

A Comparative Study of the Significance of Suffering in James 1:2-4

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Abstract

When individuals are confronted with challenging situations, they may contemplate whether the difficulties are the results of divine intervention or evil influences. Even more, they may also believe that the negative outcomes they are experiencing are the results of the sin they have committed. Rather than just assessing the impact of these trials on their lives, it is essential to consider whose perspective to adopt when dealing with adversity. Different religious and belief systems offer varying views on the causes of suffering and hardship. In this qualitative research, a comparative study is applied to examine several belief systems, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. As a result, one can gain insight into the origin of life's difficulties and adopt a suitable mindset. The findings of this research can be particularly helpful for Christians, as they can better comprehend the role of suffering in life and cultivate a perspective that strives to be conformed to the image of God.

Keywords: Trial, God's Perspective, Suffering, Belief System, Attitude.

I. INTRODUCTION

Enduring hardship and difficulties are inherent aspects of the human experience. Holding diverse perspectives on suffering in life, each belief system presents its own set of ideas and principles.

In Judaism, there is an Avinu Malkenu melody that has been frequently sung by Jews for centuries during the celebration of the High Holidays. This melody is a prayer recited to regulate the levels of self-examination, repentance, and self-forgiveness. The theme that was heard was about a human's ability to turn around or repent and start a change in his life. The mindset and outlook of Judaism are embedded in this chant, specifically that humans can improve their relationships

with others through corrected attitudes and behavior that can extend and receive forgiveness. This prayer reflects Judaism's spiritual view of human behavior (Meyerstein, 2004).

Judaism believes that from the beginning, the Bible has recorded how suffering characterizes human existence (Genesis 3:19; Job 5:7). In Job's case, his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) who approached him when he was beset by various misfortunes, all agree that sin and suffering are always connected as a cause and effect of something that is not holy. Suffering does not arise if there is no previous sin, consciously or unconsciously. If Job was not guilty of willful and open sin, then there must have been some unconscious and hidden sin.

God sent suffering because the Israelites had sinned. All the goodness of life, in a narrow sense, is His direct gift. All calamities and tribulations of life are punishments sent for disobedience or transgressions committed. They viewed God as a benevolent ruler, particularly towards the Jews whom He had selected as His favorites. However, they believed His will to be unpredictable, capricious, and irrational (Craig, 484).

Suffering is usually associated with sin, both personal and communal. Because of these sins, God is angry and people suffer because of it. On the contrary, people who live righteously before God will receive blessings in life. Take Joseph for example. He went through many difficult times because of the trickery of his own brothers and other people around him (Gen 37; 39:7-20; 40). But in the end, God blessed him with a high position even though he had experienced times of being deceived (Gen 39:1-6, 21-23; 41:39-45). This view has merit in many circumstances, but it does not form a generally valid picture of suffering (Davids, 2004: 35).

There are also insights from the experience of the divided kingdom of Israel, the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, and the exile of the Israelites. The Jews came to realize that suffering is often closely related to the right way of life. As such, it does not stem from a person's sinful deeds, but rather from a spiritual state. In this context, the tradition of trials emerged. This tradition is even older than its context, for example in the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22 and the temptation of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. Genesis 22 records how God tempted Abraham to sacrifice his son. This tradition developed an idea of His chosen servants enduring suffering caused by the devil. In this development, the tradition was rewritten to replace God as the direct cause of suffering by the devil. Thus, suffering becomes a place of conflict. If the suffering person gives up and blames God, then God and he himself lose. But if he persists, then God wins and the person gets his reward. The two most prominent figures in this regard are Abraham and Job. In fact, these two characters are used to show that suffering is a normal experience for God-fearing people and is not an alien or impossible experience ((Davids, 2004: 58).

In the view of Hinduism, suffering is part of *karma*, which is the result of actions in the past, whether verbal, mental or physical, originating from this life and previous lives. Hinduism believes that there was a life that had taken place before the life that is now being lived. The result that occurs is not a punishment but a consequence that arises naturally as a response to violations of the moral laws that apply in the universe.

Humans will definitely be living with suffering until reaching *moksha*. *Moksha* is a state in which humans are liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). As long as humans reside in this world, they will inevitably be subject to its laws and experience suffering, including physical pain. However, despite the body's susceptibility to suffering, the soul remains unaffected and unscathed. Therefore, there's no need to be excessively concerned about temporary suffering. Those who are ill can find solace in the knowledge that their afflictions are impermanent and will not harm them internally.

