

The Understanding of Suffering in the Early Christian Church

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Early Christians knew that life as normally lived in this world is profoundly unsatisfactory, marked by the suffering that comes from impermanence, sin, and death. The Buddhist tradition warns of the three poisons of craving, ignorance, and anger. Early Christians recognized analogous dangers. Justin Martyr (ca. 100 to ca. 165) viewed sin as rooted in “erroneous belief and ignorance of what is good” (*pseudodoxia kai agnoia ton kalon*).¹ Living in a society of dramatic inequality, early Christians were acutely aware of the suffering caused by poverty, greed, and the

abuse of wealth. Sickness was a constant threat, and devastating plagues periodically inflicted widespread suffering, dramatically demonstrating the transience of human life. Moreover, because Christianity was not recognized as a legitimate religion until the fourth century, Christians faced the chronic danger of persecution from Roman authorities who could demand that Christians worship the protecting deities of the Empire, and threatening torture and execution for those who disobeyed. This posed the challenge of how to respond to violence.

Early Christians reflected on suffering in light of the biblical tradition, the example of Jesus Christ, the intellectual resources of their cultures, and the specific challenges that they faced. Their perspectives on suffering cannot be organized into one coherent, all-embracing system. They were unique individuals, differing in time of birth and place of residence, in early upbringing and in philosophical background. In the first centuries the Christian movement did not have universally accepted creeds. There were intense and painful disputes over Christian identity, and what became the mainstream of the later Catholic tradition emerged only through a long process of debate and conflict.² Any attempt to construct a single, systematic approach to suffering in the early church would be doomed to failure. Nonetheless, we can explore the insights of early Christian leaders in particular areas without attempting to impose any artificial systematization.

1. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 14.1; cited in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 167.

2. Recent scholars have used the term “proto-orthodox” to refer to the early Christian leaders whose views would shape the mainstream of the later Christian tradition, but even this term includes a wide variety. See David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7–10.

Origin of Suffering

The Letter of James in the New Testament traces the origin of conflicts and disputes to out-of-control cravings and sharply chastises those who acquire and hoard material riches unjustly at the expense of laborers and the poor: “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts” (Ja 4:1–2).³ The Letter of James’s reproach evokes the account of the first murder in the book of Genesis: Cain envied his brother Abel, killed him, and later founded the first city (Gen 4:3–17). The early Jewish-Christian homilies attributed to Clement of Rome linked the Hebrew name of the first murderer, Cain, to its two possible root meanings: “possession” (from *qana*, to acquire, as in Gen 4:2) and “envy” (from *qana*, to be envious).⁴

In the ancient Hellenistic world, the wealthy often acquired and preserved their assets through unscrupulous means. In a world of vast inequities and widespread slavery, early Christians reflected on the relation between craving, envy, the accumulation of property, and suffering. The notion that craving for private property is the source of human strife and suffering runs throughout early Christian literature, in Martin Hengel’s phrase, “like a scarlet thread.”⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–390) believed that private property

arose only as a result of the fall of the first humans, and he viewed almsgiving as a crucial component of the process of becoming like God.⁶ Gregory’s friend Basil of Caesarea (329–379) was scathing in his challenge to the wealthy who thought they were harming no one by holding on to their possessions. Basil questioned the very notion that humans can possess anything:

Tell me, what is yours? Where did you get it and bring it into the world? It is as if one has taken a seat in the theatre and then drives out all who come later, thinking that what is for everyone is only for him. Rich people are like that. For having pre-empted what is common to all, they make it their own by virtue of this prior possession.⁷

One of the most eloquent early church preachers, John Chrysostom (354–407) observed that God had created the sun, the air, the earth, and water as common goods for all persons to benefit from. He launched a vehement critique of those who claim these goods as private possessions:

[O]bserve, that concerning things that are common there is no contention, but all is peaceable. But when one attempts to possess himself of anything, to make it his own, then contention is introduced, as if nature herself were indignant, that when God brings us together in every way, we are eager

3. All translations from the Bible are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: The New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Michael D. Coogan et al., Augmented 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

4. Pseudo-Clementine Homilies 3.25; Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 1.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 3; John A. McGuckin, *St Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 13. See also Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

7. Basil of Caesares, cited by Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, 2.

to divide and separate ourselves by appropriating things, and by using those cold words “mine” and “thine.” Then there is contention and uneasiness. But where this is not, no strife or contention is bred.⁸

