SJT 60(4): 394–411 (2007) Printed in the United Kingdom © 2007 Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd
doi:10.1017/S0036930607003717

# Redemptive suffering: Christ's alone

Mary VandenBerg
Calvin Theological Seminary, 3233 Burton SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA
*mvberg96@calvinseminary.edu*

## Abstract

In recent years feminists and others have taken issue with traditional understandings of the atonement. Part of their criticism has been the assertion that to glorify Christ's suffering entails glorifying all suffering, a connection that potentially leads to abusive behaviour. Suffering, they claim, is not redemptive – ever. In this article I argue that, based on the biblical text, at least one instance of suffering, the suffering of Christ, is redemptive. In addition, I argue that redemptive suffering is unique to Christ. Human suffering is not redemptive and should not be spoken of in those terms.

## Introduction

'For God So Loved the World?' is the provocative title of an essay by theologians Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker. In this essay, Brown and Parker level harsh criticism against traditional Christian theology, focusing especially on the plight of women and children who have endured abusive situations. According to Brown and Parker, the church is a responsible agent, perhaps even *the* responsible agent, in the oppression and abuse of women and in affirming societal norms that allow this oppression and abuse.[1]

The big problem Brown and Parker have is the Christian belief that Christ's death was part of God's plan to deliver his people from their sins and from the results of those sins. They care very little about the different constructions of how Christ's death accomplishes human salvation. They object to the fact that, in every atonement scheme, Christ's death is considered necessary to accomplish atonement and that his suffering is commended to his disciples. Although they recognise the multiplicity of understandings as to how suffering brings redemption, they write, 'every theory of the atonement commends suffering to the disciples. The Christian is to "be like Jesus" – and imitation of Christ is first and foremost obedient willingness to endure pain'.[2]

Brown and Parker do not focus their criticism only on the penal substitution model which has often been the target of theological criticism.

[1] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds), *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), p. 2.
[2] Ibid., p. 4.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

They analyse each of the three traditional atonement models, Christus Victor, satisfaction and moral influence, but finally reject all three. Brown and Parker's concluding statements make clear that no doctrine of atonement is worth salvaging. They write, 'Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering'.[3] They continue:

> Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of the culture is of 'divine child abuse' – God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son? If Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from this theology. We must do away with the atonement, this idea of a blood sin upon the whole human race which can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb. This bloodthirsty God is the God of the patriarchy who at the moment controls the whole Judeo-Christian tradition.[4]

Like Brown and Parker, Julie Hopkins rejects the glorification of suffering along with the idea that Jesus' suffering was in any way part of a divine plan. She writes, 'A god who punishes through pain, despair and violent death is not a god of love but a sadist and despot'.[5] Unlike some theologians, Hopkins does not deny that some oppressed people might find comfort and inspiration to live by identifying with Jesus' sufferings on the cross.[6] Nonetheless, pastors who encourage imitation of Jesus' sufferings are encouraging nothing less than masochism.[7] For Hopkins, 'the central theological insight of the Christian proclamation of the cross is that God is present and in loving solidarity with those who suffer unjustly at the hands of corrupt and violent people'.[8]

Denny Weaver in his book, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, proposes a model that he calls 'narrative Christus Victor'.[9] Paying special attention to feminist, womanist and black theologians, he recognises a connection between the glorification of suffering and abusive and oppressive behaviour. He rejects the notion that Jesus' suffering and death were purposive. Rather, he understands Jesus' suffering as a consequence of his mission.[10] It was Jesus' life that was redemptive, not his suffering and death.

[3] Ibid., p. 26.
[4] Ibid., p. 26.
[5] Julie Hopkins, *Towards A Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 50.
[6] Ibid., p. 54.
[7] Ibid., p. 50.
[8] Ibid., p. 58.
[9] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 22.
[10] Ibid., p. 74.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The problem these theologians and others present is formidable. One cannot deny the human suffering caused by the exploitation of women, children and marginalised people throughout the world. And the church is not without guilt. Various sociological studies indicate that women from strong Christian backgrounds tend to view their abuse as God's punishment for some wrong-doing or as a result of not submitting properly to their husbands.[11] In addition, a study of pastors done in 1989 indicated that 26 per cent of the pastors surveyed 'agreed that a wife should submit to her [abusive] husband and trust God would honor her action by either stopping the abuse or giving her the strength to endure it'.[12] Not infrequently, verses referring to Christ's suffering are cited in support of this sort of counsel.

