

When You Are Struggling with your Heart

Decision Making and God's Will

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Bible Text: 1 Peter 4:1-11

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Have you ever been in a situation where what you were being told to do was difficult in part because it just went against all of your natural instincts? You would have normally and automatically done x and yet somebody in your life whom you trusted, you respected, was telling you to do y and now you're in that dilemma? For example, you're walking on a high bridge over a deep canyon and the bridge is kind of rickety and unstable and your first instinct is to look down yet the person leading you is saying, "Don't look down! Don't look down! Don't look down!" Can you picture yourself doing what you're being told to do even though it's just about killing you? Or when you were a kid, pulling off a Bandaid. The natural way to accomplish that task is as slowly as possible. Hair by hair. Your Mom or your Dad or the school nurse says something like, "Just yank it off." Your Mom probably would have said it sweetly but your Dad, certainly the school nurse, says, "Yank it off!" In some cases, if you wouldn't, they did and there was that split second of just terror. Or taking medicine you didn't like. It's the same thing: your instinct says to go as slowly as possible, slow sips, yet the other person is saying, "Gulp it down. Just gulp it down and get it over with."

Are you picturing that dynamic? Where what you're being told to do is difficult in part because it just goes against all your natural instincts? Now, let me ask you this question: why are events like the ones I'm trying to describe, so difficult? Part of the answer is: because we already have an established way of thinking about that situation and it's hard to abandon that if what the other person is saying is radically different and especially if there's pain or uncertainty associated with that event. We just cling tenaciously to what we're thinking and we're very reluctant to think differently.

One last question: what would have to be true of your relationship with the other person before you were willing to look at that situation his way instead of yours? Well, there would have to be trust. There would have to be respect along with a corresponding spirit of humility on your part and a willingness to learn. Now, you know this message isn't about taking off your Bandaid the way your Daddy told you to or walking across a bridge the way your friend said. See, there is somebody else in your life that has a way of encouraging you to think about things a lot differently than you naturally would and who would that be? Yeah, your God. If the Christian life is anything it's counterintuitive meaning God's view is often dramatically different than yours which I hope you would

say when you stop and think about it, is good news. If God ended up being exactly like you or exactly like me, I'm not sure he'd be much of a God.

So, God's view is often dramatically different than ours. What's more, he's daily inviting us to abandon our interpretation of whatever is occurring at the moment and adopting his. Right? Here's what you're thinking right now about your parents, here's what you ought to be thinking. Here's what you're wanting right now out of that friendship, here's what you ought to be wanting. Here's what you feel like saying to your spouse right now, here's what you ought to be saying. It's maddening how different God's perspective is to what comes natural to all of us and it doesn't just happen occasionally. It happens like all the time. All the time. That's why Jesus said, "If you want to come after me," and by the way, do you? I figured I'd get a "yes" on that. I'm really glad to know that. If you want to come after Christ, you must what? You must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him.

That was said, by the way, just after Jesus announced for the first time his plan was to build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. And then he explained that in order for a church to be built, he was going to have to go to Jerusalem and he was going to have to suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and scribes. And he was going to have to be killed and raised up again on the third day. That was completely counterintuitive on many levels to the people who heard it, especially the notion that there couldn't even be a church, a called-out group of followers of Christ who had a personal relationship with God, unless Jesus himself was willing to die in their place. Counterintuitive because their belief was they needed Jesus alive so they could overthrow the Roman government and their belief that because of their Jewish heritage and adherence to the law, they could earn heaven on their own without needing something from someone else. And maybe even just legitimate desire to not see the teacher they loved suffer in this way.

I mean, we don't for sure know everything that Peter and the other disciples were thinking when they heard this news but we certainly know what Peter said, "God forbid it, Lord. See, you've got a perspective and I've got a perspective and, Lord, I prefer mine. God forbid it, Lord, this shall never happen to you." And lest we beat up on Peter too much, we have a way of responding to Jesus' perspective of whatever might be happening in the moment, in exactly the same fashion. "You want me to respond to my parents how? Not so, Lord. You want me to desire what out of this friendship? Not so, Lord. You want me to speak to my spouse how? Even when I'm hurt or mad or frustrated? Not so, Lord." Well, just face the fact that we frequently say that same thing to the Lord when his perspective is different than ours and before you give me the, "No, I don't," you really shouldn't talk to your pastor that way. Okay? But our response, at least by the fact that we go ahead and ignore his view and act on our own, "Not so, Lord."

