

How Can We Cope With Our Present Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from a dear friend, Earle Craig. Following his graduation from Stanford University, Earle was disciplined here at Peninsula Bible Church, studied in our intern program, and worked for a while in the Careers' ministry. He then went to live in Newport Beach and ministered with Mike Regele in the singles' ministry of Mariners Church there, the "Salt and Light Company". I was delighted to hear Earle's voice on the phone, and I thanked him for a present he had sent me recently. But he interrupted me and said, "I don't want to talk about the present. I want you to pray for me. I just went to the hospital to have something checked out and they discovered that I have cancer. I'm frightened. Please pray for me that I will be faithful to the Lord and that I won't miss what God is going to teach me through this."

Earle has since had to undergo surgery for removal of the cancer, and has had two series of chemotherapy treatments. He called me again before the second series of treatments and asked the staff and body of PBC to pray that he would have courage to share Jesus Christ with the other patients in the hospital. He told me he had just had a very difficult week. He admitted to having struggled with God, that he had been tempted to ask himself, "Is it good to trust God?" He came to realize that it was a miracle that anybody would trust God, but he discovered that it was a good thing to trust Him because God is good. When he had that trust, God rewarded his faith with life, but when he did not trust God, he was rewarded not with life, but with death. He told me that his wife was holding up very well under the strain, but dealing with other members of her family who were sick and caring for two young children had begun to take its toll on her. She is physically weary, but emotionally and spiritually, she is a giant. Feeling the pressure of all of this sickness, however, she said to Earle a couple of days ago, "I'm tired of playing cancer. Let's go back to normal living." He had to say to her, "This is normal living. This is life."

How can we cope with personal suffering such as this? Today we will look at verses 6-9 of the first letter of Peter. This letter was written by the apostle from Rome to Christians in Asia Minor who were undergoing a season of personal, political and social suffering. Peter calls them "aliens" on this earth. People did not understand them or their actions. But he tells them to keep in mind that in God's sight they were not aliens, but "chosen" ones whom God by the Holy Spirit had set apart to come to the knowledge of God, and they had been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Knowing that, they could have peace with God. Further, they had been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Their salvation--their justification, their sanctification and their glorification--were secure in God's hands, so they could maintain their living hope despite their present circumstances of suffering.

Peter is not writing from an ivory tower, as it were, in Rome, completely divorced from reality. He has already experienced the physical, emotional, and spiritual trials that are the lot of all followers of Jesus Christ. "All who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," Paul has promised us (2 Tim. 3:12). Peter had just been through a whole series of imprisonments and hardships for the sake of the gospel. When he preached on the Day of Pentecost he was accused of being drunk. Once when he was going to the temple to pray, he healed a lame man and then preached to the crowd that had gathered because of the excitement that resulted over that, and was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. He found himself standing on the very stones that Jesus had stood upon at his trial and subsequent condemnation. The apostle was threatened and eventually released.

Peter was arrested a second time, together with some of the other apostles, because the authorities were jealous of how the church had grown. He was jailed, only to be released by an angel who directed him to go to the temple again and preach the whole gospel of Jesus Christ. He was arrested yet a third time, threatened by the high priest,

flogged, and almost killed by the Sadducees before he was freed again. Then Stephen was killed in the persecution of the early church, and believers had to flee Samaria and Judea. Peter was again arrested by Herod Agrippa, who had just killed James, the brother of John. He was put into prison by Herod in order to please the Jews and maintain peace in the community. The apostle was chained between two guards, but again he was released by an angel. Yes, Peter knew what he was talking about when he spoke of physical, emotional and physical trials. He is not writing from an ivory tower. He wants to encourage these believers in Asia Minor that his own faith in Jesus Christ was real and was in the process of maturing, and that would also be true of them as they walked in obedience and truth.

Again we ask the question: How can we cope with suffering, whether it be political, social, or personal (and within this category--spiritual, emotional or physical) suffering? According to these verses which we will study today, we must realize that God defines some suffering as testing. Verses 6-7:

Realize God defines some suffering as testing

In this you greatly rejoiced, 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 the revelation of Jesus Christ.

What does Peter mean by "in this" they greatly rejoice? He is referring to verse 5, to their glorification, who they will be when Jesus Christ reveals Himself; their life in Christ, outside of time and space. Peter is saying they should rejoice over their "living hope," to realize that it's coming, it's real, that the invisible Christ is present within them; thus they are protected by the power of God. Because of the mercy of God, they had been born again, they had already experienced justification, they were presently experiencing sanctification, and one day they would wholly experience glorification. That was their "living hope."

For "a little while," though, they would have problems. Peter comes right back to reality. We would like that "little while" to be confined to six or seven minutes, but throughout the history of the church, many Christians were made to suffer for years. Some underwent 60 or 70 years of constant suffering for Jesus Christ, while others suffered for just a few days, or through a few incidents only. Here Peter is telling these Christians, however, that no matter how long their suffering seems to last, it is nothing in light of eternity.