One common thread running throughout the critiques of atonement theology is the criticism of the church's insistence that suffering is redemptive. Joanne Carlson Brown asserts that this insistence perpetuates the victimisation of others, especially women.[13] 'Suffering is never redemptive', she writes, 'and it cannot be redeemed'.[14]

Is she right? Is suffering never redemptive? I intend to argue that one instance of suffering was redemptive – the suffering of Christ. Human suffering is neither redemptive nor intrinsically positive. In fact, suffering is the result of evil in the world; the very evil Christ came to overcome. While it is true that human suffering *can* have positive outcomes and *can* be transformative, it is not necessarily so.

Working from a framework of biblical texts that deal with redemption, I will present a definition of 'redemption'. I will show that redemption, in the soteriological sense, is something only God can accomplish. Working from this understanding, I will show that Christ's suffering was indeed redemptive, again relying primarily on biblical texts.

I will then show that human suffering is not redemptive. I will work with biblical texts that speak of Christians suffering as Christ suffered to show that while suffering may be part of the Christian life and may produce good results in us or others, it is not redemptive and should not be spoken of in those terms.

[11] Marie F. Fortune, 'The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective', in Brown and Bohn (eds), *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, p. 140.

[12] John M. Johnson and Denise M. Bondurant, 'Revisiting the 1982 Church Response Survey', in Carol J. Adams and Marie Fortune (eds), *Violence Against Women and Children* (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1995), p. 425.

[13] Joanne Carlson Brown, 'Divine Child Abuse?', *Daughters of Sarah*, 18/3 (Summer 1992), p. 24.

[14] Ibid., p. 28.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

## Defining redemption

The term 'redemption' is used rather ambiguously throughout theological literature dealing with atonement. Frequently one will read that Jesus' death was or was not 'redemptive' as well as that human suffering is or is not 'redemptive'. But what is meant when we read such statements?

Redemption is a term that was used for particular commercial transactions in the ancient world. Use of the word 'redemption' necessarily entails asking the question, 'what is one being redeemed from?' Most often, redemption involved a payment to effect release from some legal or cultic obligation.[15]

The Bible uses a variety of terms to express the idea of redemption. The two Hebrew terms used in the Old Testament and frequently translated as 'redemption' are גאל (*go'el*) and פדה (*padah*). The New Testament is a bit more diverse. The most frequent term used to express redemption is λύτρον and the related words λυτρόω and ἀπολύτρωσιν. The words ἀγοράζω and ἐξαγοράζω are also used but much less frequently.

## Redemption in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word *go'el* has few semantic connections in other Semitic languages. Its primary understanding has been deduced from the biblical text.[16] In the Old Testament, it is used with two connections. First, it is used socially and legally in connection with Israel's political life. Second, it is used with respect to specific acts of redemption by God.[17] Most often, the social sense of *go'el*, when used as a verb, has to do with redemption of property. Sometimes that property is land or animals (Lev. 25:29). Other times the property could be a person who had been sold into slavery (Lev. 25:48). When used as a noun, the *go'el* could be a near relative who has the responsibility to redeem a person or property, as with Boaz in the book of Ruth. In addition, the *go'el* was the 'avenger of blood' and had the responsibility to take vengeance on the perpetrator of the murder of a fellow tribesman (Num. 35:19–27).[18]

When used with respect to specific acts of salvation by God, Ringgren notes that *go'el* most often stands in parallel with *padah* (to ransom) but can also be found in parallel with *yasha* (to save, deliver), *natsal* (to save, rescue) and *'azar* (to help). He considers *go'el* to be nearly synonymous with *padah*

[15] John D. Harvey, 'Redemption', in David Noel Freedman, (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1114.

[16] Helmer Ringgren, 'Ga'al', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans , 1975), p. 351.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., p. 352.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and notes that both of these verbs generally refer to rescue or delivery from slavery, exile or distress in general.[19] In my survey of the texts that use this term, the general theme of redemption or rescue ran throughout, although from whom the person or nation was being rescued varied. Sometimes God is needed to deliver Israel or his servant from slavery, either to Egypt (Exod. 6:6) or to Assyria (Jer. 31:11). Other times God needs to rescue Israel from more general oppression and enemies (Ps. 74:2 and Ps. 72:14).

*Go'el* is only rarely used to directly refer to the Exodus but, in every case where it is, the one who has redeemed or will redeem Israel from bondage in Egypt is God (Exod. 6:6; 15:13). Outside of Leviticus where *go'el* is used almost entirely in the social or legal sense, the highest concentration of some form of this word appears in Isaiah.

