

Suffering of the Righteous: Any Justification for Upright Living?

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ABSTRACT

The paradox of the righteous enduring suffering has remained a profound theological, philosophical, and pastoral concern across generations. While biblical faith affirms God's justice and the blessings of righteousness, lived experience often reveals the contrary, as seen in the trials of Job, the lament of the Psalmist in Psalm 73, and the persecution of early Christians. This article examines whether there is any justification for upright living in the face of suffering, engaging both biblical testimony and theological reflection. It explores theodicy, the moral order, and the eschatological hope that frames Christian perseverance. Through an exegetical and thematic analysis, the study highlights that suffering, far from negating righteousness, may serve as a means of spiritual formation, witness to divine grace, and participation in Christ's redemptive mission. African contextual realities—marked by poverty, injustice, and persecution—are also considered, revealing how communities of faith interpret and endure righteous suffering. The paper concludes that upright living remains justifiable not merely for its earthly rewards but because it aligns believers with God's character, purposes, and ultimate promise of restoration. Such a perspective fosters resilience, hope, and moral courage in the face of adversity, affirming that faithfulness transcends immediate outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of why the righteous suffer has persisted as one of the most perplexing challenges to faith and morality. From ancient times to the present, this paradox has provoked deep reflection among theologians, philosophers, and believers. The Hebrew Scriptures themselves acknowledge this tension: the psalmist laments the prosperity of the wicked and the affliction of the upright (Ps. 73:3–14), while the book of Job offers an extended narrative of a blameless man enduring extreme suffering without apparent cause (Job 1:1–22). In the New Testament, Jesus warns His followers of persecution (Matt. 5:10–12) and Paul reminds the early church that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12, NIV).

Theologically, this problem falls under the domain of theodicy, the attempt to reconcile belief in a just and loving God with the reality of suffering (Hick 7). Some traditions interpret suffering as divine discipline (Heb. 12:5–11), others as a test of faith (James 1:2–4), and still others as participation in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of the gospel (Phil. 1:29; 1 Pet. 4:12–16). In African Christian contexts—where poverty, injustice, and political instability often afflict even the most devout believers—the question takes on urgent existential and pastoral dimensions (Bediako 112).

This study seeks to examine whether upright living remains justifiable despite the suffering it may entail. It will explore biblical perspectives, theological arguments, and contextual applications, arguing that righteousness is not validated merely by immediate reward but by alignment with God's purposes and the eschatological hope of ultimate restoration.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

To establish a clear framework for this study, it is essential to define the key concepts that shape the discussion: suffering, righteousness, upright living, and justification.

Suffering

Suffering refers to the experience of physical pain, emotional distress, or spiritual anguish resulting from adverse circumstances (Anderson 15). In biblical theology, suffering may be understood as a consequence of sin (Gen. 3:16–19), a result of living in a fallen world (Rom. 8:20–23), or a means through which God accomplishes redemptive purposes (2 Cor. 4:17). John Stott emphasizes that Christian suffering is not meaningless but can be transformed into a testimony of faith when endured in trust and obedience to God (Stott 95).

Righteousness

Righteousness, in the biblical sense, denotes right standing with God expressed through moral integrity, obedience to divine commands, and justice in human relationships (Wright 49). It is both a gift of grace and a human responsibility. In the Old Testament, righteousness often relates to covenantal faithfulness (Deut. 6:25), while in the New Testament, it is grounded in Christ's redemptive work (Phil. 3:9).

Upright Living

Upright living refers to the consistent practice of righteousness in daily life, encompassing moral purity, ethical conduct, and faithfulness to God in both public and private spheres (Bediako 133). It reflects a holistic spirituality that integrates belief and

behavior, aligning the believer's life with the values of the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33).

Justification

In theological discourse, justification may denote either the divine act of declaring a sinner righteous through faith in Christ (Rom. 5:1) or the rational and moral grounds for a particular course of action. In this study's context, "justification" refers to the reasoning—biblical, theological, and practical—that supports the continued pursuit of upright living in the face of suffering (Hick 212).

By clarifying these terms, this paper aims to ensure conceptual precision and avoid ambiguity in exploring the central question: Is there any justification for upright living when the righteous suffer?

