

A man went to see his doctor in a state of high anxiety. “Doctor,” he said, “you have to help me, I think I'm dying. Everywhere I touch it hurts. I touch my head and I hurt. I touch my leg and I hurt. I touch my stomach and I hurt. I touch my chest and I hurt. You have to help me, Doc – everything hurts.”

The doctor gave him a complete examination. “Mr. Smith,” he said, “I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is you are not dying. The bad news is you have a broken finger.”

“I have some good news and I have some bad news” is a phrase that kind of sums up what we have covered thus far in our study of **1 Peter**. As followers of Christ, the good news is there's unimaginable glory, inexpressible joy, and unspeakable peace that is waiting for us just over the horizon – the bad news is we will likely go through suffering as we make our way there. We may not understand it, and we most certainly won't like it, but none of us are exempt from it.

This morning, we are pressing on in our study through **1 Peter**, and yes, suffering – and living through suffering continues to be the focal point of this letter. The letter began with suffering and it will end with suffering because the original recipients of this letter – were suffering. So, if you have your Bible, let's pick up where we left off last week in **1 Peter 4**, and we will begin with **verse 12**.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

Peter begins this passage with the word “**beloved**” and I can't tell you how important it is to be assured that you are completely loved by God, especially when you are suffering. The word “**beloved**” means to be “prized and valued – dearly loved” and it's within the reality of His love for us that we are able to make sense of our suffering. In other words, if we know that God loves us – and He does, then we can see and try to understand our suffering from that starting point – from that point of reference. Our suffering is best seen and understood in the light of His love.

God loves us deeply, that's the gospel truth, but Peter tells us that even though we are loved by God, we should not be **surprised** or bewildered when we suffer for living for Christ. We should not be surprised when we suffer for openly standing on God's Word and on biblical principles, and we should not be surprised when we suffer for doing what is right and good for the sake of Christ. That's what Peter is telling these believers – yes, you are deeply loved – and never forget that, but don't

be surprised when you face a **fiery ordeal**. It's no accident when you face intense and maybe even painful suffering for being a follower of Christ.

Now, that's a hard pill to swallow for many because a lot of Christians believe they should be fireproof. How often have you heard it said or maybe even said it yourself – “I can't believe this is happening to me!” or “*Why doesn't God protect me from these things?*” or “*Why is God allowing this to happen now?*”

I think it's a normal reaction for us, but Peter says we should not be surprised when the fiery ordeals come upon us for following Christ, and instead of seeing our suffering as punishment where God is the perpetrator and we are the victim – we should see our suffering for the purpose of **testing**, where God is the Teacher and we are the student.

In his message “The Sixth Law: There is No Growth Without Struggle,” Ray Stedman said this, “Years ago, my friend Jim Warren (the longtime host of Primetime America on the Moody Broadcasting Network) passed along this bit of advice: “Ray, when hard times come, be a student, not a victim.”

*The more I have pondered those simple words, the more profound they seem to me. Many people are professional victims, always talking about how unfair life is. A victim says, “*Why did this happen to me?*” A student says, “I don't care why it happened. I want to learn what God is trying to teach me.” A victim looks at everyone else and cries out, “Life isn't fair.” A student looks at life and says, “What happened to me could have happened to anybody.” A victim feels so sorry for himself that he has no time for others. A student focuses on helping others so that he has no time to feel sorry for himself. A victim begs God to remove the problems of life so that he might be happy. A student has learned through the problems of life that God alone is the source of all true happiness.”*

That was deep, and in a round-about way, Peter is saying the same thing. Suffering for Christ's sake is not punitive, it's not punishment, rather it is purifying. As a student, suffering is a **test** that pushes us to our limits in order to reveal to us the true reality of our faith. Like the refining fire that treats gold, the fiery ordeals – the fire of suffering tests and purifies and strengthens us.

I was talking to Les last week, and I described our time in this world like boot camp. I went to boot camp in 1978, and boot camp was not fun. I was regularly pushed beyond my perceived limits, tested physically, and mentally, and emotionally, and I was required to experience things and do things under intense

stress that I was not accustomed to doing as an 18-year-old. On a daily basis, it seemed we progressed from one crisis to another – all planned of course, and all done under the watchful eye of a drill instructor. After a while of this, boot camp changes you. I went in as a boy who was accustomed to living as an individual and came out a young man who was part of a team. In a sense, I was transformed in boot camp, and likewise as believers – we are being conformed into the image of Christ. Life is like a boot camp, and we should not be surprised when we are tested by God with suffering.

