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**Excursus:
SUFFERING IN 1 PETER AND THE NEW
TESTAMENT³⁹**

A. INTRODUCTION

The central issue in 1 Peter is probably the problem of suffering, with which all Christians must of necessity deal. Unfortunately the meaning of the Greek term in 1 Peter is obscured in English, in which the word "suffer" covers a large spectrum of life, for, as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* reveals, the verb means to "undergo pain or grief or damage or disablement . . . ; undergo martyrdom." In other words, the semantic field of the word is wide, including the experience of "pain, loss, grief, defeat, change, punishment, wrong, etc." It has been normal for the church to deal with these meanings as a single group, and since our experience in Western Christianity is usually not that of martyrdom or punishment, we tend to focus on pain from illness or grief from death as the main examples. One can cite, for example, C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain or A Grief Observed*. This type of literature is part of a long tradition in the Christian world and it is the unconscious background of the interpretation of 1 Peter.

In order to differentiate our exegesis from this unconscious background, then, we need to develop a scriptural definition of suffering. But before plunging into the Scriptures, we underline the fact that good pastoral care can be based on poor exegesis. There are many places where at least one aspect of the care of souls may go on very well in ignorance of biblical truth. Usually another aspect of pastoring suffers as a result, but we must in no way discount the good produced by the weak theology in the areas in which it works. This is certainly true of suffering; we discount no one's experience of God through whatever he or she may have suffered, even though the biblical material may give a different picture. Yet at the same time we need to do careful exegesis in a biblical commentary.

B. THE VOCABULARY OF SUFFERING

Suffering is a complex issue within the biblical material. Christians can approach it from several directions: (1) they can begin with a particular

39. One version of this excursus was published as "Suffering: Endurance and Relief," in *First Fruits* (July/August 1986), 7-11; although this version is significantly different, it is published here with the permission of the editor.

type of human suffering (e.g., suffering as testing or suffering as oppression), (2) they can start from a particular relationship of suffering to theology (e.g., sin and suffering or "affliction produces patience," Rom. 5:3), or (3) they can look more broadly at the vocabulary of suffering. It is the latter overview approach which we have chosen. Therefore we will begin with the words involved.

In the NT the situation is easy to deal with, for the teaching about suffering revolves around the *paschō* ("suffer")⁴⁰ and, secondarily, *thlipsis* ("oppression, affliction")⁴¹ word groups, along with a few other related terms.⁴² Only *paschō* and its cognates appear in 1 Peter. There are two advantages in this situation. First, there is a single Greek root translated by the English concept "suffer," and second, this root is an abstract term like the English word. Naturally, as we will see, there is not a complete semantic overlap between the two languages, but it still presents a relatively simple situation with which to work.

In the OT the situation is more difficult, for there is no single word that can be translated "suffer." The closest one comes is the *'ānāh* word group (*'ānī*, *'nūt*) along with *dak* (both words indicating poverty or oppression), and also terms for pressure or weight and for evil (but only in some contexts).⁴³ These data indicate that there is no abstract word in Hebrew meaning "to suffer"; the Hebrews tended to speak of the concrete types of suffering rather than of suffering in general.⁴⁴ We will have to build their equivalent of our English term from a wide variety of data, which is not an easy undertaking given the bulk of the literature. Furthermore, since the OT was written over a period of more than a thousand years, we can expect some changes in outlook in the material as time pro-

40. Πάσχω, προπάσχω, συμπάσχω, πάθημα, κακοπαθέω; cf. W. Michaelis, "πάσχω," *TDNT*, V, 904-39; B. Gärtner, "Suffer," *DNTT*, III, 719-25.

41. Θλίψις, θλίβω; cf. H. Schlier, "θλίβω, θλίψις," *TDNT*, III, 139-48; G. Ebel and R. Schippers, "Persecution," *DNTT*, II, 805-809.

42. "Test" (πειρασμός), "persecute" (διώκω), "lack" (ὑστερέω), "experience loss" (ζημιώω), "evil situation" (κάκωσις).

43. The terms for "pressure" or "weight" are *šārar*, *šar*, *šārāh*, *lāḥaš*, *mū'āqāh*, and those for evil are *rā'*, *rā'a'*.

44. The data of the Septuagint are an interesting reflection of the situation of the Hebrew text, which lacks a single theological term for suffering. The *πάσχω* word group appears almost exclusively in Intertestamental literature and additions to OT books. Only in Amos 6:6 does it have a Hebrew equivalent. Its most frequent use is in 2 and 4 Maccabees, books that focus on persecution.

