


# Hebrews 5:5–10: A synthesis for the hermeneutical challenge in Pentecostalism on suffering?



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Pentecostals adopt a distinct hermeneutical approach when reading and interpreting the Bible, emphasising the New Testament more than the Old Testament and, when they do engage the Old Testament, are more inclined to focus on narratives of victory, success and triumph, which align with their emphasis on triumphalistic faith. Conversely, texts addressing lament, suffering, persecution and defeat receive less attention in Pentecostal hermeneutics. It is important to recognise the perplexity that not all prayers are answered, not all Christians succeed and sometimes believers endure severe hardships without expecting any change in their circumstances. Hebrews 5:5–10 is a passage that discourages the suffering of the Messiah and how he achieved perfection through suffering. This text may serve as an exemplum to challenge Pentecostals to consider a new hermeneutical approach when dealing with texts on suffering. Pentecostals often read the Bible with the expectation to share in the same spiritual experiences as the biblical characters, particularly focusing on breakthroughs and victories. However, the message in Hebrews 5:5–10, on the suffering Messiah, may invite Pentecostals to reconsider their emphasis on triumphalism and to engage with biblical themes of suffering and perseverance.

**Contribution:** This article aims to provide Christian believers, particularly Pentecostal believers, with an alternative perspective on suffering. It emphasises that suffering does not necessarily indicate a deficiency in faith or prayer. By reconsidering their hermeneutical approach to biblical texts on suffering, Pentecostals can find meaningful insights and perspectives to help them navigate their experiences of suffering.

**Keywords:** prosperity; suffering; healing; Pentecostalism; Pentecostal hermeneutics; theodicies; triumphalism.

## Introduction

Pentecostals tend to have a specific hermeneutical approach when reading the Bible and tend to place a bigger emphasis on the New Testament than the Old Testament. When reading the Old Testament, they are more inclined to focus on narratives that emphasise triumphalistic faith and tend to ignore texts on suffering and defeat. Triumphalistic faith is interpreted through the lens of the conquering Christ and the Holy Spirit's power. The neglect of texts concerning suffering raises, however, pragmatic concerns (Archer 2005:198; Fettke & Dusing 2016:162; Maré 2008:7, 96–97).

This article is an attempt to caution Pentecostals against proclaiming an overly simplified message of triumphalism, that might fail to provide adequate pastoral support for individuals experiencing enduring suffering. While the possibility of miracles and healings is not questioned, the sobering truth is that not all prayers yield desired outcomes, not all Christians succeed, and some endure profound hardship without foreseeable alleviation.

While Pentecostals have an honest intention to interpret the Bible as God's Word, there are those in the Pentecostal and Charismatic tradition who are guilty of misinterpreting the Bible, and in doing so causing irreparable damage to the message of the gospel and the Pentecostal ethos. This is particularly true of the so-called 'prosperity gospel'. Proponents of the prosperity gospel argue that believers should enjoy a life filled with abundance and that every sickness will be healed. Suffering is mostly explained as temporary and short-lived, or as an attack from the enemy that can be neutralised by faith, prayer and God's miraculous intervention (Anderson 1987:76; Kgatle 2021:143; Mbamalu 2015:1, 2).

Pentecostals therefore need to be cautious not to engage the Bible selectively, particularly by ignoring texts on suffering, which is an existential reality, but rather considering possible alternative interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

## Pentecostal hermeneutics

The expression *Pentecostal hermeneutics* is rather problematic in that Pentecostalism, as a global phenomenon, encompasses many expressions ranging from classical Pentecostalism to Neo-Pentecostalism.<sup>2</sup>

There is no consensus on a single definition of Pentecostalism and, as such, no single definition of Pentecostal hermeneutics (Keener 2016:30; Nel 2017:86). However, there is consensus on the unique manner in which Pentecostals view and interpret the Bible, by regarding it as a 'living book in which the Holy Spirit is always actively working'. God can therefore be encountered on every page, and the activities of God, as depicted in the Bible, are argued to continue to this day (Maré 2008:7).

When Pentecostals read the Bible, there is an underlying anticipation that they will share the same encounters with God that biblical characters had, especially when facing challenges and difficulties. The biblical texts may, through the Spirit be translated for the contemporary reader in a new, current and revising way, giving a new meaning for a new context. Seeking experiences similar to those in biblical times, Pentecostals want to answer both questions: What did the text mean then, and what does it mean now? For Pentecostals, the challenge of doing hermeneutics is to take the biblical text from the 'there and then', and find God's message and meaning within the 'here and now' (Maré 2008:8; Nel 2022:17).

To arrive at specific contemporary conclusions and interpretations, Pentecostals utilise a 'pneumatic Pentecostal hermeneutic' where the Spirit mediates revelation, interpretation and application. This necessitates pneumatic encounters with God in the Bible, with the expectation that the events in the Bible will be reenacted by the Spirit, especially in the form of wonders and miracles. While Pentecostals, like most Protestants, confess that the Bible is the measure that determines faith and practice, they also constitute their doctrines in terms of their experiences with God (Archer 2005:328; Nel 2022:3, 17, 89).

