



# TESTED BY FIRE

*The Origin & Purposes of Suffering & Evil*

Fully Updated  
and Expanded  
for 2023

## ABSTRACT

Every day of our brief lives we are confronted with the inescapable fact of the most appalling human suffering and outright evil — whether through the agency of the various media sources, our observation of the world, or the cruel witness of our own circumstances. Sooner or later, the question arises in the minds of men and women: Why is there suffering in this world? Why is there so much evil, seeming chaos and endless conflict? These are the profound questions which are answered equally profoundly in this paper.

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2nd  
Edition

# Tested by Fire

*The Origin & Purposes of Suffering & Evil*

**Dedicated to my Divine Master:  
The Christ  
who walked this earth in the flesh  
fulfilled His mission  
defeated the forces of darkness  
and who will come again  
with power and great glory**



This paper was originally published in a much shorter **first edition in 1999**. It has now been improved and expanded with 35% more material for this **second edition** in an eBook format by 'Under the Radar Publications'. For further information and to notify about typographical errors, please contact the author at the following email address: [diakrisis-project@outlook.com](mailto:diakrisis-project@outlook.com) .

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**Bible references** in this paper are often taken from the Berean Standard Bible. <https://berean.bible/> . The author also consults the Hebrew or Koine Greek texts and uses his own personal translations of them in order to get as close to what he believes to be the best meaning possible.

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Every day of our brief lives, we are confronted with the inescapable fact of the most appalling human suffering and evil – whether through the agency of the various media, our observation of the world, or the cruel witness of our own affairs. Sooner or later, the question arises in the minds of men and women: “Why is there suffering in this world?” Many a disciple of Christ has also been brought to the crossroads of doubt through a personal experience of suffering. In the midst of his or her agony, s/he asks: “How could there be such suffering in a world created by a God who so loved it that He gave His only Son?”

There are three primary reasons why we must strive to answer this challenging question. **Firstly**, doing so will enable us to have full assurance that the Lord is in complete control of all things; **secondly**, it is our business to prevent the name of the Lord from being tarnished and thereby for us to witness to His almighty power; **thirdly**, to be in possession of a biblical theology of suffering and evil will prevent us from developing misguided and even dangerous ideas about the work of the demonic realm and the plagues and diseases which so afflict the human race.

**In this study, through a careful analysis of the Biblical data, we will set out to reveal the derivation of all the evil, suffering, misery, and oppression which characterize human existence.** In doing so, we will come to learn that there is a majestic, cosmic design of Divine origin which encompasses, absorbs, and transforms all the wickedness and disharmony which will ever come to pass in the universe.

Although this study involves some profound issues (some may even call them ‘heavy’), if you persevere with the reading of it, and take the subject matter into your soul, then this will reap many benefits. Your faith will be enhanced; your trust in God will be increased; your dependence on Him for everything will thrive; you will get an overview of the purpose behind the creation; and you will have a matrix through which you will not fear suffering but will be able to bear it.

I pray that all these benefits will be yours in abundance.

**Alan Morrison,  
Mexico,  
March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023.**

“If I go east, He is not there, and if I go west, I cannot find Him. When He is at work in the north, I cannot behold Him; when He turns to the south, I cannot see Him. Yet He knows the way I have taken; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Book of Job, chapter 23, verses 8-10)

## PROLOGUE: Asking all the Right Questions

Let us begin with that stark, perennial question: *Why is there suffering in the world?* And when the spotlight is turned on the Creator of the world Himself, the questions begin to multiply: “*If God is all-powerful, why does He not overrule suffering and evil?*” or “*If God is a God of love, why does He permit such heartbreak and destructiveness to continue unchecked?*” It is not only those outside the *Ekklesia* who would ask such questions. Every disciple of Christ will be taxed at some time in his or her spiritual life by the problems raised in the need to reconcile the God they know from studying the Bible with the apparent chaos which pervades the world in which they live.

They may also ask the understandable questions: “If I am a new creation and all things have been made new, then why do I still get sick?” or “If Christ has been victorious over Satan, why is the Church so beset with problems?” The need for disciples to be able to answer these questions is vital. **Firstly**, it will enable us to witness to those who are not yet disciples more effectively. They often put such questions to us, and this whole issue of the existence of suffering and evil is (humanly speaking) one of their greatest stumbling-blocks to coming to faith in Christ. **Secondly**, if we acquire a deep insight into these matters, this will deeply increase our own assurance as diligent disciples of Christ.

However, before tackling this whole issue in its fullness, let us first mention some of the answers which have been suggested by numerous cults, religions and philosophies throughout history concerning the reason for the existence of suffering and evil in the universe. We could sum up these answers by isolating six rationales, each of which claims to give a credible explanation for the anomaly of evil in a Divinely created universe:

1. God Himself is evil and brings suffering into the world deliberately to hurt us.
2. God is too weak and ineffective to prevent suffering.
3. Evil and suffering, like life itself, are merely temporal illusions and do not really exist, other than in the minds of people.



4. The principles of good and evil are on an equal footing – chance alone being the determining factor of the ultimate outcome.
5. All suffering and evil come about as the direct result of demonic beings working immediately in the realm of creation and nature.
6. The Sovereign Creator of the universe controls and oversees all things (both good and evil) in ways that human beings cannot fully comprehend.

The first of these is obviously absurd and nihilistic. The second is equally absurd, as the God who is capable of creating and sustaining an unimaginably complex universe such as ours would cease to be God if He was unable to prevent suffering. The third is commonly offered as ‘truth’ by many Eastern religions, Christian Scientists, the New Age Movement, and other cults, who claim that suffering and evil can be overcome with meditation rituals, the power of ‘positive thinking’ or ‘Karmic work-out’ through reincarnation. The fourth of the above possibilities is also a hopeless position: the person who holds such a dualistic view would obviously have no interest in understanding the true place and purpose of suffering. The fifth proposition is animistic in outlook, and little different from the fourth. While denying the power and sovereignty of God over His creation it upholds a superstitious and dualistic view which is characteristic of many pagan cults and religions, yet it is also becoming increasingly held by many people who claim to be ‘Christians’. Taken to its logical conclusion, it is also an atheistic position because it involves a practical denial of the servitude of the demonic realm to their Creator (a reality which I will prove in the course of this paper).

In vehement rejection of the other five rationales, this study is written unashamedly in support of the sixth proposition. The reason is simple: **because the Bible tells us so**. In this study, we will systematically search the word of God to discover what it reveals to us about the existence of suffering and evil. Only in the Scriptures can we hope to find such teaching.

When the psalmist, Asaph, fell into confusion because evil people appear to thrive in this world while good people are often plagued with difficulties (Book of Psalms, 73, verses 1-14), he soon realised that this superficial judgement would not do justice to God. Realising his folly, he says:

“If I had said, ‘I will speak this way,’ then I would have betrayed Your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was troublesome in my sight until I entered God’s

sanctuary; then I discerned their final end” (Book of Psalms, 73, verses 15-17).

These deep matters were too much for him to comprehend **until he went into the sanctuary of God**. This was the key to his understanding. Only then did he begin to make sense of the presence of evil in a world created by a perfectly righteous and holy God; and we must do likewise. We must draw near to Him and put our trust in Him, for then He will be the strength of our heart and our portion forever.

If we wish to come to a deep and satisfying understanding of the reasons for the presence of suffering and evil in God’s universe, then we will only find that understanding in the pages of the Bible. Before we can begin to understand why there is suffering on a personal level, we must develop a cosmic overview of its origin and purpose. Admittedly, this is a vast and complex subject, and I do not pretend to have all the answers. Nevertheless, Truth was never meant to be the exclusive province of priests, theologians, and would-be philosophers, but has been revealed to all of God’s children according to their needs and depending on what has been revealed (Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 29, verse 29). On this basis, our aim is to gather together all that is pastorally necessary for the Lord’s people to have comfort and assurance in times of distress.

In the course of this brief study, we will explore the biblical revelation on the original source of all suffering and evil, what is its purpose in the world and in the Church, why disciples of Christ have to suffer, and how we should respond to that suffering.

## I. THE ORIGIN OF SUFFERING AND EVIL

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until the present time.”  
(Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 22).

The first thing we can unequivocally assert here is that suffering and evil did not emanate directly from God. *“God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all”* (First Letter of John, chapter 1, verse 5). In the beginning God created things *“very good”* – including the first humans in Eden (Book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 31). There was no death, no suffering, no pain, no heartache, no disease, and no disasters. Everything was in harmony and peace throughout the creation. Or was it? Two elements would appear to cloud the apparent perfection of this pristine paradise and give clear hints of something anomalous in the cosmos. **First**, the appearance of the angel, Satan, presented to us as a serpent (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verses 1-6; cf. Second Letter to the Corinthians,

chapter 11, verse 3; Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verse 9) would suggest that there had already been a rebellion of angels against their Creator at an earlier date – an event which is actually alluded to in the Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verses 3-4. **Second**, the fact that those first humans were seduced by the scheming of Satan after a clear warning from God would suggest that although they had been created “*very good*”, they still had the potential to sin in their state of freewill.

**With a vast pantheon of fallen angels on the loose, and a couple of fallible human beings in a state of relative innocence, the scene was set for a cosmic encounter of some magnitude.** And when our first parents fell for Satan’s suggestion that they could be little gods and have unconditional eternal life (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verses 4-5), they could have had no idea of the cosmic repercussions which would echo down through the ages. **Here in this third chapter of Genesis, we have a complete model for all subsequent development of the human race.** It is of vital importance for us to grasp the supernatural significance of the events recorded in these verses of Scripture – the cataclysmic effect they have had on the development of the world and its civilizations and which are still having that effect in our lives today. We are the genetic descendants of this Adam and Eve of the Bible, inheriting their sinfulness and disobedience and all the associated problems of being at enmity with God by nature. This is what is known as ‘original sin’ (Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verse 12; Book of Psalms, 51, verse 5; Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 3; Book of Jeremiah, chapter 17, verse 9).

### **A Cursed Earth**

Yet not only was all their human progeny to be tainted, but so also was the whole creation (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 19-22). For the Lord pronounced judgements on His creation with devastating effects. For women there would be a multiplication of conception which would become, in childbirth, a painful event. Her motherhood would be fraught with sorrow, and in her marital relations she would become subject to her husband (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 16). This judgement for that primal sin can be seen down through the ages as woman’s lot has been, in many cultures, one of great hardship and subjugation to a man – though that will be considerably ameliorated if she accepts that situation in faith and is bonded to a genuine man who also lives by that same faith.

The railings of feminists are just one expression of sinful humanity’s rebellion against the imposition of this universal judgement against the sin of our first parents. They can never overturn that judgement but only

bring it down upon themselves. As the wise man has said, *“Consider the working of God: for who can straighten what He has made crooked?”* (Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 7, verse 13).

So far as the judgements against men are concerned, his working conditions were to be affected with great hardship: the ground would be cursed and bring forth weeds alongside the field-crop, which would be harvested with great toil (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verses 17-18). This accounts for the ubiquitous problems which occur in any working situation, giving rise to the economic chaos and poor labour relations which prevail in all cultures. Additionally, drastic changes would take place in the organic chemistry of the world. Mutations, viruses, harmful bacteria, parasites, etc., would gradually begin to take hold of the environment. Physical death, too, was to become a part of life – having not been built into the original creation (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 19) – in fulfilment of God’s earlier promise (Book of Genesis, chapter 2, verse 17). From that moment, everything began to go into a state of decay, a state which we now consider to be a normal process of life. But decay is not a normal process; it is thoroughly abnormal; it is death, which is the price paid for the human moral failure that we call “sin” (Letter to the Romans, chapter 6, verse 23). What scientists now call the Second Law of Thermodynamics – that all systems, if left to themselves, tend to become degraded or disordered – originated in this curse of God on all organic matter, because of which the whole creation is anthropomorphically said to groan (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 22).

**So, the evil and suffering of the universe did not emanate directly from God but came to exist as a direct result of the original sin of the first humans through their seduction by Satan.** As Solomon puts it: *“Only this have I found: I have discovered that God made men upright, but they have sought out many schemes”* (Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 7, verse 29). The Apostle John concurs when he writes: *“because all that is in the world, the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the vaunting hubris of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world”* (First Letter of John, chapter 2, verse 16). Today, we can see the results of this combination of our original, ancestral sin and this life-distorting curse working through such developments as poverty, famine, warfare, terrorism, earthquakes, marital discord, adolescent rebellion, addictions, cruelty, abuse of all kinds, narcissism, mental and emotional disorders, disease, disasters, bereavement, and every human heartache imaginable. The fact that a lengthy timespan has passed since the events of early Genesis and our century is irrelevant. We are still busily, though largely ignorantly,

working out the effects of the Fall at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The whole of the universe is in some disarray because of the Fall of humanity and waits with bated breath for the time when all things will be made anew at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 21-22).

### **The Fall was no Surprise to God**

However, let us not imagine that God was taken by surprise by the Fall into sin in Eden. He knew full well what kind of a world He was creating. **To put it boldly, God knew that the first couple of humans that He created would be seduced by Satan's siren charms: but this did not deter him from creating them.** And if we step back for a moment to take a cosmic view of the progression of life in this universe, we will discover a most important factor in our study. **For the purpose behind the entire creation was the manifestation of Jesus Christ** (First Letter of Peter, chapter 1, verse 20; Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, verses 10-11). Indeed, He was the One through whom and for whom all things were created (Letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, verse 16). And Jesus Christ was manifested with the sole purpose of destroying the works of the devil (First Letter of John, chapter 3, verse 8). Of great significance to all this is the fact that "eternal fire" was originally prepared for Satan and his fellow fallen angels (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verse 41), rather than for humanity – yet rebellious humans will go into it because they will have proven themselves to have taken on the same character as those demons for whom it was originally prepared.

