

Walking With God Through Suffering

1 Peter 4:12-19

When my daughters were much younger, I had to take them both in for checkups. Allison also had to get 4 immunization shots. The doctor wouldn't let me take Alyssa out of the room, or distract her in the corner. Instead, I had to hold Allison still while he impaled my daughter, with my other daughter watching in full view. Alyssa screamed and cried and tried to pull the doctor away, yelling, "No, no, no, don't hurt my sister." I tried to explain to Alyssa that it was necessary, and it would help her not be hurt later on. What I wouldn't have given for a nurse in that room. But I must confess I wanted to scream and cry and hit the doctor myself.

Some experiences in life are like that. They are difficult. They hurt. We may even want to scream and punch at God. But God lets us go through them because they benefit us in the long run. They are a blessing in the big picture. In the moment, though, they're tough, and we'd much rather skip it.

We come to a passage today that talks about those difficult moments. There is no secret to fulfillment, no key to joy. There is no immediate reward at all. There is just grin and bear it commitment, a reminder to keep the long view in mind, because there are times when everything in the near view is unpleasant. There is no promise of deliverance or comfort, just the assurance that it will all be worth it in the end.

1 Peter 4:12-19

12 Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. 13 Instead, be very glad--because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering, and afterward you will have the wonderful joy of sharing his glory when it is displayed to all the world. 14 Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God will come upon you. 15 If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs. 16 But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his wonderful name! 17 For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin first among God's own children. And if even we Christians must be judged, what terrible fate awaits those who have never believed God's Good News? 18 And

*"If the righteous are barely saved,
what chance will the godless and sinners have?"*

19 So if you are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is right, and trust yourself to the God who made you, for he will never fail you.

This passage talks about the importance, value, and necessity of Christian suffering. Suffering is usually listed among the spiritual disciplines, not because we seek it out like we do prayer or fasting or serving, but because it seeks us out. Suffering is not a habit we choose, the discipline comes in how we face it, how we respond to it, and what we learn from it. The discipline is not in the suffering, but in the perseverance we develop in the midst of it. Anyone who truly wants to walk with God will have to learn how to walk through times of trial.

Suffering is also counted among the disciplines because it is talked about so much in Scripture. Our passage this morning is the fourth time the topic has come up in 1 Peter alone. Scripture is filled with dozens and dozens of teachings and examples of suffering.

This is hard medicine for us to swallow, especially as Americans. As Americans we are unaccustomed to pain. Pain relief is a multibillion dollar business in the United States, and as a nation we consume 30,000 tons of aspirin a year, that doesn't even count ibuprofen or acetaminophen. 1/3 of all drugs sold in the world are aimed at pain relief, and Americans who are only 5% of the world's population, consume 50% of all the world's pain relief medication.

But pain, whether physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual, is not the enemy. It is, as Christian doctor and author Paul Brand says, "a loyal scout announcing the presence of the enemy." We can silence pain without ever addressing its cause. A numb person is not a healed person. This is not only true physically. It is true spiritually as well, and we live in a culture full of numb people. Here's what Dr. Brand wrote in his book *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*:

On my travels I have observed an ironic law of reversal at work: as a society gains the ability to limit suffering, it loses the ability to cope with what suffering remains. (It is the philosophers, theologians, and writers of the affluent West, not the Third World, who worry obsessively about the "problem of pain," and point an accusing finger at God.)

Certainly, the "less advanced" societies do not fear physical pain as much. I have watched Ethiopians sit calmly, with no anesthetic, as a dentist works his forceps back and forth around a decaying tooth. Women in Africa often deliver their babies without the use of drugs and with no sign of fear or anxiety... The average Indian villager knows suffering well, expects it, and accepts it as an unavoidable challenge of life...

In the modern view pain is an enemy, a sinister invader that must be expelled. And if Product X removes pain thirty seconds faster, all the better. This approach has a crucial, dangerous flaw; once regarded as an enemy, not a warning signal, pain loses its power to instruct. Silencing pain without considering its message is like disconnecting a ringing fire alarm to avoid receiving bad news.

I must say that the apostle Peter sounds a whole lot more like Dr. Paul Brand than he does a commercial advertising, "More pain reliever. Faster acting." Yet so many Christians want to run to God with their physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual pain, and we expect God, like some cosmic doctor's office, to give us some spiritual prescription to take the pain away, without stopping to consider why we're hurting.

Instead the great physician writes out a slip saying, "Be glad that you are suffering as a Christian. It is a good thing. It will bring you good things in the long run, but for right now, you'll just have to put up with the pain." That's not what we wanted to hear from the doctor. We would have much preferred, "Take three pills and call me in the morning." It's rather like the doctor told us, "I'm sorry, but I've got some good news. This is gonna be good for you, but it's gonna hurt."

Let's take a closer look at our doctor's note delivered to us through the hand of Peter. There are three realities we learn about Christian suffering here.

