

SALVATION AND SUFFERING

by Doug Goins

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

Reflecting on these things, I had the joy yesterday evening of performing a wedding for a dear friend of mine. I had participated in a memorial service for Helen's first husband several years ago, and now she 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. I was struck by a statement in their wedding service, which they took out of the Presbyterian Book of Order: "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." During the service Helen and Joe exchanged vows: "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." They were acknowledging the reality that at some point death would invade that relationship and take one or both of them.

Usually weddings emphasize the part about plenty, joy, health, and long life--those prospects are what most newlyweds are excited about. But Helen and Joe had a more mature understanding of their wedding vows and the expectations. They realized that 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. In fact, Joe had an aunt who died suddenly Thursday morning just before the wedding. 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: Helen's cousin, a delightful young Catholic priest named Kevin, from a parish in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles, told us how the rioting, looting, and fires came within two blocks of his church. While the wedding was a time of celebration, all the preparations were tempered by an objectivity not found in most weddings.

A balanced perspective such as comes right out of the Bible. 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 central theme of this letter through all five chapters is that we 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.

I prepared to teach this series in 1 Peter three months ago and had decided to excerpt from each chapter one paragraph that focused on the reality and 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. The media have asked, "Could this be the beginning of a long hot summer? Is this just a foretaste?" Whether or not that is to be, our hearts need to be encouraged and our thinking informed.

Peter examines 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 in 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 accompanies suffering. 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 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-- precipitated directly by the emperor Nero. That summer a terrible fire burned the entire western section of the city of Rome. Early historians agree that Nero himself set the fire, but he blamed the Christians, using them as scapegoats. A terrible wave of persecution broke out against the Christian population (as well as against the Jews). A Roman historian, Tacitus, living at that time, 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. He probably watched the flaming conflagration of 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 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 only 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-- 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 on Thursday night at the elders' meeting; he is going back into the hospital tomorrow morning for his third angioplasty on an artery that won't stay open. He is greatly anxious about it. 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.

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 shares out of the experience of his own personal suffering and from witnessing the sufferings of Jesus. These experiences affected him deeply--his letter is strongly emotional at times.

We have read and heard a lot of scholarly reflection on the riots last week. The experts are on television now, examining and evaluating what is happening. Politicians at every level are appealing 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. That is how Peter speaks to us about the experience of suffering.

While speaking of suffering Peter introduces the theme of joy. He explains that 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 [intensify, or crescendo] 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 (verses 6 and 8). The source of joy is not our present experience, which is one of suffering. 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.

These verses--an explosion of praise and worship--are a doxology, based on the absolute certainty that our ultimate salvation is Jesus Christ. This is the foundational truth that this whole investigation of suffering is built on. It was echoed in Romans 8:18-30 as we read together responsively this morning.

Verses 3-5 of 1 Peter tell us that our salvation as individual believers is according to the eternal purposes of God--not because of some 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. 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 we have 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. It is not only our inheritance that is being protected, but we ourselves are being guarded through the power of God, guaranteeing our inheritance in 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--e.g., to material resources that could protect us or sustain hope. It is not even dependent on our own emotional resources to "hang in there"--to tough it out. Those resources can be violated, undermined, and destroyed. Last week we watched people's material resources going up in smoke and their emotional resources crumbling; they had nothing left to draw on. Peter says those things can be corrupted and defiled. 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 it is exalted. This is a joy that the rest of the world doesn't understand at all.

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. 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 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 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 a necessity. It is part

of God's providential activity in our lives, and there is a purpose for it. 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 NIV says *suffer grief*, and the NASB 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. My friend with cancer has talked about his own discouragement, how emotionally debilitating this disease is for him. Our brother who is going back into the hospital for the third time is experiencing discouragement--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 describing his own experience. He told the disciples that he was to go to the cross, "...and suffer grief." In the Garden of Gethsemane when he is wrestled with his heavenly Father, 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 was awful to go through.

Verse 6 says is that suffering will 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 examines several of those sources of suffering in this letter. He teaches about Satanic attack--sometimes there is flat-out supernatural demonic onslaught against us, individually and collectively. 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.

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, "*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. Our universe is dying just as we human beings are. Whether we experience an epidemic that rages through a population wiping out hundreds of thousands of people, Alzheimer's disease, earthquakes like the one that devastated Humboldt County two weeks ago, cancer, mechanical failures that maim and kill people, mental illness, allergies, deep depression, 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. This is not "the best of all worlds."

In verses 6b-7 Peter gives us the ultimate purpose of suffering in the life of a Christian. It is easier to go through difficult times 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. 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. 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 again described in the same way: "*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, more acceptable before the Lord. Our suffering, whether great or small, is part of the process God uses to conform us to his own image. God 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 that we must be rid of. He wants our faith to be increasingly pure. He must separate confidence in ourselves from confidence in him. He must purge out our confidence in material wealth, education, human relationships, intellect, background, planning, and manipulating. God turns the heat up and these 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.

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 lonely because his co-workers have abandoned him and the faith as well. But he is able to say (2 Tim. 4:8) 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. We learn to obey him more through suffering. It sounds 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 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. I know from my own experience that suffering softens me; it makes me more tender. It forces me to have a teachable heart.

Finally, suffering causes us to rejoice in Jesus more. We don't rejoice because we're suffering, but we rejoice because of the absolute certainty that God will finish the salvation that he has begun in us.

During the five months that I have spent time together with my friend dying of cancer, 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. My friend expresses deep joy--he is more and more confident that he can really come into the Lord's presence with no embarrassment. He knows now that he is going to be presented to the Father by the Lord Jesus, and his praise will ring true.

Up to this point in Peter's discussion, 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 takes a look back into past salvation history. When you get involved in suffering, you get emotionally sucked into it, and you lose objectivity and perspective. Peter is saying, "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. He now reminds us of God's gift of salvation 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.

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 resurrection, and his glorification at the right hand of the Father were all foretold in the Scriptures. This paragraph teaches us wonderful, important things about the inspiration and authority of the Bible. The writers 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 enjoy the benefits of that selflessness on the part of the prophets and apostles.

Why does Peter talk about that here in the context of an investigation of the difficulty of suffering in the life of the believer? First, at the heart of the Old Testament teaching on the Messiah are linked together two realities: He is a suffering, dying, humiliated Messiah. 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. He wants to encourage us through the life of Jesus and his experience of suffering: Crucifixion had to precede the resurrection, humiliation had to precede exoneration. There is a logic to the phrase, "the sufferings of Christ *and* the subsequent glory."

Peter also 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 as the *pioneer of our faith* (Heb. 12:2). 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. 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?

In the five months I have spent 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. 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.

First Peter 2:21, 24 gives us a great summary statement of all 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 himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

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