

# PART ONE: THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING

## *Prologue: Vulnerability*

*(This meditation was written in a guesthouse bedroom in Northumbria on Sunday, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2005. Its main theme is the need to ask for God's help during a period of great danger and personal weakness.)*

Oh Lord!

- 1) We are in a position of weakness,  
Please strengthen
- 2) We are in a position of vulnerability,  
Please protect
- 3) We are in a position of terror,  
Please deliver
- 4) We are in a position of suffering,  
Please help
- 5) We are in a position of strife,  
Please pacify
- 6) We are in a position of sickness,  
Please heal
- 7) We are in a position of powerlessness,  
Please empower
- 8) We are in a position of loss,  
Please redeem
- 9) We are in a position of isolation,  
Please come
- 10) We are in a position of hunger,  
Please supply
- 11) We are in a position of hopelessness,  
Please intervene
- 12) We are in a position of homelessness,  
Please shelter
- 13) We are in a position of helplessness,  
Please restore
- 14) We are in a position of exhaustion,  
Please refresh
- 15) We are in a position of destitution,  
Please provide
- 16) We are in a position of despair,  
Please encourage
- 17) We are in a position of dismay,  
Please comfort

18) We are in a position of danger,  
Please protect,

19) We are in a position of confusion,  
Please guide

20) We are in a position of anxiety,  
Please calm

21) We are in a position of affliction,  
Please act

And

Quickly rescue us

From the great peril

Tormenting us, Amen

### **1.1 Definition of Tribulation**

The full reason as to why God allows suffering remains a mystery; nevertheless, the writer takes the view that offering a partial explanation is better than no explanation at all. The focus on this three part article will be on the way God uses suffering to try our faith.

Tribulation is any suffering allowed by God and having a definite purpose i.e. purifying, the faith of the believer and increasing his/her personal fruitfulness. The word '*tribulation*' stems from the Greek '*Thulupsis*' meaning '*pressure, affliction or trial*;" The suggestion is that tribulation is a test – something that the Lord allows. As well as being undergone by the individual believer, tribulation can also afflict whole groups of churches, especially during times of persecution or natural disaster. Scripture emphatically teaches that tribulation is an inevitable part of the Christian life - to suggest otherwise would be a lie. Also to assume that Jesus will prevent all suffering is also a lie. This fact is readily seen in the life of Saint Paul, whose Christian life was characterised by many different forms of suffering (as described in 2 Corinthians 11:23f.) One complication is that, in the short-term, tribulation may actually appear to bring about a diminution in faith and fruitfulness.<sup>1</sup> Often, it's only after a trial has come to an end that a heightened Christ-likeness is noticed. However, this is by no means always the case. Great faith and fruitfulness may be seen during the affliction itself. If this were not the case then the young Christian Church would never have lasted. Instead, it would have been viewed as a meaningless, painful journey, where suffering only stopped at the point of death.

Tribulation encompasses all types of suffering except the reprobate suffering endured only by unbelievers.

### **1.2 Types of Suffering**

The ultimate cause of all suffering is Satan who, by his suicidal revolt against God not only precipitated Mankind's fall into sin, but also caused the whole of Creation to fall out of alignment (working in a less than perfect manner). Motivated by sheer malice, Satan now wants to drag as many people as possible down with him into Hell, so that they too can share in his endless misery. Perhaps in his twisted reasoning, he hopes to inflict grief on the deity and thus get revenge for the defeat of his own rebellion. The Devil uses suffering as a means of inflicting hurt and of alienating people from God; however, what he fails to reckon with is the Lord's ability to use suffering as a means of drawing men and women back to Himself. Here, as usual, one of Satan's chief weapons has been made to backfire on him. This fact must leave him personally humiliated and exceedingly wrathful.

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<sup>1</sup> As in the life of Job who spent much of his trial engaged in bitter disputes with his friends who completely misunderstood the nature of his ordeal. They wrongly believed that it was a sign of divine displeasure at some form of personal sin. His restoration to prosperity completely surprised them.