Peter is trying to describe the same feeling the apostles had when Jesus told them of the tribulation they would face, and he used the figure of a woman about to give birth. I don't have great personal insight into this matter of childbirth, except to say that I held my wife's hand when she gave birth to our youngest son and I could not believe the pain she suffered in that process of childbirth. But the moment Roddy was laid on her stomach, her pain turned to joy. That's what Peter is saying: what you are going through now is just "a little while" in light of the joy that is coming--a joy that will never be taken away from you.

Some, Peter says, have to suffer because it's necessary. According to 3:17, God is behind suffering. Some have to suffer because it's necessary for what God is doing in and through them and in and through a community. Don't fight it, but know that God is in control.

The Christians to whom Peter was writing were suffering various trials, and these trials came from without, in this context. They were trials of hatred, suspicion, violence, slander and malice; some had even been tempted to give up their faith. This battle between good and evil began before the foundation of the world. It continued in the Garden of Eden, through Adam and Eve, right down to our day. There has always been conflict between the "seed of the woman and the seed of Satan," between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, between the children of light and the children of darkness. That is part and parcel of our humanity. Yet God uses this conflict to His honor and glory. Satan cannot win that one either because God has placed His life in us.

We should not wonder at these trials. First Peter 4:12 says, "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." My

wife has had much suffering in her life at different times during our marriage. In the midst of pain, however, she has always reminded me, "This is a difficult season, but seasons don't last forever." What a wonderful God we have, that even in the midst of suffering, we have hope that things will get better. God will bring joy out of all our suffering, and our hope will be fulfilled.

That hope is in Christ, not in hope itself. Our hope is in the resurrected Jesus Christ who will fulfill everything He promised us. We will spend eternity with Him in our new bodies and there will be no more tears, no more pain, and the last enemy, death, will never confront us again. As Christians, what a hope we have! What absolute despair the world has! The greatest gift of Christianity is this living hope which we possess because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul said, if we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men to be pitied.

Jesus Himself taught this truth of how to live in this world. To His own family He said, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its deeds are evil." That is why we have some of these social problems in our communities. At the pastors' conference in Mount Hermon recently, one of the teachers, John Perkins, who is working in the slums of Pasadena, told us that a fellowship building they are working on there had just had all its windows broken. It didn't bother him at all. "They could always replace windows," he said. He is hated there because his ministry has moved into an area where drug pushers and prostitutes run the streets. That is the price tag he pays for being a child of light in the midst of darkness. The world hates to have its evil deeds exposed.

In Luke 9:22, Jesus said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." Jesus wanted people to realize why He came to earth and what the cross was all about. The cross that's hanging behind me is beautifully decorated, but when the original cross was erected with Jesus Christ hanging on it, it was not a beautiful sight at all. There was blood, anguish, grief, pain and thirst on that cross. There was confusion on that cross, as Jesus cried out, "Father, why have You forsaken Me?" There was death on that cross. God's plan may not look very attractive to you now that you are suffering, but wait until you've seen the resurrection. You are going to be part of it. Every prophecy about that cross was fulfilled, and because of it, we are going to live forever.

Jesus lived a life filled with physical, emotional and spiritual suffering, especially as he approached the time of His death. Peter will speak of this later in his letter to encourage believers to follow Christ's example while being tested, even though they may be innocent. I never mind suffering if I've done something foolish. When I've made a mistake I've got to pay the price. But I hate suffering when I did not do anything to deserve it--when I'm innocent. Jesus Christ was the innocent Lamb of God. He was killed because He brought good news to mankind. Peter tells us not to fight back when we are made to suffer.

Jesus taught His disciples about trials. Matthew 5:10-12:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Our Lord told His disciples in the upper room on the night He was betrayed by Judas (John 15:18-23):

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My namesake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates

Me hates My Father also.

The point is, if you are going to follow Jesus, you must follow Him in all aspects of life--the good and the bad, the painful and the joyful.

Meanwhile, even though these Christians in Asia Minor were suffering in political, social and personal ways, there was even greater suffering to come; there were even darker clouds on the horizon. Peter may already have been experiencing this suffering in Rome; if not, he is writing just before the great persecution of Christians under Nero. In any event, he wants these Christians to know that in a very real sense, the worst is yet to come.

The persecution of Christians began following the great fire that almost destroyed the city on July 19th, 64 A.D. The fire raged for three days and nights, destroying the shrines, the temples, the historical buildings, and the household goods. The historians of the day said that the people of the city were left in a state of "wretched hopelessness." The people blamed Nero himself for starting the fire as he had plans for rebuilding the city and already had models for his designs. It made sense to them that he was the one who started the fire, although to this day, no one really knows who did so. Nero and his lieutenants needed a scapegoat, so they decided to use this strange sect, the Christians--the ones who followed the rebel Jesus who was executed 30 years earlier--as their scapegoat.

