

Going Deeper
**A THEOLOGY
OF SUFFERING**



*“My God! My God!
Why have You
abandoned me?”*

~ PSALM 22:1

Why?



Discipleship
Course

What about Evil?

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

1 THE ORIGIN OF EVIL & SUFFERING:

The Biblical Answer to Evil & Suffering

2 GOD'S ANSWER TO EVIL: THE CROSS OF CHRIST

3 THE CROSS & SUFFERING: Luther's *Theologia Crucis*

4 FOLLOWING IN JESUS' STEPS

5 FROM WITNESSES TO MARTYRS

6 BIBLICAL LESSONS IN SUFFERING

Section 1: THE WORD OF GOD - THE BIBLE

THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

When God created the world, the Bible says he looked and saw that it was very good. **Genesis 1:31** "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

Q So why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?

REBELLION IN HEAVEN



Michael & Angels in White Fighting Satan & Fallen Angels
Painting by Peter Breughel the Elder: Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels, Belgium

In **Isaiah 14:12-17** and in **Ezekiel 28:11-19** we are given two descriptions of a heavenly being of extraordinary beauty, who was in the very presence of God. This angelic being was a guardian angel, anointed by God, beautiful and blameless. But he set his heart on usurping God's position and power through pride and rebellion, in which he managed to attract a third of the angels with him (**Revelation 12:3-4**) before they were banished to earth.

REBELLION ON EARTH



Archangel Michael driving Adam & Eve out of The Garden of Eden
Painting by Michaelangelo

In **Genesis Chapters 1 and 2** we see God creating human beings in his image and placing them in The Garden of Eden to enjoy perfect fellowship with him and with one another. But it wasn't long before Satan imported his rebellion to earth to ruin God's perfect creation.

REBELLION IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN & ITS RESULTS

In **Genesis 3** we see Satan using stealth tactics to deceive Adam and Eve into disobeying God's instructions not to touch or eat the fruit of The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which symbolizes God's omniscience and truth.

The results of their disobedience were disastrous for human beings.

THE RESULTS OF THE FALL

- **SIN & DEATH**
- **SICKNESS & SUFFERING**
- **SEPARATION FROM GOD & OTHERS**

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL



The Problem of Evil

If God is all powerful and all loving, why does he allow all the evil and suffering in the world?

Segregation of Arrivals at Auschwitz-Birkenau Photo: The Jewish Virtual Library

THE CLASSIC FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

states:

- *If God is perfect love, how can he allow evil and suffering?*
- *If he is all powerful, why doesn't he deal with it?*

A BIBLICAL TYPOLOGY OF EVIL & SUFFERING

The problem of sin and suffering is a theme to be seen throughout both Old and New Testaments from Genesis to Revelation.

- **NATURAL EVIL** the result of living in a fallen world involving natural disasters, genetic diseases, earthquakes, etc
- **MORAL EVIL** the result of human rebellion against God involving mankind's free will to choose to disobey God's law
- **SATANIC EVIL** involving supernatural evil in high places perpetrated by satanic agents and systems hostile to God



What About Evil & Suffering?

NATURAL EVIL



Volcanic eruption in Iceland Photo: Tetiana Grypashevsk, Unsplash

Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis; the death of babies and young children from genetically inherited diseases, or deaths from road accidents caused by landslides are the result, the Bible says, of living in a world originally created perfect by a loving Creator God, but suffering the deadly effects of satanic intervention in the Garden of Eden.



Inhabitants of Herculaneum caught in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD
Photo: Domenico Baianto, Unsplash

Romans 8:22

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.



MORAL EVIL

Imagine There's No Heaven

"It's Easy If You Try" ~ The Beatles

No Final Justice Just Hell On Earth

Segregated for Slaughter at Auschwitz-Birkenau Photo: Jewish Virtual Library

SIN - REBELLION & REFUSAL TO LET GOD BE GOD

I John 3:4 Everyone who sins breaks God's Law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. In **Romans 5:12** Paul writes that Sin and Death entered the world, because of Adam and Eve's refusal to obey God's instructions. **Human sin brings suffering and death in the form of Moral Evil.**

MORAL EVIL is of two kinds -

- **Sin Committed *By Me*** against God and another human being
- **Sin Committed *Against Me*** and God by another human being

GOD'S LAW is contained in *The Ten Commandments* written down by Moses in **Exodus 20:1-17** and again in **Exodus 34:1-7**

EXAMPLES OF NATURAL & MORAL EVIL

Look at the examples below. Identify each type by ticking the boxes.

	NATURAL	MORAL
Murder	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adultery	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Famine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual abuse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Earthquakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internet abuse on social media	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
State-organised persecution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Death by dangerous driving	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



SATANIC EVIL

Album cover of a satanic rock group

Image may be copyright

SUPERNATURAL EVIL in heavenly places & on earth

The Bible is clear that just as God has his forces of angels and human beings filled with the Holy Spirit, so Satan has his supernatural forces of fallen angels, demons, and individuals, who worship Satan in return for power. **Satan's strategy and tactics are to be seen in every activity involving lies, deceit and destruction** - whether at the personal, social, national or international level.

