
*DIVINE GRACE
Through
HUMAN SUFFERING*



By Alesana Fosi Pala'amo

DIVINE GRACE
Through
HUMAN SUFFERING

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By Alesana Fosi Pala'amo

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Dedication

To my late mother Latai.

The humility she lived and the love she shared not only within our family but more so the Church, has become the inspiration to open my door to the Lord.

To my father Rev Elder Fosi, to Norman, Rowena, Junior and Maina, who have supported me all my life in all that I do, and always encouraged me to take on the Lord's work.

To our dear families, of whom we have felt the sincerity of love, prayers and support every minute of every day.

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Contents

	Page No.
Title Page	ii
Dedications	iii
Introduction	1
 Chapter One	
Hope amidst Human Suffering: India – A Case Study	5
I The Purpose of the Mission to India	
II Different Faces of Poverty in India	
III Hope of the People	
IV A Christian Understanding	
 Chapter Two	
Classic Christian Thinking on Suffering from 1 Peter 1:3-7	9
I Purpose of the Letter	
II 1 Peter 1:3-7	
 Chapter Three	
A Suffering God	15
I Isaiah 52:13- 53:12	
II The Human Suffering of Christ (Mark 14:12- 15:39)	
III The Death of Jesus on the Cross	
 Chapter Four	
Finding Peace in God's Grace	20
I Peter Abelard's Moral Theory of Atonement	
II Are we ever <i>free</i> from suffering?	
III Courage in the Event of Grace	
 Conclusion	 24
 Bibliography	 26

INTRODUCTION

All we need to do is open our eyes, and then we see the suffering that surrounds our daily living. The poor, the lame, the dying and the sick, the marginalized millions and the oppressed of the world. These are some of the faces of human suffering that we can identify with. They elicit the feeling that it is almost impossible to escape the realm of suffering in the world. The local newspaper speaks of suffering; the evening news report speaks of suffering; even the Holy Bible speaks of suffering. Sadly in some contexts, suffering has become the norm of society. This evidently has become the case in India. Wars, famine, natural disasters, disease, social, political and economical injustices all contribute to the suffering of humanity.

However, it is not the purpose of this paper to give a detailed analysis of the *causes* of human suffering. But rather, *where is God* in all forms of human suffering? Does God allow suffering, and if so, why? The proposal is simple - through human suffering and misfortunes, God's Grace will become illuminated ever so radiantly. It suggests that one *must* suffer (or be prepared to suffer, in some form or another), in order to rejoice in the Divine Grace of God. This is not to suggest that suffering is a natural phenomenon, or separate from God. It is the thesis that within human suffering one may still experience the presence and blessings of God's grace, a love that is *free for all* including sufferers. Divine grace therefore is not excluded from the suffering of the world, but in conditions that may question the very presence of a loving God, Divine Grace can still be found, but possibly clouded by the onset of human suffering.

Divine Grace or the Grace of God - **cariš tou/qeou**

First and foremost, a clear definition of this particular phrase must be put forward, before any type of relationship can be drawn with the '*Grace of God*'. Such a relationship becomes the nucleus of this work, the mindset that human suffering *and* the Grace of God are interrelated.

In the New Testament itself, **cariš** is used to describe different things, as it holds various connotations in the New Testament – “grace” (Rom 5:11), “gracious” (Lk 4:22; Col 4:6), “gracious work” (2Cor 8:6), “manifestation of divine presence” (1Cor 15:10), “favour” (Lk 1:30; John 1:14), “credit” (Lk 6:32), “approved” (1Pet 2:19), “gift” (Rom 4:4) and “blessing” (2Cor 9:8).¹ **However the most common translation of **cariš** is *grace* that speaks of the unmerited goodwill and favour of God.** The Old Testament usage of the Hebrew term *hesed* commonly used to denote God's favourable disposition and translated as “mercy” and “favour”, is the equivalent of the New Testament **cariš**.² The genitive, **cariš tou/qeou**, becomes an entity that is *of* God, that it *belongs* to God, and thus is translated as '*grace of God*' or '*gracious work*' of God. **The *Grace of God* therefore refers to the unmerited and goodwill that belongs to, and emanates from God.** It is following this interpretation of **cariš** that New Testament writers (the Gospels, Paul, John and Peter) have often utilised **cariš** in a distinctively Christian manner, to mean the “gracious work” of God as seen through the death and resurrection of Christ.³ “Grace” therefore is central to the

¹ Shogren, Gary S., “Grace: New Testament” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.(electronic ed.) Logos Library System; Anchor Bible Dictionary. (New York: Double Day, 1992)

² Shogren, Gary S., 1992.

³ Shogren, Gary S., 1992

Pauline soteriology⁴, and plays an essential role in the language of Acts, Hebrews and 1Peter.⁵

It is therefore the interest of this paper to read scripture from the perspective of human suffering, in the attempt to discover the connection between the '*Grace of God*' and *human suffering*. The notion that the *Grace of God* is the liberating factor amidst human suffering. In reference to 1Peter, it shall be read from a liberation standpoint giving meaning to the *gracious work* of God embodied in the Resurrected Christ. Thus illustrating how this soteriological event in history gives *hope* for not only the persecuted Christians of whom Peter addresses in his epistle, but also the millions of sufferers worldwide.

A Broken People

In August 2005, I was blessed with the experience of a lifetime. Through the on-going endeavours of the Council for World Mission (CWM), I was one of the ten candidates on an exposure mission to India, a country I had no intention of visiting in my lifetime. The experience as it turned out was nothing short of inspirational. It was an experience that has changed my outlook at life not only as a human, but more importantly as a Christian. It has no doubt been the inspiration for the present work, to try to understand (as a Christian) the suffering of the millions in India, and how this correlates to God's Love and God's Providence.

The first encounter no doubt was the poverty of India. The cries of poverty amongst her people were echoed loud in all facets of Indian life, and you could really see, feel and smell the struggles and sufferings of the people of India. Suffering was real to them, and it appeared at times that it had become part of their everyday living. They had grown immune to the revolting stench of the slums; the beggars numbering in the thousands; and the sad reality of the sick, the lamed, the deformed, and the lepers that flooded the streets of India – these scenes have evolved into becoming the norm of the Indian society.

By the end of the eight-week program, I too, from a little island in the Pacific, had grown accustomed to the realities of the human suffering that had found its home in India. But what hope can there be for the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalised millions of India? This question constantly ran through my mind, whenever we shook hands with the lepers with no fingers and no toes; whenever we mingled with the children who had become homeless, orphaned, and carriers of HIV / Aids; whenever we drove past the homeless who lay asleep on the city streets, oblivious to the commotion around them. Where is God's hand in all this suffering that we had witnessed firsthand? Why is there so much poverty in India? Where *was*, and where *is* God, for these people?

Despite the hopelessness that the situation appeared to be for the suffering millions of India, the comfort one could learn from such an experience is the proactive and caring role the Church plays in a suffering society. The role as Carer, and Provider for a people whereby hope seemed to have lost its way. The Church in this instance is not simply the ecumenical Church of South India⁶ (CSI), but it incorporates the notable presence of the various Ecumenical Church bodies of the World. This indeed was the positive aspect of the entire mission, but needless to say, the images of the suffering millions still haunt me to this day.

⁴ Shogren, Gary S., 1992

⁵ Shogren, Gary S., 1992

⁶ Consisting of Congregationalists, Methodists and the Anglican Churches

A Biblical Understanding

To reflect on the topic of human suffering (as witnessed in India together with the suffering we know) in relation to the Grace of God, one can attempt to search for meaning and rationale through various scripture readings. Discussions commonly allude to the element of *hope* for God's universal people – the hope that God will somehow liberate a suffering people from their struggles.

1Peter is an example of scripture, that when interpreted from a liberation standpoint, it may encourage the reader and offer hope for freedom from one's struggles.⁷ This hope is seen in the 'gracious work' that God has done through Jesus Christ. The author of 1Peter emphasises this point, as later discussions shall attempt to illustrate the correlation between Divine Grace and the suffering of humankind.

