

Feed My Sheep, 1 & 2 Peter: Lesson 6

Suffering For Christ

Memory Text: “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:” (1 Peter 2:21)

Setting The Stage: A newspaper reporter phoned a story into his editor about an empty truck that rolled down a hill and smashed into a home. The editor was unimpressed and told reporter he didn't want to run the story. The Reporter responded, "I'm glad you're taking this so calmly since it was your own house."

Life is often filled with the unexpected. Some of those unexpected events bring surprise and happiness (a pay raise, a baby, a loved one coming visit, etc.) while others create shock and horror (a demotion, an accident, robbery, death of a loved one, etc.). We don't mind the nice things that come our way, but it's the hard-to-handle things that come crashing into our lives that we would rather not have to experience. These things can cause us to experience a great deal of suffering.

To “suffer” means to “experience or be subjected to something bad or unpleasant.” “Suffering” is the “the state of undergoing pain, distress, or hardship.” No one is suffering when they have to eat broccoli, do homework, take a test, or clean the toilet. Obviously, suffering involves something of consequence.

It goes without saying; no one likes to suffer. Yet, suffering is a (natural, unnatural) part of life. We have our first parents to thank for that. Although to be fair, I suspect if they knew the ramifications of disobedience, perhaps they wouldn't have been so quick to eat the fruit. But here we are, whether we like it or not (not). To live means that at some point in our lives we will suffer. No one is exempt. Not a pleasant reality, is it?

And Christians aren't exempt either. We don't get a “get-out-of-suffering-free” card. We are just as subject to pain, distress, and hardship as anyone else. If we are human (and we are), we will suffer. And the reason I'm leaning into this a little, is because in facing this truth we'll be better prepared to the next time suffering comes knocking at our door. How, you ask?

Even though truth is often difficult to accept, it is much better for us than a lie. If you live in a pretend world believing you won't ever suffer, then you increase the chances of suffering getting the better of you. But accepting the truth about suffering puts our feet on the path to peace and victory. And this doesn't happen because we have learned to steal ourselves against it, but because we have learned to surrender our life to Jesus no matter what comes our way.

It was Helen Keller who said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." And with Jesus help we can each overcome suffering, given His grace and a little time.

While Christians don't get to escape the suffering that comes as a part of living in this world, Christian's will have to experience something the regular person doesn't have to face – suffering for Christ. (Don't view this as a double whammy. Just think of it as getting two for the price of one!) You could also refer to it as suffering *with* Christ. According to the Bible, suffering with Christ is a great privilege. Someone asked C.S. Lewis, "Why do the righteous suffer?" "Why not?" he replied. "They're the only ones who can take it."

Peter's first letter provides three major passages that deal with suffering for, or with, Christ (1 Peter 2:18-25; 3:13-21; 4:12-19). The passage in 1 Peter 2 talks about Christians doing good and suffering. Peter presents several scenarios where we are called to be submissive. On the tail end of his counsel to Christian slaves (think employee), Peter admonishes them to patiently endure any mistreatment received, as it is pleasing to God. Copping (enduring) the consequences of wrongdoing is a given, but it takes special grace to endure ill treatment that is being dished out for no good reason at all.

To a Christian, being mistreated for their faith is known as persecution. "Persecution" is hostility and ill treatment. On a smaller scale it might look like persistent annoyance and harassment. On a larger scale it might look like imprisonment, torture, and death. Peter's advice regarding suffering was given to Christian's dealing with degrees of persecution. Persecution is the devil's device to discourage and destroy the faith of the believer.

Sunday / Persecution Of Early Christians

1 Peter 1:6; 5:10; Romans 8:18; Revelation 2:10

1 Peter 1:6; 5:10. What is Peter talking about, and how did he tell his readers to respond to what they were facing? In chapter 1, Peter encourages believers to "greatly rejoice" because of the "inheritance incorruptible" that each one "kept by the power of God through faith" will get to experience. Turning from a future reality, Peter acknowledges a present reality that Christians of his days would have to face – suffering through various trials. Those "trials" were very real and had a lot to do with how Christians were being treated (read mistreated).

What type of persecution were the Christians to whom Peter was writing enduring?

1 Peter 2:12; 3:9; 4:14. The Christians had to endure false accusations (a false charge or claim that someone has done something illegal or wrong), reproach (insults), and reviling (to criticize in an abusive or angrily insulting manner).

While these aren't pleasant to experience, what these Christians suffered wasn't to the extent many other Christians experienced during the first to third centuries at the hand of the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, Peter's inspired counsel provides ample advice and encouragement to all Christians living at all times experiencing any degree of persecution.