The *θλίψις* group is used frequently, mostly for the *šar* word group mentioned above and mostly in the Psalms. It also focuses on persecution.

gresses. Yet despite the difficulty, it is possible to draw some conclusions from a study of this literature.⁴⁵

C. THE OLD TESTAMENT

First, in the OT there is a direct connection between suffering and sin. Both the man and the woman experience labor or pain (*'ešeb*) as part of the curse resulting from the sin in Eden. Later on the law connects suffering to sin very explicitly (e.g., Deut. 28:15-68, a long section of curses), and both Joshua (in the Achan incident) and Judges (in its famous sin-suffering-repentance-restoration cycle) work it out. In fact, the whole Deuteronomic history (1 Samuel-2 Kings) could be said to be a demonstration of how suffering came upon Israel and Judah because of sin and blessing because of righteousness and repentance.

The sin-suffering connection is true of all types of things covered by the English term. Death is traced to sin in Gen. 3, although afterward this fact is rarely reflected upon so long as an individual dies peacefully at a ripe old age. In such cases death is accepted as the fate of the race and long life is considered blessed (e.g., the death of Jacob in Gen. 48-49). Where death itself is connected most closely to sin, it is almost always untimely or violent death (e.g., 2 Kings 20:1-7, where it is the timing of death, not the event per se, that disturbs Hezekiah). The main forms of suffering mentioned are sickness (especially plagues), military defeat and the resultant oppression (including death in battle or execution afterwards), and natural disaster (especially famine, given the geography of Palestine). None of these things is expected to be the normal experience of Israel, but they are all frequently the result of sin. For the OT suffering is not the lot of humanity, but the lot of sinful humanity. The suffering of *the pious* is the only problem with suffering.

Second, God is the main agent behind suffering. While there are some places in the OT where Satan appears in connection with suffering (most notably Job, although there are further hints in Daniel, 1 Chronicles, and some of the prophets), the OT is for the most part very direct in its presentation of suffering: God sends it. If God sends suffering, it must

45. Much of the data for this study has been drawn from P. H. Davids, *Themes in the Epistle of James that are Judaistic in Character* (Manchester, Eng.: unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Victoria, University of Manchester, 1974), especially part II, pp. 94-183, which follows the theme of suffering in Jewish literature (considering the NT also Jewish literature).

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have a purpose. Therefore suffering is often viewed as testing (*nāsāh*, Deut. 8:2-3) or discipline (*mūsār*, Job 5:17; Prov. 3:11). This direct involvement of God will not be characteristic of the NT.⁴⁶

Suffering as testing puts the person in a situation of decision. The person either obeys God and faces what looks like certain suffering, or else he or she disobeys to avoid suffering and reveals a heart not fully committed to God. Abraham in Gen. 22 is the cardinal example of one who obeyed and passed the test: He continued with the sacrifice of Isaac until God stopped him. On the other hand, Israel in the wilderness is the cardinal example of failure. Each time Israel is tested there is either the demand that God act or a working out of its own plan to reduce suffering by a “back to Egypt” cry.⁴⁷ These testing situations are not limited to the Pentateuch; Dan. 3, for example, is an instance of passing the test, although the vocabulary of testing is not used. When faced with death or obedience to God the three men say, “If it be so, our God . . . is able to deliver . . . ; and he will deliver us. . . . But if not, . . . we will not serve your gods. . . .” In other words, there is implicit trust in God’s ability and even willingness to deliver, but a resolve to obedience without a demand that they be delivered. Interestingly, only Job, which also does not use the vocabulary of testing,⁴⁸ presents disease as a test. Otherwise testing is always connected to environmental challenges, for example, enemies or famine.

Third, it follows from the above that suffering in the OT is largely persecution or oppression by enemies. This is true throughout the OT, including the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 34), but it is not normally noticed. There are times when suffering includes illness, as for example in the curses of Deut. 28 which include the diseases of Egypt, and in some of the Psalms in which illness at least contributes to the suffering (but enemies who are taking advantage of an illness to oppress or plot against the person are the focus of concern), but this is a less usual form of suffering. Normally oppres-

46. This is one place where continuing revelation has to be taken into account. The simpler OT picture will become more complex in Daniel and still more so in the NT as we discover that God is dealing with Satan and a whole spiritual realm. From the Christian point of view we should not read the OT as if the NT never happened, but realize that the simplified statements made there must be qualified by later revelation.

47. The best treatment of this material is still B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God’s Son* (Lund, 1966).

48. Job uses the *nāsāh* root twice. In 4:2 it is used in a secular sense, and in 9:23 it again does not appear to mean “test” but rather “calamity,” although the meaning of the Hebrew is debated.