Based on a computer concordance search, I counted twenty-five different times that Isaiah uses *go'el*. Isaiah speaks of Israel as 'the redeemed' (Is. 35:9; 51:10). He speaks of God redeeming Jerusalem (Is. 52:9). He speaks of redemption as something God has done (Is. 48:20) and as something God will do (Is. 52:3). Of particular interest is Isaiah's use of the participial form of *go'el*. He uses the participial form no less than nine times to refer to God. It is God who is the redeemer of Israel, both from Egypt and from Babylonian captivity. He has redeemed Israel to be his own people.[20]

Unlike *go'el*, *padah* has a number of semantic connections in other Semitic languages such as Akkadian, Ugaritic and Old South Arabic. The meaning of the related word in those languages ranges from 'spare or release' to 'buy, pay, redeem'.[21] In most of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, the usage of this word is legal. It refers to a payment made to a particular party to release someone or something from a legal obligation. For instance, Exod. 13:13 prescribes payment to God for release of the firstborn male person or animal. The firstborn belongs to God but that does not mean it must be sacrificed.[22] Securing its release is expected and provision has been made for that release.

Outside of these legal references, most redeeming action belongs to God. It is God who has redeemed Israel from Egypt according to the author of Deuteronomy (Deut. 9:26, 9:26, 13:5, 15:15, 21:8 and 24:18). David recognises that God is the redeemer of his life from threats (1 Sam. 4:9 and 1 Kgs 1:29). God is the redeemer of Israel (2 Sam. 7:23) and the one from whom Israel seeks redemption (Ps. 24:22, 44:26, 55:18). In addition,

[19] Ibid., p. 351.
[20] Ibid., p. 354.
[21] H. Cazelles, 'Padah', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 483.
[22] Ibid., p. 484.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there are references to God's redemption or ransom of Israel from Sheol (Ps. 49:15), from iniquities (Ps. 130:8), and from death (Job 5:20).

Although the references to redemption from Sheol, iniquities and death are all drawn from wisdom literature it is clear that, whatever concept Israel had of these enemies, God was the only one capable of rescuing them. No human deliverer is mentioned. What is not clear in these texts is exactly how redemption works. It is certainly through God's power and might, but if redemption assumes payment, to whom is the payment made and what is the cost? Sometimes, as with redemption from Egypt, the cost might be the firstborn son of the Egyptians. Other times, however, no cost is mentioned (cf. Ps. 34:22; Ps. 55:18; Is. 29:22).

With that ambiguity in mind, Cazelles suggests that a better translation might be 'release' since, at least some of the time, no legal transaction seems to take place whereby God makes payment of some sort.[23] Rather, in some unknown way, God releases his people or the Psalmist from the problem at hand, perhaps simply by his power. Nonetheless, the important point is that it is God who will release or redeem Israel, whether through his own power or through an appointed agent. Of course, none of this means that God will necessarily redeem or release, only that it is he who has the power to do so.[24]

It appears clear from this brief survey of Old Testament texts that, outside of the legal or commercial use of the term redeem, the only one who can redeem individuals or the nation of Israel from dire circumstances is God. In fact, the exodus from Egypt, the major salvific event for Israel, is accomplished by God alone. He is their Redeemer.

## Redemption in the New Testament

As mentioned above, the most common word for redemption in the New Testament is λύτρον or some form of this word. Outside the New Testament, λύτρον is most often used in the sense of money paid as a ransom. It is first of all a commercial, not legal term. 'It is a commercial transaction in legal form, not strictly a legal action such as, e.g. punishment'.[25] Most often, it refers to ransom of prisoners of war but it can also refer to ransom of slaves or of some other obligation. It is rarely used with religious connotations but when it is, it refers to a payment made to a god to whom a man owes a debt.[26] In the New Testament, λύτρον is only used three times: Mark 10:45;

[23] Ibid., p. 485.
[24] Ibid., p. 486.
[25] F. Büchsel, 'λυτρον', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), Geoffrey W. Bromiley (tr.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 355.
[26] Ibid., p. 341.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Matt. 20:28; and 1 Tim. 2:6.[27] In each case Jesus is spoken of as a ransom for many or all. To whom a ransom is paid, and for what, is unclear. Nonetheless, no human pays the price. It is the Son of God who is the ransom.

