

The Suffering That Saves

1 Peter 1:6-12

David H. Roper

It is often said that there are two inevitabilities in life: death and taxes. I would like to suggest a third: suffering. Scripture tells us repeatedly that suffering is to be our lot. In Philippians 1 Paul says, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." Mark 10 records that when the disciples reminded Jesus what they had given up to follow him, Jesus said they would receive back a hundredfold and suffering. Suffering is our lot, and therefore we have to come to terms with it. Many of you today, I am sure, are struggling with adversity, and you are wondering what to do. Christians and non-Christians, and animals -- all of creation experiences pain, and somehow we must come to grips with it.

Some explain suffering by declaring that God either is not good, or is not powerful, or does not exist at all. But after you prove that God is evil, or impotent, or absent, you still have the problem of suffering and pain. Somehow merely to do away with God, or to claim he is not good, does not solve the problem. Or people may react emotionally, as Job's wife did, when she counseled Job to curse God and die. But even when you have cursed God and railed against him you still have to face reality a world filled with sorrow and pain. Therefore, what should be our reaction when troublesome times come? Here is where revelation comes to our rescue.

The Scriptures are replete with statements about the nature of suffering, and what our reactions to it should be. In the Old Testament of course there is the book of Job, which deals almost exclusively with this subject. Then in the New Testament there are Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. The apostle Paul discusses suffering repeatedly, as in Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 4. The writer of Hebrews discusses it in chapter 12, and the book of James opens with various statements about the nature and purpose of suffering. But perhaps the book which discusses the subject of suffering most thoroughly is the one we are now studying - the first epistle of Peter. Suffering is the theme of this book.

As I indicated in our last study, Peter saw that the church in Asia Minor would soon undergo persecution from the Roman Empire. Prior to Peter's writings, Christians had experienced social and personal opposition. They were ostracized and their businesses boycotted. Their children were refused admission to the best schools. But they had not yet felt the weight of the authority of the Roman Empire. Peter now sees from his vantage point in Rome that the storm clouds are beginning to gather. A very few years after Peter wrote this book, Christians in Asia Minor began to suffer under the Roman legions, and experienced imperial persecution for their faith. Peter himself was crucified upside down at Nero's command. Thousands of other Christians perished in this wave of persecution which swept throughout the Roman Empire. So Peter writes to prepare them and to warn them about what he describes as a "fiery trial which is to try you." And he provides principles throughout his letter which enable God's people to face into suffering not merely to resign ourselves to it, but to utilize it as God intends it to be used in our life.

As I indicated in our previous study, the first two chapters of 1 Peter deal with our ultimate destiny as believers, the salvation to be revealed at the Second Coming. I indicated that Paul deals with present salvation spiritual health to cope with life today. Peter's emphasis is upon future salvation -- the consummation of God's program when Jesus comes again to set all things right. Peter establishes ultimate salvation as the foundational truth which will enable believers to stand in times of trial. They are secure; they have been saved.

And this salvation is according to the eternal purpose of God. Salvation is not an afterthought. From eternity God purposed to save us. This was accomplished through the new birth. We have been given a new kind of life, a divine life which is from above, a resurrection life which, Peter said, gives us a dynamic hope, and an inheritance

reserved in heaven for us. Not only are *we* kept, but our *inheritance* is preserved. This inheritance is God himself. The Jewish Christians who received this letter would think immediately of the land of Canaan, because that was their inheritance as Jews. Here Peter spiritualizes the inheritance of Israel, promising not a land but all that God himself promised when they entered into his rest -- God himself, all that he is, all his resources available to them. And that, Peter says, is what sustains us right now. That is what gives us a living hope. That is an inheritance which no one can take away. In contrast to all earthly goods, it can never be defiled, it cannot be marred or ruined; it is kept imperishable for us.

Some of you may know Bob Young, who was for a time on the InterVarsity staff in South America. A number of years ago I heard him relate an incident which took place during his years in graduate school. He had been very outspoken about his Christian faith. He had been pursuing a doctoral program in education, and had invested a great deal of money and time in that program. After several years, his advisor called him into his office and told him that they would be unable to grant him a degree because his world view was so contrary to theirs. They suggested that he go elsewhere. Bob said that as he listened the first thing which flashed through his mind was his great loss in terms of time and money -- several thousand dollars, and several years of his life. Hard on the heels of that thought came the words of the chorus, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold; I'd rather be his, than have riches untold; I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today And, to his surprise, the situation struck him as funny, and he laughed. His advisor thought his mind had snapped under the pressure, and he ran out of the room to get help!