EXAMPLES OF SATANIC EVIL

- **War, terrorism and destruction of all kinds**
- **Attacks on God's Chosen People Israel**
- **Persecution of the Church of Jesus Christ**
- **Idolatry & worship of other gods**
- **Sorcery, witchcraft & divination**
- **New Age religion to find the god within**
- **Lies, deceit & intimidation**
- **Criminal activity involving violence, murder, and rape**
- **Political systems involving tyranny & control of the individual**
- **Satan's Control of the airways** eg satellites, internet, media

Q What examples of satanic evil can be seen today?

SUFFERING OF BODY, SOUL & SPIRIT



SUFFERING TAKES MANY FORMS

Photo: Nick Ut



Photo: Pixabay



Photo: Lightstock



Photo: Adobe Stock



Adam & Eve: Painting by Masaccio



Photo: Valeria Miller, Unsplash

MY PERSONAL DIARY OF PAIN

Pain and suffering take many forms and are personal to each one of us. List the particular kinds of pain you have experienced or are experiencing at the moment in terms of the kinds listed below.

Physical

Mental

Emotional

Spiritual

Q Which kind of pain have you found the hardest to bear?



THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Photo Adobe Stock

In **Psalm 62:11-12** we read:

One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard:


“Power belongs to you, God, and with you, Lord, is unfailing love; and You reward everyone according to what they have done.”

We have seen that the classic formulation of the problem of evil is: *“If God is all good (omnibenevolent), how can he allow evil and suffering? If God is all-powerful (omnipotent), why doesn’t he do something about it?”*

THE CRUCIALITY OF THE CROSS

We will never understand the full meaning of the Cross – it is an enigma, a mystery beyond our human understanding.

Luther pointed out that our faith in God, who is all-loving and all-powerful, is dependent upon our experience of the Cross as revealed to us through Scripture by the Holy Spirit and through our personal experience of its power to transcend suffering and enable us to share in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings.



*“My God! My God!
Why have You
abandoned me?”*

~ PSALM 22:1

Why?

Photo: Lightstock adapted

A PROPHETIC PICTURE OF GOD’S SOLUTION

Even as God was banishing Adam and Eve from his presence in the Garden of Eden, in **Genesis 3:15** God promises a Saviour who will bruise Satan’s head.

A thousand years before the birth of Jesus, King David was given a prophetic picture of how God was going to reverse the disastrous consequences of The Fall.

PSALM 22 A Prophetic Picture Of The Crucifixion

A. An Anguished Cry of Dereliction vv1-10

“My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?”

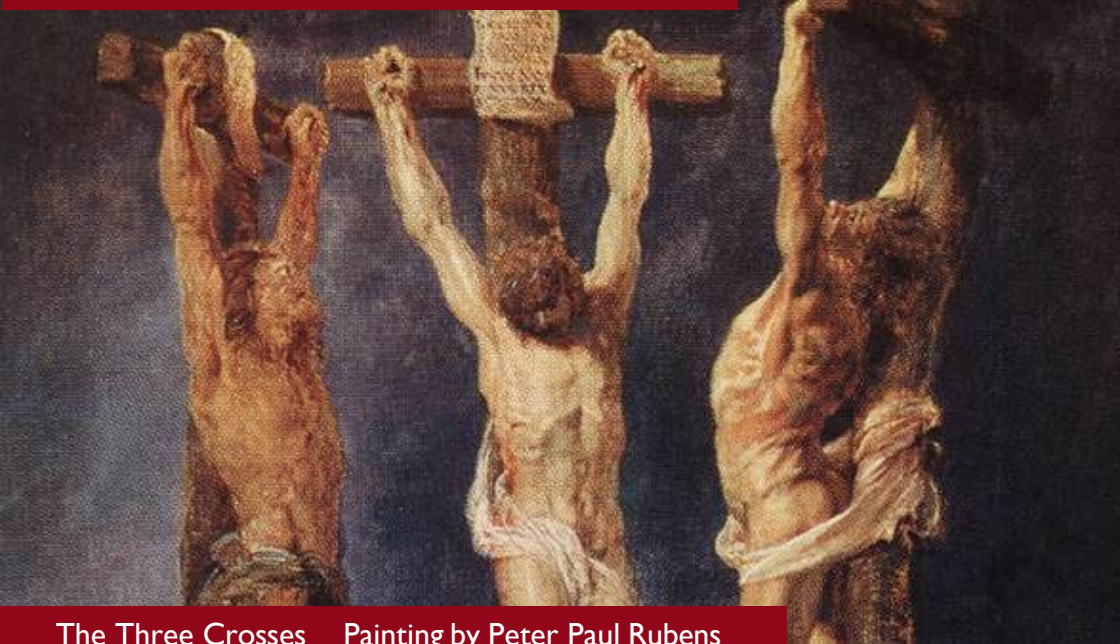
The cry of a person who feels abandoned by God, but who also reminds himself of God’s faithfulness to previous generations.

B. A Prophetic Picture of Crucifixion vv11-22

These verses contain a detailed picture of what it is like to be crucified hundreds of years before crucifixion was known in Israel.

