

--not their own comfort---that ought to be their aim. And then, ironically but wonderfully, they will find that as their minds are transformed to seek his glory in all circumstances rather than their own comfort, they will find the greatest joy and deepest comfort of all, because they will find it in Him.

Our prayers---especially in the midst of suffering---are a both a powerful witness to our faith in God and a powerful teacher to us a Christians. Commit as a pastor or a church leader not to let your prayers for suffering people, or your church's prayers for them, be shallow and insignificant. When you pray, press into the deep things of God. Uncover his purposes, express faith, and lean into the hope our faith in Jesus Christ provides.

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fer because others mistreat them; (3) persons who are just or righteous (in the eyes of God) may suffer for doing what is right.

The covenants inaugurated by God between himself and human parties form the key to the plot-structure of the Bible as a single and unified text. We can briefly survey conditions established by each of the covenants and assess the kinds of suffering discussed or observed in these portions of the plot-structure.

Genesis 1:26-28 establishes a covenant between God and humans on the one hand and between humans and the creation on the other. Adam was called to be an obedient son in relation to God and a servant priest-king in relation to the earth and the creatures living there. When Adam and Eve violated the covenant relationship with God, relations between humans and

### **SBJT: Is there a difference between suffering under the Old Covenant versus under the New Covenant?**

**Peter J. Gentry:** That question is an important one to ask so let's briefly consider it for a few moments as we consider and explore continuities and discontinuities between living under the Old Covenant versus the New.

Scripture clearly distinguishes at least three types of suffering: (1) all humans suffer because (a) we live in a fallen world and in addition (b) our own wrongdoings bring consequences in our lives and in our world; (2) innocent people may suffer

between humans and the earth broke down quickly. Cain in anger murdered his brother and Abel suffered. Certainly Abel suffered as an innocent person, and possibly on account of his righteousness. Seven generations later in the descendants of Cain, Lamech murders a boy for merely striking him.

Genesis 3:8-19 demonstrates that God subjected the creation to frustration on account of human sin (Rom 8:20). Corruption and social violence increased to a breaking point in the eyes of God (Gen 6:11-13) so that he brought further judgement in the form of a flood. Again we have suffering in the form of humans wronging other humans and humans subject to divine judgement.

The Covenant with Noah reaffirmed the original Covenant with Creation, but did not change the human heart (Gen 8:21) so that immediately afterwards suffering continues in the drunkenness of Noah and the uncovering of his nakedness by Ham—humans wronging other humans.

After divine judgement destroys human unity at Babel God focuses on one person, i.e., Abraham, and his descendants as a means of blessing or cursing in relation to all the nations (Gen 12:1-3). This introduces a new perspective on suffering: an individual or nation may suffer ill for the way they treat the family of Abraham. We can see this in relation to Pharaoh when Abram sojourns there and Pharaoh takes Sarah as his wife. Later we see something similar, only much more magnified, when the Egyptians mistreat Israel for a long period of time and Yahweh brings his people out by executing judgements upon the Egyptian gods and people. God is true to his promises to Abraham.

Under the administration of the Abrahamic Covenant, Joseph is an example of a person who suffers either for doing right or in spite of doing right. His commitment to purity motivates Potiphar's wife to prevaricate and have him cast into prison. Abel and Joseph appear to be isolated instances whose suffering is not brought about by the covenant situation that governs their lives.

The Covenant with Israel mediated by Moses enables the nation to live in the land given to them by God and experience blessing by showing them how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in truly human ways, and how to be good stewards of the earth's resources. Therefore the Mosaic Covenant administers the outworking of the promises to Abraham in the Iron Age culture and period.

With the Mosaic Covenant suffering becomes more severe in that increased revelation brings greater responsibility. Stephen Dempster notes: "A closer look at the text shows that Israel is treated differently after Sinai. Murmuring is not only judged; it is judged severely. No sooner does Israel leave

Sinai than the complaining of the people results in the divine fire of wrath burning the outskirts of the camp. A conflagration (Taberah Num. 11:1-3) quickly becomes a graveyard (Qibroth Hattaavah 11:34) as many are struck down by the divine wrath for craving meat while being tired of manna. Whereas pre-Sinai Sabbath violation leads to reprimand (Exod. 16:27-30), post-Sinai trespass leads to death (Num. 15:32-36). Israel succeeds against the Amalekites before Sinai (Exod. 17:8-16) but miserably fails after Sinai (Num. 14:41-44). At pre-Sinai Meribah (Exod. 17:1-7) Israel is rebuked; at post-Sinai Meribah (Num. 20:1-13), Moses and Aaron themselves are condemned to exile. Within the overall structure of the text there is thus a hermeneutic that points to the failure of Israel to keep the Sinai covenant and to the virtual inevitability of exile on these terms. The kingdom of Priests mediating creation blessing to the nations does not seem possible for this firstborn son. The sentence of exile that is passed on the great Moses, the one whose face shone with the glory of God, seems to make this point in dramatic fashion (*Dominion and Dynasty* [InterVarsity, 2003], 113).

