

European Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religious Studies (EJPCR)



**SUFFERING AND SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD
ACCORDING TO JOHN PIPER AND ITS
IMPLICATION FOR THE CHURCH TODAY.**

Tigist Woyesa

Prof. James Nkansah-Obrempong

Dr. John W Dilworth



SUFFERING AND SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD ACCORDING TO JOHN PIPER AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

Tigist Woyesa

Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Africa International University

Corresponding Author's Email: tigistw2009@gmail.com

Prof. James Nkansah-Obrempong

Supervisor: Africa International University

Dr. John W Dilworth

Supervisor: Africa International University

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper was to analyse the theology of suffering from a biblical perspective by using literature review as methodology.

Methodology: One of the foundational evangelical presuppositions for theological research is that Scripture is divinely authored and is therefore without error, and authoritative for our faith and practice.

Findings: The study found that suffering is biblical and should be expected by all Christians as they are not exempted from it, unlike prosperity teaching. Suffering has the purpose of refining and maturing our faith. Further, it helps to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God in the believer's life.

Unique Contribution to Practice and Policy: Therefore, it is recommended for Christians not to be surprised by suffering but to depend on God at all seasons by asking for more grace.

Keywords: *Suffering, Sovereignty, prosperity, African & John Piper*

Introduction

Suffering raises some critical theological questions such as why can a good and merciful God allows suffering in this world when he has the power to eradicate it? This paper proceeds from the assumption that suffering is inevitable for Christians of all ages and uses Christian theodicy to argue. There are paramount teachings about the denial of suffering in today's churches mainly by the prosperity and false gospel preachers. Prosperity gospel preachers twist the scripture and teach the absence of suffering and by this, the church seems to neglect a theology of suffering. Especially, in the African church context where Christians suffer from problems like poverty, illness, persecution, war...etc. Today's church is facing different problems concerning this issue, one of them is heretical teaching or lack of sound doctrine. But God by His grace has preserved some churches that teach a right theology of suffering and affirm the sovereignty of God. So in this paper, the relationship between suffering and the sovereignty of God and its implication to the church was discussed with a particular focus on John Piper's work.

Suffering is "to permit, to go through, to tolerate and to suffer" death. The word suffering is mentioned in the whole Bible 53 times in NIV Translation.¹ The Bible makes it clear that suffering is the result of evil action or sin in the world. This type of suffering is the result of the fall in the Garden of Eden as stated in the book of Gen 3:16-19. So sin is the root cause of all sufferings and knowing the origin of suffering is crucial. One way of defending the problem of evil/suffering is through theodicy and the early church father called Augustin has presented an approach to theodicy which focuses on the "fall of Adam that presented all suffering as a result of the fall."² St. Augustine presented this solution to the problem of evil by making humankind responsible based on Genesis 3. So according to this argument, humans are responsible for the problem of evil though it was Satan who deceived Adam and God allowed it.

Whereas, suffering belongs to all of Christ's followers too (2 Cor 1:7; Gal 3:4), because we all live in a fallen world or the "already but not yet" state. Also, every believer has been told by God that they will suffer for the sake of righteousness as Christ also told his disciples that in this world, they will have tribulations. Thus, God in his word is honest about the existence of suffering and does not want to deceive his people by making it look like suffering does not exist. Paul David Tripp on this says that: "Suffering is never abstract or theoretical rather it is real and specific."³ So, the Bible never presents suffering as a mere idea only but it puts it as part of real human experience.

On the other hand, John Piper has done great work in explaining suffering for the contemporary church and he argues saying "the ultimate biblical explanation for the existence of suffering is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by suffering himself to overcome our suffering."⁴ So, God allows Christians to suffer to make them realize that they do not have the power to avoid it and that they need the grace of God. A similar case is found when Paul was sick and God told him saying; '*Paul my grace is sufficient for you* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Thus, God's grace is enough in suffering and controls all things, including

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Fully rev., In Volumes (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1988).

² Edward A. Matusek, *The Problem of Evil in Augustine's "Confessions": Intellectual and Experiential Aspects* (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2012).

³ Paul David Tripp, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

⁴ "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God - Kindle Edition by Piper, John, Taylor, Justin, Piper, John, Taylor

sickness, the devil, and natural problems. Therefore, no event and no movement of any creature escape God's sovereignty and he controls the outcome of it. So, believers should not be terrified since God is sovereign over their sufferings.

