Contents

CHAPTER 1

The Grammar of Suffering

Basics of Affliction in Scripture

By Gerald W. Peterman and Andrew J. Schmutzer

Hearing the terms *pain* and *suffering* makes many people uncomfortable, often evoking painful memories of experiences gone by or still being endured. Yet when we are talking about suffering, what really is the subject? This is an important question, and one we will return to below and several other times in the book. To begin, we assert that pain and suffering, although intricately related, are not identical.

There are several good books on the subject of pain and suffering, but with most the writers typically assume—in our view wrongly—that to talk about one is to talk about the other. For instance, in his excellent book on Pauline theology, Thomas R. Schreiner has a chapter entitled "Suffering and the Pauline Mission: the Means of Spreading the Gospel." He defines suffering as beatings, imprisonments, persecutions, and deprivations.[1] But by our definition, these things are pain, not suffering. What if Paul was deprived of food for two to three days but *gladly did this forced fast for the sake of the gospel?* Certainly he would experience the pain of hunger, but would he be suffering?

PAIN VERSUS SUFFERING

If the answer to this question is complicated, it just demonstrates that the relationship between pain and suffering is not straightforward but intricate and dynamic. It is important for us to ponder that dynamic relationship. So we will address pain and suffering from several perspectives.

Similar is Walter C. Kaiser Jr., who proposes "Eight Kinds of Suffering in the Old Testament."[2] But the kinds, as Kaiser describes them, would better be labeled "Eight Purposes for Pain in the Old Testament." The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is *retributive* suffering and the diseases of Job are *testimonial* suffering. In other words, Kaiser discusses the very important theological questions concerning what goals pain can have or what pain can accomplish. The chapter, however, has very little actual discussion of suffering.

What, then, are pain and suffering? The following two points will begin to answer this question and will continue to be important throughout the book.

Pain

We assert that pain is primarily *objective*, external, and typically social or physical as opposed to personal and mental.[3] That is, we will look at pain primarily as a thing or an event. A pain–event could be a betrayal, hunger, poverty, persecution, disease, a laceration, or a broken femur. These things can be viewed as events that are potentially damaging to the person, to the person's relationships, or to the person's cherished goals. The degree to which a person experiences suffering with these events is highly personal, and we will discuss this more below.

Suffering

We assert that suffering is primarily *subjective*, internal, and typically mental or emotional as opposed to physical or social. That is, we

will look at suffering primarily as an experience. So, for example, one might have the same physical symptoms (objective) but vastly different subjective interpretation (that is, emotion). An example comes from Professor Patrick Wall, a medical doctor who specializes in the study and treatment of pain. He tells of interaction with a twenty–two–year–old female Israeli Army lieutenant with one leg blown off above the knee by a shell explosion. She "was in deep distress with tears flooding over her face. When asked about her pain, she replied, the 'pain is nothing, but who is going to marry me now!' "[4] Her suffering was related to her physical pain, but only indirectly. The suffering was primarily about the perceived loss of a cherished future goal (i.e., marriage), not about the pain in her leg. She suffered—and we suffer—when she interpreted her pain as destructive of her self or of the person she believed she should be. It is this interpretation that yielded acute emotional distress; that is, it yielded suffering. As Ferrell and Coyle assert, "Suffering results when the most important aspects of a person's identity are threatened or lost."[5]

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PAIN AND SUFFERING

From what has been said, we can see that the relationship between pain and suffering is highly complex. Hurding is correct when he explains that "not all pain, as a physical sensation, necessarily entails suffering."[6] Furthermore, just as we might have pain without suffering, so we might have suffering without pain.

Suffering without Pain

In their book *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*, Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey tell of a rare disease called congenital analgesia, or congenital insensitivity to pain. One clinician had defined congenital insensitivity to pain (CIP) as "a rare inherited disorder of the hereditary sensory and autonomic neuropathy (HSAN) family. This disorder is

characterized by a dramatically impaired perception to painful stimuli that leads to frequent trauma and self–mutilation."[7] In his medical practice Brand encountered a four–year–old girl named Tanya. Her insensitivity to pain meant regular repeated trauma to her body. It started in her crib when she bit off the tip of her finger and then "painted" with the blood. Her mother was horrified but, with her daughter's complete absence of pain, she had no way of convincing the infant Tanya that the behavior was destructive.