### **1.2.1 Satanic Suffering**

In this world direct satanic suffering often comes through demons, (those fallen angels who joined the Devil in his attempt to overthrow God). They have the ability to inflict people with various temptations (enticements to evil) and/or outright possession (control through personal indwelling). They may also be the authors of natural disasters and some forms of physical and mental illness. (It must however, be stressed that it would be unwise to ascribe all sickness to the devil. In the main it arises through living in a world, which has fallen out of alignment with God's purposes - although personal irresponsibility may sometimes act as another cause.)

All Christians, even the most simple and weak because of their relationship with Jesus, and the infilling of His Holy Spirit are free from the threat of satanic possession, unless they deliberately sin by fooling around with magical practices clearly forbidden in scripture. Yet, despite this, they can, at times, be subject to severe and persistent temptation, even when faithfully following God's will. As Satan can no longer dominate them internally he'll endeavour to assault them externally through many temptations and adverse circumstances. It must be stressed that such buffetings do not necessarily arise from a person's sin, although the Devil often likes to pretend that this is the case in order to grind the believer down into remorseless self-accusation. Consequently, sincere Christians, genuinely faithful to Jesus can be the subject of satanic onslaught. An example of this occurs in Mark 4:35–5:19 where the disciples are loyally following the Lord's command, rowing Him across the Sea of Galilee. Despite their fidelity they run into a storm which throws them into a panic and then, having crossed to the other side, a man full of violent devils immediately confronts them. Furthermore, even Jesus Himself, free from any taint of sin and obeying God in everything, is also tempted (Matthew 4:1 shows Him being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil).

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that if Christians deliberately turn away from God, they run the UNNECESSARY risk of exposing themselves to temptations they would otherwise have not encountered. If consistent obedience does not always guarantee immunity from temptation, longstanding disobedience inevitably leads straight to it. The disobedient Christian is left to cope on their feeble resources. The only hope of rescue and total safety lies in true repentance and obedience to God's will. As James 4:7 promises, '*Submit yourselves to God, resist the Devil and he will flee from you.*'

This type of suffering (directly inflicted by Satan and his angels) may be classified as '*Satanic Suffering*' and it is recorded in such passages as Genesis 3; 1-16; 1 Samuel 16; 14-16; Job 1; 1-27; Matthew 4; 3-11; Luke 13; 16 and Revelation 12; 10-13.

### **1.2.2 Environmental Suffering**

Another type of suffering lies in the fact that people live out their lives against the backdrop of a fallen and imperfect Creation – one with a strong element of chaos that prevents it from behaving as it should; moreover, the resulting suffering falls indiscriminately on Christians and non-Christian alike. It includes such things as natural disasters, crop failures, illness, deformities, seemingly random accidents, the presence of death and the fact that people are born with an inbuilt tendency to evil. Sometimes, as in the cases celebrated in Psalm 107, God may intervene miraculously and save his people. At other times He will not, *i.e.* the same earthquake will see some Christians miraculously delivered whilst others will lie dead, crushed beneath an avalanche of rubble. This type of suffering is not directly satanic, although it may be used to advantage by him.

This type of suffering (directly related to living in an abnormal Creation) may be classified as '*Environmental Suffering*.' Its effects are alleviated through the use of modern technology and medicine. However, its devastating effects are still often unavoidable, at least until the return of Christ. It is recorded in such passages as Genesis 3: 17-19; Psalm 51:5; Jonah 1: 4-17; Luke 13:4; Romans 8:22 and Revelation 21:1-4.