The verb λυτρόω has a virtually identical frame of reference as the noun. Specifically, it means 'to free by ransom' or 'to buy back by ransom'.[28] In the Old Testament (the LXX) it is used to refer to the redemption of Israel from Gentile oppressors including, but not limited to, the redemption from Egypt. It is also used to refer to the final redemption which Israel awaits and which the Messiah, God's appointed agent, will achieve.[29]

In the New Testament this verb occurs only three times: Luke 24:21; Titus 2:14; and 1 Peter 1:18. Büchsel writes 'it is used exclusively for the redeeming act of God or of Jesus'.[30] This might not be completely clear in the Lukan passage where redemption by Christ is 'hoped for' but not necessarily accomplished, at least in the mind of the disciples. But both Titus and Peter make clear that redemption is God's work. In addition, Titus clarifies what it is that Jesus redeemed us from. 'He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds'.[31]

The noun, ἀπολύτρωσις, is used quite frequently in the New Testament. According to Büchsel, 'It means "setting free for a ransom" and is used of prisoners of war, slaves, and criminals condemned to death'.[32] The word carries ideas throughout the New Testament both of redemption already accomplished and redemption still hoped for: Rom. 8:23, Eph. 1:14, and Eph. 4:30 all speak of a redemption that believers wait for. But verses such as Eph. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:30 and Col. 1:14 refer to the redemption already accomplished by Christ. Colossians 1:14 links this redemption directly with the forgiveness of sins, speaking of Christ, 'in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins'. Regardless of whether the texts are referring to accomplished redemption or awaited redemption, it is God, usually through his son Jesus Christ, who is the agent of redemption.

Two other New Testament words bear mentioning, ἀγοράζω and ἐξαγοράζω. The word ἀγοράζω is primarily a market term meaning 'to

[27] Timothy actually uses αντιλυτρον but the meaning is identical. Cf. Büchsel, 'lutron', p. 349.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 350.
[30] Ibid.
[31] *The New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).
[32] Büchsel, 'lutron', p. 352.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

buy'.[33] While the word is used quite frequently, the majority of New Testament passages where this word is used are purely secular, referring to buying food, a field, or some such thing. In fact, every use of this word that I found in the four gospels is purely secular. Paul picks up this market term and uses it in reference to Christians. According to Büchsel, the point of the term in Pauline writings is to show Christians that they belong to Christ. 'Intentionally it is not said who has bought them, or from whom they are bought, or at what cost. The reference is simply to the fact of their redemption.'[34] In contrast to Paul, however, Revelation 5:9 specifically states that believers were bought by the blood of the lamb and 2 Peter 2:1 refers to the 'Master' who bought the believers.

Like ἀγοράζω, ἐξαγοράζω has the idea of buying behind it. It is used four times in the New Testament, only two of which speak of redemption of persons. In contrast to ἀγοράζω, where the intent is to show God's ownership of believers, ἐξαγοράζω is used in connection with the purchase of a person for freedom.[35] In both instances the term is used to refer to the purchase of persons from the curse of the law into freedom in Christ (Gal. 3:13, 4:5). As with other redemption terms, this purchase is made by Jesus Christ, not by human effort of any kind.

The New Testament usages of various words for redemption express the Christian notion of salvation from sin and evil more explicitly than do the Old Testament passages I have examined. In addition, it is clear in the New Testament that the redemption of persons is always accomplished by God, usually in the second person of the Trinity. Given the thrust of the biblical texts overall, both Old and New Testaments, it is clear that to speak soteriologically of redemption is to assume the Redeemer is God.

## Christ's suffering

We have very little information about the life of Jesus prior to the beginning of his public ministry. Other than his narrow escape from Herod, which Matthew records (Matt. 2:13–15), and his excursion to the temple when he was 12 years old, which Luke records (Luke 2:41–52), we know almost nothing about Jesus' early life. Jesus' adult life as depicted in the Gospels, however, is a life that involved suffering. While a certain amount of suffering

[33] F. Büchsel, 'αγοραζω, εξαγοραζω', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), Geoffrey W. Bromiley (tr.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 125.
[34] Ibid., p. 125.
[35] Ibid., p. 126.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can be seen throughout his life, his suffering is magnified during the Passion week.

Jesus himself seems to understand his mission as a mission of suffering and death. All three synoptic gospels record Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death at least one time. Matthew and Mark simply record that Jesus told his disciples about what would happen to him (Matt. 16:24–8; Mark 8:31–3). But Luke 9:21 records Jesus' own words: 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised'.[36]

Of course, as the story unfolds, this is exactly what happens. Jesus is betrayed by Judas, one of his twelve close disciples (Matt. 26:47–50; Mark 14:43–7; Luke 22:47–8; John 18:1–3). He is then brought before the Jewish authorities and condemned (Matt. 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–65; Luke 22:66–71; John 18:12–14, 19–24). The gospel writers then tell of Jesus' trial before Pilate and subsequent sentence to death by crucifixion (Matt. 27:11–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28–19:16). In the midst of all this Jesus is mocked by the soldiers (Matt. 27:27–31) and beaten (Matt. 27:26). Jesus then, according to Roman custom, is forced to carry his own cross to a place called Golgotha (Matt. 27:33), is stripped of his clothes and nailed to the cross between two criminals (Matt. 27:32–44).

