



Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as 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. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And,

"If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (1 Peter 4:12-19).

Today I get to talk once again about suffering for being a Christian. This is my third sermon on suffering because it's a major theme of the letter. Apostle Peter was addressing a group of Christians, scattered all throughout Asia Minor, who were suffering for following Jesus. They were being ridiculed, persecuted and shamed because they were exiles. They didn't fit neatly into Greco-Roman culture. Remember, Peter's main purpose in writing this letter was to answer the question: How do Christians live in a non-Christian society? Peter spends the first half of his letter talking about their identity in Christ. He reminds them of who God is, what he has done for them, and who they are in him. Because behavior flows from identity, he then spends the remainder of the letter talking about how to live as a follower of Jesus. Now, in today's passage, he's showing once again how Christians should respond to suffering.

C.S. Lewis famously said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain, suffering, and trials are the common denominator for every person living on planet earth. It's unavoidable; no one escapes it. And even though we all know that, what happens to most people is suffering often takes them by surprise. Deep down we all idealize a life free from suffering. We want more than anything to be free, secure and happy. So, where does that leave us? Do we just accept suffering as a fact

of life and move on? Thomas Merton, in his book *No Man Is an Island* writes, "Merely accepted, suffering does nothing for our souls except, perhaps, to harden them."

If you are a follower of Jesus, our task is not to merely accept suffering as an inevitable part of life because God calls us deeper. If we are going to walk with Jesus, that means we are going to live as exiles, strangers, and foreigners in this world and because of that, we will face suffering like everyone else. And sometimes suffering will come simply for being a Christian. In these last and final thoughts on suffering, Peter gives the early church and us today three ways God uses suffering in our lives. Specifically he's zeroing in on suffering for being a Christian, but the implications are broad enough to include most of the ways we suffer. Let's look at each of these ways.

Suffering as a Christian is God's Way of Testing Your Faith

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you (v. 12).

Did you know that God tests you? Unlike your high school chemistry teacher, God does not test you to see **what** you know; God tests you to see **who** you know. God has a purpose behind his testing. He tests us for our good, to draw us near, but the Devil tempts us for our destruction. Sometimes we confuse the two. Suffering is God's way to test and see if your faith is genuine or not. For some people suffering drives them away from God and in most cases he gets the blame, "God if you loved me, you would never allow me to suffer like this." For others, suffering drives them to their knees and to their God. Suffering has a unique way of purifying us from self-reliance and self-righteousness. And most often, when we allow God to redeem our trials, when we get out of the storm, we're stronger, more mature, closer to God and filled with more faith.

In verse 12 Peter says, "Don't be surprised!" suffering will come and it comes as a refining test from God. Suffering shows who you are, what you are made of, who you love, and what you are about. Peter has already explained the purpose of suffering earlier in his letter, "*In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is*

revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7). So don't be surprised but suffer joyfully because God is using it.

When a submarine comes out of dry dock, the first exercise is called a "sea trial," which takes the submarine to a depth in the ocean to test the integrity of the hull. Naval personnel sometimes call this phase a "shakedown cruise" because it measures a vessel's performance and general seaworthiness. If integrity is compromised in any way, such as a poor weld, the stress from the increased pressure of deep water will inevitably find that weakness. The same is true for followers of Jesus. God uses the trials and pain that come our way to test the integrity of our "hull." He's testing your faith and refining it, making you more like him and better at withstanding the pressures of life. That's the first way God uses suffering in our lives; it's a test of faith.

Suffering as a Christian is the Way You Participate in the Sufferings of Christ

But rejoice inasmuch as 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 (verses 13-14).

Peter is saying, "Hey, Jesus suffered so that when you suffer, you will be like him and that is a reason for joy! If you are insulted, that's great because you're blessed with the Holy Spirit of God in you!" Unlike the Greco-Roman world who viewed suffering as a sure sign of the gods' wrath, Peter says it's a sure sign of God's work. Peter's saying that it's possible to have joy in trials but that doesn't mean we have to pretend to enjoy suffering. No, suffering sucks. But, suffering for your faith is a foretaste of the joy we will have when Jesus returns in his glory.

Peter could say this confidently because Peter suffered the agony of denying Jesus three times. But, after the resurrected Jesus restored him to ministry, he goes back to Jerusalem where he is arrested, along with the other apostles, for preaching the Gospel. Before they are released, Peter gets a chance to speak in front of the Jewish High Council, the religious leaders of his day. They want them to all stop talking about Jesus. But, Peter basically tells them that it ain't going to happen, they are going to obey God, not men! The apostles were beaten and released. Listen to how they responded, "*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah*" (Acts 5:41-42). Suffering for the sake of Christ motivated the apostles to keep on and it gave them great joy.

Ronald Rohlheiser in his book *Sacred Fire* writes, "Crises of every kind will find us ...But these crises enter our lives not just as challenges to us to retain our balance and stability, but as invitations to stretch our hearts and minds ...Every crisis includes within

itself an invitation for us to move from being good people to becoming great people." When you suffer for the right reasons, it doesn't mean God has abandoned you, it's the opposite; God is powerfully present. It's an invitation to greatness in God's eyes. The Apostle James put it this way, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*" (James 1:2-4).

Do you want to grow and mature in your faith? Look at your suffering in a different way. It's a cause for joy. It's what God uses to connect you closer to Christ. Peter seeks to clarify his point in verse 15:

If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

He's saying that not all suffering is a result of God's work. Suffering for your own sinful choices is another matter altogether. If you suffer, it should be because of our union with Jesus, not with evil. Peter is not talking about suffering you deserve or that is your own fault. But, often times suffering is not your fault. And here's what the enemy, the Devil, loves to do. He is the master of spin. When you suffer, he will do everything in his power to convince you that it's all your fault, that you don't deserve it. How could a good and loving God allow you, his precious child, to suffer? He'll convince you that God doesn't love you, that God is punishing you. That's what the Devil does.

