

PLAIN TRUTH®

inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Following in Jesus' Footsteps

By Greg Albrecht

Many religious professionals and the religions they represent are all too willing to explain why God allows suffering.

- Some insist that God actually causes suffering.
- Many believe that “everything happens for a reason—God has a plan.”
- Some suggest that God’s plan is to let us suffer or even cause suffering in our lives so that faith might be produced in us.

While there are no easy answers to all of our “why” questions about suffering, here are three Christ-centered truths:

- Suffering is part of what it means to be human.
- Suffering is an inevitable part of life—God doesn’t have to “plan” it.
- Suffering happens “all by

itself” without any assistance or intervention from God.

The idea behind “everything happens for a reason—God has a plan” is that while we don’t know why we are enduring and experiencing distress and sorrow, God does—he is right on top of what is going on—“in control.”

It all sounds reasonable, doesn’t it? Reasonable, but not biblical. Makes sense, but it’s not true.

The Bible has nothing to say about this far-fetched idea, comforting though it might be. In fact, the Bible contradicts the idea that “everything happens for a reason because God has a plan.”

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. – 1 Peter 2:21

1) *To this you were called...*

“To this” refers, in the immediate context, to unjust

suffering. In the preceding sentence (before he says “to this”), Peter notes the difference between suffering because of “doing wrong”—self-inflicted consequences—and suffering for “doing good.”

Peter calls suffering even though one does not deserve it “commendable before God” and then tells Christ-followers we were called “to this.”

There are plenty of people on television who will tell you that when you suffer you are “outside” of God’s will.

They are also fond of explaining suffering away by saying the person in pain doesn’t have “enough” faith.

To say that a person who is suffering is “outside” of God’s will and that they do not have “enough” faith is a denial of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ suffered unjustly—he was God in the flesh. Was Jesus, God in the flesh, “outside” of God’s will and did he suffer because he did not have “enough” faith?

2) ...because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example...

You can hear and read many people who will tell you that Jesus Christ suffered for you so you don’t have to.

You can read and hear plenty of people who will tell you all the ways that you should follow in the

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footsteps of Jesus just like they think they are.

However, they invariably leave out the part about *following him in his suffering*.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about health, wealth and prosperity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about following Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about inspirational seminars designed to make you into a person who enjoys all the fruits of success (defined as excess). The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about having your best life now.

According to 1 Peter 2:21, the precise way in which Christ-followers follow Jesus is in suffering.

Peter says that Christ suffered for us—that's the emphasis of this passage. Yes, Christ died for us, but this passage is talking about the life of suffering that Jesus endured.

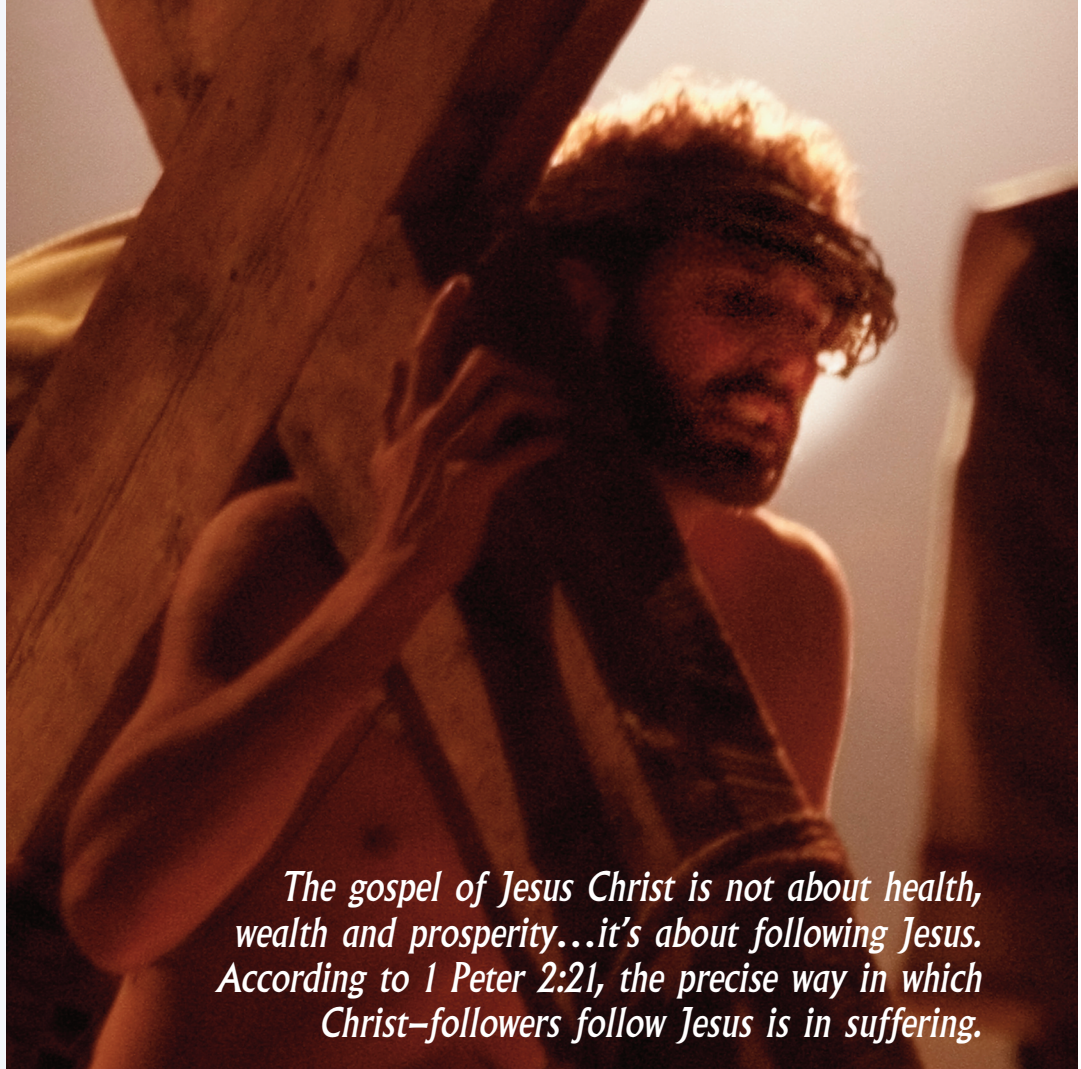
3) ... that you should follow in his steps.

