffering of God's people.

Now as we look at the New Testament we have to take into account the difference in the database. While a great number of the Psalms reflect the cries of believers, there are few records of the cries of believers in the New Testament. This need not be taken as an indication that the New Testament community did not express such cries. Nor is this evidence that such outpourings of distress were inappropriate for New Testament believers. Rather the New Testament, with its many consolations and encouragements in the face of sufferings, as it were, may be seen as recording but half of the conversation between God and his people of which the Old Testament records both sides - the expressions of distress as well as the encouragements to the suffering and distressed. Also, while this is generally true, there are, in fact, some reflections of the distress side of the dialogue in the New Testament as well in the Old (e.g. Rev. 6:10).

### *Physical Affliction for Sin*

May God's New Testament people be afflicted because of their sin? Of course all suffering in the world is due to the presence of sin in the world. But is there still that suffering from the hand of God directed at his people for their particular sins?

First, it is clear that this is not always the case. The Lord made this abundantly clear from his answer to the disciples concerning the man born blind in John 9. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (v.3). Yet this does not differ from the Old Testament situation. There the book of Job points in the same direction. The physical suffering of God's people, of Old and New Testament, is not necessarily due to their sins.

On the other hand, as Leon Morris, in comments on Christ's words to the healed paralytic in John 5:14, indicates, "In 9:1ff. Jesus repudiates the idea that disasters like blindness are inevitably caused by sin. But He does not say that they are never caused by sin. In the present verse He seems to imply that the man's sin had brought about his infirmity."<sup>16</sup>

An instruction in James points in the same direction:

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<sup>16</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 307.

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (Jms 5:14-16<sup>a</sup>).

A. Ross notes with respect to verse 15, “The special idea suggested here, quite likely, is that sickness may have been directly caused by sin...”<sup>17</sup>

This perspective is further reinforced by Paul’s exhortations to the Corinthian church concerning the Lord’s Supper:

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

While there is debate concerning the exact nature of the sin involved, it is clear that there is sin: “...whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning...” (v. 27). This sin has brought judgement from the Lord: “...when we are judged by the Lord...” (v.32). This judgement has taken the form of physical suffering: “...many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep”<sup>18</sup> (v. 30).

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 100.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Fee comments helpfully: “Most likely Paul does not see the judgment as a kind of “one for one,” that is, the person who has abused another is the one who gets sick. Rather, the whole community is affected by the actions of some, who are creating “divisions” within the one body of Christ. Probably the rash of illnesses and deaths that have recently overtaken them is here being viewed as an expression of divine judgment on the whole community” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), p. 565.

So we may conclude that the physical suffering of God's New Testament people, as with their Old Testament counterparts, as reflected in the psalms, may be due to their sin.

### *Emotional Suffering*

Because of the different nature of the New Testament data, there is not much explicit information on, nor anguished expressions due, to these types of suffering. Also the New Testament and the redemptive historical events on which it concentrates give greater encouraging insight to the believer than was available to the Old Testament counterparts. On the other hand, reading between the lines, we can see that sufferings, which may be termed emotional, were not foreign to the experience of those who lived in the New Testament times any more than those who had preceded them. For the very encouragements, of which there are multiple examples throughout the New Testament, are indicators that the Christians to whom they were first written were in need of such. Thus the encouragements themselves reflect, by their very presence, the reality of the suffering in the Christian community which they were designed to alleviate. Read from this perspective, the following sample of encouraging exhortations reveals that believers experienced suffering similar to, if not exactly the same as, that experienced by believers in the Old Testament.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!... Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:4, 6-7).

These very exhortations of Paul imply that the Philippian Christians were not rejoicing continually, were attacked by anxiety, and lacked the experience of the peace of God, or were in danger of falling into these conditions. They, at least in part, or from time to time, were suffering emotionally.

We may read the familiar passage to the Romans in the same way. Amongst these believers was potential, if not actual, concern of being separated from Christ's love, of anxiety about and fear of any number of afflictions including execution. Hence Paul writes:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35-37)<sup>19</sup>

Any number of encouragements and exhortations of the New Testament may be read this way. The New Testament people of God knew suffering, including emotional suffering. In this they were very much like the psalmists of old. It is true that the grounds for the encouragement were much clearer. The ongoing history of redemption had revealed more of God’s overall plan. Yet this did not make the initial suffering any less real. So we may conclude that that which the psalms articulate the New Testament documents imply. The people of God in the New Testament as well as the Old experienced emotional suffering. Is it too much to think that they expressed these concerns in words very like those of the psalms, if not in those very words themselves?