Nero's argument that the Christians started the fire was convincing for a number of reasons. Remember that if we look at the activities of Christians from an unbeliever's point of view, Christians can be accused of doing many strange things that just don't make sense to those who don't know what's going on. Take the Lord's supper, for instance. Christians have been accused of cannibalism because they talk about "eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Lord." Take the "love feast," with the holy kiss between brothers and sisters. "Isn't that incest?" people charged. Christians were also accused of breaking up marriages between believers and unbelievers. Then there was the issue of slaves and their masters. Christians held that slaves were people, not things to be exploited. But the clincher in the accusation that the Christians had started the fire that had destroyed the city was that Christian preachers had actually preached that the world would end in fire. Peter himself on the Day of Pentecost had preached on this, quoting the prophet Joel.

So the people of Rome believed the lie that the Christians had set fire to the city and thus began the terrible persecution under Nero. Christians were wrapped in freshly slaughtered animal skins and fed to dogs and wild animals. They were dipped in pitch and set alight as torches to illuminate Nero's gardens at night. This was the first of nine persecutions which took place under the Roman Empire during the next 250 years. (The apostles Peter and Paul both died under this first persecution.) In the midst of all this incredible suffering, however, Peter encourages these Christians in Asia Minor, "Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13); not to get caught up responding in kind to the malice, slander, suspicion and insults, but rather to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, and pray for those who were persecuting them.

Later, in 2:21-23, Peter says, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in His steps. He who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." The hardest thing for us to do is to trust God "who judges righteously." Peter holds Christ as our example. No matter what kind of persecution, trial, temptation, or affliction comes, we are to rest in God--to trust Him to work these things out.

Peter goes on to show why God was allowing this suffering to occur. Verse 7: "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." Job understood this principle: "God knows the way I take. When He has tried me I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). The saints in both the Old and New Testaments knew that God would use their trying circumstances to test their hearts and souls to bring them to spiritual maturity; that through testing and trials, God would check whether their faith was genuine.

Peter uses a familiar figure, which is used throughout the Old Testament, of God as a goldsmith and man as a

rock containing some gold, as well as several different elements and impurities. God puts this rock in a crucible and raises the heat so that the rock liquefies, and the impurities rise to the top and are scooped off. Then God waits a little while until yet other impurities surface, and then He raises the heat further. That's the part I don't like! I thought He got all the impurities in me the first time He raised the heat, but I didn't know my own heart well enough. God will keep raising the heat until He can look at that gold and see a perfect reflection of Himself. He wants us to come to a place where we will reflect the very image of Jesus Christ. Yet although you are still in your earthly body, I can still say to you, having been with you, "I know your name is Charlie, but I feel I've been with Jesus"; "I know your name is Mary, but I think I've been with Jesus." That is when I know that God has been turning up the heat--when the impurities have been scraped off.

But when we slip and fall, there comes another season of raising the heat so that other impurities become apparent. Don't fight that for a minute, but trust that God will give you the power to endure. "He who began a good work in you is faithful to complete it." When He is finished, we will be like Christ. That's what God wants. One thing that irritates me is when someone says to me, "You're really changing, Ron," because my ego tells me, "You've changed enough already!" When people say that to me, what they are really saying is, "God still has some work to do in you, Ron." My heart wants to respond, "Well, He has work to do in you too!" We don't always like what God is doing in our lives, but he is working for our good, not for evil. He wants us to reflect the character of His Son. We don't do well at times until He turns up the heat.

Gold is precious, Peter says, but it's not as precious as our approved faith. Gold is temporary, but our approved faith is eternal. The testing of our faith is not to the glory, honor and praise of Christ, but the fact that our faith in Jesus was tested and has been approved, and that approval "results in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Christ is here right now, invisible, not revealed, but present. One day when He is revealed, we will stand to His praise and His honor and His glory, and we will praise, honor and glorify Him by our approved faith. Let us seek to walk in that truth.

In Revelation 2:10, we have the words of Jesus to the church at Smyrna: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison that you may be tested and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." Through the centuries many people have claimed to be Christians--even many here among us have made that claim--but when God brought them to the test to see if their faith was genuine, and when the heat was raised, they were found lacking. Persecution is a cleansing process. True believers know that this kind of testing is normal. It rids our walk of faith with Christ of impurities, and produces spiritual maturity, which results in praise and honor and glory from God the Father.