On the flip side, the Devil will spin it the other way. Sometimes the suffering is because of your sin, poor judgement, or mistakes, but he'll spin it so that you feel like a martyr. We say things like, "I didn't get that promotion because I'm a Believer, not because I'm lazy and don't perform well!" You think you're being persecuted for your faith when you're not! Sometimes we suffer because we are right or because we are wrong. Sometimes we are persecuted for our faith. And sometimes suffering happens for no reason at all. Peter is saying, suffer for the right reasons.

Finally, the third way God uses suffering in our lives is to reveal if you are in God's family or not. He calls it the beginning of God's judgment. And here's where this passage gets a little confusing, at least it did for me.

Suffering as a Christian is a Judgment That Reveals You are in God's Family

However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And,

"If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,

what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (verses 16-19).

Peter makes a connection between suffering and judgment here. He says this time of judgment has already started with God's house. That is you and I, the living stones, that make up the spiritual temple of God, his church. This judgment is not a punishment for the believer's sins, because they were all laid on Jesus. The persecution Christians are facing for the name of Christ back then and today is a phase of God's future judgment. What Peter's saying here is the final judgment has begun, but it has begun with the purification of God's church, God's people, just as it happened in the Old Testament. It will end, not in condemnation for God's people, but in glory. But, for those who don't know and follow Jesus, their judgment will be harsh.

This week I read a story about a family that somewhat illustrates this: "When my son Scott was just learning to walk, he fell on a cement driveway and split the area below his chin so deeply that the floor of his mouth was exposed. Hospitals and doctors were 250 kilometers away over tortuous mountain roads. I had no surgical instruments with me. A quick catalog of our resources turned up a less-than-impressive array of one needle, coarse thread, one pair of rather blunt scissors, and a pair of eyebrow tweezers. Infection in children develops rapidly and infection in the floor of the mouth can have fatal complications. We also had a little sulfonamide powder. There was no local anesthetic. Rightly or wrongly, I decided to trim and stitch the wound with what we had. We sterilized 'the instruments.' I could not help but look at the affair from Scott's point of view. I did my best to explain, but what can a one-year-old understand? Then he was placed on the dining room table and judgment descended on him. Cruel adults seized his limbs and his head so that movement was impossible. Then the father he had trusted became a fearful monster inflicting unbelievable pain on him. How I wished that he could understand that I feared for his life. Mercifully, he still seemed to trust me when it was over. As for me, I caught a glimpse of judgment from God's angle."

Suffering is the beginning of God's judgment because we were never created to suffer. While suffering is normal to us, it's not normal to God. Peter points to the day when Jesus returns and make all things new again, where there will be no more suffering, pain, tears or death. This is why Peter ends the passage with a combination of two powerful words—faithful and Creator. In your suffering, God is faithful, he will not leave or forsake you. In your suffering, God is also Creator, which means he is fully in control of all things. Any pain you experience, he has sovereignly allowed to pass through his hands. And he will never give you any more than you can handle. As a result, Peter says, continue to do good. Because God is with you and God is for you, keep loving

people and doing good because the end is nearer than you think. Let me summarize the three ways God uses suffering in our lives:

- Suffering as a Christian is God's way of testing your faith.
- Suffering as a Christian is the way you participate in the sufferings of Christ.
- Suffering as a Christian is a judgment that reveals you are in God's family.

Here's my big idea: You can suffer joyfully because God is faithful and in control.

How do we apply this to our lives? First, I've tried to make it clear that not all suffering is equal in the eyes of God. It is possible to suffer for the right reasons and to suffer for the wrong reasons. Suffering for being a Christian is what Peter is mostly addressing here. Suffering for the wrong reasons is when you and I suffer as a result of our own failures and sin. That being said, I do think we can broaden Peter's understanding of suffering to any trial we are going through. So here's what I want you to do: think about whatever suffering you are going through right now. Maybe there are problems in your marriage, or with your kids, or in another relationship. Maybe you are going through a really difficult time at your job. Maybe you are experiencing some serious health problems or financial difficulties. Here are some questions I'd like you to think and pray about this week:

1. What is the source of my suffering? Is it a result of living in a fallen world tainted by sin? Is it because of your faith in Jesus? Is it because of your own sin?
2. How can this trial lead me into deeper fellowship with Jesus?
3. How can I glorify God through this trial?
4. How can I best commit myself to God and keep doing good?

I want to end with this powerful letter I read this week. For me, it put Peter's words in the right perspective. It was written by a Southern Baptist missionary to Iraq—Karen Watson—prior to leaving for the Middle East. The letter was dated March 7, 2003. Karen was killed, along with four other missionaries, on March 15, 2004.

Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger:

You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death.

When God calls there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, his glory my reward, his glory my reward.

One of the most important things to remember right now is to preserve the work....I am writing this as if I am still working with my people group.

I thank you all so much for your prayers and support. Surely your reward in heaven will be great. Thank you for investing in my life and spiritual well-being. Keep sending missionaries out. Keep raising up fine young pastors.

In regards to any service, keep it small and simple. Yes, simply, just preach the gospel....Be bold and preach the life-saving, life-changing, forever-eternal gospel. Give glory and honor to our Father.

The Missionary Heart:

Care more than some think is wise.

Risk more than some think is safe.

Dream more than some think is practical.

Expect more than some think is possible.

I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience....There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him. I love you two and my church family.

In his care,

Salaam,

Karen

You can suffer joyfully because God is faithful and in control.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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