Reading scripture from a liberation perspective has been the focal point of liberation theology since it first emerged in scholastic circles. Originating in Latin America in the late 1960's within the Roman Catholic Church, liberation theology took on the much needed task of offering a form of liberation from all types of human oppression – social, economical, political, racial, sexual, environmental and religious oppressions.⁸ Latin American liberation theology became popular in the 1970's, following the meeting of Latin American bishops at Medellin, Columbia in 1968.⁹ Throughout the next decade it became a significant approach to theology, so that by the time of the meeting of the bishops in Puebla Mexico in 1979¹⁰, liberation theology had developed into the main stream of doing theology in Latin America. It was not until much later that African and Asian liberation theology began to emerge.¹¹

A clear and concise definition of liberation theology is somewhat difficult, for the reason that it primarily is a theology that is contextual in nature. It develops from within the social, political and cultural contexts of the given environment from which conditions of oppression have resulted. There however does appear to be some common features within the contexts of which liberation theology is administered. Oppression to some degree, be it the result of social injustices or social and political change, is placed on a particular regime of society. Commonly it is the situation by which the poor are exploited; the 'non-persons' of any given society are disregarded and treated unjustly and without compassion. The living conditions that the oppressed and marginalised find themselves in are inhumane to say the least, where basic human rights are not even considered. It is within these conditions that the idea of God, and thus the 'grace of God' is sought to give meaning and purpose to the oppressed millions in the world.

Can we ever be free of suffering?

The present work shall address the issue of how a 'suffering people' could make sense of God, and the love of God that Christians worldwide proclaim and believe in. Is the reality of God the same for a suffering people, compared to those who are considered '*free*' from suffering? However, the question needs to be raised – in real terms, can we ever be '*free*' of suffering?

⁷ The core of this paper will be a reading from 1Peter 1:3-7. Attention will also be given to parallel scripture readings (Isaiah 52:13- 53:12; Mark 14:12 – 15:39)

⁸ Lindfield, Derek. *Lecture Notes*, (unpublished). Sussex University, Brighton, 2000.

⁹ Nickoloff, James B. (Ed). *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings*. (London: SCM Press, 1996) 156

¹⁰ Nickoloff, James B. (Ed), 1996, 156

¹¹ Lindfield, Derek. *Lecture Notes*, 2000.

Samoa herself is a relatively young Christian nation compared to the ‘super-powers’ in the Christian world. Samoa arguably is also young, in terms of the influence of Westernisation and the modern world of information and technology. The question still stands – ‘Is Samoa *free* of suffering?’ Central to any Samoan household today is the importance placed on the family unit, and for this reason her culture is still rich and strongly embedded deep into the hearts and minds of her people. However, the argument may be put forward that Samoa is in fact a suffering people. Amidst her beauty and natural heritage, Samoans find themselves trapped in two worlds – between the realm of *modernity* breaking down the code of *reverence* to the God of a religious people. Suffering is in the consciousness of her people, whether to allow the modern age to rule over a culture and society that is centred on God. The suffering is a cultural/social one, focusing upon the fundamental question, ‘Who am I?’ The tensions that come from the interaction of Western culture and the *Fa’aSamoa*, particularly among those who are educated, causes real identity crisis problems. Could it be that one of the reasons for the high rate of suicide in Samoa, particular among the young, is rooted in this tension?

The suffering in Samoa may not be to the extent of suffering and displacement as witnessed in the Indian context of today, but there is still evidence of suffering within this tiny island in the heart of the Pacific. Suffering in the consciousness of her people. Suffering in the sense that her people are trying to make ends meet given the limitations of financial resources, but somehow through God’s grace and the love of others, we still get by. Suffering in the sense of the clashes of cultures (the *Fa’asamoa* and Globalisation) that some may feel oppressed as the silent and unheard voices of Samoa. Where freedom of speech and freedom of expression remain suppressed under the umbrella of the *elders* of the Samoan family and the community at large.

So where does the ‘grace of God’ come into the scheme of things when human suffering is a worldwide epidemic, that not even Samoa is immune to? In reading scripture in the context of suffering, it is envisaged that the Grace of God (*cariḡ tou/qeou*) is the liberating factor for which the suffering millions in the world are seeking. The challenge put forth is this: through the suffering that one may encounter, this is when one can truly appreciate and accommodate Divine Grace that is readily available, but somewhat camouflaged and hidden within the ills of human suffering. It is through human suffering, that the Grace of God and His love for that matter shall be revealed. It is when we find ourselves at the lowest point in our lives, when we suffer in one form or another, that we are met with the Grace of God - face to face.

CHAPTER ONE

HOPE AMIDST HUMAN SUFFERING: INDIA - A CASE STUDY

I The Purpose of the Mission to India

Prior to travelling to India in 2005 (on an exposure mission facilitated through the Council for World Mission), a friend once advised me that India is a place where you will feel that *you have landed in a totally different and foreign place, like no other*. This statement proved to be true, for when one travels to a place like India you quickly lose any memory of the life you had left behind, in the witness to such a suffering people. The two-month mission as it turned out not only exposed our visiting group to the Indian culture, but also to the suffering that *is* India.

Our Christian mission involved exposure to the cries of the oppressed, of the Dalits (the outcastes of the Hindu Caste system¹²) and of the marginalised millions. We bore witness to the aftermaths of a growing and industrialised nation, evident in the pollution, the debris, the rubbish, and the waste in her streets and villages. However, we also experienced the splendour and beauty that occupy some regions of India. The magnificence of the Mysore Palace; the immaculate grounds of the Ecumenical Christian Centre compound at Whitefield; the glamour and wealth of the Springfield Shopping Complex in Chennai, and the Buddhist caves in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai. These were some of the less distasteful images of India that went hand in hand with a suffering people.

In a country that holds a population of 1.2 billion¹³, India is such a place where her people have become accustomed to the many different faces of human suffering as it presents itself. Notably the underlying factor that one can say with confidence about the ongoing process of human suffering in India, is the poverty. People living in cardboard boxes, living in shanty settlements consisting of tens of thousands of families was a common scene in the nation. People dying from hunger and malnutrition, from HIV/Aids and from widespread diseases had likewise become the norm in India. It comes as no surprise that the United Nations' classification of the poverty in India, estimates that 48.3% of the population are considered below the poverty line (equivalent to 579.6 million people).¹⁴ The poverty line in this instance is defined as not having one square meal per day. As figures suggest astronomical dimensions of poverty-stricken India, there prevails an urgent desire for liberation from deficient living conditions. Simply liberation from the political, economical and cultural injustices that have taken a stronghold over India.

¹² The Hindu caste system dominates the Indian society, and becomes the criterion for social class. It consists of a four-fold system that the individual occupies only through birth, where migration between the four levels is not possible. The upper caste is known as the *Brahman*, the priestly order of the Hindus. Next is the *Kshatriya* caste that consists of the leaders of society. The next caste is known as the *Vaisya*, who generally are the traders of society. The fourth and final caste is known as the *Sudras*, who are the peasants. Those who fall outside of this caste system are known as the *Dalits*, or simply the '*untouchables*'. The Dalits consequently suffer the most, as they are fall outside the Hindu caste system.

¹³ Benjamin, Solomon. *Lecture Notes*, (unpublished). United Theological College, Bangalore, 2005.

¹⁴ Benjamin, Solomon., 2005.

In addition, the Hindu caste system that governs 85% of the population has indeed had a direct impact on the suffering of India. The caste system is such that those who fall outside of the four-dimensional hierarchical system are considered as outcastes (including the Dalits) or untouchables. As these labels suggest, they are discriminated against, they are assigned menial duties in the community (cleaning of streets, and human waste disposal) and these injustices have only intensified the poverty crisis of the oppressed and the marginalised of India. The illiteracy rate of 40% of the nation has blown the population of India to what it stands at today, for there exists a positive correlation between the two. When the illiteracy rate of any nation is high, so too is its population.¹⁵

It appeared that even though suffering was extremely visible and heartbreaking at the most of times, there was always the wealth and beauty of the nation that kept lurking in the background. The inconsistency between the poverty and the wealth of India is such that only 9% of the population share 91% of the wealth of India, whereas the remaining 91% share only 9% of India's wealth.¹⁶ These figures clearly indicate a distribution of wealth that favours the rich, where the rich simply get richer, and the poor get poorer. As a result, the masses are desperately searching for food and shelter on a daily basis. The suffering millions of India have become the by-product of urban growth and industrialisation, by which their very livelihoods have been forsaken for the economical growth of modern India in world trade.