And how did Jesus respond to Peter at that particular moment? "Get behind me Satan. You're a stumbling block to me for you're not setting your mind on God's interests but man's." That would be called a major invitation to abandon his perspective and adopt Jesus' way of thinking about the matter, "Get thee behind me Satan." But think about

this: I wonder if we gave the Lord any occasions this week to have a similar response to something that we were thinking? Or something we were doing?

Where he's essentially shaking his head, watching what you're thinking or watching what you're wanting or watching what you're saying and watching what you're doing and essentially shaking his head and then kind of doing one of these to you. In other words, suggesting that you ought to abandon your perspective and adopt his. How long and how hard would you have to think about everything that occurred last week before you could produce an example that might fit that description? And it's in that context that Jesus utters those well-known words, "If anyone wishes to come after me. You have to deny yourself; you have to abandon your perspective and adopt mine. You must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me." You see, the Christian life if it's anything, is a daily invitation to abandon our interpretation of whatever is occurring at the moment and adopting the Lord's and if you really believe that he is who he says he is, then you're willing to take that step over and over and over even when it's hard.

With that in mind, please open your Bible this morning to 1 Peter 4. That's on page 182 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. This fall we're doing a verse-by-verse study of the book of 1 Peter entitled "Decision Making and the Will of God." That particular title is going to make a whole lot more sense after we get through this particular passage this morning, but the reason we used that wording for this entire study is because the book of 1 Peter is intensely practical and since we've set out at the beginning of this year working on planning to grow, remember that? That's our church's annual theme, well, what better thing to do than looking at a book of the Bible that has all sorts of real-life answers to help us do just that.

So, here's God's will when you're struggling with trials we've seen and here's God's will when you're struggling in your marriage we've seen and here's God's will when you're struggling with your testimony, etc. Now, our verses today dive deeper into the inner man issues of all of this. It's crucial. The inner man issues of all of this, so we're talking about decision making and the will of God when you're struggling with your heart and who among us would not fit that category? So, let's lock on to what the Word of God says and remember what I've been saying so far, that's the words of man. You can listen to that to whatever degree you think you ought to listen to your pastor but now we're about to read from the Bible. That's the Word of God so what do I do when I listen to the Word of God? I ratchet up my attention even higher, right? Can you hear it clicking in your brain? Click...click...click. Ratchet it up and the reason that's so important today is because you have to lock onto the argument of this text. God is trusting you with the flow of thought that is crucial to applying what we're talking about here. So, are you ready to lock on?

Here we go. 1 Peter 4, beginning in verse 1,

"1 Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin."

If you're listening carefully, you're saying, "What? What? What?" That's fine, just lock on.

"2 "So as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the," here it is, "will of God. 3 For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries."

That wasn't a compliment about your former life, in case you're wondering.

"4 In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; 5 but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead." What? "that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God."

There is our theme again.

"7 The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint. 10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

We're talking about decision making and the will of God when you're struggling with your heart and with the time we have remaining, let's look for three actions of a person who wants to adopt God's perspective. You want to, don't you? You want to figure out what God's base is and then get on it? There are three actions of the person who wants to adopt God's perspective. It starts right here according to the text: you have to create the right mindset. You undoubtedly noticed as we were reading this passage how much of the attention is focused on the heart, on your inner person. That's one of the misconceptions of Christianity on the part of people who are unfamiliar with the Bible, it's the belief that if you're going to become a follower of Jesus Christ, it involves a list of things that you have to start doing and it involves another list, they give you two lists, another list of things you can't do any longer. In other words, it simply involves behavior, what you do with your hands. Nothing could be further from the truth. In many ways, we see that principle encapsulated in a passage like Proverbs 4:23, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life." You see, the Lord is most interested in giving you the ability to change at the level of your heart. There is some great news

because if you make changes there, your hands, your behavior will definitely follow. “Out of it flow the issues of life.”

Now, it’s probably necessary just to pause for a minute and be sure we’re on the same page here when it comes to the matter of this word “heart.” It’s a very significant word in the Bible. It’s used over 700 times in some of the most significant passages in all the Word of God about how God’s people change, your heart. It has nothing to do with your physical organ, okay? We’re not talking about cardiovascular exercise this morning; we’re not talking about your blood pumper. This is a comprehensive term and it includes everything about you that is immaterial which is why so often in the Bible, it is set over against your physical body. Like a passage like Matthew 15:8, this is a quote from Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.” You see, what matters first and foremost is what you allow to occur in your heart. That’s why one well-known Bible teacher who did his Th.D. dissertation right up the road here in Warsaw at Grace Seminary, on the word “heart” and it is a comprehensive discussion like you would expect any Th.D. dissertation to be and when he got all done, the summary definition of the word “heart” that he chose was “the control-center of man.” It’s a great definition. Your heart is your control-center.

