

HOW TO SUFFER

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A
STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 2:21-25

Sixth Message

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He was left in a ditch to die. That's what the pastor told me after Hindu extremists had attacked him outside of his home village in India. I was in Bangalore teaching a pastors conference, talking casually with one of the pastors there. He said it was normal—that anyone who had been in ministry very long had been attacked physically. It was just part of the calling.

I thought back to my own time in ministry. Being attacked and left for dead certainly hadn't been part of my experience in ministry. I definitely didn't understand it to be part of my calling.

And yet, ministry has involved more suffering than I anticipated. More than that, life in general—the life of following Jesus—has been filled with hardships. Different suffering than my colleague in India. Nonetheless, I've gone through more pain than I expected.

When people suffer, the most common question we ask is "Why?" Even if we could get a definitive answer to that question, I don't think it would give us any relief. Maybe there's a better question that we could be asking.

We've called this series in the book of 1 Peter "Flourish: Hope in a Strange Land." This letter from the apostle Peter to early followers of Jesus offers them a guide for the full life of a Jesus follower. Throughout the letter, Peter has referred to suffering repeatedly.

In our passage this morning, Peter doesn't answer the question most of us ask when we suffer. He gives us something better. He doesn't tell us why. He tells us how to suffer.

Last week Scott Grant taught the Bible passage that referred to how we relate to government and how slaves ought to relate to their masters. Next week, Scott will teach again on wives and husbands.

Why is a passage which uses the suffering of Christ as a model for all of us to follow stuck in between passages having to do with servants and wives?

I think there are two reasons. First, this passage follows the discussion on servants because the image of a servant is one of the primary metaphors for how we relate to God. Time and time again, Paul refers to himself as a servant of God or a slave of Christ. That's what it means to follow Jesus: to become a servant.

But secondly, Peter is also aware that most of our suffering in life comes in the context of relationship. The deepest pain often comes from the hands of the people we are closest to—those we work with or for; our spouses or parents or children or roommates. It's a consequence of how we were created to be in relationship. The hardest suffering happens between people.

But as we'll see at the end of this passage, this isn't all bad news. Our deepest hurt happens in relationship, but so does our greatest joy. Having a guide to suffering well shouldn't be a depressing thing. It gives us a new kind of freedom because when we face suffering, we know what to do. As we've seen throughout this book, we have hope.

For Peter, everything about suffering comes back to Jesus. Jesus is our example of how to suffer. Jesus gives us an approach to suffering, and the suffering of Jesus makes sense even of our own pain.

Let's look at what Peter has to say about how to suffer.

The example of Jesus

When you're trying to do something new, it always helps to see someone else do it first. We mostly learn skills by watching someone else do it. That's why Peter begins by explaining that Jesus is the model for our suffering.

1 Peter 2:21:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Peter says “to this” you have been called. The first question we have to ask is “what is ‘this?’” That isn’t too hard to figure out. If we look at the previous verse, we have a phrase that makes sense. In verse 20, Peter said, “But if when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.” Then he says, “to this you have been called”.

The calling for those who follow Jesus is “Do good, suffer for it, and endure.” Is what you thought you signed up when you agreed to follow Jesus? Is that what you expect from life?

The word translated “example” here is “hypogrammon”. That’s the prefix “hypo” for above and “grammon” for “writing”. In ancient Greece, a hypogrammon was a pattern of letters that you would give to children to trace when they were learning to write. They would write their letters on top of the letters already written.

That’s what the life of Jesus is to us. It’s a pattern onto which we live our lives.

When we are young, most of us are given a pattern that we expect our lives to follow. In the United States, we often talk about the American Dream. Maybe you don’t realize it, but for many of us, the American Dream is our hypogrammon. It’s a simple pattern. Work hard, follow the rules, and you will succeed. Work hard, follow the rules, and you will be a success.

That’s what we teach our children from an early age. It’s the lesson we learn in school. It’s the expectation that we carry into life far into adulthood. If I work hard and do what is right, things are supposed to go my way.