### 1.2.3 System Suffering

Human Society itself is in a fallen state, existing within the context of a fallen Creation. This is readily seen in the layers of evil having been laid down by proceeding generations, and culminating in unjust social systems and oppressive political governments. Such outcomes result in adverse effects upon individuals who themselves were never personally responsible for their inception. This can be seen in a hypothetical situation where a child conceived in England in 1985 will have grown up in a society having first turned its back upon God in the 1860s. This increasingly morally lax society then adopted an economically destructive, centralised bureaucratic form of government in the 1940s and in the 1960s abandoned any pretence of following Christian morality at all. If that child grew up to be first imprisoned and then executed by a totalitarian regime (emerging from the above-mentioned circumstances during the twenty-first century) it will have fallen victim to forces generated before its grandparents were born! Perhaps this is what the Lord meant in Deuteronomy 5:9 when he stated, *'I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.'*

This type of suffering (directly related to living in a fallen society) may be known as *'System Suffering.'* Its origins lie in humanity's general wickedness, and can be seen in shown in unjust economic structures, political oppression and hedonistic forms of advertising. Although it can and should be amended by positive social reforms, this type of suffering, (arising from corrupt political and socio-economic systems) is, in many cases unavoidable - especially as constructive reforms take time to take effect and may have unexpected negative consequences. (South African apartheid is a classic example of system suffering.) It's presence is recorded in Genesis 6:11-13; 1 Kings 12:3-19; Amos 4:1; Luke 13:1; John 19:12 and Revelation 17:5-7.

### 1.2.4 Folly Suffering

*'Folly suffering'* is very different from the aforementioned types of suffering. It's the unnecessary suffering an individual creates through foolish attitudes, tactless remarks and incorrect behaviour patterns. Put simply, it's the type of suffering caused by personal stupidity. As far as the Christian is concerned (who is being gradually emancipated from the dominance of sinful impulses) this type of suffering should impose less of a problem. However, if a professing believer, well tutored in the things of God, still continues to bring about such needless suffering (upon both themselves and others) then something is very wrong. As far as possible, Christians should ensure that what sufferings they do endure aren't brought about by their own foolishness. The following line of reasoning should be adopted by the responsible, thinking Christian, *'There are enough problems in the world already – why add to them needlessly through my own stupidity?'*

This last question can also be applied to the area of persecution. Genuine persecution is one thing, but Christians have no biblical mandate whatsoever to provoke pointless persecution through any irresponsible behaviour on their part, serving only to offend people unnecessarily. A self-inflicted martyrdom is just one more form of folly suffering. The Apostle Paul appeared to warn against this in 1 Corinthians 13:3. Martyrdom is a gift of God – He will provide the grace to endure it. Christians should never seek it out for themselves.

When viewed on a large scale such folly suffering creates only discord and can bitterly divide churches. On Judgement Day, Christians will not be asked to give an account for the suffering Satan inflicted or for what stemmed from a fallen Creation or an unjust Society, but simply for the sufferings they needlessly inflicted upon themselves and others because of their continued tactlessness and personal sin. The responsibility will clearly lie upon their shoulders.

This type of suffering, (directly related to personal sinfulness) can be classified as *'Folly Suffering'* and is recorded in such passages as 1 Samuel 2:27-36; Psalm 1:4-6; Proverbs 18:3; Matthew 23:18; Luke 12:20 and 2Timothy 3:9.

### **1.2.5 Persecution Suffering**

In total contrast to *'folly suffering'* are the real pressures experienced through simply adhering faithfully to the will of Jesus Christ. Doing this can stir up a whole hornets nest of both spiritual and human opposition - this type of suffering is known only to Christians and can vary in degree from misunderstanding and ridicule through to all-out physical assault and even murder. When this sort of suffering manifests itself, it may well be a sign that the Devil has become aggrieved by the quality of a person's Christian witness and is trying to despoil it.

This type of suffering can be brought about by the malice of unbelievers, nominal churchgoers or even sincere Christians, acting out of genuine ignorance. This last source of opposition is usually the most hurtful due to it being so unexpected! Sometimes prolonged freedom from persecution suffering can be a sign of an ineffective Christian – having only little impact in his/her Christian witness. The Devil is usually unwilling to disturb such slumbering Christians and therefore has no wish to intervene. In Matthew 5:10 Jesus states, *'Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.'*

Sometimes persecution suffering may lead to martyrdom (where someone's life is sacrificed as a witness to Jesus.) Even in the affluent Western World of 2004 true believers may yet have to reckon with the possibility of martyrdom should the present trends of apostasy continue unabated.

