

SALVATION AND SUFFERING

by Doug Goins

I heard Bryant Gumbel comment on the *Today* show last week, "You know, now we need to hear some good news." I'm sure this has been as difficult a week for you as it has been for me and my family. These are unsettling times that are raising many questions about our society, our relationships, and our personal responsibility in all that is taking place.

In the midst of reflecting on these things, I had the joy yesterday evening of performing a wedding for a dear old friend of mine named Helen and the man God has sent into her life, Joe. (I had participated in the memorial service for Helen's first husband several years ago, and now Helen was remarrying.) Helen and Joe are both in their mid-fifties, and their wedding was a bit more traditional than some of us might be used to, but I was struck by a statement in their wedding service, which they took out of the Presbyterian Book of Order, especially in light of the times that we found ourselves living in last week:

"Our Savior has instructed by his apostles those who enter into this relation to cherish a mutual esteem in love, to bear with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, to comfort each other in sickness, trouble, and sorrow."

A bit later in the service Helen and Joe exchanged vows and said to one another, "I do promise to be thy loving and faithful husband (wife), in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live," acknowledging the reality that at some point death would invade that relationship and take one or both of them.

Usually the weddings I participate in emphasize more the part about plenty, joy, health, and long life; those prospects are what most newlyweds are excited about. But Helen and Joe, being in their mid-fifties, had a more mature understanding of their wedding vows and the expectations they should have. They realized that the part about want, sorrow, sickness, and the certainty of death was real. It had come from their personal experience with death and with parents in failing health. As a matter of fact, Joe had an aunt who died suddenly Thursday morning just before the wedding, who would have been a part of the celebration last night. Both Helen and Joe have also been through serious financial struggles as a result of recessionary times. They both have had struggles in relationships with grown children. The events in Los Angeles even intruded on our ceremony, because Helen's cousin, a delightful young Catholic priest named Kevin, who serves a parish in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles, told us about how the rioting, looting, and fires came within two blocks of his church. He was an eyewitness to all the tragedy and human suffering before he flew up here Friday morning to be a part of this celebration of joy.

The wedding was delightful, a great time of celebration, but the service, the rehearsal, and the reception were all tempered by an objectivity that you don't find in most weddings. There was a realization of how tough life is and will probably continue to be. The vows themselves, which talk about that tapestry of suffering and joy, sickness and health, plenty and want, life lived in the realization that death will invade, spoke much more powerfully last night than in other wedding services I have performed.

This balanced perspective comes right out of the Bible. The wedding service I quoted from a moment ago says, "Our Savior has instructed by his apostles those who enter into this relationship...." The apostolic writer who weaves that tapestry of joy and suffering together most tightly and perhaps most beautifully is Peter in his first epistle. The great central theme of this letter through all five chapters is that we as followers of Jesus Christ have a joyful, hopeful certainty that remains through the inevitable times of suffering, struggle, and sorrow. In Peter's thinking hope and suffering are always tied together. The word suffering or some cognate occurs sixteen times in this short letter; we see the words trials, testing, pain, sorrow, abuse, reviling, and

ordeals.

The Lord laid it on my heart to teach this series in 1 Peter three months ago. I had decided to excerpt from each of the five chapters one paragraph that focused on the reality and the necessity of suffering in the life of people who choose to follow Jesus. This week I began to understand God's timing for us as a church family. We need good news and we need clarity when we are going through difficult times such as these. The question has been raised in the media, "Could this be the beginning of a long hot summer?" That is, is this just a foretaste of what is to follow? Whether or not that is the case, our hearts need to be encouraged and our thinking informed on how to respond to what we have seen this last week. In our next five weeks together, Peter is going to examine this reality of suffering in our lives from many different perspectives.

In verse 13 of chapter 1 Peter speaks about the need for hopeful, mature objectivity as we go through the experience of suffering:

Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

He calls us to sobriety, clear thinking, and objectivity. Without a clear focus on Jesus—who he is, what he has accomplished, and what he is continuing to do in our lives—we are going to become overwhelmed, wiped out emotionally and physically by the fearful concern, the subjectivity, that comes from suffering. It will undermine our ability to think clearly and to live life the way we are designed to live it. Focusing on Jesus will keep us safe from anxiety.

