

SURVIVAL AND SUFFERING

by Doug Goins

This month we are being taught by the apostle Peter as we trace one central theme through his first letter to the Christians scattered across Asia Minor in about 65 AD. This theme is Peter's absolute confidence that as followers of Jesus Christ we can live lives of joy and hope in spite of the suffering, struggle, and sorrow that are built into our experience in God's sovereign design. First Peter 1:3 affirms, "...we have been born anew to a living hope."

We have seen that suffering comes at us from a variety of sources, some of them natural because of the world we live in, some Satanic in origin; we have an enemy who wants to destroy us if possible.

The sufferings that we are examining together represent all the ways that life can try to intimidate us and overwhelm us--physically, emotionally, spiritually, materially, relationally, financially, and so on. Every week in our prayer sheet there are requests from people in our own body to be supported in prayer because of the suffering they are experiencing.

We're going to find again that Peter is a realist as he looks at suffering. He is going to teach us that the best defense against suffering is a good offense. Chapter 3, verses 8-18 are going to explain some important skills that we need to survive suffering and to combat it by going on the offensive. Peter does not advocate stoicism, passivity, or escapism. In this paragraph he issues a ringing call to live life to the full with zest, integrity, and confidence in God.

This passage is going to amplify an earlier command that Peter gave in chapter 2 verse 12: "Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." We are to make sure our lives are so beautifully attractive, and reflect God's own character to such a degree, that when unbelievers look at us, even when we are under the pressure of suffering they will see God at work.

Now, you might be thinking that when you are overwhelmed, weak, vulnerable, and struggling with suffering, it's difficult to obey commands. And our passage is full of specific orders from the Lord on how to respond to suffering. But the good news is that God never asks us to do anything in his word without providing the resources by which we can obey. Imperative statements, or commands to obey, are always coupled with wonderful indicative statements, or objective facts, about God's character, his resources, his provision, and his commitment to help us obey him and live out what we believe.

A wonderful example of this is in Philippians 2:12-13, where we are called to maturity, and then we are promised that God will make us mature. The command, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...." is followed by the wonderful promise: "...for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." He has already determined his will for us; it is guaranteed that he will make us what he wants us to be. The Living Bible paraphrases verse 13 this way: "For God is at work within you, helping you want to obey Him, and then helping you do what He wants." God will provide the resources to respond in obedience to all the commands that we find this morning in 1 Peter 3:8-18.

Verse 8 is the introduction to this section. He starts out,

"Finally, all of you...."

Peter has been addressing specific groups of people and talking about relationships in which these groups were

suffering. He addressed residents of the Roman empire and the suffering they were experiencing in their relationship to the evil Roman government under the emperor Nero. He talked to slaves about their relationships to despotic masters and the suffering that resulted from that. And he spoke to wives and husbands suffering the reality of cruelty in family relationships. Now he is saying, "You may not have been personally affected by any of those relationships, but what follows is for everyone in the family of believers." So he broadens the application of his teaching to every Christian listening then, as this letter was being read aloud in all the churches across Asia Minor, and to each one of us this morning as we read it.

Peter outlines skills for surviving suffering. The first one to understand is the importance of Christian community when we're suffering. Verse 8:

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind.

Christian community is an absolute necessity when we are hurting the worst. We are especially tempted to withdraw and to build emotional defenses to protect ourselves from other people when pain and suffering overwhelm us. Peter is saying, "Don't let your own suffering desensitize you to the hurts and needs of other people." He says that we need to be willing to enter into others' experiences, to be open, vulnerable, and available to each other, and at the same time to trust others enough to allow them into our experience. What he is describing in this verse is the wonderful experience of *koinonia*, of fellowship. He is saying that we must not allow our suffering to increase our own isolation and introspection.

There are a number of things we need to do in Christian community to combat suffering. The first one in verse 8 is to be like-minded or to have "unity of spirit" (unity of thought is more accurate). When we are unsettled or overwhelmed, we need people who can help us think straight. Earlier we noted Peter's call to be objective, to "gird up our minds. (1:13)" We need people we can talk things through with because they can help us understand what we are feeling and adjust our view of reality.

Secondly, he says we are to be sympathetic. That means literally to be willing to suffer together, to actively enter into one another's sufferings empathetically and compassionately. We must be willing to be the same kind of people, to combat suffering in others' lives.

It says we need to love with brotherly love. This is *philadelphos*, a uniquely Christian word. This kind of love is referred to only in the New Testament, and it was unknown in secular society. It means to understand that we are part of a spiritual family. There really are people who are brothers and sisters we can trust, who will accept us and with whom we can feel secure.

The fourth thing he says is to be tenderhearted. It speaks of an attitude. The heart in the ancient world was the seat of emotion or feeling. It was where you felt things, which was often in your solar plexus, or to use the old-fashioned word, your bowels. He is saying that we need to emotionally commit ourselves to one another. We must feel emotionally, not just remain intellectual or theological.