Biblical–Theological Foundations

The question of righteous suffering is deeply embedded in the biblical narrative and theological tradition. Both the Old and New Testaments present a consistent, though paradoxical, witness: righteousness does not guarantee immunity from hardship; rather, suffering often accompanies faithfulness to God.

Old Testament Witness

In the Old Testament, the book of Job stands as a profound exploration of undeserved suffering. Job is introduced as "blameless and upright" (Job 1:1, NIV), yet his life is marked by catastrophic loss and personal anguish. His experience refutes the simplistic retribution theology that equates righteousness with immediate blessing and wickedness with instant punishment (Carroll 88). Similarly, Psalm 73 captures the inner conflict of the faithful who see "the prosperity of the wicked" while the righteous endure affliction (vv. 3–14). The resolution comes in recognizing God's ultimate justice and the eschatological reversal of fortunes (vv. 17–28). The prophetic literature, especially Habakkuk, affirms that "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4, ESV) even when injustice seems unchecked.

New Testament Witness

The New Testament intensifies this theme in the life and teaching of Jesus. The Beatitudes bless "those who are persecuted because of righteousness" (Matt. 5:10–12), affirming that suffering can be a mark of divine approval. Jesus Himself embodies the paradigm of the suffering righteous one, enduring the cross for the redemption of the world (Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 12:2). For Paul, suffering is not an anomaly but an integral aspect of discipleship: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29, NIV). Peter similarly exhorts believers not to be surprised by trials but to rejoice in sharing Christ's sufferings (1 Pet. 4:12–16).

Theological Implications

Theologically, righteous suffering is interpreted within the framework of theodicy and eschatology. It serves as a means of spiritual refinement (James 1:2–4), a testimony to God's sustaining grace (2 Cor. 12:9–10), and a participation in the redemptive mission of Christ (Rom. 8:17–18). In African contexts, where faith communities often face persecution, systemic injustice, and economic hardship, this biblical vision provides a framework for endurance and hope (Bediako 141). The Christian response to suffering is therefore not resignation but active trust in God's justice and ultimate restoration.

Literature Review

The question of righteous suffering has been addressed extensively in biblical scholarship, theology, and pastoral literature. The discussion generally falls into three broad streams: classical theodicy, biblical theology of suffering, and contextual approaches, particularly within African Christianity.

Classical Theodicy

Classical theodicy seeks to reconcile the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God with the reality of suffering. Augustine argued that evil and suffering are the result of human free will and the corruption of creation through sin (Augustine 96). John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy builds on Irenaeus, contending that God permits suffering as a means of moral and spiritual formation (Hick 253). Alvin Plantinga defends the "free will defense," suggesting that moral freedom necessarily entails the possibility of suffering (Plantinga 30). While these frameworks offer philosophical coherence, critics argue they often lack sensitivity to the lived experience of sufferers (Adams 41).

Biblical Theology of Suffering

N. T. Wright emphasizes that the Bible consistently frames suffering within God's redemptive purposes, with the cross of Christ standing at the center of this vision (Wright 201). Christopher J. H. Wright notes that Old Testament narratives—especially Job, Psalms, and the prophets—reject a simplistic retribution theology, offering a more nuanced portrayal of divine justice (Wright 87). John Stott highlights the transformative potential of suffering when endured in union with Christ, arguing that it can serve as both a witness and a form of discipleship (Stott 95).

African Contextual Approaches

African theologians address righteous suffering through the lens of socio-political realities and communal resilience. Kwame Bediako underscores how African Christian communities interpret suffering not merely as individual trials but as corporate experiences tied to historical oppression, poverty, and systemic injustice (Bediako 144). Mercy Amba Oduyoye stresses the importance of solidarity, community support, and hope rooted in the resurrection as essential responses to suffering (Oduyoye 58). These perspectives expand the conversation beyond abstract theodicy to include pastoral care, justice advocacy, and contextual faith practices.

Synthesis of Perspectives

While classical theodicy provides philosophical frameworks, biblical theology grounds righteous suffering in God's redemptive narrative, and African contextual approaches bring the conversation into lived reality. Together, these perspectives affirm that upright living, even in the face of suffering, is justified not merely for immediate reward but for its alignment with God's purposes and eschatological promises.

