

Last week I had the chance to catch up in person with a college friend. We were good buddies in college, and even though we live in different parts of the country now, we still get in touch a couple of times a year. In January, his wife passed away after a long battle with breast cancer. He's forty years old, a newly widowed single dad. Last week was my first chance to see him. We hugged each other for a long time. I told him I loved him. He was kind enough to share with me some stories from Sarah's life about her resilience, her faith, her strength, her kindness, her selflessness, her heart to adopt their child. Even though the past few years, and the past two months in particular, were so hard, my friend felt closer to God than ever, and his faith was stronger than ever before! There was a unique blend of pain, hurt, and sorrow on his face, mixed with joy and hope. It was a sacred time for me. As I talked with him, I found myself thinking, "This is what faithful suffering looks like." I was with him on Monday morning. Monday afternoon I sat down to prepare this sermon, which is about how Christians respond faithfully to suffering. I just saw it lived out in real life, then I looked down and saw it in the Scriptures.

If you have your Bible, open it to 1 Peter 4:12-19. We are going to see how faithful followers of Jesus respond to suffering.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Seven different words for suffering, hardship, trials, and ordeals appear in this passage. Peter wanted the people he was pastoring to know, and God wants us to know, how to faithfully respond to suffering. Peter fleshes out three essential elements in this passage.

Anticipate Suffering

First, Peter tells us to anticipate suffering. "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). When suffering and hardship come, don't be surprised. Rather, be prepared. This makes a huge difference.

It probably doesn't surprise you because of my incredibly intimidating muscular frame, but I played football growing up. (Some of you are thinking, "The pastor was the backup kicker.") I loved playing football. I took a lot of hits over a lot of years, but the hardest hit I ever took, one

that left my head spinning, was when I was covering a kickoff. I was running at full speed and got hit by a player from behind me and to the side. I found myself flying through the air, feet above my head. I got the wind knocked out of me. Because I never saw the hit coming, I had no ability to prepare and protect myself.

Suffering should never catch us off guard, because God tells us repeatedly to expect it. When it happens, we shouldn't be surprised, saying, "Why is this strange and unexpected ordeal happening to me?" We should say, "That's what I expected!" If you wake up at the Ritz Carlton with water dripping on your face, you're upset. If you're camping in the middle of the woods, you may not love it, but you got what you paid for.

Jesus told us repeatedly to expect hardship.

- "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:18-20)
- "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33).
- "You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me" (Luke 21:16-17).

In other words, if you are a follower of Jesus, don't expect an easy life! Two weekends ago, our family drove to Kentucky for my father-in-law's 70th birthday. He and his wife recently moved into a new house, and rather than us throwing him a party and giving him gifts, he wanted us to give him a workday around the new home: patching drywall, painting walls, moving furniture, unpacking boxes. It was eight hours of hard labor! The younger kids were told they could enjoy a movie marathon while the work was being done. Hudson was so excited for the movies, but when 8:00 a.m. rolled around, I handed him a pair of work gloves and told him it was time to work. Hudson thought he qualified as a younger kid and was expecting a day full of movies. Instead, it was a day full of work. He was a little mopey at first. He mumbled under his breath, "I'm pretty sure OSHA has rules against child labor." Once he got his expectations right, he dialed in. So much of life comes down to expectations. Jesus says we should anticipate suffering.

Discern Suffering

Second, Peter tells us to discern suffering. Not all suffering that Christians face is the same. There are different categories or types of sufferings, different *reasons* for the suffering. Peter draws that out in his passage. I want to give you a diagnosis grid we can use to discern the source of the suffering. Once we discern the source, we know how to respond.

- Is this suffering because of *personal sin*? Sometimes we suffer because we've made foolish choices. "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler" (1 Peter 4:15). Some of us are out here claiming we're being "persecuted for the gospel" at work. No; people gossip about you because you're the guy who heats up leftover tilapia in the office microwave. That's not your cross; that's poor life

choices. There is enough suffering that will come into your life in this world. Don't bring additional suffering on yourself by being foolish. If that's why you are suffering, *repent*.

- Is this suffering because of *another's sins*? Sometimes it's not our harmful choices that bring suffering, it's someone else's. You never picked up a cigarette, but you grew up in a house with a chain smoker, and you absorbed the consequences. You can extrapolate that to a host of other things. The ripple effects of other people's sin impact all of us. Romans 12 speaks to this sort of situation and tells us, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, do not take revenge, and do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." When we suffer because of someone else's sins we don't retaliate; we *offer forgiveness and seek justice* wherever possible, and we entrust the situation to God.
- Is this suffering because of *original sin*? This is suffering we endure because we live life in the shadow of Adam and Eve's rebellion. Sin brought disease, decay, and death into the world. We have earthquakes, tornadoes, and tsunamis. We have cancer, Alzheimer's, and dementia. We have anxiety, depression, and postpartum. This pain is no one's fault. You can't blame yourself or anyone else. We simply live in a world and with bodies that are not yet fully redeemed. The Bible says we groan inwardly and eagerly wait for our redemption. When we experience this kind of suffering, we pray and we focus on *our hope in heaven*.
- Is this suffering because of a *spiritual attack*? This is suffering that comes because Satan is real. Jesus says that he is a thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy. He wants to wreck your marriage. He wants to ruin your kid's life. He wants to divide relationships. He wants to implode churches. The Bible says that we are in a battle, not against flesh and blood, but against power in the spiritual realm. Our enemy is planting landmines all around our lives. When this kind of suffering happens, what's our response? *Fight!* Let me ask the men in this room: What would you do if someone broke into your house in the middle of the night, and your wife and kids were home, and they intended to harm them? What's your move? Keep laying down in bed, hoping he goes away? Hide in the closet and hope he doesn't see you? No, every man in this room just mentally grabbed the nearest weapon in their house. Some of you already know which golf club you're using. With the enemy, you don't cower away; you fight back in the power of God! Ephesians 6 says, "Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground!... And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."
- Is this suffering because of *righteousness*? This is suffering that comes specifically because you are a faithful follower of Christ. This is what's talked about most directly in this passage. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed. The bros in the office call you names because you don't look at the images of women that are passed around or join in on the demeaning jokes. You're passed up for a promotion at your university because Christians are seen as anti-intellectual. I have a friend who was the vice president of a very successful construction company with huge revenue. He worked there for over ten years and was very tight with the president and owner. He found out the owner was having an affair with his secretary. He wasn't violating the law, but he was violating his marriage oath, his integrity, etc. Because my friend is a follower of Jesus, he didn't look the other way; he confronted him on it. The next day, he lost his very comfortable,

