Peace Amidst Suffering

INTRODUCTION – It's interesting that in many hymnbooks there is no category of "suffering" in the topical index. As we age, it seems we feel we suffer more; it's often a PAIN to grow old. The aches and pains, the long- and short-term illnesses, the injured and broken bones and joints, and often the mental anguish of so many around us dying. Relatively few, though experience what many in the past have experienced – and even now many others do – in terms of suffering. Many times we hear the slogan "no pain, no gain." Yet doctors warn us that pain is an indication that something is wrong – and that we should (with their guidance, of course) do something about it. So how are we today as believers in Christ view suffering?

A. Prevalence of suffering – "Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward." (Job 5:7) Adam's sin brought pain and suffering to the whole human race. (Rom 5:12 and verses 15-19) "We know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." (Rom 8:22)

1. In Scripture – Words for suffering occur 156 times in the Bible ("suffer" 96x, "suffered" 50x, "suffereth" 5x, "suffering" 5x) – not quite as often as faith (247x) and trust (134x) or love (310x) and charity (28x).

2. In America – Examples of suffering abound – auto or biking accident, bankruptcy, blindness, brain aneurism, COVID, cancer, death of a loved one, debt, delinquency, drowning, drug overdose, fraud, headache, heart attack, hunger, injustice, jail, being lost (in mountains, desert, or a foreign country), paralysis, persecution, taxes, terrorism, tyranny.

3. In history – Let's just note here three major atrocities (genocide) in recent history: an est. 1.8-8.1 million killed in Hitler's Holocaust, 20-60 million in the U.S.S.R. under Stalin, and 40-74 million in China under Mao Tse-Tung.

B. Difference in suffering – Suffering is one of many areas where **we're NOT all created equal**; believers have many of the same basic trials as the unsaved. "There hath no temptation (testing / trouble) taken you but such as is common to man." (1Co 10:13; cf. 1Pt 3:17; 4:19)

1. Legality – Some suffer **justly** for doing evil, others **unjustly** for doing good or just existing (1Pt 3:17; 4:19).

2. Variety – **indiscriminate** (familial, financial, medical, emotional, mental, environmental, nutritional, societal) vs. **deliberate** / intentional (political / religious – scoff, shun, shock, starve, shoot, suffocate, set ablaze)

3. Longevity – severed ear for a few seconds (Lk 22:50-51), issue of blood for 12 years (Lk 8:43), a spirit of infirmity 18 years (Lk 13:11), sick man at Bethesda pool 38 years (Jn 5:5), man lame from birth 40 years (Ac 3:2; 4:22)

4. Intensity – The Nazis jailed escaping/hiding Allied soldiers – but killed those who hid them.

5. Deficiency – mental, moral, physical, political, or social deprivation

So, why is suffering universal? Why is there suffering at all? Why do the righteous (good, nice people) suffer?

As with other aspects of His plan for history, the Bible does not disclose all of the God's own reasons for deciding to create a world in which there is suffering. Yet, He does give us a number of reasons – generally and specifically.

I. Generally, reasons for suffering of mankind

This does NOT include all the NATURAL causes for suffering in our lives – the things "beyond our control" – DISASTERS such as fires, floods, hurricanes, icebergs, landslides, perfect storms at sea, tornadoes, tsunamis

A. **Iniquity**

1. Inherited sin – Due to Adam's sin as the federal head of the human race (the Fall), all humans suffer: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble." (Job 14:1)

2. Committed sin – The law of sowing and reaping: "They that plow iniquity and sow wickedness reap the same."(Job 4:8) "Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Gal 6:7)

We're hurt by a. Our own sins – e.g., **Israel** suffered oppression and deportation (exile) because of her sins.

b. Others' sin – e.g., **Abraham's sins** led to trouble for Abimelech, **Achan's sin** led to the loss of 3,000 of Israel's soldiers, and **Pharaoh's hardness** led to Egyptians' loss of substance, sons, and soldiers.

B. Idiocy – Humans are often unwise in what they do – or where or with whom they go.

1. Consuming harmful substances – e.g., a nurse we know smokes cigarettes and pops addictive pills.

2. Taking unneeded risks – e.g., a professor (age 57) died climbing Mt Fuji, a teenager became a paraplegic by diving into shallow water, and alligators attacked children and near ponds.

3. Being illegal and dumb – e.g., a guy (Nathan E. Brown) wrote on the back of a check in a pizza parlor "Hand me $60," and then changed his shirt right outside – and got caught.

C. Ignorance – scams, defective and contaminated products, investment "deals" (> steals), charlatan pastors making money by fleecing their flocks, false teachers/prophets, cults, medications (friends of ours have checked medicine

labels and found many conflicts between meds prescribed by doctors for them and given them by pharmacists)
The WORST type of ignorance is WILLFUL IGNORANCE –"This **they are willingly ignorant** of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water – whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished." (2Pt 3:5-6) – e.g., evolutionists ignore the Second Law of Thermodynamics, truth about mutations (most are bad), and that humans remains are found UNDER and in SAME LAYER as their alleged ape ancestors.

II. Specifically, reasons for suffering of the redeemed – Two groups of reasons for our suffering present themselves. Some suffering is meant directly for our GOOD; as Romans 8:28 tells us, God is making it so that all types of things work together in a number of ways for our good. Other suffering we endure is for the benefit of others.

A. FOR believers – Recall what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians – "No man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. (1Th 3:3) – and to the Philippians – "**Unto you it is given** in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also **to suffer** for His sake. (Php 1:29 my emphasis) Suffering was God's GIFT!!!