It’s also comprehensive in that, you have to understand this, it included your thoughts. It includes your desires. It includes your will. It includes your emotions. It includes your soul. It includes your spirit. Think about all of those different terms in the Bible that speak about some aspect of your inner man. Like a barrel of molasses, not like a barrel of marbles. Like you have to figure out, “Okay, what’s going on in my soul right now. Ah, what’s going on in my spirit right now. Ah, what’s going on in my emotions right now.” That’s not the way it works. When you study this in the Scripture, you find there’s a tremendous amount of overlap between the use of those terms. So, if you’ve got this big barrel of molasses, all these different terms in the Bible, describing aspects of your inner man that run over one another and run together and on the outside of the barrel is labeled the word “heart.”

So, followers of Christ work hard to get our hearts in line with God’s perspective. These verses can help us do that in a big way. I hope you want it. It starts right here: willingness to follow Christ. You say, “Why is that there?” Because the chapter begins with the words “Therefore since Christ,” which takes your attention to what has been building throughout this book. It’s a desire to live our lives the way Christ lived his. We saw that same emphasis in chapter 2:21, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example.” There it is, you can never think correctly without wanting to adopt the mind of Christ. Paul said the same thing to the Philippian church, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”

Now, in order to get to that place, there has to be an understanding that you’re in a battle with your mind. Peter said, “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh,” here it is, “arm yourselves also with the same purpose.” It doesn’t take a genius to understand what that metaphor is alluding to. “Arm yourself,” it’s a military term. It’s the Greek word *hoplizo*. I just love some Greek words, there is one of them, *hop li zo*. “Hoplion,” by the

way, means “weapon.” Just file that away for some trivia game you might be involved in some day. *Hoplizo* is the verb form of that word, “to arm yourself with weapons; arm yourself with the same purpose,” which means this “wise is the person who wakes up every morning and acknowledges before barely lifting one’s head from the pillow, I’m going to be in a battle today and a large part of that battle is with my own mind. It’s with me.” To paraphrase a great old Christian chorus, “Not my brother, not my sister but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer and standing in the need of change.”

Now, you have to lock onto this next part of the discussion or you’ll be lost, follow the argument of verse 1 very carefully. In fact, I’m going to quote it from the ESV which makes the point even more obvious, “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” What does that mean? Arm yourself with the same way of thinking because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. I mean, when are you ever going to cease from sin? Do you want the answer to that question? The day you die or the day Christ comes and receives his church. You say, “Why is that in the text?” Well, remember the persecution is heating up to the point where some of them would be martyred for their faith. In fact, clearly that is what is going to happen to Peter himself. That, by the way, is what verse 6 said. That might have tweaked your interest too. The gospel preached to those who are dead? Well, that means those who have already died in the church because of the persecution.

But the point is: one of the great things about death for a Christian and our subsequent entrance to heaven is, there will no longer be a struggle with sin. You will then finally have ceased from sin. Stop and imagine that. To be able to relate to people and events around you apart from sin in your own heart, that’s going to be a happy day. And everybody else is there and will have ceased from sin in their own heart, that’s going to be a happy day. And you’ll be in an environment where there will no longer be the curse of sin.

Here’s the catch: in order to make that possible, Jesus had to suffer. Right? Was there any other way for the price of our sin to be paid? By the way, if you get that one wrong, if you say, “I want sin to be paid for, I want to be in a position where I and others can cease from sin without Jesus having to suffer,” do you realize that takes you right back to Matthew 16 and you’re going to get a “Get thee behind me Satan.” So don’t go there. But that was Jesus’ mindset. “I am willing to suffer so that the sins of man can be addressed,” and in order for you and me to be on that trajectory, we have to suffer as well. That’s the logic. Arm yourself with that same mindset which means this: if my suffering today, being surrounded by people who disappoint me, have any of those? Or who hurt me or who misunderstand me, if that puts me in the best position to see and subsequently address my own sin, that’s exactly the kind of imperfect situation in which I would want my sovereign God to place me today. Why? Because times of suffering are often what best reveals a sin that still resides in our own hearts. That’s how all of this is completely counterintuitive because we tell ourselves, the best children for me are the ones who always do everything I want them to do immediately, joyfully and perfectly. And the best friends for me are the ones who do everything I want them to do immediately and

joyfully and perfectly. The best spouse and the best boss and the best neighbors and the best in-laws. In other words, what's in the best spiritual interest for me is to never have to suffer. Peter would say that mindset has to change.