I. Christian Suffering is to be Expected

The first reality of Christian suffering is nothing abstract or mystical, just a blunt statement of truth: Christian suffering is to be expected. There is nothing unusual or unexpected about it. Peter says, *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."*

Suffering as a Christian is normal part of our spiritual journey. Every faith journey experiences road blocks, detours, and rough spots. There is no way to avoid all of them. Jesus never promises us that if we have enough faith, pray enough, read our Bible enough, or listen to enough K-Love that he will keep you from the hard times. In fact, Jesus says the opposite. He tells his disciples in John 15:18-19, *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."*

John, one of Jesus' disciples remembered well what Jesus said, because in his own letter in 1 John 3:13 he tells us, *"Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you."*

Earlier I read a quote of Dr. Paul Brand who said *"as a society gains the ability to limit suffering, it loses the ability to cope with what suffering remains."* This couldn't be truer of the American church. I doubt if any generation of believers in history had it so good as the last 4 or 5 generations of the American Church, yet never has there been a group of believers so inept at handling what little hardship they do have.

In fact, we have a whole host of so-called churches and preachers who say that if we as Christians just have enough faith, God will take all our pain and suffering away. Not only does this false doctrine deny the plain teaching of Scripture, it ignores centuries of Christian experience.

Two periods of persecution in the early church killed all but one of the apostles. During the third persecution of the church, Pliny the second wrote to Emperor Trajan, complaining that thousands of Christians were being killed every day, though none of them were guilty of a crime.

From the 4th persecution we receive the story of Polycarp, an 86 year old church leader. He welcomed his captors by having a meal prepared for them. He was taken into the stadium where many people heard a voice speaking to Polycarp, though no one witnessed the speaker. Because of his advanced age, Polycarp was given a chance to recant, to which he replied, "86 years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?"

Threatened with wild beasts and fire, Polycarp stood his ground. He even said they did not need to tie him to the stake, because Jesus would help him stand strong, so they did not bind him. When they lit the fire, yet the flames lept around him and left him unburned, until finally the crowd convinced a soldier to plunge a sword into him.

The fifth persecution which began around 200 A.D. was so severe that even the dead bodies of Christians were dug up and mutilated. From this persecution comes the story of Perpetua, a 26 year old mother with a baby at her breast. The pagan authorities demanded she sacrifice her child to the idols. She refused and she and her fellow Christians were offered to wild beasts and a public show. Perpetua died while singing a hymn of praise as she was torn to pieces by leopards and bears.

And so the persecutions continued, yet all the while the church not only continued, she thrived and grew far beyond any human expectations. Down through the centuries millions of faithful Christians have been disowned, ostracized, beaten and murdered for their faith. Missionaries have been beheaded for preaching the gospel. The Catholic Church burned thousands of Christians at the stake for translating the Bible into languages people could understand. Such persecution led to the eventual founding of our nation, and though the Christian faith flourished in the new world, persecution continued. In fact, more Christians died for their faith in the last century than any previous century in Christian history. There are some 35 nations today where Christians are harassed, persecuted, tortured and even murdered as a matter of government policy. They denied basic civil rights based on nothing more than their faith.

Now, compare that to the expectations of most American Christians. We don't realize how good we have it. There is a rising tide of anti-Christian sentiment in our nation, and it's only going to get worse. We need hear Peter's message and rearrange our priorities, or the world is going to do it for us. Peter says, *"Do not be surprised as though something strange were happening to you."* I fear that many of us are going to be caught by complete surprise, and we are totally unprepared for the suffering we will face, when we can't deal with the mostly small sufferings we face today. We need to change our attitude towards our spiritual trials and hardships, because not only are they to be expected, but Peter gives us a second reality as well.

II. Christian Suffering is a Blessing

First, Christian Suffering is to be expected. Secondly, Christian suffering is a blessing. No, you didn't misunderstand what I said. It's not a typo. What we normally avoid if at all possible, Peter tells us to understand as a blessing.

1 Peter 4:13-17

13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you...16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

If Peter is right, the very thing that we try to avoid and escape is the very thing that is sometimes needed. Just because you don't go to the doctor, doesn't mean you're not sick. Look at the company the Christian suffering keeps: words like rejoice, overjoyed, blessed, and praise.

No doubt, such an understanding of suffering runs against the grain of our culture. We live in a world that views suffering as the enemy. Americans live as if freedom from discomfort is a God-given right recognized in the Declaration of Independence.

I must confess I have a hard time grasping all that Peter means here. I understand it from a distance, but how much have I really had to suffer, and to be perfectly honest I'm not exactly filled with glee with the little suffering I do face. This is one of those teachings I must accept by faith, because I certainly don't know it by experience.