This is why life is full of so much disappointment—when you can’t get pregnant; you feel betrayed because you worked hard, you followed the rules, but things didn’t go your way; when you get a cancer diagnosis, you can’t understand it; when your child turns away or makes bad decisions; when someone you love betrays you. Most of us think this way: if I work hard and obey the rules, life is supposed to work. So when it doesn’t work, we get angry, disappointed, and we turn against God.

But that’s not the pattern of life that God gave us to follow. Peter says that Jesus is our hypogrammon, not the American Dream. Do good, suffer for it, and endure. That’s the pattern of life that we should try to emulate. It’s the pattern that Jesus set for us. We are called to follow in his steps.

It’s a bit ironic that Peter is writing these words. After all, if you remember any of the stories in the gospels, Peter had an incredibly difficult time with the idea that Jesus would suffer. The first time he heard it, he rebuked Jesus. That earned him the honor of Jesus, referring to him as Satan. The second time Peter realized that Jesus meant to suffer, he drew his sword and attacked the soldier coming to arrest Jesus. Good thing he missed and only cut off an ear. The third time Peter encountered this, he gave up on Jesus altogether. Three times, he denied that he even knew Jesus.

Peter rebuked Jesus, he tried to fight, and he outright denied his Savior. Then he figured something out. That’s what he writes in this letter. He figured out how God uses suffering. He figured out what the path of Jesus really meant.

Jesus’ steps of suffering

Now that we expect to suffer and follow Jesus as an example, we can get to the meat of the passage where Peter describes how Jesus suffered.

1 Peter 2:22-23:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

We’re going to look at five things that Jesus does here which Peter offers as a model for us to follow. First, I want to point out where Peter gets all these ideas. He’s pulling almost everything from Isaiah 53, a powerful poem about what is usually referred to as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

Peter takes that prophecy and applies it to Jesus. In fact, nowhere else is Jesus identified as the Suffering Servant quite as explicitly as he is here in 1 Peter. But Peter doesn’t just quote the prophecy. He takes the pieces of it and assembles them in a way to make his point.

Peter mines Isaiah 53 for predictions and then builds a case for how Jesus’ suffering becomes a model of our own. He moves through five different elements of how Jesus sufferings. Let’s take a quick look at those.

As we do this, I’d invite you to have the image of Jesus standing trial on the night before his execution. Many of you are familiar with that story. Allow that to

be the backdrop of Peter's description. If you don't know that story but are interested, an excellent portrayal of it is found in John 18-19.

We may even speculate that Peter remembers those days as he writes these words. Here's what he draws out: "committed no sin"

First, Jesus was innocent. He "committed no sin." Peter's statement is not about the type of suffering that you experience when you make bad decisions or mistreat people or bring it upon yourself. Sometimes Christians act unkind or spout off at people or behave carelessly. When their behavior catches up to them, they claim unjust suffering.

That isn't what Peter is describing. This isn't about the natural consequences of our actions. It's about suffering what you don't deserve.

Second, Jesus was honest. We are told: "neither was deceit found in his mouth." He didn't bend the truth when things got hard. We tend to do this. When we are challenged by someone else, or things get messy, we often turn to exaggeration or denial to make things seem worse for us than they are.

Think of all the things Jesus could have said when he was standing trial. Think of Peter's denials and the other disciples' abandonment. When things get hard, we often look for any way to get out of our suffering.

One time when a friend was challenging something I said, my response was "I never ever thought that way." Really? Never ever? Pain makes it tempting to say whatever we can to get out of it.

Jesus was innocent; he was honest. Third, we see that he was non-defensive. He "did not revile in return." That's really remarkable to me. Jesus was never afraid to call out his opponents, but when they were trying to execute him, he says nothing. He doesn't call them a "brood of vipers" or "white-washed tombs" or anything similar. He just stood silently.

Defensiveness is our most common response to pain, especially when it comes at the hand of someone else. If you accuse me of something, my natural reaction is to defend myself.