II Different Faces of Poverty in India

When I first arrived into India, the first thing that struck me were the horns. Coming from a small island in the Pacific, I found the horns from the cars, the motorcycles and the auto rickshaws quite new and extremely annoying. But as we proceeded towards the compounds of the United Theological College in Bangalore that was to become our *home away from home*, I began to forget about the horns but focus more on the images I was passing. People living in tarpaulin shelters, in shacks made from dried up coconut leaves, and people literally sleeping on the roads. The lepers, the lame and the limbless roamed the streets in search of food and money. These were the immediate images that struck me, and they were images that were not easy at all to digest.

Visiting the many slums as we did throughout the numerous cities we travelled to, the countless faces of poverty-stricken families appeared over and over again. Women and young children roaming the streets as beggars were a common occurrence. They carried with them stench of people who had been wanderers in a polluted land for quite some time. The desperate and the sick populated the market places, and the general consensus was that they had become a nuisance to society out of their battle for survival. Travelling along the train tracks further added vivid and clear images of the sad and unfortunate conditions that these people were living in. As it turned out, poverty reappeared itself continuously throughout our travels.

An image that I will never forget is one witnessed travelling through the streets of Mumbai, early one morning. As we travelled through a settlement that some had set up underneath an overpass in Andheri East, I sadly noticed a young mother bathing her child, who would have been no older than two years. The sight saddened me, for the mother was using dirty water from a puddle in the pavement to bathe her child. Surely the city had enough clean water that this mother would not have to succumb to bathing her child in a

¹⁵ Benjamin, Solomon., 2005.

¹⁶ Benjamin, Solomon., 2005.

puddle? In the background of this image was yet another young child of similar age, relieving herself on the pavement (in clear view of the public), and noticeably this young child was suffering from diarrhoea. Basic human needs like clean water and humane living conditions appeared to be lost to these people, which opened my eyes and my heart to the desperation of the people.

The floods of 2005 in Mumbai and the tsunamis that hit the Southern regions of India late in 2004 were seen as escalating the struggles of the people. They have had to deal with the grief and realities of the loss of loved ones, property and livelihoods, at the same time as engaging in the on-going poverty crisis. But somehow, “*through the Grace of God*” (as stated by many of the victims) instrumented in the work of the Church and various Non-Government Organisations (NGO), the rebuilding of the lives of the thousands affected was made possible. Hope of the people had never been displaced or buried. They had seemingly lost their livelihoods as a people, but they never lost hope of a better and brighter tomorrow. This hope came in the work of the Church for Christians and non-Christians alike.

III Hope of the People

Of all the marginalised sectors of the Indian society that we encountered, I witnessed many people in these sectors, to be smiling. The poor, the oppressed, the sick, the neglected, and the abused - everywhere we encountered them, they were always smiling. I would not say that they were smiling out of joy or happiness in their current conditions, but rather, they were content with what their lives had become and simply grateful to be alive. They were smiling, as they could envisage hope for a brighter tomorrow, through the love and deeds of others. They may have thought amongst themselves that *we* were the sunrays of hope for their troubled lives, that through us, their lives could somehow be changed. Unfortunately, we were merely students on an exposure journey. We were theological students on tourist visas. Someone who has lost hope and any reason for living does not smile, but we did not encounter this kind of people in India.

The Church of South India (CSI), alongside with many NGOs all play a major role in keeping the element of hope alive, in the poor, the oppressed and the abused people of India. This was predominantly seen through all the various organisations we visited throughout India. Evidently hope and happiness had been restored in the lives of the marginalised and the displaced, as realised in their newfound lifelines. St Catherine’s home in Mumbai gives hope to orphaned children and neglected babies, victimised children of HIV/Aids and abused young girls, by taking them into their care. Vatsalya Home also displayed this, amongst the former street children of Mumbai. The Freedom Foundation located in Bangalore gives hope to adults and more importantly the children facing death, at the hands of HIV/Aids. Even if their lives were prolonged for only a little while longer through the love and care of centres like the Freedom Foundation, the emphasis here is that they had been given hope, even if only for a day.

As for the Church, it clearly had been seen as being instrumental and proactive in her role as carer and provider for the community. The various aid and donations for tsunami-stricken families and villages; the free health care for 20,000 families¹⁷ below the poverty line in the South Kerala Diocese; the rebuilding of 25 houses and the donation of 56 acres¹⁸ of fertile farmland by the CSI Madras Diocese for the leprosy colony at Pudunagar. These are

¹⁷ Rt. Rev. Dr. J.W. Gladstone (Bishop of CSI South Kerala Diocese), Interview, Trivandrum INDIA, 16 September 2005.

¹⁸ Rt. Rev. Dr. V. Devasahayam (Bishop of CSI Madras Diocese), Interview, Pudunagar INDIA, 5 September 2005.

just some examples of the love and care as administered by the Church, which generate hope for the poor and the marginalised people of India. It is without any doubt, that the Church has kept the hope alive in these people that somehow, some day soon, their lives can and will get better.

IV A Christian Understanding

India has been labelled as a land of plurality.¹⁹ Plurality of religions, plurality of peoples, and plurality of cultures. But what is needed in India is for all these pluralities to come together as one, and meet the needs of the suffering people. The Church of South India holds this policy, for in her mission it caters for all peoples - Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Dalits, the poor, the marginalised and the neglected people of India. Religious backgrounds and caste appear to play little bearing in the Church's administering of love and care to the desperate people of India.

In a Christian context, one may attempt to give rationale to the suffering of India, through various scripture readings. Throughout the Old Testament we hear of stories of hope for God's people, that amidst all their suffering, the Messiah will come and liberate them from their oppressions. The trials facing the poor and the needy are common features in the time of Amos, and his message, is that God will rectify all the suffering of his people. All the social and political injustices will be corrected and uplifted by God. Likewise the gospels speak of Jesus as the liberator, the embodiment of hope for God's people. For "*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, ...and after three days rise again*" (Mk 8:31). This is the hope for the people of God, that beyond suffering, there will be restoration and new life. The hope that one day, following all their suffering, they will be risen up and given a new life of peace and happiness.

Interestingly enough, Christians only make up 2.4% of the Indian population (equates to 28.8 million Christians), and yet it is this minority group of society that maintain the hope of many.²⁰ In a land dominated by Hinduism, the Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ of whom they represent, they become the lifelines for the suffering millions of India. They become the hope that the needy and the oppressed turn to for their livelihoods.

We witnessed a people suffering as the result of urban growth and natural disasters, and yet there was forever hope in their eyes. Hope in the work of the Church, hope in the work of NGOs, and more importantly, hope in God. The hope that through the *Grace of God*, they will live on to see a new and better tomorrow.

Poverty may be a reality in India, but the *Hope* of her people is a much wealthier facet of Indian life that is ever so rich and prevails abundantly amongst her people. This is the impression of India that I confess to, that even though it is littered visibly with poverty, India is a land rich in hope. Sure there is suffering, but beyond this suffering, is hope. That's why the suffering millions, the poor, and the oppressed were constantly smiling when approached and interacted with. It is in the hope that God will provide for their daily needs; it is in the hope that through God's Grace they will live another day, that encourages the people and gives them reason and meaning in their broken lives.

¹⁹ Razu, John Mohan. (Ed). *Face to Face Manual: A Handbook for Cross-Cultural Exchange Participants*. (Bangalore: Brilliant Printers, 2002) 116

²⁰ Oommen, George. *Lecture Notes*, (unpublished). United Theological College, Bangalore, 2005.

CHAPTER TWO

CLASSIC CHRISTIAN THINKING ON SUFFERING FROM 1 PETER 1:3-7.

In a world full of suffering, how could the devoted Christian make sense of God's involvement, or rather, God's *lack of intervention* in the hardships facing His people today? Scripture has revealed that human suffering is not unique to the world of the twenty first century, but that God's people have endured suffering from the beginning of time. The core of the present work shall delve on the mindset of Christians regarding human suffering, as evident in 1Peter.

