

Suffering with Christ

Romans 8:17-18 *And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*

The phrase "*suffering with Christ*" (*sympaschō*) has a specific theological meaning. In mainstream biblical scholarship, it does not mean that God inflicts sickness on people to make them like Jesus.

The debate over whether illness counts as "*suffering with Jesus*" usually stems from different theological perspectives. The text can be understood across these two main viewpoints:

1. The Contextual View: Persecution and the Battle with Sin

In the immediate context of the New Testament, "*suffering with Christ*" primarily refers to the unique hardships a person faces because they choose to follow Jesus.

Persecution and Rejection: Jesus was rejected, mocked, and persecuted by the world. When Christians face social exclusion, hostility, or persecution for their faith, they are actively sharing in the same kind of suffering Jesus did.

Spiritual Warfare and Self-Denial: Just a few verses earlier (Romans 8:13), Paul talks about "*putting to death the deeds of the body*" by the Spirit. Forcing your flesh to submit to God, denying selfish desires, and fighting sin is an agonizing process - a form of suffering with Christ to live a holy life.

2. The Broader View: Living in a Broken World

While the primary focus is gospel-related persecution, the verses immediately following (Rom 8:19-23) expand the scope to include the physical world. Paul writes about how the entire creation is "groaning" under the weight of decay, and how humans groan while waiting for the redemption of their physical bodies. (1 Cor 15:53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality)

Physical Illness: Under this view, things like cancer, chronic pain, and physical illness are not a special punishment from God, nor are they a "requirement" to earn glory. Instead, they are the reality of living in a fragile, fallen world.

How Illness Becomes "With Jesus": If a believer experiences illness and chooses to rely on God, maintain their faith, and reflect Christ's character through the pain, that trial is transformed. The illness itself isn't a holy badge, but the way a person endures it in fellowship with God unites their experience with the "Man of Sorrows".

A Note on the "Prosperity Theology" Debate

Some mention that "*sickness is suffering with Jesus*" often comes up in debates surrounding Word of Faith or Prosperity theology. Prosperity teachers often argue that Jesus bore all physical sickness on the cross (citing Isaiah 53:5), which He did, but they say it means Christians should expect *perfect* physical health, while salvation is secure, our physical bodies will continue to decay, get sick, and die until the final resurrection (Romans 8:23). Teeth rot. Therefore, enduring physical sickness with faith is earthly groaning. Again, if our bodies are to be perfect down here, why do they need to be changed before entering heaven? Jesus' body was an example of transformation.