**With all this in mind, it would surely not be straying into the bounds of speculation to say that God's main purpose in His human creation is ultimately that of displaying His glory and demonstrating that His wisdom is infinitely superior to that of the devil, by triumphing over the old serpent through a cosmic battle which was set to last for millennia and of which we are but one part** (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 15). In other words this planet is the 'theatre of war' in a marathon spectacle in which Jesus Christ has the starring role and we are the supporting players. No wonder angels (good and evil) desire to be spectators of what is happening throughout the ages in our world (First Letter of Peter, chapter 1, verse 12; Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, verse 10). Through the unfolding events in His human creation, God is providing them with a lesson they will never forget. We are given a brief glimpse into this systematic age-long spiritual battle in such passages as the Book of Daniel, chapter 10, verses 13 & 20-21; chapter 12, verse 1 and the Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verses 7-8.

In the Book of Revelation, we are given as intimate a degree of knowledge as we will receive this side of eternity concerning the cosmic confrontation between the powers of light and the forces of darkness, and the victory for God in which it culminates. And when we read that in the wake of the Cross, *“having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it”* (Letter to the Colossians, chapter 2, verse 15), we are being given a dramatic news bulletin on the progress of the war (cf. Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verses 17-18), the ongoing reality of which is spelled out by the Apostle in his Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10-20.

Nothing has ever happened that was outside of God’s control. Nothing is unfolding outside of His ultimate will and purpose for the world and for the Church. Our reason for saying these things is not to embark on a wilful probing of the deepest recesses of the mind of God. We are not going any further than the sacred texts would allow. The central purpose of this study is to show that God is, and always has been, the great Orderer and Controller of all the activities of the universe – including those which are so awful that we shudder to think of them. This mighty fact we will now pursue.

## II. THE PURPOSES OF SUFFERING AND EVIL

“The Lord has made everything for His own purpose – yes, even the wicked for the day of calamity” (Book of Proverbs, chapter 16, verse 4).

Many of those claiming to be ‘Christian’ fail to realise that the original creation of the universe was never designed to be the finished product in God’s handiwork. As the sacred texts clearly show, the ultimate purpose in the creative mind of God has always been a completely reconstituted universe in which suffering and evil have no place (Book of Isaiah, chapter 65, verse 17; chapter 66, verse 22; Book of Acts, chapter 3, verses 20-21; Gospel of Matthew, chapter 19, verse 28; Second Letter of Peter, chapter 3, verse 13; Book of Revelation, chapter 21, verses 1-5). The cosmos as it is currently constituted is simply a vast stepping-stone on the pathway to a new heaven and a new earth. In this way, we can see that everything that happens within it is in some sense, in the inscrutable will of God, contributing towards that ultimate purpose. Understanding this fact will bring a completely new perspective to suffering and evil in this present world, which must be seen as provisional, transient and always under the controlling hand of God.

Consider this: **Although our first parents will have had a profound understanding of the sovereignty and omnipotence of their Creator, their experience of God was incomplete and would have remained so unless it was supplemented by a practical and experiential perception of the Divine attributes, the full number of which could only be revealed in the event of their Fall into sin.** Had our first parents never fallen under the power of the devil, neither they nor their progeny would have known of those qualities of God which, by imputation through Christ, enable a person to resist and overcome evil. Divine attributes such as mercy, forgiveness, long-suffering, judgement, deliverance, and compassion would have remained forever locked up within the inner life of the Godhead. Truly, the fullness of God would not have been displayed unless there had been a Fall of Man. Through the results of the Fall – sin, evil, suffering and God’s unique way of dealing with it – we have the precious privilege of a more holistic view of God.

If God, through His re-creative purposes and through the vast process of time, is purifying *“for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds”* (Letter to Titus, chapter 2, verse 14), they must of necessity be *“sanctified, useful to the Master, and prepared for every good work”* (Second Letter to Timothy, chapter 2, verse 21). Those who are the Lord’s new creation in Christ are indeed being thoroughly prepared for every good work – eventually being refined to the highest perfection that a creature can attain – whereas our first parents, *before* they fell into sin, were far from being so prepared, as their subsequent behaviour clearly shows!

**This is why we can say that the Fall, iniquitous though it was, formed a necessary part of the full outworking of God’s creation.** This does not mean that we can condone the actions of the first humans. It would be utterly nihilistic and bizarre for anyone to recommend increased sin as a means to receiving increased grace! (Letter to the Romans, chapter 6, verse 1). The person who sees the full breadth of the things that accompany salvation naturally grows to hate every evil way and purifies himself just as the Lord Himself is pure (First Letter of John, chapter 3, verse 3). **However, through the squalid depths of sin and evil and the resultant multifaceted bittersweetness of human suffering, a dazzling array of the sublime and awesome characteristics of our wonderful God are made manifest which would otherwise have remained forever concealed, locked up in the Godhead.**

There are many passages of Scripture which throw considerable light on this flesh-withering concept. When the Lord said, *“I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace and create calamity. I the Lord do all these things”* (Book of Isaiah, chapter 45, verse 7), we must not make the deduction

that He must therefore be a malicious God. The sense in which He can be said to be the ‘Creator of calamity’, in this verse in Isaiah, is that He is the One who originally created the universe and set it in motion – knowing fully all that would ensue, both good things and evil, and yet choosing to continue with it – though He may also create calamity through the means of judgement, and He does – which humans will have brought on themselves. This is not to say that evil itself has *emanated* from Him, for, as I have already shown, that could not be possible (First Letter of John, chapter 1, verse 5; chapter 2, verse 16; Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verse 4). What I **am** saying is that even though the evil into which the world would fall after the creation had been fully foreseen by Him, He deliberately chose to go ahead and create it, knowing that nothing is too difficult for Him and that He could work all things (both good and evil) so that they would unswervingly serve His ultimate purpose. This purpose is the new heaven and the new earth in which “*there shall by no means enter into it anything that defiles or causes an abomination or a lie*” (Book of Revelation, chapter 21, verse 27), and in which “*there shall be no more curse*” (Book of Revelation, chapter 22, verse 3). **This first creation, with all its pitfalls and madness, has had to exist as the testing-ground and pathway leading timewise towards the new creation, which is the final goal.** Through this mighty act of Divine sovereignty, He has demonstrated the eternal truth that He is the One who is in ultimate control of all things.

On the way to the accomplishment of that mighty purpose, His aim is twofold: **First**, to demonstrate His own glory and, **second**, the welfare of His own people. The way that God controls and orders suffering and evil works out in these two areas: He uses them to glorify Himself and to work to the benefit of His elect people. Let us look at these two areas in some more detail, as they will furnish us with a mind-transforming outlook on the disasters and calamities of the world, and our personal trials and adversities in this present life.

## **1. Suffering and Evil Glorify God**

“Worthy are You, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things; by Your will they exist and came to be” (Book of Revelation, chapter 4, verse 11).

One of the greatest examples of this mighty phenomenon occurs in the healing by Jesus of the man with congenital blindness (Gospel of John, chapter 9). After refuting the disciples’ suggestion that it was the man’s sin (or that of his parents) which had made him this way, Jesus reveals



the remarkable fact that the man was born blind with the foreordained intention that *“the works of God should be revealed in him”* (Gospel of John, chapter 9, verse 3). **In other words, this man’s blindness was foreordained by God so that His unique, Divine redemptive attributes, as manifested in Jesus the Christ, would be demonstrated – not merely to those who were alive in Jesus’ day but also to everyone of a future time who would read of it in the Scriptures (as shown in the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verse 30-31).** Such an action is not capricious or whimsical on the part of God but is vitally necessary in the shining forth of spiritual truth. For that ninth chapter of John proclaims the parabolic truth that Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, bringing people out of spiritual darkness as well as physical blindness (which serves as a metaphor for its spiritual counterpart).

A great stumbling-block in these matters is that many people have a ‘snowflaky’, over-sentimentalized concept of God, which has been gleaned more from a Helen Steiner Rice greetings card than from the Bible! So the idea that He could ‘arrange’ for someone to be made blind from birth is totally unacceptable to them. For those who doubt that God is sovereign even over human blindness – or, indeed, any other handicap – there is a Bible passage which clearly shows the truth of the matter. When Moses was called by God to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt and announce it to Pharaoh, he responded by saying that he was *“slow of speech and tongue”* (Book of Exodus, chapter 4, verse 10) – a possible reference to a speech impediment. But to this the Lord declares: *“Who gave man his mouth? Or who makes the mute or the deaf, the sighted or the blind? Is it not I, the LORD?”* (Book of Exodus, chapter 4, verse 11). Wow! Does that give you goosebumps, as it does me? Frankly, I am only interested in a God who has that kind of power and control. **If that frightens you, let me say that it shouldn’t, because God is not an evil despot but a just and righteous Creator and Sustainer of His cosmos.** Therefore, you can absolutely guarantee that whatever He does in all His wisdom is the right course of action – despite all appearances to the contrary from a human standpoint – and will ultimately result in blessing.

Everything is under the controlling hand of God – even those natural disasters and famines (see Book of Amos, chapter 4, verses 7-10; Book of Haggai, chapter 1, verses 7-11; Book of Revelation, chapter 6, verse 5-6), all of which appear to be increasing so poignantly in our own time. **This is not a mark of cruelty on God’s part but is rather an exhibition of His power and mercy and of our need for dependence on Him alone.** He declares to us from His own mouth: *“See now that I am He; there is no God*

*besides Me. I bring death and I give life; I wound and I heal, and there is no one who can deliver from My hand"* (Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verse 39). Yes, the Lord of creation kills as well as makes alive (see also Gospel of Matthew, chapter 10, verse 28, for Jesus' words on the matter)! How could it be any other way? It is, after all, *His* world. He is the potter; and we are merely the clay (Book of Isaiah, chapter 29, verses 15-16; Book of Jeremiah, chapter 18, verses 5-6; Letter to the Romans, chapter 9, verses 20-23), and His purpose will stand. His ways are not arbitrary or capricious but perfect, just, faithful, and righteous – for He is the self-professed God of both truth and righteousness (Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verse 4; Book of Daniel, chapter 4, verse 37; Book of Psalms, chapter 33, verses 4-5; Second Book of Samuel, chapter 22, verse 31). I have no problem with any of that. In fact, I rejoice in it! Otherwise, there would only be chaos, disorder, and randomness.

### **The 'Necessity' of the Fall**

Now we can begin to see the true place and purpose of suffering and evil in this world. Are you ready for this? For this is where disciples need to get a grip and 'man-up'. Satan wants you to be a lily-livered snowflake and be offended by the absolute power of God. In fact, he wants to keep you from understanding that power altogether. **For if there was no suffering and evil, we would not have an adequate conception of God's mercy and powers of deliverance.** Thus, we would never have known the true depths of degradation from which He has the absolute power to deliver us.

If we deny the absolute sovereignty of God over all things – including awkward things such as famine, disease, blindness, and other physical and mental handicaps – we limit our understanding of Him to such an extent that we will be as ignorant of His work and character as were our first parents. Had the Fall never happened and had iniquity never entered the world, **the grace of God** would never have been displayed in His merciful pardoning of sin. Had evil never entered into the heart and mind of man, **the justice and holiness of God** would never have been shown in His punishment of wickedness. We would, therefore, never have been able to consider **both the goodness and the severity of God** (Letter to the Romans, chapter 11, verse 22). Had the curse of suffering, with all that it entails – illness, handicap, famine, disaster, bereavement, and so on – never entered into the organic process of life, we would have been entirely ignorant of **the redemptive process of deliverance and healing**. We would never have realised our continual need for dependence on God for these blessings. **Even death itself, in spite of the fact that it is the just 'wages' of lawlessness before God,**

**will ultimately be seen to glorify Him; for if there was no death, there would be no resurrection – which is the ultimate display of the power of God over the supreme enemy** (Gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 25-26; First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 26; Second Letter to Timothy, chapter 1, verses 8-10).

For when all things have been accomplished in Christ and the new heaven and new earth have been established, our victorious God will have brought His eternal plan to fruition in His own refined and resurrected people and in a wholly reconstituted universe. When that time comes...

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away” (Book of Revelation, chapter 21, verse 4)

This is why, when told of the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus could say: *“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it”* (Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 4). Here we have another great illustration of the fact that all suffering exists ultimately for the humbling of man, the glorification of God and the revelation of His sovereignty. **We must not bark at this truth like dogs woken in the night by a strange noise; rather, we should be comforted that this is the full reality of the living God.**

### **God’s-Eye View**

To grasp the fullness of this truth requires considerable patience, great humility, and a more God-ward, less selfish view of the process of life. Only then will we begin to understand why the dark and deadly things of life have been an integral part of God’s plan of the ages. Again, we stress, this does not mean that God Himself is the instigator of evil; for it is His *creatures* (angelic and human) who have fomented lawlessness in the universe. **But God is certainly the Orderer and Controller of all that which the creatures have brought to pass.** We should be thankful for this, for otherwise we could not even begin to handle the kind of foulness which exists throughout this troubled world on such a gigantic scale.

As you are reading these words, innumerable things are happening across the globe which are so atrocious that you could not even conjure them up in your wildest imagination, many of them carried out not only by warped individuals but also by militaries, intelligence agencies, governments, scientific laboratories and many more. Yet our living God is so omnipotent, so all-encompassing, that He has everything under

control. All the holocausts, the massacres, the bloodbaths, the disasters, the plagues, the rapes, and child murders – every horrific thing you can imagine – all these are being secretly managed and overseen by God and His angelic agents in the heavenlies in order to fulfil His own inscrutable purposes.