And finally, he says we need to have a humble mind, literally to think humility. Being patronizing or behaving like a spiritual boss toward someone who is in pain is very damaging. When we are feeling weak and vulnerable, we don't need someone talking down to us. We need somebody who can identify with us in humility. That helps lower our defenses.

This became powerfully true in my life seventeen years ago when I lived in Pasadena, California with my five-year-old son Trevor. I was going through a divorce, and I felt deep humiliation, failure, shame, and pain. Last Friday a woman whose husband had left her asked me, "When you were going through your divorce did you get nauseous?" I remembered that at times I did. I withdrew. But thank God for some really committed brothers and sisters--a couple who lived in Thousand Oaks, and some brothers I was going to seminary with more or less forced their way into my life and wouldn't let me be self-protective. They loved me, prayed with me, laughed with me, cried with me, and surrounded me with Christian community, even against my will! And God used that

loving community powerfully in the healing process in my life.

Peter says in verses 9 through 13 that we are to combat suffering, secondly, by having a gracious and forgiving spirit.

Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing. For "He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile; let him turn away from evil and do right; let him seek peace and pursue it.

For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil."

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?

The first thing Peter tells us in verse 9 is that we have a choice as to what attitude we are going to have. We can choose to respond positively even to those who mean us malicious harm. Of course we never have a right to bad attitudes toward those who attack, misunderstand, or accuse us. But it says that we can even offer them grace, or a blessing. That means in both word and deed. We can respond with kind, gracious, loving words in the power of the Spirit. And we can go beyond that: We can actually perform gracious, loving acts toward people who oppose us and attack us.

In the middle of verse 9 is an echo from chapter 2, verse 21:

"For to this you have been called."

Our calling is to follow Jesus in suffering; the suffering we experience is normative for us as Christians. Then Peter promises, moreover, that a Christlike response is going to result in the blessing of God. Blessing means happiness or contentment. Verses 10 through 12 explain the lifestyle of blessing that Peter says God wants to give us even in the midst of suffering.

Now, verses 10 through 12 are Peter's paraphrase of Psalm 34. Peter is remembering the words of King David after God had delivered him from Philistine captivity. The period of being held captive by the Philistines meant great embarrassment, humiliation, and failure for David. He tried to get himself off the hook using his own cleverness, but he didn't succeed. God had to deliver him. After that David wrote this incredible song of deliverance, a celebration of how good God was. When David says in the opening section,

"He that would love life and see good days..."

he is considering this after God had miraculously bailed him out, when he couldn't save himself. As a matter of fact, prior to these verses that Peter quotes, David says,

"I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed." (Psalm 34:4-5)"

Loving life and seeing good days is the kind of life all of us would like to have. That means you wake up in the morning excited about what adventures the day holds, all the things that God is going to do. You have nothing to be embarrassed or apprehensive about. You go to sleep at night with a clear conscience, and you sleep like a rock because of the security you have in the Lord. David says, do you want to live like that? Well, here's how! And the amazing thing is that it has nothing to do with circumstances. If you look closely at verses 10 through 12, they all have to do with character and with our identity in Jesus Christ.

He says, do you want to be happy? Then make sure your tongue is kept from evil. Never permit yourself to be cruel or to maliciously attack someone with your speech. Measure your own words.

Keep your lips from speaking guile. Guile means dishonesty. Never distort the truth. Be a person of consistent

integrity in your communications.

In verse 11,

"...turn away from evil and do right...."

That means to resist the temptation to adopt any kind of evil lifestyle. Don't compromise on anything if you want to be happy and know God's blessing.

"Seek peace and pursue it."

That means to be willing and even proactive to enter into human relationships where there is miscommunication, hurt, or damage; and be a peacemaker. It's hard work, and you will be misunderstood at times. But be proactive--let God use you as someone who brings his own calming influence into relationships.

It says it is important to live that way because, in verse 12,

"...the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer."

That speaks of a vital relationship of intimacy with the Lord, a life of communication with him in prayer, not hiding anything. His wonderful promise is that he listens, he watches, and he responds to us, whatever the need or problem might be.

There is a warning in the second half of verse 12. If we don't choose a life of righteousness, it says his face is turned against us. That doesn't mean that he has rejected us absolutely, but it means that his provision is cut off. God as an ally and a resource isn't there anymore, and we're pretty much on our own in trying to survive the suffering.

Do you want to live a life of happiness? Understand that it is based on a relationship with the Lord. It really has nothing to do with the circumstances. It is not a lack of suffering that brings blessedness, but living life in right relationship to him and to the people around us.

At the end of this paragraph, in verse 13, Peter says we need to understand that ultimately we are protected; we really are safe in the Lord.

"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?"