As for death by crucifixion, it was one of the most cruel forms of death one could imagine. John Stott writes that the Romans reserved crucifixion for 'criminals convicted of murder, rebellion, or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigners or other non-persons'.[37] The victim of this form of punishment died slowly and painfully. Morna Hooker writes that crucifixion 'combined the death penalty with excruciating torture and with total humiliation'.[38]

There can be no question that Jesus suffered. But was his suffering redemptive in the sense we have already defined? The gospel writers rarely use any of the Greek terms for redemption in referring to Christ. Two notable exceptions to this are the parallel passages of Matt. 20:28 and Mark 10:45. In response to the questions from James and John (or the mother of James and John in Matthew), about who will sit at his right hand, Jesus says, 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

[36] *New Revised Standard Version*.

[37] John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 24.

[38] Morna Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 8.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This passage suggests that Jesus' death will have the effect of redeeming or ransoming 'many'. Mark does not tell us what Jesus' death redeems the 'many' from, but Hooker notes that there are various hints throughout Mark's gospel. She refers to imagery of the defeat of Satan and the powers of evil (Mark 3:23–7) as well as forgiveness of sin (Mark 2:1–12).[39] Matthew does not offer much help in clarifying the matter. But what the gospels leave rather translucent, Paul clears up.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul writes that Jesus 'became . . . your redemption'. Colossians 1:14 tells us a bit more about what this might mean when Paul connects redemption with forgiveness of sins and states that this redemption is accomplished by Christ. In Romans 3:24 Paul says that we are 'justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ'. He follows this by talking about Christ's death as a 'sacrifice of atonement'. Paul thus makes explicit the connection between Christ's death and our redemption. If that is not enough, in Ephesians 1:7 Paul connects all three ideas: Christ's death, our redemption, and the forgiveness of sins. He writes, 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace'. Clearly, Paul understands the suffering and death of Christ to be redemptive. As Stott writes, 'The New Testament never presses the imagery to the point of indicating to whom the ransom was paid, but it leaves us in no doubt about the price: it was Christ himself.'[40]

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is also unequivocal in his explanation of Christ's suffering and death. The author of Hebrews uses the language of 'redemption' only two times, preferring cultic language instead. In Hebrews 9:12 he writes of Christ entering the Holy Place of the temple and obtaining for us 'eternal redemption'. This 'eternal redemption' is obtained 'not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood', that is, with the blood of Jesus. Likewise, in Hebrews 9:15 the elect receive their eternal inheritance through the covenant 'because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant'. The death here, given the context, is none other than the death of Christ.

Two other texts bear mention. In his first epistle Peter writes, 'You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18). While it may not be clear exactly what the 'futile ways' are that Peter's audience is redeemed from, it is clear that they are redeemed through Christ's death. Revelation 5:9 also speaks of redemption or ransom through the blood of Christ. The twenty-four elders standing

[39] Ibid., p. 56.
[40] Stott, *Cross of Christ*, p. 179.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

before the throne of God sing this song to the slain lamb: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation'. The lamb, of course, is Christ and it is his death that has redeemed the saints.

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this section is that we cannot completely reject the idea that suffering is redemptive. If one wants to develop a view based on the biblical text, one must accept that at least one instance of suffering was redemptive – that of Jesus Christ.

But the biblical text makes another point equally clear. Christ's suffering was unique. His suffering redeemed human persons from the powers of sin, offered forgiveness and ushered in a new age which will be culminated at his second coming. Nancy Duff writes, 'because Christ is the Messiah, fully divine and fully human, the salvific nature of his [Christ's] death has a uniqueness and finality that cannot be repeated. No other person is required – or able – to do what Christ did.'[41]

## Human suffering

Suffering is part of the human predicament since the fall. The first man and woman were subjected to the curse of God after eating from the forbidden tree in the garden. Humanity would now suffer in the work they were assigned to do (Gen. 3:16–19). In addition, corruption, sickness and death were introduced to God's good creation. Following the fall, to be human is to suffer.

The Bible has much to say about suffering. The New Testament has numerous references to suffering as somehow good. Indeed, in at least one instance Jesus says 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Matt. 16:24). Mary Daly notes that this gospel of self-denial and suffering has been especially detrimental to women. She writes, 'The qualities Christianity *idealizes*, especially for women, are also those of a victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealised in Jesus "who died for our sins", his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women'.[42] The encouragement by the church of 'passive acceptance of suffering' allows women no escape from abusive or unjust situations. Following the same line of thought,

[41] Nancy Duff, 'Atonement and the Christian Life: Reformed Doctrine from a Feminist Perspective', *Interpretation* 53/1 (Jan. 1999), p. 27.

