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**How Does God’s Grace and Living in Gracious Community Help Us to Endure Present Suffering**

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“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,” Phil. 1:29, NIV.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.HeidelbergSeminary.org](http://www.HeidelbergSeminary.org).

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### Introduction

One truth about suffering, among others, is that suffering is part of life in every culture and that every culture has ways to overcome it. Helen Keller (1880-1968), a US blind and deaf educator echoes this truth. “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.”<sup>2</sup> She is a living document that testifies that “the world is full of suffering” and that the world “is full also of the overcoming of it.” One is tempted to see her world as people, though it covers the whole creation. She was taught to read and write, while blind and deaf, and commented, “That living world awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.”

The Word of God tells us that even the believers are to suffer in this world. “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him” (Phil. 1:29, NIV). God, through Peter, goes on to say: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” (1 Pet. 4:12-14, NIV). Christians do not only rejoice but also lament. They praise God for the salvation and lament to God for the suffering they share with Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> [Helen Keller](#) (1880-1968). U.S. blind & deaf educator. Being deaf and blind when she was only nineteen months she could learn to read and write. She was born in the world where many women did not go to college and disabled were not recognized by the community as people, but she could go through and graduated “with honors from Radcliffe College in 1904.”

The purpose of this paper is to show those in the Lord, the gifts of endurance God has placed before them. God has granted his grace which is vindicated by the gracious life of community. It will show, from biblical perspective, how these gifts help people to endure suffering with patience and faithfulness. Hence while all people suffer in this world, those in the Lord have the comfort of God's grace and gracious community.

### **I. Presuppositions which the Theme Suggests and Apply**

The theme suggests some presuppositions of suffering and endurance which need to be discussed and applied in the whole theme.

The first presupposition is that the theme suggests that there is "God's grace" even in this age of pain and suffering. The grace of God is for people's advantage because it means that when they are suffering, God stands by their side so that they can overcome their suffering. Without thorough discussions, the grace of God is assumed in this paper as a fact, regardless of the hardship people are facing in natural disasters like tsunamis, earth quakes, floods, draught and others. In this age of HIV and AIDS people are tempted to ask: Where is God while they are suffering in anguish and pain?<sup>3</sup> By this question people are asking: where is God's grace? The natural assumption of people is that where there is God's grace there is no suffering. One fact that people need to know and believe about the grace of God is that God's grace is in every situation in this age.

The second presupposition suggested by the theme is that there is "the gracious community" in this time of pain and suffering which helps people to endure suffering. The theme presupposes that in this sinful world, God has placed gracious community in the midst of it. The gracious community is a given fact! God did not just create human beings as individuals, but He created them as also as families and communities. In every family and community there is warmth for every person.

The third presupposition is that there is human "suffering" in the present age. It need not be debated that life in this age is full of pain

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<sup>3</sup> This is not an easy question to answer. Cf. Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 62-63.

and suffering because people experience this in their everyday lives whether it be in the heat of the summer or cold of the winter. As a result, every season comes with advantages and disadvantages.

The fourth presupposition is “endurance”. This gives us hope after looking at the reality people are facing in this planet earth. There is the way to endure! People need not to be disparate or confused when facing suffering. The Lord is the shepherd to his people. Those who trust in him shall not want! (Ps. 23:1). The situation may be dark in such a way that it may seem as if there is no hope of light. But inside the situation if a person looks closely there is a little light which is growing brighter each moment.

## II. Theology of Suffering in Community and Communal Context

God’s grace grants us a gracious community which unites people so that they may go on in life in whatever circumstance they are in. People develop a philosophy of life that tells them that they should never give up even when things are not good. They use this philosophy or belief to encourage each other to endure. The philosophy or theology of suffering is the core belief of community.

Life after the fall of our ancestors Adam and Eve, at the Garden of Eden, is characterized by suffering and pain (Gen. 3:14-19). Vhavenda say: “*Tsho bebwaho tsho fa*”,<sup>4</sup> which means, “that which is born is dead”. The message of this expression is that a living creature is destined to suffer and die. When they say that that which is born is dead, it is because death symbolizes the pain and suffering that usually goes with dying. It means that every person born of the woman has to experience various types of suffering. One reads this philosophy in Jose Marti’s words: “Man has to suffer. When he has no real afflictions, he invents some.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the sufferings are from the people’s hand. They invent them!

Vhavenda understanding of suffering, as indicated above, is in line with the theology of Job on suffering.<sup>6</sup> The theology of suffering

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. a brief explanation and implications of this expression in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 141-146.

<sup>5</sup> Jose Marti’s quotation.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. a brief exposition of pain in the book of Job in DR Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 88-91.

in the book of Job is that suffering is part of life as a person is born to suffer. “Man who is born of a woman is of few days and full of troubles. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure.” (Job 14:1-2, NIV). There is no doubt that this passage tells us that every person “born of a woman” is destined to suffer and die. The word translated as trouble (רָגַז “rogez”) can equally be used for suffering or pain. The picture of a person as the flower that “withers away” and as “a fleeting shadow” tells us that the end of every person is death.