Zealousness for what is right speaks of passionate commitment, not just assent with good. It means we are zealots for truth and righteousness, and everybody knows it. We care more about those things than we care about circumstances. So no matter what physical suffering or material hardship we encounter, who can do us any real harm? We are ultimately safe and protected as spiritual beings no matter what happens physically and materially to us.

In summary of verses 9 through 13, a gracious and forgiving spirit in the face of suffering, and the choice to live righteously will result in the blessing of good days and a love of life.

Robert Chapman, a Christian leader from the nineteenth century, pastored a church in a little town called Barnstable in southern England. He went to that church at age 29 and stayed until he was 99. He preached his last sermon there two days before he died.

Chapman was known more than anything else for his love. They called him the pastor of *agape* because the love of Jesus was so evident in his life. But not everyone liked Robert Chapman. Having a guy like that around makes you nervous! A biographer tells about one grocer in town who hated Chapman for ten years. Chapman always

asked the Lord for a chance to bless him.

Chapman ran a care center for indigents and needy people who stayed with him on a regular basis, and he was always in need of more foodstuffs. He was delighted with a visiting cousin's offer to provide groceries. But he wanted him to go to the store of the grocer who was always persecuting him to buy the groceries, and then have them delivered to the house. He told him only the name of the grocer, nothing about the situation.

So the cousin went to the store, bought a lot of groceries, and then told the grocer to deliver them to Chapman's house. The grocer said, "He didn't ask you to come to me, did he?" The cousin replied that Chapman did indeed. So this grocer delivered the groceries to Robert Chapman's home, and when the door opened he burst into tears and asked Pastor Chapman to forgive him. By the end of the day, he had accepted Christ as his Savior.

The third thing that Peter says combats suffering (verses 14, 15) is fearlessness.

But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord.

These two verses contain another quotation from the Old Testament. This one comes from God's word to Isaiah that he was to speak to King Ahaz, who had rejected Isaiah's prophesy; the nation had accused Isaiah of treason, he was standing all by himself, and God said, "Don't be afraid of them or what they can do to you, but always tell the truth." Again, it's quite a loose paraphrase of Isaiah (8:12), but Peter does use the Scriptures to teach that we are to suffer for the right reasons. That echoes verse 13, being zealous for the sake of righteousness. Peter says if you are suffering because you are so committed to people's being in right relationship with God, and your own relationship with God is paramount, then that is terrific! That means you are blessed; you should be happy about that, as contradictory as it sounds. He uses the same word, blessed, that Jesus uses in the beatitudes. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:10-12.) (That included the prophet Isaiah, whom Peter is quoting in these two verses.)

Peter says that no matter how frightening the circumstances, how great the threat or at least the perceived threat of physical destruction is, we are not to be afraid of anybody. This word for fear means to be terrified or traumatized. We are not to lose control as we view things. Peter said earlier in chapter 3, verse 6, where he was writing to wives who were probably being treated badly by pagan husbands, to always do the right thing and let nothing terrify them. It's hard not to be terrified when you're faced with terrifying circumstances, though, isn't it?

Four years ago Candy and I were faced with a terrifying circumstance. Our little girl Alayna, who was four years old then, was born with a congenital heart defect we had not known about, and she was going to need heart surgery to have it corrected. Now, I believed theologically all these things we have been talking about; I had espoused them for years. But my wife and I were overwhelmed with the fear of what was going to happen to our little girl in surgery. The only way we got through it was to do what it says in the first part of verse 15,

"but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord."

And Peter says generally that is the only way anybody is going to get through an overwhelming reality.

I have to hang onto the fact that the resurrected Jesus Christ is the absolute Lord of the universe, the sovereign. We can voice our confidence that he is in charge of everything, that he is a faithful creator, protector, defender, and sustainer. But when we are facing pain and possible loss, Peter says that in our hearts, we must believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is absolutely in charge of the worst possible outcome that we can imagine. That is what it means to reverence him as Lord.

The thing that strikes me is how much Peter was grounded in both his experience with Jesus and his absolute confidence in the truth of the Scriptures. Both of those things sustained him. His confidence was that God would

keep him from going to pieces. And that is what Candy and I hung onto through Alayna's surgery and recovery. (God was good and worked sovereignly through the surgeons at Stanford University Hospital to give us back a healthy, mended little girl who has great prospects ahead in life.)

The fourth survival skill to combat suffering is in the second half of verse 15. Peter says that a reasonable defense combats suffering.

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence....