I Purpose of the Letter

The letter of 1Peter is considered to be one of the *general* or *catholic* epistles in the New Testament, sharing this distinction with the letters of Hebrews; James; 1-3John; 2Peter and Jude.²¹ These epistles are set apart from other letters in the New Testament for the fact that they are not recognized as letters written by Paul, nor are they addressed to any particular church.²² They are considered catholic in the sense that they are written to a collective of churches, rather than to a specific church in a given location. In addition, 1Peter is labelled catholic for its purpose of offering encouragement for Christians suffering because of their faith, from the end of the first century till the present day.²³

The letter is also a pastoral letter, as it aims to encourage and reassure the Christian churches in Asia Minor, as stormy seasons of persecutions begin. Notably the persecutions that began at the end of the first century CE are actually carried through to the Christian community of today, since the epistle speaks of suffering now and the glory of God to come.²⁴ It is through the reading of 1Peter that Christians can make sense of the suffering one may encounter, for their steadfast faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁵

Edmund Clowney's discussion of 1Peter, suggests that no Christian can escape suffering on behalf of Christ, in that the faithful believer in Christ *must* encounter suffering because of His name.²⁶ It supports the thesis that one must be prepared to suffer to some degree, in order to share in God's glory. Suffering therefore becomes a condition that the true believer and follower of Christ must be willing to accept, and rejoicing in the glory of God is the end product of enduring and withstanding all forms of suffering in one's life.

Authorship of the epistle is questionable, as some hold to the pseudonymous nature of the letter.²⁷ However, despite the uncertainty of authorship and likewise the dating of 1Peter,

²¹ Barlett, David.L., "The First Letter of Peter: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreters Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Hebrews, James, 1&2 Peter, 1,2 & 3 John, Jude, Revelation*. VOL XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 229

²² Barlett, David, L., 1998, 229

²³ Barlett, David, L., 1998, 229

²⁴ Clowney, Edmund., *The Message of 1Peter: The way of the cross*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988)15

²⁵ Clowney, Edmund., 1988,15

²⁶ Clowney, Edmund., 1988,15

²⁷ Michaels, J.R., *Word Biblical Commentary: 1Peter* (electronic ed.) VOL 49. Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988)

the theological prowess of the letter must not be denied. It served as encouragement for both Jewish and Gentile Christians in times of harassment and persecutions. It enabled those who had taken to the gospel of Christ to set their suffering in the history of God's activity. To uphold the atoning death of Christ as the liberating factor from the slander and disarray their lives had become, evidently because of their faith.

II 1Peter 1:3-7

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* ⁴ *and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,* ⁵ *who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* ⁶ *In this you rejoice,^a even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,* ⁷ *so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*
(NRSV)²⁸

The crux of the Christian message can be found in the selected passage from 1Peter. In typically Jewish fashion, the author begins his letter's thanksgiving with blessings on Israel's God, who is also 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. The main themes of 1 Peter are set out in these verses. The passage may only entail five verses, but its' message speaks volumes especially for Christians during periods of persecutions and hardships due to their faith. This particular passage has been labelled as one of the richest passages of the New Testament, for there are few passages where more of the great fundamental Christian ideologies are displayed.²⁹

It speaks of Christ's resurrection, in that it has brought about a new birth in those who have accepted the Gospel. It thus can almost certainly be a reference to baptism. Moreover, it offers even more in the future, when Christ's work will be complete: 'a living hope', 'an inheritance that is imperishable', and a salvation ready to be revealed. It places all forms of current suffering into perspective (either actual persecutions or hostility due to one's faith). Indeed, it may serve to test our faith and faithfulness.

Letters written around the time of 1Peter commonly opened with thanksgiving to God, and 1Peter is no exception. Following the opening greetings of verses 1 & 2, the writer in this passage gives thanksgiving and blessing, which incorporate the dominant themes throughout the epistle - suffering and hope.

1:3-5. *Euloghtos o` qeos* "*Blessed be God.*" The passage begins with a doxology to God, but with a difference, by integrating both Jewish and Christian traditions. Blessing God is a common feature in the Old Testament (Gen 9:26; Ps 67:20), and consequently this form of praise had found its way into the Christian liturgical tradition.³⁰ It is a form of prayer that is predominantly more Jewish than Christian, as the common Jew began prayer with the use of the phrase "*Blessed art thou, O God*". The Christian however adopted this prayer in praying

^a alternative reading *Rejoice in this*

²⁸ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996, c1989)

²⁹ Barclay, William. (Tranl)., *The Letters of James and Peter.* Revised Edition. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976) 171

³⁰ Davids, Peter H., *The First Epistle of Peter.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) 51

– “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*”.³¹ However, the Jewish/Christian nature of the doxology means that the sufferers (Jewish/Gentile Christians in Asia Minor) as addressed by the epistle, they can all relate to this form of praise to God. No longer is God praised as Creator or a distant and unknown God, but now as the Father of His Son.

The author uses the word “mercy” - *elēeo* – rather than “love” or “grace” to define one of God’s core attributes, for the reason that mercy commonly alludes to God’s election.³² 1Peter from the outset states to whom the epistle is addressed, and these communities consequently are predominantly Gentile. Mercy therefore signifies the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church, with the great blessings of being included as the chosen ones of God. In the realities of suffering and tribulation, God’s mercy provides a “new birth” and “living hope” as made possible through the resurrection of Christ.

Hence, *new birth* becomes a free gift from God through His mercy. For the early Christians, being identified as a Christian meant to be born anew - the old self had passed away alongside with all its shortcomings, and forsaken for the insecurity and blessings in the “new life”. Regeneration itself is distinctively a Christian motif found elsewhere in the New Testament; however the writer here uses the term *anagennaw* to refer to ‘rebirth’.³³ It is closely aligned with the element of baptism, for there are similar combinations of God’s mercy, regeneration and a future hope, in other instances where new birth is displayed in the New Testament (for eg John 3:3,5,7; Titus 3:5).³⁴ It also alludes to baptism as in Romans 6:4, suggesting the individual as dying through baptism with Christ, and thus raising with the risen Lord from death to a newness of life.

Rebirth is made possible through the works of the Spirit dwelling and making changes within the individual. It suggests that rebirth is not achievable through human effort, but becomes the will and the act of God.³⁵ Just as the individual achieves his or her physical birth through the will and blessings of God, Christian rebirth also comes from God, but not through human effort. It happens by the word of truth - the revelation and embodiment of God’s word in Jesus Christ that makes this rebirth possible (James 1:18; 1Peter 1:23).³⁶ Hence, the Christian is given a new life to victory. Rebirth therefore becomes a form of liberation from one’s old self of sin and circumstances, to victorious living with God dwelling in the “born again” Christian. Ultimately when the individual is reborn, it is to a living hope - the hope for liberation from sin and conditions causing distress and anguish in one’s life.

Rebirth therefore becomes a liberating factor to human suffering. Just as the case is in Hinduism (the dominant religion in India), life involves a process of rebirth for the devoted Hindu. The life of the future is shaped by actions done in the present, meaning that one can actually escape a life of suffering and pain in the present by doing good, to be reborn into a better life.³⁷ By doing good deeds (karma), one can be liberated from a life of struggles into a better life through the process of rebirth. However for the Christians of 1Peter, the encouragement was that Christ had already carried out the ultimate *good deed* (through his death and resurrection) and it paved the way for rebirth into a living hope.

³¹ Barclay, William., 1976, 171

³² Best, Ernest., *New Century Bible Commentary: 1 Peter*. (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Publishing, 1971) 74

³³ This is one of the only two occurrences of the Greek verb *anagennaw* in the New Testament, the only other reference is found in 1:23.

³⁴ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 51

³⁵ Barclay, William., 1976, 171

³⁶ Barclay, William., 1976, 172

³⁷ Parrinder, E.G. *What World Religions Teach*. (London: George G. Harrap and Company, 1963) 31

Consequently, rebirth leads into a living hope, a hope that is alive because it is based on the resurrection of Christ who triumphed over death; a hope that is alive because in the face of tribulations, it does not waiver or grow faint; and a hope that is alive because ultimately it gives life.³⁸ The audience of 1Peter can take heed to this living hope, especially in light of the persecutions at hand, but more importantly, the times of uncertainty and disarray that lay ahead of them because of their faith. A reality of hope that enables one to face even death without fear, as death to the Christian is not simply the end of one's journey in life, but rather, the beginning. From this living hope a parallel can be drawn, with the resurrection of Christ. They both move from death to life, from the old self to a newness life. The resurrection of Christ therefore becomes the foundation of the new life for the Christian who once had little or no hope, but now is given a lifeline of hope that is continuous and that lives.