This type of suffering (resulting directly from faithful obedience to Jesus Christ) may be classified as *'Persecution Suffering.'* It is recorded in such passages as Nehemiah 6:1-2; Psalm 119:157; Jeremiah 15:15; Matthew 24:9; Acts 8:1 and 2Timothy 3:11-12.

### **1.2.6 Redemptive Suffering**

All of the aforementioned types of suffering may be used by God to achieve His own purposes. His aim is to draw people ever deeper into a loving relationship with Himself. For the unbeliever, suffering may lead to heartfelt repentance as the realisation dawns concerning the peril of their situation without Jesus. For the Christian redemptive suffering should, over time, bring increased faithfulness and fruitfulness in God's service. Moreover, for obedient followers of Jesus, all types of suffering can be providential, even those emanating from satanic malice or their own personal folly. (However, God may not always redeem our acts of folly – especially those having resulted from deliberate wilfulness. Such Christians may well be left to endure the bitter consequences their own actions.) A sure guarantee that this is the case is given in Romans 8:28, *'and we know that ALL things work for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.'*

This type of suffering (used to bring individuals or groups of people closer to God) may be classified as *'Redemptive Suffering.'* Its main characteristic lies in the fact that it can make use of all of the previous types of suffering and bring good out of them. It is recorded in such passages as 11 Chronicles 33:9-16; Job 38:1-42; Psalm 107; Matthew 27:51; John 21:15-19 and Acts 9:16.

### **1.2.7 Reprobate Suffering**

This type of suffering happens to non-believers who never repent and never come into a relationship with Jesus. However, it may also happen to Christians who wilfully do not fully yield to God during the course of their lifetime and whose works of straw and stubble are burnt up on the last day, (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Certainly, for the non-Christian trapped in this category, suffering is of no use at all. It is just a first instalment of Hell. For them the exact opposite of Romans 8:28 applies, *i.e. 'and we know that all things work to the evil of them that hate God and are not called according to his purpose.'*

Such suffering produces no good in any sense because those affected do not turn to God and so remain closed to the blessings of providence (divine government). Those undergoing it receive no lasting benefit even though much sorrow maybe involved. As Paul states in 2 Corinthians 7:10: *'For Godly sorrow works its repentance to salvation not to be regretted but the sorrow of the world works death.'*

This type of suffering (which does not bring an individual or group of people back to God) may be classified as *'Reprobate Suffering.'* It too may contain elements of all of the other types of suffering – except persecution suffering – but nothing of a constructive nature emerges from it. It is recorded in such passages as 1 Samuel 31:4-10; 1 Kings 22:30-38; Obadiah 2-18; Matthew 27:1-8; Acts 1:18-20; Revelation 16:9-11.

In a given set of circumstances only one type of suffering may be clearly apparent. However, in others many types may be present, causing the exact nature of the suffering to remain obscure. This is especially true of large-scale events where many people are involved, but it can also be apparent in the smaller events of life too. Take those surrounding the crucifixion. Demonic elements formed a definite backdrop in that Satan entered the heart of Judas so that he would betray Jesus, (Satanic Suffering). Also, the fact that Creation had been horribly affected by the *'fall'* and man's sinfulness made it necessary for Jesus to die upon the cross, (Background Suffering). The Roman Imperial System of government enabled corrupt, cowardly, self-seeking men such as King Herod, Pontius Pilate and the High Priest, Caiaphas to attain influential positions - thus giving them scope to act as Christ's executioners, (System Suffering). Moreover, the impulsive folly of the disciples prevented Christ's rescue, (Folly Suffering) whilst Jesus Himself, by his firm stand against the religious abuses of His day, provoked the very persecution, which led directly to His death, (Persecution Suffering). Yet, miraculously, under God's firm hand, the crucifixion led to the redemption of a large section of the human race and to an outpouring of divine blessings, the benefits of which still resonate down the centuries, (Redemptive Suffering). Sadly, reprobate suffering was all too evident in Judas' life, when he went out and hung himself, having shown no sign of genuine repentance, (Reprobate Suffering).