Now, that is the kind of hope we have - our security is not tied to that which is corruptible and can be defiled, but to an incorruptible inheritance reserved for us in heaven. And that enables us to rejoice in any circumstance. Now let's resume our study, beginning with verse 6:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory [or, "glorified joy"], obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

You will note that in this paragraph Peter's concern is the present. Twice the expression "now" occurs. Verse 6: "...even though *now* for a little while...you have been distressed by various trials And again in verse 8: "...and though you do not see Him *now*, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice... This paragraph is set in contrast with the first paragraph, verses 1 through 5. There he is dealing with future salvation. In this paragraph he is dealing with how that salvation works out in our present experience. The second thing you will notice is that this paragraph is connected to the previous one by the words, "In *this* you greatly rejoice," i.e., in this salvation to be revealed in the last time. That is something yet to be. But for the present, Peter says, you are distressed.

There are a number of other things I want you to observe in this paragraph. The first is that Peter does say that suffering causes *distress*. The Greek word he uses means to be in "great heaviness" -- to be tearful, sorrowful. It is a strong, intensive word. It indicates to us that Christian faith is not stoic. When suffering comes, Christians are not expected to keep a stiff upper lip and show no emotion. It is all right to be distressed. It is all right to feel heavy, to be burdened and to shed tears. As George McDonald says, "Sometimes tears are the only cure for weeping."

Jesus was distressed, and he wept over Israel. When he stood at the tomb of Lazarus he was burdened and pained. The term that John used to describe his emotions is also used of the snorting of a horse. He was grieved and outraged at the thought of the death of his friend. He experienced every emotion that you and I experience, apart from sin. Therefore it is not wrong for us to experience deep emotions during times of stress. We must not feel guilty. It is good to know, during these times, that the Lord himself has gone through these experiences, and therefore he understands. When you weep, he weeps with you. When you are frustrated and angry, he is angry

too. We are that closely identified with him. He understands, and can enter into that emotion with us.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse once told of an incident which occurred when he was studying in his office. His little girl was playing around the desk, rifling the drawers and making a general nuisance of herself. He put up with it for a while, but she was very distracting. He was getting a little annoyed, because he was trying to concentrate on the sermon he was preparing. Finally she slammed the drawer on her thumb and let out a shriek. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. Dr. Barnhouse picked her up, put her outside the door, told her to go to her mother, and slammed the door shut. She ran crying down the hall to her mother, who took her in her arms and asked what was wrong. When she told her mother what had happened her mother asked, "Does your thumb still hurt?" She said, "No." Her mother asked her why she was still crying, then. The little girl said, "Because Daddy didn't say 'Ohh'." Now, that is what we too desire, and we do have such a Lord, who says "Ohh" when we suffer! He understands. He is a Father who is as distressed as we in times of turmoil and confusion and pressure.

There is a second thing Peter wants us to know about suffering. Verse 6 indicates it is "for a little while". The expression really means just "a little", and can refer both to the length of time that one suffers, and to the extent of that suffering. Suffering is only a little thing. In terms of eternity it does not last long, and in terms of the glory that will be ours when Christ comes back again, it is incomparably light. Paul says in Romans 8 that he believes that his sufferings "are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us [when Christ comes again]." And in 2 Corinthians 4 he says, "For this *light*, momentary affliction is producing for us exceeding and eternal *weight* of glory far beyond all comparison." He contrasts the lightness of his affliction with the exceeding weight of glory which will be his when Jesus comes again. If you read through 2 Corinthians 11, you are surprised that Paul can refer to these sufferings as "light":

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.

And yet Paul says these are light, momentary afflictions which are working for him a far greater weight of glory. And that is why Peter can say, if we have the right kind of perspective, if we see the span of our life here in terms of eternity and the glory which will be revealed when Jesus comes again, suffering is only a little thing.

Then he says that these sufferings are necessary. The New American Standard translation says "if necessary;" it would be more accurate to say "since they are necessary." Suffering is not really an option for us as believers. It is a necessity. We say, "Who needs it?" God says, "You do." It is part and parcel of the process that God is carrying out in our lives to conform us to the image of his Son. Therefore it is necessary.