That was certainly true among the congregations to which Peter wrote in the first century. This letter, written sometime between 64 and 67 AD, was sent to groups of Christians in Asia Minor, five provinces of the Roman Empire located in what is modern-day Turkey. Peter had gone west to Rome from Asia Minor in about 63 AD. He arrived in that city just before the terrible outbreak of violence against Christians in 64 AD, which was precipitated directly by the emperor Nero. That summer a terrible fire burned the entire western section of the city of Rome. Early historians all pretty much agree that probably Nero himself set the fire, but he blamed the Christians for it, using them as scapegoats. A terrible wave of persecution broke out against the Christian population (as well as against the Jews). A Roman historian named Tacitus lived through that time, and he said that in the five-year period between 63 and 68 AD, every Christian in Rome either lost his life or fled the city for safety. Peter was probably there when this happened, and he watched the flaming conflagration and all the suffering unleashed on Christians in the city. So he wrote this letter to the brothers and sisters in Christ to whom he had preached the gospel in Asia Minor, people he had led to Christ personally, to warn them. He saw the writing on the wall, and he knew that persecution was probably going to spread and that they would all suffer because of it.

The word terrify is used several times in this letter. Peter realizes that circumstances like this cause terror in our hearts. It's just as true for us today as it was for those first-century Christians. It is not just Roman persecution that terrifies, but the things swirling around us right now in our modern world. The prospect of the infirmities, weakness, sickness, trouble, and sorrow listed in that wedding service terrifies us.

Let me ask you this: What are the things going on in the world right now that scare you to death? What causes you to lie awake at night, to live with a sense of apprehension? Perhaps, as some have suggested, this conflagration in Los Angeles is just a symbol of violence, destruction, and social anarchy to come, triggered by hatred, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness across a whole segment of our population, racial unrest, anger over disparity in economic status, just plain greed, and frustration with our criminal justice system. The experts are certainly apprehensive about it, and their concern filters down to us. It was frightening for my children as they watched the television this week, saw the pictures in the newspaper, and listened to the radio. They had never seen their country this way before.

Perhaps your fear is more centered in your own personal experience, in relationships or difficult circumstances that you're going through right now. We prayed for one of our brothers in leadership in our body on Thursday night at the elders' meeting; he is going back into the hospital tomorrow morning for his third angioplasty on

an artery that they just can't get to stay open. He is greatly anxious about it. I got a phone call yesterday morning from a dear friend of mine on the east coast, a lady I've known for twenty years since she and her husband were first married, and she told me through anguished tears that her husband said he wants a divorce, and on top of that, the very same week they found out that their seventeen-year-old daughter, a junior in high school and an athlete, has an arhythmic heart problem that seems pretty serious. Across the continent I sensed this dear friend's terror over those prospects. I spent Thursday morning last week with another dear friend in our church family, an older gentleman who is dying of liver cancer. He discovered that five months ago, and our relationship has been deepened and strengthened since then. We planned his memorial service as he anticipates his death. There are probably similar concerns in your own heart about things that impact you directly.

Peter's concern for the Christians in Asia Minor and his concern for us this morning is going to come through very personally. This letter is not Peter's philosophy of suffering; we are not going to find theory or ivory tower scholarship here. He is going to share out of the experience of his own personal suffering and that of watching the sufferings of Jesus. These will inform his thinking consistently through the letter. They affected him deeply, and this letter is strongly emotional at times.

We have read and heard a lot of scholarly reflection on the riots last week. All the experts are on television now, examining and evaluating what is happening. And we have seen politicians at every level making appeals for order and understanding. But I don't think anything has touched me as deeply as the halting, stumbling, emotional plea from Rodney King when he said on television, "We've got to stop. This isn't right." There was a man speaking out of his own personal crucible of emotional, physical, perhaps even spiritual suffering. And that is how the apostle Peter is going to speak to us about the experience of suffering.

But in the middle of this Peter introduces the theme of joy. He is going to explain to us how in spite of suffering, struggle, and sorrow, paradoxically we can be joyful. Look at chapter 1, verses 6 through 9:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.