Suffering is part of human history. When a person is sick Vhavenda use to say, “*muthu a si tshitanda*”. By this they mean that “a person is not a stick”. They believe that a stick does not have a feeling or cannot suffer pain. A stick can be broken without a sign of feeling pain and even laying in good condition it does not feel happy. But a person does feel hurt when exposed to a bad condition and feel happy when placed in a good condition. By these words they are saying that suffering is part of life. Every person has to experience suffering in one way or another.

Vhavenda also have another expression that can help us to picture the experience of pain and suffering well. “*A hu na pfene li no fa li songo gonya luwa*”, translated as “there is no baboon that dies without climbing the cliff or a big stone”. The meaning of this expression is that there are common things or experiences in human life. Suffering is one of them. The truth is that all people suffer to a certain degree regardless of how they are rich or poor, Christians or not.

A community, with this theology of suffering, as can be seen in the book Job, builds a sense of care and love toward each other. This view of suffering pictures a biblical community that sits around a person in pain supporting him or her. It is a suffering oriented community. This is found in the communal communities where support for those in pain is part of what people are living for.

The author would like to show the other side in suffering which people usually do not see when they are suffering. It is the side of the healing which is brought by the grace of God as executed by the

gracious community.<sup>7</sup> One reason why God gives people a community is that they should endure to rule the world (Gen. 1:28). God is Lord everywhere.<sup>8</sup> This task after the fall of human beings into sin includes pain and suffering. Community is called to heal suffering. A Church, in particular, is a Christian community that is called to heal the pain and suffering in a special way. Hence God has graciously created it. The church has experienced God's grace and as result it has to pass on that grace to community and individuals. Some individualistic cultures accept that there is suffering but do not see the gracious community as a gift of God for healing. Each person has to face it alone. Every person has a medical scheme or policy that has to take care of his or her suffering.

### III. Definition and Illustrations of Important Words in Theme

We can understand this topic well if we understand some of its key words. I have identified the following key words: God's Grace; Gracious Community; Endurance; and Present Suffering. I will define and illustrate how they feature to the whole theme.

#### A. God's Grace

There are different conceptions of God's grace within Christianity like common grace or general grace and special grace or particular grace. This paper will not dwell on the different conceptions of grace except that grace in the New Testament is the translation of the Greek word "*charis*" (Greek Χάρις). "*Charis*" has become a common word in Christian Churches today with the focus of "*charismata*" or the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The teaching on "*charis*" encourages every church member to be active in ministering the church, which is the body of Christ. The positive understanding of "*charis*" promotes the life of the church community to be a vibrant life. Hence it is possible to speak of gracious community.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. a brief explanation on "Pastoral Care and Counselling can be enriched by looking at how communities care for themselves in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 62-64.

<sup>8</sup> This is supported by Abraham Kuyper's famous words: "Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'" In James D Bratt.

Strong's Concordance gives this definition of Χάρις; "Grace, the state of kindness and favor towards someone, often with a focus on a benefit given to the object." The definition of this word is determined by the way it was used. The following passages help us to understand the biblical grace: Romans 5:1-2 reads "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (NIV). Another passage is Galatians 5:4 which reads, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (NIV). In the above cited passages the word "*charin*" and "*charitos*" are used respectively. In the context in which the conception of grace is used, grace is God-given as Christ has been given to the world by God the Father. It stands without saying that grace is Christ because through Christ "we have gain access by faith into this grace" (Rom. 5:2), and to be "alienated from Christ" equals to be "fallen way from grace" (Gal. 5:4). Grace is God's gift of salvation offered to sinner by faith in Christ alone.

Hence "The Christian teaching is that grace is unmerited mercy that God gave to us by sending his Son to die on the cross to give us eternal salvation."<sup>9</sup> Grace is Good News because it brings laughter to people. Every normal person rejoices when given a gift (*charisma*). The origin of these two word; "*charis*" and "*charisma*" is "*chairō*" which means to rejoice, be glad, and delighted. The Old Testament "*chen*" (חֵן) has the same meaning.<sup>10</sup> Strong's Concordance defines the Old Testament "*chen*" as "favor, grace or charm; grace is the moral quality of kindness, displaying a favorable disposition."<sup>11</sup> A simple definition can be adopted: "Grace is God giving a blessing or good that I do not deserve."<sup>12</sup>

By God's grace we are therefore talking of God's favor which brings joy in people's lives as consummated by giving His only Son, Jesus Christ. Understanding grace under this light, it is relevant to our

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<sup>9</sup> From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Reagan David check internet.

theme of suffering, in the sense that it carries people through in the midst of suffering.

### **B. Gracious Community**

Having defined God's grace, it is easy to define the gracious community. Community is a group of people who are connected to each other in one way or another. By gracious community it means that God has given his general and particular grace to communities that they may be able to care for their members who are in pain. But here one could add that a gracious community is a community which is full of God's favor. It is a group of people who have accepted God's grace in their hearts and as result they are a channel of God's grace to each other and the world. They, therefore, intentionally act graciously to each other and the whole humanity. It is an intentional act because they can defend and explain why they are doing it (1 Pet. 3:15). They have a reason for why they are acting graciously. They do not act graciously because it is their tradition, but they act graciously because they are fully persuaded that what they are doing is the right thing to do and is good for others. As stated above, God's grace is incarnated in the Son, Jesus Christ, who comes and dwells in the people. As Christ dwells among the people, people are transformed into a community of grace. The church, as community of grace is "a different community with a different set of practices".<sup>13</sup> The indwelling of Christ is done through his Spirit and Word (John 14:15-21, 23).