C. A Triumphant Shout of Resurrection vv22-31

A triumphant shout God will raise him from the dead and ending with *“He has done it!”* Mission accomplished!



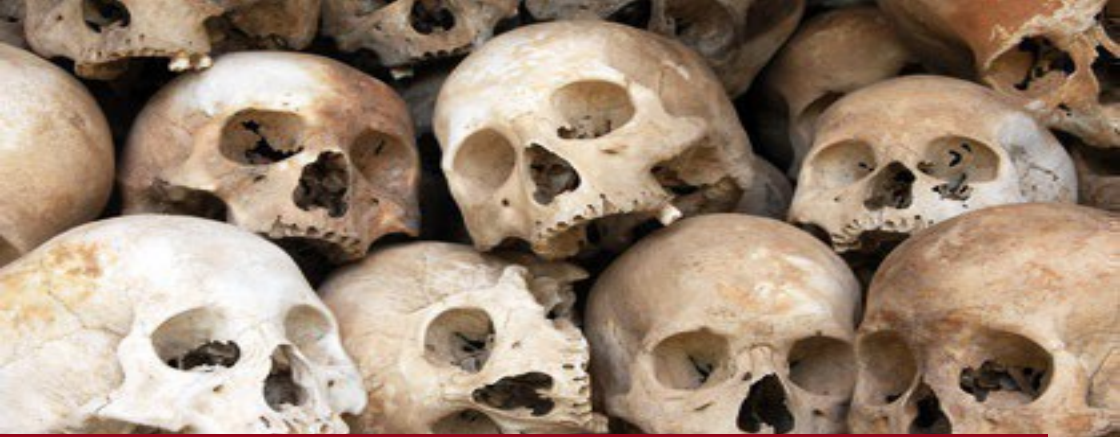
The Three Crosses Painting by Peter Paul Rubens

THE PICTURE OF A SUFFERING SERVANT

Three hundred years after David's prophecy in Psalm 22, the prophet Isaiah was given a prophetic picture of God's promised Messiah in **Isaiah 52:7-53:12** as a **Suffering Servant**, who would recover the authority over everything Satan had stolen.

"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." (**Isaiah 53:2b-5**)

After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. (**Isaiah 53:11**)



Skulls from The Killing Fields of Cambodia

Photo: Adobe Stock

JESUS DIED TO DESTROY THE DEVIL'S WORK

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's orders in The Garden of Eden, they unleashed disastrous consequences for mankind. These included:

- The **Sin-gene** in all human descendants of Adam and Eve.
- **Physical Death**
- **Sickness & Suffering**
- **Separation from God & Others**

By their rebellion against God, they also handed **Authority Over This World** to Satan, as we read in his extraordinary claim, when trying to tempt Jesus to hand over control of heaven as well as earth to him and abort God's plan of salvation.

Luke 4:5-7 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him: *"I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."*

Jesus' refusal to accept Satan's offer was key to his submission to the Father's plan and prayer in The Garden of Gethsemane to submit to the Father's will rather than his own desire to avoid suffering.

I John 3:8b The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.



Christ on the Cross Painting by Eugene Delacroix

HOW JESUS FELT AS HE WAS CRUCIFIED

As Jesus hung on the Cross, he quoted the first and last verses of Psalm 22 as a shorthand for any Jew watching to understand what was happening.

His **cry of anguish** as he experienced the Father's abandonment at the sin of the whole world was accompanied by the reminder of God's faithfulness to previous generations.

There is a detailed picture of **the physical and emotional agony** he was enduring in verses 11 to 22.

And finally, there is a **triumphant shout that he has accomplished the mission** his heavenly Father had sent him on to reverse all the results of Adam and Eve's rebellion by regaining control over the world their disobedience had handed to the Devil.

Read **Matthew 27:33-56**; **Mark 15:22-31**; **Luke 23:33-49**;
John 19:17-37

Q Why don't the Gospel writers describe the crucifixion in detail?

Q Why did Jesus quote the first and last lines of Psalm 22?

Q How was he feeling as he was dying?



“Tetelestai” - “It Is Finished!”
John 19:30

Photo: Fotolia adapted

As Jesus drew his last breath on the cross, he cried out: *“Tetelestai!”* - Greek meaning *“It is finished!”* He had finished the work the Father had given him to fulfill to reverse the results of Adam and Eve’s rebellion and usher in God’s kingdom rule once more that had been usurped by Satan.

RESULTS OF THE FALL	RESULTS OF THE CROSS
SIN	FORGIVENESS
SUFFERING	HEALING
SEPARATION	RECONCILIATION

At the very moment Satan thought he had managed to defeat God, Jesus had just sealed his death warrant by his obedience to the Father’s plan of salvation.

Hebrews 5:8 Even though he (Jesus) was God’s Son, he learned obedience through suffering.



Loch Leven Photo: Peter Ribbek

GOD'S SALVATION PLAN

God's plan of salvation shows a remarkable symmetry from Genesis to Revelation with the Cross as the hinge of history.