“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.” You might say, “Well, how would I know if I were thinking that way? How would I know if that were happening?” That's a great question. That's actually where I would want you to be logically at this point in this discussion because it leads to the next step in the logic of the text: choose the right desires where you are no longer living for the lusts of men. That's a crucial concept in the Bible. Another aspect of your heart. Lust is the Greek word *epithymia*, or desire. Every day you wake up wanting things. That's part and parcel of the way God made you and there's this constant interplay between what you want and what you think and what you think and what you want. Here is what the sinful lusts of men from that text, here's what that sounds like: “I want everyone in my life to serve me. I want everyone in my life to please me. I want everyone in my life to make me feel the way I want to feel right now. I want maximum pleasure and minimal pain. I want what I want when I want it with as little effort and as little resistance as possible.” Well, you put two people like that together in the same friendship or in the same office or in the same marriage and throw a few kids in the mix, you have an endless war on your hands. Do you realize that? And you put a couple thousand people like that together in a church, you have a potential nuclear explosion.

That's why it's so important to get in the habit of regularly pausing and asking what am I wanting right now? And is that a desire that God can bless? What am I thinking right now and is that a thought process that honors the Lord? Here's the beauty: in Christ, because of the efficacy, the power of the blood of Christ, the result of him suffering on the cross for us, you can choose to live not for the lusts of men, not for those same old worn-out desires and what is set off is being the opposite of that in this verse “so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for,” what? “For the will of God.”

I realize I've said a lot. You could summarize much of what I've said with this point: instead you want to do the will of God even if it involves suffering and especially if that suffering reveals ways that you need to change. Let's go back to your pillow. You've spent a lot of time with that pillow of yours. Let's go back to your pillow: your eyes have just opened in the morning and hopefully you've thanked God for a new day and you praise him for your salvation that was secured by Christ's shed blood and you thank him for his willingness to suffer and the impact that willingness had on the power and the penalty of your sin and the sin of the entire world. Then you start praying verses like this, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,” why? “So that we might die to sin and live to righteousness for by his wounds we were healed.” And then you choose to begin conforming your thoughts and conforming your desires to his purpose and you say something to the Lord like this, “Lord, what I really want today is to let the imperfections of those around me reveal my own sin, not be a catalyst for my anger, not be an opportunity for me to grump or be depressed or whatever. I want to let the imperfections of those around me reveal my own sin so that I can put it to death by your power and

your grace and therefore accomplish your will even when it's hard." It's the anthem of John the Baptist. "Not my will but thine be done."

Do you realize if you get your brain heading in that direction, if you get your will, your desires, heading that direction, if somebody in your family is a bit cranky, a bit irritable, they don't seem to be in the mood to give you everything you want, do you realize that doesn't have to ruin your day? Do you realize that doesn't have to start the merry-go-round of arguments spinning yet again? Suffering well can help you cease from sin.

John MacArthur summarized this passage like this, please lock onto this quote, "If the goal of the Christian life is the freedom from sin which comes at death," that's what verse 1 said, "then he should live the remainder of his life on earth pursuing the holy will of God." "Lord, show me ways I need to change and if suffering is going to reveal that, bring it on." "Pursuing the holy will of God rather than the ungodly lusts of the flesh."

Let's pause for a moment on that one. Think about the ten most significant interactions you had with other people in your life in the last week. The things you thought, the things you wanted, the things you said, the things you did. The ten most significant interactions you had with people in your life this past week and let's say we had some kind of a giant separator up here and we could pour all your thoughts and pour all your desires and pour all your words and pour all of your actions into the separator and it would separate all of that into two piles. Pile #1, those that resulted from ungodly lusts of the flesh. Pile #2, those that resulted from following the holy will of God. When we separated it all out and turned off the machine, what would the size of the two piles look like? Is it possible that in some cases, perhaps many cases, Jesus would be looking at you and would be motioning with his finger, "Hey, my child, you need to come over here. You need to repent. You need to turn around. You need to get off of your perspective. You need to abandon that whole thing you've got going on and you need to adopt my perspective in this matter."

Now, if you say, "Well, I'll do that as soon as she does. I'll meet her halfway." Lame. There isn't anything about that in this text and you have to decide whether or not you love Jesus Christ so much that you would adopt this approach to living even if you're doing it alone. Even if you're doing it alone. And I realize you might say, if you're a man, "Well, if I live that way all my buddies would call me a chump. What? I'm supposed to focus on my own sin day after day after day and I'm supposed to allow the suffering of an imperfect wife to motivate me to concentrate on that even if I'm not getting what I want? My friends would call me a chump if I lived that way."

Well, this text actually anticipates that. To the surprise and sometimes ridicule of those around you. "In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses," their same lustful behavior. If you don't have some people in your life who are surprised that you won't run with them, I highly question whether or not you are a follower of Christ.