**Although we may have difficulty comprehending the whole picture of this subject, all the things which happen in this world have been ordained to work towards a higher purpose – the Divine purpose – which forms a vital part of an unseen plan which lies beyond our mortal comprehension.** God sees the whole arena of time in this universe from outside the temporal realm, so to speak. He sees the beginning, the middle and the end of time as being all-of-a-piece. He is the great eternal **I AM**. But we humans are like the three blind men who stumbled upon an elephant and wrongly identified it: The first felt the leg and thought it was a tree; the second felt the trunk and thought it was a hose pipe; the third felt the tail and thought it was a piece of old rope! Unless we have some understanding of the big picture we will continually slip up. This is precisely why disciples of Christ must walk by faith rather than by sight as they pass through this evil world (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 7; chapter 4, verse 18), if they are to come to the deepest understanding of suffering and evil and not lose themselves in the atheistic notion that God is not in control of His own creation.

Hopefully we can now begin to appreciate that the primary purpose of suffering and evil is to display the glory and supreme power of God. Let us now turn to another great purpose of suffering and evil: the furthering of the temporal and eternal welfare of the Lord's people.

## **2. Suffering and Evil Work for the Welfare of God's People**

“This third I will bring through the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God’” (Book of Zechariah, chapter 13, verse 9).

One of the ways in which the Lord shows Himself to be the power and the glory is through bringing good out of evil. **He works with the evil brought about by man in the service of Satan, in order to transform it into something which works to the Divine advantage.** Let us examine how this has worked out in salvation history.

From the time that Abraham, the spiritual father of the Lord's people, was called by God out of the idolatrous, spiritually decadent Ur of the Chaldees, He has dealt with His people through all their meanderings in the most extraordinarily providential, gracious, and merciful manner. Speaking of the welfare of Israel in the times of the patriarchs, the psalmist puts it like this:

“When they wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another. He let no man oppress them; He rebuked kings on their behalf: ‘Do not touch My anointed ones! Do no harm to My prophets!’” (Book of Psalms, 105, verses 13-15)

Moreover, even when evil has befallen the Church, far from it having a malignant outworking, it has actually been to its ultimate advantage. The evil doers are shown for who they really are, while the faith of the faithful is strengthened. **To put it bluntly, suffering and evil have always been used by God to further the progress of His people in both Old and New Testament times.**

### **The Example of Joseph**

In order to prove this, the story of Joseph is a good place to begin. You will no doubt recall that this young man was thrown into a pit by his brothers and then sold to some passing traders who took him to Egypt, where he became a slave to Pharaoh's captain of the guard, Potiphar (Book of Genesis, chapter 37, verses 12-36). All would agree that this was an occasion of suffering and evil. All the ingredients were there: jealousy, lying, conspiracy to murder, kidnapping, deception, grief, etc. Yet, this apparently tragic chain of events is not at all what it at first appears to be.

In all his affliction, Joseph, as an elect child of God, had the Lord with him and He made all that he did to be a success (Book of Genesis, chapter 39, verse 3). Eventually, Joseph rose to a great height in the Egyptian court and we come to the telling scene when, as a result of widespread and severe famine throughout Egypt and Israel, Joseph's brothers (unbeknownst to them) are forced to come to buy food from him, as he had been given control of all food rations by Pharaoh. Not unnaturally, the guilt-ridden brothers quake in their sandals when they realise they are confronted by the brother who they had got rid of years earlier. However, with great spiritual insight, Joseph gives the following extraordinary analysis of what, from a purely human standpoint, would normally be cast as a thoroughly sordid business. He says:

“Now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me into this place, because it was to save lives that God sent me before you. For the famine has covered the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting. God sent me before you to preserve you as a remnant on the earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. Therefore **it was not you who sent me here, but God**, who has made me a father to Pharaoh—lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Book of Genesis, chapter 45, verses 5-8).

Here Joseph boldly ascribes all that had taken place to the providential hand of God. But he is not saying that God actually planned the kidnap, then used the brothers to bring it off. We can see this from a further statement by Joseph when, years later, after his brothers again beg his forgiveness, he says:

“Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? As for you, **what you intended against me for evil, God intended for good**, in order to accomplish a day like this—to preserve the lives of many people” (Book of Genesis, chapter 50, verses 19-21)

Here Joseph has demonstrated his deep understanding of the cosmic purpose of all suffering and evil. It was not God who meant it for evil, but his brothers. **For the Lord would transform the evil in this situation to work for good.** This is the Divine specialty. The concealed programme which lay behind all the scheming of Joseph’s brothers was the hand of God working towards the preservation of Israel. And there are many other examples I could give which demonstrate this fact.

### **The Example of Naomi**

A famine in Israel had forced Naomi, with her husband and two sons, to go to Moab in order to survive. A short time later the husband died and the sons married local Moabite girls called Ruth and Orpah. Ten years later, the two sons died, leaving Naomi with her two daughters-in-law. Here, as always when suffering and evil strike the People of God, there was a sovereign purpose in it which is never immediately apparent. **The outworking of that to full fruition may take years, decades, or even centuries!** So what was God doing in Naomi’s life? She had had a triple bereavement in her family and was uprooted twice. She suffered, and her days were full of evil. At least, that is the human analysis. But in the midst of these afflictions, God was working for the good. For Ruth, whom Naomi brought back to Israel with her, was to marry Boaz. Now

we have the key! Boaz was a descendant of Judah, the chosen bloodline from which the Royal Sceptre would never depart (Book of Genesis, chapter 49, verse 10), leading eventually to the Redeemer-King, the Messiah, the promised Seed of the woman, the Lord Jesus Christ (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 15). And in the final verses of the Book of Ruth we are informed that Boaz and Ruth had a son called Obed who was the grandfather of David, the earthly ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here was the secret reason for all the heartache of Naomi. In the midst of all her sorrows, God was working away for the welfare of His people, to preserve a remnant for His glory, yet she could never have known this at the time. From this, we should take note and be heartened.

### **The Book of Esther Too**

This secrecy and hiddenness of God's providence in the midst of suffering is seen at its best in the Book of Esther, in which there is neither the mention of God nor of any 'religious' exercise. Yet, God's work in His people's suffering was never more apparent. Many more examples could be given. **And here we have a great pastoral lesson – for even in the midst of our own sorrows, God is working through them in ways we can never comprehend at the time.** Only in retrospect does it become apparent – if it ever becomes apparent at all, this side of eternity.

### **Satan's Work is Always Ultimately Foiled**

Again and again, we see that hidden agenda behind the evil in a situation: The hand of God in the preservation of His people. This has been the way from the very beginning. Even though Satan, as part of his ongoing cosmic battle with the Lord (*his* Lord, though he would never admit it), had always determined to obliterate the chosen blood line which would lead to the Lord Jesus Christ (superbly depicted in the Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verse 4), his ways have been thwarted at every turn by the One who is greater than him. He sought to destroy Abel through his emissary, Cain (Book of Genesis, chapter 4, verse 8; cf. First Letter of John, chapter 3, verse 12), but God raised up Seth in his place (Book of Genesis, chapter 4, verse 25). He tried to pollute the godly line of Seth (Book of Genesis, chapter 6, verses 1-2), but God raised up Noah (Book of Genesis, chapter 6, verse 8). The old serpent tried to have every male child in Israel killed at birth by the midwives, but God made provision to ensure that would not succeed (Book of Exodus, chapter 1, verses 15-22). Later, he stirred up Queen Athaliah to murder all the royal heirs of Judah; but Jehosheba hid little Joash – the last royal heir in line – in the recesses of the temple for six years (Second Book of Kings, chapter 11, verses 1-3). In the fullness of time, when the Lord Jesus was

born, Satan used his servant, Herod, to issue an edict that all the male babies under two in Bethlehem and its environs should be killed (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 16-18): but that too was an abject failure. Finally, he set about attempting to destroy the Lord Jesus Himself (e.g. Gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 28-30; Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 53). And here we have yet another example – the supreme example, in fact – of the Lord transforming the evil which is hurled against the *Ekklesia* so that it works for its greater good. Small wonder that it is said that God, “*having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross*” (Letter to the Colossians, chapter 2, verse 15). Despite all their malevolence, the entire demonic realm was made into a laughing-stock through what Christ achieved on the cross and with His resurrection.

It is true that the murder of Jesus the Christ was surely the most evil incident in the history of the universe. The Son of God sent as the Saviour of the world, rejected by His own people, and then destroyed by a convenient coalition of wicked people who were threatened by spiritual truth. But all of this was not happening by chance. As the disciples put it in their majestic prayer for boldness in the face of Pharisaic persecution in Jerusalem:

“Sovereign Lord,” they said, “You made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them... In fact, this is the very city where Herod and Pontius Pilate conspired with the Gentiles and the people of Israel against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed. **They carried out what Your hand and will had decided beforehand would happen**” (Book of Acts, chapter 4, verses 24-28).

Do you see the significance of what these men were praying? **They recognized, without a qualm, that all of what happened to the Lord Jesus, no matter how evil, was doing so under the controlling hand of God.** Here we have “the deep things of God” in glorious action. Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. This is why Jesus could say to Pontius Pilate: “*You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above*” (Gospel of John, chapter 19, verse 11). **No one took Jesus’ life from Him; He laid it down of His own accord and had the power to take it up again** (Gospel of John, chapter 10, verses 17-18). This was a command He had received from His Father. God was in complete control. I trust that you are now appreciating the comfort that one can take from all this!



Think about it: There was the old serpent imagining that he had finally eradicated the One that God had sent to destroy him and his works; but the very manner of Jesus' death was the event that God would use to bring about the salvation of His people. **The pinnacle of the evil Satanic "power of darkness" (Gospel of Luke, chapter 22, verse 53) was, in reality, the climax of Christ's atonement for His people!** What all this illustrates is that whatever Satan throws at the Church, God not only protects His people from it, but he also transforms the evil to work for good. We see another example of this in the Letter from the Lord Jesus Christ to the persecuted Church at Smyrna. He first tells them:

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will suffer tribulation for ten days" (Book of Revelation, chapter 2, verse 10)

By giving these disciples advance information about their sufferings, the Lord demonstrates that it is He who controls the 'whens' and 'wheres' of demonic affliction. But this is not cruelty on God's part. The devil and his human followers who inflicted the sufferings meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. For He then goes on to comfort the disciples at Smyrna with the uplifting words: "*Be faithful even unto death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Book of Revelation, chapter 2, verse 10). Here again, the old serpent must have been rubbing his hands together at the thought of these suffering disciples of Christ; yet the very means with which he was tormenting them would be the very instrument by which they would receive the crown of life! In another place, the Lord Jesus tells all those who suffer for the faith that far from it being a solely harrowing business, such suffering "*will be your opportunity to serve as witnesses*" (Gospel of Luke, chapter 21, verse 13). The furtherance of the kingdom is infinitely more important than any momentary suffering that disciples have to undergo.

"If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and for the gospel will save it" (Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, verses 34-35).

There is yet another affliction of the people of God by the devil which actually works to the advantage of the *Ekklesia*. All the heresies and antichrists which have plagued the Lord's people from the beginning of the Gospel age (Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verse 15) are also a part of God's plan to purify the Church. For Paul tells us that "*there must be*

*heresies [divisions] among you, in order that those who are approved may be made obvious among you"* (First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, verse 19; cf. First Letter of John, chapter 2, verses 19-20). Do you see the significance of this, how it works? God so orders and controls the evil and suffering in history – especially that which is hurled at His hated Church – that it always brings good in the end to His people. As has been wisely said many times over: *"Whatever poison Satan produces, God turns it into medicine for His elect"*. But not only does He work this way in relation to the passage of the Church as a whole through the corridors of history; He also works this way in the personal lives of each one of His children – the lives of all disciples. And this way is called **Divine chastisement**.

### **3. Suffering and Evil Work to the Benefit of Christ's Disciples**

*"We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 3-4).*

In the same way that God, on the cosmic level, is refining the Church as a body through the offices of suffering and evil, so, on the individual level, He is progressively refining each disciple, and purifying his or her inward nature. **This must be one of the least understood of all Bible truths among the many folks in churches today; for such a way of thinking would be anathema in today's Charismatic megachurches where so-called "Prosperity Theology" is practised.**

In this section of our study, I am responding to the question: *"Why do Disciples of Christ have to suffer?"* You will notice that this question takes it for granted that they *will* suffer. This needs to be stressed, because there are an increasing number of professing 'Christians' who feel that they should be exempt from suffering, affliction, distress, illness, etc. – the presence of which is taken to be an indication of faithlessness, unconfessed sin, or demonic oppression and even actual possession. This conceit has itself caused considerable suffering in the lives of many gullible, weak, or untaught sheep – not to mention the divisions and ostracisms which have resulted from it, and the mess of counselling for those who are the victims of this evil teaching.

We can identify three primary reasons why disciples of Christ suffer: **1)** Because they are still subject to the curse on creation. **2)** Because suffering is necessary for their progressive sanctification. **3)** Because there is a need for the purging of the primal sin. In the following three sub-sections, I hope to prove that not only are disciples going to suffer

but that they are ultimately going to derive immeasurable spiritual benefit from it.

*i. Disciples of Christ are Still Subject to the Curse on Creation*

Before showing the main purposes of suffering in the life of the disciple, it is necessary to show from the Scriptures that it is in the purpose of God that disciples should suffer. Most especially, it has become of paramount importance today because many disciples are labouring under the illusion that the disciple of Christ has an automatic right to physical healing and can claim immediate relief from suffering. Generally, this belief has rested on the flimsy foundations of a few verses of Scripture lifted from their context, misunderstood, and misapplied. For example, when the Scripture says: “*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all His kind deeds – He who forgives all your iniquities and heals all your diseases*” (Book of Psalms, 103, verses 2-3), we must not dash headlong into thinking that this means that all those who ask God to heal them physically will definitely be healed.