According to Hinduism teachings, everything in existence is a manifestation of the Creator, and thus nothing can be solely characterized as good or bad as the Creator encompasses all. Consequently, perceiving suffering only as negative is a one-dimensional perspective. Instead, suffering can also be viewed positively if it facilitates a spiritual journey. Some individuals even voluntarily embrace suffering because they consider it a means to be tested and learn from challenging experiences on their path toward spiritual growth (Whitman, 2007: 609).

Meanwhile, Buddhism is fundamentally concerned with identifying the spiritual causes of human suffering, the possibility of gaining freedom from suffering, and the ways to realize this freedom. There are many writings on the teachings of this belief which contain various ways to train the mind in order to reduce or alleviate the source of suffering (Wallace and Shapiro, 693). Mental suffering is said to be caused by an imbalance in the mind. Anxiety, frustration, and depression are considered symptoms of an imbalanced mind. Conversely, a body that is healthy and uninjured is generally free from pain. Therefore, a healthy and balanced mind will be relatively free from psychological stress, even in times of adversity.

Although mental suffering is often stimulated by environmental and social influences and is most likely always correlated with nerves, this suffering can often be traced to a subjectively experienced mental imbalance. Buddhism shows that most of these mental imbalances can be corrected through skillful and sustained mental practice (Wallace and Shapiro, 693). Buddhism offers a variety of meditations designed to cure or restore specific desires and other obsessive desires to promote healthy aspirations.

Three aspects of suffering that are believed by the Buddhist view are (1) suffering that is common or common in humans, namely illness, aging, grief, experiencing difficulties, death, and various other suffering states, which include physical and mental; (2) suffering caused by change, for example when a pleasant thing passes away, suffering arises; and (3) suffering caused by conditions related to human existence. This third aspect is profound philosophically. Human existence is indeed suffering, which begins with his birth in the world.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative comparative study. This study demonstrates the ability to examine, compare and contrast subjects or ideas. In doing it, applies a library research method. Prior studies on the topic are essential in finding the research gap. It takes the Epistle of James from the Bible as well as research results on various religions and belief systems to be compared. Conducting a biblical study on this epistle of James will help to convey the message regarding an attitude taken

in difficult times in life. Secondary data such as books, journal articles, and others are taken as references. Qualitative data analysis involves the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data presented in the full body of empirical materials. The data is sharpened, sorted, focused, discarded, and organized in such a way that the final conclusion can be drawn and verified. While doing the analysis, the data is organized and compressed in order to get a group of information that allows conclusion drawing and action. Here is where the data is displayed. Later, the conclusion is drawn and verified (Miles et al, 2014).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Epistle of James is a book written by James, half-brother of Jesus. James himself did not explicitly state that. However, many sources said that the author of the book was Jesus' own brother, James. Among them was Eusebius, who is called the Father of Church History (Hughes and Laney, 1996). James was the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Mary (Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55; Gal 1:19). He was one of the leaders of the early Christian group in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21).

One of the most interesting and distinctive themes of the Epistle of James is that of suffering or testing, often referred to as trials. The trials he refers to are the temptations and sufferings of life, such as persecution or tragic experiences. They are external afflictions (Vlachos, 2017: 52). This theme appears at the beginning of the letter (Jas 1:2), in the middle (1:12), and even spreads throughout the letter of James. At the beginning of the letter, James mentions the twelve tribes that were overseas (1:1). The twelve tribes of Israel were scattered among many nations. They were Hebrew believers (1:2, 16; 2:1; 5:7) who were scattered because of the persecution that took place in Jerusalem after Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 8:1). The epistle shows that the recipients were in the midst of persecution and temptation at that time (Jas 1:2-4, 12; 2:6) (Hughes and Laney, 1996).

"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials," (James 1:2, NKJV). Here James addresses his readers as "my brethren", where he considers the church members to be his beloved brothers. This warm greeting from the beginning to the end of his letter was used so that he could be one with his readers and share their weaknesses (Davids, 2011: 25).

One point that is closely related to this matter of suffering is the origin of sin. Sin is seen as a force that originates from within a person, namely an impulse to do evil. This impulse is a pure, undirected impulse that is part of nature. This makes Adam and Eve took a decision to break God's command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3). However, desire is something that can become dangerous, as it can achieve whatever it can by using whatever is available. Hence, evil impulses can lead to sin.