Christ breaks the walls of hatred among the peoples and builds walls that connect rather than divide them. The walls which Christ builds are walls of love and friendship. He comes so that people may become one as He is one with the Father (John 17:11). The grace of God is no more just far away in heaven (John 17:21). It is found in the transformed people and makes a community of care.

The character of that gracious community is care. Hauerwas is right in making care the centre of church as disciplined community. "Insofar as we are able to maintain any presence in modern society we do so by being communities of care".<sup>14</sup> Once Church community

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley Hauerwas "Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciple Community," [www.christincentury.org](http://www.christincentury.org).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

loses care as its character, it loses its presence in modern society and it is like every other community in this world. Family needs to be revived to its caring ministry, if we want to experience a real community of care. “Across the developed countries, the roles of families (in particular, women) are changing. Families themselves are smaller. They are more mobile and, with divorce and separation commonplace, may be less able to take on any significant caring role.”<sup>15</sup> These are the signs that teach that the formation of gracious community is important.

Gracious communities are communities wherein people serve one another. As people serve one another, especially the little ones or the weak, they are serving Christ (Mat. 25:40). The gracious community heals those members of the community who are suffering or weak.

### C. Endurance

Endurance, in this paper, means that while people are in pain and suffering they should not give up their faith and go back to their human made gods and philosophy. People who endure stand firm in their true faith even if the suffering continues in their lives. Endurance does not mean healing or the end of the problem. It means that even if there is no healing a person continues to trust in God. Endurance is about “Trusting God again”.<sup>16</sup> Job trusted God when he was healthy and wealthy, and again when he was sick and poor. This is what is called endurance. Job trusted God again and again against the expectation of the Satan (Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5).

The gracious community helps a person to endure even though things are not good by giving moral and physical support. They do not literally take away suffering but they stand by the side of a suffering person. They encourage a suffering person to hold on the Lord and never to lose hope.

Christian life is pictured like a race, war, and farming to mention but a few. In these activities endurance is the motto. There is no way one can be a true Christian without endurance except being a superficial Christian.<sup>17</sup> A superficial Christian is a Christian who does

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<sup>15</sup> Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Carney Glandion and Long William, have illustrated this in their book *Trusting God Again: Regaining Hope After Disappointment or Loss* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> P.G. Matthew, Saint’s Endurance, a sermon on 27 May 2007.

not face reality. It is to be an artificial Christian in the sense that a person is not real. A real Christian is flesh and blood, that suffers when pressed or hurt.

In order to endure the race the athletes need a community that cheers them up to continue to endure. The author of Hebrews comes to this point when saying, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb. 12:1, NIV). God marked out a race for us to run. The race is tough but with crowd of people by our side we can persevere. The witnesses of the saints shout words of encouragements to Christians.

Paul wrote to Timothy that he should endure hardship as a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3-6). Endurance is easy to say but hard to put it into practice. A person needs other people to help him or her to carry it through. Alone, it is easy to give up. A soldier needs to endure the hardship of the war and fight till all enemies are dead / subdued or runaway to faraway places where they pose no threats to the public. This means that a soldier endure until the victory is won. There is sweating and blood mingled in war. Christians are pictured as soldiers in many occasions (Eph. 6:10-20). The enemy has the weapons which may hurt us, but we should never give up. “Never give up!” This is the motto of the war which simple says “endure!”

Endurance is needed in every work a person does. The farmer needs a team of people to support his efforts. In Vhavenda culture, some men enter polygamous marriage for farming purposes. This view is based on presupposition that says, the more the wives the more the people to work in the fields and the more the children who can join in the work force. If a person does not have a big family there was “*davha*”<sup>18</sup>, meaning a team of people coming to help in someone’s field, in which he or she can prepare some food or drink and invite community people to come and work in his or her field.

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<sup>18</sup> “Davha” is a community institution in which a person invites people to come to his or work place and help him to finish his or work in time. The owner of the work can prepare some food or drink if he or she is able. But if he or she is poor can invite them telling that there will be no food. The workers help someone voluntarily. It is done in many cultures in Africa. It is known as “letsema” in Sesotho / Setswana cultures.

In this paper “endurance” is used as a mechanism or skill of going on with life in the midst of suffering.

#### **D. Suffering**

The suffering that is being looked at in this paper is the present suffering.<sup>19</sup> At this present time, all people suffer. It should be repeated that Christians also suffer at this present period. But they are not going to suffer when Christ appears in his second coming (in the eschatological period). The word of God tells this through the writings of Paul: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18, NIV). He pictures present suffering as child birth pains (Rom. 8:22 cf. Gen. 3:16). Child birth pains are unbearable but they are not compared to the joy of when a child is presented in the mother’s arms.