When reading the Bible, Pentecostals search for a personal experience and encounter with God, which underlines their pneumatic hermeneutical approach and argues that, without such an approach, the Bible would become mere cognitive

1.The author is an ordained minister of the Apostolic Faith Mission, the largest Pentecostal denomination in South Africa and has been in ministry for 38 years. This article is therefore a critical reflection on some practices and approaches within the Pentecostal tradition when interpreting the existential reality of suffering. While the author is aware of some newer movements in Pentecostalism, Pentecostalism and Pentecostals will, for the purpose of this article, refer to classical Pentecostalism.

2.There is consensus that Pentecostalism generally includes classical Pentecostal denominations as well as independent charismatic movements, also known as Neo-Pentecostalism, because of the views on the Holy Spirit, such as continuationism, the Gifts of the Spirit and the speaking in tongues (De Beer 2020:4).

and intellectual information. Pentecostals read the Bible to inform their spirituality, basing their interpretation largely on what they experience. Their approach to the Bible is not primarily to gain historical or dogmatic information but relies on the experiential aspect. This experiential aspect provides the language to define their encounters with God, and cultivate an expectation of these experiences (Archer 2005:328; Nel 2017:89).

The predominant approach among contemporary classical Pentecostal congregants and clergy also involves a fundamentalist literalist approach to Bible reading, contributing to the Pentecostal understanding of suffering in the biblical text. Although Pentecostals engage with the Bible through a four-step process, namely observing, interpreting, evaluating and correlating the text with their personal experiences, they simultaneously adhere to a strictly literal interpretation. Contemporary Pentecostals are also more influenced by fundamentalism than by the paramodern hermeneutics of early Pentecostals (Nel 2021:68, 74–75).

Fundamentalism is characterised as a religious stance prevalent in conservative circles, where the Bible is regarded as the ultimate source of authority, verbally inerrant and notably exclusivist and sectarian. This view is in stark contrast with the ethos of Pentecostal spirituality and hermeneutics. However, a large number of Pentecostals have adopted fundamentalist Bible reading practices, without contemplating the inherent contradiction this poses to their ethos. Pentecostals furthermore tend to interpret the Bible in terms of typology and allegory, applying the perceived meaning literally and immediately to their contemporary context (Nel 2017:93, 2024:3).

By accentuating the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as found in the New Testament and more specifically the narratives in the Gospels and Acts, and the selective use of the Old Testament, Pentecostals then therefore tend to communicate a message of triumphalism (Maré 2008:7; Nel 2017:90). While emphasising the authority of the Bible, in practice they are very selective in their use of the Bible, rarely giving attention to texts on suffering, such as the Psalms of lament, which express experiences of suffering in life. While Pentecostals argue that God can be encountered on all its pages, they subjectively seem to avoid texts on suffering (Maré 2008:6).

## Texts on suffering as an existential reality: The conundrum for Pentecostalism

Pentecostal language is filled with accounts of dramatic healings and miracles, affirming and legitimising Pentecostal doctrines and practices. Physical healing is argued by Pentecostals as available to all in the same way that salvation is available to all. Pentecostals place a far greater emphasis on healing than any other theological and Christian tradition, and dogmatically argue that Christ not only died for sin but also for sickness (Bosman & Theron 2006:1, 3).

While it is proclaimed that healing and miracles are available to everyone, the reality is that not all are healed or experience a miracle when suffering; as such, some may experience internal spiritual conflict and self-doubt. Fettke and Dusing (2016:163) point out that this internal spiritual conflict and self-doubt is intensified by a one-dimensional theology, that always proclaims healing and miracles. Prevalent in Pentecostal theology is the so-called 'prosperity gospel' arguing that believers are assured and entitled to prosperity, triumphalism and healing, due to them 'living in the power of the Spirit'.

Those who do not experience what is proclaimed are sometimes blamed for a lack of faith and are exhorted to keep on believing, despite the apparent non-answer to their prayers, or are adjudged as 'unspiritual', and then marginalised or ignored within their community of faith. This situation has resulted in numerous disillusionments, self-doubt and spiritual conflicts for Pentecostals who struggle with illness and suffering (Fettke & Dusing 2016:163; Kgatele 2021:143; Mbamalu 2015:2). Pentecostals should therefore honestly engage with the question of suffering, and avoid a one-dimensional interpretation of the Bible, as pointed out by Kärkkäinen (2004:150), who argues this misconception of the Christian message. He alludes to the construct of *overcoming*, which has become a characteristic of Pentecostal preaching that introduced an idealistic concept: that Christian living is always victorious with spiritual power to overcome life's challenges. This has sometimes led to fatuousness, such as withholding medicine from a dying child. The emphasis on triumphalism has led to unrealistic expectations for positive outcomes in various aspects of life. When those outcomes did not materialise, despite high expectations and prayers, it led to significant disappointment, confusion and even a crisis of faith, or eventually giving up on their faith (Kärkkäinen 2004:150).