Early Christians reflected on the origin of suffering amid an intense debate over the goodness of creation and the cause of suffering. Some early Christians viewed creation as flawed from the beginning and thus as not the work of the God of Jesus Christ. Marcion of Pontus (ca. 85–ca. 160) distinguished between the good God of Jesus Christ, who was known only through revelation, and the just God of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition, who created this world and who could be tyrannical. Many who came to be known by the disputed moniker of “Gnostics” saw this world as the imperfect creation of a lesser deity, sometimes called Ialdabaoth, who was according to some accounts motivated by jealousy.⁹

The proto-orthodox leaders who shaped the mainstream church strongly rejected these views, asserting that the universe is the creation of an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God. The book of Genesis taught Christians that creation itself is good and is an expression of the goodness of God (Gen 1:1–31). The Apostle Paul

related suffering and death to the primordial sin of the first humans (Rom 5:12–19), and early Christian leaders similarly viewed suffering and death as entering the human condition because humans are not what they were intended to be.

Early Christian authors differed widely in their interpretation of the fall of the first humans. Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 225) taught that death comes to humans “not as a natural consequence, but as a consequence of a fault which was not itself natural.”¹⁰ He took up the challenge of Marcion, who had claimed that the fall of the first humans was inconsistent with God’s goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience. Tertullian affirmed all three attributes of God and accepted the conclusion that God foreknew human transgressions.¹¹ However, Tertullian insisted that God is not responsible for the fall, for the transgression is the result of human free will. God created humans to know and love God and to be happy in union with God. To be worthy of knowing God, humans had to be able freely to choose the good. Free choice demands the possibility of choosing evil. Tertullian believed that the first sin was impatience:

Impatience is, as it were, the original sin in the eyes of the Lord. For, to put it in a nutshell, every sin is to be traced back to impatience. Evil cannot endure good. No unchaste person but is intolerant of chastity; no scoundrel but is irked by righteousness; no negligent person but resents

8. John Chrysostom, *Homily 12 on 1 Timothy 4*; cited by Hengel, 1–2. See also John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984).

9. There are intense debates over the use of the term “Gnostic” and the relation between Gnosticism and Christianity. See Brakke, *The Gnostics*; Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Antti Marjanen, ed. *Was There a Gnostic Religion?* (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

10. Tertullian, *De anima*, 52; in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 115.

11. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 2:5–6; in Bettenson, *The Early Church Fathers*, 111.

his obligations; no agitator but is impatient of peace. Although anyone may become evil, not everyone can persevere in good.¹²

Thus Tertullian believed that suffering comes to all humans because of the sin of the first humans.¹³

While Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 to ca. 215) and Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130 to ca. 200) had different understandings of the primordial sin, both regarded it as the fault of a child in the process of growing up, an understandable, immature mistake rather than a malicious adult crime. For Clement of Alexandria, the first sin was disobedience, a refusal to be educated in accordance with God's plan. Because of this disobedience, suffering and death entered the world; humans were cast into a new environment where pain and suffering abound. Clement does not admit any intrinsic

12. Tertullian, *De patientia*, 5.21; in Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, trans. Emily Joseph Daly (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 202.

13. Origen also affirmed that God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful; but he interpreted the fall very differently from Tertullian. According to Origen's vision of the universe, God first created pure spirits destined to live and love in happiness. Since they were endowed with free will, they could choose not to love. Those who rejected love fell from the state of being pure spirits and acquired bodies. Those who chose most completely not to love became devils. Those who chose least against love became angels. Those whose choice lay between the two extremes became humans. (Origen, *On First Principles* 2.9, trans. G.W. Butterworth [Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973], 129–37). In general, Origen attributed the cause of diversity of conditions among humans to the free choice of spiritual creatures, but he made a significant exception to this rule: some creatures who were relatively good in their previous existence receive suffering in this world not because they deserved it but rather “to perform a duty to those below them, in order that by this means they themselves may become sharers in the endurance of the Creator” (Ibid., 2.9.7; 136). While his work was tremendously influential in many respects, Origen's belief in the pre-existence of spirits was not accepted by the Christian Church as a whole.

physiological transmission of the first sin to later generations. Later humans are tainted by parental example and environmental influence, but for Clement there is no direct inheritance of the original guilt.