What appears to have eluded many brethren is that the words ‘sickness’ and ‘healing’ in Scripture by no means automatically refer to the problems of the body. In fact, almost all of the Old Testament references directly concern **spiritual healing** (e.g. Second Book of Chronicles, chapter 7, verse 14; Book of Psalms, 6, verse 2; 41, verse 4; 107, verse 20; Book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verse 10; chapter 57, verses 17-20; Book of Jeremiah, chapter 6, verse 14; chapter 17, verse 14; chapter 30, verse 17; Book of Lamentations, chapter 2, verse 13; Book of Hosea, chapter 6, verse 1; chapter 14, verse 4; Gospel of John, chapter 12, verse 40; Book of Acts, chapter 28, verse 27; Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 13; Book of Revelation, chapter 22, verse 2).

The whole object of God’s plan of salvation is to bring about the restoring of the world from sin (i.e. moral failure, lawlessness), and this is spoken of in Scripture in such terms as “*the healing of the nations*” (Book of Revelation, chapter 22, verse 2). It is this same idea which is being expressed in Psalm 103, verses 2-3, as quoted above. The forgiveness of all our iniquities is parallel with the healing of all our diseases. They are different expressions of the same principle. **The real disease of man is his sin, from which he needs redemption and forgiveness, which, in turn, leads to his (spiritual) healing.** Even in the English language, it is no coincidence that the word ‘salvation’ is closely related to the word ‘salve’, ointment (cf. Book of Revelation, chapter 3, verse 18).

As a shining example of this parallelism between healing and the forgiveness of sins, the prophecy of Isaiah concerning Jesus’ atonement

says, “By His stripes [wounds] we are healed” (Book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 5). This does not mean that those covered by the blood of Christ will never be sick nor undergo affliction after their conversion, as some seem to interpret this text today. That there is healing at all – whether physical, spiritual, or emotional – certainly has its roots in Jesus’ atonement. But this does not mean that everyone who benefits from Jesus’ atonement will always be healed of any physical disease they may have. In his definitive commentary on this verse in Isaiah, the Apostle Peter speaks of Christ as the One

“who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes [wounds] you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (First Letter of Peter, chapter 2, verses 24-25).

The healing being referred to here is clearly spiritual – the forgiveness of sins – rather than the curing of mere bodily ailments; and this is the thrust of the entire Scriptures. None of the passages which refer to healing in the Bible could be taken to infer that God always wants everyone to be healed and has provided for that. In fact, the idea is explicitly refuted in one place by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 25-27), and the same can be inferred from many more incidents in Scripture. The fact that the majority of New Testament references to healing involve miraculous bodily healings by the Lord Jesus Christ does not detract from this principle. **For through the healing of physical disease, Jesus was foreshadowing His atoning work in healing our spiritual disease and the thoroughly corrupting effect it has on our lives** (e.g. Gospel of John, chapter 9, verses 39, 5-7; chapter 11, verses 43, 44, 25-26). He was acting out signs. His healings of the body were a gracious sign to the Lord’s ancient covenant people that the Physician of the soul had truly arrived – exactly as had been foretold through the prophets (Book of Isaiah, chapter 29, verse 18; chapter 35, verses 5-7; Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, verses 1-5; see especially Mark, 2, verses 9-10, 17). In just the same way that it is futile to have a full stomach and an empty heart, so it is of no lasting consequence to have full bodily health yet remain spiritually untransformed (First Letter to Timothy, chapter 4, verse 8).

In a revealing verse, the prophet Jeremiah tells us that the human heart is “deceitful above all things and incurably sick” (Book of Jeremiah, chapter 17, verse 9). That is the literal meaning of the Hebrew, although it is often translated as “desperately wicked”, which good exegetes would recognise as a most apposite equivalent of “incurably sick”. For it is this spiritual

sickness which is being healed forever by the atonement of Jesus Christ, not the physical ailments of our brief life in this passing world.

Although it is a fact that in the new heaven and the new earth, the new creation made after the return of the Lord Jesus, there will be no sickness – nor, indeed, any kind of suffering (Book of Revelation, chapter 21, verse 4) – the earth in its present state is still a fallen planet and the people in it are still organic partakers in a fallen world. We see this clearly from Paul’s teaching in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, where he discusses the awful tension which exists between the continuing corruption of the old order and the germination of the new order through those called by the Spirit of adoption to be the children of God. The Apostle is at great pains to show beyond refutation that, in spite of the appearances of things – the continuity of fallenness in the created world – those regenerated in Christ have absolute assurance of salvation. He says that if we are the children of God, then we are

“heirs: heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ—if indeed we suffer with Him, so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 17).

Here Paul clearly acknowledges that disciples of Christ will suffer with Christ. Our Master suffered; therefore we also will suffer (cf. Gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 19-20). The Apostle then immediately makes the profound statement that *“our present sufferings are not comparable to the glory that will be revealed in us”* (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 18). **Here we have, in essence, the true disciple of Christ’s understanding of suffering. No matter how bad things get in this life, they pale into insignificance when we consider the sublimity of our future state in eternity.** Then, after a memorable verse which superbly expresses the tensions in the whole creation – shot through as it is with imperfection – Paul says that it is not only the brute creation which strains at the seams in the stranglehold of corruption, but *“we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”* (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 23). Why does he say this? Because he wishes to emphasise the fact that disciples of Christ too are still partakers according to the flesh in the world of decay and corruption. We still have bodies which are subject to mortal decay. It has not yet been revealed what we shall be in the time of the resurrection (First Letter of John, chapter 3, verse 2). We still have that sin which is connected with ‘the flesh’ to contend with, although we are being renewed every day according to ‘the inward self’ (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 16). *“By His stripes we have been healed”* – that is, spiritually

reconciled to God – but the fullness of that spiritual healing will not be openly revealed until all things have been made anew. Until the day that we breathe our last, we will continue to need fillings in our teeth and spectacles on our eyes, as well as atonement for our sin!

In order to avoid falling into mistaken ideas on this thorny subject, and to put the life experience of the Disciple of Christ in its true perspective, we must recognise that there is a twofold development in the process of full redemption. As the Apostle writes:

“Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await Him” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 9, verse 28)

There are two stages there: Jesus Christ came the first time to bear the sins of His people (i.e. spiritual healing); He is coming a second time to complete the redemption process when all things will be made anew (i.e. the full restoration of all things and the reversal of the Fall, cf. Book of Acts, chapter 3, verse 21), including our bodies, which continue to be disease-prone and mortal between the two advents of Jesus. **To put it another way: The kingdom has come in grace, but it has not yet come in glory.** The all-too-common misunderstanding of this ‘not-yetness’ aspect of the kingdom has led to many errors in the Church throughout its history, such as the sinless perfection of the disciple, healing and wholeness for all, and what is known as ‘Dominion Theology’ or ‘Christian Reconstructionism’.

**That the healing which is in Christ would have to be applied spiritually before the entire physical wholeness would come to fruition is absolutely central to the main thesis of this present study. As we shall shortly see, it is through the refining fire of suffering, evil and ultimately physical death that the people of God are brought into full glory.** This does *not* mean that the disciple of Christ’s salvation is uncertain until Christ’s return. Perish the thought! But God has chosen not to bring to pass the full *accomplishment* of the glorification element so long as His children remain in their mortal, temporally-adapted flesh. He has, however, done the next best thing: He has given all His children the indwelling Holy Spirit as a kind of downpayment or deposit as a guarantee of the future glorified life to come. That is how it is actually put in the sacred texts (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 22; chapter 5, verse 5; Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 11-14).

So long as we remain in our physical bodies as they are presently constituted, *“we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling”*

(Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 2). This is every disciple's experience. But to be so clothed does not happen yet. We disciples of Christ remain in this present fallen world; we groan, being burdened, subject to the effects of that original Fall-induced curse on creation and subject to the persecutions of the atheistic, antichristian world-system. However, in order to prevent us from becoming despondent or doubtful while we wait for full redemption at Christ's return, our gracious and loving God has organized the most comforting remedy. He has given us the ultimate Comforter (Gospel of John, chapter 14, verses 18,25-26; chapter 15, verse 26). As Paul puts it:

“God has prepared us for this very purpose [i.e. full redemption at the resurrection] and **has given us the Spirit as a pledge [guarantee, downpayment] of what is to come.** Therefore we are always confident, although we know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. **For we walk by faith, not by sight**” (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 5-7).

**It is crucial for us to realise that because the Fall of humanity was brought about by doubt, therefore human restitution must be brought about by faith.** If everything in our lives was suddenly totally transformed into perfection the instant we became disciples of Christ, the whole purpose behind the Fall would be undermined and the aeons of sin, suffering and death which have been designed for our learning would be rendered meaningless. Therefore, until Jesus' return, we remain clothed in imperfection and in a suffering world in order that we may carry out our allotted role as God's appointed heralds of salvation to those who are still to be brought into the kingdom (Gospel of John, chapter 17, verse 15; cf. Letter to the Philippians, chapter 1, verses 21-24), while at the same time we are enabled to undergo our own progressive purification process. For it is during that paradoxical period between conversion (spiritual rebirth) and bodily death that the child of God is being systematically trained up for heavenly service. And it is to this training process that I will now direct our attention.

#### *ii. Suffering is Necessary for Sanctification*

Many of those professing to be 'Christian' have so emphatically put their feet under the table of this present world that they are almost entirely ignorant of the fact that this mortal life is but a brief, preparatory prelude to the eternal life which is to come. Accordingly, when they begin to suffer in some way, they assume that something entirely anomalous has

happened to them and that the will of God has somehow been thwarted. In other words, they begin to walk by sight rather than by faith.

God could so easily have made all things to stand in the fullness of perfection from the very outset. He could have created our first parents so that they were incapable of falling into sin, or at least preserved them from the beguilings of the devil (as He clearly originally did with some of the angels, First Letter to Timothy, chapter 5, verse 21). **But that is not the world which He chose to create. Instead, He ordained the long, dark pathway of sin, suffering, death, and salvation in Christ.** When a person becomes bonded to Christ, despite the fact that his or her sin has been put away through the atonement, the metamorphosis of the disciple is by no means complete. Salvation itself is assured, but the progressive process of sanctification has only just begun – and it takes an entire lifetime! **As God on the cosmic level is refining the Church as a body in its passage through history, so on the individual level, He is refining each disciple through the fires of suffering and evil which surround him on all sides in this wicked world.**

Although spiritual rebirth is instantaneous, the progressive cleansing process that follows is an experiential one. Our restoration must be a conscious experience, in which the person is an active participant. The children of God are *led* by the Holy Spirit (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 14). **Led!** They are not ‘possessed’ by the Spirit, as one would be by a demon, so that they become instantaneous mini-gods, mindlessly transformed to sinless perfectionism, able to do all the works of Jesus. Disciples of Christ have mighty lessons to learn and they must walk every painful step of the way themselves, with the indwelling help of the Spirit (Letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verses 13-14). Thus, for the disciple, a new pathway is opened up, but it is by no means an easy one. It was never supposed to be easy! The victorious, suffering-free, triumphalist allegedly ‘Christian’ life extolled in many parts of the Church today is not the way of Christ. As Paul and Barnabas said, when exhorting and strengthening the gentile converts: *“We must endure many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”* (Book of Acts, chapter 14, verse 22).

### **Groaning and Affliction Lead to Life**

It was never supposed to be easy. *“Indeed, all who desire to live devoutly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (Second Letter to Timothy, chapter 3, verse 12). Or, as the Lord Jesus told the disciples shortly before His departure from this earthly life: *‘in the world you will have tribulation’* (Gospel of John, chapter 16, verse 33). Earlier in His ministry, concluding the Sermon on the Mount, our Saviour had said:



“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. Because narrow is the gate and afflicted is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew, chapter 7, verses 13-14).

The Greek word here translated as ‘narrow’ (*stenos*) is closely related to a word which means ‘groaning’ (*stenagmos*); while the literal meaning of the Greek word translated as ‘difficult’ (*tethlimmenos*) is ‘afflicted’, ‘under tribulation’ or ‘oppressed’. In other words, the way of the disciple of Christ which leads to life one could say is the way of *groaning* and *affliction*. How different this is to the message given out by some evangelists today: “*Come to Jesus and all your troubles in life will be over!*”

This ‘way of groaning and affliction which leads to life’ is in total harmony with Paul’s assertion which we mentioned earlier: “*We also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan [Greek: stenadzomen] within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body*” (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 23). It is absolutely natural that this groaning should occur, and also most necessary for the disciple to go through this process, so that he will finally and fully grasp the horrific nature of lawlessness before God and the need for complete dependence on Him for everything.

**Grace and salvation have been ordained for the people of God in the midst of an evil world, with all its attendant suffering, to induce them to despise lawlessness and live unto God alone. This is the cost of true discipleship. It is the pathway of self-denial, service, and sacrifice. It is the pathway of divine chastisement.** Proof that disciples of Christ must undergo such training/discipline/chastisement is scattered like confetti throughout Scripture. **We have been appointed to it by God** (First Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 3; Letter to the Philippians, chapter 1, verse 29; Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verse 11) **for our education** (Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8, verses 2 & 15-16; Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 4-6), **as an aid to our correction** (Book of Psalms, 119, verses 67 & 71; Second Book of Chronicles, chapter 7, verses 13-14), **to prevent us from sin** (Second Book of Samuel, chapter 12, verses 13-20), and **in order that we should glorify Him who has saved us** (First Letter of Peter, chapter 4, verses 12-16). This chastening process is how the disciple of Christ is taught by God. We do not learn merely through studying the Scriptures, for we have the great need of a ‘hands on’ experience of our foolishness, weakness, and the need to be dependent on the Lord.

