

Suffering Well¹

Has 2020 surprised you? So much suffering – on an individual, national and global scale. Think specifically of ways 2020 has brought suffering to those following Jesus – making healthy body life harder and causing Christians to be further pushed to the margins in a culture obsessed with false gods. Peter says, “Don’t be surprised.”

He wrote to believers suffering under oppressive Roman rule and following Christ in a pagan culture. It’s no surprise that the theme he comes back to over and over in his first letter is *suffering*.

In our passage today, Peter does not question whether Christians will suffer for doing God’s will – that is certain. The real question is: **will we suffer well?**

How do we suffer well? To answer this, Peter tells first of the *nature of suffering* in the Christian life, and then he shares the proper *response to suffering* (two points).

What he wants us to see is that **instead of being surprised by suffering, we can entrust our souls to our faithful Creator while doing good.** This is suffering well.

I. The Nature of Suffering in the Christian Life (vv. 12-18)

A. Suffering is Normal

(v. 12) *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”*

Do not be surprised at suffering. What surprises us? Something we don’t expect. Why don’t we expect suffering as Christians?

1. What is Peter’s definition of suffering? [2:20] – Doing good/following the will of God and suffering for it.

(2:21) – What Peter says next is shocking to our Americanized sensibilities – *“For to this you have been called”* – *this* being suffering. **Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life.**

¹ Idea and wording taken from 2004 Sunday School lesson by Pastor Chris Thompson of Briarwood.

Why? (v. 21) “...because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”

I wonder what memories were swirling in Peter’s mind when he wrote these words – “*Do not be surprised*”?

- Perhaps he remembered his own surprise at suffering when Jesus told he and the other disciples that “*he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you’*” (Matthew 16:21-23). And Jesus rebuked him.
- Or maybe he remembered his surprise when Jesus was actually arrested – so surprised that when questioned by a servant girl, “*You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?*” he replied, “*I am not*” (John 18) to avoid suffering.
- But perhaps these moments of failure brought to his mind the following words Jesus spoke hours before his betrayal and arrest:

¹⁸ “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.* ¹⁹ *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.* ²⁰ *Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*” (John 15:18-20).

As a young woman in 1895, Amy Carmichael moved across the world from Ireland to South India, never returning once she arrived and enduring decades of suffering.

“We who follow the Crucified are not here to make a pleasant thing of life; we are called to suffering for the sake of a suffering, sinful world. The Lord forgive us our shameful evasions and hesitations. His brow was crowned with thorns; do we seek rosebuds for our crowning?”²

Brothers and sisters, don’t be surprised when you suffer while doing good. Don’t be surprised when you’re called to preach on short notice or when you’re trying to navigate being a faithful teacher or student or medical

² Accessed from: <https://www.imb.org/2018/03/05/amy-carmichael-secret-fight-discouragement/> on 9.19.20.

professional or parent or _____ during a pandemic. Don't be surprised – suffering for doing the will of God is normal.

But this is not cause for despair – to grow cold to life and grin and bear it.

B. Suffering is Purposeful

(v. 12) *“do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you...”*

Why does suffering come upon us as we follow Jesus? **To test us.** You say, is this some kind of cruel joke? What kind of test is this?

Hint: “fiery trial” – literally, “burning/trial by fire.”³ This is a picture of a refiner’s furnace. In metalwork, precious metals are refined by fire – removes impurities – everything that’s not gold melts away.

Earlier in chapter 1, Peter explains – *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:6-7).*

One of the primary purposes of suffering in the Christian life is to test our faith so that “it might be purified and shown to be genuine.”⁴

All of us are experiencing this burning – fiery trial – in some way. Don't be surprised, and don't lose heart. Instead, Paul says, “Rejoice” (v. 13) because...

C. Suffering Has a Glorious End

(v. 13) What does it mean to share Christ's sufferings? Not that Christ's sufferings are somehow not enough and we have to fill them in, but that as Christians we experience the same kinds of sufferings Jesus did (we follow in his steps) and this links us to him⁵ – things like rejection by popular culture, friends and family; being misunderstood, even by those closest to you; being insulted, falsely accused, and in many cases around the world, physically harmed or killed.

³ Zerwick, Greek-English Lexicon, p. 713.

⁴ ESV Study Bible, p. 2405.

⁵ Edmund Clowney, *The Message of I Peter*, p. 190-191.