Christians are called to be disciple of Christ who should carry the cross of Christ. Matthew describes the present suffering in the simple terms. “True Christianity, however, is following Christ and suffering with him. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up the cross daily, and follow him. Why the cross? Because the world will do to us what it did to Jesus because we belong to him.”<sup>20</sup> Christians suffer many kinds of suffering or trials which they have to endure (cf. James 1:1-2). They are not expected to surrender to suffering, but to overcome all pains and suffering. They could shout with Paul in great joy: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37 NIV).

#### **1. Our Present Suffering**

The present suffering is temporary. It comes and go. It has limits. In the story of Job God commanded Satan to inflict him to a certain limit (Job 2:6). People are under God’s gracious care in such a way that not a single hair can fall from their head without God’s knowledge and permission (Mateo 10:29-31).

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<sup>19</sup> The present suffering should not be confused with the eschatological suffering which is clearly stated in the Bible. When Christ comes “. . . those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” (John 5:29). There is a second death which those in the Lord will have no share. (Rev. 20:11-15; 21:8).

<sup>20</sup> P.G. Matthew, Saint’s Endurance, a sermon on 27 May 2007.

A community that miss that suffering is part of life, has missed the fundamental mechanism of coping with suffering.<sup>21</sup> It has a blame shifting tendency and it is not equipped to heal those who are suffering. In communities where suffering is not taken as part of life, people who are suffering are blamed of their disbelief and/or committing sins because it does not just happen except being the result of disobedience. True observance can see the general grace as these Vhavenda expressions as they are being supported by the Word of God.<sup>22</sup>

Even though suffering and pain is part of life, it is like a stranger everyday it appears. Every pain is unique; people are not used to it. In communal communities it is expected that community has to join hands in bringing healing to people who are suffering. It must be confessed that this is the toughest expectation the modern community is facing. People are geared in individualistic ideology.

The disappearance of extended family brought new ideas about community caring its members. It is interesting to note how people describe this new community. They have expression like “*Sedza zwau, u songo sedza na zwa vhanwe*”, which can be translated as “Look at your matters, not others’ matters.” This expression is a new one encountering the old ones which stress co-operation and communal living. There is the “don’t care for others spirit” lingering in people’s minds. Today suffering has become unbearable because people do not have community.

Ministers of the Word serving these communities are facing the toughest expectation that they should provide the solution to all the problems people are facing, without the community’s involvement.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. a brief explanation of the concept of death among Vhavenda as part of life in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 152-154.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. The general grace make it possible for people to have truth even if they do not know the true living God. It is no this basis that Paul quotes a pagan prophet in Titus and then pronounce, “This testimony is true”. He also quotes the Greek poet Aratus on Mars Hill, “We are his offspring,” as part of Paul’s own argument against idolatry (Acts 17:28). On the other place he quotes the Greek playwright Menander, “Bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Cor 15:33). Solomon and the other authors of Proverbs place in Scripture certain maxims that have parallels in the wisdom sayings of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Paul appeal to the pagan standards of family ethics to indict an incestuous couple in the Corinthian church, stating that such immorality would not be tolerated among unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:1). In *Common Grace and Theological Scholarship* by Dennis E. Johnson, July 27, 2010.

People usually expect “the pastor to make life pain free.”<sup>23</sup> A new culture that is developing is the “quick solve culture”.<sup>24</sup> It is in that culture where suffering people, who visit a church service in wheel chairs, expect that after the service they will be walking miraculously.

## 2. God’s Grace and Our Present Suffering

There is a question which people usually ask. “If God is good and gracious why do people suffer?” In this question one reads that some people think that the grace of God should prevent them from suffering.<sup>25</sup> There are people who go to the church or join Christianity as religion, running away from suffering. To their surprise, while they are in the church, suffering comes or continues. And some of them become frustrated and hate God. Wes Moore tells us about these frustrations. He tells about Ted Turner who once planned to be a Christian missionary but turned away from Christianity and became a vocal atheist because he failed to find the answer when asking: Why did my sister die? Wes Moore reads the report from *The National Review* which says that Turner prayed for his sister an hour a day but for in vain. “She used to run around in pain, begging God to let her die,” Turner recalled. “My family broke apart. I thought, ‘How could God let my sister suffer so much?’”<sup>26</sup> People like Turner are in the church for wrong reasons. They did not want to join hands with other in enduring suffering. They want “a suffering-free-community” in this world. When reality strikes they show their true colors.<sup>27</sup>

Some people think that the grace of God should make them immune from suffering. “For those who believe in a loving God, death and suffering is one of the most difficult issues to deal with. If you view God as love, how can you reconcile evil, suffering and death? How can you answer Mr. Turner’s very valid question: How

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<sup>23</sup>Kesler, J. 1988. Vol. 13: “Being holy, being human: Dealing with the expectations of ministry.” *The Leadership library* (CTI; Word Books: Carol Stream, Ill.; Waco, TX), 70.

<sup>24</sup> The “quick solve culture” is the culture that wants to solve the problem quickly and without hard work.