GOD'S PERFECT HEAVEN
ruined by
**REBELLION OF SATAN
& HIS ANGELS**



**GOD'S PERFECT
CREATION ON EARTH**
ruined by
ADAM & EVE'S REBELLION
resulting in
SIN, SUFFERING & DEATH

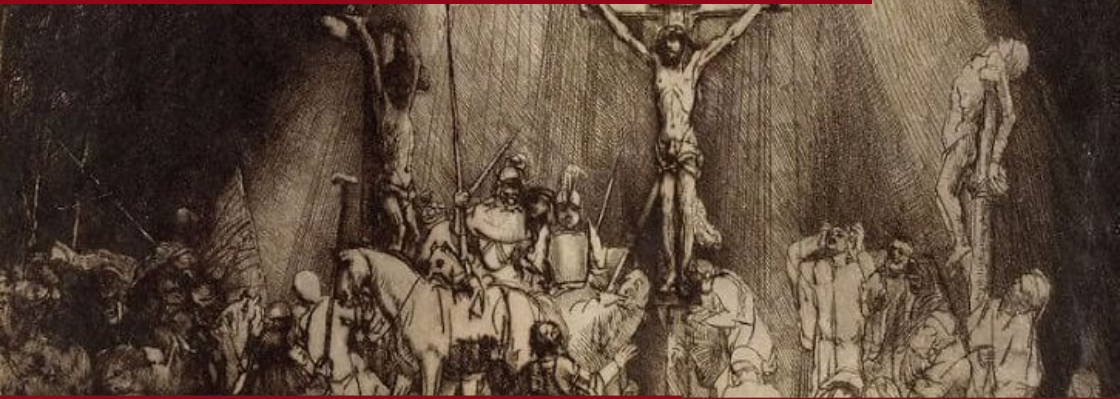


**THE CROSS & RESURRECTION
OF JESUS CHRIST REVERSES
THE RESULTS OF THE FALL OF MAN**
bringing forgiveness, healing & eternal life



GOD'S ETERNAL KINGDOM-RULE
established in
A NEW HEAVEN & A NEW EARTH
&
**THE DESTRUCTION OF SATAN
& HIS FORCES**

Section 3: A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS



LUTHER'S *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS*

Etching by Rembrandt van Rijn
The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In 1518 Martin Luther produced his *Theologia Crucis* – *A Theology of The Cross* – at a disputation of Augustinian monks in Heidelberg.

It represented the result of Luther's own struggle to understand 'the righteousness of God' - how God can be *both* the Righteous Judge and the Merciful Forgiver of sinners.

Alister McGrath highlights five main points:

- The Theology of the Cross is a **theology of revelation** rather than speculation on the nature of God.
- The revelation is *both revealed and concealed* similar to God's revelation of himself to Moses in **Exodus 33:23**.
- The revelation involves recognizing **the sufferings and cross of Christ** rather than through human moral activity.
- Our knowledge of the 'revealed yet hidden God' is a matter of **faith**, which is itself a revelation of God (**Ephesians 2:8-10**).
- God is known **especially in and through suffering** (as in **Job 42:1-6**)

Luther summarized them with the words: "***crux probat omnia - the Cross tests everything.***"

~ Alister E. McGrath *Luther's Theology Of The Cross* Blackwell, Oxford 1985
Chapter 5 pages 149-152



'GUTTER LEVEL' THEOLOGY

Photo: Valeria Miller, Unsplash

Luther's *Theology of the Cross* might reasonably be termed 'gutter-level theology'. In my desperation at realizing God hates sin and I am a sinner in his eyes, I finally reach the gutter, admit my need of God's forgiveness and put my faith in Christ's death on the Cross in my place. I realize

- **God has to allow sinners to experience suffering** before they will repent of their sins and turn to him in fear of God's judgment
- **He does this by showing us Christ died for our sins**, not his - he had none - in a miracle of God's grace, mercy and love.
- The revelation of Christ's suffering reveals *both my desperate need of God's forgiveness and my need to trust in Christ's faith in God as a gift* and cannot save myself (**Ephesians 2:8-10**).
- **The revelation of God's love and power (Psalm 62:11-12) is hidden in the weakness, suffering and apparent foolishness of Christ's suffering** in our place.
- When we suffer, we are **sharing in the fellowship of Christ's pain and suffering**, as Paul states in **Philippians 3:10**.

Q How did God bring you to a realization of your need of a Saviour?



BEING BORN AGAIN

Photo: Forgiven Photography, Lightstock

THE 'BORN-AGAIN' EXPERIENCE AS A GIFT OF FAITH

The Christian experiences Christ's death and resurrection through being born *anthen* from above by the Spirit. This was the revelation Luther received while meditating on **Romans 1:17** as he wrote later.

"Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience...I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners..... At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, *'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'*"

There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." ***Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.***

Q How did Luther grasp the reality of the cross and resurrection?

Q How do we?