Like Tertullian, Irenaeus of Lyons viewed the primordial sin as impatience with God's plan of salvation. Denis Minns comments that in Irenaeus's view, “Adam snatched at immortality and likeness to God before he was able to bear them, or God ready to bestow them. His disobedience is echoed in every human's sin.”¹⁴ Irenaeus saw the first humans as childish and immature. He noted that all humans begin in time and must pass through a period of training for adult life. The first humans were in this initial period of training and did not yet possess mature judgment; thus they were easily led astray by the devil. God's reaction was not anger but “gentle pity.”¹⁵ God exiled the first humans from the Garden of Eden in order to prevent them from continuing to sin by eating the fruit of the tree. Had they done so, the sin would have been eternal, and “the evil without remedy.”¹⁶ Sickness and death, according to Irenaeus, save humans from eternal sin and paradoxically constitute the beginning of the offer of salvation.

In addition to discussing how suffering first entered the human condition, early Christian leaders considered more specifically whether humans can know the reasons why particular sufferings come at a particular time. When Demetrianus, the proconsul of Africa, charged that Christians were the cause of wars, famine, and pestilence because they did not honor the pagan gods, the

14. Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 115.

15. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.23.5; in Bettenson, *The Early Church Fathers*, 73.

16. Ibid.

bishop Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200–258) responded by reversing the accusation, maintaining that the disasters occurred because the non-Christian Romans did not worship the one true God and because they were persecuting Christians. Cyprian viewed the increased sufferings of humanity partly as a result of the earth's old age. He believed that the world itself was in the process of failing and that everything in the world shared in its degeneration. Disease and pestilence were foretold as part of the misfortunes of the last days of the world. Cyprian believed that God sent plagues to convert humans while there was still time before the last judgment. However, Cyprian believed that suffering is not strictly meted out on the basis of merit or demerit, for the innocent suffer the same diseases as the guilty. He wrote: "In the meantime [i.e., in the present life], we are all, good and evil, contained in one household. Whatever happens within the house we suffer with equal fate, until, when the end of the temporal life shall be attained, we shall be distributed among the homes either of eternal death or immortality."¹⁷ Thus, the general principle that suffering and death come as punishment for sin is admitted in the overall perspective, but the sufferings of one particular individual cannot be attributed to any particular sins because the innocent suffer as well as the guilty.

While they saw suffering overall as a consequence of the fallen human condition, most early Christian leaders believed that innocent, righteous humans suffered and did not deserve their suffering. The suffering of the innocent appeared most dramatically in the case of martyrs who died for the Christian faith.

17. Cyprian of Carthage, *To Demetrianus*, Treatise 5.19; in *The Writings of Cyprian*, trans. Robert Wallis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), 437.

Martyrdom

Anger threatens to call forth more anger, and violence threatens to call forth more violence in unending cycles of revenge. When threatened with martyrdom, early Christians looked to the example of Jesus Christ for their primary model for understanding how to accept unjust suffering. Many tried to find something positive amid suffering. Paul wrote to the Christian community in Rome: "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:3–5). The Letter to the Colossians, which may have been composed by a later follower of Paul, presents Paul as saying: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24).

In the early second century CE, the bishop Ignatius of Antioch was arrested and was led by ten Roman soldiers as a captive to Rome, where he faced execution. It is presumed that he suffered martyrdom in Rome in about the year 110. During his captivity, he was led from his see in Antioch (modern Antakya in southeastern Turkey) to Philadelphia in Anatolia, and then to Smyrna (modern Izmir), where he received Christian visitors from Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles. He was also able to write a number of letters to Christian communities and one letter to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna.

Ignatius was acutely aware that he was being led to likely martyrdom, and he interpreted his upcoming suffering as a way of sharing in the passion and death of Jesus Christ and of perfecting his identity as a Christian disciple. In writing to the Christians in

Rome, he feared that they might use their influence to free him from his expected execution, and he urged them not to do this: “Grant me nothing more than to be poured out as a libation for God while an altar is still ready, that becoming a chorus in love you may sing to the Father in Jesus Christ because God judged the bishop of Syria worthy to be found at the (sun’s) setting having sent him from the (sun’s) rising.”¹⁸ The image of the martyr being poured out as a libation recalls the Apostle Paul’s description of himself in similar terms while he was in prison (Phil 2:17; see also 2 Tim 4:6). Ignatius impatiently repeated his request: “I write to all the churches and certify to all that I die willingly for God provided you do not hinder me. I exhort you: do not become an inopportune kindness for me; let me be the food of wild beasts through whom it is possible to attain God. I am the wheat of God, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread.”¹⁹ The wheat is probably an allusion to the wheat used to make bread for the Eucharist, which becomes the body of Christ.