So, instead of seeing your suffering as something that is **happening to you** where you perceive yourself as the victim, Peter tells us to see our suffering for the purpose of testing where you are the student. And like boot camp – it's by design. The fires of suffering are designed by God, tailor-made by Him to purify and strengthen the lives of His followers. Our suffering is not accidental – rather, it is part of His purpose and plan.

Now before we move on, I want to say one more thing about my boot camp experience. I hated the drill instructor with a passion. As far as I knew, he was the physical manifestation of Satan dropped in a military uniform. He was mean and ruthless and heartless. On the last day of boot camp, the drill instructor gathered the recruits all together to explain what he did and why he did what he did. As it turned out, he was a regular guy who actually had our best interests in mind, and he was following a well-thought-out and purposeful plan. Once he explained his role to push us and the desired outcome – once he laid it all out, I saw him in a completely different light, and in the end, what he did made complete sense.

The Apostle Paul said in **1 Corinthians 13:12**,

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

One day, our suffering will be fully explained to us – we will know fully in the future what we only know in small pieces now. God's purposes and His plans will be revealed – they will make complete sense to us, and we will see that God was true and right all along – but in the meantime, on this side of heaven, especially when we are suffering, we have to trust that God loves us and knows exactly what He is doing in our lives.

Then, Peter says something outlandish. He says we can actually **rejoice** in our suffering. He says beginning with **verse 13**,

¹³ but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

There are parts of the Bible that are really hard to understand, and this is a good example where Peter tells us we can **rejoice** in our suffering for the sake of Christ. Now just for clarification, Peter is not saying we should be all happy and giddy because we are being mistreated, and he's not suggesting we should take pleasure from pain, because I don't like pain. But what Peter is saying is that suffering has its rewards, and for that – we can rejoice, and let me explain.

Peter says, that as we **share** in the sufferings of Christ, and obviously our suffering does not come close to the suffering He experienced on our behalf – we can rejoice. Think of it this way. **Have you ever walked through a tough time with a friend where you shared in suffering together? What typically happens?** As you walk through the difficulty together – you tend to grow closer as friends. That's what Peter is saying. He wants us to understand that nothing moves us closer to Christ than when we share our suffering with Him. Suffering puts us into a deeper fellowship with the Lord, and as this occurs, our level of trust in Him increases, and we can rejoice in that.

Peter also says we can rejoice in our suffering because of the **revelation of His glory**. That speaks to our hope for the future, for we know our suffering in the here and now will ultimately lead to future joy. Jesus spoke about this in **John 16** beginning with **verse 20** when He said,

²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. ²¹ Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. ²² Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.

Jesus said, the baby that brought much pain in childbirth, is the same baby that will moments later be the cause for great rejoicing, and Peter is essentially saying the same thing. Yes, you're suffering now, but it will be cause for great rejoicing in the future – so look ahead to your glorious future even though your current reality may be difficult.

Lastly, Peter says we can rejoice in our suffering, because we will experience the special work of the Holy **Spirit** in our lives, and God's presence will be seen in us. This explains how believers can sing praises to God in the midst of a fiery furnace. It explains how suffering Christians can calmly and confidently face ridicule and harassment for the sake of Christ. I was reminded of Stephen as he faced the Jewish Council – without fear, boldly proclaiming the truth and revealing the One they had crucified was standing at the right hand of God the Father.

Now, for the sake of context, we know that not all suffering we experience is the result of following Christ. There is some suffering we experience that simply comes from living in a fallen world – it is suffering that common to all of us, and almost everybody experiences this kind of suffering to some degree. For example, as we get older, things tend to hurt more. That tends to be true for all of us – it is common to us. Together, we also experience natural disasters and crazy weather conditions. Jesus said, *“Our Father causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”* Again, there are things that are common to us all – to include suffering, but unfortunately, there is also suffering that we bring upon ourselves. Let's look at **verse 15**.

Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;

Here, Peter speaks of suffering for doing things that are wrong. Many people are suffering because of the choices they have made. Bad choices and sinful actions bring consequences. You reap what you sow – there is no way around it, and many times, when people face the kind of suffering that they bring on themselves – they want to blame God – when in fact they are suffering because of their own choices. They drink a six pack of beer a day and when they get cirrhosis of the liver it is God's fault. They consume illegal drugs and blame God when they lose their job and all of their possessions in order to support their habit. Some abuse their spouse or commit adultery and then ask why God allowed their marriage to fail. Choices have consequences and consequences may, in fact, bring suffering.