Seven years later Dr. Brand received a call from Tanya's mother. Brand reported:

> Tanya, now eleven, was living a pathetic existence in an institution. She lost both legs to amputation: she had refused to wear proper shoes and that, coupled with her failure to limp or to shift weight when standing (because she felt no discomfort), had eventually put intolerable pressure on her joints. Tanya had also lost most of her fingers. Her elbows were constantly dislocated. She suffered the effects of chronic sepsis from ulcers on her hands and amputation stumps. Her tongue was lacerated and badly scarred from her nervous habit of chewing it.[8]

Here we encounter a clear and tragic example of suffering without pain (that is, physical pain). Some forms of pain are a "gift." Tanya actually needed pain. But other examples could be included. Many of us have known people who, though generally wealthy, healthy, and loved, have suffered terrible mental trauma. Take Elliot Rodger. As reported in the online publication *Public Discourse,* Rodger had good looks, good health, above average intelligence, "a new BMW sports car, nice clothes, $300 Gucci sunglasses, college tuition fully paid for by his parents, and thousands of dollars in spending money."[9] Nevertheless he was tortured by his own jealousy and envy, resulting in a shooting rampage in which he killed seven and then took his own life.[10]

Pain without Suffering

But there is another angle to consider. Just as there can be suffering without pain, so there can be pain without suffering. Athletes know this. A gymnast preparing for the Olympics will invest long hours in her training, end all unnecessary relationships and social life, strictly schedule every hour of the day, and go through much pain in the form of sore muscles, short–term failures, and numerous minor injuries. But with most athletes in training, none of this pain is viewed as suffering. Of course, the pain–inducing workouts involve sacrifice and frequently lead to exhaustion. But it is not suffering. Similarly, a runner training for a marathon may log sixty miles in one week, tear a few toenails, and even fall hard, but claim not to be suffering.

When the goal is kept in mind and good progress follows, all the pain and exhaustion is a pleasure. It is the *meaning* that the athletes assign to their pain that allows them to consider it a stepping–stone to victory and achievement rather than a cause of torment and suffering.[11] In fact, some mothers make the same claim about the birthing process, because they are so focused on the goal of the precious child (cf. Isa. 66:7–10; John 16:21).

The Person's Perception of the Pain

What meaning do I assign to the pain I encounter? As we saw with the Israeli soldier earlier, the issue with her suffering was primarily a matter of interpretation or *assigning meaning* to her injury—her perspective on the pain evoked the suffering. The view we are describing here on the relationship between suffering and meaning is very similar to the view of Dr. Eric Cassell. In his excellent book *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, he discussed this relationship extensively. He wrote, "Patients sometimes report suffering when one does not expect it or do not report suffering when it can be expected."[12] What makes the difference? It is the meaning assigned to that pain.[13] For the gymnast, a professional runner, or a woman in labor, the pain can be viewed as a means to a desired end rather than something that

threatens them as persons. This is a significant issue of perspective.

The meaning assigned to pain is highly subjective. It will vary from person to person depending on a great variety of factors, including personality, individual history, theology, family background, community support, and personal desires and goals, to name but a few. In light of this, Cassell rightly comments, "The only way to learn whether suffering is present is to ask the sufferer."[14] The implications for empathy and response from others should not be missed.

When we say "assign meaning," it may sound clinical, calculated, or even detached. In truth, it might be anything but. For some of us, assigned meanings come quickly and subconsciously; for others deliberate, conscious thought may be required. And meaning is always very personal, context–specific, and rather dependent on a certain *relational ecosystem*. If a spouse betrays us, then certainly it pains us in ways that infidelity on the movie screen does not pain us. This infidelity of our own spouse takes on a certain meaning, such as:

> "I can no longer trust anyone."
> "I am damaged goods. I am second rate."
> "My life can never be happy and fulfilled."
> "My children will carry scars for the rest of their life."
> "My reputation and community standing are permanently destroyed."

These statements are all emotionally painful and are the result of a highly personal *interpretation*. The interpretation—the assignment of meaning—depends on how personally one takes the pain. If the pain takes away a cherished expectation, if it ruins a career, if it threatens my sense of self, my physical, social, or emotional integrity, then surely it will result in suffering.

Our approach to pain, suffering, and emotions is based on what has come to be called a *cognitive theory of the emotions*. "Emotions are closely related to our thinking and especially to how we interpret events in our life, whether an event is good or bad, a blessing or a threat. But in order to interpret something, we need beliefs, convictions, or perspectives."[15]

Since beliefs and perspective vary from person to person and place to place, so will the assignment of meaning and thus, suffering.

A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: PAUL AND JEREMIAH AS SERVANTS WHO SUFFER

Regarding the personal assignment of meaning, let us take an example from Scripture. We will compare the prophet Jeremiah (580 BC) with the apostle Paul (AD 50). We will look at the similar pains they encountered, yet the very different suffering they reported. Then we will attempt to explain the differences.