Peter's point is not that the suffering itself is joyful but that suffering as a Christian *produces* joy.⁶ Why? Because if I suffer because I'm a Christian, that is evidence that I truly *am* a Christian, and if I truly *am* a Christian then, as Paul said, "*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us*" (Romans 8:18).

Because suffering has a glorious end, we can rejoice as we anticipate that end. But Peter says there is also blessing here and now in suffering.

D. Suffering brings Present Blessing

(v. 14) Why blessed? "*because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you*" – Suffering brings the blessing of intimacy with God. His Spirit rests upon the suffering. God is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18).

[Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – "*Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?*" Daniel 3:24]

This is the opposite of what we are tempted to think in the middle of great suffering – "God, where are you?" But the suffering is actually evidence that he is near.

In vv. 15-16, Peter reminds us that he is not talking about just any suffering – living in a fallen, sinful world, everyone suffers. If we are suffering as a result of sin we've committed, we don't need to rejoice, but repent. The suffering that produces joy and brings blessing is suffering "for the name of Christ" or in v. 16 – "suffering as a Christian" – in another's words, any "suffering that comes because one is living for Christ...in a society that is hostile to one's fundamental convictions and values."⁷ Suffering that comes from following in the footsteps of Christ.

Those who suffer in this way need not be ashamed – we will not fit in with popular culture – this is no reason to feel shame or to apologize for standing firmly for truth, for this brings glory to God and sets us apart from those who will not stand in the judgment.

E. Suffering is Part of God's Judgment

⁶ Karen H. Jobes, *I Peter*, p. 287.

⁷ Jobes, p. 288.

(v. 17) *“it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God”* (OT reference – Malachi 4:1-3)

Yes, Christians will be judged. In fact, Peter says Christians suffering for being Christians are experiencing that judgment already.

(v. 17) There are two kinds of people in the world:

1. “the household of God” (followers of Christ)
2. “those who do not obey the gospel of God”

(v. 18) – seems cryptic – Proverbs 11:31 *“If the righteous is scarcely saved”* (“with difficulty”), *what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”*

- For the “household of God,” life is difficult. Jesus said the way is narrow and few find it. Those who find it, find out that this narrow road is one of suffering. But our suffering is purifying, fiery trials that prove our faith is genuine and lead to blessing and endless joy.

- If judgment for the household of God is this difficult, what will judgment be like for those not of Christ? Utter destruction.

[Picture – fiery furnace – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego walk out unharmed; guards who put them in perished in the fire].

Why were the three not harmed? Why is the household of God purified by God’s judgment while all others perish?

The short answer is that there is a fourth person in the furnace with believers.

This brings us to...

II. The Proper Response to Suffering

(READ v. 19)

“Entrust” – “commit to the keeping of another.”⁸ **This is the secret to suffering well: entrusting our very selves to God.**

How did Peter learn this secret? He followed the footsteps of his Master, who *“When he was reviled,...did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did*

⁸ Blue Letter Bible, Interlinear/Concordance, “entrust.”

not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:23).

Jesus entrusted himself to the will of his Father – we see it in the garden of Gethsemane, and we see it in the whole of his life of perfect submission to his Father’s plan. He knew all along what that plan was – he knew the Scriptures. He was familiar with Isaiah’s prophecy: *“although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him”* (vv. 9-10).

Even in his final words on the cross, *“Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this, he breathed his last”* (Luke 22:46). **Jesus is the fourth man, with us by his Spirit in our sufferings as we share in his.**

It seems easier to entrust myself to God when things are going well.⁹ When things are difficult, and especially when I’m faithfully following Jesus and I’m suffering for it, my first thought is not “Here I am, God,” but “God, where are *you*?”

In my heart I often wonder, “God, if you’re so good, why is my life so hard? I’m not so sure I can trust you to order my life.”

Who can I trust to order and keep my life? “a faithful Creator.”

As “Creator,” God knows what the world was like without suffering and sin, and he knows how to get us back there. The way back is following in the footsteps of his Son that lead through suffering to resurrection and glory.

Peter knows that the faithful Creator is also the One who brings new creation, and that the One who tests our faith is the One who keeps it by his own hand. He knows that God uses fiery trials to bring us to the utter end of ourselves so that we give up trying to rule our own lives and instead entrust them to him.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you. Instead, let us entrust our souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

⁹ Jobes, p. 295.

This is the secret of suffering well.