[42] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 77.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Joanne Carlson Brown claims the problem with Jesus' example is that it glorifies suffering and that 'the glorification of anyone's suffering allows the glorification of all suffering'.[43] But does the Bible actually assert that suffering is good? Does the Bible glorify suffering in general?

Because the gospels have little to say about these questions, we will need to focus on the various epistles. There are a number of texts that speak of Christians suffering as Christ suffered or suffering for his sake. While we cannot look at all of these texts, I will survey some of them to try and discover what the biblical writers have to say.

Paul's letters have within them both implicit and explicit exhortations for Christians to rejoice in suffering and to endure suffering. For example, in Romans 5:3 Paul writes 'we rejoice in our sufferings' and in Romans 8:17 he suggests that we are heirs, 'heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings'. In both of these texts Paul seems to at least imply that believers should suffer and even rejoice in suffering as he does. While it is not clear here to what type of suffering Paul is referring, to suggest that Paul is commending all suffering, as something positive or perhaps even something to be desired because it may produce positive results, seems to push the text beyond a straight reading. In fact, John Stott suggests that the word used for suffering here, *thlipsis*, was 'almost a technical term for the suffering which God's people must expect in the last days before the end'.[44] He says that these sufferings are 'not what we sometimes call "the trials and tribulations" of our earthly existence' but are 'the opposition and persecution of a hostile world'.[45]

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul also speaks of suffering. He writes, 'For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well[30] – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have'(Phil. 1:29–30). The language of suffering as 'privilege' is interesting, given that it is probable Paul wrote this letter while awaiting trial under house arrest in Rome.[46] In addition, when Paul talks about the struggle his readers 'saw I had' and that they are now experiencing, Paul probably has in mind his flogging and imprisonment during one of his visits to Philippi (Acts 16). The question, again, is what type of suffering Paul might be referring to. Is any suffering a privilege or only a certain type of suffering?

[43] Brown, *Divine Child Abuse?*, p. 28.

[44] John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), p. 141.

[45] Ibid.

[46] David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (eds), *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38a, *Romans*, by James D. G. Dunn (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), p. xxxvii.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is clear from the context of this text that Paul has in mind suffering as a consequence of Christian preaching or practice. In Philippi, Paul was thrown into prison for casting out a demon in the name of Christ (Acts 16:16–24). He makes it clear that he is in chains in Rome for preaching the gospel (Phil. 1:13). In Phil. 1:29 he tells his readers they will 'suffer *for Christ*'. Gerald Hawthorne writes: 'They have taken their stand with Christ. As a consequence they have put themselves on a collision course with hostile forces abroad in their world that are opposed to Christ'.[47] Although the theological understanding of the phrase υππερ χριστου is debatable, however one reads the preposition υππερ, the suffering is still a result of following Christ.

In Philippians 3:10 the nuance is slightly different. Paul expresses his desire to share in Christ's sufferings as he will share in his resurrection. Paul seems to have in mind here the idea of union with Christ, a union that includes dying. In verses 4–9 Paul lays out his familiar idea that nothing he does 'in the flesh' will merit him right standing with God. Rather, right standing comes by faith in Christ that includes a dying off of the old flesh through union with Christ. To die with Christ means to be dead to sin. By so doing, one attains new life in Christ.[48] What Paul desires is not more physical suffering, although he certainly would have endured that. What he is expressing is a desire to conform more to the image of Christ.[49]

This sort of suffering is hard but it is not imposed on us externally. Rather, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we should work daily to die to ourselves, to set selfishness aside. We try to 'look not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others' (Phil. 2:4). This does not necessarily entail putting the interests of others ahead of our own or becoming a doormat. It is simply a reminder that our tendency to put ourselves on centre stage, something contemporary culture encourages,[50] is wrongheaded. Instead, we should actively look out for the well-being of others. Neal Plantinga has encapsulated this notion in his understanding of hospitality. He writes that hospitality is 'to make room for others and then to help them flourish in the room you have made'.[51] I think this is what Paul had in mind.

[47] David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (eds), *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 43, *Philippians*, by Gerald F. Hawthorne (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), p. 60.

[48] Ibid., p. 144.

[49] William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1962), pp. 168–9.

[50] I'm thinking of commercials that make this notion explicit like L'Oreal ('You're worth it') and Daytimer ('It's all about you') but the implicit assumption runs throughout advertising.