The classic text which shows the doctrine of divine chastisement at its strongest occurs in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12. The fountainhead of this passage occurs in chapter 10, verses 32-34, where Paul is highlighting the appalling suffering and persecution of the Hebrew disciples of Christ who often had their houses looted (a common practice in those times). He then develops this into a treatise on faith which climaxes, in chapter 11, verses 35b-38, in a catalogue of all the sufferings that so many had to endure in the history of the Lord's people in the Old Testament. Then, in chapter 12, verse 1, Paul tells the Hebrews that they are not alone in their suffering but are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have borne the most awful adversity. All this leads into the teaching about that special chastening which comes from the Lord. Some people would say that this passage is about routine discipline rather than suffering, but it is clear that the discipline referred to in chapter 12, verses 5-11 involves the suffering mentioned in the previous two chapters.

### **The Redundancy of Ritualism**

Paul is obviously trying to comfort these disciples by showing them that their sufferings, afflictions, and torments are an integral part of God's plan for them, for their profit, for their training, that they may be partakers in His holiness (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verses 10-11). So, when they have their houses looted by opposing Jews (as they did) they do not need to 'plead the blood' over their homes, as many superstitious professing 'Christians' do today; neither do they need to enact 'prayer-walks' around their houses in order to 'reclaim the territory for Christ', as many ignorant professing 'Christians' do today. Such ritualism is entirely redundant for the disciple of Christ (and as uselessly superstitious as the New Age folks burning a 'smudge' of sage to 'ward off bad energies'). As Paul points out, they simply need to accept whatever their affliction is *"with joy"* and rest in the assurance that they *"have a better and permanent possession"* for themselves in heaven (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 34). As the apostle says elsewhere, *"our present sufferings are not comparable to the glory that will be revealed in us"* (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 18), and *"our light and momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory that is far beyond comparison"* (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 17). Just as the Author of our salvation is made *"perfect through suffering"*, so also are those made perfect who are being sanctified through Him (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 2, verses 10-11). We actually become one with Him through our sufferings.

Another clinching aspect of this divinely appointed chastisement through suffering is that it is actually a sign of adoption into the family of God. As Paul says:

“Endure suffering as discipline; for God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you do not experience discipline like everyone else, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verses 7-8).

Although all men and women could be said to be the children of God *by creation* (i.e. they are ‘in Adam’), not all are His children *by adoption* (i.e. ‘in Christ’). The first Adam was disowned from the family inheritance (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verses 22-24). But through our salvation in Christ (“*the last Adam*”, First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 45) we are adopted back into God’s family. Paul is saying here that one of the primary outward signs that we are in that family of God is that we are subjected to the chastisement of our Father in heaven. It is His way of showing us that He loves us (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 6). “This is a strange way of showing love”, you may say. “What Father would inflict pain on his children?” This is an understandable reaction. But the fact that it is not your desire that your children should suffer, does not at all mean that it cannot be in God’s will that His people suffer. On this point, many disciples make the all-too-common mistake of applying their own feelings and conclusions to those of God. But when you tread on this ground, the words of the Lord thunder out:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Book of Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 8-9).

You simply cannot base an understanding of the ways of God with His people on your personal dealings with your own children. In any case, there are surely some circumstances under which even human fathers would want their children to learn their lesson through the hardship of adversity if they were behaving badly – e.g. to suffer a comparatively minor burn so they will be savvy enough to avoid a major burn. This is the way it is with divine chastisement: but He does it for our eternal benefit, that we may be partakers in His holiness (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 10). That is why this chastening is a sign that you are loved by God. **If you are not one of His children, He leaves you to your**

**just deserts. But if you are His child, He intervenes – often in a most dramatic manner – to alter or control your residual sinful behaviour.**

We are wayward creatures by nature before being transformed by the Holy Spirit. Even though we have been ‘definitively sanctified’ the moment that we “*crossed over from death to life*” (Gospel of John, chapter 5, verse 24), we still need ‘progressive sanctification’ for our actual spiritual growth. In the same way that the kingdom comes in two stages (already here in grace, but not yet present in glory), so one can also say that our perfection comes in two stages. We disciples are already perfect in Christ. Our life is hidden with Christ in God (Letter to the Colossians, chapter 3, verse 3). Everywhere in the New Testament, disciples – both mature and immature – are described as ‘saints’, i.e. already sanctified and made holy (e.g. Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 1; Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 1, verse 1). That is the first level of perfection. The second level of perfection concerns the progressive ‘hands-on’, learning process, which is needed because, from an anthropological standpoint, we still have ‘the flesh’ to contend with, even though – on the spiritual level – we are indeed ‘in Christ’.

### **The Endurance of the Disciple of Christ**

That Paul certainly included deep personal suffering under the umbrella heading of ‘chastisement’ in the twelfth chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is proven by the fact that he begins his argument about chastening in verse 5 by quoting from the Book of Job, chapter 5, verse 17a, which refers directly to the experience of Job – an event which involved the death of all his children and the loss of all his property. Later in this paper we will learn in what way Job was to benefit through this seemingly crushing tragedy.

The chastening which comes from the Lord is not a thing to be shunned or avoided at all costs. It must be **endured**, for it will reap its own rewards. Timothy was told by his teacher, Paul, to “*endure afflictions*” as a fulfillment of his ministry (Second Letter to Timothy, chapter 4, verse 5). And James concurs when he writes:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you encounter trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Allow perseverance to finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Letter of James, chapter 1, verses 2-3).

In just the same way that the evil presence of false prophets and heretics in the Church tests the faith of its members and enables the truth to be made manifest, so the furnace of affliction through suffering and evil in the life of the disciple brings the slag to the surface and facilitates the purification of his soul. It is with this process in mind that the Apostle Peter exhorted the elect pilgrims of the Diaspora:

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith—more precious than gold, which perishes even though tested by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (First Letter of Peter, chapter 1, verses 6-9).

Job, too, expressed this idea when he said: “*Yet He knows the way I have taken; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold*” (Book of Job, chapter 23, verse 10). Such is the way that God sanctifies His people. As the Lord Jesus told the lukewarm church at Laodicea: “*Those I love, I rebuke and discipline*” (Book of Revelation, chapter 3, verse 19; cf. Book of Proverbs, chapter 3, verse 12). **The life of the disciple of Christ is not for those who want to feel wonderful all the time. It is for those who wish to submit to the infinitely superior discipline of their Father in heaven, no matter how that makes them feel.**

Every single circumstance — even the unpleasant ones — which He generates or permits in the lives of His children is for their benefit. When Job exhorts us not to despise “*the discipline of the Almighty*”, he gives a timely reminder of the fact that “*He bruises but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole*” (Book of Job, chapter 5, verse 17). From our human standpoint, this may seem decidedly grim; but it is all being worked out for our ultimate healing. The word ‘ultimate’ has been used in this paper a great many times; this is because very often the Lord’s working of good out of evil can only be seen after years, centuries or even millennia! ‘Ultimately’, all things will be seen to work for good. As the apostle Paul puts it:

“No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields a harvest of righteousness and peace to those who have been trained by it” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 11)

“**Trained by it**”. Our Divine chastisement/discipline is the highest form of education possible. The Greek word translated here as ‘trained’ is *gumnadzo*, from which we derive our words ‘gymnasium’ and ‘gymnastics’. It means, literally, to exercise naked (from *gumnos*, naked),

as the Greeks would have done in their athletics. And it refers back to the beginning of the chapter when Paul said, *“Let us run with endurance the race which is set before us”* (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 1). The race which is set before us is the span of time allotted to the disciple between *now* and his or her bodily death. And this verse tells us that it will only last for as long as it takes for us to be trained by it. Sometimes this will be relatively quick but sharp; other times it will be prolonged with a dull sort of pain. Yet again, some brethren – even the most apparently godly people – will be subjected to a particular form of training for their entire lives. We may never fully understand the Lord’s purpose in these matters; and we should certainly never make judgements about a person’s spiritual condition according to his or her sufferings. It was to this Divine chastisement that our Lord was referring in His final discourse to the disciples, when He said that the Father *“cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, and every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes to make it even more fruitful”* (Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 2). It is significant that the Greek word translated here as ‘prunes’ (*kathairei*) means in a literal sense ‘cleanses’ or ‘purifies’, from which our word ‘catharsis’ is derived.

Before closing this section, it is important to stress that the chastening which the Lord’s people must undergo should not be confused with the popular idea of chastisement as punishment for sin; rather, it is a means of certain purification in preparation for heavenly service. Divine chastisement was never designed by God as an actual *punishment* for His children – for their sins are already forgiven in Christ (First Letter of John, chapter 2, verses 1-2 & 12; First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 11). **Instead, it forms the foundation of that necessarily painful but refining process between our regeneration and our bodily death which is designed to take us from the depths of filth to the heights of glory.** The true child of God should not find this a matter of dread, for in comparison with the pains of everlasting torment and alienation from God, our divinely appointed chastening is relatively light (Book of Acts, chapter 20, verses 23-24; Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 18; Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 7), and always far less than we deserve (Book of Psalms, 103, verse 10; Book of Ezra, chapter 9, verse 13; Book of Lamentations, chapter 3, verse 2).

Therefore, like Paul, *“we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope”* (Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 3-4). This does not mean that we should deliberately seek out suffering as a penance, as some have felt motivated to do in the history of the Church, in a vain attempt to

manipulate the unfolding pattern of their lives. We can have no idea what is best for us in terms of our spiritual growth and development, and we could never anticipate the unique, sometimes exciting, sometimes harrowing purificatory plan which God has ordained for the lives of each one of His children. As a wise one once said, *“The thing we think is best for ourselves is often worst for our souls”*. Just bear in mind the liberating fact that whatever testing He does send in our direction, it will never be *“beyond your ability”* to cope with it, for with that testing *“He will also provide the way of escape, so that you will be able to endure it”* (First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 13). He certainly wounds, but He always bandages up.

There is yet more. For behind all this there lies a Divine motive that can be traced back to the dawning of cosmic history. It is the idea of the purging of that primal sin – the transgression which lies at the very root of this fallen world.

### *iii. The Purging of Primal Sin*

Here we return to the subject matter of the beginning of our study: the origin of evil in the universe.

In the aftermath of the Fall, the Lord made the statement that His human creation had *“become like one of Us, knowing good and evil”* (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 22). For this reason, they (and all their progeny) had to be expelled from having access to the tree of life (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verses 23-24). The phrase *‘knowing good and evil’* cannot refer to a basic human knowledge of the difference between right and wrong, for our first parents already had a knowledge of God by the light of nature (Letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verses 19-20; cf. chapter 2, verses 14-15) – as can also be seen in the fact that the Lord would never have given them a commandment if they had no basic understanding of the difference between right and wrong. In fact, the state into which our first parents had fallen was a fulfilment of the promise of Satan that *“you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 5). This *‘knowledge of good and evil’* refers to a usurpation of that which is the exclusive prerogative of God and God alone. It is as if Satan was saying: *“Follow me, and you will know all about good and evil and how to control it just like God”*. In other words, Satan promised those first human beings that they could exercise the same knowledge that God had in order to have dealings with good and what is evil and how to transform it, control it, harness it – the exercising of divine knowledge. Only God can really *know* good and evil in this way. His knowledge of these matters is so vast that he can work all things (even evil things) together

for our good, as I have amply shown already in this study. We ourselves could never do that.

But people, in the wake of satanic seduction, have set themselves up as the sole arbiters of what is good and what is evil and how it can be managed – thus dethroning God from what is His unshared privilege. In other words, Man has made himself into a little god. He had *“exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is forever worthy of praise!”* (Letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 25). ‘The Lie’ is that the creature can take the place of the Creator, and it was introduced into this present world by Satan, who was rightly described by the Lord Jesus as the father of it (Gospel of John, chapter 8, verse 44), and it is reiterated bigtime among humans with the revealing of the Antichrist (Second Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 11), who will set himself up as if he is God (Second Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 4).

It seems extraordinary that so many tomes have been written on the ‘Theodicy’ – the apparent conundrum of the existence of evil in a world created by a good God. Yet, there is really nothing terribly complicated or philosophically obtuse about the existence of evil in the universe. Rational, created beings, when left to their own devices in a state of freewill, have a capacity to doubt their creatureship and God’s creatorship. **Evil always begins with a denial of ‘the Creator’ by ‘the created’.** It always has been that way and it always will be – until God brings this present age to a stunningly dramatic close.

### **Striving with our Maker**

Here we see the seriousness of idolatry. It is not simply a matter of the created being raising *his or her own self* up above the Creator (although that is bad enough). It is also the created being raising up *any created thing* above the Creator – to whom alone worship is due (Book of Revelation, chapter 4, verse 11). Just take time to read the forty-fifth chapter of Isaiah. You will find there the most flesh-withering statement in the entire Bible concerning the Lord’s declaration of His Creatorship over and above the creature. It is a complete denunciation of the primal pride of man, with its centrepiece as the statement: *“Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker”* (Book of Isaiah, chapter 45, verse 9). **It is this ‘quarrelling with his Maker’ which has been at the heart of all the problems in the universe from the fall of Satan to the final trump.** As Isaiah puts it elsewhere:

*“You have turned things upside down, as if the potter were regarded as clay. Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘He did not make me’? Can the pottery say of the*



potter, 'He has no understanding'?" (Book of Isaiah, chapter 29, verse 16; cf. Letter to the Romans, chapter 9, verse 21).