When Brueggemann (1984:11) argues that 'much Christian piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its positiveness', it is especially true for some Pentecostals, who advocate that faith implies never acknowledging the negative aspects of life when one is faced with pain and suffering, even when one experiences negative emotions (Maré 2008:6).

## Perfection through suffering: Hebrews 5:5–10: A new Pentecostal hermeneutic?

If Pentecostals want to be spiritually relevant in a world where suffering is a reality, they need to engage meaningfully with texts on suffering. Kärkkäinen (2004:150) rightly points out that Pentecostal preachers hardly address the issue of prayers not being answered, and that Pentecostal or charismatic publications seldom engage in candid reflection on real-life scenarios when prayer remains unanswered.

There is a tendency among some Pentecostals, when they do experience suffering, to view it as either a lack of faith or attacks from the devil. However, Pentecostals also need to

reconsider other interpretations of suffering, by engaging in a new Pentecostal hermeneutical approach to texts on suffering, and not be reluctant to honestly engage with the mystery of suffering. Chan (2000) sadly underlines this unwillingness of Pentecostals to venture into this discourse when he says:

[In] the mystical way the devout soul must pass through the *dark night* of the soul and spirit, between illumination and union. But Pentecostals have no place in their schema for the *dark night*. (p. 75)

Pentecostals will have to be cautious not to address suffering in an overly simplistic manner, as it may result in internal spiritual conflict. It is essential to provide mechanisms to assist suffering Pentecostal believers in logically processing their experiences, particularly when they feel that they do possess faith and trust in God, concerning their circumstances.

Research in neuro-related brain sciences has shown that, while a practical response to suffering offers some pastoral possibilities, it does not create sufficient space to make the experience of suffering meaningful within the whole of human existence. There should be a spiritual environment where the believer can cognitively process suffering, to facilitate meaningful actions when experiencing suffering. One of the greatest fears in humankind is not being able to make sense of, or find meaning in the happenings and experiences of life. The need for meaning in times of suffering is an involuntary and automatic process of the brain that occurs spontaneously throughout life (Lamprecht 2016:1–2).

The need for Pentecostals to engage with suffering from a spiritual and cognitive approach is further underlined by Lamprecht (2016:5), when he argues that the disorienting experience of suffering, which entails pain, death and evil, has the potential to threaten frameworks of meaning. This happens when there is no sense of meaning between the experience and the 'what?', or 'why?' of the experience. The theoretical question 'why?', coupled with the equally complex question 'why, God?', does not get answered by responding with compassionate silence. Although this has some pastoral value, the brain fundamentally asks for a theoretical framework of meaning, that can calm the aversive brain processes (Lamprecht 2016:5).

To address the tension between the promise of victory and its actualisation meaningfully, it is necessary to re-evaluate the communication of the gospel, including the message of healing within Pentecostalism, and honestly engage in a new hermeneutical approach with texts on suffering (Bosman & Theron 2006:3).

A complex debate will always be about why a loving God allows suffering. Although a clear answer remains elusive, the believer is never alone in their suffering, as God serves as an empathetic companion, fully aware of human affliction. The study of theodicy is therefore relevant, exclusively to the devoted believer who sincerely acknowledges both the benevolent and omnipotent nature of God, while also

recognising the existence of evil (Du Rand 2011:534). Hebrews proclaims that the Messiah attained obedience through suffering, thereby fostering empathy with humanity. Pentecostals, in their hermeneutical examination of texts concerning suffering and the theodicy discourse, should thus consider alternative perspectives, such as the notions of Christomorphism and cruciform theology, while reflecting on a theodicy that aligns with Jesus' crucifixion, as both representatives of and interconnected with the suffering of believers. These aspects will be addressed later on.

Nel (2022:19) points out that the majority of Pentecostals endorse the biblical perspectives that ascribe suffering to retributive justice as a consequence of human sin, and regard it as a means of testing, shaping and refining the character of believers. Nel (2022:19), however, argues that a new Pentecostal hermeneutics needs to start with God's character and the revelation of salvation. When Pentecostals read the Bible in terms of their experience of God's presence, Nel claims it can present intriguing new ways of thinking about God's role in human and other sufferings.

Hebrews 5:5–10 is a text on the suffering Messiah and exemplifies the Messiah achieving perfection through suffering. I would argue that this text can challenge Pentecostals to a new hermeneutical exercise when Pentecostals read the Bible with the underlying anticipation that they will also share the same spiritual experiences that biblical characters had. This is particularly true when engaging the Bible as a means to find answers to challenges, difficulties and questions in life.

