

God of Our Suffering by Ah Kie Lim, PhD

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Introduction

Why would a loving God allow suffering and pain in this world? God could easily have shielded us from all the evil. What happened to the promises of God to keep us from all harm and danger? Do all the scriptures of His promises apply only to those who do not sin or special people He loves? Can I still trust God when I am suffering?

These questions are difficult questions to which there are no right answers.

Suffering comes in different forms. Many people suffer from the aftermath of broken relationships, shattered dreams, dashed hopes, discrimination, grief, and the list goes on. All of these speak to the prevalence of suffering in the world. Suffering can either turn our hearts away from God or open us to a deeper experience of God's love and grace.

It is normal and okay for us to ask why, amid our pain and suffering. I believe God is big enough for us to ask Him why. He will not be offended by our questions. We have a God who understands and knows our struggles (Hebrew 4:14-15). Jesus has gone before us. He knows our struggles, temptations, and pain. We read in the Psalms that David asked God over and over again about his suffering, his unfair treatment in life, and why he was chased by his enemies. God was not offended by David's questions.

I recall the years of persecution from my family as a young believer in Jesus. During those years, I questioned God many times and wondered why I had to suffer for my faith. In persecution and pain, I learned so much about God who walks with me. It was during this season in my life that I knew, without a doubt, that God can be trusted. I believe and know that in suffering we learn more about God and ourselves if we allow Him to walk the journey with us. In suffering, God not only gives me hope, but also the Holy Spirit, which reassures me of His presence, love, and grace. I am thankful for the years of persecution. God built faith in me, which would not have been so if I had not experienced Him personally.

Biblical View of Suffering

What are God's views on suffering? Does the word of God have an answer for those who are struggling to understand their journey of suffering?

- We are called to suffer for Jesus. It is not true to say that, once we become a follower of Jesus, we will not ever have to suffer any pain or sickness, or there will be no worries and problems. That was never the promise of God to those who believed. The promise was peace in the midst of suffering. Jesus said in John 16:33, “In this world, you will have trouble. Take heart. I have overcome the world.”
- Suffering is normal and inevitable in the Christian life. It is the cost of obeying His call. We are called not only to believe in Him, but to suffer for him (Phil 1:29). Those who wish to live a godly life will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12). Jesus also said whoever wants to follow Him must take up their cross and deny themselves (Luke 9:23-24). I think of our brothers and sisters in China today who are experiencing persecution. Some of them are being interrogated and arrested time and again by the police. They pay the price for believing in Jesus and following after Him as His disciples.
- If they have persecuted Jesus, what do you think about us? John 15:20 says, if they persecuted Jesus, they will also persecute us who wish to follow Him. Jesus embraced suffering as an integral part of His mission, not comfort and security. Jesus has gone before us and left us an example of suffering for our faith in Him (I, Peter, 2:20-21).
- God uses suffering for our good. Suffering conforms us to the likeness of His Son. Suffering produces endurance, builds depth of character in us, and teaches us to hope in God, who will not disappoint us (Rom 5:3). Suffering also shows the depth of God’s love for us. He is always with us, and nothing can separate us from His love (Rom 8:28-29). In suffering, we profoundly experience His presence. We would not know our faith and love for God if there was no suffering.
- He allows suffering to test us and to make His name glorified. The children of Israel were tested in the desert for forty years. God could easily have led them to the Promised Land in two weeks. The desert experience showed them who God is to them, and who they are as His chosen people. Many of them failed the test, but God remained faithful and brought their children into the Promised land (Deut 8:2). In the desert, God’s name was glorified as the nations around them saw the God of Israel as One who protects and provides for His children.
- He gives us courage and joy in our trials (James 1:2-4). This is the promise of God to us. He will give us the courage to face whatever difficulties that may come. In pain, there will also be joy because He promises to walk with us through the valley.

Scripture provides us with promises of God, even as we go through suffering. He promised that He would never leave us or forsake us. This promise of God to us still holds. In my own experience, while I was going through persecution, this promise of God kept me going. It was such comfort to me, knowing He is with me, even though I

might feel alone. Yes, some days there were fears and doubts in my heart. But I never felt I was suffering on my own. I felt His presence with me each day, and even more real whenever I was afraid of what will happen to me.

He is with us on all our journeys of life. He has promised to be with us. Psalm 23 talks about God walking with us in the valley. We will never walk the lonely journey alone. He leads us into streams to drink from Him and to enjoy His presence. He will also provide a way of escape for us if He knows we are not able to handle temptation or trials (1 Cor 10:13). This is the God we trust and believe in. This is our good God in the midst of our suffering. He walks closely with us.

When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2019, it came as a shock. I have always been very healthy and made sure I took good care of myself. Did my regular exercise and ate healthily, and tried to have enough sleep with my busy travel schedule. In my cancer journey, I learned to surrender to Him my fear, all the unknown, and feeling alone. At the end of the treatment, I discovered God even deeper in my heart. He is indeed a God who walks with us in the dark of the night when no one is there for us. The God of suffering knows exactly what I am going through, what comfort it is for me. He knows how we feel and what knows how dark the night can be.

- His faithfulness will be our shield and rampart (Ps 91:4). He will be faithful to shield and protect us.
- God promises His grace is sufficient for us in times of our weakness (2 Cor 12:9). God will not give us trials that we will not be able to handle. If the trials or the burden are too much for us, He will provide a way of escape for us.
- During our pain and suffering, nothing can separate us from His love for us (Rom 8:28). It is such comfort to know that no matter how hard and difficult our journey is, God's love always surrounds us.
- He promises His presence to be with us (Matt 28:20). Yes, He will always be with us, as He has promised. What He has promised is what He will do. He does not lie (Num 23:19). What a comfort to know God is true to His promises.

Jesus and Suffering

Mark 14: 32-36

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to

death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. However, not what I will, but what you will.”

Jesus prayed through the night, asking His Father to remove the cup of suffering that was to come to Him. Jesus knew what was to come, the pain, betrayal, torture, and separation from His Father. He yielded to the will of His Father and suffered the pain of being crucified for humankind. Through His suffering, He can understand and sympathize with us because He has gone before us.

As I pondered in the garden of Gethsemane, it brought so much comfort. Jesus wrestled with what was to come to Him. He came before the Father to ask if it was possible to remove the cup of suffering. After much wrestling in prayer, Jesus yielded to the will of His Father and walked the journey of pain with His strength and grace.

What a revelation for me to know Jesus wrestles with pain and suffering as He yielded to His Father’s will. It is comforting to know that it is okay for us to wrestle with God. Taking the cup has to do with completing the surrender to the One who holds our lives and the future. It involves trusting God when we do not understand what is going on, but knowing He is in control.

Conclusion

In suffering, we develop maturity as we rise to life’s challenges rather than reacting from fear. Maturity allows us to live according to God’s values, remembering that we are created in God’s image. When suffering well, we are living by God’s values, whether in pain or joy. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane could remain connected to the Father and did not change under pressure and the pain that He had to endure. His deep connection with the Father enabled Him to suffer well and take the cup and yield to His Father (Wilder 2015:27-28).

Pain and suffering are part of life, as we are in this mortal body. In pain and suffering, we see the realness of God in our lives. His word stands forever true. There is a purpose in suffering and pain. Each of us who is on this journey will need to dig deep into Him to discover the joy that comes with pain and suffering. It is our joy to discover that for ourselves. Like Job said in Job 23:10, “When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” Yes, there is a precious gem in pain and suffering.

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