This living hope leads into the concept of *inheritance*. For the sufferers in the world who have lost all that they once had, and thus have nothing, to be promised an inheritance of any sort is eagerly welcomed. To gain something from nothingness is gratefully accepted. An inheritance that is described as possessing a three-fold quality – it is *imperishable*, *undefiled*, and *unfading*. An inheritance that will not rot away or decay; that is morally and religiously pure; and that will never wither or become old. It has been summed up as an inheritance that is untouched by death, unstained by evil, and unimpaired by time.³⁹ It is a living hope that no earthly power can do damage to or diminish in any way.

The claim that Christians through rebirth have access to an inheritance from God that is preserved in heaven, has its background in the Old Testament.⁴⁰ Abraham was promised the land of Canaan as inheritance for God's chosen people, and this promise consequently became the fundamental factor in Old Testament theology (Gen 12:7; 50:24; Deut 34:4; Josh 1:2, 6).⁴¹ This inheritance later in the Old Testament evolved into not referring to the physical occupation of a land as such, but rather to the reward of the godly on judgment day (Isa 57:6; Dan 12:13).⁴² The New Testament carried forth this interpretation of inheritance, as evident in the gospels, Pauline letters, together with 1Peter (Mark 10:17; 1Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5; Col 3:24; 1Peter 1:4). The proposal is that even though Christians may suffer in the present age, there awaits for all the faithful an inheritance that is far more fulfilling than the conquest of any earthly land - the reward of becoming heirs to a living hope that survives all human activity.

1:6-7. ἐν τῇ ἀγαλλίαςῃ “*In this you rejoice.*” The reference (“in this”) more than likely is not referring to the *eschaton* (“*last things*” as found at the end of verse 5) but rather it alludes to the contents of verses 3-5. Christians of Asia Minor should rejoice for God has brought about their rebirth through Christ. The joy that is based on the understanding that Christ has come (Luke 10:21; John 8:56), and the revelation to them of God's saving grace through Christ (Acts 16:24). They can look forward to the magnificent inheritance awaiting them beyond their suffering, into a life with God. A hope gained through the death and resurrection of Christ, in spite of hopelessness.

As stated earlier, the nature of the various trials facing the Christians of Asia Minor is believed to be more or less in terms of local harassment. Full-scale national persecutions of Christians at the hands of imperial powers had not yet taken place. The verb ἀγαλλίαςῃ (“*you rejoice*”) even though it can be interpreted as either indicative or imperative both in the present tense, it may also be understood as being in the future, suggesting an alternative

³⁸ Barlett, David, L., 1998, 250

³⁹ Best, Ernest., 1971, 76

⁴⁰ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 52

⁴¹ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 52

⁴² Davids, Peter H., 1990, 52

reading - *in this you will rejoice*.⁴³ This not only gives hope in the form of liberation from *present* conditions facing Christians, but more importantly, in the face of *future* sufferings that they will need to endure because of their faith.

There is a hint in this section of the passage that the suffering facing the Christians of Asia Minor is only *for a little while*. It is suffering that is only brief, and the encouraging factor is that these conditions causing distress and mayhem in their lives are far from being permanent. It suggests that suffering is not a normal part of life in the use of *arti eivdeon* “*even if now*”, indicating that suffering was not ordained by God in creation.⁴⁴ Not all will suffer however there will be some who may suffer, but only momentarily.

The author identifies the suffering to come, in the use of *poikilois peirasmois* “various trials”. The Greek term used for ‘various’ is *poikilois*⁴⁵ and the literal translation of this means ‘many-coloured.’ The ideology is that for the many troubles and difficulties one may encounter in life (the ‘many-colours’ of life’s struggles), there are also ‘many-colours’ of God’s Grace to counter these different struggles of the world.⁴⁶ There is no situation in human suffering that the Grace of God cannot match. So for every trial and hardship in the world, you will find the Grace of God to match it.⁴⁷

Suffering thus can be seen as under the ultimate control of God. This however does not mean that it is part of God’s ideal world. In the Gospels, Jesus frequently teaches about the fulfillment of God’s plan either of prophecy about himself or in terms of the end of days (Matt 17:10; Mark 8:31; Luke 24:7).⁴⁸ In terms of suffering, clearly it is evident in the gospels that it *must* take place in order to fulfill God’s plan, under the sovereign hand of God. But that does not mean that God Himself approves of suffering, neither does it mean that suffering or agents administering suffering are good. It may not be God’s desire, but it is through His mercy and Grace that one may be liberated from such trials. The underlying point is that suffering is not outside of God’s sovereign control.

The various trials as mentioned in the passage pose the purpose of testing Christians. It is a test of their faith, to withstand the troubles and persecutions their lives as faithful Christians had attracted, and the blessings of Christ’s glory awaits the faithful at the end of these *various trials*. They are trials that are externally caused, by the world that has turned their backs to God in rebellion to His love and authority.

The theme of *faith testing* is one that runs throughout scripture, as well as in early Judaism.⁴⁹ Abraham was tested for his faith, and passed as being faithful to God (Gen 22:1). Likewise Israel was tested many times for their faith to God, and repeatedly they failed (Num 14:20-24). Now whether these ‘tests-of-faith’ were wide scale persecutions or local harassments (of which both were caused by external forces), they all posed the same threat to the faithful ones of God – the threat of losing hope and diminishing their faith. But the epistle reminds us that these *various trials* are only brief, and still under the sovereign hand of God. The faithful can anticipate with joy the coming hope and glory revealed in Christ. The theme of faith testing can also be found in various apocryphal books,⁵⁰ thus the author dwells on his readers having an inbuilt understanding of these passages.

⁴³ Barlett, David, L., 1998, 251

⁴⁴ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 56

⁴⁵ The only other time this Greek word is used in the epistle is found in 1Peter 4:10 when it refers to the Grace of God.

⁴⁶ Barclay, William., 1976, 177

⁴⁷ Barclay, William., 1976, 177

⁴⁸ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 56

⁴⁹ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 56

⁵⁰ “Having been disciplined a little, they (the righteous) will receive great good because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he

The analogy of the metal gold that the author uses to describe the *genuineness of faith* is one familiar to his readers, an analogy already known in early Judaism.⁵¹ Gold being the purest of all metals was subsequently tested by fire (cf 1Cor 3:12-14). But pure as gold is, like all earthly goods it is still susceptible to perish over time, and deemed useless to the one owning it (Matt 6:19; Luke 12:20; 1Tim 6:7-10). However for the ones who pass the trials before them and prove the genuineness of their faith, the reward for them is eternal, in the glory of the coming Christ.

The end result of being tested is praise and glory from Christ. The epistle shares language reminiscent of the final judgment as depicted in Matt 25:31-46.⁵² For those who have proved the genuineness of their faith by enduring the various trials and remaining faithful to God, Christ rewards them with honour and praise. In this reversal of events, honour and praise that were commonly given to the Risen Lord, Christ now shares these with those who have remained faithful to Him, despite the trials and struggles they have had to endure.

The overall message is of hope, out of conditions of hopelessness. A hope made possible through the Risen Christ, the *means to the end* of all human suffering. Evidently the blessings for the faithful Christians who remain steadfast and persevere through their sufferings, is that they will rejoice in the glory of Christ. They will rejoice in the saving grace of God as seen through the Risen Lord, sharing together with Christ, a divine glory that ultimately is His.

accepted them.” (Wisdom 3:5-6). And “My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing....For gold is tested in fire, and those found acceptable in the furnace of humiliation.” (Sirach 2:1-5).

⁵¹ Davids, Peter H., 1990, 57

⁵² Davids, Peter H., 1990, 58

CHAPTER THREE

A SUFFERING GOD

In spite of our suffering, everything will be fine. This is the message that 1Peter portrays. Even if we are to experience suffering *for a little while*, in the end all will be well. We need to persevere through the suffering that surrounds us, for Christ has prepared for us the living hope. For the 580 million people in India who suffer from poverty; for the 200,000 people around the world who are dying of starvation every day⁵³; for the oppressed Rwandans living in conditions reminiscent of the 1994 genocide that massacred 500,000 of her people⁵⁴ - does the message of 1Peter really mean anything to these people suffering extreme and almost inhumane conditions? What do these sufferers make of the encouragement offered through 1Peter – to be strong and patient, to endure all the suffering one faces, because all will be fine?