Joy is mentioned twice in that paragraph, first in verse 6 and then again in verse 8. The source of joy is not our present experience, which is one of suffering. No, this joy that he talks about is rooted in truths we find back in the opening paragraph, verses 3 through 5:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

That is an explosion of praise and worship, a doxology, because of the absolute certainty that our ultimate salvation in Jesus Christ, our security in him, is confirmed. This is the foundational truth that this whole investigation of suffering is going to be built on. It was echoed in Romans chapter 8 as we read together responsively this morning. The apostle Paul is totally convinced of the same wonderful reality.

In summary, verses 3 through 5 of 1 Peter are telling us that our salvation as individual believers was according to the eternal purposes of God; it was not an afterthought for him. From eternity, before time began, God decided to save each one of us individually. It was accomplished through Jesus, through his sacrificial death and resurrection, and through the new birth that is ours because of that. This salvation is being born again to a new kind of life—a divine life really, a resurrection life, being changed from the inside out.

Peter says that believing this gives us a dynamic, confident hope for the present and for the future. He says we have a wonderful eternal inheritance, reserved and protected for us in heaven. And it is not just our inheritance that is being protected, but we ourselves are being guarded through the power of God, guaranteeing that we are going to be able to cash in on that inheritance when we get to heaven. The word guard is a military word. The power of God is active in our lives right now as he garrisons about us and protects us through everything, no matter what the circumstances are. That is why we can be hopeful.

Our security in the Lord is not tied to any immediate circumstances---for example, to material resources that could protect us or sustain hope. It is not even dependent on our own emotional resources to "hang in there" and tough it out. Those resources can be violated, undermined, and destroyed. Last week we watched people's material resources going up in smoke and people's emotional resources crumbling; they had nothing left to draw on. Peter says those things can be corrupted and defiled. But our security is tied to God's saving and keeping power. This is the source of joy that is unutterable---it can't even be put into words---and exalted. This is a joy that the rest of the world doesn't understand at all.

Now, verse 6 takes suffering very seriously. Peter does not make light of the experience of suffering in our lives. He gives us the objective reality of it. Verse 6 tells us four things about suffering that God is totally in charge of. First, we see this little phrase at the beginning of verse 6: "though now for a little while." What this says about the experience of suffering is that it won't last as long as it feels like it's lasting. When I was with my friend dying of cancer Thursday morning, he talked about how time has slowed down for him in the last five months. He says his days are long and his nights are longer. That represents his physical reality as well as what is going on inside of him emotionally. But in light of eternity--and he is going to enter eternity in a very few days to be with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ--it is going to be only a little while longer for him, no matter how much longer it feels like it's going on to him, and no matter how much longer the Lord really keeps him on earth. We affirmed that truth in unison this morning when we read together Romans 8:18:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time [duration or time span] are not worth comparing with the [eternal] glory that is to be revealed to us."

The second thing Peter says is that suffering is necessary. The phrase translated in my Bible, "You may have to suffer" is more accurately translated, "You will have to suffer." It is not an option for us, but an absolute necessity, and if it hasn't touched your life yet, thank God for that, but know that it is coming because it is the human experience. It is part of God's providential activity in our lives, and there is a purpose for it. We are going to see Peter develop this theme of God's purposes every week that we study this together. What is God doing through the bad things that come into our lives? Peter wants us to understand that. God is sovereignly at work through our suffering.

The third thing about suffering is that it does cause us distress. The word is translated suffer in my Bible. The New International Version says suffer grief, and the New American Standard uses the word distress. Literally, it means to be in great heaviness; to be tearful or sorrowful. It is a strong, intense word. As Christians, we do not make suffering a matter of stoicism, keeping a stiff upper lip and getting through it somehow. Through the last five months, my friend with cancer has talked about his own discouragement, how emotionally debilitating this disease is for him. Our brother on the board of elders who is going back into the hospital for the third time is experiencing discouragement, and that is what we prayed about for him Thursday night.