Similar Kinds of Persecution

First, Jeremiah and Paul were similar in their encounter with persecution. For example, on one occasion, after hearing Jeremiah's preaching, "Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord" (Jer. 20:2). Paul experienced a similar persecution. As a result of freeing a demon–possessed girl, "the crowd joined in attacking [Paul and Silas], and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely" (Acts 16:22–23).

The similarity between Jeremiah and Paul goes deeper than this one instance. Jeremiah is a prophet to the Gentile nations (Jer. 1:5) as Paul is the apostle to the nations (that is, Gentiles: Rom. 11:13). Both are set apart from the womb (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15–16).[16] More importantly, Jeremiah is warned that his hearers will fight against him (Jer. 1:19). Paul likewise is one destined for suffering, as Jesus told Ananias, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16).

Different Responses to Persecution

Second, these men display vastly different responses to this persecution. Later in the same chapter we hear of Jeremiah's despair: "Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, 'A son is born to you,' making him very glad" (Jer. 20:14–15). In contrast, after their imprisonment, we find that about midnight "Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25).

Why the difference? We dare not oversimplify nor be reductionistic. There were times of trial and despair for Paul (Acts 20:17–35; 2 Cor. 1:8). Still, a reading of Jeremiah's book and Paul's letters verifies that their *responses* to pain, betrayal, and persecution were worlds apart. Certainly there is nothing like Lamentations for Paul; for him there was nothing like the self–reporting of a Jeremiah 20. If we look at the broad sweep of Paul's life, he appears much more positive. And just as certainly, if we consider the broad sweep of Jeremiah, he is a prophet immersed in tears. How do we explain this?

The Influence of Personality, Coworkers, Commission, and Understanding of the Messiah

Third, perhaps the following can set us in the right direction in explaining the differences between Jeremiah and Paul. Possible influences —that need not to be considered disjunctive—include the following:

Type of personality. For all we know, Jeremiah might have been a verbal processor and one given to melancholy. Paul might not have been. Some of us might have more of a tendency to retreat to our "cave" and think, while others are prone to vent their frustrations.

Coworkers. Friends help us deal with suffering. Who was there to support Jeremiah? It appears from his writings that there were few (e.g., Baruch). With Paul the reverse is the case. For the apostle the list includes at least Silas, Timothy, Luke, Prisca and Aquila, Apollos, Titus, Aristarchus, and Barnabas.

The nature of the commission. In Jeremiah's case, there is little hope for real change or repentance from Israel (see Jer. 1:17–19). He is told this up front and commanded to mourn (4:8; 6:26).[17] What about Paul? As an apostle to Gentiles he has a different commission (Acts 26:16–18), "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins."

A Suffering Messiah. Even if Jeremiah understands the suffering Messiah as well as the prophet Isaiah (53:2–12), Paul is still at a great advantage. He can look back to the suffering of Jesus and interpret his suffering christologically. Jeremiah cannot do so. When it comes to pain and suffering, our life–setting matters.

The Holy Spirit. Paul had the new covenant experience of the Spirit. We must not fault Jeremiah for not having blessings and insight that can only come after Pentecost.

WAYS THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

Suffering within the Covenantal Relationship with God

Broadly speaking, the Old Testament offers no explanation for suffering. Instead, the Old Testament Scriptures *recontextualize* suffering by placing it inside a dynamic covenantal relationship with God. Entire communities could assign meaning to suffering (cf. Num. 11:3, 34; 1 Sam. 7:6). For relationship is, after all, the be–all and end–all of faith (Ps. 73:23–28). As such, it is relational trust and devotion that makes meaning of suffering.[18]

Beginning with Genesis 3, suffering is introduced by human rebellion—a profound breakdown of relational trust.[19] "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (3:11, 17). But the grand movement of the Old Testament focuses on the national sufferings of Israel, due to their disobedience. It is rare for the biblical

text to ever explore the suffering of those "outside" Israel (e.g., Josh. 6; 1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 5; Matt. 15:21–28).[20]

Individual suffering is largely swept up in the larger social community that is never far away (Gen. 50:20). But it is in the Psalms where the most intense expressions of personal suffering are found (e.g., Psalms 39, 88). Whether caused by sin, enemies, or God himself, the prayers of lament "constitute Israel's primary faith strategy for drawing suffering into the orbit of YHWH's concern."[21] In the lament, Israel transposed suffering into a theological exchange to which God must respond.[22]

The Syntax of Loss

When someone suffers, they experience some kind of *loss* (cf. Job 1:13–2:7). This "tear" in the fabric of life can occur in a number of ways: a broken friendship, an abrupt transition, isolating circumstances, death of a close friend, a divorce, failed plans, or a life–altering diagnosis. In each, *something is pulled apart*, and the fullness of life is undermined. That is, some diminishment occurs—usually relationally—that formed the larger fabric of life: "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness" (Ps. 88:18). Experiences of suffering are directly equated with the ruin of what is vital and dear to life.[23] That Job never cursed God (1:11, 22; 31:30) is not to say Job did not suffer greatly or even have anger toward God—"But it is God who has wronged me" (19:6a NLT; cf. v. 11). From the very beginning, however, Satan assumed Job would assign a negative–reactive meaning to his suffering (2:5). But the Accuser got this wrong.