To prevent this, it does not mean that man has to eliminate all his desires and wants, but there is strength to resist. This countervailing power can be obtained for example from the existence of laws and commandments, the urge to do good, and especially the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings the identity of a Christian in dealing with suffering in life (Sulistio, 2022: 687). This is one of the missions of the Holy Spirit. It transforms the Christians to be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (Jas 1:4). This

resisting power channels and limits the evil impulse into something good. The struggle within can be won if man gives himself over to following good impulses.

Conversely, the problem of sin can also be seen from the outside. Satan is often seen as a figure who is constantly competing with God to gain people as his followers. The method used by this demonic force is to use whatever means available to mislead people and torment those whose lives are faithful and obedient to God. This seriousness to face the devil is a challenge to faith that can clearly be seen in the last part of the Lord's prayer (Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil), as written in Matthew 6:13.

James was well aware of the connection between sin and suffering, especially in terms of sickness. He wrote this in 5:14-16.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (NKJV).

Confession of sin can basically be part of the healing or restoration process. But there are suppositional phrases that he uses to emphasize his deeper focus, that it can lead to a dangerous thing where suffering can lead one to sin or that one can even sin in an attempt to avoid suffering (David, 58).

The apostle Paul mentioned about his weakness in 2 Corinthians 4 and how God wonderfully manifested his power through it (Grudem: 2018).

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4:7-11, NKJV).

He added in the latter verses that he is not discouraged by his physical sufferings.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor 4:16-18, NKJV).

The real burden of the letter comes in James 1:2-4, 12-15. The community he is addressing is suffering. It is not an acute persecution that they are experiencing, but an environment that the writer sees as a trial or test (πειρασμός). James tells his

readers to consider it a joy (χαρά) if they fall into various trials. At these times, faith is put to the test and there are also many tears, pain, and sweat. These trials should be geared toward creating joy in the last days, where God's purpose is not for evil. The value of perseverance will be demonstrated by those who endure and eventually come to a greater perfection than before: that they are tried and true (δόκιμος in 1:12).

On the contrary, there are also those who truly encounter difficult circumstances. They are persuaded to blame God in the midst of their trials, just like the Israelites in the wilderness (Num 14:2-4; Joshua 5:6). This certainly leads to failure, which will provide an opportunity for evil impulses to arise. These people firmly affirmed that God cannot be tempted (1:13). Their failure was due to their own inner urges, not God's. It is not God who brings one into the temptation of the devil (1:13).

While Christianity may see trials in life as one of the effects of committing sin, Judaism firmly states that suffering occurs when a human commits a sin. Christians view suffering as an opportunity to experience God personally in their lives, because of the power of the Holy Spirit which enables them to pass it and makes their faith perfect in the end. For Jews, the suffering caused by sin is the punishment that God gives for the transgressions committed. If he improves his life, then God blesses him. However, this is not an entirely accurate and valid picture of God and human suffering.

Hinduism says that suffering is the result that is reaped from what has been done in the previous life cycle. Due to mistakes or transgressions committed in the previous life, one experiences much tribulation and suffering in the next life. This turns out to have something to do with sin or guilt as well. Buddhism views suffering in life as something natural, even the presence of humans in life since he was born is already suffering. With birth at its origin, existence is suffering.

From these various views, humans who are equipped with good and wise minds from God can choose the best attitude and behavior in undergoing difficult and challenging things in their life. This is what James meant in this letter. Rather than simply pointing out such tough moments in life, James emphasizes the need for a change in perspective toward such trials. Man tends to see the difficult events that occur in his life only from his own perspective. The more important thing is how people can see from a different perspective, one that has an ultimate purpose according to God's intentions, so that there is a deep joy to be gained. What James is referring to is not merely outward happiness, but an expectation of a future reward at the end, a joy in the last days. This is not only possible, but necessary. That is why James commands it. *πειρασμός* relates to the waiting for the last days (5:7). In that waiting, of course, people must turn away from actions that lead to sin (5:19-20).

In difficult and severe situations, it is possible for people to get caught up in the situation they are facing. His faith erodes and the struggle stops halfway. However, if a man understands God's perspective, man can see that he has the opportunity to gain future rewards through the struggles he faces in the world. Faith will be preserved to be able to face the various pressures in life (Davids, 2011: 26).

IV. CONCLUSION

What James wants to emphasize in his epistle is the attitude that people need to have in response to suffering. They should refrain from yielding to malevolent impulses and attributing blame to God in the face of suffering, but rather display patience and endurance. Trials can result in spiritual growth if individuals can persevere and remain patient. Trials are not brought about by God. Naturally, trials entail suffering, but this suffering can ultimately lead to the glorification of God.

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