Ignatius saw his suffering as the culmination of his becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ: “[I]f I suffer, I shall become a freedman of Jesus Christ, and I shall arise free in him; and now I am learning, as one bound, to desire nothing.”²⁰ By sharing in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, Ignatius hoped to share in his resurrection. He saw his mistreatment by the Roman soldiers during his journey as already the beginning of this process (Rom 5:1), and he vividly imagined his future suffering: “Fire and cross, and packs

18. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans*, 2:2; in William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 170.

19. *Ibid.*, 4:1; 175.

20. *Ibid.*, 4:3; 175.

of wild beasts, the wrenching of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of my whole body, evil punishments of the devil—let these come upon me, only that I may attain Jesus Christ.”²¹

Ignatius made the dramatic plea: “[A]llow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God” (*epetrepsate moi mimeten einai tou pathous tou theou mou*).²² This plea poses the intriguing question of how Ignatius understands the “suffering of my God.” Elsewhere Ignatius describes Jesus Christ as “first passible and then impassible” (*proton pathetos kai tote apathes*).²³ Writing to Polycarp, Ignatius urges him to turn to Jesus Christ:

Look for him who is above time—
non-temporal,
invisible,
for our sakes visible,
intangible,
impassible (*ton apathen*),
for our sakes passible (*ton di hemas patheton*),
one who endured in every way for our sakes.²⁴

While Ignatius affirms the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ, he does not have a set of abstract conceptual terms to express this identity or to explain in what sense Jesus Christ can be both passible and impassible. Nonetheless, his understanding of suffering martyrdom as a way of imitating Christ and attaining God was tremendously influential. Bernard McGinn comments:

21. *Ibid.*, 5:3; 178.

22. *Ibid.*, 6:3; 181.

23. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians* 7:2; 59.

24. Ignatius of Antioch, *To Polycarp*, 3:2; 266.

“Martyrdom, as portrayed in Ignatius’s letters and the more authentic of the martyr acts, was *the* Christian ideal of perfection in the second century.”²⁵ Later in the second century the Epistle of Barnabas taught the necessity of suffering to attain the reign of God; it presented Jesus telling his followers: “Those who wish to see me and take possession of my Kingdom must possess me through affliction and suffering.”²⁶

One of the most important authors to reflect on martyrdom and the suffering of God was Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254), who began his life in Egypt and later moved to Caesarea in Palestine. Origen knew well the danger of martyrdom. His father was martyred in the persecution of Septimius Severus in 202; and according to Eusebius of Caesarea, Origen escaped death only because his mother hid his clothes so he could not rush out to join the martyrs.²⁷ In a later treatise, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, he reflected on the paradox of losing one’s self:

Long ago, therefore, we ought to have denied ourselves and said, “It is no longer I who live” (Gal 2:20). Now let it be seen whether we have taken up our own crosses and followed Jesus; this happens if Christ lives in us. If we wish to save our soul in order to get it back better than a soul, let us lose it by our martyrdom. For if we lose it for Christ’s sake,

casting it at His feet in a death for Him, we shall gain possession of true salvation for it.²⁸

Origen suffered torture in prison during the persecution under Emperor Decius in 250; he was released from prison and died shortly afterward, probably in Tyre in 253 or 254.

In some of his earlier writings, Origen affirmed the impassibility of God.²⁹ In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, he paradoxically referred to Jesus Christ as “the impassible one suffered by being compassionate.”³⁰ In his later homily on Ezekiel, he asserted that God the Father also suffers:

Moreover, does not the Father and God of the universe somehow experience emotion, since he is long-suffering and of great mercy. . . . The Father himself is not impassible. If he is asked, he takes pity and experiences grief, he suffers something of love and he comes to be in a situation in which, because of the greatness of his nature, he cannot be and for our sake he experiences human emotion (*humanas sustinet passiones*).³¹

28. Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 12; in Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVI on Numbers*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 49–50.

29. Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, 23:2; *On First Principles*, 2.4.4.; see Robert M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 29.

30. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 10:23; cited by Grant, 30.

31. Origen, *Homily on Ezekiel*, 6:6; cited by Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God*, 30.

25. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* Vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 82.

26. *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 7.11, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, no. 6, trans. James Kleist (Westminster, Md: Newman Press, 1948), 48.

27. Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Church History* 6.1, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 188–89.

Robert Grant comments: “What Origen has finally done is to give more weight to the revelation of God in Christ than to the negative conceptions provided by philosophical theology.”³² The question of whether God can suffer would play a major role in the debates of the fourth and fifth centuries.³³ While much of the later Christian tradition would deny that God suffers, many Christians would see the acceptance of suffering as a way of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ and of becoming more closely united to him. The question of whether God suffers has challenged later Christians down to the present day.