[51] Cornelius Plantinga, Jr, *Engaging God World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 21.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Several passages in 2 Timothy also warrant attention: 2 Tim. 1:9, 1:12, 2:3, 2:8–9 and 4:5. Once again, Paul is writing from prison in Rome. This is his second imprisonment and, unlike the first, considerably more harsh.[52] Paul says he is 'chained like a criminal' (2:9) and the end of the letter indicates he did not expect to be released.[53] In 2 Tim. 2:3 and 4:5 Paul tells his readers to 'share in suffering' and 'endure suffering'. As with Philippians, it is clear that the suffering he has in mind is suffering because of one's Christian teaching and life. Paul says in 1:9 that he is suffering 'for the gospel'. He reiterates this in verses 11 and 12 where he indicates that the reason he is suffering is because of his gospel ministry: 'For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,[12] and for this reason I suffer as I do'.

Paul encourages Timothy to 'be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' (2:1) and 'share in suffering' (2:3), likening the struggle to a war or an athletic competition. Timothy has continued Paul's ministry to the church in Ephesus. Thus, Paul is encouraging Timothy to share in suffering for the sake of the gospel, like Paul's own suffering. In verses 8–9 Paul makes clear again that the suffering he is enduring is due to preaching the gospel. Likewise, in 4:9, Paul encourages Timothy to 'endure suffering' in the context of instructing him to preach the gospel whether people like it or not.

This survey of Pauline passages demonstrates that, while Paul does commend suffering to his readers and even rejoices in his own suffering, the only type of suffering he suggests they follow is suffering because of their Christian beliefs. Paul is no masochist and does not expect his readers to be either. He recognises the offence of the gospel and the conflict a commitment to Christ is likely to bring. Hence, he encourages his readers to endure this suffering with patience and the hope of Christ's return.

In addition to the Pauline literature we would be remiss not also to examine the book of 1 Peter. Peter has numerous references, both direct and indirect, to suffering. It is likely that Peter's readers were suffering persecution of some sort. While most commentators agree that it is unlikely any state-sponsored persecution was going on, there is also general agreement that there was some sort of local persecution. Simon Kistemaker writes, 'the persecutions alluded to in Peter's epistle appear to be local harassment generated by people who expressed hatred toward Christians'.[54] Robert Mounce concurs, suggesting that the letter was probably written to

[52] Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (eds), *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 46, *Pastoral Epistles* by William D. Mounce (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. lxii.

[53] Ibid., p. lxiii.

[54] Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), p. 18.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

give encouragement to Christians who were suffering as a result of their commitment to Christ.[55]

It is within this context of persecution, because of their Christian beliefs and practices, that Peter's statements must be understood. Kistemaker suggests that the theme of the book is suffering as a result of a commitment to Christ. He writes, 'Christians endure suffering in a world that is not theirs. They are strangers in the world and therefore are rejected by it. As a result, they receive its scorn and contempt.'[56] Peter is writing the letter to give his readers hope in the midst of all this.

As suggested by Kistemaker and Mounce, the majority of references to suffering in 1 Peter can be easily understood, from both the immediate context and the general context of the book as a whole, as references to suffering because of Christ (1 Peter 1:6; 3:14; 3:17; 4:15; 4:19; 5:9). 1 Peter 2:18–22, however, is a considerably more difficult passage.

> [18]Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.[19] For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.[20] If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. [21]For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

This sounds exactly like the sort of preaching Brown and others want to reject. What is Peter saying here? Would he suggest, for instance, that a woman in an abusive marriage 'endure' because she is being beaten unjustly?

This is a very difficult passage but perhaps we can attempt to understand what is going on here by taking a closer look at the *sitz-im-leben* of slaves within the context of Christian persecution. Under Roman law, slaves had no rights; they were property. S. S. Bartchy writes, 'a slave was a *res*, a thing, a chattel to be owned, bought, and sold'.[57] While most slaves could expect to be freed by age 30, until that time their legal rights were limited.[58] They could not simply choose to leave if their master or situation was harsh.

Since Peter addresses slaves within the general context of persecution, we can assume that some of them have come under harsh treatment from their

[55] Robert J. Mounce, *A Living Hope: A Commentary on 1 and 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 5.

[56] Kistemaker, *Commentary*, p. 21.

[57] S. S. Bartchy, 'Slavery', in Geoffrey W. Bromily (ed.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 544.

[58] Ibid.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

masters as a result of their Christian beliefs. In other words, like the rest of Peter's readers, the slaves are suffering for 'doing right' (2:20), but unlike his other readers, the slaves had no means of escape from mistreatment. Thus, the admonition for slaves to 'bear up under the pain of unjust suffering' is neither tacit approval for those in authority to mistreat those who are subordinate to them, nor is it a command to remain in any situation of unjust suffering. The most one can say is that a subordinate, who is enduring unjust suffering because of her belief in Christ, should not retaliate and may need to 'bear up', at least until an opportune time to escape the suffering presents itself.