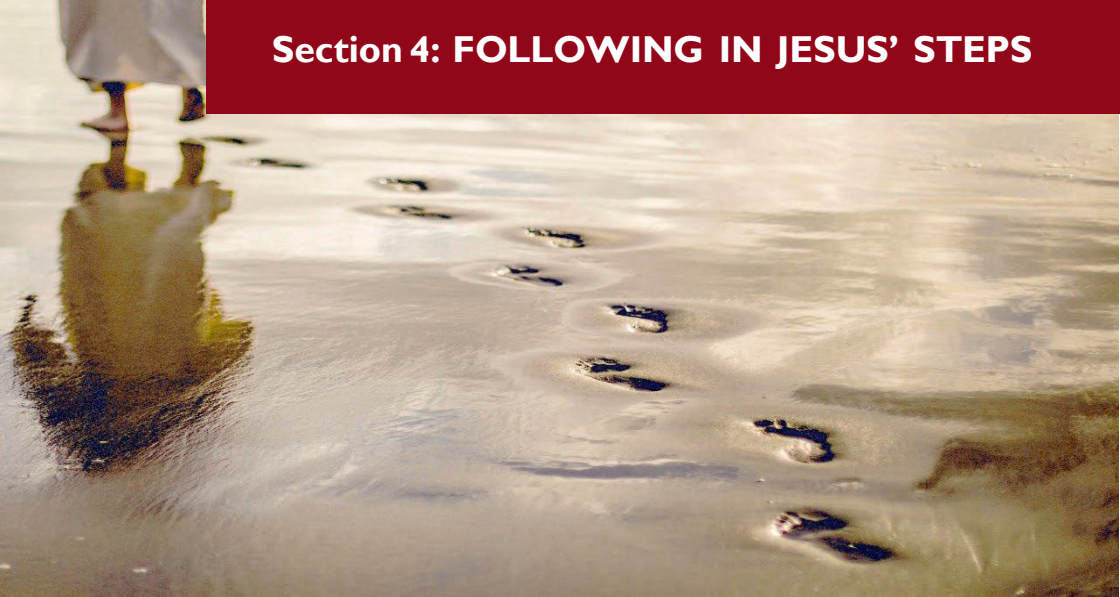


Photo: Lightstock

THE CALL TO FOLLOW JESUS

In **Matthew 16:24-25** Jesus says:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (NIV)

“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how.” (The Message paraphrase)

This was just after Peter had said he would rather die than let Jesus go to the Cross. And Jesus had said to him:

“Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works.” (The Message paraphrase)

Peter would go on to deny Jesus three times before being restored and commissioned to carry the Good News of the Gospel to Rome where he would die a martyr’s death.

Q What does the call to be a disciple of Jesus mean for you?

Q Why do we find it hard?



Olive oil press, Nazareth

JESUS IN THE CRUSHER

JESUS IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

In **Matthew 26:36-46** Jesus takes Peter, James and John to The Garden of Gethsemane. Its name in Hebrew is *gat shaman* meaning *Oil Press*. Olives were crushed in an olive press, like the one shown above, to produce the olive oil used for light, heating, cooking and healing.

Jesus was experiencing being emotionally crushed at the prospect of dying for the sins of the whole world on a cross - the most barbaric form of execution designed to humiliate the victim and to deter others from challenging Roman power.

He takes his three closest disciples - Peter, James and John - to support him in his hour of need at a place where they had prayed before and asks them to pray for him as he goes to be alone with God the Father.

Jesus falls to his knees and pours out an agonizing prayer to God, begging him to take away the cup of his wrath at human sin he knows is the Father's plan to save a lost humanity. He does this three times but also says: "*Nevertheless Father, not my will but your will be done.*"

Q How do you think Jesus is feeling at this moment?

Q What is his biggest challenge?



Photo: Lightstock

THE HARDEST DEATH OF ALL

THE DEATH OF SELF

Suffering confronts us with the reality of death - the reality that ultimately, I am not in control and of the awful reality of divine judgment. It shows me I am not God in spite of man's desire to be so, as Jean Paul Sartre the atheist philosopher maintained.

That is why Jesus told his followers in **Matthew 16:24** "*If any of you wants to follow me, he must **Deny Self, Pick Up His Cross and Follow Me.***" Q. How do we do that? A. We follow Jesus to *The Garden of Gethsemane* to reverse the results of Adam and Eve's rebellion in *The Garden of Eden*.

THE LESSON OF GETHSEMANE

Q Jesus prayed three times and asked God the Father to save him from the agony of the Cross. Was his prayer answered?

Q In **2 Corinthians 12:9-10** we read that Paul prayed three times asking God to remove his 'thorn in the flesh'. What answer did he receive?

Q What do we learn from **Hebrews 5:8**?

Q What lesson is there for us as Jesus' followers?



IS HE WORTHY?

A Prophetic Call To Share In Christ's Sufferings In *Philippians 3:10*

to
Dr Helen Roseveare,
Medical Missionary to the Congo

Helen Roseveare was raised in the Anglican Church where a Sunday School teacher told her class about India. Helen resolved that one day she would become a missionary. In spite of growing up in a Christian family, she sensed an emptiness in her life and felt distant from God.

When she went up to Cambridge to study medicine, she was befriended by a group of young women in the Christian Union, who invited her to a weekend retreat at Christmas 1945. She felt desperate after listening to the speaker, Dr Graham Scroggie and fled to her room, where she fell on her bed in tears crying out to God and asking him to show that he was real. Looking up, she saw the words BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM on the ceiling above her bed. [The last word of Psalm 46:10 'GOD' had been washed out by rain from a leaking roof!] She realised God had just heard her prayer and there and then got down on her knees and asked Jesus into her life.