<sup>25</sup> Piper John, on his work on this subject, “Why God Appoints for His Servants”, asks the positive “why”. He argues from the biblical point of view that God has good reason in letting His servant suffer.

<sup>26</sup> Wes Moore, in *Christian Reader*, Internet, Nov. 15, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> I use to remind church members while burring Christians that people who come to the church thinking that they are not going to suffer and die in this world have the wrong reason of coming to the church. I remind them that many Christians with that wrong motive of being Christians backslide before their earthly death arrives because they have no idea of endurance.

could God allow my sister to suffer so much?” Kesler’s<sup>28</sup> illustration on how the grace works nail the point of grace and suffering very well. The grace of God does not mean that God does everything for us while we do nothing. God does not want rob us the gifts he has given us. He wants us to be involved in his work of creation and re-creation. Even before sin came in this world, God gave people the responsibility to subdue and manage the earth (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). After the fall a person was re-mandated to subdue the cursed (Gen. 3:17; 9:1).

The grace of God does not mean that God has to spoon feed us, but that he teaches us how to feed ourselves through his grace. Kesler<sup>29</sup> tells us about his friend. “I have a friend who should be a good mechanic but who can’t even change a tire on his car. Why? Because his father was a master mechanic, and every time the son started to do something with a tool as a boy, as soon as he made the smallest mistake, the father would grab the tool out of his hand and do the job ‘right.’ Now this son is totally inept with any kind of tool.”

The grace of God makes us to “emulate” God. As we walk and talk with him our walk and talk are also moving each day towards that of God’s. We learn from God how to solve the problem. Kerler goes on to discuss the issue of his friend: “There’s a sense in which a large part of the glory of any father is in his son’s ability to emulate him — to walk and talk and work and think like him. Yet my friend can’t emulate his father’s mechanical skill at all. If God stepped in and solved every tough situation at the first sign of trouble, we likewise would be weak and ineffective, incapable of emulating our Father. The result would be no glory to God, but just the opposite instead.” It glorifies God when fallible people are equipped to deal with suffering and pain. It means that God is within the people carrying that heavy load.

The grace of God teaches us to look at suffering from the positive perspective which helps us to cope with suffering in positive terms. “That is, coping isn’t a matter of struggling and reconciling yourself to failure. Rather, it’s an acknowledgment that God has us in a

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<sup>28</sup> Kesler, J. 1988. Vol. 13: “Being holy, being human: Dealing with the expectations of ministry.” *The Leadership Library* (CTI; Word Books: Carol Stream, Ill.; Waco, TX), 72-73.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

developmental process. He's in the business of slowly but surely, throughout our lifetimes, conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup> The positive side of suffering is that God uses it to purify his people (1 Pet. 1:7). Suffering's chief goal is make those in the Lord stronger in faith.

#### **IV. How Does God's Grace and Living in Gracious Community Help Us Endure Our Present Suffering**

##### **A. God Created a Human Being with View of Community**

God created people with a view that they must be a community. People should understand why God created two people with a command to fill the earth and subdue it. One reason is that they should help each other even in that sinless earth. The ideal community of God is envisioned in the wellbeing of God and in his creation. God is one but is in plural as He talks to himself saying “Let *us* make man in *our* image” (Gen. 1:26 NIV, italics mine). Look, God does not say “Let *me* make man in *my* image”. This plurality of God is the strong foundation of community. It tells us that GOD IS NOT ALONE nor LONELY.

The creation story reveals God's plan of the community of grace in a glorious way. The change from the singular to plural in the creation of a human being suggests a gracious community. Then God said, “‘Let us make *man* in our image, in our likeness, and let *them* rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created *man* in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*; *male and female* he created *them*.” (Gen. 1:26-27, NIV italics mine). It is simple to note the change of the language from “*man*” to “*them*”, from “*man*” to “*male and female*”, and from “*him*” to “*them*”. This is God's plan and action of creation. The last result is the gracious community.

God commanded that the man and woman he created should form community because the work before them needs community to be done. As it is stated, “let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the

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<sup>30</sup> Kesler, J. 1988. Vol. 13: “Being holy, being human: Dealing with the expectations of ministry.” *The Leadership library* (CTI; Word Books: Carol Stream, Ill.; Waco, TX).

creatures that move along the ground.” To work on the land and take care of it is a big work. It needs a community.<sup>31</sup> God blessed and commanded the people to ““Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”” (Gen. 1:28, NIV). This task is summed up in Genesis 2:15 as to “work it and take care of it.” It goes without saying that before the fall this was not a painful task because there were no sweating to get food (Gen. 3:17-19). But still it needed community.

The same blessing and command, of becoming a task oriented community, came again after the great flood. “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (Gen. 9:1-3).

These passages sum up that in order for an individual to endure suffering he or she needs the community. A person cannot do it alone. He or she needs other people who co-carry his or her burden. Gracious community has “support-groups.”<sup>32</sup> Shelly illustrates what the support groups do to individuals which can be helpful to people who are suffering so that they can endure. In a church, support groups service as unit family. The church as a community of grace serves as a family where everyone finds warmth and comfort. The church is a functional family where every type of hurt or suffering is healed by the warmth and comfort of the gracious community. The church, therefore, needs to be a family, in order to be a healing balm. The communal principle of the church is that there should be no stranger in the church; if she wants her members endure suffering.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. for more Vhavenda expressions on how people need each other in DR Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective*, (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), p. 162.

