

Here/There—Suffering

It seems some parents will do almost anything to keep their kids from suffering. We have helicopter parents who constantly hover over their children to make sure nothing goes wrong. We have lawnmower parents who simply mow down every obstacle in their children's path. Aunt Becky anyone?

When I was a kid helicopters were the winged seeds of maple trees we'd throw into the air, and a lawnmower is what I spent all of Saturday pushing around the yard. I grew up in a time when childhood was dangerous. Child car seats were unheard of. Seatbelts were completely optional. How many of you sat on your dad's lap and helped him drive the car? I remember standing up in the back seat wanting my dad to take a sharp turn. How many of you rode on long trips in the back window? How many of you remember riding in a pickup truck sitting on an open tailgate?

Bicycle helmets? Ha. You would be made fun of the rest of your life, if you wore a helmet. And playgrounds when I was a kid...today they would be a playground for lawyers filing lawsuits. There wasn't any smooth gravel, rubber pieces or padding to fall onto. If you fell off the swing, you had to deal with solid terra firma. We had teeter totters that could launch a kid into near earth orbit, and we slid down solid steel slides that got over 200 degrees in August. If you wanted to have fun, you had to lose layers of skin.

We played outside all the time. And we played life-threatening things. We had this outdoor game galled lawn darts. Today we just toss little bean bags into little holes. No, we were tossing deadly missiles into the air that could take out your little brother or the family dog who thought it was fun to chase after things you tossed into the air.

When I was a kid free range parenting wasn't just one of 25 different parenting styles. It was simply what you did. My parents would leave my sister and I home alone for hours at a time. When I was in 5th grade my parents left me home alone for a week while dad went to preach a revival several states away. I could walk anywhere in our town by myself. It was no big deal. The only rule was be home by supper.

When I was you kid, you got spanked in school. It happened to me three times. Then you got spanked again when you got home.

Those were the days when childhood was dangerous, toys were hazardous, and you grew up to be a real man or a real woman.

Okay, I'll admit it, things probably needed to be made a bit safer. But is it possible we now expect things to be too safe? Do we protect our children too much?

We will go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that our children don't ever have to suffer. Don't use red ink. Don't keep score. Hand out participation ribbons. We wouldn't want to bruise their fragile self-esteem. Remove swing sets from playgrounds. Suspend a kid for

bringing a toy Lego gun to school. We can't even let a kid use chapstick without going to the school nurse. We coddle them throughout childhood, then we wonder why so many young adults have trouble adapting to the pressures and demands of real life. Here's a news flash: suffering is a part of real life.

Let me share 2 things I believe to be true:

1. Suffering is not the enemy. 2. Sheltering is not our friend.

Suffering is an essential part of growing up. A child that never has to deal with stress, disappointment, failure, and hurt will never be ready for adulthood. Scientists have found that brief periods of stress are important for brain development.

Suffering isn't only important for our physical maturity, it is essential to our spiritual growth as well. Our Heavenly Father allows us to experience suffering in our spiritual journey, and He doesn't shelter us from every unpleasant experience. James 1:2-5 says this:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

In his book *Leadership Pain*, Sam Chand says that suffering is God's classroom for growth. He writes, "Pain isn't the enemy. The inability or unwillingness to face pain is a far greater danger."

Chand has found though that Christians often have the hardest time with suffering. He writes,

Christians often have more difficulty handling personal pain than unbelievers. They look at the promises of God and conclude that God should fill their lives with joy, love, support and success. That's reading the Bible selectively. The Scriptures state – clearly and often – that enduring pain is one of the ways, perhaps the main way, God works his grace deeply into our lives."

We pursue happiness all our lives, but strong character is formed through suffering of all sorts, whether it is physical pain, emotional anxiety, or mental stress. Revelation 21:4 promises that in eternity Christ, "will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." But that happens once we are fully and finally THERE, but as long as we live HERE, suffering will not only be a part of our lives; it is vital to our spiritual growth. This doesn't mean that as Christians that we like to suffer, far from it, but our response to suffering must change. Avoidance shouldn't be our first, final and only response. We need to look for ways to redeem our hardship and allow God to turn our hurt into something holy.

