

 Chapter One

IS SUFFERING A PUNISHMENT FOR SIN?

This chapter is the first of four chapters that deal with questions suffering people often ask. Sufferers often have many questions about their experience, and, if they are Christians, they frequently address these questions to God. Daniel Simundson addresses seven of these concerns in his valuable study, *Where Is God in My Suffering?*¹ In Part One of our study, we will focus on four questions. The question “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal 2:17) provides the umbrella or context for this book and will be addressed throughout our study. The four questions highlighted in Part One are representative of the concerns expressed by sufferers or by the people who try to help them with their suffering.

**Do we suffer as
punishment
for sin?**

Sufferers in biblical times had no qualms about addressing questions to God. As we saw in the introductory chapter, they did not always receive full-fledged, complete answers to their questions. Habakkuk, for instance, was perplexed about the threat of a Babylonian invasion. Habakkuk understood the Hebrews to be God’s chosen people, so how could God let a bad, pagan nation attack the good guys? God never gave the prophet a theoretical answer to his query, but God told him he needed to live by faith, not sight (Hab 2:4; 2 Cor 5:7). The Bible frequently records human questions and divine responses.

Even though my major concern in this book is to sketch out a theology of suffering rather than a traditional, philosophical theodicy,

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paying some attention to selected perennial questions will help set the stage for our later discussions. Christians, for example, often ask about God's role in relation to tornadoes and other natural disasters (chapter two). Some wonder if God experiences suffering or anguish when we suffer (chapter three). Christians wonder how long God will allow evil to flourish (chapter four).

WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

One of the most common responses to suffering is the blame game. Many people assume there is a close link between sin and suffering. If there is suffering, then someone has sinned. Often nicknamed the doctrine of retribution, this familiar response to suffering can be diagrammed this way:²

good → success
bad → suffering

Most Bible scholars have noticed the prominence of this theme in many biblical books, and retribution has been identified as the basic biblical view of suffering.³ A full discussion of biblical teaching on retribution is beyond the scope of this book, but the popularity of retribution as an explanation for suffering in popular culture and some churches demands some attention.⁴

Jesus dealt with this theological perspective on two significant occasions. First, his disciples tried to figure out whose sin caused a man to be born blind. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Here the disciples reflected a common Jewish view of that day: sin led to suffering, and pious living led to prosperity. Some of the rabbis believed that a person could commit a pre-natal sin, so the disciples were not being foolish to ask if the man could have caused his own blindness.⁵

Whose fault is suffering?

Jesus rejected the application of the doctrine of retribution to the blind man's situation. Sin and suffering do not always correlate. Because this man was blind, however, Jesus could perform a miracle, demonstrating God's power (John 9:3). Jesus did not linger on speculative questions such as the origin of suffering; he quickly moved to help the sufferer.

Likewise, Jesus rejected a retributive interpretation of two different situations (Luke 13:1-4). The slaughter of some Galileans by some of Pilate's men was not due to the Galileans being more sinful than other people. Also, the tower did not fall on eighteen people in Siloam because they deserved death.

Despite Jesus' criticism of the application of this doctrine of retribution in specific cases, it is still a major theme in the Bible. Retribution is an important topic, but it needs to be understood carefully in the context of other biblical themes.⁶ My interpretation of its validity as a Christian response to suffering will involve several stages. I will look at the question "Is suffering a punishment for sin?" by starting with a general answer and then move on to more specific possible answers.⁷

A GENERAL ANSWER FOR A GENERAL QUESTION

Is suffering a consequence of sin? My general answer to this general question would be "yes." Actions do have consequences, and sin often results in suffering, either for the sinner or those affected by his actions. The story of the "fall" of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 supports this positive general answer. Human sin has produced human suffering. Without going into the details of the specific punishments on Adam, Eve, and the serpent, the connection between sin and suffering seems clear. God creates a good world, but suffering enters human history after the original people sin. God announced the consequences of sin on the serpent, the woman, and the man (Gen 3:14-19). Surprisingly, the story of these original

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sinners is not cited often in the rest of the Bible as an explanation for human suffering. Based on this story, however, the idea that sin produces suffering is certain.

SPECIFIC ANSWERS FOR A SPECIFIC QUESTION

Although many Christians would agree that sin and suffering have some connection, they disagree with specific applications of the doctrine of retribution to suffering today. Several of my close friends have died of cancer. Their medical conditions seemed to have no correlation with their morality or relationship to God. No one at their funerals would have thought they deserved to die at a

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young age. Still, our basic conviction that God is just seems to give credibility to the notion of retribution.