1. Contentment – Suffering need gave Paul a good perspective on life: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." (Php 4:11-12)

2. Endurance – Paul and James agree that "tribulation worketh patience" (Rom 5:3) and "the trying of your faith worketh patience." (Jas 1:3). The Greek word rendered "patience" in those verses means steadfastness or perseverance. The ***Herald*** (Dubois County, IN) put it this way: "Those who fail in life often pursue the path of least **persistence.**"

3. Holiness – to produce good living: earthly parents "for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure – but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness.... Chastening ... afterward yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." (Heb 12:10-11)

4. Humility – Life's problems remind us of our limitations and prompt dependence on God and His power. "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." (2Co 12:7) "I glory ... in my infirmities ... take pleasure in ... reproaches, necessities, persecutions, distresses." (2Co12:9,10)

5. Hunger for heaven – Suffering brings sometimes may bring a longing for heaven, when life "swallows" death, as Paul put it: "We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life." (2Co 5:4)

6. Instruction – Through suffering we can see more clearly man's sinfulness and God's sovereignty.

7. Joy – It's been said that "Money can't buy happiness." Yet, somehow, having more money usually brings more happiness than the absence of it. NOTHING brings happiness to some people; ANYTHING brings it to others. Peter says "think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." (1Pt 4:12-13) James, too: "Brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." (Jas 1:2)

8. Perfection – Suffering is God's way of perfecting us: "the God of all grace, who hath called us, ... after ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." (1Pt 5:10 – cf. Job 23:10 "when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.")

9. Restoration – Some suffering is to motivate saints to give up their sins. "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth – and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth." (Heb 12:6) Paul's discipline of a man at Corinth was "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1Co 5:5)

10. Rulership – God gives this promise: "If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him." (2Ti 2:12)

11. Trust (faith) – what does Peter tell believers was a purpose of tests, trials, temptations, and tribulations? They endured "manifold **temptations**" "that **the trial of your faith,** being MUCH more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be **tried** with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." (1Pt 1:6-7)

B. THROUGH believers

1. Consolation of others – Paul spells this out clearly: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort – Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. (2Co 1:3-4)

2. Ministration to others – Paul wrote about Epaphroditus (being sick from work for others): "for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me." (Php 2:30)

3. Preservation of Israel – God let Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery so that Joseph could end up actually saving them from starvation: "As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." (Gen 50:20)

4. Evangelization of unsaved – Paul's imprisonment enabled the "furtherance of the gospel." (Php 1:12-14) "I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the

elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." (2Ti 2:9-10) In countless situations in history it has been true that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

5. Demonstration

a. To show **Satan** that some serve God because they love him, not for reward. (Job 1:8,9,22; 2:3,10)

b. To show **humans** Jesus' life in our lives: "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh." (2Co 4:10,11) Gipsy Smith put it this way: "Christ, the transforming light, touches this heart of mine, piercing the darkest night, making His glory shine. Oh, to reflect His grace, causing the world to see, love that will flow till others shall know – Jesus revealed in me."

6. Glorification of God – Sometimes our trials are used to bring glory to God.

a. The man born blind (Jn 9:3 – "that the works of God should be made manifest in him").

b. Lazarus' death – Lazarus' sickness led to his death, but it didn't end there. "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God.... If thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God." (Jn 11:4,40)

CONCLUSIONS – Five reactions should naturally follow as believers contemplate their present suffering.

A. Appreciation

1. For Jesus' suffering – The hymn "For All My Sin": "Was ever love so strong? Was ever crime so wrong – when Jesus suffered long for all my sin? He saw my greatest need, became my Friend indeed. Through Him I have been freed of all my sin."

2. For God's saving – "Jesus ... delivered us from the wrath to come." (1Th 1:10)

3. For God's showering of blessings – He has already "blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1:3), and He is giving us "richly all things to enjoy." (1Ti 6:17)

4. For our suffering – Paul gloried in his infirmities (2Co 12:9) and took pleasure "in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake" (2Co 12:10). Believers are told to "Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." (Ja 1:2) Also, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." (1Pt 4:12-13) Thank God for suffering? Yes!!

B. Acceptance

1. General life – Variety is the common lot of mankind – a mixture of highs and lows, victories and defeats, ecstacy and misery. "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21) "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10)

2. Individual life – Some lives include (or end with) more suffering than others – including OT believers (Heb 11:35-39) and NT believers, such as John the Baptist (Mk 6:16, Stephen (Ac 7:59-60), and Peter (Jn 21:17-23).

C. Assurance – We need to rest assured in our trust in God.

1. His governing – "He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand." (Dan 4:35)

2. His giving – Some of what God "gives" (or plans) for believers in desirable and some isn't. "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake. (Php 1:29)

3. His goodness – God is doing a good work in our lives, and He will finish it when Jesus comes (Php 1:6). God's plan for believers is good. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to *His* purpose." (Rom 8:28). "Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls *to Him* in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator. (1Pt 4:19) "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25)

D. Anticipation

1. Now – Believers need to expect to experience suffering now, not to escape it. We are saved from sin, not from suffering. "All who will to live godly" shall **suffer**. (2Ti 3:12)

2. Then – Our suffering ends when Jesus comes for us! "We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption – the redemption of our body." (Rom 8:23)! The beloved hymn "Some Golden Daybreak" puts it this way: "Some glorious morning sorrow will cease. Some glorious morning all will be peace. Heartaches all ended, school-days all done, heaven will open, Jesus will come."

E. Assessment – It helps to compare present grief to future glory. We are "joint-heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together. "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy ***to be compared*** with *the* glory which shall be revealed in us." (Rom 8:17-18)