He is not saying here that we are to defend ourselves. The word to make a defense, *apologia*, really means to make an explanation, as in apologetics. When people ask us, "How is it that you handle the suffering so well?" we are to explain it to them. We can tell them about our rest in Jesus, that we really do trust him through the circumstances. And this explanation does not come just out of our own experience; it is based on revealed truth as well. Again, as Peter encourages brothers and sisters struggling in the first century, he doesn't just empathize or encourage them emotionally; he tells them the truth of what God's word has said. He teaches them here out of the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah. If we are going to give a logical explanation for how we are handling suffering, it must come out of the Scriptures. We should be able to explain that our hope comes from the crucified, risen Christ who has been glorified at the right hand of the Father and who will finish what he has started.

I had breakfast last week with Luis Larzabal, and he told me about the great adventure that God gave him and Dick Haines recently in their two weeks in Novosibirsk, Russia. Luis shared with me about his experience sitting on a stage in a Red Army men's prison in Novosibirsk with four hundred sixteen-to-eighteen-year-old wards of the state, and there were soldiers all around. On the spur of the moment he was invited to give his testimony, without any preparation. He talked about the fear he felt as he stood up, his heart pounding, without a clue of what to say. But his fear of the Lord was greater than his fear of those people and the circumstances, and as he trusted God, God used him, not just to tell his own story, but to talk about the risen Christ who could make a difference in his own life and in their lives as well.

Readiness to make a defense combats suffering, and it is also an incredibly exciting way to live. Again, you are not self-absorbed anymore. You are concerned about other people.

It says in verse 16 that a good conscience is a survival skill which combats suffering.

...and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

A guilty conscience makes suffering much more intense. That is really important to remember. Those who are watching us are going to look for inconsistencies in us, attitudes and actions that betray what we say we believe. The fact is that we are under scrutiny all the time. If there is unconfessed sin in our lives, then remember what it says in verse 12: We are cut off from the resources of God, who wants to be the ally who will help us through the suffering, pain, and struggle. We are on our own, and it allows Satan to attack us more viciously. The questions come flooding in: Maybe I deserve this. Maybe God doesn't really love me. Or else we become defensive and start to justify our sin.

There are only two ways to keep a clear conscience in the Scriptures. One is to live the kind of life described in verses 10 through 12 of this passage--a life of openness, integrity, and obedience to biblical truth. That results in authority in our lives. The other is to confess the sin and repent of it; get it out in the open and deal with it. It is not sin or failure that disqualifies us; it is our tendency to cover it up that erodes whatever witness we might have when people look at us. So combat suffering with a clear conscience, so you can look the Lord right in the eye, with nothing to be embarrassed about or ashamed of.

Finally, verses 17 and 18 teach us that we can combat suffering by understanding that our experience serves God's

purposes.

For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.

Peter says in verse 17 that it is better to do what God wants and to suffer injustice, if that should be God's will, than to escape suffering through some disobedience. Our suffering is purposeful and under the authority of God himself. At the end of chapter 4 Peter identifies God as a faithful creator and sustainer whom we can trust completely. God is merciful, even in the face of a world system that at times is merciless.

Jesus is the pattern, the model that we can follow. We have found this theme in every passage we've looked at in this series. He is the only man who ever lived who was perfectly just, and yet he suffered injustice on behalf of a world of unjust people, including each one of us. He purchased our salvation by bearing our sin, verse 18 says. He made us righteous and brought us to God; he put us into right, restored, intimate relationship with our heavenly Father. He also gives us internal integrity and restores relationships with people around us.

Jesus' suffering was precisely at the heart of God's plan of salvation. The gospels focus the majority of the narrative on the passion week of Jesus and his death. Our suffering is purposeful in the same way. **"For to this you have been called,"** (5a) it says. We will share his pattern of experience. Our suffering is not wasted; it is part of the call to be concerned about other people and aware of how God can use us out of our own pain.

The first person who introduced me in depth to 1 Peter was a Roman Catholic nun. In 1967, my first year out of college, I worked for three months at the College of the Holy Names. Sister Lorraine Marie, a woman in her mid-fifties, was one of the funniest, most vivacious people I had ever met. About halfway through that summer I found out about the suffering and pain in her life. She lived with crippling arthritis that had caused her to lose the job she had held for twenty years in this teaching order. So when I met her ten years later she was a seamstress and laundress at the convent.

I remember her talking about her nights of pain when she couldn't sleep, and how God had given her a ministry of intercession. She always gave thanks to Jesus for the privilege of sharing in his suffering, and for the ministry he had given her at the College of the Holy Names. And I witnessed the incredible ministry she had to the students at that college. She was always counseling, praying, and hugging. She attracted people like a magnet.

I want to be like her! I want to be somebody who really is born again to a living hope. In conclusion let's read the last stanza of *Like a River Glorious*. Do you really believe this? I hope you do.

Every joy or trial
Falleth from above,
Traced upon our dial
By the sun of love;
We may trust Him fully
All for us to do--
They who trust Him wholly
Find him wholly true.
Stayed upon Jehovah,
Hearts are fully blest--
Finding as He promised,
Perfect peace and rest.

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