What does the Bible say about retribution? Does God punish us for our sins with disease, death, and other tragedies? I will look at three possible answers to a more specific form of the original question: Is *my* suffering a punishment for *my* sin? By adding the personal pronouns to the question, I am getting closer to the way most sufferers today formulate their concern. Is my suffering my fault? Do I deserve my pain?

Suffering Is a Punishment for Sin

The first answer to these more specific questions is still affirmative. Yes, my suffering is my fault. This view may be an instinctive response for some Christians based on their understanding of some Bible texts and an underlying conviction that God is just. This positive answer seems so logical that it often appears in popular culture. Lucy, a character in Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip, often expresses this positive view. When Charlie Brown's baseball team is losing another game, several of the characters express their opin-

ions. Lucy's view is "If a person has bad luck, it's because he's done wrong, that's what I always say." When Linus gets a splinter in his finger, Lucy's explanation is the same: "That means you're being punished for something!" Like Job's friends, she demands that Linus confess his sin.

This first answer to the question about personal blame could be supported by selected biblical texts. For example, Moses warned the Hebrews "be sure your sin will find you out" (Num 32:23b). The Apostle Paul cautioned his readers that actions have consequences: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Gal 6:7). Some people claim Jesus' support for the doctrine of retribution because of passages such as the story of the two builders that concludes the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:24-27). Their different approaches to home construction have different results.

Perhaps the most famous example of the "yes" answer to our question can be seen by the responses to suffering given by Job's friends. They insist on the direct link between Job's sin and his suffering. As long as he prospers, they assume he is good. When he suffers, they know he is actually a sinner with unconfessed sin. Eliphaz asks Job, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?" (Job 4:7). Job's friends assume that all suffering is deserved; they leave no room for the category of innocent suffering or disproportionate suffering.

Suffering Is Not a Punishment for Sin

The second answer to the question "Is my suffering a punishment for my sin?" is negative. People who give the "no" answer insist that some suffering is clearly innocent. Or, at least some suffering is disproportionate to the amount of sin committed. Job, for instance, never rejects the doctrine of retribution promoted by his friends, but he argues that he does not deserve as much suffering as he receives. In chapter 31 Job identifies several sins he could have committed that should appropriately result in the tragedies he has already suffered. He does not claim sinless perfection, but he questions the justice of his suffering. He appeals to the justice of God to correct the wrongs he experiences (31:6).

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The teachings of Jesus, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, about the man born blind, the men killed by Pilate's men, and the tower of Siloam accident could support a negative answer to our question (John 9:1-3; Luke 13:1-4). These people do not get what they deserved; they experience injustice. Jesus also notes that his followers will, in some contexts, experience rejection and persecution (Matt 5:10-12), and the wicked, like the false prophets, will be popular (Luke 6:26).

Other texts that support a negative answer identify the prosperity of the wicked. In Psalm 73 the author begins by affirming the justice of God, but he becomes disturbed when he notices "the prosperity of the wicked" (73:3).⁸ Sometimes the good suffer and the wicked prosper. The doctrine of retribution does not seem to fit the real world. The psalmist receives some consolation when he is reminded that the prosperity of the wicked is temporary (73:16-20).

Suffering Might Be a Punishment for Sin

The third answer to my question is a mediating one. *Maybe* my suffering is linked to my sin. Such an answer is not necessarily a cop out on a difficult subject. Again we need to acknowledge that human experience does not always fit easily into our doctrinal categories. The author of Ecclesiastes, for instance, raises a serious objection to the doctrine of retribution. He observes that piety and prosperity do not always correlate. "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" (Eccl 9:11). Although many Christians would not be as skeptical as the author of Ecclesiastes, they would acknowledge that the doctrine of retribution does not always work in their lives.

Jesus does not endorse the cynicism of Ecclesiastes, but he does note that life's experiences do not always meet our expectations about justice. Although God is just, he "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). When tornadoes devastated much of cen-

tral Oklahoma in May 1999, they did not skip over the homes of all Christians and strike only the homes of unbelievers.

I often tell my college theology students that there are three possible answers to any difficult question: yes, no, and maybe. Our question, “Is my suffering a punishment for my sin?” can be answered these three ways. Some suffering can result from specific sins. For example, some types of food or drink can result in health problems. Some behaviors seem to have specific health consequences. Promiscuous sexual relationships, for example, might lead to sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies.