## Exegesis of Hebrews 5:5–10

Before commencing the exegesis of the text, I will first offer a few observations regarding the employed methodology. I fully acknowledge the significant contributions of various critical approaches, such as historical, literary and rhetorical analysis. The sources consulted in my exegesis encompass these diverse methodologies. While I agree with the view that the issue of suffering in Hebrews can also pertain to the persecution of early Christians, I will also argue that the existential reality of suffering, in the lives of contemporary believers, substantiates the relevance of the text. Hebrews 5:5–10 discusses the exalted Messiah, who was also the suffering Messiah, who learned obedience and attained perfection through his sufferings. In their search for answers to struggles and suffering, Pentecostals read the Bible with an underlying expectation of experiencing the same encounters as the biblical figures. My reading of the text is therefore primarily concerned with its theological implications, as they pertain to the central problem addressed in this article. The following approach will entail a close reading and baseline interpretation of the text and an examination of the existing scholarly commentary. From this, I will derive my conclusions and arguments:

Hebrews 5:5 In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'.

Hebrews 5:6 And he says in another place, 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek' (NIV).

Hebrews 5:1–4 states the exemplary status of a high priest who did not appoint himself but was taken from among humans, and appointed on behalf of humans by God. Hebrews 5:5 emphasises that Jesus not only fulfilled the qualifications of a high priest but surpassed them, as affirmed by Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4. The glory attributed to the Son is defined by his role as the 'radiance of God's glory' (Heb 1:3), superior to the angels (Heb 1:4) 'crowned with glory' (Heb 2:7, 9), worthy of greater honour than Moses (Heb 3:3), the one to whom glory is ascribed 'forever and ever' (Heb 13:21; France 2006:110; Guthrie 1998:250; Stedman 1992:40; Thompson 2008:108).

The glory bestowed upon the Son in his appointment to the high priesthood is indicated by Psalm 110:4 and is the acclamation of his special status. With this introduction to the elevated status of the Son and how Jesus meets the first qualification, the author of Hebrews follows the rabbinic hermeneutical principle of *gezera shewa* by connecting the two passages that begin with 'you are' (Guthrie 1998:250; Johnson 2006:144; Thompson 2008:108).

By referencing Psalm 110:4, the author aims to assert that Jesus holds the position of high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, thereby distinguishing him from all high priests within the Levitical system. The Hebrew author is the only New Testament author who uses this text, and makes more references to Psalm 110:4 than the Old Testament, quoting it three times and referring to Melchizedek eight times. Melchizedek was a Canaanite priest-king who had a singular encounter with Abraham (Gn 14:17–20). Melchizedek is described as the 'king of Salem' and 'priest of God Most High', who brought out 'bread and wine' (Gn 14:18) and blessed Abraham, who in return 'gave him a tenth of everything'. The only other place where Melchizedek is subsequently mentioned in the Old Testament is in Psalm 110:1–4, where he is depicted as the king seated at God's right hand, administering justice and serving as a 'priest forever after the order of Melchizedek' (Allen 2010:341; Thompson 2008:144).

Melchizedek first of all, was a priest, but he was also a king. This reference to the office of a priest-king contrasts with the tradition that mandated kings and priests originate from different tribes. While the concept of a 'priest-king' did occur once in the Hasmonean times, Jews were opposed to such a combination. They advocated the separation of the anointed high priest from the anointed king (Messiah), with the priest coming from the Levitical priestly line and the king from Judah. Melchizedek was, however, not from the Levitical, nor the Jewish priestly line (Keener 2014:646; Thompson 2008:144).

Much more is written about Melchizedek in Jewish tradition than in the Old Testament, and the extensive literature in Jewish tradition about Melchizedek is most likely the reason



for the author's reference (Thompson 2008:144). In Jewish literature, Rabbinic interpreters identify Melchizedek with Shem, the son of Noah and assert that Melchizedek reassigned the priesthood to Abraham, thereby establishing a line of descent from Israel's patriarch to Aaron. Additionally, Melchizedek is credited with inaugurating temple worship in Jerusalem (Thompson 2008:144). Philo of Alexandria also cited Melchizedek to emphasise the importance of tithing and offerings, arguing an allegorical interpretation of the bread and wine brought out by Melchizedek, given the reference 'king of righteousness' and 'king of peace', and inferring that Melchizedek was the divine logos (Thompson 2008:144).

In apocalyptic literature, Melchizedek is portrayed as a heavenly figure, enacting justice on God's behalf and as an eschatological redeemer, ensuring freedom for those held captive by the power of Belial. The heavenly Melchizedek mobilises the forces of good against the forces of evil. In other apocalyptic texts, Melchizedek's role is notably similar to that of Michael, who is also responsible for the defeat of Belial at the end of days. Michael and Melchizedek both serve as God's agents in delivering punishment upon evil, and both lead angelic forces. The apocalyptic imagery about Melchizedek is accentuated in 2 Enoch (Thompson 2008:144–146).