<sup>32</sup> Shelley, M. 1997. Vol. 3: “Building your church through counsel and care: 30 strategies to transform your ministry.” *Library of Leadership Development* (Bethany House: Minneapolis, Minn.), 166-169.

God has given the church many gifts, as the body has many members with different gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). So, the church is formed by people from different backgrounds and who have undergone different sufferings and experiences. God has let them go through these fires to purify them so that they may be of the service of the body of Christ (1 Peter 1:6-7). The body image of the church means that no member lives for himself or herself. Every member thinks of others. The church is the community that is commanded not to look only to its interests but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4).

The idea of support groups in the church is to form small communities within the big community with common problems or experiences. People suffering from the same type of suffering like divorce, cancer, and others, can group themselves to share and serve each other.

The body of Christ model is the model which pictures Church ministry as teamwork. In this model church members form a team with church office bearers. Every member is a player. There is no spectator, as everyone has gifts for the whole team. The point of team work is that no church member should suffer alone. In the soccer pitch team mates share the ball as they move it towards opponent's goal post at the same time they prevent or defend it from coming to their goal posts. These team mates need different skills in the team like running, controlling and striking the ball according to their positions or tasks.

The church community as a gracious community should use all the gifts or talents God has given it. Church members come to the church with heritage that can be utilized to enhance the kingdom of the God. Healing should be seen from holistic point of view, not from a single point of view. It means that in order that the community be a healing community, it must be as healthy as possible. The sick community may hurt its members rather than heal them. God creates a healthy community that heals the suffering.

A gracious community works all the time rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. It does not wait for suffering to crop out. It must be vibrate all the time in other communal activities.

Every community member should do what he or she can in life all the time. In this way the community is alive. When the suffering world asks, “Who cares?” The answer should be, “The church does, in more ways than one.”<sup>33</sup>

## **B. Ways in Which God’s Grace Helps Us to Endure Present Suffering**

God’s grace does not stop pain like pain killers. People in God’s grace still feel pain but God’s grace enable them to endure it. Let us not make a mistake and think that a person can befriend pain. But there are some ways in which God’s grace can help us endure suffering.

### **1. Suffering Is Not the End in Itself**

The first way in which God’s grace helps us to endure suffering is that grace teaches us that suffering is not end in itself. Christians have been called to a bigger and better goal. They are called to a full comfort in the house of the Lord. They are called to be with the Lord for eternity. Christians are marching to Zion, the beautiful city of God (Heb. 12:22). They are strangers in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).<sup>34</sup> Suffering helps them to be prepared and be matured for that big goal (Jer. 34:3; Rom. 5:1-5; Prov. 3:11-12; 1 Cor. 11:32). Therefore suffering from a Christian perspective should be seen in a positive way. It should be counted as joy (James 1:2-4; Rom. 5:3-5; 1 Peter 1:6-7). The joy while suffering does not mean that there is no pain as it is viewed in masochistic point of view. The joy in suffering is not taking pleasure in pain but in the end results of pain – “the future reward beyond pain”. The joy is “eschatological anticipated joy.”<sup>35</sup> It is not the joy on the present suffering but the anticipated joy and its foretaste. The joy in suffering is a joy while a person is suffering as Jesus teaches Christians. “. . . Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven” (Mat. 5:11-12). The goal oriented view of Christian suffering makes people to rejoice in pain. Kaiser tells how

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<sup>33</sup> Shelley, M. 1997. Vol. 3: “Building your church through counsel and care: 30 strategies to transform your ministry.” *Library of Leadership Development* (Bethany House: Minneapolis, Minn.), 169.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. a brief exposition of pain in the book of 1 Peter in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 97-98.

<sup>35</sup> Kaiser, W. C. 1997, c1996. *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity), 693-4.

athletes view their pain. “Athletes may run or lift weights to the point of pain, but all the time their eyes are set on the big race or game. They rejoice not in the enjoyment of the stress but in the knowledge that their muscles are growing stronger and therefore they will do better when it counts.”<sup>36</sup>

## 2. Christian Worship and Life Is Praise and Lament<sup>37</sup>

The second way in which God’s grace helps us to endure suffering is that it teaches us that “Christians rejoice even while they truly experience sorrow . . . because their rejoicing is in the hope of heaven . . . While joy overcomes sorrow, it does not put an end to it.”<sup>38</sup> Normally it is difficult to understand that Christianity is the religion of pain. People easily accept that Christianity is the religion of joy, peace and happiness. Some people view Christianity as the religion of praising God without lament. They forget or ignore living under the cross as the Bible indicates the Cross is part of Christian life. The cross is the centre of Christianity. From the time human race fell into sin, life has been characterized by suffering and pain (Gen. 3:16-19). Jesus Christ the Savior has been characterized as the suffering servant (Is. 53). Christ implies that Christians will suffer when he says: “For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:31, NIV). The Word of God goes to link Christians with Christ’s suffering: “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.” (2 Cor. 1:5-6, NIV).