What, precisely, is retribution?

We can dig a little deeper into our discussion by raising some more questions about the doctrine of retribution. I do not raise these issues to further muddy the waters but to help us think as clearly as possible about the relation of sin and suffering.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS ON SIN AND SUFFERING

A quick glance at six more questions related to retribution will help us see both the value and the danger of this doctrine for understanding our suffering. These six questions overlap to some degree, but for the sake of analysis I will outline them separately.

First, is retribution individual or collective? In early Hebrew history retribution was understood in relation to groups. If the Hebrew nation was faithful to God, it would prosper. If the Hebrews rebelled against God, they would suffer. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 illustrate the collective interpretation of retribution. This view is challenged by later prophets. Jeremiah and Ezekiel, writing in the context of the exile, both criticize the proverb about sour grapes (Jer 31:29–30; Ezek 18:2–4). Apparently the Hebrews had explained their captivity by blaming their ancestors. Their fathers had eaten sour grapes and the children experienced the consequences.

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God replies to this sour grapes version of retribution by insisting they are in Babylon because of their sins. The wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, also stresses individual responsibility. What you do matters. For example, if you work hard you will get ahead, but if you are lazy you will be poor (Prov 6:6-11).

Second, is retribution material or spiritual? Some Bible texts emphasize the material rewards and punishments people receive. Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 mention long life, good health, and other forms of material prosperity for the faithful Hebrews. The book of Proverbs also used physical rewards and punishments as illustrations of retribution. Some texts stress more spiritual rewards, such as a strong relationship with God, inner peace, and forgiveness of sins. A disciple of Jesus would be “blessed” because of her strong relation with Jesus, but she might experience persecution in this life (Matt 5:10-12). The Apostle Paul identifies “peace with God” as one of the consequences of salvation, but Christians can also expect suffering (Rom 5:1-5).

Third, is retribution temporal or eternal? This question, closely related to the second one, highlights the timing of rewards and punishments. Some texts stress a this-worldly situation, but others look ahead to life after death in heaven and hell. At the risk of making a sweeping generalization, I suggest the Old Testament tends to stress temporal and material consequences, and the New Testament tends to stress eternal and spiritual results of actions in this life. A strong Christian might, for example, experience ridicule and persecution in this life but be with God in heaven for eternity. We will look at the topic of eschatology, or the study of last things, in chapter four. The New Testament has a stronger affirmation of the eschatological or eternal elimination of suffering than the Old Testament presents.

Fourth, is retribution a direct divine act or an indirect divine act? This question will be explored more in the next chapter, but a few comments can clarify the issue here. In some passages God says he will directly reward or punish (e.g., Lev 26:4, 6, 9, 11, 12, 16-20, 22). In other texts God seems to be in the background. God is still sovereign over his creation, but he has created a world in which actions seem to have “natural” consequences. The book of Proverbs,

for example, does not always mention God's direct involvement in life. Laziness produces poverty, but God's role is more indirect than direct (Prov 6:6-11).

Fifth, is retribution a reversible formula? Job's friends seem to believe that the doctrine of retribution is reversible.⁹ If good actions produce prosperity and bad deeds lead to trouble, then you can gauge a person's character by looking at his or her condition in life. A suffering person must be a sinner! Earlier we saw that the doctrine of retribution can be diagrammed this way:

good → success
bad → suffering

Job's friends assume the formula can also look like this:

good ← success
bad ← suffering

Job's experience and God's criticism of their theology suggests the danger of reversing this formula (Job 42:7). Many sufferers today, however, still tend to think God must be punishing them for something they have done wrong. They ask, "What have I done wrong? Why is God punishing me?" Some suffering may result from sin, but the retribution formula is not reversible.

Sixth, is retribution a comprehensive explanation or a helpful generalization? Again, Job's friends are the best illustration of this issue. Although scholars can distinguish some differences in the views expressed by Job's four friends, these friends tend to argue that retribution is a comprehensive explanation of suffering. In other words, all suffering is deserved. Most Christians see retribution as a helpful generalization. All things being equal, good people will get ahead, and bad people will be punished. Ecclesiastes' "time and chance" factor (9:11) reminds us that retribution allows for many exceptions.