We grieve, we struggle. We don't say, "Praise the Lord because things are so awful." Jesus uses the same word for suffer twice in the gospels in describing his own experience. When he is telling the disciples that he is going to have to go to the cross, he says, "...and suffer grief." And in the Garden of Gethsemane when he is wrestling with his heavenly Father and asking the question, "Could this cup pass from me?" he uses the same word again. He admits to his Father that he is in anguish, that this is awful to go through.

The last thing verse 6 says is that suffering is going to come in a variety of different ways. My Bible says you will have to suffer *various* trials. Some of your translations may say *manifold* trials. The word literally means variegated or multicolored, and it's telling us that suffering is going to come from every conceivable direction,

from an incredible array of sources. Peter is going to examine several of those sources of suffering in the letter. He is going to teach us about Satanic attack; sometimes there is a flat-out supernatural demonic onslaught against us, individually and collectively, and Peter wants us to understand that source of suffering. Sometimes suffering comes because of the sinfulness and rebellion of the human heart. Jeremiah tells us that our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked, and desperate wickedness results in suffering and struggle for us. Sometimes suffering comes out of the social order itself; we live in a world system that is in rebellion against God. All three of those sources of suffering have been powerfully at work in Los Angeles this week and around the rest of our country.

There is one more source of suffering that is part of our experience: We live in a fallen natural world. The whole physical order, the creation, has been blighted ever since sin came into the human experience through Adam and Eve. Romans 8:20-22 affirms that reality; Paul writes that the creation was subjected to futility, it is in bondage to decay, and it is groaning in travail. That wasn't God's original plan for the world or for the human race. He ordered things to work in perfect balance and harmony. But when Adam and Even sinned, not only were we affected by it, but the natural world was affected as well. Entropy was introduced into the physical world at the fall, I'm convinced. Our universe is dying just as we human beings are. So whether we experience an epidemic that rages through a population and wipes out hundreds of thousands of people, Alzheimer's disease, earthquakes like the one that devastated Humboldt County two weeks ago, cancer as we've talked about this morning, mechanical failures that maim and kill people, allergies, deep depression, dementia, tidal waves, volcanoes, or tornadoes-whatever destroys life and the quality of life, even peaceful death in one's sleep at age 92-it all testifies to the fact that we live in a world that is in rebellion, that is out of whack.

Now in verses 6b-7 Peter gives us the ultimate purpose of suffering in the life of a Christian. It is easier to go through even bad things when you understand that there is a point to it.

"You may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Peter says that suffering for us is like a refining fire. It's proving, testing, or assaying us; purifying us; preparing us for something. Suffering purges the impurities out of us just as fire purges precious metal; as the metal is heated hotter and hotter it turns to liquid, and the impurities float to the top where they can be identified and skimmed off by the silversmith or the goldsmith. That imagery is all through the biblical writings. In Zechariah 13:9 God identifies his role in this: "I will put this third [of the nation of Israel] into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested." There God identifies himself as a silversmith or a goldsmith doing the refining. Later on in the history of Israel, in Malachi 3:3 God is described not as the silversmith but as the fire itself: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord."

The purpose of suffering is for us to be made into something more beautiful and more acceptable before the Lord. Our suffering, whether large or small, is part of the process that God uses to conform us to his own image. God isn't like some perverted mad scientist performing experiments on us, fiendishly rubbing his hands and saying, "I wonder if they're going to make it." No, he knows we are; he is committed to completing the work he himself is doing in our lives. He is going to use the pressure and the heat to purge out the fleshly dependencies that are built into us, the sinful, rebellious elements in us that we need to get rid of. He wants our faith to be increasingly pure. What he wants to do is separate confidence in ourselves from confidence in him. He wants to purge out our confidence in material wealth, education, human relationships (people who prop us up or reinforce us), intellect, background, planning, and manipulating. God says dependency on those things has to come out. So he turns the heat up, and they start to come to the surface. That is how it works in me. I do fine when there's no pressure, but when things get tough, the ugliness comes floating to the surface, and then I can identify it and repent of it, and God can skim it off. The quality of my character becomes a little bit more pure in the process.