I do find it interesting that in Peter's short list of wrong doing, he lists a **meddler** in the same class with a murderer and a thief. Maybe meddling was a problem in the churches he was writing to. If you don't know, a meddler is a busybody, and it refers to Christians who stick their noses into situations where they have no business, and by interfering in the lives of others, they disrupt the peace and harmony of the local church. They don't make things better, instead they make things worse, and they will suffer for it – and for those who suffer as a result of

their wrong choices and sinful behavior – don't blame God, and don't say you are "suffering for the Lord" for you are not. There is a difference between being a Christian who is suffering, and suffering because you are a Christian, and that's the contrast Peter makes in **verse 16**.

but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

I like what John MacArthur says about this verse. He says, "*The people of the world hate the name of Christ. They do not want to hear it. God is okay; Jesus is not. They hate who He is, what He said and what He did. If we would renounce our allegiance, the world would leave us alone. They do not hate us. They hate Christ in us.*"

Let's think about that for a moment. If you are harassed and abused and slandered – if you suffer because you identify with Christ and do what is right and good for His sake, then apparently you are on the right track, and in an odd way, suffering for the Lord serves as landmarks of hope and joy that let you know you are doing what He wants you to do. There is no reason to be **ashamed** as Peter says, which is somewhat ironic, because Peter had previously denied Jesus out of fear of suffering for the Lord's sake. It would appear that Peter has come a long way.

So, for a follower of Christ, suffering can have a positive impact – although, it may be painful. We know we are loved by God, and by His plan – as His students, we are tested through suffering with the purpose of purifying and strengthening us.

Then Peter offers some more encouragement. Let's start with **verse 17**.

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER?

This is an interesting passage and I struggled with it a bit because it seemed like God is judging believers just like those who have rejected Him, but that's taking the passage out of context because we know our judgment was settled at the cross long ago.

In context, we are still dealing with the fiery ordeals that come upon us, and in this passage, Peter first focuses on the issue of time, meaning for the church, our

suffering – our fiery ordeal is in the here and now, it occurs on this side of heaven, but for those who reject Christ – their fiery ordeal will be later when they stand before God in judgment.

Secondly, for the church, our fiery ordeal is not meant to punish us, rather it is meant to lovingly test us, to purify us, and to mature us, and that's good news. The bad news is that for those who reject Christ – the purpose of their fiery ordeal will be for eternal punishment. So, don't be complaining about suffering now and experiencing glory later – for there are those who reject Christ and may even seem to miss the suffering now, but later they will have to endure their suffering forever and ever.

Then in summary, Peter says in **verse 19**,

Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

The idea that if you're in the center of God's **will** – you'll be free from suffering, is not biblical. Being in the center of God's **will** may mean that you are also in the center of suffering. So, if you are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is good and right, and **entrust** yourself to the One who made you.

Charles Swindoll had an interesting comment about this verse. He said, the common response to suffering is to resist it, to drop out of training, but we all need to come to grips with the fact that God's tailored trials (*or tests*) are not simply elective courses in the Christian life. They are, in fact, prerequisites for Christ-likeness.

Swindoll continues and says when trials (*or tests*) come, remember that God is faithful. Contrary to what your circumstances may seem to tell you, God hasn't abandoned you. Forget about what cynics tell you. God hasn't forgotten you. God is faithful. We can trust that He's working out His purposes for our ultimate good. When you doubt whether God has kept His promise never to desert you or forsake you, remember that He's the **faithful Creator**. This means He can never lie. But it also means that everything He created was very good, everything He is making is good in time, and everything will be ultimately restored to perfection.

So, because God is who He is, because He is faithful, because He is powerful, because He loves us and demonstrated that love through His Son Jesus Christ – we can deposit our lives in His hands for safe keeping, even though the fiery ordeals.

For Lorraine Fusco, it may have seemed that her useful days on earth were behind her. Cancer struck at the base of her brain and traveled down her spine, paralyzing her completely. Tubes were used to feed her and help her breathe. The only voluntary movement she could make was to open and shut her eyes and mouth. There certainly wasn't much Lorraine could do, but she refused to sulk and turn sour, or to bemoan her fate and curse her condition.

According to her husband, pastor Bill Fusco, she became a prayer warrior and a shining light of hope. During one stay in the hospital, she so influenced two workers with her joyous outlook that they put their trust in Christ. Later, while her husband served as a college president, she spent entire days praying for each student.

When death finally claimed her, she left a powerful testimony. Lorraine lived joyfully for God despite her trials. She saw her suffering as part of God's will—and she gave every ounce of her energy to serving Him. She could do nothing but pray and live joyously, but that was enough.

Source Material:

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