On the last night of the retreat she gave her testimony on how God had met her in a personal way. Dr Scroggie wrote **Philippians 3:10** in her new Bible and said:

“Tonight, you have entered into the first part of this verse ‘That I may know Him.’ This is only the beginning, and there’s a long journey ahead. My prayer for you is that you go on through the verse to know ‘the power of His resurrection’ and also, God willing, one day perhaps ‘the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.’”

To hear how this prophetic word was confirmed when Dr Roseveare went out to the Belgian Congo as a medical missionary, click on the link here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssl5vUxJgqw>

Q How did God confirm his word to her in Philippians 3:10?

Q What question did he ask her in the midst of her suffering?



Joni Earekson Tada

quadriplegic in constant pain
with a worldwide ministry
sharing the love of Christ
giving hope to millions

Joni was an athletic 17-year-old when she was paralysed from the neck down in a diving accident in 1967 and has been a quadriplegic ever since in a wheelchair and in constant pain day and night. She has battled COVID-19 and cancer twice as well as double pneumonia in September 2023. But through it all she has learned the truth of God's promise in **Isaiah 43:1-2**.

In the early months as she tried to come to terms with her condition, she even contemplated suicide, but friends refused to help her do so.

One night a friend suggested that she take her suffering to Jesus and let him show her he is real and able to take us through the pain, just as God took him through the pain of the Cross and raised him from the dead.

In 1979 with the help of friends she founded *JONI & Friends*, an international ministry supporting people in pain of all kinds with the love of Jesus. In a recent interview she said:

"It seems to me, only in the Christian experience can we know both joy and sorrow at the same time; it's like it's on a continuum, and they happen simultaneously. In the West, even we Christians, don't know what to do with suffering and pain. We try to drug it, medicate it, escape it, divorce it. If it's a child with a disability, we institutionalize it. We do everything but learn how to live with it. And I don't mean live with it begrudgingly but live with it confident that a sovereign God has you in the midst of this for a good reason. And usually, most of those reasons are that we might cast ourselves wholly and completely on Christ Jesus."

To read more about her life and work, visit: <https://joniandfriends.org/>

Q What lesson from Scripture has Joni learned as a follower of Christ?

Q How did Jesus deal with the emotional and physical pain?

Q What implications does this have for us when we are suffering?



Section 5: FROM WITNESSES TO MARTYRS

DON'T BE SURPRISED BY SUFFERING

In **Acts 1:8** Jesus gives his disciples two instructions before he returns to heaven.

- **Wait** until you receive power from the Holy Spirit
- You will be my **Witnesses**

The Greek word for “witness” is “*martus*”, from which we get the word **martyr**. It wasn’t long before the disciples witnessed their first martyr, when Stephen was arrested and stoned to death in **Acts 6-7**

In **1 Peter 4:12-13** Peter writes:

“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.”

Peter and Paul were among the eleven apostles who died as martyrs witnessing for Jesus. John was exiled to the island of Patmos.

Bishop Antipas of Pergamum was burned to death in a bronze bull on the altar of the Temple of Zeus in Pergamum, Turkey (**Revelation 2:13** seen in *The Pergamon Museum, Berlin* shown in the photo above).

“When Christ calls a man to follow him, he bids him come and die.”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Commitment*

THE MARTYRDOM OF BISHOP POLYCARP OF SMYRNA



Roman amphitheatre, Nîmes, France

THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS = THE SEED OF THE CHURCH

The death of Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna in the arena c 160AD is an example of Christians following Jesus even to death. *Polycarpus* means *very fruitful*, and his death was an inspiration to many other Christians in the Roman empire to refuse to swear an oath to the emperor by saying *Caesar is Lord* because *Jesus is LORD*.

As he was burned at the stake in front of a crowd baying for his blood, Polycarp is reported to have prayed the following prayer:

"Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, 'the God of angels and powers and all creation' and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence:

I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for 'resurrection to eternal life' of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood.

For this and for everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto the ages to come. Amen."

Q How is Polycarp's death an example of following Jesus?



Photo: Lightstock

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

In **John 15:18-25** Jesus warned his disciples they would face persecution.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” (vv18-20)

The history of the two thousand years since Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension has shown he spoke the truth. Persecution takes various forms:

- **Political, state-organised persecution** eg 'Dechristianisation' in The French Revolution; Marxism-Leninism in USSR; Maoism in China
- **Religious persecution** of Christians by other faiths eg Islam and of Christians by different Christian groups eg Catholics vs Protestant
- **Scientific rationalism** which denies the possibility of the supernatural & regards the scientific method as the only valid form of knowledge
- **Atheism & secular humanism** which deny the existence of God and moral absolutes of good and evil in favour of moral relativism
- **Universalism & The New Age** drive to a One World Religion which precede the arrival of False Prophet & False Messiah