## Conclusions

Having established a definition of redemption, and surveyed a number of appropriate biblical texts, I can draw several conclusions. First, suffering is part of the Christian life, indeed, part of human life. In addition, Christians should expect to suffer because they are Christians. The gospel we understand as 'good news' stands in opposition to the values and teachings of the world. It is, as Paul says, an offence. If we live lives that imitate Christ, we can expect to suffer as he suffered.

Second, none of the texts indicate that our suffering is 'redemptive' as we have defined and understood the term from the biblical text. There is one instance, Col. 1:24, where Paul seems to say that he is finishing in his suffering something Christ had started. But, given Paul's repeated emphasis throughout his writings on the impossibility of the flesh to accomplish anything salvific, we cannot understand him here to be saying that he is able to do something to 'help' with his salvation. While our suffering may work to sanctify us or draw us into closer fellowship with God, it has no salvific effect. Only Christ's suffering was redemptive. As John Stott writes, 'Since Jesus Christ is the one and only Redeemer, and the New Testament never uses redemption language of anything we do, we will be wise not to talk of "redemptive suffering"'.[59]

Third, to glorify suffering is to misunderstand the overall mission of Christ on the cross. His was a mission of renewal; renewal of human beings and of the whole creation. In fact, all the epistles we have examined point towards the hope of no longer suffering, either in the texts cited or in the overall context of each epistle. Christ did not come to glorify suffering but to overcome suffering, sin, death and the power of evil through his suffering. This point is important. Suffering, to borrow a phrase from Neal Plantinga, is 'not the way it's supposed to be'. It is due to the fall. 'According to the

[59] Stott, *Cross of Christ*, pp. 318–19.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bible', writes Stott, 'suffering is an alien intrusion into God's good world, and will have no part in his new universe. It is a Satanic and destructive onslaught against the Creator.'[60]

Much of our suffering is unavoidable. We will inevitably suffer from illness, either temporary or chronic, the pain of broken relationships and loss of loved ones through alienation or, eventually, death. But this was not God's intent. Perhaps we will find the strength to rejoice in these sufferings, but perhaps we will only find pain. Either way, there is nothing wrong with seeking release from suffering through medicine, support groups, or other means that do not violate God's moral laws.

In addition to these 'normal' sorts of sufferings, we may suffer unjustly at the hands of a criminal. This criminal could even be a family member or clergyman. Marie Fortune identifies this as 'involuntary suffering'.[61] Involuntary suffering is 'inflicted on one person by another person against their will and results only in pain and destruction'.[62] This sort of suffering must never be commended and only endured until safe escape can be made. While it is true that God can use even horrible situations and experiences to teach, sanctify, or draw us close, these sorts of situations can also lead to irreparable damage.[63] To suggest that someone 'bear up' under this type of suffering is nearly as criminal as perpetrating it.

I think that Christian suffering, that is, suffering because one is a Christian, is also evil. Paul and Peter's exhortations seem to be addressing the reality that Christians will suffer, not suggesting that suffering is, in and of itself, good. Christian suffering, like all other forms of suffering, is due to the evil intentions of humanity. It is a mutation of the way the world was meant to be. It is part of the evil Christ came to defeat.

Finally, to reject the redemptive suffering of Christ is to reject our hope. It is because of Christ's suffering that we can look forward with hope to the end of injustice, abuse of women and children, in fact, the end of all suffering. Glorifying Christ's suffering does not glorify all suffering as Brown and Parker suggest. Glorifying Christ's suffering is the implicit rejection of all suffering and should spur us to look for ways to lessen or eliminate suffering until Christ returns and eliminates suffering forever. It is because

[60] Ibid., p. 313.

[61] Fortune, 'Transformation of Suffering', p. 142.

[62] Ibid.

[63] In my own experience I know of a friend who was raped but says that God has used that negative experience to strengthen her in certain ways. I also know of someone who was abused by a leader in her church and has since left the faith. My point is that these sorts of experiences are evil – nothing more, nothing less – and that the outcome seems dependent on the help available to the victim.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Christ's suffering that we look forward to the vision of John at the end of the Apocalypse:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2]And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3]And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
> 'See, the home of God is among mortals.
> He will dwell with them as their God;
> they will be his peoples,
> and God himself will be with them;
> [4]he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
> Death will be no more;
> mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
> for the first things have passed away'.[64]

[64] Rev. 21:1–4.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930607003717 Published online by Cambridge University Press