### *Suffering in the Face of Death*

As Christians we are wont to recall and be strengthened by the New Testament’s exclamations of victory over death. Paul’s perspective that “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21) and his expressed desire to “depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (1:23) moulds our thinking on the ending of our mortal sojourn. Therefore we can consider it inappropriate for Christians to look at death with apprehension. It can seem that this aspect of the psalmists’ suffering has been overtaken by the fuller revelation in Jesus Christ, who has “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). While we allow for the suffering of grief, as is proper, it is the grief of the loss of others, not usually the suffering of the contemplation of one’s own death.

Yet again reading between the lines in the New Testament can give a fuller, and perhaps more balanced, view of this issue. Paul, referring to Epaphroditus, writes to the Philippians, “Indeed he was ill, and almost died.

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the link between the experience of the Old Testament and New Testament people of God is highlighted by the comment in the *NIV Study Bible* on verse 36: “Ps 44:22 is quoted to show that suffering has always been part of the experience of God’s people.”

But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow” (Phil. 1:27). Obviously the emotional suffering of Paul is reflected in this passage. But more interestingly the sparing of Epaphroditus’s life is seen as an act of God’s mercy. This suggests that the Christian’s death, under any and all circumstances, is not necessarily to be viewed positively. For if all Christian death is positive, it is no act of mercy for God to keep one from such an experience. So it is proper to conclude, with Calvin, that, even though this life has many miseries, “all these things do not prevent this life from being, nevertheless, considered in itself, an excellent gift of God. More especially those who live in Christ are happily exercised here in hope of heavenly glory; and accordingly...life is gain to them.”<sup>20</sup> For Paul, and the Christian, death remains an enemy (cf. 1 Cor. 15:26). Hence it appears that, in some circumstances at least, death was not a blessing for New Testament believers, even as it was not always for their Old Testament forebears. And, though it is not stated explicitly, it would be consistent with this view that expressions of suffering at the contemplation of death were appropriate for Christians as they were for the Old Testament psalmists and saints.

### *Cries of the Suffering for Judgement on Those Causing Suffering*

It is clear that God’s people continue to suffer because of the opposition of enemies. This is clear, for example, from the mention of the “sword” in Romans 8:35 quoted above. Also Paul speaks of “those who trouble” Christians (2 Thess. 1:6), Peter notes that believers might “suffer for what is right” (1 Pet. 3:14), and the writer to the Hebrews encourages his readers:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (Heb. 10:32-34)

As Jesus had warned the disciples, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). God’s people suffer still because of God’s and their enemies.

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<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and the Thessalonians*, John Pringle, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 82.

In the psalms there are clear calls for God to deal with those who cause the suffering of the righteous. Though there are difficulties with ongoing application of this principle, the New Testament does give data that are consistent with those suffering cries for judgement found in the Psalms. This is particularly true if the principle of conditionality, as presented above, is taken into account. The sufferers in the psalms call for justice for God's people in the face of oppression by the wicked. And Jesus recognised the propriety of such calls in his parable of the unjust judge. As he concludes: "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:6-8<sup>a</sup>). Consistent with also is the cry of the souls under the altar: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth, and avenge our blood?" (Rev. 6:10). Thus New Testament sufferers call for justice against their oppressors, as did the psalmists.

Of course there are difficulties in knowing how to correlate these calls for judgement on the oppressors and the Lord's instruction to pray for those who persecute. There is the question of whether such calls for judgement seek pre-parousia vengeance or are only properly focused on the final assaying and its outcomes for the persecutors of God's people. But, even when these difficulties are not resolved, it is hard to deny that the New Testament, with respect the sufferers' desire for justice, moves in the same direction as the psalms. This is seen further in the New Testament use of the psalms in certain contexts. The predicted victory of Yahweh and his anointed, spoken of in Psalm 2, is picked up in the New Testament to point to the final judgement (cf. Rev. 2:27; 6:16; 12:5; 19:15). Other reflections of such thoughts are seen in the words "day of God's wrath" (Rom. 2:5, cf. Ps. 110:5); "those who do not know God" (2 Thess. 1:8 cf. Ps. 79:6); and "Away from me, you evil doers" (Matt. 6:8 cf. Ps. 6:8). And are not the persecuted suffering ones of the first century encouraged by the vision of their king on the white horse, who "treads he winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty"? (Rev. 19:15).

