

SUFFERING? WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

Scriptures: I Peter 4:12-19; Romans 8:18-25

On the Questions of Faith inserts that I collected from the congregation this summer, one person wrote, “Why does God allow Christians to endure suffering?” They also asked, “How can Christians remain faithful during hard times and allow the experience to bring them closer to God?” Another person wrote, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” A third person’s question was even more poignant: “Why does God take the life of a child?” In the Frequently Asked Questions of the Christian faith, these are right at the top.

It is natural to think that if you give your life to Christ, if you try to serve God as faithfully as you can, then God will give you a few breaks: that you won’t get the kind of diseases that strike down other people, that your children won’t suffer from the peer pressure, drugs, and bad choices that afflict other children, that you won’t experience the kind of debilitating pain, depression, or struggles with relationships that happen to other people. It is tempting to think that Christians are exempt from these things, but they are not.

In our first scripture lesson the apostle Paul notes that it is not just us who suffer in this world. The whole creation suffers. Romans 8:22-23:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

In a world that is fallen, sadness and grief are the natural emotions of faithful Christians. If you grieve when you watch the evening news, if you feel deep sadness and pain at the suffering of children in this world, whether your own or anyone else’s, then you are not denying your faith in Jesus, you are expressing it. It is the Holy Spirit that groans in your heart, yearning for the day when these things will be made right.

Please, I do not for a moment mean to minimize the anguish of those of you who asked these questions of faith. More than one person in this congregation has asked me through tears, “Why does God take the life of a child?” More than one person in this congregation has asked me through their tears, “Why is my family being torn apart?” I don’t have an answer for these questions. I only know that faithful, loving Christians are not exempt from those tragedies. That’s why Peter says, “Don’t be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” Christians are not given a free pass from suffering.

But even though Christians are not exempt from suffering, we are given special resources to deal with it because of our faith in Christ. And that is what Peter explains in the rest of our second scripture lesson. If you take out the white insert, I would like to point out four things Peter mentions that can help us deal with suffering. These things do not explain suffering. They do not justify it or rationalize it or get rid of it. But they can help us deal with suffering in better rather than worse ways.

The first is mentioned in verse 12: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal taking place among you to test you.” The term fiery ordeal is a Greek word drawn from metallurgy. It often refers to refining metal by fire. In I Peter 1:6-7 Peter says,

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold, that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

One way to deal with suffering is to **look for the good that God can do in it**. We have to be careful here. We are not saying that God sends suffering in order to test us to improve our character. One person who had lost a child said, “Why should God take my child in order to improve my character?” Peter is not saying that God sends you suffering and tragedy in order to improve your character. What Peter means is that suffering and tragedy, even as bad as they are, may yet provide an occasion for God doing something good.

One person in our church who was diagnosed with terminal cancer said to me, “At least I will get to show my grandchildren how a Christian faces death.” I am not saying that justifies the person’s illness. I do not think for a moment that God sends cancer on people in order to teach their grandchildren a lesson. This is not an explanation of suffering. It is an attempt to see suffering in a new light. Even in suffering, even in tragic loss, God may yet do something good if we allow God to work in our lives.

A second way to deal with suffering is to **rejoice in the company you have on the journey of suffering**. In verse 13 Peter says, “But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” In Greek the verse says literally, “Rejoice in so far as you have fellowship with the suffering of Christ.” Christians are not exempt from suffering, but we are in good company. Jesus also suffered, and he is with us in our suffering. So is his family. We have fellowship in our suffering, and that is no small gift. That does not explain suffering. That does not justify the losses you have experienced. But it may help you deal with it a little better. Be thankful for the company you have: the Savior who wants to be with you, as well as the other people who want to be with you.

A third way to deal with suffering is to **acknowledge the role of your own actions**. Your own actions can make suffering better or worse. Peter addresses this in verse 15-16: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace.”

In my experience people tend to make one of two opposite mistakes. Either they blame themselves for things that are not really their fault, or they blame others for things that are their own fault. If some tragedy or crisis happens to you, don’t automatically assume it is your fault. I think parents are especially prone to this. If something bad happens to their children, they automatically assume it’s their fault. As a parent you have great responsibility for your children, but you are not God. You cannot control everything. That is true in your own life, too. Do not blame yourself for everything that happens. And do not always blame other people. Instead seek God’s guidance in discerning how your own actions can make things better or worse.

The fourth way to deal with suffering mentioned in this passage is to **do whatever good you can**. Verse 19: “Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.”

Let me close with a story I have shared with some of you before. One of the best books ever written on suffering and loss is Jerry Sittser’s book *A Grace Disguised*. Many of you remember his story: how his wife, daughter, and mother were all killed in a car accident on highway 95 in north Idaho. This book contains numerous examples of the themes we read in I Peter 4:

- Look for the good that God can yet do in your life
- Rejoice in the company you have on the journey of suffering
- Acknowledge the role of your own actions in making things better or worse
- Do whatever good you can

But my favorite part of the book is one of the images he uses. After the accident he says,

I felt like I was staring at the stump of a huge tree that had just been cut down in my backyard. That stump, which sat all alone, kept reminding me of the beloved tree that I had lost. I could think of nothing but that tree. Every time I looked out the window, all I could see was that stump. Eventually, however, I decided to do something about it. I landscaped my backyard, reclaiming it once again as my own. I decided to keep the stump there, since it was both too big and too precious to remove. Instead of getting rid of it, I worked around it. I planted shrubs, trees, flowers, and grass. I laid out a brick pathway and built two benches. Then I watched everything grow. Now, three years later, the stump remains, still reminding me of the beloved tree I lost. But the stump is surrounded by a beautiful garden of blooming flowers and growing trees and lush grass. Likewise, the sorrow I feel remains, but I have tried to create a landscape around the loss so that what was once ugly is now an integral part of a larger, lovely whole (pp. 42-43).

In the book of Romans the apostle Paul puts it this way, “Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.”

- Ken Onstot