

# SIGNIFICANCE AND SUFFERING

by Doug Goins

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In the last few weeks I become very much aware that many folks from our church family are struggling financially---directly affected by these recessionary times, either through job layoffs, salary reductions, and an uncertain job market. A college senior this week told me he has had seven interviews for jobs. Though he's skilled, trained, and ready for work, the prospects are pretty slim. This sort of concern can create real anxiety among all of us.

An article this week in the business section of the San Jose Mercury News was entitled *Feeling Sad, Uneasy? It May Mean That Economic Recovery is Being Delayed*. It talked about how depressed economic times affect our psyche. The psychologist from Los Angeles said, "Feeling states like pessimism, anxiety, fearfulness, caution and scarcity; those kinds of experiences are associated with recession." The article states further: "What you see during a recessionary period is an increase in depression in people. People lose their jobs. They tie in their sense of self-worth with the work they do so not having a job means they're not OK. This then hooks into the basic sense of inadequacy that we all have."

No matter what the difficulties we face---whether economic or physical or relational---our sense of well being, can be undermined. The passage we're going to examine this morning speaks directly to that issue of security and significance. The apostle Peter wrote in the first century to Christians scattered across Asia Minor. They were being affected very directly by persecution. Their homes were being confiscated, and their property taken away because of their stand for Jesus Christ. They were losing jobs and civil rights. They were suffering in very real material and economic ways because of their relationship to Jesus. To that group of Christians in Turkey in the First Century---and to us this morning---the apostle Peter says this:

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. (I Peter 4:12)

Unexpected struggle or sudden disaster in life catches us offguard---we feel things are out of control. Usually we're, alarmed, outraged, or confused---at least initially. But Peter assures us that everything in life really is under control. Suffering in the life of the believer is normal not abnormal! We don't want to accept such a concept! At least one major industry is based on man's desire to escape that reality. Read the travel section of the newspaper when you go home today. The travel industry is built upon our felt need to escape stress and hassle and pressure, to "get away from it all." Yet the scriptures assure us that God knows what he's doing. These "fiery ordeals" we experience are normal. They characterize the fallen created order we are a part of. It's part of life in a rebellious world system, held in place by authorities who can be harsh, cruel and oppressive.

This verse lets us know we can hang onto our identity in times of trial---We are beloved. We are loved of God intimately, tenderly. God pays close attention to each one of us, as a loving Father in the midst of the difficulty. Peter also loved these people. He calls them my beloved. Remember the fact that even when you're struggling there are people right here in this church family of whom you are very beloved. Our sense of worth and significance does get attacked by overwhelming suffering. Yes, sometimes we really do start asking questions such as, "Does God love me? Does he know what he's doing." "Do my friends really understand and care?"

My wife Candy recently talked with our sister-in-law. She had cared for her first husband the last ten years of his life, as he suffered with multiple sclerosis. Then the Lord blessed her with a second marriage to Candy's brother. Two families were blended together when she married Candy's brother, and they now have five children between them, four from their two previous families and one from this new marriage. She has struggled with glaucoma for a number of years and had two cornea transplants trying to save her eye. Three months ago she finally lost one eye to the disease. Last year her mother died of cancer. Dione is a lady who loves the Lord, who has been really toughened by all the suffering she's gone through but she learned just a

week ago that she has a tumor on her salivary gland right under her ear which will require very delicate surgery. Her question to Candy this week was, "Does God really know what he's doing?" Is he really at work in and through this?

The word the Peter gives us for tough situations like this is: YES! God has everything under complete control! No matter what it feels like to us, we are God's beloved children. Suffering is also purposeful. Peter says that it's purpose is to prove us or test us. Suffering often is a very fiery ordeal, but it's an important part of the sanctification process in our life. We need to be able to look at suffering with confidence that God is working through it to accomplish some greater good. Consider the sixty-sixth Psalm for a moment. This is a song of worship and gratitude, surveying the history of the nation Israel, and God's dealings with them. Look at verse 8 of Psalm 66:

Bless our God, O peoples,  
And sound His praise abroad,  
Who keeps us in life,  
And does not allow our feet to slip.

For Thou has tried us, O God;  
Thou hast refined us as silver is refined.  
Thou didst bring us into the net;  
Thou didst lay an oppressive burden upon our loins.  
Thou didst make men ride over our heads;  
We went through fire and through water;  
Yet Thou didst bring us out into a place of abundance.

