

# Toward a Theology of Risk and Suffering

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## Toward A Theology of Risk

Some preliminary thoughts on risk:

- Risk is part of life in a fallen world. Each of us take risks everyday. But these risks are normative for us and we have adapted. Driving a car is risky, there are far more deaths in automobiles than public aircraft. Our tolerance of risk changes with familiarity.
- Each of us has a varying threshold of risk as well as personalities that are either more given to risk or conservatism in actions.
- What may be perceived as risky someone living in the midwest of the US who has not traveled internationally will seem pedestrian to cross-cultural workers who move in and out of multiple and/or unstable regions.
- Thus, it is not wise to make risk into a moral issue. Often a decision to “risk” is not a right or wrong issue - especially in non-western cultures. It is gracious and wise to avoid judgement of others for their decisions on risk and personal suffering.
- As is seen from the passages below, there are times to flee and times to not only stand your ground but willingly head into harm for a greater cause. Jesus and the apostles did both.
- Wise organizations (including churches) will allow for these variances in determining protocol on risk assessments.
- We ought not make independent decisions regarding risk. It is wise to seek out counsel from those who are experienced with the variables that are brought to bear on decisions.

Passages to reflect on risk. In working toward a Biblical theology, first read over all applicable passages on the subject. Then list facts and principles from the various passages. From this list one can develop guiding principles for life - thus having a biblically-grounded, practical theology of any given topic.

### Examples from Jesus and the Apostles

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|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Luke 4:24-30                 | 9.                         |
| 2. Matthew 12:14-15; Mark 3:6-7 | 10. Acts 9:20-30           |
| 3. Luke 13:31-33                | 11. Acts 14:1-7; 19-28     |
| 4. John 8:59                    | 12. Acts 17:1-15           |
| 5. Matthew 24:1-14              | 13. Acts 18:9-11; 22-24    |
| 6. Acts 4:1-31                  | 14. Acts 20:22-25; 21:1-14 |
| 7. Acts 5:17-41                 |                            |
| 8. Acts 8:1-8; 26-30            |                            |

## Toward A Theology of Suffering

### A general teaching on suffering from the NT: 2 Corinthians 1:4-9

### Some Preliminary thoughts on suffering:

- The western culture is one of commitment to comfort. There is little in our churches, seminaries or bible colleges that teach us to think well on suffering, let alone to journey well through suffering. For example, Biblically speaking pain and suffering is not “bad.” Suffering is hard, painful, difficult and loaded with loss and grief. But that does not make it bad. Jesus’ suffering on the cross was the ultimate manifestation of the love, beauty, majesty and goodness of our God. Jesus’ pain and suffering brought me life.

- All suffer. Further, those in Christ are invited to share in his sufferings.
- Suffering is an essential element of maturation in Christ.
- Thus thinking well on suffering is crucial. The Word of God is the final authority on this (and any) subject.

### Defining suffering:

- There are several words used in the Greek New Testament that we render “suffering” in English. These Greek words give breadth to the many English words we use – words like affliction, trial, testing, temptation, persecution, rebuke, insult, grief, reproach and more.
- θλιψις (flipsis) which is used 45 times in the NT, 24 by Paul alone, is one of the more commonly used words. Its meaning is generic in that it is inclusive of the human experience with affliction of any kind.
- A working definition: Suffering is *any* experience that causes internal or external duress physically, emotionally, spiritually or relationally.
- Two tendencies of the Evangelical world toward suffering: dismissal and minimization on one end and over-spiritualization on the other. God always honors the human experience and invites us to honor one another’s as well. Aspects of honor are to acknowledge pain, confusion, mystery, loss, and grief and to allow those to exist alongside the equal reality of the goodness, loving care, and redemptive work of God.

### Summary:

### NT Passages to Assist Developing a Theology of Suffering

- James 1:2-4 & Romans 5:2-4 are identical in teaching
- Philippians 1:29 suffering is gift (grace) just as justification is
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 4:7-18; 6:1-10; 7:2-16; 11:22-28; 12:7-10 Paul’s experiences and lessons
- John 1:10-11
- John 12:23-26
- John 12:32 Jesus’ “mission statement”
- John 15:20
- John 16:1-4
- Luke 12:4-12
- Matthew 4:1
- Matthew 5:10-12 suffering is our heritage
- Matthew 13:53f; Mk 6:1f; Lk 4:16-30
- Luke 17:25; 22:28
- Romans 5; 8:17-39 (reward is tied to suffering well); 9:2; 12:9-21
- 1 Peter 1:11; 2:19-23; 3:14-19; 4:13; 5:1, 9-10 mostly on persecution, but applications to any suffering
- 1 Peter 1:3-7 strengthen our faith
- 1 Peter 4:1-2 teach obedience
- James 1:11
- James 5:11
- Philippians 1:7; 12; 19-20; 27-30; 2:1-11; 2:17-18; 2:25; 3:7-11; 4:11-14;
- Hebrews 2:9-18; 4:14-16; 5:5-11; 11:24-26; 11:36-40; 13:3
- Galatians 1:13; 4:13-15; 5:11; 6:12; 6:17
- Ephesians 6:10-20
- Colossians 1:24
- 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7; 2:2; 3:3-4
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12
- 2 Timothy 1:8,12; 2:8-9; 3:12
- Revelation 2:10; 6:9; 12:11; 17:6; 18:24; 19:1-5; 21:4

### Sources for Reflection on Suffering in the Christian’s Life

- Ann Jervis *At the Heart of the Gospel*
- John Swinton *Raging with Compassion” Pastoral Response to the Problem of Evil*
- *Trauma and Resilience (Edited) Chapter 1 Toward a Theology of Suffering*
- [tendingscatteredwool.com](http://tendingscatteredwool.com) a blog I write in which the subject of suffering and caring for those in the midst of hardship is a frequent topic. Here are four recent entries:
  - How Personal Risk Deeply Reflects God’s Nature* April 13, 2015
  - What if God does not Resolve Problems* June 29, 2015
  - Taking a Hit When Doing What God Asks* September 16, 2015
  - Shepherds Mustn’t Over Protect Sheep* January 6, 2016