Q How did Jesus respond to persecution? Read **1 Peter 2:19-25**

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

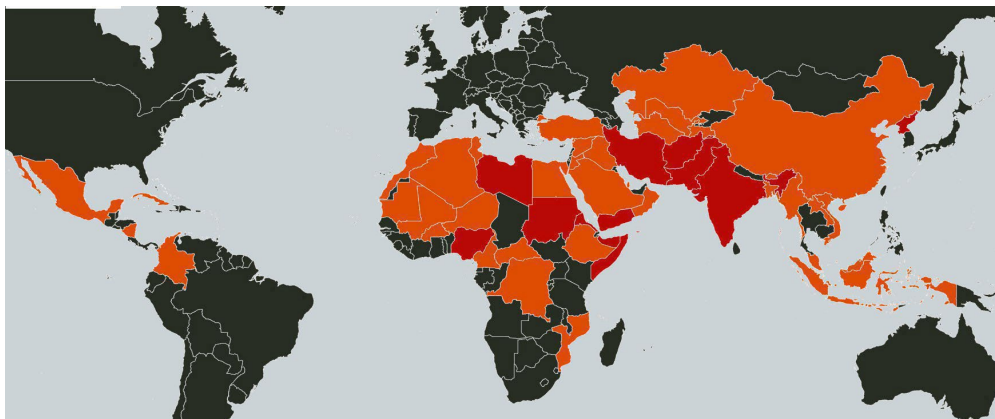
voice

of Persecuted Christians

PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH WORLDWIDE

Before he returned to heaven, Jesus warned his disciples they would be persecuted for his sake ([John 15:19-21](#)). And history has shown he was telling the truth.

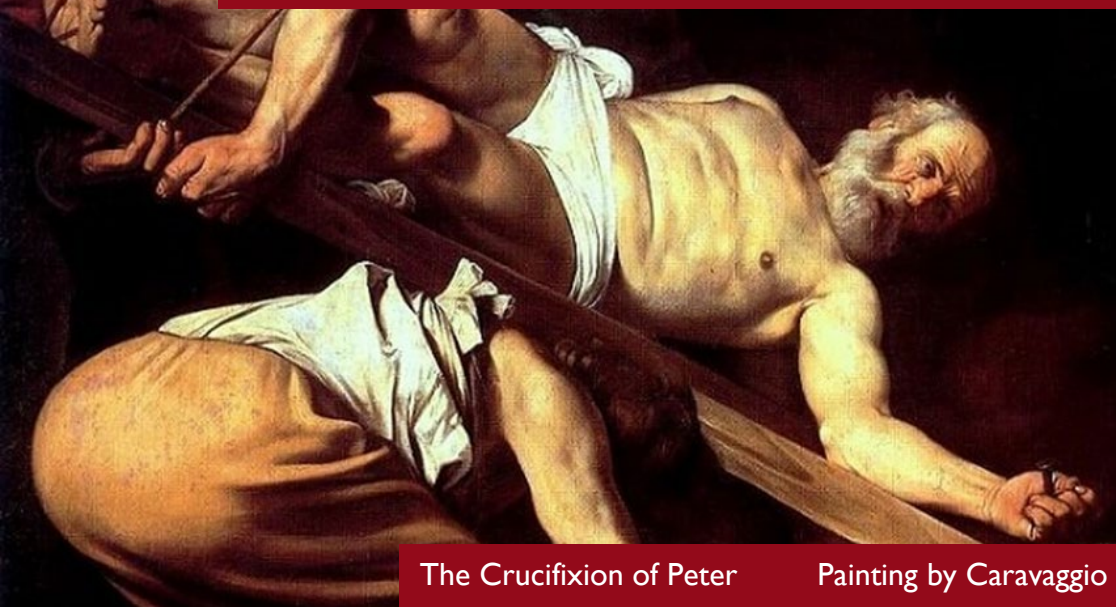
Open Doors publish an annual map of the places in the world where persecution of Christians is ongoing. Below is the map for 2023 of the fifty countries where Christians are experiencing serious persecution. (The darker the colour, the worse the persecution.)



Map © Open Doors, World Watch List, 2023

Q Do you or your fellowship support persecuted brothers and sisters?

Q How can we support our brothers and sisters in Christ across the world who are experiencing persecution for following Jesus?



The Crucifixion of Peter

Painting by Caravaggio

Lessons from Job

Even your friends will abandon you in your pain. Job wished he had never been born but said:

- *Though God slay me, yet I will trust in him.* (**Job 13:15**)
- *I know that my redeemer lives and in the end he will stand on the earth.* (**Job 19:25**)
- *Previously my ear had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. I retract my foolish words and repent in dust and ashes* (**Job 42:5**)



Job by Leon Bonnat, 1888

Lessons from Paul

- *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* (**1 Cor 1:18**)
- *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God* (**2 Cor 1:3-4**).
- *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* (**Rom 8:28**)



Paul by Rembrandt, 1657



The Death of Socrates Painting by J L David
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

THE TRUTH OF BIBLICAL PARADOX

Socrates the Greek philosopher is credited with the **Socratic Paradox**: - *“I am the wisest in the world because I know that I know nothing.”*

There are several paradoxes about pain and suffering in the Bible.