Simple ideas need refinement, but healing is for broken lives. "And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job . . . the LORD blessed the latter days of Job" (42:10a, 12a). So declaring, "Well, that's life!" may describe the plight of humanity, but as an attitude *in* life, such comments repair nothing. Instead, they stifle empathy toward others, shun meaningful reflection, and promote cynicism within one's self. Growth comes from grieving our losses, not merely enduring them.

Sounds and Gestures of a Suffering Creation

Suffering itself has no "voice." No alarm is sounded for aid to come running. Instead, there are primal sounds and physical gestures that form the grammar of suffering. In fact, the initial stages of suffering often resist speech altogether.[24] Some forms of pain and trauma even switch speech off (e.g., torture, rape, shock).[25] We must learn to read and translate the grammar of suffering that we observe in the lives of people around us. Advocates, counselors, and healers understand the unique, "unlocking" gift of words and the power of speech (cf. Ezek. 24:25–27).[26] In Hosea, the prophet even commands the use of words: "Take with you words and return to the Lord" (14:2a). Until suffering is *translated* into a language form—even such things as art—neither processing (for the hurting) nor understanding (for the empathizing) can adequately occur. So candid prayer not only pleas for relief, it signals that a healing communication is alive!

From the very beginning, we should realize that the scale of suffering is more than global—it is *cosmic*. The Creator cares about his suffering world—not just suffering humans. The Old Testament is less interested in distinctions between the human and nonhuman. Because all creation is naturally dependent on the Creator (Job 12:10), biblical writers saw a plurality of relationships with greater association and intimacy (Jonah 4:11). For example, even the land responds as a sensate creature that "mourns" (Isa. 24:4; Jer. 4:28) and can be nauseated to the point of "vomiting" (Lev. 18:25, 28; 20:22) when it ingests violence.[27] Just as sin and contamination could defile the sanctuary, so wickedness could defile the land.[28] So Paul also declares that "the whole creation has been groaning *together*," waiting for God's future restoration (Rom. 8:22, emphasis added). In the Old Testament, the comprehensive connections of life go even further.

The Old Testament assumes we know that animals also cry out to their Creator: "How the beasts groan! . . . Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up" (Joel 1:18a, 20a). Job chastises his "counselors," challenging them to "ask the beasts, and

they will teach you" (Job 12:7a). God also referred to a catalogue of animals who could instruct Job about suffering and dependence: "Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God for help?" (Job 38:41a; cf. Job 38:1–42:6). Jesus also mentions his care for simple birds: "Consider the ravens . . . and yet God feeds them" (Luke 12:24; cf. Ps. 147:9). Jesus tries to stimulate the faith of his disciples. If God cares for ceremonially "unclean" birds, surely he will care for ignorant people, who are worth more than animals (cf. Matt. 6:26).[29]

A person enters this world with a cry, lives amid wordless sighs, and then dies with a groan. Ecclesiastes and Lamentations do not hide these realities. But primal sounds also mix with gestures. In fact, physical gestures are an external expression of internal feelings.[30] Eyes can sparkle or shoot daggers; hands can go limp or fists can clinch; a face can beam or wince; a body can jump for joy or curl up in the fetal position.

Suffering ultimately finds its voice by drawing on the various "grammars" of a given culture: social, religious, and domestic.[31] Professional trades create with their own lexicons: writers tell stories, painters create portraits, and doctors read symptoms. These trades provide definition and context to understand suffering. Poets, sculptors, actors, and musicians offer aesthetic form, shape, and dignity to our losses, misery, and brokenness. They identify and interpret personal and collective suffering. But it is the community of faith that adds the authoritative Scripture, which invites the suffering to locate their distress within the context of shared faith.[32]

THE OT REGISTRY FOR EXPRESSING SUFFERING

Expressions of suffering in the Old Testament range from dire human experiences to a cacophony of sounds expressing the suffering of men and women. The OT registry is pervasive, indicating the ongoing dilemma of humankind.