As a heavenly figure, Melchizedek furnished a foundation for comparison to the exalted Christ. In the Hebrew Eistle, Melchizedek is portrayed as superior to the Levites because Abraham gave him a 10th of the spoils. There is also no indication in Scripture of his death, or his genealogy, thus being without 'beginning of days or end of life' and, as such, 'resembling the Son of God' (Guthrie 1998:331). Keener (2014:646) points out that while Melchizedek appears in Jewish traditions as a heavenly figure who will also feature at the end time, the writer of Hebrews does not appeal to this extrabiblical tradition and, thus, Psalm 110:4 was sufficient for his case.

Hebrews 5:5–6, therefore deals with Christ's appointment to the office of high priest and the repetition of Psalm 2:7, also quoted in Hebrews 1:5, indicates that the author wants to show that the exalted and incarnate Son has also been appointed by God to a new and unique high priesthood, linking the concepts of sonship and priesthood with the significance of Melchizedek (Guthrie 1998:251; Thompson 2008:144–146):

Hebrews 5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Hebrews 5:8 Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered. (NIV)

While Hebrews 5:5–6 emphasises the superior position that the Son holds in his appointment as high priest, there was a specific path during the days of his life on earth: suffering, obedience and endurance. It began with the incarnation,

which can already be argued as a path of suffering, as the Son, who 'being in very nature God' and equal to Him (Phlp 2:6), 'made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness' (Phlp 2:7). The phrase, 'during the days of Jesus' life on earth', refers to Jesus' incarnation in general (Guthrie 1998:251; Johnson 2006:145).

Some commentators argue that verses 7–8 point to the specific event when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane to 'the one who could save him from death'. Jesus's petition, however, did not save him from death, suggesting that God did not 'hear' that prayer (Lane 1991:495). Harnack (as cited in Lane 1991:495) theorises that the text in all MSS is corrupt and that the 'negative particle οὐκ was originally placed before the passive participle εἰσακουσθεῖς and should read "he was not heard (and rescued) from his anxiety, although he was the Son"'. Harnack argues that on dogmatic grounds, the assertion was offensive and the negative particle was therefore deleted from the text at a very early stage.

Others argue that God did hear the petition of Christ, but that the petition was answered through the resurrection. Some suggest that the 'cries and tears' are part of the Gethsemane accounts, but more likely resonate with 'prayers of the righteous sufferer' found in the Psalms (France 2006:113; Guthrie 1998:251; Keener 2014:646). Stedman (1992:40) argues that Luke 22:43 indicates that Jesus's plea was heard while praying in Gethsemane, as evidenced by the angel sent to strengthen him in response to his reverent submission. Guthrie (1998:251) also argues that Hebrews 5:7–8 is best understood as a reflection on Jesus's experience in Gethsemane, a pivotal moment in the Passion, through the lens of early Christian adaptation of 'righteous sufferer' psalm material. Both the Psalms of righteous suffering and the narratives of Gethsemane depict 'reverent submission'. While some argue Jesus's complete submission to the Father's will, the phrase 'reverent submission' [εὐλάβειας] can also be translated as 'fear'. The noun εὐλάβεια, which also occurs in Hebrews 12:28, implies 'godly fear', suggesting reverence. Luke is the only other writer who uses εὐλάβεια and it is always used in the sense of 'reverence'. It cannot therefore be excluded that Jesus's prayer was also motivated by fear. What Jesus could have feared was not just his death on the cross, but moreover that the sins of the whole world would be laid on him and that he would face the judgement of God (Allen 2010:343; Guthrie 1998:251; Johnson 2006:146).

The initial emphasis on the exalted status of Christ is grounded in his unique relationship with the Father, but that did not exempt the Son from the path of suffering, necessary to be appointed to a superior position. This may seem paradoxical, as the Father appointed the Son to this superior status according to the order of Melchizedek, bestowing this honour with the affirmation, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'. Guthrie (1998:251) notes that the structure of the passage, 'Although he was a son, he learned ...', exhibits a linguistic principle, namely a *contra expectation*,

where the 'dynamics in the situation' are not what would be expected. Contrary to the usual practice where a position would be conferred upon an ancient prince by filiation, it was expected that the Son would embark on a path of obedience through suffering, to be appointed to this superior privilege (Guthrie 1998:251–252).

The phrase that Christ 'learned obedience', might suggest that the Son was disobedient and needed to learn obedience. In Greek education, discipline involved corporal punishment and learning through suffering. In Jewish wisdom traditions, divine chastisement is seen as an expression of God's love. The concept of *learning from the things he suffered*, was a common theme in ancient literature (Guthrie 1998:252; Keener 2014:646). This phrase does not imply that the Son needed to be disciplined, and Guthrie (1998:252) argues that it rather suggests that Jesus's calling required obedience, which ultimately led to the decisive sacrifice destined for him by the Father. Through this, the Son attained a new stage of experience, by passing through the school of suffering. His obedience was not to the law but to the Father's will. He 'learned obedience' by submitting to a very specific demand by the Father, never encountered before, and his experience of human suffering elevated him to be the eventual eternal high priest (Guthrie 1998:257; Keener 2014:646; MacArthur 1983:147). The phrase, *learned obedience*, can also imply that Jesus learned by experience to be obedient, confirming Jesus's complete humanity and presupposing human development, as found in Luke 2:52. While his suffering culminated in the events of Gethsemane and his death on the cross, the Son learned obedience from what he suffered throughout his life, in that suffering became an educator whereby sympathy with human suffering was taught (Allen 2010:343; DeSilva 2016:637; MacArthur 1983:147).