### **1.3 The Relation of Tribulations to Suffering**

This section explores the relationship between tribulation and the aforementioned types of suffering. In essence, tribulation is only another name for redemptive suffering, and each term can be used interchangeably. In its precise, narrow sense, tribulation refers to that redemptive suffering undergone by Christians to increase both their openness to Jesus and their fruitfulness in His service. Greater individual holiness should be one outcome of tribulation.

On a broader note, tribulation also affects those who will eventually become Christians - though they may, for a while, be bitterly hostile to the faith – blaming God for their troubles. Tribulation may also act as a means of purifying whole groups of churches and enable them to witness to the gospel. At the global level, Tribulation will subdue evil and prepare the world for Christ's return. In Matthew 24:21 Jesus used tribulation in its global sense when he predicted, *'for there shall be great tribulation such as was not seen since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be'*.

Finally, on a cosmic scale redemptive suffering will destroy the old fallen Creation in order to make way for the new Heaven and Earth promised in Revelation 21:1-4. The nature of this particular form of trial is only dimly understood, but it does confirm that, throughout scripture, a pattern exists of RESTORATION THROUGH TRIBULATION. This pattern applies at all levels, from the individual to the cosmic. Believers undergoing a period of redemptive suffering can anticipate that it will act as a prelude to further restoration, either in this life or the next. Sometimes, restoration may be gradual, but on other occasions (as in the case of Christ's own resurrection) it can be sudden and dramatic. Tribulation is best regarded as God's way of undoing the effects of Satan's fall and Adam's sin. It has to occur because the whole of Creation is naturally resistant to God and this resistance can only be overcome through suffering. Any theology failing to take into account the important role of suffering in God's purposes is seriously deficient.

A useful convention followed here is to designate tribulation in its narrow sense with a small *'t'* and in its broader sense with a capital *'T'*. By doing this, it's hoped that the risk of confusion on the reader's part will be greatly diminished. This convention will be followed for other articles in this series. Mostly, however, tribulation will be used in its narrow sense.

With this analysis now complete the next logical step is to look more deeply into the Biblical view of tribulation.

## **1.4 Summary**

**1)** Redemptive suffering (known also as *'tribulation'*) is designed to bring unbelievers to Jesus and to increase the faithfulness and fruitfulness of God's own people. It can affect both individual people and whole groups of churches. It has six levels of meaning: -

**1.1** The narrow meaning, (denoted by a small *'t'*) referring to that redemptive suffering undergone by Christians

**1.2** The broad meaning, (denoted by a capital *'T'*) referring to that redemptive suffering undergone by Non-Christians, generally to bring them into God's Kingdom

**1.3** The very broad meaning, (denoted by a capital *'T'*) referring to that redemptive suffering undergone by whole groups of churches in order to purify and make them effective witnesses to the Gospel

**1.4** The Global meaning, (denoted by a capital *'T'*) referring to that suffering which will be undergone by the whole world in order for evil to be subdued prior to Christ's return

**1.5** The Cosmic meaning, (denoted by a capital *'T'*) referring to that suffering, which will be undergone by the old fallen, Creation to make way for a completely new one

**2)** Increased faithfulness and fruitfulness may occur during the Tribulation itself or after it.

**3)** Satan, who is the ultimate cause of all suffering, aims to: -

**3.1** Alienate people from God

**3.2** Inflict grief on God

**3.3** Take revenge for his banishment from Heaven

**3.4** Force others to share in his eternal misery in Hell

**4)** The following types of suffering exist: -

**4.1** Satanic suffering

**4.2** Background suffering

**4.3** System suffering

**4.4** Folly suffering

**4.5** Persecution suffering

**4.6** Redemptive suffering

**4.7** Reprobate suffering

**5)** These types of suffering may take place either separately or together, as at Christ's Passion.