Dire Human Experiences

People who suffer personal loss, economic poverty, physical distress, imprisonment, and various forms of oppression are numbered among the: poor (*dal*, Gen. 41:9; Amos 4:1) and needy (*'ni we'evyon*, Deut. 15:11; Ps. 35:10); the "faint and weary" (*'ayef*, *yagea'*, Deut. 25:18); the "crushed" and "broken" (*daka*, *shavar*, Job 20:19; Jer. 23:9); and the "shamed," "humiliated," and "disgraced" (*boshah*, *kherpah*, Lam. 2:1).[33] One reads: "She who bore seven has grown feeble; she has fainted away; her sun went down while it was yet day; she has been shamed and disgraced" (Jer. 15:9a).

Expressions of Human Sorrow

The verbal expressions of sorrow in the Old Testament are varied to reflect people's circumstances: "to grieve, suffer" (*yaghah*); "to be in pain, to grieve, hurt" (*kha'av*, Job 14:22); "to be bowed down, oppressed" (*qadhadh*, *khara'*); "to become dark, gloomy" (*qadhar*); and "to be devastated, frightened, troubled, in difficulty" (*pa'am*, *qashah*, Gen. 41:8; Josh. 10:2). One reads: "'Oh no, sir!' she replied. 'I haven't been drinking wine or anything stronger. But I am very discouraged, and I was pouring out my heart to the LORD'" (1 Sam. 1:15 NLT).

Intense Reaction to Pain

Some verbal expressions capture acute and instinctive human reactions to pain: "sigh, groan" (*'anaqah*, Ezek. 9:4); "weep" (*bakhah*); and "mourn" (*'aval*, Gen. 23:2; 1 Sam. 30:4; 2 Sam. 3:31). One reads: "As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry" (Gen. 27:34).

Sounds of Human Suffering

Some expressions of human suffering are taken from the world of animals: "howl" (Isa. 52:5), "roar" (Isa. 5:29), and "growl" (Isa. 59:11). In anguish, people "cry out" (Ex. 2:23; Job 35:12) and cry aloud (Ps. 3:4;

27:7). One reads: "Because of contention the oppressed cry out; They shout because of the power of the great" (Job 35:9, Tanak).

The "Twisted" Human Body

In various forms of suffering, the human body can "weaken" (Judg. 16:19), "fail" (Isa. 17:32), and "waste away" (Ps. 31:10). The effect of calamity and suffering means one's bones can "shake" (Job 4:14), "burn" (Job 30:30; Ps. 102:3), "scatter" (Ezek. 6:5), and be "out of joint" (Ps. 22:14). One's eyes can "grow dim" with grief (Job 17:7; Ps. 88:9). The heart can "melt" (Josh. 14:8; Isa. 13:7), break (Ps. 69:20), "throb" (Ps. 38:10), or become "hot" (Ps. 39:3). The heart also can become weighed down (Prov. 12:25), faint (Job 19:27), wither (Ps. 102:4), and be "stricken" (Ps. 109:22).

Like no other genre, the poetry of Scripture uses the vivid imagery of wounds. These are high–density expressions for pain and suffering that draw richly on the imagination and paint "loaded" pictures. While laments occur throughout the Old Testament (see Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Lamentations, Job), the laments of the Psalter are legendary for their candid use of somatic terms.[34] Whether protesting their innocence (Ps. 54:1, 3), confessing personal sin (Ps. 32:3–5), or calling God out for his inexcusable absence (Ps. 44:10–12), laments use imagistic representation for affliction, incapacitation, and diminishment.

While individuals may suffer, the family and community never sit passively by. The shame and social stigma of the suffering party forces friends to act in loyalty or betrayal. Whether in help or hindrance, suffering becomes a communal concern (Neh. 9:5–37). So in the Psalms, for example, the physical deterioration associated with pain and suffering always risks the social alienation of friends and family, who may "withdraw" (Ps. 38:11). At times, God himself seems to join those in flight from the hurting (Pss. 10:1; 22:11; 35:22; 38:21).

CONCLUDING OT OBSERVATIONS

Suffering etches deep marks in the people of the Old Testament. Old Testament accounts of suffering include: punishment, hardship, grief, disaster, loneliness, injury, shame, disgrace, disease, and death (Deut. 30:15–19). It has left an extensive lexicon that describes different "layers" of suffering. Suffering affects multiple realms in the *relational ecosystem*—sometimes several at once (e.g., physical + emotional + social).[35] Job's suffering illustrates this composite–dynamic (Job 1:6–2:10). From this discussion, we can make several concluding observations.