It can also be argued that 'during the days of Jesus's life on earth' was also a form of suffering, as he took on human flesh, made himself nothing, a servant and was made in human likeness (Phlp 2:7). While the phrase, 'he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears', can be interpreted in the Gethsemane context, Jesus also prayed on other occasions (Mt 14:23; Mk 6:46; Lk 6:12). Although the specific content of Jesus's prayers is not detailed, it can be argued that these prayers likely included petitions expressed with fervent cries and tears, reflecting the suffering inherent in his incarnation. 'During the days of Jesus's life on earth', emphasises that he was fully subjected to the conditions faced by humanity and was tempted in every respect. This was essential for him to become a high priest, who is deeply empathetic to human infirmities, indicating that the Son suffered not only on the cross but also throughout his earthly life. His suffering also implies the surrender of his own will, accepting what God intended and required to fulfil his divine purpose and plan (Guthrie 1998:257; Lane 1991:510).

Hebrews 5:9: ... and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ...

Hebrews 5:10: ... and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek ... (NIV).

The requisite for exaltation and perfection signified a process achieved through obedience, which inherently included suffering. In attaining this state of perfection, the Son became 'the source of eternal salvation'. The culmination of 'the days of Jesus' life on earth' is characterised by this perfection process, intimately linked with the cross, where the Son offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. The phrase, '... once made perfect', can be taken out of context if interpreted to mean that Jesus shared humanity's moral imperfection. The concepts of *being made perfect* and *obedience* must be understood in the broader biblical context of the *righteous sufferer* (Guthrie 1998:257).

Allen (2010:345) notes that there are various interpretations of the meaning of Jesus having been 'once made perfect', namely:

- The culmination of learning and suffering was reached through his death.
- He endured suffering to accomplish the atonement.
- He fulfilled the qualifications for high priesthood through suffering, obedience and death, pointing to his resurrection and glorification.
- This signifies his moral development, enabling him to be a perfect sacrifice.
- Not to be 'made perfect' but rather to be 'sanctified'.

DeSilva (2026:636) argues that perfection refers to Jesus's ascension into the divine realm upon the culmination of his earthly mission, from where he can fulfil his mediatory role. Allen (2010:345) is, however, of the opinion that this verb must be interpreted in the broader sense of 'vocational qualification and personal completion' with the notion of consecration. Keener (2014:646) notes that in the Septuagint, the word used for 'made perfect' also applies to the consecration of priests. Guthrie (1998:257) argues that the aorist passive participle, *τελειωθεις* [*teleiotheis*] (once made perfect), refers to the concept of *finishing* or *completing*, implying that by finishing what Jesus came to do and fulfilling his role as high priest, he was made *complete*.

The perfecting of Christ is intimately coupled with his sufferings, and his sufferings were instrumental in learning obedience and thus making him 'perfect', preparing him for the ultimate goal and purpose, to qualify as a high priest (Allen 2010:346). The Son's suffering resulted in him becoming what he had been appointed to be by God before his suffering, to be a high priest according to 'the order of Melchizedek'.

Hebrews 5:5–10 explicates the exalted status conferred upon the Messiah due to his obedience through suffering. The Messiah, as the Son, inherently possessed an elevated status but was required to endure suffering, to attain an even higher status, achieved through obedience, learned in suffering. Similarly, in Romans 8:17, Paul asserts that believers will share in the Messiah's glory, but he also suggests that believers must first partake in the Messiah's suffering. While Pentecostal interpretations typically emphasise victory, Hebrews 5:5–10 may prompt Pentecostal hermeneutics to

reconsider the notion of obedience through suffering, as a prerequisite to exaltation and victory, thereby advocating for an alternative hermeneutical approach to texts addressing suffering.

## Possible synthesis

When Pentecostals read the Bible in their quest to find answers to struggles and suffering, it is with an underlying anticipation of sharing the same encounters that biblical characters had. If they are consistent in their hermeneutical approach, then the same emphasis should be placed on texts that allude to suffering. Hebrews 5:5–10 speaks about the exalted Messiah, who was also the suffering Messiah, who learned obedience and achieved perfection through his sufferings, which were accompanied by anguish, torment, prayers, fervent cries and tears.

Although Christ's suffering, notably embodied in his passion, is regarded as unique, he also shared in various forms of human suffering. His empathy towards those experiencing suffering is interpreted as an expression of care for the entirety of the human experience. It is emphasised that while salvation does not exempt Christians from suffering in the present world, it provides them with the resilience to persevere through it (Hestenes 2006:72).