One of my personal measures for having grown in some maturity is how quickly I respond to difficult emails. Ten years ago if I got a challenging email, I'd fire

off a response right away. These days I take some time to pray it through, search my own heart, and let things cool down.

Fourth, Jesus was also non-retaliatory. He "did not threaten." When threatened, he did not threaten in return. Another common response to when we feel attacked usually is to either defend ourselves or attack back—fight or flight. That's our natural response to pain.

A chemical response actually happens in our body; it's not entirely within our control. And yet Jesus doesn't do this.

This used to be my go-to approach in marriage. Early in our marriage, I would rarely bring up relational issues until my wife did. I never wanted to bring up conflict. But if we are already having conflict, that seemed to be a great time to discuss my issues too.

It seemed reasonable, but it was really a way to retaliate. You attack me, so I'll attack you back. That's no way to treat your spouse.

Jesus was innocent, honest, non-defensive, and non-retaliatory. Finally, he was faithful—"entrusting himself to him who judges justly." Faithfulness is really the key to suffering well. It is the aspect that allowed Jesus to do all the others. He knew that even though he was suffering unjustly, he could trust "him who judges justly." The current situation was only temporary. Ultimately, justice would prevail.

Jesus' faith in the righteousness of his heavenly judge allowed him to endure the unrighteousness of his earthly judge. That's powerful. That is available to us.

Do you know that God is a fair judge? Do you have confidence that he will be fair to you? If you are a follower of Jesus, you can know that for sure. You won't be judged harshly, but you will be welcomed with mercy and love.

Jesus has given us a master playbook for how to suffer well. When we suffer, we are called to be innocent, honest, non-defensive, non-retaliatory, and faithful.

Each of these is very hard to follow. We're all tempted in different ways when we suffer.

Jesus gives us clear areas where we can grow in how we respond to suffering. The question is not whether you will suffer. Maybe it's a little, and perhaps it's a lot. But you will suffer. The question is, how?

Let me remind us that the goal here is not to suffer well to please God or get a good grade. Suffering well is the way to flourish. We will all suffer in life, but when you suffer the way Jesus did, it actually leads to something good. That's where Peter concludes his thoughts.

Result of suffering

Peter began by explaining that Jesus is our example for suffering. Then he showed us the steps for how to suffer well. Now he offers a picture into the results of suffering according to God's plan.

1 Peter 2:24-25:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

The Christian worldview offers the most spectacular and compelling picture of the value of suffering. We see it right away in the first phrase: "he bore our sins...that we might live." Jesus suffered for the sake of others.

When I was in high school, Christian T-shirts were really popular. At the time, there was a trendy shirt from a fitness center called Gold's Gym, which read on the back "No Pain, No Gain." The Christian version of this shirt turned it into "God's Gym", and the back of it read "His Pain, Our Gain." Setting aside the cheesiness of this, that shirt actually captured the rich theology of the gospel.

In God's kingdom, suffering accomplishes something beautiful. We have experienced that because Jesus' suffering gave us new life. But the same can also be true of our pain. Our pain can be others' gain.

When we suffer according to God's plan, something good will come of it. Now, Jesus is God, and his suffering was part of the cosmic plan of redemption. Our suffering isn't like that. But our suffering too can be redemptive in the lives of others. Our suffering has a purpose. Suffering is redemptive.

This is why the apostle Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4:12, "So death is at work in us, but life in you." We may be experiencing death, but life can come from it.

Here's how another commentator put it, "The way of suffering is the divinely intended manner of bringing the greatest victory of God into the world." Sit with that for a minute. Suffering is the key to God's victory.

Conclusion

Think back to the conversation I was having with the pastor in India. How was it that he was able to talk about being beaten and left for dead so casually? I think it's because he understood the message Peter is trying to communicate here.

He understood that our calling as followers of Jesus is to "Do Good; suffer for it, and endure". He also understood that saying that isn't bad news. He had seen how suffering is the path God has chosen to get to victory. Because of that, suffering along with Christ is an honor and a gift. We get to suffer. We get to take part in God's plans to redeem the world.

Listen to Hebrews 12:1-2: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."