Responses to Suffering

Early Christian leaders are forthright on the importance of caring for those who are suffering, both in the Christian community and beyond. Caring for the sick with a non-discriminating love was one of the Christian community’s concerns from a very early date.³⁴ During a plague in Carthage, North Africa, Cyprian urged the Christians to aid not only fellow Christians who were sick, but also those outside the community, including their enemies; his biographer, Pontian the Deacon, describes his concern:

He [Cyprian] subjoined, that there was nothing wonderful in our cherishing our own people only with the needed attentions of love, but that he might be perfect who would do something more than the publican or the heathen, who,

overcoming evil with good, and practicing a clemency which was like the divine clemency, loved even his enemies.³⁵

While the early church valued the ideal of the communal sharing of goods in the earliest community in Jerusalem (Acts 2:43–47), in practice it did not demand that Christians donate all their possessions to the church; nonetheless it did establish a network of relations between the wealthy and the poor that was different from patterns in the general Roman society. Those with sufficient material possessions were expected to donate to a common fund that supported the poor. Ignatius of Antioch attacked the heretics (Docetists who denied that Jesus had truly come in the flesh) for not being concerned for the afflicted: “Now observe those who hold erroneous opinions about the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us, how they are opposed to God’s purpose: for love they have no concern, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for one distressed, none for one imprisoned or released, none for one hungry or thirsty.”³⁶ In his description of Christian worship, Justin Martyr notes that those who have some money freely help those who are in need. Free contributions are collected and are distributed to “the orphans and widows and all who are in want through sickness or any other cause.”³⁷ Peter Brown comments: “In a society where the elites and the subelites were more than usually fragmented and set in competition one with each other, a church provided a space where groups of different backgrounds could

32. Ibid., 31.

33. R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 109–128.

34. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73–94.

35. Pontian the Deacon, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, in *The Writings of Cyprian*, trans. Robert Wallis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), xxi.

36. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans*, 6:2; 238.

37. Justin Martyr, *Apologia*, 1.67; in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 62–63.

come together. The hard outlines of status (which cut so sharply in the outside world) were softened within its walls.”³⁸

Early Christian leaders also offered guidance to those who were suffering. The Didache urged the faithful to be long-suffering and “to accept as blessings the casualties that befall you, assured that nothing happens without God.”³⁹ Tertullian wrote a moving treatise on patience, even though he confessed that he was not himself a patient man at all.⁴⁰ He notes that the pagan schools of philosophy see patience as a goal, even though they disagree on everything else. Tertullian’s model is God’s own patience. God bears with even the ungrateful nations and restrains from punishment in spite of the pagans’ insults to the divine Name. Tertullian presents the supreme act of patience in the passion of Jesus Christ as the ideal that Christians should strive to imitate. He adds that Christians should accept their sufferings as Job accepted his, not succumbing to bodily afflictions and never cursing God. Far from being mere pretended indifference, true patience involves a deep acceptance of external fortunes. Patience is “peaceful and untroubled. Its brow is clear, unruffled by any lines of melancholy or anger. The eyebrows are relaxed, giving an impression of joyousness. . . . For where God is, there too is the child of His nurturing, namely Patience.”⁴¹

38. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 124.

39. *The Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 3.7, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, trans. James Kleist (Westminster, Md: Newman Press, 1948), 17.

40. Tertullian, *De Patientia* 1.1–5; 193–94

41. *Ibid.*, 15.4, 6; 220.

Conclusion

Early Christian leaders instructed their readers to respond to the suffering of others with charity and to their own sufferings with patience. While they viewed suffering as ultimately the result of the fallen human condition, they denied that any particular individual’s sufferings could be attributed to any particular sin; all humans, innocent and guilty, good and bad alike, suffer together. No one is condemned to suffering by sins, and no one can become immune to suffering through virtue. Moreover, God’s punishment as a general principle is to be seen not as motivated by anger but by love. God punishes in order to correct, in order to bring sinners to grace before the last day.

Early Christians teach that suffering reminds Christians that they are not as self-sufficient as they would like to think; suffering cautions Christians not to try to stand defiantly by themselves and not to trust only in their own resources. Suffering teaches Christians to be dependent upon others and to accept help that they have not earned. Above all, for early Christians, suffering offered a path to align one’s life with the values of Jesus Christ, to carry one’s cross in the hope of sharing in his resurrection.

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