Suffering and Sovereignty of God

The concept of suffering and sovereignty of God is of paramount importance to the church. God is sovereign over all Christian sufferings and nothing escapes his sovereign control. The sovereignty of God means that he is supreme in his exercise of power. A modern-day theologian, John Piper celebrates the biblical truth that God is sovereign over Satan's delegated world rule, angels, hand in persecution, life-taking power in his book about suffering.⁵ Piper in this book shows how modern-day evangelism has failed to teach the truth of God and of suffering as he focuses on the sovereignty of God over the evil work.⁶ Further, Piper writes saying, evangelicalism today has been entertaining people to the point that the God of the Bible looks like a poor God who is surprised by sufferings. Moreover, he asserts that God is sovereign and omnipotent and all-wise, and the Scripture teaches that he does all are according to his will. But the church today has lost that truth and the Bible is making no sense. As a result, when people undergo suffering, they forget what the Bible has to say about suffering and wonder about the nature of God.

Whereas, the prosperity gospel which is found mainly in Africa provides a way to eliminate suffering and presents it as a non-Christian thing. The teachers of this movement believe that a Christian must be wealthy and healthy at all times. So sufferings like poverty, sickness, war, etc are considered as a curse or as a result of not having enough faith. By this prosperity gospel teaching focuses on living our best life on earth and according to these preacher's good life and wealth are guaranteed for Christians. These preaches twist the scripture and make it sound appealing, but that is not biblical. Jesus said that humans will have tribulations in this world (John 16:33) and Christians will be persecuted. And the truth is that Christians are not free of suffering unlike the teaching of wealth, health, and prosperity gospel because the Bible does not promise such a thing. A theologian named R.C Sproul says, "as long as we bear the guilt of sin, we cannot protest that God is unjust in allowing us to suffer."⁷ I agree with this statement because if God would be just, He would have left us for ourselves. But through grace, believers are given new life in Christ Jesus even when they are sinners. Therefore, the assumption that says when one becomes a Christian then all the pain and suffering will vanish is a wrong theology that needs correction.

R. C. Sproul again comments like this: "Suffering is sent by our heavenly Father who is both sovereign and loving for our ultimate good. Indeed, I want you to understand that suffering is a calling from God."⁸ Here he says that suffering is sent from the Father to His children and that God is sovereign over all events. Thus, God does not abandon his Children during suffering, but he comes and suffers with them since believers are members of the body of Christ. But the church today has not been teaching the biblical truth about the person of God and his works, that is why people are quick to see suffering apart from God. John Piper on the purpose of suffering says that "the ultimate biblical explanation for the existence of suffering I believe is that the entire universe exists to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Surprised by Suffering: The Role of Pain and Death in the Christian Life: Sproul, R. C., sarris, George W.

⁸ Ibid.

God.”⁹ Thus, Christians need to depend on God at all seasons by asking for wisdom and grace from Christ by knowing that he is in control of all things and that he has ordered everything before creation. In addition, the church should teach a biblically correct and theologically sound doctrine regarding suffering. Theology shapes not only the mind and but also the belief which leads to the right practice in life. So, believers need to have the right theology about suffering to answer the question of why a good God allows evil.

The Suffering of Apostle Paul

When Jesus first called Paul, he said to him “*I will show him how much he will suffer for my name*” (Acts 9:16). Based on this the calling of Paul was basically a call to suffering but it did not cause Paul to abandon the faith rather he gladly embraced it. Thus, the life of the Apostle Paul in the Bible can show how much God Himself is in control of the sufferings of his Children. On the other hand, when Christ calls Paul, he told him that he must suffer for his name and that statement was spoken before Paul engaged in active ministry. That means that all the sufferings that Paul will encounter in his ministry were all permitted to occur and were ordained. So, Paul had to rely on God and trust him fully and he affirms this in 2 Corinthians 1:9 by saying, “*We had this sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God that raises the dead.*” According to this verse, suffering taught Paul not to trust in himself but to trust in God who alone can raise the dead. This means that Paul had a hope of the resurrection, and he was assured of that to the point he considered the present suffering as nothing compared to the glory of the future.