The Psalmist understood that God was at work in his people even through their persecution and oppression by evil men who had turned their lives upside down. God was totally in charge of these things. They also understood that these trials would purify their faith. So they were able to thank God for that purification process.

The writer of Hebrews said the same process was at work in the life of the Lord Jesus---Jesus was made perfect through suffering. What this means is that he was completed by suffering. Though Jesus was perfect and sinless to begin with, yet he still needed to learn something in relationship to his heavenly Father. Hebrews also says that Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered. If it was necessary for Jesus in terms of his maturation process, if he still needed to be matured, then how much so for us! Suffering shouldn't raise doubts in us about whether God loves us. Our fiery ordeals, Peter says, prove how attentive he is, how committed God is to our maturation, to our ultimate perfection. Our identity in Christ is strengthened through these "normal" sufferings and struggles.

In verse 12 of chapter 4, Peter has stressed the value of suffering because of its end result in our lives. God really will accomplish his purposes through it. In verse 13 the apostle adds a second idea---we are to rejoice in suffering, to be joyful. He's not referring to superficial emotion, but to a settled, confident, joyful certainty that God knows what he's doing, that's he's going to finish what he's started in our lives. Peter says one of the reasons we can be joyful is because we are sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. Our experience is like that of our Lord. Look at verses 13 and 14:

...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. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Three things that we can be absolutely certain of that come out of these two verses. The first one is in the first half of verse 13. Right now, in our present experience, we're sharing in Christ's sufferings. The word share in my Bible is the word *koinonia* ---which means fellowship. We all enjoy fellowship that's comfortable, with good friends and good times. Peter defines for us a fellowship of suffering with Jesus that produces joy in us.

The apostle Paul prayed in Philippians 3, asking for the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Now why did Jesus suffer? What did he do to deserve the sufferings that he experienced? Jesus was a good man. He was wonderfully attractive in his life, the most attractive person who ever lived. There was no self-righteousness about the Lord. There was no self-consciousness about his own goodness. But he was killed for it. The world that we live in hates goodness, hates Christlikeness. The world we live in sits in the very lap of evil. This world is controlled by Satan and Satan hates anything that's like Christ. Satan doesn't hate niceness. Niceness is not the least bit threatening to Satan, but Christlikeness, moral ethical goodness, is threatening to him. He will attack anybody who attempts to live that way. The Lord Jesus said to the disciples in John 15, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."

At the present time we share in the sufferings of Jesus. The second half of verse 13, is future tense---we will share in his future glory. Paul wrote in Romans 8 that if we are willing to suffer with Jesus Christ, we will be fellow heirs with him and we will be glorified with him. Paul is confident, and Peter as well, that when Jesus comes back to claim his own we're finally going to be just like he is. Right now we're aware that we're not like him, we're not as good as he was, we're not as attractive as he was. And yet we are going to share his glory. In this context, the glory of Jesus is his character, his perfection, what's so beautiful and attractive about him. The promise is that we're going to share that perfect character ultimately. We'll be just like him---which is what we want to be anyway. Through suffering our character is being changed so that we really can finally be just like him. That's a tremendous thing to look forward to.

Verse 14 goes back to the present tense saying that right now we have incredible resources available to us to draw from so that we are able to endure whatever testing, or suffering, or hardship, or difficulty God may ask of us.

These resources are defined in the second half of verse 4:14. There is a little quote out of Isaiah 11 Peter draws from. It's a messianic promise that there will be One who is going to come forth---the Messiah. He will come out of obscurity, but he will do powerful things---because the Spirit of God indwells him, and the power of God controls him and we can be assured that our lives will also have the same impact. We are protected through suffering, we can have the same kind of impact that Jesus had---because the same Holy Spirit indwells us and because the same power of God expresses itself through us. Peter now introduces another word, glory. The word glory is not in the Isaiah 11 passage so Peter adds it. It's the Shekinah glory of the Old Testament. Do you remember that cloud that was visible over Mount Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses? The shining cloud was also visibly present over the tabernacle, the tent of worship. Then it shone forth again visibly when the temple was dedicated in Jerusalem. The cloud of glory was a symbol of God's active presence with his people. When they saw the cloud they were greatly encouraged---God was there, they were not alone. Peter says we actually have the same glory of God, with us, over us, around us, protecting us, directing us, even though we can't see it.