The apostles Peter and John encouraged Christians to hang in and be faithful to the end, until Christ is revealed. Peter heard Christ say, "When the Son of Man returns to earth, will he find faith on the earth?" Peter may have heard Paul say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. In the future, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all those who have loved His appearing." When Christ returns, will He find faith on the earth? Both Peter and Paul could reply, "Yes. I'm going to hang in until the end." Personally, I don't have the confidence of these men, so I called two of my friends and told them, "I have come a long way in following the Lord, but I'm not finished yet. If God is gracious I've got 20 years left. I want to be able to say at the end, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.' I need to have a covenant of accountability with a couple of brothers to help me make it. Let's pray for one another, admonish and encourage one another until Christ returns. Would you be willing to do that with me?" They both agreed. I don't feel I can do this myself. I need people from the family of God to help me.

How can we cope with our present suffering? Realize that God defines some suffering as testing. Secondly, realize that this isn't all there is. Verses 8-9:

Realize this isn't all there is

...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, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

Peter's words to these Christians in Asia Minor, now 30 years removed from the days when Christ walked this earth are, "You have not seen Christ in His humanity as a man, in His humiliation on the cross, in His resurrection and His glorification, in His ascension, but all the same, you love Him." How is that possible? How is it possible to love someone you have never met, to have your heart so filled with joy you can hardly express it in words?

How can millions and millions of Christians through the centuries love God so much they are willing to serve Him all their lives and even die for Him? First John 5:1 says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God [born from above, born again, born of the Spirit]; and whosoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him." In order to love God in this way, you need to be born again, to come to a place where you acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the only One who can save you from your sin, your shame and your guilt. Romans 5:5 says, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

That's how we're able to love the Savior we've never seen--by the power given to us by the Holy Spirit. I have an intimate, thrilling relationship with a Living Savior whom I've never seen! I'm willing to spend the rest of my life serving One I've never seen! And when I talk to you, I discover that you have that same kind of intimate relationship with Him. The Holy Spirit within us makes that possible. We love Jesus although we have not seen Him. We have the same kind of relationship with Jesus as these first century Christians had. We love the resurrected Christ who first loved us.

Not only do we love this Christ, but we also put our faith in Him, and we believe in Him (verse 8). We place our faith, our confidence, our trust, and our life in Him as Lord and Savior. Why is this? Thomas at first did not believe that Jesus had been resurrected. He had to see Him and touch Him before he would believe. Then Jesus suddenly appeared before him and greeted him, "Come and place your hand in My side and believe." Thomas immediately became one of the greatest believers, and expressed that faith in these words he said in reply, "My Lord and my God." Jesus told him, "Blessed are those who have not seen Me but have believed." How is it that God is able to express Himself through believers so that men who have never seen Him can believe? According to 2 Corinthians, when Christ comes into our life, there is a "fragrance" about us so that people see the life of Christ in us, despite all kinds of circumstances, times of persecution and good times.

I meet each week in a private home with people who are in the process of considering Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. One young woman, a recent convert, shared about the wonderful week she had just had in her job as an airline stewardess. The host of the evening, who is not yet a believer, said, "She's got it!" Then he turned to my wife and said, "And she's got it!" He looked at me and said, "You've got it." Then he said of himself, "But I don't have it!" He was upset at seeing something he wanted but did not have. He wanted Jesus Christ, but at that very moment he wasn't at the place where he was willing to come to Him. I have the greatest confidence in the resurrected Jesus Christ, however, that very soon this man is going to "get it," to the praise and honor and glory of Christ, and when he "gets it," I'm going to tell you about it!

As a result of the "agape" love and faith in the invisible but ever present resurrected Lord, two wonderful things occurred in the hearts and minds of these believers in Asia Minor. First, Peter says, despite their present suffering, they "greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory." Despite the violence, evil, destruction, murder, cruelty, sexual immorality and demonic activity, they still had joy. And they did not have this joy because of their sufferings, but they had joy in the midst of them. This joy, Peter says, is a taste of eternity.

Secondly, he says to these Christians, "you are obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls." That faith was expressed in invisible realities--the resources of the resurrected Lord and His Kingdom were theirs right then and there. While it's true that Christians will be given a new body in eternity, right now our spirits have become new creations--"Christ in us, the hope of glory." Even during times of trial, testing and temptation, we are obtaining right now the salvation of our souls. We are already sensing and experiencing this. We see that so clearly in Romans 14: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the

Holy Spirit"--right now, regardless of outward circumstances.

How can we cope with our present suffering? First, we need to realize that God sometimes defines suffering as testing. Trust Him for that, for He is purifying our faith, our motives, our hearts, and our lives so that we will reflect the very image of Jesus Christ. Don't fight it, because it really is only for a little while, in light of eternity. Secondly, realize that this life isn't all there is. We're going somewhere. We're experiencing the salvation of our souls, and one day we're going to experience the salvation of our bodies. We will spend eternity with a body equipped for that dimension, so we need to rest in that hope.

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1 Peter 1:6-9
Third message
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