Under the Old Covenant, then, one might think that full obedience would bring eternal life. The people experienced blessings and cursing in an earthly way: obedience would bring bodily health and strength, good marriages, full families, crops and herds that were successful, and victory over enemies; disobedience brought the reverse (Deut 28).

As Paul points out in Romans 5:12-14, people who lived before the Mosaic Covenant died because all humans are involved in Adam's sin in some way. Even at the very moment that the Mosaic Covenant was being inaugurated and mediated, the people violated it and the text points to the failure of Israel to keep it. So, again, as Paul notes, the Mosaic Covenant revealed sin for what it is (Rom 7:13) and did not remove the death penalty either. At the same time, penalties for sin under the Old Covenant were overlooked as God awaited the full propitiation wrought by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross (Rom 3:21-26). So people did not suffer for sins as much as they might have suffered.

In the section of the Jewish canon known as the Writings, there are reflections on the question of suffering. In the book of Job, for example, Job suffers because of the attack of the Adversary upon him. This suffering, however, is limited by the wager between God and the Adversary. Job's "Comforters" argue from the standard theology of the time that Job is being punished for his wickedness. This is not the case, but the reason for the suffering is hidden from Job and his comforters. Yahweh, the Covenant Lord, answers Job in a storm. He does not explain the reason for Job's trials but

he does demonstrate from Behemoth and Leviathan, symbols of the power of the Adversary within the poetic sections, that his power over creation is much greater than that of the Adversary, however great the power of evil may seem. Not all English translations make this clear, but Psalm 103:26 states that Leviathan is a mere plaything before Yahweh. Thus, according to the Book of Job, a person can suffer for other reasons unknown to us, but known to the heavenly council where the rule of God is supreme.

According to Ecclesiastes, life is beautiful, but as ephemeral as soap bubbles. There are many aspects of life that frustrate logic and reason in attempts to understand them: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve (8:14 NIV). He also affirms that “there is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins” (7:20).

While Ecclesiastes and Job attempt to probe the problem of human suffering, the book of Proverbs is focused on the end results: rewards for the righteous and punishments for the wicked. Nonetheless, the book of Proverbs assumes that the righteous experience pain and poverty for a season. Reflect on these texts: (1) 13:23: “A poor man’s field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away;” (2) 16:8: “Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice;” (3) 17:1: “Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife;” (4) 24:16: “for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity.” These proverbs show that the book assumes suffering is experienced by the righteous for a season, but it is not the focus of its teaching. Note also that the wicked do lay traps for innocent people and commit acts of social injustice against them (Prov 1:11).

A new stage in God’s dealings with Israel and the nations is reached in the Covenant made with David (2 Sam 7). First, a king of the line of David will have a kingdom and a throne forever. Second, this king will function as the covenant mediator in order to make sure the covenant is kept by the people, assuming he fulfills Deuteronomy 17:14-20. Third, the king stands as the covenant head of the nation. He will do for Israel as an individual what Israel has failed to do as a nation and be the instrument to bring the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to the nations (2 Sam 7:19). Fourth, all nations must eventually receive instruction from this kingly line (Ps 2). This is what makes possible Isaiah’s Servant Songs, which show God’s solution for the problem of sin and suffering.

The prophecy in Daniel 7, enlarged upon in 8 and 10-12 has a bearing on our topic. Daniel 7 describes four human kingdoms followed by the king-

dom of God. The Son of Man in Daniel 7 represents the divine ruler, the human ruler, and the people of that kingdom. The depiction of this kingdom as a human (Aramaic, son of man), as opposed to an animal, symbolises the fact that only in this kingdom can one achieve what it means to be truly human. The main point in Daniel 7, however, is that the Son of Man, i.e., both leader and people, will enter this kingdom through suffering.

The important teaching in Daniel 7 is taken up by the apostles, the authorised agents of the New Covenant, promised by the prophets of the Old Testament and inaugurated via the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is both divine and human ruler of the Son of Man kingdom in Daniel 7. Although these texts may be familiar to us, they need to be cited to hear them afresh on this topic:

1 Peter 2:11-25: “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

1 Peter 4:1, 12-19: “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves



also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin ... Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."

2 Timothy 1:8-12: "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me."

2 Timothy 2:1-3: "You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

2 Timothy 3:10-13: "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse..."

Peter distinguishes between suffering for doing wrong and suffering for

doing what is right or even suffering simply “according to the will of God.” If we suffer for doing what is right, we follow the model of Jesus, our Messiah. And in fact, we have been called to this model of suffering under administration of the New Covenant.

Paul supports this teaching in his instructions to Timothy. He is suffering as a messenger of the gospel and Timothy may expect exactly the same thing. Paul’s life is a model for Timothy. Persecution and suffering for doing what is right is part of the calling of the believer in the New Covenant community.

There is no teaching like this under the Old Covenant. Apart from sporadic cases, it is not the norm under the Old Covenant. It seems that there is a discontinuity between the Old Covenant and the New in the matter of the question of suffering.