All three of these great resources of God in our lives are mentioned in the life of Stephen, the first New Testament martyr. Stephen was arrested, (Acts 6,7) and brought up on charges of treason before the Jewish high court, the supreme court. As he was giving his speech in defense of himself, (preaching Jesus really, the resurrection of Christ), Luke says that Stephen was a man full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. That's what empowered him in the face of his accusers. The account goes on to say that when the death sentence was announced, his face was like that of an angel. Something supernatural was at work in Stephen---it was visible to other people. As he lay dying, in the process of being stoned to death, Stephen looked up and saw the glory of God, the Shekinah glory! What an incredible thing God allowed him, to see that wondrous cloud again---"Stephen, you're not alone. You're going to be with me,"---literally within moments.

Our calling today is to suffer for the name of Christ, Peter says in verse 14, that we are to share in Christ's sufferings. Some of our university students at Stanford have recently faced increasingly hostile attitudes towards Christianity on that campus because they have lovingly reached out to other students---especially gay and lesbian students on campus---with the simple good news that God loves them so much that he really can change their sexual orientation. The response has not been gratitude, or appreciation for the good news. They have been reproached, and reviled---with a vengeance. Our church, and several other Christian groups on campus, recently sponsored a speaker on campus who God saved 17 years ago after 15 years in a lesbian

lifestyle. She gave a wonderful, loving witness to that deliverance from her past lifestyle to a crowd of 600 Stanford students. She told her audience with great sensitivity how much God loved them. Dorman Followwill, our college pastor, was subsequently quoted in the "Stanford Daily" account of that meeting. Dorman did not sound homophobic, nor did he come across as some fanatical idiot---as often times the press pictures Christians. Dorman told the students how much God loves gay and lesbians, and he assured them compassionately that God could change their lives through the power of Jesus Christ. The responses from Queer Nation and other radical organizations were amazing---they were both profane, and lewd. Some of our students were frightened. I was delighted to hear of the Christian spirit of acceptance and love expressed at that meeting, and yet that very goodness was responded to with anger, hatred, and outright physical opposition. In reality that's what we can expect to happen if we choose to stand for the goodness of Jesus. But God is with us in such difficult situations. His power will guard us. We really will withstand the pressure.

Verses 15 and 16 of 1 Peter 4 are parenthetical. They warn us about two dangers to our significance as "beloved," our significance as those who suffer for Christ. The first warning is the danger that we may be suffering for the wrong reasons, and the second warning is the danger we will be ashamed and deny the Lord in situations where we should allow him to be made known.

By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in the name let him glorify God.

This is the third time that Peter has warned us about this possibility of suffering for the wrong reasons. Two weeks ago in chapter 2 verse 20 he asked the question, For what credit is it if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently. Then last week in chapter 3, verse 17, he said, For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong. Verse 15 suggests that sometimes our suffering is our own fault. It's not because we're Christlike, it's not because we're suffering for righteousness sake---it's because we're boorish, or obnoxious, or stupid, or outright rebellious---and we pay a price for it. Peter has already said in verse 3 of this chapter that the time is past for outright flagrant sins of the old life. That stuff is over with, he says. But now he broadens it and goes further: "Anything that might be alien to a Christian lifestyle, make sure that's now the cause of your suffering." He mentions murder. That does include physical assault but it can also include slanderous character assassination, blind rage, our wishing that someone were dead. Jesus said if we think it we are guilty of it. He talks about being a thief. That's robbery, stealing. Whether it's criminal or not, if it's taking away from somebody else what's rightfully theirs, in God's sight it's robbery. I believe that even naive, unwise, selfish financial management of resources is robbery---If we're basically serving ourselves with our own money then we're stealing from God. The third word that he uses there is criminal activity. Think of the tragedy every time you hear in the media that some Christian leader has been convicted of crime, consider the reproach that sort of thing brings on the body of Christ.