And then he describes their suffering as "*various* trials." The word means "variegated," or "many-colored." Trials tend to come from all directions. Sometimes we think we have had all we can endure (and the Lord tells us that he will not give us more pressure than we can endure) and then something comes from yet another direction. They are "manifold" trials. The only other place that Peter uses this term "manifold" or various is in chapter 4, verse 10, where he refers to "the manifold grace of God". Though the trials may be manifold, so is the grace of God. For every trial there is a corresponding grace which God gives to meet that circumstance.

In verse 7 he speaks of the purpose of trials. Trials are purposeful. That is a helpful concept, for there is nothing quite so distressing as to believe that there is no order or purpose in the world, that God is acting capriciously, or that we are buffeted about by mere chance, with no design to it all. Peter says that is not the case. Suffering occurs to prove or authenticate our faith. Now, he is not rejoicing over the *process*. Some translations seem to indicate that it is the trying of our faith which causes rejoicing. That is not what causes joy. It is the *product* of testing that causes joy. God uses adversity in our life in order to purge out the elements of our lives which need to be cleansed

away and to leave behind the faith which is pure and genuine.

When we come to Christ we all are a mixture of faith and flesh. That is, we have a measure of belief and confidence in the Lord, but we also have a large measure of self-confidence. We believe in ourselves. And it is this that God has to purge from our life. The only thing which has any value in God's eyes is faith. The fleshly confidence has to be overthrown. And so he puts us into circumstances which take us to the end of ourselves, which try our souls, and bring us to the place where we have no strength nor ability to cope. So then we turn to the Lord, and we lay hold of him, and we discover that he supplies everything we need to face into the circumstances.

Godlike character is almost always the result of suffering. It is usually only when we come to the very end of ourselves and we lay hold of him that we have his love, joy, peace, and patience. The only way he can build our faith is to take us through times of testing - as gold is purified by fire. The goldsmith melts the gold in order to bring the impurities to the top where they are ladled off. And the process goes on until the goldsmith can see his face reflected in the gold. Peter says suffering is like that. It purifies your faith (which is much more precious than gold which perishes). God brings adversity into your life in order to bring impurities to the surface -- areas of confidence in self - in order that these may be put away so that the face and character of Jesus Christ can be seen, and our faith "...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." There is no other way to get character. There are no shortcuts. The process takes time. God has to put us through periods of intensive testing in order that the thing which is really valuable in his eyes, our faith, may be demonstrated as genuine.

I'm afraid somehow we have the mistaken idea that the Christian life is a matter of growing in strength until we personally are able to cope with anything. Thus it is somewhat discouraging to us to discover, after years of Christian experience, that we can revert to the same sins we used to commit. Growth in the Christian life is *not* a matter of greater personal strength but, rather, growth in our capacity to exercise faith more consistently. When we trust ourselves, we will always revert to what we were. We can be guilty of sins we thought we had long since laid aside. The only time we can be what God intends us to be is when we trust him and appropriate his life. It is suffering which teaches us to trust him consistently. It is our faith which grows. And this process will go on, Peter says, until we stand before him to his praise and glory and honor.

In verse 8 he goes on to say, "Though you have not seen him [literally, "though you have not caught a glimpse of him in the past" (these people had not seen Jesus in the flesh, although Peter had)], and though you do not see him now [i.e., the Second Coming has not occurred yet], right now [even though you stand in the inter-advent period between his First and Second Comings, and you do not see him] you can love him, and you can believe him." That is, you can learn the process of walking by faith so that you are able to cope with everything that comes into your life, and you are able to stand in praise and glory and honor *now*, right where you are. And you do that by loving him and believing in him *now*.

Love, as it is described in Scripture, is not an emotion. It used to concern me greatly that I could not feel love for the Lord. I seldom do now. But love is not a feeling. Love is a commitment to do his will. Jesus said, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me." There may be times, as A. W. Tozer says, that we "walk to Zion to the beat of the band," but most of the time we merely walk -- in obedience to the principles God has laid down. We do so in faith. Peter says this is what you are to do now. Keep on obeying him, keep on believing him. No matter what your circumstances are, lay hold of him, trust him, obey him in that circumstance. Christ is the one fixed reference point which never changes. Keep your eyes on him. Obey him, trust him. That provides stability in the midst of adversity.