In saying this, it is my contention that 1Peter offers only one half of the gospel regarding suffering. The epistle speaks of the Resurrection of Christ as the *means to the end of suffering* for humankind. The Resurrection provides the living hope to a new creation where there will be no more suffering, but rejoicing in God's glory. But I would argue that we need to take a look at the other side, the side of God, where God Himself suffers. Only then will we get the totality of the gospel regarding suffering, in taking into account the Crucified God of whom we worship. The Crucified Christ who suffered like no other on our behalf. This is the totality of the gospel – The Resurrection *and* the Crucifixion of Christ, and jointly they become the element of hope that all sufferers worldwide can draw courage from, including those in the context of India.

Quite often the presence and providence of God especially in times of trials and tribulation has been questioned, even by the most devoted of Christians. But a truth that most find hard to digest given the Supremacy of God, is that God Himself suffers, just as the world suffers. God is not depicted as being separate or above the suffering of humankind, but rather God is right there suffering *together* with His people. Evidently, New Testament scholars have drawn their understanding of the suffering of humanity (and of God) from the prophetic voices of the Old Testament.⁵⁵ It draws on the suffering that God Himself must undertake to fulfil his ultimate plan for the world, as expressed through prophets like Isaiah. Christians have traditionally looked at Isaiah for an understanding of the suffering of Jesus.

I **Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12**

The book of the prophet Isaiah incorporates many motifs of the Old Testament. It speaks of God's Judgment, of God's righteousness and more importantly, the salvation of a people who

⁵³ www.thercg.org

⁵⁴ www.christianbiblestudies.com

⁵⁵ Douglas, J D., & Tenney, M C., *NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 275

have turned their backs on God. In light of suffering, the prophet addresses the coming Messiah as the one who will suffer immensely to carry on Himself the sins of the world.

There can be found four passages⁵⁶ in the book of Isaiah that are related to suffering, in particular, the incomparable suffering that God Himself must undertake. These are recognised collectively as the *Suffering Servant* Songs. These reflective poems speak of a suffering servant of God – whom Christians have identified with Jesus. God speaks in these poems, laying down the task of His *Suffering Servant*. Unfailingly the suffering servant will triumph because he was obedient to death through which he bore the sins of many.

Throughout these poems the Suffering Servant remains voiceless. He is, however, described as being wholly exceptional because of his unmerited suffering. Immeasurable suffering that was both emotional and physical, including deformity and disfigurement, rejection by the community, and corporal punishment. It is through the obedient actions of the Suffering Servant that brings about blessings for the whole world, and it is through Him, that God's Grace can be found. It is through the actions of one man, that many shall be saved and liberated from a world full of suffering. It is little wonder that Christians have seen Jesus as the 'Suffering Servant', a motif that colours the presentation of the Passion of Christ in the gospels. Mark's account is a good example.

II The Human Suffering of Christ (Mark 14:12- 15:39)

There exists a tendency in Christian theology to gloss over the crucifixion of Christ, but place greater emphasis on Christ's Resurrection. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann speaks of the perceived abandonment of Jesus by God on the cross, as the beginning of all Christian theology.⁵⁷ It is therefore through the thinking of Moltmann that suggests the cross of Christ as the foundation of all Christian theology.

The gospels however do not show this (the tendency to focus more on the Resurrection rather than the Crucifixion of Christ), as clearly the Crucifixion *and* the Resurrection of Christ are given equal regard and worth. The gospel of Mark for instance paints a beautiful picture of the suffering that Jesus must undergo for the sake of the world, which demonstrates the significance of the cross.

Christ in all of His agony and pain on the cross asks the same question that many sufferers in the world today are asking - where is God?

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
(Mark 15:34)

It appears that these words as spoken by Jesus in his dying moments on the cross, they display Jesus' despair and accusation of God. These words accuse God for abandoning the Son of the Father. In all the torment that Jesus faced leading up to the climatic finale of his suffering in his death on the cross, Jesus felt deserted by God; Jesus felt that he had lost any claim to his Sonship of God the Father. Interestingly after three hours on the cross awaiting his last breath, Jesus no longer refers to God as Father, but formally as 'God' – as though he had come to doubt what had been his fundamental identity, that he was the Son, the Beloved of the Father. As a result, Jesus cried out in anguish that amidst all his pain God was nowhere to be found. It appeared that Jesus had died alone on the cross, forsaken by the Father.

The account of Jesus' suffering begins with the upper room discourse, the final instructions of Jesus to his disciples before the events leading up to and including his death and resurrection. It is a narrative about the betrayal of Jesus, and his opening words in this

⁵⁶ (i) Isaiah 52:13- 53:3; (ii) Isaiah 53:4-6; (iii) Isaiah 53:7-9; (iv) Isaiah 53:10-12.

⁵⁷ Moltmann, Jurgen., *The Crucified God*. (London: SCM Press, 2001) 207

dark section of the gospel are shocking to say the least: “*Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me!*” (Mark 14:18). The betrayal is intensified with by Judas’ presence. Judas is not recorded here as being absent, but he is right there dipping his bread into the bowl with Jesus – a sign of camaraderie between Judas and the rest of Jesus’ companions. The motif of betrayal continues immediately following the meal, when Jesus predicts that they *all* will desert Him. Evidently at the moment of Jesus’ arrest, “*All of them deserted Him and fled*” (Mark 14:50). The way to the Cross was too difficult and life threatening for the closest of Jesus’ friends. So they abandoned Jesus at the very beginning of the ordeals that the Son of Man was destined to face, and sadly, Jesus was to face these testing times alone.

Mark contrasts the darkness of abandonment, betrayal and disintegration in this section of the gospel, with the narrative of the new covenant (Mark 14:22-25). In full awareness of what was to follow, Jesus promises a new covenant. Despite the forthcoming abandonment of Jesus by those who had shared his ministry and life, Jesus promised them a future. A future not based on the disciples’ response or faithfulness, but rather a future that was based on the cross that he was to face alone. A new covenant that brings with it the Kingdom of God, where Jesus will once again fellowship with others as the result of the fate that awaited him.

Several times in the gospel we find Jesus withdrawing himself from his disciples and the crowds to be alone in prayer (cf Mark 1:35; 6:46). It appears that Jesus drew strength and courage from God the Father in these unaccompanied times in communion with His Father. However, this was not the case in Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane, where clearly Jesus was desperate not to be alone in God’s presence (Mark 14:32-42). He asked his friends to stand guard while he prayed, because Jesus was absolutely terrified of the things to come. The Greek used by Mark to portray the terror that Jesus felt qualifies this, in saying that Jesus began to be distressed (*ekqambeiſqai*) and agitated (*adhmoneih*). These words depict the utmost degree of horror and suffering that Jesus was experiencing at the time.⁵⁸ Jesus begged for mercy from God – he threw himself on the ground in desperation and pleaded with His Father to spare him of what lay ahead (Mark 14:36a). But all he received in return was silence. It was precisely this silence from his Father that terrified Jesus. The silence that made Jesus feel abandoned by God in the moment of his suffering.

The horror that Jesus felt was simply his humanity taking control. Jesus would not have been human had he not feared the events that were to follow. The fear Jesus felt was not simply for his life – Jesus was prepared to die – but rather it was the fear that he, the Son and the Beloved, seemed to have been forsaken by the Father whom he loved like no other. It was the prospect of abandonment from the Father that was the source of Jesus’ terror. This abandonment resulted in his cry of desperation on the cross, when he felt forsaken and disregarded by his disciples – he no longer was their master. When he felt forsaken by his very own people – he no longer was a Jew. When he felt forsaken by God – he no longer was the Son of the Father.

III The Death of Jesus on the Cross

Why did God abandon Jesus to the cross? What death did Jesus die on the cross? The suffering that Jesus endured that led to his death on the cross, has been argued as the death of Jesus’ human nature. Moltmann stands by this claim, saying that of the two natures of Christ

⁵⁸ Moore, Lawrence. “Abandoned by God?” in *Reform*. (April 2006), 22-23.

(human and divine), it was Jesus' humanity that faced all his suffering; that died on the cross; and that cried out questioning the presence of God on the cross.⁵⁹

Jesus died the death of Israel's Messiah at the hands of the Romans. He also died the death of a child of God. Jesus died the death of a Jew; he died the death of a poor man, being the Son of a man from Galilee who was without power and rights. Jesus faced the wrath of the Roman Empire and was punished and stood trial as a slave. Notably more than 7,000 slaves had died on crosses set up on the Via Appia between Capua and Rome, by the end of the Spartacus revolt in 71 BCE.⁶⁰ Crucifixion became a deterrent measure by the Romans to crush rebellions that often arose from many of the slaves that lived in Rome. In dying the death of a slave in Rome, Jesus added to this tally of the many who were crucified by the Romans. These were all the deaths that Jesus took upon himself on the cross, and it appears that he died on behalf of all things living. It was not only his own natural death that died on the cross nor was it simply a death on behalf of all sinners, but it represented much more. He died for all things created, and likewise brought about it a new creation.