**The elevation of the creature above the Creator is the wellspring of evil and suffering.** It is surely not insignificant that the very first of the Ten Commandments states: "*You shall have no other gods before Me*" (Book of Exodus, chapter 20, verse 3), and that the Apostle John abruptly concludes his First Letter by leaving the stark warning of the final verse resounding in the minds of his readers: "*Little children, keep yourselves from idols*" (First Letter of John, chapter 5, verse 21). The elevation of the creature above the Creator. The violation of this law is at the heart of all human civilisation throughout every age of Man. It has climaxed and expressed itself (and will again) with great vividness at certain points in history (e.g. Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verses 6-7; Book of Genesis, chapter 6, verses 5,11-12; Book of Genesis, chapter 11, verse 4; Book of Isaiah, chapter 47, verse 10; Gospel of Luke, chapter 22, verse 52; Book of Acts, chapter 12, verses 21-22; Second Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 4). But ripeness for the fullness of judgement on this sin will not reach its zenith until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, when the world-system which is under the rulership of Satan (mystery Babylon) will finally be destroyed (Book of Revelation, chapter 18, verse 21).

When Satan and our first parents elevated themselves above the jurisdiction and authority of God, they were manifesting 'the Lie' (the substitution of the creature for the Creator) in all its nakedness. This is the sin of pride. **It would seem that to fall into this sin is in the capacity of the rational creature, if left to his own devices in the exercise of his freewill, as were our first parents.** A number of the angels (apparently the majority, as shown in the Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verse 4a) did not fall with Satan. However, it should be noted that the ability of these angels to persevere was due solely to the fact that they were 'elect' (cf. First Letter to Timothy, chapter 5, verse 21), i.e. they were chosen by God and enabled to stand with Him in the event of an apostasy by the other angels. If you do not like that idea about them being 'elect', all I can say is, "Tough!" This is the way that it is. **You have to just let God be God and not get all bent out of shape thinking that you can do His job better than Him.**

### **Why Did Satan Fall?**

Tracing things back to the earliest origins of evil, we can account for the fall of our first parents through the seduction of the God-dishonouring

lies of Satan. However, when we come to the fall of the angel, Satan himself, we come to an apparent dead end – a seeming moral impasse. (It is worth noting here that his name has not always been Satan, which is based on the Hebrew word for ‘adversary’ or ‘opponent’, and obviously only came to be applied after his fall). We know of no temptation of Satan, yet this initially pure created being led a rebellion of angels against his Creator. Here the question must be asked: *“What could conceivably have led to the fall of this once glorious angelic being?”*

One hesitates to speculate at this point about what led to the fall of Satan, but two possibilities spring into my mind: the first is that he had concluded that God is just as much of a creature as he is, and that He was merely setting Himself up as the Creator – in which case Satan can just battle it out with Him in order to try and gain the upper hand. A second possibility is that he began to believe that there was never any creation of Divine origin, but that everything – including God Himself – had simply evolved out of a ‘cosmic soup’. Whichever of these scenarios is correct (and they are both only speculative possibilities), they are in effect the same, as they simply place God and Satan on an equal footing to slug it out down through the cosmic corridors of time until a victor emerges triumphant. This would account for the fact that even though Satan knows the contents of the Bible – including the final showdown in the Book of Revelation – better than anyone calling themselves ‘Christian’; and even though he somehow knows that he only has a short time, he still carries on fighting regardless.

### **Taking Away the Sin of the World**

All this is not just speculation for its own sake, or to aid the unfolding of philosophical theories. It is clear that the very root of the problem of evil in the universe is the *hubris* by which the rational creature (human or angelic) judges for himself, according to his own values, whether a thing is right or wrong (what is known as ‘situation ethics’). **In the same way that when “there was no King in Israel, everyone did that which was right in his own eyes” (Book of Judges, chapter 21, verse 25), so when a human begins to doubt that there is a King in heaven, he will build a world based on that ‘situation ethics’ – a world which ultimately issues in disorder, lawlessness, and chaos.**

Some readers may be wondering what all this has to do with divine chastisement. But an understanding of this original sin of pride – the Lie which puts the creature above the Creator – is crucial to understanding the purpose for the God-ordained affliction of disciples. It all begins with that capacity of the rational creature to doubt his

creatureship, with the logical move from that position towards the deification of the creature (Letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 25), which manifests either in idolatry or the illusion of self-divinity. **The purpose, therefore, of affliction from God is the humbling of the creature in order to remove all possibility of this sin of pride, the primal sin, from our hearts.** The process of taking away the sin of the world (the business of the Lamb of God, Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 29) must involve its necessary and painful destruction. Pride is simply the elevation of the creature above the Creator and it has to be crushed if there is to be progress of any kind.

In the wake of the Fall, all human beings are born with this lawlessness engraved on their hearts, so to speak (Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 12-14; cf. Book Jer.17:1), and it is avidly encouraged by Satan who was the founder of it on this earth (Gospel of John, chapter 8, verse 44). Affliction, therefore, provides a unique opportunity: **For those who are not yet disciples, it provides the occasion involving the potential to come to Christ in repentance, thus dethroning pride and putting God back on the throne of his or her heart. For the disciple of Christ, affliction serves to renew that closeness and dependence on God which can so easily wane as we wander through the distracting wilderness of this present fallen world.** One of the principal reasons for the chastening of disciples at the hands of God is in order that they may be restored to an immovable dependence on their Maker and be faithful forever.

Before looking at some examples of this precious process in the sacred texts, take some time to meditate on these words of John Newton (1725-1807), written fresh from the white-hot furnace of Divine chastisement, and which beautifully hymns the dumbfounding ways that God deals with His beloved children:

1. "I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know, and seek more earnestly His face.
2. 'Twas He who taught me thus to pray, and He, I trust, has answered  
prayer; But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.
3. I hoped that in some favoured hour at once He'd answer my request;  
And by His love's constraining power, subdue my sins and give me rest.
4. Instead of this, He made me feel the hidden evils of my heart,  
And let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

5. Yea, more, with His own hand He seemed intent to aggravate my woe,  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed — blasted my gourds and laid me  
low.

6. ‘Lord, why is this?’ I trembling cried, ‘Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to  
death?’ ‘Tis in this way’, the Lord replied, ‘I answer prayer for grace and  
faith.

7. These inward trials I employ, from self and pride to set thee free,  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy, that thou mayest seek thy all in  
Me’.”

#### *iv. Three Examples of Divine Chastisement/Discipline*

For those who find it hard to accept all that has been said so far about suffering and the will of God for His people, there are three particular characters in Scripture with whom the Lord has dealt in such a way that the conclusions are inescapable, and which therefore provide us with a template through which we should view all other references to suffering in the life of the disciple of Christ. For the cases of Job and David in the Old Testament, and Paul the Apostle in the New Testament prove beyond a doubt that the control of our suffering rests ultimately with God. Let us now consider these three perfect Biblical examples of Divine chastisement.

### **The Patience of Job**

The information that we have been given in the sacred texts about Job is one of the very few places where we are provided with a heavenly glimpse into the extraordinary way that the unwitting Satan is used by God to fulfil His own designs; and that must surely be one of the prime purposes of this Book of Job being in the canon of Scripture. In just the same way that the Lord Jesus was not the *passive* object of random demonic affliction — in the sense that the wilderness confrontation with the devil was actually set up by the Holy Spirit (Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verse 12) — so Job’s sufferings were also at the instigation and suggestion of God.

In the opening chapters, we see that it was Jehovah who brought Job to the attention of Satan, “*Have you considered my servant, Job...?*” and that God controls the extent to which he can be tested (Book of Job, chapter 1, verses 8, 12; chapter 2, verses 3 & 6). Think through the information that this gives us. For it shows three precious things: **First**, that Satan must have permission from God before he is able to inflict suffering and evil in the world (Book of Job, chapter 1, verse 6; chapter 2, verse 1). Anything that Satan does is totally subordinate to the will of God. The

**second** element that is revealed in the Book of Job is that in all that Satan does, he can only go as far as he is permitted by the Lord (Job chapter 1, verse 12; chapter 2, verse 6). In fact, the devil, no matter how fiendish he may become, is actually, in a sense (without even realizing it!) — like his unfallen angelic counterparts — acting as a “*ministering spirit sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation*” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 1, verse 14). Do you find this an astonishing thing? Well, it is true. In spite of all the superstition and nonsensical incantations that are mustered against Satan in many Charismatic circles today, that Old Serpent is completely under the control of his Creator; and no matter what evil and havoc he can make in the world, he can never do any more than will ultimately be necessary towards the furthering and fruition of God’s final purpose. As Prof. W.H. Green puts it in his superb exposition of the experience of Job:

“With all Satan’s hatred of God and spite against His people, he cannot emancipate himself from that sovereign control which binds him to God’s service. In all his blasphemous designs he is, in spite of himself, doing the work of God. In his efforts to dethrone the Most High, he is actually paying Him submissive homage. In moving heaven and earth to accomplish the perdition of those whom Christ has ransomed, he is actually fitting them for glory. Fiend as he is, full of bitterness and malignity and intent on every form of mischief, he is constrained to be that which he most abhors, and is furthest from his intentions and desires: to be helpful and auxiliary to the designs of grace!” [William H. Green, “*The Argument of Job Unfolded*,” Klock & Klock, first published 1874, reprinted 1977, pp.63-64].

The book of Job clearly shows this: that everything that Satan does will prove, in the long run, “*to be helpful and auxiliary to the designs of grace*”. What a marvellous comfort this is! Satan meant it for evil, but God means it for good.

There is a **third** precious element that is revealed to us in these first chapters of the Book of Job: **that it is God Himself who decides the ‘whens’ and ‘wheres’ of suffering and affliction in the lives of His children** (Book of Job, chapter 1, verse 8; chapter 2, verse 3).

Now each of these three elements spells out the same fundamental message: **That God is the Master of the universe, and that the creature is always subject to the Creator.** Yet many of those who call themselves

'Christians' — especially in Charismatic-Pentecostal circles today — behave as if the devil has a completely free hand. To hear of people performing 'Jericho Walks' around areas in order to 'reclaim the territory for Christ' suggests that they believe that the devil has the upper hand on this planet, and that God is dependent on 'Christian' types to flush him out of their neighbourhoods with detestable superstitious pagan-style rituals. But such an idea is based on a complete misreading of the Bible and a misapprehension of God, not to mention it being pure superstition.

The devil dealt out one cruel blow after another on Job. His children and property were destroyed and his health was blighted terribly. But what was it all for? Was Satan having a heyday just doing whatever he wanted to Job? Was God colluding with Satan to inflict cruelty on this good man? Not at all! The reason behind all this mayhem in Job's life was to bring about his humbling (Book of Job, chapter 40, verses 3-5; chapter 42, verses 1-6). No matter how good any person may appear to be, there is always some residual pride or self-righteousness in the creature — Job being no exception (Book of Job, chapter 27, verses 5-6) — and the Divine antidote to the indigenous pride of humans is to first reveal His omnipotent majesty and then to lay them low. There can be no better preparation for heavenly service than this. It is a Divinely-appointed process that we see repeated again and again throughout the pages of Scripture.

In one example, when Isaiah saw the glory of Jehovah on His throne, He cried out, *"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips"* (Book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 1-5). Only after this humbling experience would he then be equipped for divine service (Book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 6-10). When the wicked king, Manasseh — who had led Judah into even worse iniquity than that of the surrounding heathen nations — was taken off to Babylon and being afflicted hugely,

*"in his distress, Manasseh sought the favour of the LORD his God and earnestly humbled himself before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to Him, the LORD received his plea and heard his petition; so He brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God."* (Second Book of Chronicles, chapter 33, verses 12-13).

So God heard his prayer and restored the kingdom to Manasseh. And it was the same with Job. Once he had been abased and humbled, he was blessed by God who *"doubled Job's former possessions"* (Book of Job,

chapter 42, verse 10-17). [NB: Lest readers should make the mistake of seeing this as support for the 'Health 'n Wealth' theology which is as popular in many churches as it is among New Age folks, remember that Job lived in Old Testament times, when God's blessings and cursings were often measured in physical and temporal prosperity and impoverishment. See the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 28, for prime examples of this]. These cases provide vivid illustrations of the principle in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 11 that the children of God are only chastised for as long as it takes for them to be trained by it.

### **God Can Do it for You!**

In yet another Old Testament example of the Lord purging His children of their residual pride, we find the complex and often wayward King David under a grievous affliction. In this 39<sup>th</sup> Psalm, although we never discover exactly what this affliction was (illness is a possibility, v.10), it was certainly well-nigh overwhelming. At the height of his crying out before the Lord, David makes one of the most remarkable exclamations in Scripture, when he says to Jehovah concerning his ordeal, *"I was silent, I did not open my mouth, because it was You who did it"* (v.9). Who did it? Jehovah did it! **This recognition of God as the Orderer and Controller of the events and circumstances of the lives of His children is the crossbeam which stands between two statements of humbling and confounded pride.** First, he says:

*"Show me, O LORD, my end, and the measure of my days. Let me know how fleeting my life is. You, indeed, have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing before You. Truly each man at his best exists as but a breath"* (Book of Psalms, 39, verses 4-5).

And then,

*"Remove Your scourge from me; I am perishing by the force of Your hand. You discipline and correct a man for his iniquity, consuming like a moth what he holds dear; surely each man is but a vapor"* (Book of Psalms, chapter 39, verses 10-11).