Justifications for Upright Living Despite Suffering

The persistence of suffering among the righteous raises the critical question: why should believers continue to pursue upright living when it often appears unrewarded in the present life? A synthesis of biblical, theological, and contextual perspectives yields several compelling justifications.

1. Alignment with God's Character and Will

Upright living is first and foremost an expression of alignment with God's holiness and justice. Scripture portrays God as righteous (Ps. 145:17) and calls His people to mirror that character (Lev. 19:2; 1

Pet. 1:15–16). Christopher J. H. Wright observes that righteousness is not merely instrumental—pursued for reward—but intrinsic to the covenant relationship with God (Wright 112). The righteous persevere because their ethical orientation flows from their identity as God’s people, not from the expectation of immediate benefit.

2. Witness and Mission

Suffering endured with integrity serves as a powerful testimony to the reality of faith. The early church’s endurance under persecution contributed significantly to the spread of the gospel (Acts 5:41; Tertullian 50). John Stott notes that patient suffering “authenticates the message” by embodying the self-giving love of Christ (Stott 95). This missional dimension remains evident in contexts where Christian communities face social marginalization or violence.

3. Spiritual Formation and Maturity

Suffering refines character, producing virtues such as perseverance, humility, and compassion (Rom. 5:3–5; James 1:2–4). John Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy underscores that moral and spiritual growth often requires trials (Hick 256). In African contexts, this formation is often communal, with shared hardship strengthening the bonds of fellowship and mutual care (Bediako 146).

4. Participation in Christ’s Redemptive Mission

The New Testament presents suffering for righteousness as participation in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13). This theological reality imbues suffering with eschatological significance, connecting present trials to the cosmic victory of God over evil (Wright, *Evil* 118). Believers are thus invited into a redemptive solidarity that transcends their individual pain.

5. Eschatological Hope and Ultimate Justice

The final justification is rooted in the promise of God’s ultimate justice and restoration. The biblical vision anticipates a future where God will “wipe away every tear” and eradicate suffering (Rev. 21:4). This hope sustains the righteous, enabling them to endure temporary affliction in light of eternal glory (2 Cor. 4:17–18). Augustine reminds believers that the trials of this life are fleeting compared to the joy of the City of God (Augustine 114).

Conclusion

The paradox of righteous suffering remains a profound theological and existential challenge, but the biblical, theological, and contextual evidence affirms that upright living is not only justifiable but essential to Christian identity and mission. From the testimony of Job and the psalmists to the witness of Christ and the early church, Scripture consistently portrays righteousness as a non-negotiable covenantal commitment rather than a utilitarian pursuit of blessing. Theologically, suffering is reframed as participation in God’s redemptive purposes, a means of spiritual formation, and an opportunity to bear faithful witness in the world.

In African contexts, where suffering is often compounded by systemic injustice, poverty, and political instability, this vision is particularly urgent. As Bediako and Oduyoye emphasize, the church’s endurance in righteousness amidst suffering serves both as a prophetic critique of evil and as a source of communal resilience. The hope of ultimate justice and eschatological restoration anchors believers, enabling them to endure with integrity and courage.

Recommendations

1. Theological Education – Churches and seminaries should integrate a robust theology of suffering into discipleship, equipping believers to endure trials without losing faith (Wright, *Evil* 145).

2. Pastoral Care – Clergy should provide holistic pastoral support that addresses both spiritual encouragement and practical needs, fostering resilience in suffering communities (Stott 98).
3. Communal Solidarity – Faith communities should cultivate mutual care and advocacy, embodying the biblical call to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).
4. Public Witness – The church should maintain a prophetic voice against injustice, demonstrating that upright living includes active engagement for societal transformation (Bediako 150).
5. Eschatological Focus – Believers should be continually reminded of the ultimate hope of resurrection and God’s final justice, which relativizes temporal suffering in light of eternal glory (Augustine 118).

In sum, the justification for upright living despite suffering is grounded not in the absence of hardship but in the certainty of God’s character, the transformative power of suffering, and the unshakable hope of God’s final victory over evil.

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