The death of Jesus on the cross also brought about the suffering of God in losing a Son. The abandonment Jesus felt on the cross by no longer being the Son of the Father meant that God too lost his own Fatherhood. God felt the pain and the loss in losing His Beloved. In doing so, God took on Himself the blow of losing His divine identity as *Abba*, as Father. Jesus therefore did not suffer alone on the cross; the Father did not forsake Jesus on the cross. God was right there, suffering *together* with His Son.

The sufferings of Christ are God's sufferings, as through them God reveals his solidarity with the world, the unity of God with all of creation. It portrays the message that *God is always with us*. The sufferings of Christ are God's sufferings, as through them God intervenes into our lives, to become our salvation. The times in our lives when we are at our weakest and in desperate need of life, God throws us a lifeline. It shows that *God is always for us*. The sufferings of Christ are God's sufferings because through them we are given rebirth; we are given a second chance. It suggests that we all ultimately *originate from God*. The reunification of God with a fallen humankind, together with the gift of salvation and generating a new creation - these are the divine dimensions of Christ's sufferings, and these are the reasons why Christ died on the cross. But in order to complete these we have the Risen Lord, who revealed his Sonship, his Divinity and his Love to the doubtful world through the Resurrection. It brought about the fullness of God's Glory and the fullness of God's Grace, that beyond the suffering that Christ encountered, he rose victoriously above it all.

So where was God in the cross of Jesus? Did God abandon Jesus on the cross? God was right there, suffering for us all! God took all the sufferings of Christ upon His own God's self, out of love. His unimaginable love for the created world through His Divine Grace, has given a living hope for a damaged humanity. It is not only us humans that can feel suffering, but God suffers as well, together with His people.

The message that God did not abandon Jesus to the cross, gives hope to all sufferers. For the millions of sufferers in India, this very point demonstrates hope amidst the turmoil and disarray that their lives have become. It suggests that they are never alone in their suffering; God is always there with them. Amidst all the pain and uncertainty they experience daily, God is there. The God of Love helps them to cope and get through their troublesome times. He does not abandon them in their moments of despair, but rather, He is working His grace (either directly or through others) to ease the pain and loss as a result of their suffering. It is through God's Grace that we can find the courage to persevere through all the hardships

⁵⁹ Moltmann, Jergen., 2001, 236

⁶⁰ Moltmann, Jergen., *The Way of Jesus Christ*. (London: SCM Press, 1990) 168

in life. It is through God's Grace that we can experience peace, amidst the struggles and suffering that surrounds our daily living.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDING PEACE IN GOD'S GRACE

So how does one make sense of suffering in light of the scriptures? We have looked at the *Resurrection* - the living hope for all sufferers as shown in 1Peter. We have looked at the *Crucifixion*, in showing that God Himself suffers so revealed in the significance of the cross. Collectively the message is of hope, and the reassurance that we are never alone in our suffering. Maybe this is why the millions in India are still smiling in spite of their hardships. They have come to accept their suffering, that it has become part of their daily living, and the hope is that *through God's grace*, they will be fine – they will see another day.

Precisely what is the element of hope that can be drawn from the gospel as revealed through the Crucified and Risen Lord? Peace, comfort, acceptance, courage, and strength – these are attributes that one can draw from the experience of God's grace, and these become the blessings of hope that are found through God. Peace in knowing that God is right there suffering with us, and the comfort in knowing that God has not abandoned the down trodden and the weak in spirit. Evidently, God's grace at times may be felt through the work of others. Surely God's hand is present in the responses of the Church and humanitarian groups that help ease the pain caused by human suffering. As individuals victimized by suffering, God's grace gives the courage to endure suffering. The courage that gives us strength to pick up our broken and painful lives and battle on. God's graciousness therefore is not manifested for the purpose of eliminating all the various struggles and trials in life, but rather, God's grace is to help us get through our suffering.⁶¹ God achieves this, by standing in solidarity with all sufferers. In standing together with the suffering millions in India, God becomes their passageway towards liberation from all their struggles in life. God gives them freedom, from lives that have been entrapped by suffering. It is through God's grace that one can find peace amidst suffering. It is through God's grace that we be can be enlightened, into realising that God has never abandoned us in our times of need.

I Peter Abelard's Moral Theory of Atonement

The belief that God is always with us in spite of our suffering is the emphasis of the twelfth Century French philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard. One of Abelard's major works is his "**moral theory of atonement**." Traditional views of the atonement held that Christ's death paid a debt to God, of which we humans could not pay ourselves. However, Abelard approached the matter from a more subjective angle. He explained that Christ's life and death were such radical demonstrations of the love of God, that as our response, we must love God in all that we do.⁶² It is on the basis of this love, and on the intercessory prayers of Christ, that we are forgiven by God, of our shortcomings and transgressions.

⁶¹ John, V.J., "Grace of God and the Struggles of Life: Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15) Revisited," in *The God of All Grace*, ed. Joseph George (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation & United Theological College, 2005) 71

⁶² Waddell, Helen., *Peter Abelard*. (London: Fontanna Publishers, 1960) 23

Our redemption through the suffering of Christ is that deeper love revealed to us that not only frees us from slavery to sin but also secures for us the true liberty of the children of God, in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear. Out of our love for God who has shown us such grace and love that no greater love can compare. The suffering of Christ therefore becomes the grounds for our redemption. It suggests Christ as the sole liberator for all humankind, and it is out of love that we respond to God's initial love, rather than out of our God-fearing nature.

Abelard's theory places emphasis on the soteriological significance of the cross of Christ. It becomes the event in history where God's Grace (and suffering for that matter) is revealed to the world. This however is not to say that God has been absent from all the visible onset of suffering in the world. Abelard claims that God was, and is always present with His people, even in times of suffering. So where is God's Grace when there is so much suffering in the world? According to Abelard, the question becomes, where is it not?

Abelard speaks of the cross of Christ as represented by the rings seen in the stump of a sawn down tree. The cross-section of the tree stump shows the many rings that indicate the different stages of growth of the tree, and these rings run the whole length of the tree. Likewise, the cross of Christ is the bit of God's suffering we see in time, but it happens all throughout time. It is the cross-section of God's suffering, the bit that we see, but it runs the whole length of time. God suffers much more than just what has been revealed to us through the suffering of Christ. God suffers whenever we do. When one of God's children is hurt, so is he. Our God participated in the pain and suffering of the cross and does not stand back now as a spectator and watch his children suffer. He shares our pain and he participates in our suffering. He identifies with us. He suffers with us. He fights both *with* us and *for* us against those things that cause us to suffer. Our God is one who suffers our pain, cries our tears, and feels our despair.

II Are we ever 'free' from suffering?

With all the suffering that prevails in the world we live in, chances are that each and every one of us has been affected by some form of suffering at some point of our lives. As much as we might yearn for a different reality, the truth is that no one is excluded from suffering, not even God. God suffers, just as we do. Wars, terrorism, violence, famine, natural disasters, poverty, oppression, illness of body, loss of loved ones, loss of job, relationship break-ups, disappointments – these are just some of the cases of human suffering that have affected us to a certain degree, some more than others. It adheres to the notion of *physical pain* and *physical loss*. But suffering also includes *psychological* and *mental pain*. Depression, anxiety, identity crisis, the loss of memory and the loss of cognitive motor skills as evident in disorders like Alzheimer and Parkinson's diseases – these conditions demonstrate *psychological human suffering*. If anything, most conditions of human suffering actually cause both physical and psychological pain. The challenge becomes the manner in which we respond to these facets of our lives that bring about heartache and loss. Do we abandon our God in asking '*where is God, and why does God allow his children to suffer?*' Or do we simply smile in spite of our suffering, knowing that God is right there with us.

Many when faced with difficult times commonly ask these questions - even the most devoted Christians. Times when we feel that there is no escape to the emptiness that we feel, and yet somehow through God's grace we are touched with an inner peace. When my mother passed away in 1990, it was a personal tragedy that made me question God:

“Where were you God, when Mum needed to breathe, when her asthma eventually took her life? Why have you done this? Why have you taken her from us, when we her children are still very young?”