We see here that through this Divinely-appointed affliction, David has been brought to recognise his own smallness, the transience of this present life and the existential futility of man in his unregenerate state. *'Let me know how fleeting my life is!'* This shows the significance of illness, affliction, disease and suffering in terms of the necessary destruction of pride. **It is not that important how long we live or how many of our**

**members and faculties are preserved, so long as we faithfully play our part in extending the kingdom of Christ for our Lord and Master.** As Matthew Henry has so beautifully expressed this: *“To the ungodly, death is the end of all joys: to the godly, it is the end of all griefs”*. That saying is worth meditating on for some time.

We who are disciples of Christ need to recapture this willingness to suffer by the process which always leads to the vaporization of our pride, *“knowing that you yourselves had a better and permanent possession”* in heaven (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 34). We need to experience our chastisements with a glad heart, like the saints of old, who *“were tortured and refused their release, so that they might gain a better resurrection”* (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, verse 35). That is what walking by faith is really all about. It is hard; but it is **real!**

### **Claim your Curses!**

On another occasion, King David was vehemently cursed by the Benjamite, Shimei, who also threw stones at him in an insulting manner. Did David see this merely as a random satanic attack? Did he feel the need to devise a way of warding off these curses with protective incantations as the heathen do with their shamans, and as even many of those calling themselves ‘Christians’ are doing today? Not at all. Instead, when one of his henchmen offered to behead Shimei, he said the most astounding thing:

*“If he curses me because the LORD told him, ‘Curse David,’ who can ask, ‘Why did you do this?’ Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, “Behold, my own son, my own flesh and blood, seeks my life. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone and let him curse me, for the LORD has told him so. Perhaps the LORD will see my affliction and repay me with good for the cursing I receive today”* (Second Book of Samuel, chapter 16, verses 10-12).

For the king to permit one of his subjects to throw stones and kick dust at him, cursing him along the way, was a sure antidote for pride. Here David fully recognized God’s sovereignty over this incident – that God had intended it to humiliate him in the way of divine chastisement. Shimei meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Such a mindset may be difficult for many modern-day so-called ‘Christians’ to accept. **We are always so willing to ascribe beneficial events to the Lord, regardless of the human instrument used in the process; but we will not ascribe our loss or suffering to the purpose of God.** If we unexpectedly receive a sum of money, we say with great piety (and not a little smugness), *“The*



*Lord provides*". But if someone steals our precious wealth, we say, "*A thief did it*", or "*Satan did it*" or "*I've hit a bad patch*", and so on. In contrast with this faithless approach to providence, David said of his affliction, "*God did it!*" (Book of Psalms, 39, verse 9) in order to "*correct man for his iniquity*" (Psa.39:11). As Job told his faithless wife, "*Should we accept from God only good and not adversity [Hebrew: literally, evil]?*" (Book of Job, chapter 2, verse 10). **Such an avid desire to recognise God as the sole authority on what best serves our spiritual interests is a mark of the true child of God.** His unique knowledge of good and evil and its purpose in our lives can never be usurped.

### **The Thorn in the Flesh**

Moving on to the New Testament, there is yet another classic example of all that we have said so far in this subsection, and which contains all the appropriate ingredients within the span of a few verses. We are referring here to the Apostle Paul's famous "thorn in the flesh" (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 1-10). Here we have a practical textbook example of what Divine chastisement is all about. First, he spoke of how he had received "*visions and revelations of the Lord*" (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 1), of how he was "*caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter*" (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 4). Such privileges could easily render a person prone to boast or to develop ideas that he had become a super-spiritual person, as many do even today. But the Lord had taken certain precautionary measures to ensure that this would not happen to His servant. Paul recognized this and disclosed the following information:

"To keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I should not become puffed-up" (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7)

The identity of the thorn is not important (it could have been the ever-tormenting presence of false teachers and false "super-apostles"), but its function as an affliction certainly is. For we see here that although the affliction was dealt out by Satan, it had been prescribed by the Lord. Just as He did with Job, the Lord used the unwitting services of Satan to afflict one of His servants. But whereas Job was afflicted by God to eradicate any pride which was already present, Paul was anticipatively given his affliction to prevent him from the possibility of falling into any future pride as a result of his high spiritual calling. Just as Jacob had to live with a permanent limp after winning a blessing from the Lord (Book of

Genesis, chapter 32, verses 24-32), so the disciple who enjoys the benefits of a closeness with God will have to bear a burdensome cross to keep him from being 'exalted above measure'.

### **The 'Exaltation Paradox'**

Then, in verse 9 of the twelfth chapter of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, we are given the words of Christ – among the few which lie outside the Gospels and Acts – which sum up the very essence of all that we have covered in this study. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in human weakness"*. Here the Lord discloses the key to the entire purpose behind Divine chastening. For it not only purifies the people of God, it also glorifies Him. **For in the abject weakness of the creature, the grace and cleansing power of God in bringing such a one out of rebelliousness and darkness into obedience and translucent light manifests the full glory of the Lord.** This is brought out elsewhere when God tells His people:

"I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, My very own sake, I will act; for how can I let Myself be defamed? I will not yield My glory to another" (Book of Isaiah, chapter 48, verses 10-11)

And so Paul exclaims:

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me. That is why, for the sake of Christ, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. **For when I am weak, then I am strong**" (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 9-10).

**Here we have the epitome of what I call the 'Exaltation Paradox', through which the Lord turns conventional worldly wisdom on its head in order to bring a clean thing out of an unclean.** G.K. Chesterton defined a paradox as *"Truth standing on its head to gain attention"* – a fitting description of what we are describing here.

The Lord Jesus was Himself a frequent user of this 'Exaltation Paradox', e.g. when He spoke of death leading to life; abasement bringing exaltation (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 23, verse 12; chapter 16, verse 25; Gospel of Luke, chapter 14, verse 11; chapter 17, verse 33; chapter 18, verse 14; Gospel of John, chapter 12, verse 25). Indeed, His whole life's work, from beginning to end, was a veritable celebration of the 'Exaltation Paradox' (Letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verses 3-9).

What this paradox denotes is that God stands human wisdom on its head in order to demonstrate the superiority of His own wisdom (Book of Zechariah chapter 4, verse 6; cf. Book of Jeremiah, chapter 9, verses 23-24). **Accordingly, the one who is bonded to Christ must often behave in complete antithesis to the accepted norms of the world in order to achieve his God-given ambitions.**

Many other examples could be given of this Divine principle. When David slew Goliath, the Scripture makes a special point of saying that this happened *“without a sword in David’s hand”* (First Book of Samuel, chapter 17, verse 50) – a sure reference to the fact that out of human weakness, God’s strength is made complete. Sometimes the Lord specifically reminds His people that their victories can only have their source in Him. When the Children of Israel did battle against the Kings of the Amorites, the Lord *“cast down large hailstones from heaven on them”*; and the Scripture records that *“there were more who died from the hailstones than those whom the children of Israel killed with the sword”* (Book of Joshua, chapter 10, verse 11). In similar vein, the Lord whittled Gideon’s army down from twenty-two thousand to just three hundred to do battle with the Midianites and Amalekites, who were *“numerous as locusts”* (Book of Judges, chapter 7, verses 1-8,12). Why? Because, as the Lord told Gideon, *“You have too many people for Me to deliver Midian into their hands, lest Israel glorify themselves over Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’”* (Book of Judges, chapter 7, verse 2). This, again, is the ‘Exaltation Paradox’ in superb action.

The Apostle Paul, too, knew this beautiful secret. He knew that in order to be truly strong he actually had to become weak (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 10), because the Lord’s strength comes to fruition precisely in situations where human weakness most manifests itself and human pride has been dethroned (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 9). This is because it must always be the Lord who has the glory – that no flesh should glory in His presence (First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 29), for that was how sin and evil came to have a part in this universe. **Man and Satan foolishly decided that without God they could do anything. But it is in the weakness of the creature that the Lord’s strength is fully manifested.** The “Exaltation Paradox”.

### **Tele-Obscenity**

The conception of so many professing ‘Christians’ today concerning healing and God’s will is far removed from that of the cloud of witnesses that we have heard from so far in our study. To imagine that disciples

have only to ask for full health and prosperity from God in order to receive it is not only dishonouring to all those saints who have suffered throughout history, but it is also downright damaging to so many disciples today who are being laid low under the chastening hand of our loving God. The Apostle Paul establishes the true position of disciples in this world when he describes himself in all his apostolic greatness, as *“the scum of the earth and the scoured-off filth of the world”* (First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 13). When we compare that description with the fat-cat, Gucci-booted tele-evangelists with their golden glinting teeth, metre-thick make-up, thousand-dollar suits and multi-million-dollar theme parks, we can only conclude that we are dealing with two entirely different religions! **A church without a biblical theology of suffering can never be a part of the body of Jesus Christ.**

It is of great relevance here that the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation (symbolic of the witness of the church in the Gospel Age) are clothed in sackcloth (Book of Revelation, chapter 11, verse 3), whereas the whore of Babylon (the Satan-inspired world-system) comes swathed in purple and scarlet, glittering in gold, precious stones and pearls (Book of Revelation, chapter 17, verse 4). This does not mean that I am in favour of asceticism or am advocating the special virtue of poverty for Christ’s disciples, as the church of Rome has done. But I am emphasising the fact that it is the Lord who decides how much or how little we will have in terms of our material necessities (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 6, verse 33), and how much or how little we will undergo in terms of our affliction (Book of Isaiah, chapter 14, verse 27; Book of Amos, chapter 4, verse 6). As a wise man once pleaded with the Lord:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the bread that is my portion. Otherwise, I may have too much and deny You, saying, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, thus profaning the name of my God” (Book of Proverbs, chapter 30, verses 8-9).

**In other words, seek, expect, desire, and pray for only what the Lord, in His wisdom, allots. For this alone can be right for us.**

In view of the widespread Charismatic teaching (derived from the occult) that those calling themselves ‘Christians’ need only to *‘visualize’* or *‘incubate’* health and wealth in order to obtain it, never has it been so important for faithful disciples to ask God to feed them with the food *He* prescribes for them, rather than seeking after the things they desire for themselves. To imagine, even for a moment, that we are masters of our own destiny is a radical satanic delusion.

[This occultic practice of ‘imaging’ or ‘visualizing’ in order to bring material benefits into one’s life — much used in Pentecostal-Charismatic circles — is discussed in detail in my 1994 book, [“The Serpent and the Cross”](#) and in a separate paper published under the auspices of Diakrisis, entitled *“Plastic Religion – The Occult Art of Visualization”*, which I must try and dig out as I have not seen it for a while!].

Truly, the primal abomination of pride of the rebellious will one day be completely eradicated from this universe in the lake of fire, the ‘second death’ (Book of Revelation, chapter 20, verse 15); that of the children of God, in the furnace of affliction, divine chastening and the ‘first death’. Let it be remembered, when your gracious God guides you by the hand through the wilderness of this world with all its afflictions and miseries — sometimes leading you into dire straits so that you will learn your frailty and lack of wisdom — it is not out of a sadistic delight in punishment. As the children of Israel were assured by the Lord, suffering is ordained for the people of God for the express purpose *“that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end”* (Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8, verse 16). Our gracious God — unlike the devil — always saves the best wine until the last (cf. Gospel of John, chapter 2, verse 10)! Now we can understand why David cried out to the Lord: *“Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Your word”* (Book of Psalms 119, verse 67). As that most lovely of hymns puts it:

“Be still, my soul, the Lord is on thy side;  
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;  
Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
In every change He faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul, thy best, thy heavenly, Friend.  
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end”.

Before we conclude in an epilogue this survey of what the Bible has to say about suffering and evil, it would be of great benefit for us to look briefly at how disciples of Christ should respond to the affliction and suffering with which they will inevitably be chastised at some time by the Lord during their lives.

### III. THE DISCIPLE OF CHRIST’S RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

“Be silent before the LORD, all people, for He has roused Himself from His holy dwelling” (Book of Zechariah, chapter 2, verse 13).

Having said all that I have said so far on this vast subject, we may be left feeling somewhat dazed — especially if we are in the midst of a period

of acute suffering or if we are subject to a chronic affliction which shows no signs of remission. The fact that one is now able to answer the question “*Why is there suffering in the world?*” may bring an inner sense of comfort to the Lord’s people, but there are still the practical difficulties to face on a day-to-day basis. Our study is therefore incomplete until we can gain some knowledge of what Scripture has to say about the responsive ways that God has prescribed for us in our daily struggle with adversity.

This is not to say that we are searching for a mechanistic approach to these matters — a checklist of foolproof responses which one can run through in the event of adversity. But we are aware that there are many false responses to suffering and affliction which range from the foolish to the downright harmful. For this reason, we will conclude with a few counsels which will hopefully provide us with instructive Biblical examples for responding to suffering.

### **1. Being Guarded Before Those Outside the *Ekklesia***

It is a sobering fact that whatever disciples may say about the greatness of their faith and the benefits of being ‘in Christ’, it is their actions rather than their words which ultimately will demonstrate the sincerity of their beliefs. **The way that we are and the things that we do are the medium behind the message.** Our words on their own are mere icons if they are not buttressed by active tokens of equal stature. This is especially the case when any kind of affliction arises in the life of the disciple. For this reason, we must take great care about the impression that we give to those who are outside the *Ekklesia* when we are smarting under the rod of Divine chastisement. When King David was being sorely afflicted, he recognized that his response to his affliction would be under severe scrutiny by any of those around him who were not of God’s people. So he said: “*I will watch my ways so that I will not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle as long as the wicked are present*” (Book of Psalms, 39, verse 1).

We may shout from the roof-tops about how God is sovereign over all things; but if we then start whingeing to our neighbours, friends, relatives, and workmates about how bad things are, our witness will be a hollow one indeed. So let us guard our tongues and realise that those outside the *Ekklesia* are always on the look-out for inconsistencies in our behaviour, often in order to undermine the character of God.