### *Alleviation of Suffering*

In the Psalms that contain the pleas of those who suffer we have noted that there is often an indication that the sought relief has come. The plea has been heard by God and he has delivered the complainant, or at least the afflicted one is convinced that the relief will come. Does this aspect of

suffering, its alleviation, have a counterpart for the New Testament people of God?

When the suffering is due to sin, the chastisement of God for disobedience, there is an expectation of relief for those who repent. Though Paul's word to the Corinthians might be interpreted as only relating to preventative measures, it would seem fair to take from it the implication that, should repentance be evident, suffering would be relieved. "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:31-32). More directly James links the relief of physical suffering due to sin with repentance (Jms. 1:14-16). It is true that there is not a special word to the sufferer as may have been the original situation for the afflicted of the psalms, though of this, in every case, we cannot be sure. Yet there was this general principle articulated, as well as the message of the wider Scripture as an encouragement and message of hope to those who needed such encouragement. As Psalm 32 implies, confession of sin is the way to relief from suffering due to sin.

Yet the suffering of the psalms very often is due to a persecutor. There is often the call that the persecution and the persecutor be removed. And we have seen that the expressions of such desires are consistent with New Testament revelation. And connected with the sufferers' pleas for relief are promises, grounds for hope that such prayers were heard and that relief would come. In response to the anguished cry from under the altar we read that "each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer...." (Rev. 6:11) – a *little* longer and not forever. For God's "chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night" Jesus says that God "will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7-8). Paul teaches the persecuted Thessalonians:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. (2 Thess. 1:6-10)

Clearly relief from suffering is promised. This is a word from God. It is mediated by an authoritative member of the covenant community, an apostle. It is almost certainly in direct response to concerns that the Thessalonians had, which concern, we must believe, would have been articulated in their prayers. For it is unlikely that Paul gives information merely for interest's sake. Rather he addresses a concrete pastoral situation. And in such a promise of relief of suffering we have a counterpart to those implied promises, whether personal or general, that appear to be behind the movement from complaint to hope seen in the psalms. The New Testament again reflects the same principles with respect to suffering as appear in the psalms.

Yet we see that in the psalms there appears to be the expectation of imminent, if not immediate, relief of the suffering. On the other hand, the locus of the provision of relief of suffering in the passages noted above is the Second Coming. Does the New Testament hold out hope for pre-parousia relief from persecution? Certainly we have examples of this in the book of Acts. Peter was delivered in response to the church's praying (Acts 12:1-19).<sup>21</sup> Herod Agrippa, the persecutor, was struck down in his pride by the angel of the Lord(12:19b-23).<sup>22</sup> There is an "already" as well as a "not yet". Still it has to be admitted that it is to the time of the Lord's return that attention is directed by the New Testament when hope for relief from suffering under persecution is given. On the other hand perhaps in some way this focus on the Lord's return also was to raise hope in a relief of suffering that was at least potentially imminent, as in the psalms. For "[n]oone knows about that day or hour....[T]he Son of man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Mat. 24:36, 44).

### *Conclusion*

We have seen that the suffering of God's people is reflected in the Psalms. This was for a number of reasons, and these reasons may, in one way or another, be present today. Also these sufferings may rightly be the subject of the cries of God's people today, for Christians, even as they were for the psalmists. Alleviation of the suffering was expected, and often affirmed with confidence and joy. This also is reflected in the New Testament witness.

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<sup>21</sup> It is true that the text does not mention explicitly that the prayers were for Peter's release, though it is hard to imagine that this had no part in their praying.

<sup>22</sup> "A miserable death associated with Herod's acceptance of acclaim to be divine, but may also be seen as divine retribution for his persecution of the church." (*NIV Study Bible*)

Admittedly there are some difficult areas of application of the biblical data, but difficulties inherent in interpreting and applying the New Testament data as well as that of the Old. They are difficulties not to be dealt with by avoidance or by naïve denial of the serious issues involved in the suffering of God's people. Rather the biblical data of the Psalms, and the New Testament, call us to work through the issues in practical situations of Christians' suffering today. They encourage us in honest and open communication with our God and Saviour, thus emulating the behaviour of both Old and New Testament believer. All the while, in the face and experience of real suffering, to be encouraged by biblical revelation to look for that time when

[the LORD Almighty] will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
<sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;  
he will remove the disgrace of his people  
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken. (Isa. 25:7-8)