FROM RETRIBUTION TO REDEMPTION

Our explorations so far into the doctrine of retribution may have puzzled or bewildered readers. How, exactly, is my suffering related to my sin? So far we have seen that a general answer is that sin and suffering are connected, at least in the general sense that the sin of Adam and Eve unleashed suffering into human history. When we personalized the question, “Is *my* suffering due to *my* sin?,” then we looked at three possible answers, yes, no, and maybe. Adding the six additional questions pushed us even farther into a complicated discussion.

If we were talking one on one about your suffering or my suffering, we might see the relevance of a particular biblical text or theme. Proof-texting, lifting a biblical text out of its context to “prove” a point, is always dangerous in theological discussion. Serious biblical scholarship tries to avoid proof-texting. When, for instance, AIDS was first identified in the 1980s, many people insisted it was God’s punishment on homosexuals. Pointing to passages that link sin and suffering, these Christians drew the conclusion that this disease was God’s specific punishment for that sin. Other Christians soon responded that such an argument is an

illegitimate use of Scripture, especially since non-homosexuals had contracted the disease through transfusions of infected blood. Arthur Ashe, a professional tennis player, contracted HIV through receiving such bad blood during surgery.¹⁰ Recent authors on the Christian view of suffering avoid connecting AIDS with homosexuality.¹¹

How do we respond to our suffering and the suffering of others?

The Development of the Doctrine of Retribution

To help avoid the danger of proof-texting in our application of retribution to cases of suffering, it might help to consider the development of the doctrine of retribution in the Bible. Since we cannot identify the exact dates when some biblical books were written, developmental studies are always tentative. One valuable proposal,

however, sketches out three stages in the Old Testament understanding of suffering.¹²

First, some believe that all sufferers are sinners. This view, held by Job's friends, insists that all suffering is deserved. If you are suffering, it is your fault. You need to confess your sins and seek God's forgiveness. Then your reconciliation with God can begin, and your suffering will disappear.

Second, some sufferers are saints. Using the word *saint* in the popular sense of a good person, this view is illustrated by people like Job. Job is not sinless, but he exemplifies what we usually call innocent suffering. He is being tested not punished.

Third, one sufferer is the savior. The best illustration of this stage is the Suffering Servant poems in Isaiah. Although sometimes the servant is identified as the nation Israel (Isa 41:8; 49:3), the servant is sometimes an individual who suffers on behalf of others. The Suffering Servant experiences both innocent and vicarious suffering:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (Isa 53:4-5)

Christians have traditionally identified this unnamed servant as Jesus. Jesus brings redemption through his sacrificial death on the cross, and the apostle Philip applies one of these Isaiah texts to Jesus in his conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:32-35). Whether Isaiah intended his message to be messianic, Christians have seen in these texts an anticipation of Jesus' ministry and redemptive death.

Responding to Suffering

Not all suffering is the result of the sinner's actions. Some suffering is innocent. Jesus' suffering is both innocent and redemptive. Given these basic biblical truths, how do we respond to our suffering and the suffering of those around us?

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First, when we suffer we need to ask ourselves if we are at fault. Rationalization is an easy trap to fall into when we are in any kind of trouble. Blaming someone else for my problems is easier than accepting personal responsibility. If I am suffering, my first step is to be honest with myself and honest with God. If my sin is causing my suffering, then I need to confess that sin to God and seek help with overcoming that sin.

Second, I need to see if my sin is causing suffering for others. Actions do have consequences, and my sins could be affecting other people as well as myself. I should attempt to be reconciled with that person and undo any of the suffering that I can (Matt 5:23-26). C. S. Lewis once noted that the majority of human suffering is due to human sin: "When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men."¹³

Third, we should avoid being judgmental about the sufferings of others. All too often Christians begin to think and talk like Job's comforters. We assume that the retribution formula is comprehensive and reversible, so another person's suffering is their fault. Christians who are deeply committed to justice, either God's justice or some human understanding of justice, often become judgmental of others. James reminded us that God alone is the true judge, and we should not judge others (James 4:12).

Several years ago a friend told me about a man dying of lung cancer. The dying man said that his cancer must be due to his chain smoking. Some Christians, strong advocates of divine retribution, might argue that the cancer was God's punishment for the man's sin of abusing his body. I would acknowledge the right of the dying man to see a connection between his sin, as he would name it, and his suffering. I do not think another person should try to make this connection for the dying man, since that expression comes close to the judgmental attitude James warned us about. God alone is judge. Some suffering is the result of sin, but God alone should announce the specific connection between sin and suffering.