But remembering this: some day we'll all be judged for these choices. Right? Peter said it very, very clear "but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." I realize you might say, "Well, I don't really want to hear about Jesus as the Judge." Welcome to "I don't really care a whole lot about what you want to hear about." Right? I mean, you don't want a pastor who sits around all week and says, "Now, what do people want to hear? What do they want to hear? That might not offend?" Seriously? The question is: what does the Word of God have to say? And I understand that there are people in this culture who don't like to think about God as their judge. Some day they will and it would be wise to get on that base like right away. Right away. And for some who hear this message, the fact of the matter is, you've been living for your own thoughts and your own desires and your own actions and the fact of the matter is, it's jammed you up.

What God would want you to do this morning is to repent, to turn around, to get off that base and to come to him in repentance and faith and place your faith and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. If you need to make that decision this morning, I would urge you to do that because if not, according to Scripture, some day you will face him at the Great White Throne Judgment and that is a terror that you would never want to experience. My job as a pastor is to present the Word of God in such a way that the Holy Spirit can help you make the decision that he wants you to make. Christian friend, I realize that there are a number of people who will hear this message and will say, "Pastor Viars, I'm trying. I think a lot about what does God want me to think right now? What does God want me to want right now? What does God want me to say right now? What does God want me to do? I'm constantly trying to get off of my selfish perspective and on to his and it's hard." But do you know what? I think many of us would say, "And that's why I keep running to the cross. That's why I keep repenting. That's why I keep crying out to him." The very same things we were singing about in our worship time this morning.

Friend, if that's true of you, if you would say, "I'm trying to implement this particular passage. I'm trying." Do you realize that some day what you will hear from the Lord, not at the Great White Throne Judgment, but at the Bema Seat Judgment, do you know what you'll hear from the Lord? Words that I hope we all long to hear, "Well done. Well done, my good and faithful servant." And I realize a message like this might be a little bit hard to hear but that's fine if it leads us to a better place in our walk with him now and better position to face him at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Well, what's the third piece of this puzzle? Actually it sets us up well for stewardship month which is going to begin just next Sunday. It's cultivating the right lifestyle because Peter goes on and he talks about this: he talks about having a fervent love. "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." You say, "Well, how is that true?" When you're letting suffering reveal your own sin and you're focusing on that, that frees you up to love the other people in your life. You can't practice fervent love and focus on all their shortcomings simultaneously because when you are suffering with somebody else and you focus on all their failures, that will result in you being bitter, annoyed, irritable and unloving. But God's way frees you up. Show me a person who suffers well and I'll show you someone who can love fervently.

In joyful hospitality. “Be hospitable to one another without complaint.” I’m not just talking about having somebody over to your house for a piece of pie, although if you make a good banana cream pie, I am available. We’re talking about welcoming imperfect people into our lives individually and corporately even if their presence results in additional suffering. I am so glad that yesterday at our campuses we’ve got all these community leagues going. Why? Because we’re trying to reach our town for Christ and if you had gone over to Faith West yesterday, some of you did, it was absolutely packed with people from India. I mean, packed wall-to-wall. People that we were just trying to love in the name of Christ. In fact, the interns who were working there with their wives told me, “We had to keep restocking the racks with all of our church brochures because so many of the people who were there kept taking them, interested in what’s going on around here in the name of Christ.” That’s exactly what we want to be doing and I realize you could say, “But if we try to win that person from the community or that person from the community, it’s going to result in additional suffering.” To which I would say, “Bring it on!” They can bring their sin in boxcars and sit it right down next to your sin in your boxcar. I’m simply saying when you’re willing to suffer it results in joyful hospitality and even in gracious serving.

“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another.” Pastor Folden is going to talk to you in just a moment, about serving in the living nativity. You have an opportunity to do that and I would encourage you to do that today. Sign up today, okay? Because you’re going to do it anyway and there are people waiting to organize all this and they need your name. You can either be a blessing and sign up today or you can sign up about a month from now and you’ll be something other than a blessing. You don’t want to be that, do you? That would have been a good time for a “no.” I realize you might say, “Well, but that might involve some suffering. I hear it’s cold in December in Indiana.” See, when I don’t care about trying to insulate my life from suffering, it frees me up from serving.

Next week, as I mentioned, we’re going to start talking about stewardship. Do you think it’s highly likely that your sweet, loving pastor is going to talk to you some about serving in the next month? Yeah. Surely. And you’d want him to, huh? And even if that involves some sacrifice, even if that involves some hardship, that’s fine because if I have the right thinking and I have the right desire, it’s going to position me to serve and to serve well.