"A little while". Twice Peter reminds Christians enduring any degree of persecution that what they will experience won't last forever. We know that the phrase, "a little while" can be relative. You remember your parents telling you when you were young, when dragging out shopping, or "popping in" to see a friend, that they would only be a "little while." Sometimes it was true. Other times, well... What may have seemed like an eternity to us as kids wasn't very long for our parents.

God isn't playing mind games with His people when He says if they're going to suffer that they won't have to suffer for very long. In light of eternity to come, our days here aren't very long in comparison. Perspective is what we need.

Romans 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Revelation 2:10: "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

"Trials". When I first typed "trials" while preparing for this class, I accidentally typed, "trails" (I got the "a" and "i" mixed up). Around California there are plenty of places to go hiking. There are lots of trails all over the place. We've been on a few of them and have enjoyed the challenge. There's one thing hikers know about trails: there is an end to them. Now it's true that some are longer than others, but eventually you find your way back to your car, climb in, and head home for a shower and some rest. We would do well to remember that trials are like trails; there is an end to them. Ultimately, all of life's trials will be over when Jesus returns. Don't you long for that day?

Monday / Suffering And The Example Of Christ

1 Peter 3:13-22; Isaiah 53:7

1 Peter 3:13-22. How should Christians respond to those who would cause them to suffer because of their faith?

First, we should remember that, according to the Word of God, we are "blessed" if we suffer for righteousness sake (v. 14). This is a repeat of Jesus' words when He said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all

kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt. 5:10-12)

According to Jesus, those who are persecuted are blessed for several reasons: 1) theirs is the kingdom of God; 2) they have received what the prophets before them received; 3) they suffer as their Lord has suffered (this reason isn't obvious in the text, but Peter clearly enunciates it in his first letter).

Next, we are called upon to be fearless and calm (1 Pet. 3:14, 15), but that can only happen when we “sanctify” (or revere) Christ in our hearts. To fear (or revere) God is to not be afraid of man. Speaking of John the Baptist, Ellen White wrote, “He could stand erect and fearless in the presence of earthly monarchs, because he had bowed low before the King of kings.” (The Desire Of Ages, p. 103) And here is the secret to gaining courage for righteousness sake.

Then Peter encourages Christians to fortify themselves against mistreatment by knowing how to respond to perpetrators of suffering with “meekness and fear.” (v. 15) Do you sometimes turn over in your mind how you would respond to different situations? When I ran the hurdles, I had to visualize how the upcoming run was going to happen. When I teach or preach, I try to visualize how I want the presentation to take place (although it doesn't always turn out the way I had hoped). How would you respond to someone who mistreated or insulted you? Do you see it happening the way Peter describes, or does it play out very differently in your mind? Are you happy with that? Will it allow you to maintain a good conscience (v. 16)?

We have to remember that the reason a Christian suffers for their faith at times is because the life they live is a constant rebuke to those who want to pursue a selfish lifestyle. A Christians life should put to shame those who would cause them to suffer. We don't always get it right (we're human after all), but through the power of the indwelling Christ, we can handle hardship as He did. And how did He respond to those who were hostile to His life and message?

Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”

Jesus patiently endured. Of course we know that Jesus spoke often to His accusers and frequently put them in their place. However, after ministering among the people for 3 ½ years, giving ample evidence of His divinity, there were many who would not believe. Some wanted to see a miracle. Jesus didn't humor them. He stood silent before Pilate and Herod. As the waves of insult and vitriol seemed ready to engulf Him, they came crashing down before His solid, immovable form.

Peter is quick to remind Christians undergoing hardships to endure them because Christ also suffered (v. 18). What's incredibly profound about Christ's suffering is that it brought about the only means of salvation so that those who believe on Him can have the assurance of eternal life. While our suffering could never equal what Christ endured, nor effect salvation that His suffering brought about, could our suffering with a Christ-like attitude be a means of encouraging people to consider Christ as their Savior?

Tuesday / The Fiery Trial

1 Peter 4:12-14; 2 Timothy 3:12; John 15:18; Job 23:10

1 Peter 4:12-14. Should we be surprised if we ever have to suffer for Christ's sake? According to Peter, we shouldn't be surprised. Why shouldn't we be surprised?

2 Timothy 3:12: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

John 15:18: "'If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.'

First, we shouldn't be surprised because as long as the great controversy between Christ and Satan rages, Satan will always send a variety of tests and problems our way designed to destroy our faith in God. He doesn't want to hurt us; he wants us lost (see Revelation 12:12, 17)!