The Suffering of Saints

In the history of Christians, many people have faced suffering for their faith. One of the early church fathers named Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of Apostle John suffered a great deal as a Christian. But he remained very strong as he faced persecution for the name of Christ. Even when he was asked to deny Christ, he refused and said “for 86 years I have been his (Christ) servant and he has done me no wrong, how can I blaspheme my King who saved me”¹⁰ From this, we learn that the early church fathers and apostles were this much courage’s in time of suffering. Therefore, Christians of this age need to learn from them and other believers who suffered and never abandoned their faith.

On the other hand, knowing God’s purpose in suffering has been one of the most perplexing things to many believers as many seem not to see the purpose of God in suffering. Thus, suffering seems to be pointless to many but there is a good purpose in suffering. One of the reasons for suffering is to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. Other purposes of suffering include: to refine and mature of our faith and making us humble.

Conclusion

In conclusion, suffering in the modern Church is one of the most rejected and denied, and forgotten teaching. According to my evaluation, many churches of our time are abandoning this teaching and are focusing on other teachings like prosperity preaching by denying the existence of suffering. For this reason, there are many Christians who deny the existence of suffering and that is not biblical.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ “Polycarp | Christian History | Christianity Today,”

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/polycarp.html>.

In most modern churches sufferings like poverty, sickness, war....etc are considered as a curse or as a result of not having enough faith. By this prosperity gospel focuses on living our best life on earth and according to the current prosperity preacher's good life and wealth are guaranteed for Christians. These preaches twist the scripture and make it sound appealing. But that is not biblical because Jesus said that we will have tribulations in this world (John 16:33). And the truth is that Christians are not free of suffering unlike the teaching of wealth, health, and prosperity gospel as the Bible does not promise us such a thing. Further, early church fathers have suffered for the gospel and for being Christians. And Christianity did not change now, nor does it evolve so Christians should accept the existence of suffering.

God is sovereign over all sufferings, whether it is a Christians or unchristian it is all under the sovereign control of God. The difference lies on we handle the problem and for an unbeliever suffering might lead to such great despair, and they can fail to know the meaning of life. But to the believer suffering should lead to a trust in God. Thus, Christians should seek wisdom and counsel from the word of God when they face different trials on this earth, and understanding the sovereignty of God in times of suffering is necessary. Further, it is important to remember when trials came our way that every single day of our life was written into God's book before the creation of the world. Therefore, none of those days and things that happen are a surprise to God. He carefully authored every step of our lives in his eternal plan and God controls all human history.

Recommendation for the Church of Today

So, what should be a Christian response be in a time of suffering?

- Christians should ask for more grace and power like Paul (Phil 3:10). Paul is a great example who knew the power of Christ and that helped me to endure.
- Christians should rest in the sovereignty of God by leaving all matters to the ultimate power of God.
- Christians need to have hope-Believers are promised eternal life (1 thse.4:13-18) and this should occupy their earthly thoughts and make them hope.
- God cares for those who are suffering- Life is not fair and yet Christians should live with hope knowing that God loves and cares for them as children.
- Christians should learn to trust God-like Biblical characters they should put their faith and trust in God by knowing that He is sovereign and in control (Heb1:3).
- Christians should expect suffering in this world, and they should commit their soul to God (Ps. 3:5-6, John 15:19-20 & Heb 12:9-10).

Bibliography

Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Fully rev. In Volumes. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1988.

Matusek, Edward A. *The Problem of Evil in Augustine's "Confessions": Intellectual and Experiential Aspects*. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2012.

Tripp, Paul David. *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2018.

“Polycarp | Christian History | Christianity Today.” Accessed July 16, 2021.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/polycarp.html>.

“Suffering and the Sovereignty of God - Kindle Edition by Piper, John, Taylor, Justin, Piper, John, Taylor, Justin, Taylor, Justin, Piper, John, Talbot, Mark, Saint, Stephen F., Ellis, Carl F., Jr., Powlison, David, Shramek, Dustin, Tada, Joni Eareckson. Religion & Spirituality Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.Com.” Accessed August 3, 2020.
<https://www.amazon.com/Suffering-Sovereignty-God-John-Piper-ebook/dp/B0026IUP9K>.

“Surprised by Suffering: The Role of Pain and Death in The Christian Life: Sproul, R. C., Sarris, George W.: 9781633893726: Amazon.Com: Books.” Accessed August 11, 2020. <https://www.amazon.com/Surprised-Suffering-Role-Death-Christian/dp/1633893723>.