Peter has a lot to say about suffering in 1 Peter. 1 Peter 2:19-23 in the ESV says:

19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in

the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Okay, what does this passage teach us about suffering?

I. Suffering is a chance to...Experience Grace

Of the experience of enduring suffering, Peter writes, *“For this is a gracious thing.”* Perhaps your translation says, “It is a commendable thing,” however the word he literally uses is grace. Peter is saying that suffering as a Christian is something filled with the grace of God. When you suffer unfairly or unjustly it is something that opens you to the grace of God.

Suffering directly connects you to what only God can provide. If you are never stretched beyond what you can handle, you will never experience what only God can do. *When the grace of God is your only hope, you learn to only hope in the grace of God.*

He’s not talking about when you get in trouble when you deserve it. Sometimes we suffer, because we ask for it. Mouthing off in class gets you in school detention. Driving like a bat out of hell gets you a hefty fine. Years of eating poorly gets you high blood pressure. Peter isn’t saying that we can’t find God’s grace at these times. This may be when we most need it. In fact, that’s what grace is- Grace is getting something good when you deserve something bad.

What Peter is saying here is that suffering connects us to Jesus in a very real, and a very special way. The next time you suffer. Don’t give up. Don’t tap out. Thank God for the opportunity to experience His grace.

II. Suffering is also a chance to....Be more mindful of God

Vs. 19 continues, *“For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.”*

How often do you think about God? It seems, based on how we live our lives, we just want God to mind His own business and stay out of our way until we need Him.

It’s kind of how some of us treat police officers. We don’t want them following us as we drive around town. We don’t want them showing up when we’re trying to have fun. But, we sure want them around when bad stuff starts to happen! And, they better be there right away or we’ll complain, “You’re never here when we need you!” We’re only mindful of law enforcement when we are in trouble.

Suffering is a great opportunity to be more mindful of God. Why? Because it’s often a time when we find ourselves in a mess we can’t fix on our own. Embrace this truth! The next time you find yourself suffering, think about God, and call upon Him to help you. And then, use it as

an opportunity to be more mindful of God when things are more calm...and you're just driving around town or having fun with your friends.

III. **Suffering is also a chance to....Please God.**

Peter writes in verse 20, *"For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God."*

Peter uses that *grace* word again. His point here is that God is pleased with us when we suffer well, which means that we're suffering, not for being sinful, but for being faithful.

I remember my dad, after I had gone through a particularly hard time, and I did it with some maturity and dignity, and my dad says, "Dan, you did good. I'm proud of you." That meant so much to me. Even as an adult my father's approval is a powerful thing in life.

I know a lot of you grew up without the approval you needed from your fathers. You never heard him say, "I love you." You never heard him say, "I'm proud of you." "You did great." And you have this hole in your life because of it.

Two things. One. Dads please bless your children with your approval. Pour grace into their lives with your praise. Two. Regardless of what you may have never received from your earthly father, you have a Father in heaven who loves you unconditionally, who loves you immeasurably, and is pleased with you when you faithfully endure hardship. He says, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."

Do you know anyone who's an ugly crier? Your lower lip disappears. Your face turns red. Your makeup runs giving you raccoon eyes. Then it happens. Your nose starts to run. We may not be able to help it when we cry.

But are you an ugly sufferer? Do you completely fall apart when a little pain enters your life? In my experience, it seems like the people who are suffering for their own sinful choices are the ugly sufferers, They get angry at God. They question him with accusations like, "Where are you?" "Why did you do this to me?"

My experience has been that people who are suffering for doing good, suffer graciously. They aren't the ugly criers.