The path of following Jesus on the *Jesus Way* is not an easy path. It's been said that a mark of deep and true humility is to be condemned without cause and to not answer in kind. That is the mind of Christ. That is part of how he suffered for us.

Jesus did not revile or slander or accuse. He did not threaten. He didn't lash out at those who betrayed him and failed him. He did not demean those who did not understand him.

As Christ-followers, one of our greatest enemies is pride, while one of our closest friends is humility. In fact, our perfect Friend Jesus is "*gentle and humble in heart...*" (Matthew 11:29).

Jesus submitted to suffering. Peter is not saying we must find and devise ways to suffer so that we can prove that we are following him. Jesus set us an example about our response and attitude when we suffer... especially unjustly.



The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about health, wealth and prosperity...it's about following Jesus. According to 1 Peter 2:21, the precise way in which Christ-followers follow Jesus is in suffering.

Why Suffering?

There are times when we suffer because we are enduring the inevitable consequences of our own silly, immature, selfish behavior. God has nothing to do with it other than to allow and consent for us to make stupid decisions and then pay the penalty. When we pay the consequences of our behavior, it's not God's plan.

There are also times when we suffer because we are paying the price of someone else's self-centered and even lustful behavior. Someone else can cause us to suffer.

Once again, that's not God's recipe—he didn't cook up the results we are going through. It's not God's plan when a child is abused, a rape occurs or a soldier bleeds out on the battlefield.

There are times when we suffer because we are the victim of time and chance. When we are victims of a crime or of an accident—we

were in the wrong place at the wrong time—when a hurricane or a flood or an earthquake took place, or when a bridge collapsed, or when some other natural disaster occurred.

When religion suggests or insists that suffering is a penalty God inflicts on us, it transforms God, who is love, into a divinity somewhat like a Shakespearean witch. God is not brewing up "Double, double, toil and trouble" to inflict on humanity.

We suffer, no doubt, for many reasons. Of all forms of suffering, the most spiritually transcendent is when Christ-followers voluntarily do so as a consequence of their faith and truth in Jesus.

God's Promise...

In Christ, and because of Christ, who is *Immanuel* (God with us), God suffers with us and as he is near and dear to us, close to us and with us, we come to know the fullness of his love.

Neither Jesus nor any of the New Testament authors try to explain suffering—the gospel of Jesus Christ never tries to make sense of suffering in a way that would satisfy all our questions.

Jesus doesn't deny the fact of suffering, he doesn't ignore it, he doesn't gloss over it—nor does he try to act like it doesn't exist in the life of a Christ-follower.

God doesn't shield us from all suffering. He doesn't provide special immunities and vaccines against suffering for those who follow Jesus Christ.

Jesus faced the reality of suffering and he invariably promises to always be with us in our suffering. The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who hurts with us—of God who is always there, always forgiving, never condemning—always embracing, never rejecting—always with us, never apart or distant.

God pours his love into our hearts even in the middle of our sufferings.

- Nothing in the Bible leads us to conclude that suffering indicates the absence of God.
- Nothing in the Bible leads us to conclude that God directly causes suffering.
- God doesn't cause suffering

and there are no easy answers about why suffering happens.

- In the midst of our suffering, we rest in Christ, who is our divine Hope.

Reflections of a Christ-centered Pastor

A pastor, whose face was plowed with deep furrows of character that witnessed to decades of both stress and joy, as he prepared to retire, spoke of lessons learned—specifically about suffering.

“You know, when I first became a minister, I never gave much thought to my personal suffering—some I served were suffering but for some reason I didn't think I ever would. In fact, I thought that anything in my life less than perfect would have caused those in my congregation to stop looking up to me.

“But as the years and decades passed, I discovered that picking up my cross and following Jesus involved pain, hurting and hardships. I found out that being a Christ-follower means experiencing and enduring difficulties most people associate with loss and defeat.

“I have come to see that suffering and pain is part of being in Christ. I learned that self-sacrificial service is about being

honest, vulnerable and humble. I stopped pretending to be perfect some years ago. It was obvious I had failed in the perfection department.

“At the beginning of my ministry I was concerned that people might not look up to me because of my failures and flaws—was I ever wrong! Thank God he shifted my focus—I realized that my job was to direct people to Jesus Christ, and look up to him and follow him!

“Next week will be my last sermon I give as a full-time pastor. I was given the assignment and topic for this sermon many years ago.


“As a young pastor I gave a sermon about suffering. After the sermon a gentleman about the age I am now thanked me for the sermon, but he said it could become a much better sermon if I would wait about 40 years and give it again.”

Our prayer:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for suffering for me.

Thank you for allowing me to follow you in your suffering. Thank you for always being with me as I follow you. Thank you for comforting me with the assurance that nothing is going to happen to me today that you and I can't handle together. □



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WITH GREG ALBRECHT
& BRAD JERSAK