There is the story of an old music teacher whose student flippantly greeted him with, "What's the good news?" He struck a tuning fork on the table, held it up, and said, "This is 'A'. The piano next door is out of tune, the soprano upstairs flats the high notes, and the tenor downstairs sharps the low notes." He struck the tuning fork again and said, "But this is 'A'. And that, my friend, is the good news for today!" And that is what we can say. We have a fixed reference point. Everything around us may be changing. There may be very few things around us which are not being shaken. But the one thing which endures is Christ himself, and we are to keep on looking at him and

obeying him, trusting him. The result will be inexpressible, glorified joy in the midst of suffering.

My Dad put me on a tractor one time, to teach me how to plow. It always looked easy to me. I had seen him plow his furrows so straight, and I was very pleased to be able to learn how. I remember looking back at the plow and watching it turn the soil. It was exciting to see it at work -- until I got to the end of the furrow and discovered that I had wandered all over the field! I did not know the cardinal rule of plowing:

you keep your eye on one spot - a fencepost, a tree, or some other fixed reference point out in front of you - and you plow straight toward that. Christ is that fixed point. When everything else is changing around us, we have one enduring, fixed reference point -- Jesus Christ -- and we are to love him and trust him, no matter what. And Peter says that we will greatly rejoice, with joy appropriating, taking hold of, obtaining as the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls.

In verses 10 through 12, Peter goes back into the past. The first five verses deal with the future, the next four verses with the present, and now these three with the past:

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Salvation was foretold by the Old Testament prophets. And in the Old Testament both the sufferings and the glorification of Christ were predicted.

There are two things I want you to note in this paragraph. The first is that the Old Testament speaks of Christ. I hope you have learned that. So many Christians overlook the Old Testament, dismissing it as obsolete. They say, "That is the Old Covenant; we have the New Covenant." And they spend the bulk of their time studying the New Testament, without realizing that the Old Testament also speaks of Christ. If you disbelieve that, then consider Jesus' words to the Pharisees in John 5: "You search the Scriptures [the Old Testament Scriptures - the only Scripture they had], because you think that in them you have eternal life; *and it is these that bear witness* [or, "testify"] *of me.*" The Old Testament tells us of Jesus. In Luke 24 there is an account of Jesus' discussion with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As he walked with them he began to teach from the Scriptures. Luke records that beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, he explained to them the things concerning *himself* in all the Scriptures. Paul wrote to Timothy, encouraging him to remember that from a child he had known the Scriptures (the Old Testament Scriptures), which were able to make him wise unto salvation.

In one of the ancient manuscripts of the book of Acts there is a scribal note added to the text. We know that it does not belong in the New Testament, but it must have been written by one who knew how the apostle Paul taught. Luke says that it was Paul's custom to reason with the Jews in the synagogue, and the scribe appended, "...arguing from the Scriptures, *inserting* the name of Jesus." That is how the apostle Paul taught in the synagogue. He would take the scroll of Isaiah, for example, and read it. And as he came to the name "Yahweh" he would insert "Jesus." You can imagine the stir that would have caused in a synagogue! Have you ever read the Old Testament this way? It will breathe new life into those Scriptures for you. Jesus is there on every page; they speak of him.

And Peter tells us that the prophets spoke of both his sufferings and his glory. They did not thoroughly understand what they were writing. They wrote of a suffering Messiah in Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, but they also wrote of a glorious Messiah, coming as a king over Israel in Psalm 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110. They could not put the two concepts together. In fact, many of the rabbis felt that there must be two Messiahs -- Messiah ben Joseph, and Messiah ben David - one a suffering Messiah, the other a glorified Messiah. Peter says that the prophets themselves did not understand. They merely wrote as directed by the Spirit of Christ. And they spoke of a Messiah who both suffered and was glorified.

They did not see the 2000 years which have intervened between the First and the Second Comings. They saw that he would suffer at his First Coming, they saw that he would be glorified at his Second Coming; they did not see the time period between. Some have said this is like looking from a distance at Mount Calvary, where Jesus suffered, and Mount Olivet, where he will come again, and not seeing the valley in between.

Why did Peter insert this statement? It is part of his discussion of suffering. He wants us to realize that Jesus himself set the example. Glory comes only through suffering. Our Lord himself is the forerunner. It was because of the glory which was set before him that he endured the pain. And all sons and daughters of God go the same way. There is no glory apart from suffering. There is no crown apart from the cross. The glory of his coming far outweighs the suffering of the present.

We thank you, Father, that you are the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our distress, so that we in turn may be a source of comfort to others. We pray, Lord, that these truths we learn from your word would be a part of our own life, and that we would share them with others in times of distress. Seal these truths to our own hearts, Father, for we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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