Let's talk about this idea of suffering well. Most of us don't set out with that as a goal. I don't think any of us had that as a New Year's resolution— In 2019 I'm going to learn to suffer well. We learn it the hard way. We learn it through years of pain. Just ask Job. Suffering well is not a journey we set out on, it something we get dragged through. But once we are on that journey, how we respond is of utmost importance.

Rick Thomas calls suffering well “God’s most feared blessing.” He writes in his book *Suffering Well*, “Your suffering, no matter what it is, did not come to you without God’s allowance as well as His mysterious concern for you.” Jesus promises blessing to those who mourn.

How can we ever find blessing through suffering? The all too short answer is this– Suffering drives us to search beyond ourselves. We can only ratchet up our willpower so many times. We can only grin and bear so much. You pull yourself up by your own bootstraps too many times and they rip off. Suffering drives us to search for someone, or something somewhere else.

God’s intention is that our hardship drive us to seek Him. He wants us to seek Him in his word, to seek him in prayer, to seek him in worship and to seek Him in His people. Seeking Him does not usually change your trouble, but it always changes you. It doesn’t remove what you have to endure, but it completely transforms how you approach it.

Rick Thomas points out that the person who seeks God in their suffering displays trust, faith, courage, grace, hope, peace, strength, and clarity when trouble comes, while others show fear, worry anger, despair, vulnerability, and confusion.

What Peter is saying here is that when the going gets tough, the tough get going...to God.

IV. Suffering is also a chance to....Follow Jesus.

Verses 21-23 say, *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”*

Peter is saying that when we suffer well we are stepping directly in the footprints of Jesus. Isn’t that what a Christian is– someone who follows Jesus? Where did Jesus go? He went to the cross. He went to where people accused him, lied about him, mocked him, spit upon him, and beat him. He went down the road of suffering.

If we follow him, where do you think it will take you? Down the road of suffering. Now, why would we ever follow him down that road? Because of what lies at the end of the road.

Hebrews 12:1-2 says, *“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

What lies at the end of the road? Joy! Power! Victory! Resurrection! Transformation! Eternity! Salvation!

Your Savior is not leading you anywhere he hasn’t gone himself. He showed the way, and he knows how to get to the other side. That’s ultimately where he wants to lead you– to a glorious eternity with him at the right hand of the Father. But the journey to get THERE requires some suffering HERE.

At the 2018 Global Leadership Summit, pastor Erwin McManus said, “Your greatness is on the other side of your pain.” What is your purpose in life? Why have you been called? Live a higher purpose than just breathing, working, eating, doing a few hobbies and then dying. Make your life matter for something more!

Don’t be ordinary! Don’t play it safe! Dream big dreams! But, understand, the road will sometimes be difficult, the journey treacherous, and there will be times you will have to suffer.

I can’t think of anyone God called who didn’t suffer. All of the disciples, except John, died as martyrs. Peter, who was called by Jesus to be a disciple and who wrote this letter, suffered a horrible death. Peter requested to be crucified upside down, because he felt unworthy to die like Jesus.

Suffering is a chance to be more like Jesus. Jesus didn’t quit. You will not quit! Be faithful in your suffering. Erwin McManus also said “God can meet us in our faith, but so often He meets us in our faithfulness.” If we want to find Jesus, if we want to know Jesus, then we need to follow Jesus.

I don’t know what’s going on in your life right now, but I can say the following with absolute certainty. Everyone here this morning, has either gone through suffering recently, is suffering right now, or will suffer in the near future. That’s simply how life is HERE. That’s how God stretches us, grows us, and prepares us for life THERE.

But that’s only one of three things I can say with certainty. Here are those three things, and again I am quoting from Rick Thomas’ book *Suffering Well*.

1. The Lord will allow bad things to happen to all people.
2. The Lord is in control of all things.
3. The Lord is always working for the good of those who love Him.

Know this, if you follow Jesus down this road, and if you seek God down this road, you will experience His grace, and he will lead you to something good. That is His purpose. That is His Promise.