The fourth word Peter uses is mischief maker, (in your Bible it may be translated troublesome meddler). This is the only place in all of first century Greek writing that this word is used---as if Peter had coined a phrase, putting two words together. Literally, it means "trying to exercise oversight or management in affairs that are foreign or alien to you." It's messing around in things you have no business being involved with. Peter's saying "make sure you're not suffering because you're a busybody." Religious management of somebody else's life can get you in lots of trouble! In contemporary culture I am reminded of the character that Dana Carvey has created on Saturday Night Live, known as "the Church Lady." If anybody's a troublesome meddler and a mischief maker in this context, it's her! I also thought of the epitaph C.S. Lewis mentioned many years ago he found on a tombstone:

Erected by her sorrowing brothers in memory of Martha Clay.  
Here lies one who lived for others.  
Now she has peace and so do they.

Our lifestyle, our conduct should be our best argument that we don't deserve the suffering that we do experience. Too often the messes we end up in are because we have succumbed to temptation, we have allowed sin to triumph. Our own flesh causes suffering. Peter says that we are to make very certain that we're

not suffering because of our own careless behavior.

The second danger Peter mentions in verse 16 is being ashamed of the name of Jesus Christ. Don't deny him, don't be embarrassed about him under the pressure of opposition of persecution! Think about Peter's own history, (There's a poignancy in this). I think if Peter had said this out loud we would have said it very gently, very lovingly, with a great sense of humility. Why? Because he remembers his own shame, his own failure, when he denied the Lord. A little girl said "Don't you know this one who's on trial?" And he swore and said, "I don't. I never knew the man." Years later, Peter can say, "I've been through it. I know what you have to live with when you give in to that sort of embarrassment and shame." Remember the wonderful reconciliation on the seashore of Galilee after the resurrection? Jesus came to Peter and gave him a chance to affirm his love for him again so that the security of their relationship was reaffirmed. It's important not to be ashamed of the name of Jesus because it's really that name that provides us the very strength we need to go through suffering. The name of anything, the name of a person, represents the value, the worth, everything inherent in that person. It's the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord that sustains us and strengthens us through suffering. Paul wrote to Timothy, a young pastor who was struggling with insecurity and timidity, with opposition and persecution from heretics who were trying to run him out of his church. "Don't be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner. Take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God." Don't be ashamed!

In the beginning of verse 17 the apostle returns to consider further the significance the value we have in Jesus as we go through difficult times. Verses 17 and 18 say that we have significance in suffering because it's happening as a family. We don't suffer in isolation. We're part of the church, a spiritual family. Verse 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? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?

This verse is sort of good news and bad news you might say. The good news is that the purifying judgment of suffering going on in the body of Christ is good for us. God is sovereign over all this process of judgment at work. The apostle of Paul, teaching in Asia Minor on his first missionary journey (Acts 14), said, "We must go through many hardships [or tribulations] to enter the kingdom of God." We're to suffer together as the church, as the household of God. God has always been at work, consistently throughout human history, purifying his own people. It happened consistently in the Old Testament. We read the passage from Psalm 66 earlier. This image of God refining or purifying the nation of Israel through fire is a common Old Testament theme. Ezekiel 9, Zechariah 13, Malachi 3 all say that God will even use evil kings, pagan rulers to judge and purify his nation. You see, God can not tolerate sin in his people. He'll purge it out of them, and us as well, because he wants us to be a light of purity to the people we work with and live with. God will be at work even through the perversity, the cruelty, the capriciousness of our society, through movements and organizations that oppose us and oppose the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. He'll use people around us to purify us, to put pressure on us. The hands of the persecutors of the members of the church are actually the hands of God. Evil activity against the church is the judgment of God--we have to be very clear on this, so we won't panic. The reality is that evil is not running rampant in the world. Satan and evil men do not have ultimate control. God uses the worst things that Satan can do to purify us, to turn up the pressure on us. And we will survive! That's the good news.

The bad news is this: nobody else will survive! The persecutors, the tormentors, those who reject the good news of this purifying judgment, they are all going to perish. Their lives will become hell on earth as they resist this good news. Ultimately, Peter says, they're going to suffer eternal condemnation, and total separation from God. They're going to go to hell when Jesus comes back. Peter quotes Proverbs 11:18 to reinforce his statement. Verse 18 ought to invoke in us tremendous concern for the people who oppose us, who make fun of us, because as Jesus said, we ought to pray for those who spitefully use us. Proverbs 11:18 says that we are barely saved. Our salvation hangs on a thread, really, the thread of Jesus' death on the cross, upon our being justified by his saving work. That's all that we can count on---nothing else---certainly not on any of our own merit or own resources. If we're saved that way---with great difficulty---what about all those people who totally reject the saving grace of God offered to the world. What about those people who don't want Jesus to cleanse their sins. Tragically, they are going to hell---without hope. This sobering truth

ought to help us look at the people who oppose us differently. They are the victims. They are the ones whose end is frightening to think about.