It's interesting that in both the Malachi passage and in 1 Peter, the ultimate result is that we will engage in pure

worship or present right offerings to the Lord. We will stand before the Lord on the day he calls us home, and the praise we offer him will be wonderfully pure, not characterized by ulterior motives or hypocrisy, but by total integrity in what we say to the Lord and offer to him. Making us better worshipers is the ultimate purpose of suffering that we have to keep in mind. Peter is going to come back to this again in chapter 4.

In verses 8 and 9, Peter says suffering can have an immediate, even discernible effect in us; it can help us in our relationship with Jesus in three ways. First, he says, "Without having seen him you love him." Suffering somehow is going to help us love Jesus more. Then in the middle of the verse it says, "...though you do not now see him you believe in him." Suffering will help us believe in Jesus more. And finally, "[You] rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy." These are not commands to try to love more, believe in Jesus more, or be more joyful. They are wonderful descriptions of what God is going to do for us through suffering.

Let's look at each one more closely. We love Jesus more, first of all. When you suffer, you feel helpless, vulnerable, powerless. It will drive you into the arms of your Savior, and you will feel more and more secure in his love. I was reminded of the apostle Paul's writing to Timothy from the Mamertine dungeon in Rome just before his own death. He is about to be executed, he is physically uncomfortable, and he is lonely because his co-workers have abandoned him and bailed out on the faith as well. But he is able to say at the end of 2 Timothy that he takes his place among those who have loved the appearing of Jesus Christ. Suffering has made his love for Jesus deeper, stronger, and tougher.

Secondly, we learn to believe in Jesus more. Here belief means obedient submission to his word. So we learn to obey him more through suffering. It sounds kind of strange, doesn't it? Psalm 119:65-72 illuminates this for us a bit. In verse 67 this anonymous writer says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I keep thy word." Then he says later in verses 71-72, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes. The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." That man learned something through suffering. He is saying, "Before God put the pressure on me, my heart wandered off. It wasn't loyal to the Lord; it wasn't submissively obedient to him. But it was really a good thing that God turned the heat up and put me through suffering, because I learned obedience. I learned to value the truth that God had been communicating to me." I know from my own experience that suffering softens me; it makes me more tender. It forces me to have a teachable heart. It gets me to the point of saying, "Okay, Lord, I give up! I'll do it your way, play by your rules, and quit trying to figure it out on my own."

Finally, suffering causes us to rejoice in Jesus more. Again, we don't rejoice because we're suffering, but we rejoice because of the absolute certainty that he will finish the salvation that he has begun in us; we rejoice in the end result. And suffering really sensitizes us to that end. The writer of Hebrews says in 12:2, "Looking to Jesus the pioneer 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 do we learn about Jesus and his suffering from this? He didn't take any delight in his humiliation and crucifixion, but his eyes were fixed on the end result, which was salvation for us. That's where he found joy, and he could rejoice more and more. My memory is drawn to John 15:11, the Last Supper. Jesus talks about joy to the disciples at the very last meal he will ever eat, on the last night he will have on earth. He says to them, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." We can know joy, and it can be strengthened and deepened even in pain, difficulty, and struggle.

During the five months that I have spent together with my friend dying of cancer, ever since he got what amounted to his death sentence, he has exhibited all three of these qualities: loving the Lord more, being more confident in and more obedient to Jesus, and even experiencing increased joy. That is less clear to him than it is to me because I've been listening to him and watching him in our interactions. He has really encouraged me with his quiet confidence that soon he is going to be with the Lord Jesus whom he loves so deeply. He expresses that joy, and he is more and more confident that he can really come into the Lord's presence with no embarrassment. He is working through the embarrassment of his past life, and he knows now that he is going to be presented to the Father by the Lord Jesus, and his praise will redound with a purity. His suffering has strengthened that confidence in him.