This brings us to a second response of the disciple of Christ to suffering and affliction:

## 2. Praying Without Ceasing and Even with Tears

The fact that we should guard against giving a poor witness to those outside the *Ekklesia* through our complaints about the sufferings of our lives does not mean that we become like robots in the event of our being afflicted, or that we develop the qualities of a Stoic. To shrug our shoulders when confronted with tragedy, coldly ascribing it to God's sovereignty, would be perverse and inhuman. It is right to express our pain, sorrow, and confusion — so long as we do so in a manner befitting those who are the children and loved ones of the Lord. Such healthy expression conveys an authenticity and depth of concern in a person, and can be brought before the Lord, or even to one another.

[**Sidenote:** This needs to be said: Even on a psycho-physiological level, it is extremely counterproductive to suppress the natural effects of grief in afflicted circumstances. In Aberfan, Wales, in 1966, 116 children of the village lost their lives when a coal-mine slag-heap collapsed onto their school. A study carried out in the wake of that disaster revealed that the fathers who had not grieved properly at the time of their bereavement — as a result of having to return to work down the mine and keep a 'stiff upper-lip' — tended to develop physical disorders at a later date, e.g. coronary disease, ulcers, cancer, etc. The mothers, on the other hand, who had held many 'mourning get-togethers' in their homes, crying together, while their husbands were out at work, did not suffer such problems.]

The shortest but also surely most expressive verse in Scripture must be that extraordinary statement: *"Jesus wept"* (Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 35). Why was Jesus weeping? Not simply because His friend Lazarus had died but because of the tragic actuality of death and the stinking decay which comes about as a result of human sin and the dastardly work of Satan. It was God grieving for the afflictions of His loved ones. When He saw Lazarus' sister, Mary, weeping for her brother, *"He groaned in the spirit and was troubled"* (Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 33). Small wonder! For He was Himself *"a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"* (Book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 3). More, *"He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows"* (Book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 4).

Because of this humanness of Christ, we can now *"approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need"* (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 16). Let us never imagine that a display of emotion in the wake of affliction is unfitting for the spiritual person. Let us never suppose that it is beneath us to weep

intensely or to cry out to the Lord in anguish because of our pain. It does not dishonour God, or our faith in Him, if we are seen by the world to show our dependence on Him for our succour in time of adversity. The Son of Man wept before His heavenly Father on many occasions. Moreover, our blessed Saviour is actually spoken of as having *“learned obedience from what He suffered”*, and not only that but also

“During the days of Jesus’ earthly life, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 5, verses 7-8).

There will inevitably be occasions when the child of God will feel so overwhelmed by his circumstances that he will be compelled to pour out his anguish or his terror before the Lord. The prophets in the Old Testament were often severely afflicted, and they cried out to the Lord for Him to deliver them — Jeremiah being a most notable example (see, e.g. Book of Jeremiah, chapter 20, verses 7-18). The Psalms are similarly filled with such emotional expression (e.g. Book of Psalms, 38; 69; 70; 120). So long as this is being done in a spirit of dependence on our Creator, such a response is extremely beneficial to our spiritual development. Obviously, this should never be done in a victimlike or gratuitous manner.

When Hannah felt the burden of the fact that *“the Lord had closed her womb”* (First Book of Samuel, chapter 1, verse 5) and she was *“in bitterness of soul”*, she *“prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish”* (First Book of Samuel, chapter 1, verse 10). When Paul the Apostle wrote to the wayward church at Corinth, he said:

“through many tears I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart, not to grieve you but to let you know how much I love you” (Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 4).

There is only one source of strength in the life of the disciple of Christ and that is in the Lord God. As Paul counselled his brethren: *“Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might”* (Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 10). Accordingly, when David was *“greatly distressed”* because the people wanted to stone him, he *“strengthened himself in the Lord His God”* (First Book of Samuel, chapter 30, verse 6).

So, let us follow the example of the faithful in Scripture and submit to God. To be a Stoic in the midst of affliction is not the calling of the one who would deny himself, take up his cross and follow Jesus. Many of



the Eastern mystical sects and religions advocate a complete detachment from suffering and affliction in the initiates, in order that they may rise above such crass concerns and so walk in some kind of *nirvanic* bliss rather than on earthly dust.

But such a way of life bears no comparison to the walk of the disciple of Christ. True, we are to set our mind on the heavenly things rather than the earthly (Letter to the Philippians, chapter 3, verse 19); but such action does not anaesthetize us to the hellish tension of being partakers in the Divine nature in an evil and fallen world, any more than the Lord Jesus was rendered insensible to His own sufferings and those around Him when He walked in the same world.

Once you learn to recognise God's hand working even in your worst afflictions, it changes your whole perspective on suffering and on your relationship with God. *"Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity [Hebrew: literally, evil]?"* (Book of Job, chapter 2, verse 10). It was only when King Nebuchadnezzar had recanted his pride and affirmed that *"the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He chooses"* that his sanity was restored to him, his kingdom returned to him, and *"excellent majesty"* added to him (Book of Daniel, chapter 4, verses 13-37). Just as the *denial* of the unique Creator-authority of God was the source of Man's undoing, so the *affirmation* of it is the root of his restoration. *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you encounter trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance"* (Letter of James, chapter 1, verses 2-3).

The best course of action with suffering is to ask the Lord: *"Why are You doing this to me, O Lord?"* — *"What lessons do You want me to Learn?"* Is it patience, tolerance, selflessness, humility, or some other quality which needs 'bringing on' into deeper maturity? If affliction is for your training, then you can rest assured that has been designed specifically and exclusively for you by the Master of the Universe, our great and glorious God. Take a unique opportunity to discover why.

### **3. Know God for Who He Really is**

One of the greatest antidotes to pride is to develop a perception of God **as He really is**. Occasionally, we will receive glimpses of this that will almost overwhelm us with their beauty and will go some way towards preventing us from forming a false conception of ourselves. For only when you begin to know God for who He *really* is can you begin to *really* know yourself, with all your limitations and potentiality. So a most efficient way to handle suffering and affliction is to cultivate a true view of God, together with a proper understanding of one's own frailty when

confronted with the reality of Divine power and sovereignty. As we have already seen, one of the most poignant examples of such a mindset is demonstrated for us by David, when he says:

“Show me, O LORD, my end, and the measure of my days.  
Let me know how fleeting my life is. You, indeed, have  
made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing  
before You” (Book of Psalms, 39, verses 4-5a)

Rather than being obsessed with eradicating all suffering and affliction from our lives — as many are today — we see here that we should be first seeking to know the glory of God, in the light of which our own difficulties pale into insignificance (cf. Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 17; Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 11-12; Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 3-5). One of the primary ways that we can achieve this is through the regular, prayerful reading of our Bibles. Not only does the overall tenor of the Scriptures fulfil this criterion, but we will mercifully stumble upon verses which remind us that:

“All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flowers of  
the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word  
of the Lord stands forever” (First Letter of Peter, chapter 1,  
verses 24-25; cf. Book of Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 6-8)

Man must first acknowledge his puniness and the limitations of his understanding if he wishes to grow closer to God. Familiarizing ourselves with the relevant Bible texts will help us to know God more closely which, in turn, will enable us to know ourselves all the better.

#### **4. Be an Imitator of Christ**

As we draw to the close of our study together, we come to consider the wisest of counsels on responding to suffering and affliction. We are fortunate to have the perfect ‘role model’ for our behaviour. At the beginning of his section on Divine chastisement in Heb.12, after giving a gallery of Old Testament ‘heroes’ (that “*great cloud of witnesses*”) who also went through the purging fires of affliction, Paul deduces that we should also “*run with endurance the race set out before us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verses 1-2). We are to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ who “*endured the Cross*”.

The Apostle then tells us to “*consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself lest you become weak and discouraged in your souls*” (Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 3 with verses 1-2). When disciples make Jesus the focus of their attentions instead of being

obsessed with themselves (especially with their ailments and difficulties), a remarkable process takes place, which is a demonstration of that ‘Exaltation Paradox’ discussed earlier in our study. Jesus hints at this when he says to his disciples, *“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me”* (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, verse 24).

Dependence on God in Christ alone — that is the key to our response to suffering and evil. **Through Adam’s failure to depend on God alone, humanity fell. Through Christ’s obedience to the will of the Father, the elect are restored.** Learning the lesson of total dependence on God alone is the whole purpose of redemptive history. *“Looking unto Jesus”*. That is the key to understanding suffering, and also to gaining relief from it. So what was Jesus’ response to the suffering which He experienced in His life and death? His entire life’s mission was to *“steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem”* (Gospel of Luke, chapter 9, verse 51), and when He stood before His pitiful executioners, His response is consistently recorded in the Gospels:

*“But Jesus remained silent”* (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 26, verse 63). *“Jesus answered nothing... and He did not answer him, not even to one word”* (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27, verses 12 & 14). *“But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer”* (Gospel of Mark, chapter 14, verse 61). *“But Jesus made no further reply”* (Gospel of Mark, chapter 15, verse 5). *“But Jesus gave no answer”* (Gospel of Luke, chapter 23, verse 9). *“But Jesus gave no answer”* (Gospel of John, chapter 19, verse 9).

This was not a time for words — it was a time for submission. The Son of Man was going *“exactly as it had been written about Him”* (cf. Gospel of Matthew, chapter 26, verse 24). As was prophesied,

*“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth”* (Book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 7).

Throughout His afflicted life, the Lord Jesus submitted to the will of His Father, even when the result would be the most horrific burden (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 26, verse 39). This is an example to be followed. The imitation of such mute acceptance of the chastening rod of Almighty God is vital to our spiritual progress. It is an extraordinary thing that even though King David did not have the benefit of the Lord Jesus as his immediate role model (although he certainly knew Him as his Lord, Book of Psalms, 110, verse 1; cf. Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses

41-46), he was often humbled enough by the chastening power of God to stand before the slaughterer in meek silence.

Is there not an uncanny resemblance to the Book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 7 when David says to the Lord in the midst of his torment: *"I was silent, I did not open my mouth, because it was You who did it"* (Book of Psalms, 39, verse 9)? This child of God knew the secret which gives strength to the suffering, for he could say, *'My eyes are always on the LORD, for He will free my feet from the mesh'* (Book of Psalms, 25, verse 15). Many other similar places in Scripture testify to this need for lamb-like submission before the slaughterer. The Apostle, Peter, counsels us in a similar manner, when he says:

*"For to this [affliction] you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His footsteps: 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth'. When they heaped abuse on Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats, but entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly"* (First Letter of Peter, chapter 2, verses 21-23).

Our suffering can obviously never be the equal of that which the Lord Jesus had to undergo. So let us look to Him; considering Him who endured so much for us. Let us take up our crosses *daily* and follow Him wherever He is pleased to lead us, knowing the great truth which we share with Job:

*"For He wounds, but He also binds; He strikes, but His hands also heal. He will rescue you from six calamities; no harm will touch you in seven... Indeed, we have investigated, and it is true! So hear it and know for yourself"* (Book of Job, chapter 5, verses 18-19 & 27).

## **EPILOGUE: Unlimited Growth**

I do not pretend to have covered all aspects of this vast and challenging subject. Every question raised leads to yet further questions: but at the very least, let us hope that we now have a biblical framework to face afflictions when they happen to us and when we are confronted with questions which could so easily lead us into some kind of bleak nihilism.

The prevailing lack of understanding about the origin and purpose of suffering and evil in the universe, which has led to so much appalling confusion in the churches about illness, healing and health, or poverty, prosperity and wealth, has come about primarily because of a grossly

superficial attitude to spiritual, psychological and emotional growth by many calling themselves 'Christian', and an associated failure to study the relevant Scriptures in depth — all of which inevitably leads to an entirely deficient concept of the sovereignty of God and His work in creation and redemption.

The subject of this paper is part of what the sacred texts call "*the deep things of God*", which God reveals to us by His Spirit (First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 10). This is the 'lots of meat and plenty of veg' aspect of our faith. We do not need to shy away from it or be intimidated by it. Such knowledge is not the province of an elite. It is given to all the saints to understand and it will reap immeasurable benefits to us if we manage to give the slip to those who want to infantilize us with superficiality and enslave us to religious mediocrity.

### **The Swiftly Experienced 'Delicate Plain Called Ease'**

But let us not imagine that suffering is all there is in the disciple of Christ's life, or that we should masochistically seek it out (as some have done). There are blessed times of respite. In his "*Pilgrim's Progress*", John Bunyan assures us that there is "a delicate plain called Ease" which all disciples of Christ will cross at certain periods in their lives; but, as he is quick to remind us, "*that plain is but narrow and we are quickly got over it*". (I have to smile at Bunyan's ingenuity there). However, these ups and downs need not shake us to our foundations, for "*we know that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose*" (Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 28).

### **Separated from Christ, We Can Do Nothing of Any Spiritual Significance**

**I hope that we have now been brought into a deep understanding of the great cosmic lesson of time and history: The purging of pride from the creature.** Fallen angels and human beings combined have raised themselves up above the jurisdiction of their Creator God, and the rest of human history has been designed to show the foolishness of that pride and the overwhelming truth that without God, the creature is both helpless and hopeless.

This is the great universal work of Divinely ordained discipline. It is the ultimate purpose of the whole span of history in this universe, with its sin, suffering and healing salvation. When the great Day of the Lord finally comes, and the entire universe is transformed into what it might have been in the first creation, the voice of the Lord will thunder out

through every nook and cranny of the cosmos, reminding every rational creature of that eternally irrefutable reality: “*Separated from Me, you can do nothing!*” (Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 5).

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