The book of Acts gives us the evidences of Christian joy and suffering which demonstrates the wonderful acts of the Holy Spirit. Christians, while praise God, also suffer illness and die. Paulo tells us about his suffering from persecution and illness (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. a brief exposition of praise and lament in the book of Psalms in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 92-93.

<sup>38</sup> “Suffering - Understanding the Love of God”: A Commentary of John Calvin’s numerous sermons on the topic of Suffering, as compiled and commented on by Joseph Hill (chap. one, purpose; number 9).

4:7-12; 11:23-29; 12:1-10). Suffering reminds Christians about the eternal glory which is waiting them (1 Cor. 4:17). The lament is for short time, and then comes the endless praises, which is joy, unspeakable joy! Without suffering a Christian has missed the true Christianity because the wiping of tears would not be for all Christians (Rev. 21:4). The expectation is that God will wipe away tears from all Christians' eyes. Suffering should remind the church the resurrection and new life in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15). The mortal body will be immortal.

### **3. Christians Should Avoid Suffering from their Sinful Behavior**

The third way in which God's grace helps us to endure suffering is that it teaches us that Christians should regret suffering because of their sinful behavior. "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler" (1 Peter 4:15 NIV). This is the suffering due to the course of justice. The community may not welcome a person as a murderer or a thief. Endurance of suffering does not cover this type of suffering. Under these circumstances a person has to change the life style rather than endure that type of suffering. Praise, be the name of the Lord who by his grace begets us in his family. We continually take off the old nature and take on the new nature (Eph. 4:20-28). God's grace encourages people to endure suffering for good causes, not for evil causes.

## **C. Ways in which Living in the Gracious Community Helps Us to Endure Present Suffering**

### **1. Unity of Community Helps People Endure Suffering**

A gracious community is a community that is united in Christ. To be united in Christ is the basis of the gracious community. The unity of the community is a reality in all communities to a certain degree whether they confess Christ as Lord or not. People in a community are united in real love and peace. The general grace has planted the seed of the truth in their culture or way of life.<sup>39</sup> God left his witness

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Phaswana DR discusses a Vhavenda model of communal counselling in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 210-22.

to all people, even when the name of Christ is not mentioned.<sup>40</sup> The biblical truth of general grace means that all good things in cultures are the work of the grace of God regardless the community believes in it or not.<sup>41</sup>

The special grace adds to the common grace in that the seed of the truth becomes clearer and made cleaned or reformed each day when the community openly confess Christ as Lord. Hence a community of believers is united through Christ in a special and an intimate way.

The unity of community helps the people in that they bear each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2). One's suffering is the suffering of the whole community.

## **2. Church of Christ as a Gracious Community Helps People to Endure Suffering**

The church is the visible act of the special grace. The special grace forms a community when the Holy Spirit, through the Word, brings Christ in the life of the community and they accept the truth as revealed in the Bible against all falsehood of the world. It also means that the community becomes the body of Christ. Each member is the member of that body of Christ, and has been given the gifts to build up the body. Every member of the gracious community is active, and has the responsibility set for him or her. In general no member of the gracious community lives for himself or herself, but lives for others (Phil. 2:4). Each member helps others to "find God's grace, mercy and good news."

The symbol of eating together the body and drinking the blood of Christ reveals the unity in Christ. The unity in the body and blood demonstrate that the bonds are really strong. In the Holy Communion, believers share the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The members of the gracious community are called to "love one another" as Jesus Christ loved them (John 13:34). In the "loving one

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<sup>40</sup>Cf. the discussions on the general grace in people's cultures in Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin's comment on Titus 1: 10-13 confirms that the truth from ungodly people is from God the source of truth: "From this passage we may gather that it is superstitious to refuse to make any use of secular authors. For since all truth is of God, if any ungodly man has said anything true, we should not reject it, for it also has come from God," (John Calvin Commentary, 363-364).

another” suffering is made bearable. As the community continue in loving one another the suffering becomes easy to carry. Suffering, by nature is not endurable, but through gracious community it can be endured.

We learn what the community teaches about loving one another as we study how Jesus Christ loves us.

The gracious community helps people to endure suffering by building each other up. We see this in the Christ’s earthly ministry. He built his Church from sinners. He walked along the coast, in town streets, and offices calling people to be his disciples. He built them up as he promised “I will make you fishers of men” if you follow me. The community formed from this ministry could not live otherwise but to “build each other up” (1 Thes. 5:11). The immediate context of this text is that Christ builds his church even at the last day, the Day of the Lord. Because of this work of Christ, believers have to build each other up. Believers are not separated from each other, but “live together with him” (1 Thes. 5:10 NIV). Every believer is next to another believer. The purpose is to “encourage and build each other up”. Jesus was his disciples focused. He taught them the Word of God, he prayed for them, he cared for their pain and suffering. He made sure that they grow from lower level to the upper level. At the end of his earthly ministry he could tell them: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (John 15:3, NIV).