The feeling of abandonment by God was the immediate reaction. My mother was the sole carer of my younger disabled brother Norman (who was nine at the time), and I felt absolutely cheated by God. We had all been faithful to God, and yet God took from us our mother whom Norman (and likewise us) depended on. She was only forty-seven, and God’s timing was not right. I felt absolute bitterness towards God. But as the proceedings began for my mother’s final service, I began to feel differently towards God. I began to feel a warmth and comfort, through the love radiated by family and friends who had come to share their condolences and love. It was through the love shared by others that I felt peace - the peace of God’s grace working in times of personal suffering. All bitterness transformed into thanksgiving to God for enlightening me, that he had never abandoned us at all. Quite the contrary - God was always there, it’s just that I had been blinded by the onset of human loss.

The argument is that we all have been touched by suffering to a lesser or greater extent, at some point in our lives. On many occasions our suffering is not limited to personal experience, but we also suffer when we see others suffer. When we see images of people especially children in Third World Countries dying of hunger and malnutrition; when we see images of the victims of wars around the world; when we see the loss of human life and property as the result of natural disasters; when we recall the tragic events of September 11 at the hands of fundamentalist terrorists – we may be thousands of miles away from the onset of these sad events affecting millions, and yet we can still feel the pain and the hurt. In this regard, we may find it hard to ever be ‘free’ of suffering.

There may be a misconception that when one has accepted the gospel of Christ, we then become *free* of suffering. This however is not the case. We are still surrounded by suffering, both as personal experience and as witness to suffering, but as Christians we find an inner peace to deal with the suffering we feel and see. Through the eyes of faith we can see God working his love. How can we mortals possibly be exempted from suffering, when the Crucified and Resurrected Christ himself suffered? The argument is that we are never ‘free’ of human suffering, but it is through God’s grace, that we can learn to cope with the suffering that surrounds us.

III Courage in the Event of Grace

Just as much as we have been touched by the onset of human suffering either personally or as witness to the suffering that surrounds us, we likewise have been touched by God’s grace. The many different faces of suffering are equally met by the many different faces of God’s grace. It is in line with this thinking that Gabriel Moran speaks about the possibility of every human being, experiencing God’s grace. Moran wrote:

“ I cannot approach...(anyone)...with the assumption that he has not been touched by God’s grace...I can only approach (another person) with an invitation that we take up the quest together, for the God who is active in our lives.” ⁶³

He suggests that everyone, the Christian and the non-Christian alike, we all have been touched by God’s grace to a lesser or greater extent. But it is through the eyes of faith one can

⁶³ Moran, quoted in Lindfield, Derek. *Lecture Notes*, (unpublished). University of Sussex, Brighton 2000.

realise that it is God's grace working either directly or through the love of others, to ease the pain and emptiness experienced through human suffering. It is through what another theologian, Karl Rahner calls the '*event of grace*' working at times unnoticed in our lives, that can lead us away from the pain and hurt of suffering, to understanding and embracing the underlying and ever present goodness of the Divine. Rahner wrote:

"Grace is simply the last depth and radical meaning of all that the created person experiences, enacts and suffers in the process of developing and realising himself as a person. When someone experiences laughter or tears, bears responsibility, stands by the truth, breaks through the egoism in his life with other people; where someone hopes against hope, forces the shallowness and stupidity of the daily rush and bustle with humour and patience, refusing to become embittered; where someone learns to be silent and in this inner silence lets the evil in his heart die rather than spread outwards; in a word, whenever someone lives as he would like to live, combating his own egoism and the continual temptation to inner despair – there is the event of grace." ⁶⁴

It is through God's grace that enables us to move on from the suffering we experience. It gives us the courage to pick up the broken pieces and continue with our lives. This courage as argued by Robert Morris is achieved through the onset of God's grace in our troubled lives. Morris suggests facing suffering redemptively, in other words, to meet suffering with courage and compassion that can clear our minds and hearts for creative responses to adversity.⁶⁵ In being responsive to courage that is drawn from God especially in times of despair, this in turn will help with personal healing and transformation. The point is that we can either sit back and let the pain, sorrow, difficulty and the deprivation of human suffering take its toll, or we can draw upon the courage found in the grace of God, to respond to suffering. In taking on the latter, peace and profound healing in times of turmoil will result, for this is God's answer to our prayers for help.

It is through God's grace that we can find the inner peace and healing to the suffering we face; the life-giving love of God that is administered directly into our troubled lives, or radiated through the work others in the *event of grace*. These are the elements of hope that can be drawn from the gospel of the Resurrected and Crucified Christ, the embodiment of God's grace. The hope that the poor, the oppressed, the Dalits and the marginalised millions in India are desperately seeking. The liberation from all their woes and suffering, and freedom from the stronghold of poverty can be found in the totality of the gospel message.

⁶⁴ Rahner, quoted in Lindfield, Derek. *Lecture Notes*, (unpublished). University of Sussex, Brighton 2000.

⁶⁵ Morris, Robert Collin., *Suffering and the Courage of God: Exploring how Grace and Suffering Meet*. (Cape Cod: Paraclete Press, 2005) 35

CONCLUSION

For the suffering that prevails predominantly in the world today, there are many faces that we can identify with. It takes on various forms, but so too does God's grace. The challenge becomes one of how we respond to these troublesome conditions that suppress our spirits in life and in God. Do we let the suffering we encounter limit our personal and spiritual growth, or do we allow God's grace to heal our pain and hurt?

The model of Christ is such that we can draw strength and courage in our times of need. In knowing that we are never alone in our suffering. The Crucified God whom we worship illustrates that God does not abandon us in our suffering, as God suffers together with us. In knowing that there is always hope for a better and brighter tomorrow. The Resurrected Christ gives us this living hope, that in spite of our suffering, all will be well. This is the totality of the gospel message regarding suffering - God is always with us amidst all the suffering, and the hope for profound healing emanates from God.

For those who are oblivious to God's grace, they are still touched by God. They may not be aware that God is working to heal their pain, but clearly in the event of God's grace working through others, their troubled lives become bearable. The poor and the oppressed in India attest to God's grace working in their lives, even though the majority do not know God. They worship their countless pagan Hindu gods, but God still touches their troublesome lives in the *event of grace*. But it is through their suffering that they come face-to-face with God's grace and life-giving love. It is through the grace of God that keeps the poor in the slums of Mumbai and the victimized children of HIV/Aids in India smiling, for they have been given hope. A hope that requires no payment, or fee, for God's love and grace is free for all. This is the beauty of God's grace, is that it is free for all. Many may not realise this, but when good things happen to us, or when strangers lend a helping hand for no reason at all, I believe that this is God's grace working wonders. So for the oppressed and suffering millions in India, those who have nothing to lose and thus nothing to give, the free gift of God's grace is a blessing for them all. For a people who have seemingly lost all that they had, this free gift is greatly welcomed. The free gift of life, given at a time when life no longer seems to matter.

This is the encouragement that all can benefit from, the assurance that God's grace is never far from us in our times of need. We may appear to abandon God in questioning his very presence and his reasons for allowing us to suffer. But God does not abandon us. God is right there suffering alongside with us. God's grace is forever upon us, however the suffering we encounter may cloud our vision to see and feel God in our moments of despair. It prevents us from realising the fullness of God's love, a love that rescues us from our darkest and loneliest moments in life. It is through our suffering, that we can see God's grace and life-giving love working in our lives.

The question of whether there can ever be indispensable solutions to the suffering that we witness and experience, is a question that may formulate doubt within us about God's providence in our lives. When we start asking why God does not intervene and rid the world of all its suffering. When we start looking for solutions in the wrong places, and yet God's grace is right there giving us peace, amidst the pandemonium that surrounds us. The underlying thesis is that for the different forms of suffering that we know, God's grace counter-balances the onset of pain and loss through the struggles we face. It supersedes any

form of suffering, generating peace and courage to equip us with the God-given gift of life, and the encouragement necessary to get through our darkest moments of loss and desperation.

Sure there is suffering that infiltrates our personal lives and the world that we live in, but superior to any form of human suffering that we may encounter is the Grace of God. So where is God's grace when it comes to human suffering? For the Christian who sees suffering through the eyes of faith, the fundamental question becomes – where is it not?

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