Up to this point in Peter's discussion about suffering, he has just been talking about our present experience and the future hope that we have in Jesus. But now in the final statement he's going to make in the last three

verses of this passage, he's going to take a look back into past salvation history. Now, that's a good way for any of us to gain perspective. When you get involved in suffering, you get emotionally sucked into it, pulled up tight against it, and you lose objectivity and perspective. Peter is saying, "Let's take a giant step back and remember God's activity and involvement that have taken place historically. What you're experiencing right now is not all there is." That helps us overcome the myopia that pain, whether it is physical or emotional, introduces into our lives. So what he is going to do in the closing verses of this section is remind us of God's gift of salvation that could come only through the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Look at verses 10-12:

The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

On the face of it Peter is saying that the salvation that he has been teaching us about was predicted by the Old Testament writers. The sufferings of Jesus on the cross, the victory of the resurrection, and his glorification to the right hand of the Father were all foretold in the Scriptures. Now, this paragraph teaches us wonderful, important things about the inspiration and authority of the Bible-how God sovereignly worked through human intellect, the minds of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles as they preached and wrote about God's grace, about God's salvation, the good news or gospel that was sent down from heaven. It powerfully affirms the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in revealing divine truth, helping them understand God's plan of salvation. He also talks about how the Holy Spirit motivated them not to be selfish, to live with a degree of uncertainty. They didn't understand everything they were writing, but they understood through the Spirit that somehow it was going to benefit generations down the line. They weren't serving just themselves and their own generation of hearers. We today in the twentieth century wonderfully enjoy the benefits of that selflessness on the part of the prophets and apostles.

But the question that I wrestled with this week is, why does he talk about that here in the context of an investigation of the difficulty of suffering in the life of the believer? Well, there are a couple of reasons. First, at the heart of the Old Testament teaching on the Messiah are linked together two realities: He is a suffering, dying, humiliated Messiah; but linked with that is his identity as the ruler, the conqueror, the triumphant Messiah. Peter says here that the Old Testament writers didn't totally understand that; they couldn't quite sort it out. It took the revelation of the New Testament to make it clear that these two realities meet in one and the same man. He says in verse 11, "when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory...." What Peter wants to do here is encourage us through the life of Jesus and his experience of suffering: Crucifixion had to precede the resurrection, and humiliation had to precede exoneration. There is a logic to the phrase, "the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory."

The other reason Peter includes this paragraph about the prophets' inquiries into the sufferings of Christ is that he wants us to understand a critical truth: Because we are followers of Jesus, we must go through this same logical sequence that Jesus went through. Remember, Hebrews 12:2 says that he is the pioneer of our faith. He went ahead of us, and we watch how he did it and learn from him. Suffering is going to be a part of our experience. But it was purposeful in Jesus' life; it was for the benefit of others that he sacrificed himself. If we follow him wholeheartedly, we're going to suffer as he suffered; we'll pay a price on behalf of other people, too. It is part of our calling. Are we willing to enter into the sufferings of Jesus? The promise is that if we are willing to die with him, then we will reign with him. We will be glorified with him and filled up with that resurrection life that helps us overcome and gives us impact and effectiveness. So even as we look at a week like this, we can know beyond a shadow of doubt that God will use us. We can make a difference as we enter into a relationship with another person, speak a word of truth, or lend a hand materially, financially, or physically.

Paul was gripped by the same reality, and he makes an amazing statement in 2 Corinthians 4:8-11:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus [this is our identification with his suffering], so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies [this is the glorification-the impact, the effectiveness]." For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

Then in verse 15:

"For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

Do you know what Paul is saying? If we are willing to suffer with Jesus and for Jesus and to trust him to make our lives count, it will have an unstoppable impact on other people to their benefit. The grace of God that is at work in us, preserving us and protecting us, will influence other people.

In the five months I have spent with with my dear friend who is dying of cancer, as we have prayed together, read the Scriptures together, and really prepared for death together, I have watched his suffering intensify his concern for his children, grandchildren, and circle of friends. He is concerned about their salvation. He wants me to preach the gospel at his funeral. He even told me what to say, because he has friends he is really burdened for. The suffering of our brother who is facing the angioplasty has also intensified his concern for others. He's not absorbed with his own pain or the uncertainty of the outcome, but with other people. That is what suffering will do for us if we let the Lord use it in our lives instead of resisting it.

1 Peter 2:21-25 gives us a great summary statement of these things:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls."

"That we might die to sin and live to righteousness" means making a difference this week in this confused, discouraged society. God will use us this way.

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Doug Goins
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