very high paying job. If you suffer because you are being a fool, repent. But if you suffer because of righteousness, *rejoice!* Jesus says great is your reward in heaven! That's how the faithful saints of the past were treated. That's how Jesus was treated, so count it an honor.

Commit Yourself to God During Suffering

The third step is to commit yourself to God during suffering. This comes right from our passage: "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19). The word translated "commit themselves" is the same word that was used for depositing money or valuables at a bank. It's recognizing that something has exceptional worth, and you are entrusting someone else to look after it and guard it for you. When suffering comes, we say, "God, you are my faithful creator. I am asking you to take care of me." When Jesus was on the cross, experiencing the greatest suffering imaginable, what did he say? "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). It's the same word. Jesus, suffering on the cross, asked his Father to care for him. That's what we do when we face opposition, too.

Last Sunday night I was taking the trash down to the curb, and my daughter asked to come with me. We live a way off the road, so it's a bit of a haul. It was 9:00, so very dark. On the way back. Addie started to get scared. She started whimpering and instinctively reached out her hand, which was her way of saying, "Daddy, I am committing myself to your care." I grabbed hold of her hand, and as soon as I did, she settled down. That's what we are called to do when we suffer—commit ourselves into God's care.

When we commit ourselves to God during suffering:

- *We experience unity with Jesus.* Do you remember the list we looked at last week showing how Jesus suffered? He was rejected by his family, undermined by leaders, betrayed by a friend, abandoned in crisis, mocked in court, beaten by soldiers, and crucified as a criminal. Jesus experienced suffering throughout his entire ministry. He suffered relationally, socially, culturally, verbally, physically, and spiritually. Isaiah 53:3 describes Jesus as "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain." Jesus knew suffering. When his friend died and he showed up at his house and saw everyone crying, Scripture tells us, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). It's not only that Jesus suffered; it's that he draws near to us in our suffering. "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).
- *We experience a blessing.* This is counterintuitive because suffering is hard and painful. But Peter says, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14), and, "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:16). It's not only Peter who says this. All throughout Scripture we are told that blessings come in the wake of suffering. "We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 4:3-4). Like pressure turns coal into diamonds, suffering transforms us. It produces perseverance, character, and hope in our lives. It transforms us and brings us closer to Jesus. One of the

individuals in the Bible who suffered more than just about anyone was Job, who, not because of anything wrong he did, but specifically because he was a righteous man, endured extreme suffering. He lost all his wealth, he had to bury his children, and he had pain throughout his body, from his head to his toes. The entire book of Job was written to try to make sense of suffering, and to consider how God can be both good and sovereign while allowing the righteous to experience pain. At the end of his ordeal, Job never comes to fully understand why he suffered. He doesn't get to read the script and make sense of it all, but he encounters God, and the Spirit of glory rests on him. He said, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

- *We continue to do good.* Just because life gets hard and the enemy shoots arrows our way doesn't mean we get to check out and spend the rest of our life in the Lazy Boy. Suffering is not supposed to get us off mission but spur us on to greater mission. "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19). When my friend Eric's wife was diagnosed with cancer, he decided he was going to withdraw from the master's program he was enrolled in, so he could focus on caring for her. His wife said, "Don't you dare use my cancer as an excuse not to improve yourself! You're going to have plenty of time in hospital waiting rooms to do your assignments." You may be suffering, but suffering is not an excuse to check out. Keep doing good!

God uses the faithful suffering of the saints to advance his kingdom like few other things. We see this all throughout the book of Acts. In Acts 5, the apostles were arrested and flogged, then stripped and beaten and ordered not to preach anymore in the name of Jesus. They endured suffering and a warning to stop doing good. Did they go home and say, "Woe is me. Following Jesus was a mistake. God's not good. Let's stop preaching." No! "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (Acts 5:41-42). What happened as a result? The very next verse says, "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing..." (Acts 6:1). Suffering came, but they kept doing good! Suffering didn't stop the mission; it accelerated it! Do not let suffering derail you from the mission of God! Entrust yourself to his care and keep doing good!

This week as I sat across the table from my friend, a man who just buried his forty-year-old wife, I saw something powerful. I saw grief. I saw exhaustion. I saw heartbreak. But I also saw faith. At one point he said, "God has been closer to us in this season than ever before." That's what Peter is describing. When suffering comes, Christians don't pretend it doesn't hurt. We don't deny the pain. We expect suffering. We discern what kind it is. And then we entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator and keep doing good. Our suffering is never wasted. The same God who used the suffering of Jesus to redeem the world can use the suffering of his people to deepen our faith, strengthen his church, and advance his kingdom. The foundation of the Christian faith is that on the other side of suffering is resurrection.