I will propose that Nel's (2022:88) synthesis to define a theodicy compatible with New Testament thinking might be a plausible approach when dealing with texts on suffering. Referring to Romans 8, he argues that the author regarded Jesus's crucifixion as emblematic of, and interconnected with, the suffering experienced by believers in the contemporary world of the first century. Through enduring persecution and discrimination due to their faith in Jesus, Christians share in and emulate Christ's suffering. Arguably, suffering in the context of Christian belief differs from suffering due to sickness or day-to-day challenges related to economic and social factors, as the suffering of Christ was within the context of human redemption. Nevertheless, it is how believers navigate their suffering that determines whether it leads to their downfall or 'perfection'.

Romans 8 does not necessarily imply that suffering is necessary for believers to attain Christ's glory. Nevertheless, Paul argues that the suffering of believers exemplifies the hope of sharing in this glory, and reminds believers that they must follow Christ's path to ultimate glorification. In their suffering, Christians join in Jesus's agony on the cross (Nel 2022:88). Christ's suffering also included injustice and mistreatment related to his earthly existence, which believers can relate to. He experienced human frailty, weaknesses and humiliation when He had to humble himself to become human (Nel 2022:37–38). Suffering can thus function as a crucible in which individuals see themselves as participating in Christ's sufferings. Relief does not mean the end of suffering but rather finding consolation that transformed suffering into a positive force in Christian life. Suffering could thus be redeemed and utilised for beneficial purposes,

leading to increased understanding, discipline, spiritual growth and maturity in faith (Hestenes 2006:73).

The challenge for Pentecostals lies in adopting alternative hermeneutical approaches to suffering, especially in their interpretation of the New Testament, by viewing Jesus's crucifixion as symbolic of and intrinsically linked to the suffering experienced by believers. I will assert that De Wet (2013:21) illustrates such an approach when he contends that suffering plays a crucial role in 1 Peter. 1 Peter 1:1–2 addresses Christians likely facing persecution and marginalisation, using the metaphor of the suffering slave to explain the concept of servitude to God, which inherently involves suffering. 1 Peter embraces unjust suffering at all levels, with the 'suffering slave' serving as an important symbol. This discourse is further developed through the concept of Christomorphism, where the suffering Christ is depicted as the archetypal suffering slave. The author of 1 Peter views all Christians as 'slaves of God', and, consequently, the suffering that Christians face, whether through martyrdom or daily challenges, is likened to a slave enduring unjust punishment. Central to this argument is Christ as the suffering slave, offering a model for suffering Christians, both slaves and free individuals, to emulate. 1 Peter does not advocate resistance to suffering but rather encourages silent acceptance, suggesting that unjust suffering sanctifies believers and embodies a powerful form of Christomorphism.

Another alternative hermeneutical approach that Pentecostals can reconsider when interpreting suffering is through the lens of cruciform theology. Cruciform theology is a theological framework that emphasises the importance of the cross of Christ, by exploring themes such as sacrifice, redemption, atonement and reconciliation, demonstrated through the crucifixion, which often shapes various aspects of Christian belief and practice. Nel (2022:40) suggests that cruciform theology emphasises God's engagement with suffering beyond the crucifixion, and encompasses the redemption and redefinition of suffering. Through Christ's crucifixion, human suffering is not only redeemed but also transformed, and imbued with new significance. This perspective includes Christ's anguish in Gethsemane, his crucifixion and his subsequent resurrection, offering a comprehensive view of suffering through the lens of Christ's passion.

There is an element of redemption disclosed in suffering, as illustrated by the martyrs who suffered for their belief in God when they understood that suffering did not mean that God had rejected them, but rather that God was with them in their suffering. When believers suffer in solidarity with Christ, they see their suffering in a new light, as they participate in Christ's suffering (Nel 2022:40). Cruciform theology, while centred on the redemptive suffering of Christ, can also be understood in the context of sickness, injustice and human frailty. Cruciform theology implies the eventual elimination of suffering as a promise in the eschatological future, because of the resurrection of Christ (Nel 2022:40). Pentecostals should therefore be cautious not to be 'theologians of glory'. Kärkkäinen (2006:257) draws attention to Luther's distinction



between two types of theologians: the 'theologian of the cross', who represents authentic theological understanding, and the 'theologian of glory', who has a flawed approach. The theologian of glory seeks God in grandeur and magnificence, while the theologian of the cross finds God's presence in hidden and humble places, such as the suffering of Christ on the cross.