Another reason a Christian suffers for their faith is because their life is (should be) a constant rebuke to those who want to pursue a selfish lifestyle (as opposed to being a reproach – see 1 Pet. 4:15, 16). As Jesus' life was a constant source of frustration to the religious leaders of His day, if we live godly lives, we can expect people around us to be annoyed by our presence as well. "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19)

At the time of this writing, the fires of persecution from Nero were about to scorch the church. The mounting harassment of the Jews and Romans was only a prelude to the coming holocaust. Satan was doing everything in his power to extinguish the faith of believers. But like the writer said, "The blood of martyrs was as seed." Instead of destroying the church, the church grew and became a formidable force in a pagan world. We who live on the precipice of the time of trouble such as never was can take heart from Peter's counsel to the early church.

Why does God allow His people to go through fires of affliction? "A clay pot sitting in the sun will always be a clay pot. But it has to go through the white heat of the furnace (heated at 2,200 – 2,600 degrees F) to become porcelain." God permitted Job to be tried by Satan to test and grow the character of His faithful

follower. God knew Job's endurance, and He knows ours as well. God doesn't send suffering our way, but He overrules by making it the means of developing our characters. Job said, "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." (Job 23:10)

Wednesday / Judgment And The People Of God

1 Peter 4:17-19; Isaiah 10:11, 12; Malachi 3:1-6

What do the following passages in the Bible have in common – Isaiah 10:11, 12; 1 Peter 4:17-19; Malachi 3:1-6?

The process of judgment is seen as starting with God's people. It then moves to the unrighteous. Malachi's prophecy not only points to the coming of the Messiah to Herod's temple, but also Christ as High Priest going to do His closing work in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly temple prior to His return. That work is one of judgment.

"While the investigative judgment is going forward in heaven, while the sins of penitent believers are being removed from the sanctuary, there is to be a special work of purification, of putting away of sin, among God's people upon earth." (The Great Controversy, p. 424)

What is the purpose of this phase of the judgment? First, it is to have a purifying effect on the lives of God's people. "And He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." (Mal. 3:3) If you feel a little heat from the Heavenly Refiner's fire, don't feel burned, but feel honored that God sees something significant He wants to bring out in your life in the closing hours of earth's history.

The other purpose of this judgment is to separate the true from the false. The pre-advent judgment is to highlight among professed followers of God those who are truly His. Sadly, not everyone who claims the name of Christ is Christ's. They profess Christ, but don't possess Him. The fulfillment of Revelation 13 won't happen primarily at the hand of atheists and agnostics, but at the hand of those who profess to follow God. They will think they are doing Christ's bidding when in actuality it is the work of the devil to destroy genuine faith in God among those who keep His commandments and have the faith of Jesus.

The judgment is good news to God's faithful followers for two reasons: 1) the judgment will exonerate the righteous who have been falsely accused; 2) the judgment will bring about the demise of the unrighteous who have caused God's people to suffer.

Thursday / Faith Amid Trials

1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9; Psalm 22:1-8

What do the following verses tell us about the origin of suffering – 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9?

The short answer is that we suffer because we are in the middle of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. War began in heaven, and although the devil was cast out, he brought his fight to planet earth. Since then he has been doing everything he can to wreak havoc, and, unfortunately, he's been very successful.

The psalmist David endured a lot suffering in his time, and this is reflected in many of his poems collected in the book of Psalms. In **Psalm 22:1-8** we hear David's anguish. For a while it remained a mystery to David why God didn't intervene and end his suffering and pain. Many, having gone through similar difficult experiences, wonder the same. Why suffering? Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Does God care? What does God know about human suffering?

Did God ever answer David? Yes, many centuries later, David received his answer. Roughly one millennium later, a descendant of David named Jesus was killed on a hill called Calvary. On the cross, Jesus endured suffering and shame. Christ was stared at and derided. In fact, Christ uttered the words with which David opens this psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" not just identifying Himself with the suffering of David, but also declaring He was bearing all of the sins of the world.

Christ, the eternal Son of God in whom the fullness of God dwells, has suffered a lot more than the average person has to endure. He suffered temptation, shame, persecution, betrayal, mockery, injustice, death, and on top of that, He bore our sins.

When asked how much God cares about the problem of evil and suffering, you and I can point to the cross and say, "That much." Christ not only experienced excruciating physical pain, and the bitterness of isolation, pain, and anguish, He also experienced with full force all of the sins of the world. We can trust a God like that through our own suffering, can't we?