First, the issue of *innocent suffering*, and its accompanying protest to God, is far more prominent in the Old Testament than the New (see earlier comments on Jeremiah and Paul). While the Old Testament writers struggle with *theodicy*[36] (e.g., Habakkuk) and the prosperity of the wicked (cf. Ps. 73:3–13), the New Testament emphasizes the transformative power of Christ's innocent suffering for the redemption of others.[37] Even substitutionary suffering (e.g., Isa. 52:13–53:12; Zech. 11:4–17) is not understood in Old Testament theology as a challenge to the justice or goodness of God. Every expression of evil and suffering is matched by a corresponding certainty that God will vindicate (Ps. 94:1–3; Isa. 57:17–21; Hab. 3:12–15).[38] The contemporary reflex of "daring" God or holding him hostage to reason devoid of mystery is a foreign and foolhardy response by biblical standards.

Second, the Old Testament portrays suffering as a *depth of loss* that resists any moralizing explanations.[39] Instead, story after story in the Old Testament faces the bald reality of someone's *guilt* that shows up in social *grief* and typically climaxes in community *fragmentation* (Gen. 44:16; Lam. 3:49, 51; 2 Sam. 13:37–39). That other people can act cruelly is a loss of nurture and shalom (Pss. 55:2–5; 59:3–4); but the abusive silence of God is utterly destabilizing (Pss. 44:10–12, 18, 24; 88:6–9a). Life cannot sustain both vertical and horizontal separations. Such loss is a rupture in the relational ecosystem of the most devastating kind

(Ezra 9:6–15; Neh. 9:5–37). Nonetheless, suffering people cry out *because* God is mighty, not in challenge of it.

Third, grief and mourning were not stoic, brief, individualistic, or of one gender. As we have seen, pain was expressed vocally and communally, and often ranged from inarticulate groaning to artistically written compositions, even intended for the teaching of the community (2 Sam. 1:17–27; Ps. 73:26a, 28b; Lamentations). Voicing one's pain was not viewed as *un*masculine.

> That the expression of grief should be brief, relatively dispassionate, and primarily characteristic of women was a Greek development that entered the church through people such as Augustine, who, for example, felt grieved that he had very briefly grieved the loss of his mother.[40]

Communities of faith that are committed to addressing a fuller spectrum of suffering must intentionally name the real ills of real people living among them, then listen to the pained testimonies of these people's suffering. Real words matter when facing real pain. Too often, the contemporary church has struck not only "sin" and "brokenness" from its working vocabulary, but also grief from its corporate expression that is needed to face suffering on personal and global levels. The Old Testament displays far greater candor and complexity when facing corporate sin and pain (Isa. 15:3; 2 Chron. 34:19; Joel 1:13). But the contemporary church, often more concerned with marketing an image, refuses to guide people into genuine lament over the effects of sin or a collective embrace of sorrow, outside twelve–step programs and "underground" accountability groups.

Fourth, within a distinctly theological worldview, the Old Testament affirms that any description of suffering and evil must factor God into the equation. Without a *theo*centric worldview, neither suffering nor evil necessarily calls the *meaning* of suffering into question.[41] Rather, they become experiences to be endured; somewhere between "That's life!" and "YOLO" (You Only Live Once). But because God

defines the beginning ("In the beginning, God," Gen. 1:1) and the end of all Scripture ("the beginning *and* the end," Rev. 22:13, emphasis added), the simple conjunction "and" calls all who suffer to locate the vocabulary of life within the grammar of faith.[42]

HOW THE NEW TESTAMENT SPEAKS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

Here we will not engage in detailed exegesis of any particular New Testament passage. Instead, we will be looking at the types and distribution of words the New Testament uses, taking a broad look at how it discusses threats to us and the suffering that can result.

Our discussion is representative, not exhaustive. Here we merely intend to illustrate the breadth of suffering in the New Testament and begin classifying pain and suffering into types for the sake of our discussion.

We will talk of external or objective threats (sources of pain) and personal or subjective suffering. As we said earlier in the chapter, these two are not equivalent, although they are related. We do not assume that the external is always disjunctive from the personal and the like.

Physical Sources (Nature and People)

The world we live in sometimes threatens us, doing so in a great variety of ways, some personal and some impersonal. New Testament writers know this quite well. Five examples follow.

Storms

A windstorm came down on the lake while Jesus and the disciples were in the boat. They were in danger of drowning (Luke 8:23). Likewise Paul had already been shipwrecked three times (2 Cor. 11:25) before he and Luke were violently storm tossed for two weeks on the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27:18–27).

Famine

"And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius)" (Acts 11:28).

Disease/Illness

Near the pool of Bethesda Jesus saw "a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed" (John 5:3). Matthew summarized Jesus' ministry, writing, "His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them" (Matt. 4:24; see also Matt. 9:35; Mark 1:34; 3:10; Luke 4:40; 6:18). Christians also suffer illness, since Paul reports that Epaphroditus "was ill, near to death" (Phil. 2:27; cf. Gal. 4:13).