Peter wasn't a glutton for punishment. It's not that he enjoyed hardship and suffering. For Peter, it was all a matter of perspective. A mountain may loom as an impossible obstacle from the valley below, but from the window of an airplane it is a puny, insignificant spot below. Peter has found himself such a vantage point from which all the trials of this life seem small and insignificant.

He sees everything from the perspective of eternity. Listen to what Peter says again in verse 13, "*But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed*" What he's saying is this, "If we are partaking in earthly sufferings like Jesus did, we will also partake with Him when He returns in all of His glory. Peter uses two very distinct words for joy in these verses, and I think he chose them very carefully. The NIV renders them as *rejoice* and *overjoyed*. The KJV has them as *rejoice* and *exceeding joy*.

We rejoice, not because we suffer, but because our suffering identifies us with Jesus. When we suffer for the same reasons he suffered, for doing what's right and for enduring in those things He has called us to persevere in, we are connected with Jesus in a very intimate and spiritual way. In those times His Spirit rests on us in a special way. The Greek word rendered *Rejoice* doesn't mean that we enjoy pain, but it does convey the idea that we understand that we are not only okay, but we can thrive, because of our connection to Jesus. Peter says we participate with Jesus. We are in a partnership with Him.

That's good news, because if we are His partners in suffering, we will also be His partners in His triumph and glory. That's why we can rejoice in our sufferings now, because we know when eternity comes, we will have *exceeding joy*. This is a different word Peter uses here. It is one of the most extreme words for happiness that would have been available to Peter in the Greek language. It means literally to leap or dance with exultation. This is what New England Patriots fans did when they actually beat the Rams. This is what someone does when they win Powerball. Puttin' up with a little pain now is no big deal when we know what's coming.

I have one more way of painting this picture. A few years ago Mike Tyson was supposed to fight someone. I don't even remember who it was, but I remember the minimum prize for just stepping into the ring was like 35 million dollars. I thought, "You know for 35 million, I would step into the ring with Mike Tyson. I wouldn't even last a round. But I could take those punches with a smile on my face, because I knew what was coming. That's the perspective we should have. And when we do, we can know suffering as a blessing.

III. Christian Suffering is a Cleansing Agent

Peter tells us about a third reality of Christian suffering. In verses 17-19, Peter talks about Christian suffering as a cleansing agent. Spiritual suffering is a purifying influence.

17 For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin first among God's own children. And if even we Christians must be judged, what terrible fate awaits those who have never believed God's Good News? 18 And

"If the righteous are barely saved, what chance will the godless and sinners have?"

19 So if you are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is right, and trust yourself to the God who made you, for he will never fail you.

What Peter is saying is this- we experience God's judgment in small doses in our lives now so that we do not have to face God's judgment in one, large, horrific dose at the end. Suffering can work like a vaccine against sin. A small dose of hardship enables us to boost our righteousness, so that we never have to face eternal suffering

Yes, Jesus died on the cross for our sin. He paid the penalty, he paid the bill that was due because of our guilt, but that's only part of the problem. He wants to also remove the reasons why we sin to begin with. You can take away the penalty of our sin, but what's the good in that if we keep on sinning.

The other thing that happens in salvation when you become a Christian is that God gives you the ability to overcome sin. But overcoming sin is an ongoing, lifelong process in the life of the believer. It's not as if one day we sin and desire to sin, and then, BOOM, never again. It's a transformation that happens over time as we grow to become more like Jesus.

God uses several tools in this process. He gives us his Holy Spirit who begins to transform us from the inside out. He gives us his written and word which is living and active and works all the way down at the level of the thoughts and attitudes of our heart. He transforms us by the renewing of our mind.

And one of the other tools that God uses in our transformation is suffering. He uses trials to train us. Just as a child learns not to touch a hot stove after burning his finger, God teaches us basic spiritual truths through life's painful trials.

Peter, in the first chapter of this little letter already compared life's trials that cause us to suffer to a refiner's fire. He says, "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

He's talking about a metal worker's forge. Any ore removed from the ground must first be refined in the fire of a forge before being fit for use. The fire does two things to the metal. First, it purifies the metal burning away any impurities that would weaken or compromise the metal. Secondly, the fire makes the metal pliable so that the metal worker can form the raw metal into whatever tool he needs— a plow, a sword, an axe.

When we persevere through trials, it accomplishes the same two things. It cleanses us of any impurities that would weaken or compromise our faith. Secondly, it makes us pliable in God's hands so that he can form us into the person he wants us to be.

Christian suffering keeps the church pure of hypocrites, half-hearted followers, those who have religion but no relationship, those seeking personal power, and those only pretending to be spiritual. The only thing that passes through the gauntlet of suffering is true, wholehearted faith.

Some may say that the problem with American Christianity is that it's too watered down, that there is little commitment, that people are only concerned about their own wants, but maybe the real problem in the American church is that there is too little suffering. There's just not enough persecution. We just have it too easy. Just about anybody can be a church-goer in America and be considered a Christian without much