The church is not built by one person but by each member of the church. This is done by seeing to it that no member of the church has “a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12, NIV). The Hebrews’ author continues to exhort believers: “But encourage one another daily ... so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13, NIV). Each member in the gracious community is given a spiritual gift for the edification of the community. The gifts complement each other. If one member fails to serve he or she has failed the whole community because the talent which is given to build up the community is hidden.

Jesus did not only build up his church but he also looks out for the best interest of his church. He cared for his church. Jesus did not look for his interest but the interest of his sheep. He laid down his life for his sheep unlike the hired hand (John 10:11-12). The laying down his life for the sake of his sheep is explained clearly in that he did not

hang on his heavenly throne but became a human being even the lower of the lowest because he became a servant (Phil. 2:5-8). It is on this basis that the gracious community is called to look to the interest of others (Phil. 2:4). This passage recognizes that each person has interests, but do not first satisfy his or her interests because that will not give him or her time to meet others' interests. Members of gracious community do not say: I am suffering too therefore I will not care for others who are suffering. They do not reason that way. Even in their suffering their interest is to help others. They want that no one should parish. Hence their focus is the future.

Jesus came into this world and lived, but without sin. But he suffered in a way that he "had no form" or "beauty" (Is. 53:2). He bore our sins to the extent that he was sentenced to death for our sake. We were supposed to die but he died so that we may live. As a gracious community we are supposed to bear each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2). One member's burden is my burden. The sickness of one member is my sickness. This principle let a gracious community help each other in love.

Jesus' ministry teaches us that we should be kind to each other. When you read the gospel you can be attracted by his kindness to the people. The picture is that "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). He fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he comforted the bereaved, he preached good news to the lost and the list can go on. He build the spirit of "being kind to each other" in the community. Believers have to offer hospitality to each other happily (1 Peter 4:9). There were many reasons that made Christians move from one city to another. One reason was persecution which is linked to suffering. Hospitality made them able to endure their suffering. We are living at the age of HIV and AIDS. In some communities people infected with HI virus are pushed aside due to stigma attached to it. The gracious community has a different attitude: to be kind to all. Jesus sat down with sinners and tax collectors, ate with them and taught them (Luke 15:1-2). He ate with the untouchable and touched them openly to confront the Jewish tradition.

The Word of God is full of illustrations that show that the gracious community can incarnate Jesus Christ to people who are suffering. Here are some of them: Honor and respect one another

(Rom. 12:10). Serve each other (Gal. 5:13). Admonish one another (Col. 3:16; Rom. 15:14). Confess your sins to each other (James 5:16). Forgive each other (Eph. 4:32). Think of one another (Heb. 10:24). Do not judge each other (Rom. 15:13). Accept each other (Rom. 14:1; 15:7). Do not stand in each other's way (Rom. 15:13). Regard each other as more important than oneself (Phil. 2:3) and others.

### **V. Gracious Community Enhance Holistic Healing**

A gracious community is an important instrument of enduring and healing suffering because it depends on many gifts. It brings holistic healing.<sup>42</sup> The community touches the whole human life. It does not focus on one aspect on the expense of the other. In fact it sees a person as a whole not in parts like body and soul. A person is one! Hence healing should cover the whole person.

There are mainly two relationships in people's lives. They are vertical and horizontal relationships. These relationships can only be distinguished but not separated. They are also self-explanatory. The vertical relationship is the relationship with God. On the other hand the horizontal relationship is the relationship with the creation which includes other people. The Great Commandment focuses on these two relationships as the whole love to God and loving other people as one loves himself or herself. These two relationships need to be healed when the healing is to be classified as holistic.

Suffering can holistically be healed or endured when the relationship with God is restored through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to save the lost. The relationship with God is restored when people receive and believe in the forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ. This makes people to listen and speak to God without hindrance (Is. 59:2).

The horizontal relationship is as important as the vertical relationship. People cannot love God while they hate each other (1 John 4:20). People's true love to God should drive them to true love to other people and the whole creation. The same applies to true love

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<sup>42</sup> Communal healing is holistic. Cf. Dr. Phaswana, *Communal Pastoral and Counselling: Culturally Gifted Care-Giving in Times of Family Pain—A Vhavenda Perspective* (Pretoria UNISA Dissertation, 2008), 159-63.

to God's creation should drive people to love God the Creator (Rom. 1:20).

Every event in gracious community is the stimulation to endure suffering which people are facing. The songs of the gracious community are praises and laments asking God to heal the land and its people. There is a need to heal the whole earth for people to have holistic healing.

### **Conclusion**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an illustration that suffering and death is for this age. The time is coming when death will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). People are invited to endure so that they will enjoy the new earth and new heaven prepared for them by the heaven Father (Rev. 20:1). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 20:4, NIV). People who believe in this glorious future do not stop trusting God because they now that great blessing is awaiting them (Rom. 8:18). Christians live by faith not by sight! (2 Cor. 5:7). The suffering does not derail them because though they can feel it they do not live by it, but they live by faith (2 Cor. 5:7).



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