Accidents

On the one hand, there is no word in the New Testament that exactly corresponds to our use of the term "accident."[43] On the other hand, Jesus spoke against the view that there is a one–to–one correspondence between disaster and sin, saying, "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?" (Luke 13:4). The point is that "natural calamities afford no proof that those who suffer in them are any worse sinners that anybody else."[44] Rather, they suffered an accident.

Abuse, Violence, or Oppression

This category is large, probably owing to a variety of factors such as the writers' sensitivity to evil and the church's encounter with persecution. Here we find the rich dragging the poor into court (James 2:6), Christians being slandered (1 Peter 3:16) and deprived of property (Heb. 10:34), Herod slaughtering innocent children (Matt. 2:16), Stephen being executed unjustly (Acts 7:57–58), Paul beaten by Romans

and from Jews receiving "the forty lashes less one" (2 Cor. 11:24–25; cf. Acts 21:30–32), and preeminently the brutality that Jesus faced (Luke 18:32–33; Matt. 27:28–31).

Spiritual Sources

The external threats we considered above do not require that we have a Christian worldview. The following, however, differ in that they presuppose a spiritual world. From a New Testament perspective, threats from the spiritual world are just as real as those from the physical world.

Demons, Demonization

This threat is commonly found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Thus Jesus' "fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons" (Matt. 4:24; cf. Matt. 8:16; 10:8; Mark 1:34; 7:29–30; Luke 4:33–35; 8:2; 13:32).

The Enemy

The enemy is Satan himself—the devil who first appears in Scriptures as a serpent (Gen. 3:1–5; cf. Rev. 12:9). Because of his threat Paul urges the Ephesians to put on "the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (6:11; cf. 2 Cor. 2:10–11), and Peter warns, "Be sober–minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Acts tells us that Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (10:38).

False Teachers

Even when a threat is "spiritual" we should not think that natural means are never used. So we are told that, for his pride, Herod was struck by the angel of the Lord. That is a spiritual cause. Nevertheless, the same verse says "he was eaten by worms and breathed his last"

(Acts 12:23). That is a natural means. So also those who teach a false gospel are willing human agents of the enemy. Thus Paul says that false apostles working at Corinth are "deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

Subjective/Personal Sources

Here we talk of suffering as we have defined it earlier. That is, the inner, subjective experience of a person in pain. Primarily we can see that suffering occurs by the emotional words that are used.

Anger

One may wonder why anger is included with suffering. We will explore this further in chapter 6. In short, anger is included since it is always a *secondary* emotion following from some other pain. Thus when Herod was tricked by the wise men, he was furious (Matt. 2:16). Jesus displayed anger toward the Pharisees because he was grieved by their hard–heartedness (Mark 3:5). Because of his pastoral love, Paul burned with indignation when Christians were abused by false teachers (2 Cor. 11:29).

Anxiety/Distress

During Zechariah's time of temple service, the angel Gabriel appeared to him, and the temple servant became "troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him" (Luke 1:12). After listing his many trials such as shipwreck, persecution, and deprivation, Paul crowns the list with the daily pressure on him of his anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28). Epaphroditus has similar distress on behalf of others. Concerning the believers in Philippi, "he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill" (Phil. 2:26), Paul wrote. In chapter 4 we will speak more of the distress of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (e.g., Mark 14:33).

Agony/Anguish

When the church in Caesarea urged Paul not to depart, he answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?" (Acts 21:13). Concerning unsaved Jews, Paul reports having great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart (Rom. 9:2; cf. Gal. 4:19). Although it does not use a specifically emotional word, a heart agony is probably reflected in Jesus' cry of dereliction: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matt. 27:46).[45]

Grief/Sorrow/Tears

We have already mentioned the grief and sorrow of Jesus, one caused by the hard–heartedness of the Pharisees, the other occurring in the garden as he anticipates arrest (Mark 3:5; 14:34; cf. John 13:21). In addition, Paul was grieved by a visit to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:1), by a subsequent painful letter to them written "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2 Cor. 2:4), and by his situation at the time of writing to the Philippians (2:27). Peter speaks of being grieved by trials (1 Peter 1:6). Tears also appear in the life of Peter (Mark 14:72), of Mary (John 20:11), and of Jesus (Heb. 5:7–8).