The final sentence in this passage, verse 19, is really a summary statement of everything we've talked about his morning. Peter says,

Therefore [or in light of all of this], let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Whenever we suffer, when we're persecuted, this verse says that these things are actually "according to God's plan and purpose." Our response ought to (always) be to do the right thing, to live obediently, with integrity, morally and ethically, even in the face of suffering. Peter says we are to trust God all the more, we are not to "demand answers" and we are not to challenge God's right to put us through tough times. When I don't trust people I find that I become demanding, "Give me answers!", or "What are you doing?" If I really trust someone, their intent, their motive, I don't need a lot of information. Peter says we are to view our heavenly Father like that. Entrust your life to him, commit yourself to him. The word in my Bible entrust (or commit, in your Bible perhaps), is same word that Jesus used when he called out from the cross as he was dying. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Unhesitatingly he was able to give that confession of faith in his heavenly Father. Why could he do that? Because he believed that God was lovingly faithful to him, totally sovereign over every circumstance.

To sum this all up, we really need to believe that all this counsel from the apostle really works---knowing we're beloved of God, knowing that we're sharing in Christ's sufferings, knowing that our good behavior in Christ does make a difference in this world, knowing that suffering as part of a spiritual family serves God's purposes, knowing God really will sustain us when the pressure is the greatest, we really can trust him with our very lives.

There's a powerful illustration and example of this truth from the life of the early church. There was a baby boy born in the city of Smyrna in Turkey---one of the cities where Peter's letter was circulated. He grew up in the bosom of that church, gave his life to Christ, and became a pastor there, spending 60 years shepherding the Christian flock in that city. There still exist today a number of the letters of Polycarp---this dear man's name---written to other churches scattered around Asia Minor. Forty years after Peter wrote his letter, Polycarp wrote a letter to the church in Philippi in 110 AD, as they were undergoing great persecution:

Let us then hold steadfastly and unceasingly to our hope and to the pledge of our righteousness that is Christ Jesus, who bore our sins in his own body on the tree, who committed no sin, neither was guile found on his lips. But for our sakes he endured everything that we might live in him. Therefore let us be imitators of this patient endurance. And if we suffer for the sake of his name let us glorify him. For he set us this example in his own person and this is what we believe.

Polycarp wrote those words when he was in his early forties, pastoring a thriving congregation. Some 45 years later he was arrested as one of the leaders of the church during a persecution under the emperor Trajan. The authorities searched for several months to find Polycarp as he had moved from house to house. The police finally caught up with him in a farmhouse outside Smyrna. An anonymous member of the church in Smyrna has written the account of his arrest, public trial, and his execution.

Even so he could have escaped to another farm, but he did not wish to do so, saying, "God's will be done." Thus, when he heard of their arrival, he went downstairs and talked with them, while those who looked on marveled at his age and constancy, and at how there should be such zeal over the arrest of so old a man. Straightway he ordered food and drink, as much as they wished, to be set before them at that hour, and he asked them to give him an hour so that he might pray undisturbed. And when they consented, he stood and prayed---being so filled with the grace of God that for two hours he could not hold his peace, to the amazement of those who heard. And many repented that they had come to get such a devout old man.

The next morning he was brought into the city to stand before the Roman Governor in the public amphitheater. Here is his final conversation before he was burned at the stake for his faith.

"And when finally he was brought up (into the public arena), there was a great tumult on hearing that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked him if he were Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, he tried to persuade him to deny [the faith], saying, "Have respect to your age"---and other things that customarily follow this, such as, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar; change your mind; say, 'Away with the atheists!'" (Christians were accused of being atheists because they wouldn't worship the emperor, they wouldn't acknowledge his divinity. So the proconsul says, "Just say 'Away with the atheists,' meaning the Christians). But Polycarp looked with earnest face at the whole crowd of lawless heathen in the arena, and motioned to them with his hand. Then, groaning and looking up to heaven, he said, "Away with the atheists!" But the proconsul was insistent and said: "Take the oath, and I shall release you. Curse Christ." Polycarp said: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

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