Most Pentecostal theological constructs on healing and miracles are entrenched in the Christ-event on the cross, and the interpretation of Isaiah 53:5, Matthew 8:17 and 1 Peter 2:24. In the Pentecostal interpretation of Isaiah 53:5, the forgiveness of sin and healing are both equated as the eventual outcomes of the Christ-event on the cross, guaranteed for all humankind (Bosman & Theron 2006:6; Nel 2022:110). Nel (2022) raises the conundrum of this interpretation prevalent in Pentecostal theology when he states:

The equalisation of forgiveness and healing leads to the pragmatic problem, that when recovery is not realised in the believer's life, it implies that the believer's security that forgiveness took place, might also be at risk. (p. 110)

I will lastly submit that the interpretation of healing, as argued by Bosman and Theron (2006:11), can also be a plausible argument to consider, given the above-mentioned. While the Pentecostal approach to healing is mainly based on soteriology, Bosman and Theron argue that a theology of healing should rather be considered within the framework of pneumatology. Such an approach may be argued by Pentecostals to compromise Pentecostal theology. Yet, it can also be argued that this interpretation may provide some explanation when Pentecostals are confronted with the reality that not all are healed. By anchoring the theology of healing in pneumatology, healing is framed as a potentiality rather than a certainty. It represents the imminent kingdom of God, granted as a divine gift. Consequently, healing is interpreted within the church's eschatological vision. This perspective acknowledges that believers encounter aspects of eschatological salvation and perfection, while remaining in a world predominantly characterised by corruption, anticipating the eventual complete realisation of God's kingdom.

Bosman and Theron (2006:12) further suggest a reevaluation of Isaiah 53:4–5, especially the focal point: '... the punishment that brought us peace was upon him ...'. The restoration of the complete individual is intimated, encompassing not only physical ailments but also spiritual and emotional wellness. The term *peace* is derived from the translation of *shalom*, embracing holistic well-being, which includes physical, spiritual and emotional dimensions. Healing is therefore always a possibility as a gracious gift of God in terms of pneumatology, but not as a guaranteed eventuality by merely professing Isaiah 53:4–5.

## Conclusion

When arguing that Pentecostals should reassess their biblical interpretation of suffering, this does not imply abandoning

their unique focus on healing and miracles. The significant growth of Pentecostalism is often linked to the 'social deprivation theory', suggesting that the poor and marginalised were drawn to it as a coping mechanism for societal and economic challenges (Nel 2020:3). Nel (2020:3), however, notes that these movements also attracted the middle-class and economically privileged, due to their emphasis on miracles and healing as a scriptural message. It is, however, well recorded that not everyone who is prayed for is healed, and must therefore deal with suffering, while also seeking meaning to it (Bosman & Theron 2006:3).

Pentecostals should recognise that suffering may also be an element of the Pentecostal experience, and should therefore seek an alternative approach to texts on suffering, such as Hebrews 5:5–10. The way Pentecostals sometimes interpret the Bible can regrettably lead to a subjectivist interpretation of the text. Nel (2022:16) points out that Pentecostals should 'keep the two dimensions, experiential-pneumatic (or spiritual-charismatic) and exegetical elements, in balance'. The notion that the modern-day Pentecostal reader will share in the experience of the original Bible characters should also be considered when encountering texts on suffering.

Pentecostal theology and interpretations should encompass the entirety of Scripture, including texts on suffering. If Pentecostals hold the belief that the Bible is true and relevant today, they have to acknowledge suffering as an inherent subject within its nuances. Despite the affirmations and assertions of Pentecostalism, suffering remains a reality. While maintaining their emphasis on healing and miracles, Pentecostals also need to acknowledge that not everyone experiences healing and that suffering is a possibility in the lives of believers, irrespective of their faith and confessions.

Pentecostals can inflict significant harm by blaming those who remain unhealed for a lack of faith or spiritual unworthiness (Fettke & Dusing 2016:163). Kärkkäinen (2004:151) rightly urges Pentecostals to ensure that they are prepared to confront the inevitable questions of life, including the presence of suffering, the complex nature of human faith, the enigma of God's concealment and the ultimate destiny of all individuals, namely mortality.

Clifton (2014:221) rightly argues that, traditionally, the primary objective of Pentecostal doctrine has not been centred on healing, but rather on establishing a connection with Jesus, who is perceived as the source of abundant life. By shifting the focus from healing to overall well-being, the significance of Spirit baptism is redirected from the transient anticipation of miraculous occurrences, towards sustained spiritual productivity throughout one's lifetime. If the life and ministry of Jesus are regarded as a model, the emphasis lies not on the extraordinary and supernatural phenomena, but on his demonstration of divine love and compassion toward both God and humanity. A distinctive aspect of Jesus's ministry lies in his proclamation of the imminent kingdom of God, which includes marginalised segments of society and those who suffered (Clifton 2014:221).



The Messiah learned obedience through suffering, and in doing so developed sympathy with humanity. Pentecostals, in their hermeneutical approach to texts on suffering, should then also consider alternative perspectives such as the concept of Christomorphism and cruciform theology, while contemplating a theodicy that is compatible with Jesus's crucifixion, as representative of and interconnected with the suffering experienced by believers. Lastly, they should consider interpreting healing within the framework of pneumatology.

The perfection of Christ is intrinsically linked to his sufferings, which played a crucial role in his learning of obedience and his attainment of 'perfection'. Consequently, suffering can serve as a crucible through which individuals perceive themselves as sharing in Christ's sufferings, with the attainment of *perfection* being the desired outcome.

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