CONCLUDING NT OBSERVATIONS

Our summary above has been cursory. Much more could be found to study. This selection is meant to show the broad representation we find in the New Testament. Much could be said in summary of the evidence but we restrict ourselves to the following five points:

First, the pain and suffering are both physical and emotional, including but not limited to: disease, grief, storms, exploitation, accidents, shame, slander, torment, brutality, terror, frustration, despair, murder, abuse, and betrayal. By definition, life in this age—although it has many joys—is in constant threat of pain and suffering.

Second, consider who suffers. In the New Testament we find preeminently the suffering of Jesus. His is innocent suffering, and suffering that redeems. In Luke 9:22 Jesus says, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." The phrase "suffer many things" has to do with "the entire process of rejection and persecution," since we see that there is a specific reference to crucifixion later.[46]

But in addition to the suffering of the Messiah, we find secondarily the suffering of the people of God—first predicted by Jesus (e.g., Matt. 10:16–22; 24:9–13), and then experienced by the early church (e.g., Acts 8:1–3; 1 Peter 4:12–13). And, as with the Old Testament (e.g., Jeremiah 20), the suffering affects the individual, as we see especially with Paul in the latter half of Acts and in some of the letters (e.g., Acts 14:19; 2 Cor. 11:23b–27).

Third, a key feature of suffering is hinted at: desire. It is not a feature that encompasses all suffering; nevertheless it is repeatedly seen. Because we have desires and goals, we suffer. Jesus desires the repentance of Jerusalem and it will not receive him. So he laments its rebellion (Luke 13:34) and weeps over it (Luke 19:41). Herod wants the sole enjoyment of kingship's power. Consequently, he kills all the male babies of Bethlehem so that no newborn king might be a threat to him (Matt. 2:16). If we had no desire, no longings, and no goals, we would have a significantly reduced liability to suffering. This has long been recognized by Buddhism. Its "Four Noble Truths" say: (1) suffering exists, (2) suffering arises from attachment to desires, (3) suffering ceases when attachment to desire ceases, and (4) freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Eightfold Path.[47]

But a life without desire is not a godly life as described and prescribed by both Testaments. Indeed a life without desires, goals, and relationships is not even a human life.

Fourth, if we take all the evidence into account, we see that *the New Testament gives us not a two–dimensional presentation, but rather an emotionally rich picture filled with intricacies and tensions.* Jesus

rejoiced in the Spirit (Luke 10:21) and had compassion (Matt. 9:36), but also grieved (Mark 3:5) and wept (Luke 19:41).[48] Similarly, on the one hand, Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice always (4:6); yet in this same letter he reports his own sorrow (2:27) and tears over enemies of the gospel (3:18). Paul also has unceasing anguish over unsaved Jews (Rom. 9:2), even though he describes himself in 2 Cor. 6:10 as "always rejoicing."[49] This tension has much in common with the experience of Old Testament saints.

Fifth, and following from the above, we find a certain perspective on emotion. *It is common to hear it said that emotions are neither right nor wrong,* "they just are."[50] *The New Testament—indeed all Scripture—takes a different view.* It does not deny emotion. It does not, for instance, tell someone who is angry that he is not angry. It does, however, praise certain emotions and not others depending on their basis (e.g., Ps. 97:10; Amos 5:15; Rom. 12:9). It does make clear that some emotional reactions are "wrong" in the sense that the emotion is based on a culpable misunderstanding, sin, rebellion, selfishness, or the like.

Thus in certain contexts certain emotions may be appropriate or inappropriate. For example, Jesus rebuked those in the synagogue at Capernaum (Luke 4:24–27). But when they heard his words "all in the synagogue were filled with wrath" and tried to kill him (vv. 28–29). We can rightly say this anger was sinful—that is, wrong. Similarly, the Corinthians were proud of a man in the congregation who had an incestuous relationship with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:12). Paul says that instead of pride (a wrong emotional response) they should have mourned (a correct emotional response).[51] We note here that the correct emotional response was to suffer.

AMID PAIN AND SUFFERING

1. Reflect on the distinction drawn between pain and suffering. Have you seen the distinction borne out in your life? In the lives of others? Discuss particular examples where you have had pain without suffering and suffering without pain.

2. Ponder the following statement: "Suffering is primarily emotional and the emotion needs to be given a voice." Do you think the statement is helpful or harmful? Explain your answer.

3. The "grammar of suffering" in the Old Testament includes cries, groans, and pained prayers written to God. Because pain and suffering still exist, what do you think are some stereotypes or myths that contemporary believers live with that are hindering their ability to face their suffering?

4. Suffering can be described as *deep loss*, resulting in serious diminishment to one's life. What kinds of loss have resulted in diminishment and suffering in your life?

5. If a good friend *assigns a meaning* to their suffering that you are not familiar with (or even uncomfortable with), what do you think would be the wisest response to your friend?