- *When I am weak, then I am strong.* Paul in **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**
- *To save your life, you must lose it.* Jesus in **Matthew 10:39**
- *If a grain of wheat dies, it produces many seeds.* Jesus in **John 12:24**
- *Humble yourself and you will be exalted* **James 4:10**
- *Set free from sin to be slaves of righteousness* **Romans 6:18**

Jim Elliot, who died along with three others, killed by Auca Indians in Ecuador, wrote in his diary as a Bible College student:

“He is no fool who loses what he cannot gain to gain what he can never lose.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his *The Cost of Commitment*:

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

*“Mystery reveals, even as it obscures....At the end of his wrestling with God, Job admits God is unfathomable, but also (paradoxically) indicates that he now knows God better than he did before: ‘My ears had heard of you but now my eyes of have seen you’ (Job 42:5) ” ~ Richard P. Hansen, *Preaching Today: Making the Most of Biblical Paradoxes* Chap 114*



Refining gold

THE PURPOSES OF SUFFERING

From Genesis 3 onwards the Bible shows individuals grappling with the problem of pain and suffering and the fact that suffering will cease only when we are reunited with God in heaven, where “*God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*” (**Revelation 21:4**). In the meantime, we are left asking the question: Why pain and suffering?

Biblical Reasons For Suffering

Below are some of the reasons the Bible gives for suffering.

God’s Punishment of Sin 2 Samuel 12:13-14; Acts 5:1-11

God’s Discipline of His Children Romans 8:14-17; Hebrews 12:4-8

God’s Test of Obedience Exodus 14:10-11; 15:22-23; 16:1-3

God’s Refining Process Job 23:15; Isaiah 48:10; Zechariah 13:9

Training in Endurance Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4

To Comfort Others With God’s Comfort 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

To Demonstrate God’s faithfulness Isaiah 43:1-5; Psalm 22:1-5

To Identify With A World of Suffering Hebrews 2:11-15

Q What kinds of suffering have you experienced?

Q Have you ever felt it just wasn’t fair and complained to God?

Q How has God used it to teach you lessons?



Photo: Lightstock

PAIN IS PART OF LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD

The Bible does not hide the fact that pain and suffering are all part of living in a fallen world - the result of Satan persuading Adam and Eve to rebel against God's instructions. Jesus not only warned his disciples they could expect trouble in this world, but even showed them how to face it.

As we reflect on what we have learned, we can see certain principles that help us face the inevitability of suffering, and eventually death.

How Jesus Faced Suffering

Matthew 26:26-36 gives us a glimpse into the agony Jesus felt as he prayed to his heavenly Father to remove the awful prospect of death on a Roman cross to accomplish God's salvation plan. Dr. Luke even tells us of the fact he sweated blood - a medical condition called *haematodrosis* which is associated with situations of extreme terror.

Psalms 22 gives us a graphic description of how Jesus was feeling as he hung dying on the Cross.

1 Peter 2:19-25 provides a summary of how Jesus responded to the injustice of the suffering he endured.



*“My God! My God!
Why have You
abandoned me?”*

~ PSALM 22:1

Photo: Lightstock adapted

Principal #1: Total Submission To God’s Will

Hebrews 5:8 tells us that Jesus learned obedience through suffering. It involved him **Denying himself, Taking up his cross and Following where God the Father was leading** - the fulfilment of his plan to reverse all the disastrous consequences of the Fall of mankind.

Matthew 16:24 Jesus gives his disciples the same instruction that the Father had given him:

- **Deny Self** - kill your will to do things your way;
- **Take Up Your Cross** - die to your own ideas
- **Follow Jesus where he leads**

Principal #2: Feeling Abandoned? Trust God’s Faithfulness

Psalm 22, Jesus begins by articulating the pain of feeling abandoned by God and not denying the reality of the situation. But he also reminds himself, and us, that God has been faithful in the past and can be trusted in the present situation.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Fix your eyes on Jesus, the Author & Finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame. Consider him.... so you do not grow weary and lose heart.



**Greater love has no man than
to lay down his life for his friends
~ John 15:13**

Photo: Lightstock

Principal #3: Abandon Yourself To God & To His Promises

Luther's experience of being born again resulted in him receiving the gift of faith that God has promised to take us through whatever we are facing (Isaiah 43:1-5; Psalm 23:1-4.)

Principal #4: Praise God For Christ's Resurrection & The Arrabon Of The Holy Spirit Guaranteeing Eternal Life With Christ

The guarantee of eternal life, as Luther discovered, comes from being born *anthen* by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3-7 and Paul wrote to the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:13-14.

Q How do you view suffering and death?

Q Do you have the assurance that no matter what happens, you will be with Jesus when you die?

If not, pray asking God to forgive your sins, and give you his gift of faith that Jesus has paid the penalty for them. Ask Jesus to come into you as your Saviour and LORD of every area of your life and fill you with the Holy Spirit to enable you to live the way he wants you to live from now on. Then praise God for his amazing grace and mercy.

Five minutes before he died of cancer, a Christian minister said out of the blue "It's marvellous!" Do you have that assurance?

Going Deeper
**A THEOLOGY
OF SUFFERING**



Discipleship
Course