

SUFFERING WITH SUFFERING – 1 Peter 4:12, 13

Practicing the Presence of God #9

The pain sometimes was almost unbearable. Usually it was just a dull ache. But it was always there. George continually suffered with pain around his jaw. It all started when George was just 22 years of age. He mysteriously lost one of his teeth, and then others began to fall out one at a time due to some strange gum disease. Within just 2 decades, George only had one tooth left – a lower-right bicuspid.

But it was more than just the pain of his gum disease and teeth falling out that bothered George. It was those horrendous dentures that his dentist kept giving him to replace his teeth. After every tooth that would fall out, his dentist would make a new set of dentures. None of them seemed to fit right. And all of them were hinged with tightly wound coils that required him to bear down just to keep his mouth shut. And the pain was constant.

Finally George went to a dentist in New York City named John Greenwood. Greenwood pulled out that last remaining tooth that George had and made him a whole new set of teeth. Dr. Greenwood's dentures fit George better than any of the others, but he still suffered in pain, probably due to the scar tissue of his former problems and gum disease.

Dr. Greenwood donated George's last remaining tooth to the New York Academy of Medicine. The Academy didn't accept George's tooth so that they could study it, but rather so that they could preserve it. George's tooth is still on display and can be seen in New York City even to this day. In fact, it might

be the only tooth on display of any President of the U.S. – the lower-right bicuspid of George Washington.

When people today think of the Father of our country, they usually think of inspirational leadership, courage on the battlefield or ingenious wisdom. The thought of constant pain seldom comes to their minds. But I'm sure that the continual suffering of a sore mouth was much more of a practical concern to George Washington than any of the lofty virtues that we generally associate with his name. Yet it was that suffering in part that helped to develop this man who is called the Father of our country into the great leader who guided our nation through its revolutionary struggles.

Suffering is a subject that at the same time both attracts and repels us. It attracts us because suffering is something that we all share in common. *People are born to trouble as surely as the sparks fly upward*, Eliphaz told Job in Job 5:7. No one lives who fully escapes the spreading tentacles of suffering. But suffering also repels us because it is something that we all want to avoid. Suffering is unpleasant. Suffering is painful –either physically or emotionally or psychologically. Yet the Bible speaks openly and often about the subject of suffering. The words suffering or suffer are found 99 times in the Bible. Jesus even went so far as to promise His followers suffering. He never promised them riches; He never promised them success in business; He never promised them fame; but He did promise them suffering.

This morning we want to look at this matter of suffering for practicing the presence of God in our lives will affect how we regard and accept suffering.

READ 1 Peter 4:12, 13:

1PE 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

In these 2 brief verses, Peter gives to us three shocking responses to suffering.

The first response is to not be surprised. Now this response is harder to realize than it first appears because we all tend to be shocked when suffering comes into our life. We all tend to blurt out in our minds, *why is this happening to me?*

Now we don't generally have the exact same response when we hear of someone else's suffering. We tend to have thoughts of sympathy, we tend to wonder what we can do to help, we tend to be sorry for them, but we don't often have the tendency to have the same surprise that we do when suffering suddenly hits us.

Our tendency to be surprised at our suffering lets us know one of the basic characteristics of our fallen, sinful natures. Because we have all been born with a sinful nature, we all have a natural tendency to be self-centered. Even though we don't usually express this consciously, we all have a tendency to think that we are special, different from others around us.

Now there is some truth to our uniqueness. Every person created by God is distinct from every other person. No two people are exactly alike. After every person was conceived, God broke the mold. But the uniqueness of our

being created in the image and likeness of God doesn't mean that we deserve special treatment from God that nobody else gets. And that is how our self-centered, sinful nature often interprets how our relationship with God should be. With many people, when suffering enters their lives, the first response that they have is why should I be suffering? Why should God be picking on me? What have I done to deserve this hardship? This isn't fair. I shouldn't be suffering.

A wise Elder in one of my former churches who has now gone home to be with the Lord often encouraged my heart when he heard of the suffering that someone was going through by saying, *I often wonder why that person is suffering and not me. Why not me?* That, dear friends, is a more biblical response to suffering. Instead of being surprised and asking *why me*, we should be wondering *why not me?* For suffering is a universal malady. Nobody escapes its clutches. If you are a young person here this morning and you have never really suffered in life, just wait – you'll get your turn. For suffering is something that Jesus promised to all of his followers. So we shouldn't be surprised when suffering cracks open the door and enters our life. We should rather be expecting it. Not that we desire it; not that we try to manufacture it in our lives, not that we go out looking for it, but we should expect it. Suffering certainly should not surprise us. That's the reason for Peter writing; *Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you.*

But now let's move to a 2nd response, and this likewise is not what we might expect. Peter says that we are to rejoice in our sufferings.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ,

Now this word, rejoice, is certainly a most interesting word for Peter to have chosen. It was the word used in a joyful greeting. When one friend saw another coming and wanted to warmly greet him, this is the word that he would use. This would be the equivalent of our seeing a long-time buddy coming today and yelling out, *Hey, how are you doing? It's great to see you!*

Peter says that this is to be our response to suffering when it comes into our lives. *It's great to see you. I'm so glad that you're here.* This certainly is a strange, unnatural, shocking response to suffering, isn't it? I think that we all would agree that it is most unnatural to greet suffering as a long-lost friend whom we are so happy to see. To greet suffering coldly as an unwanted intruder would be more natural. To greet suffering in a stoic manner as something that just must be endured in life would be viewed by most as being admirable. But to welcome suffering as a long-lost friend – something about that kind of response just seems a bit abnormal, doesn't it? But that is exactly what Peter is proposing here. Don't be surprised when suffering makes its appearance in your life, but rather rejoice – welcome it warmly as a close friend.

Why would Peter ever make such a statement? The key I believe is found in a word that he used in the previous verse. Remember, Peter didn't say to not be surprised merely at trials that come into our lives bringing suffering, but he wrote to not be surprised at **painful** trials. That word painful is only found 3

times in the Bible in its original Greek word. The other 2 times that it is found in Revelation 18:9, 18, it is translated *burning*. This is its most primary meaning. For this word usually would have been heard in the daily Roman life of the 1st century in the world of manufacturing. This was the word that was used to describe the process of refining metals in the smelting furnace.

The industry of refining natural minerals into useful metals is an ancient one going back over 6,000 years. The iron age where steel was developed and produced is generally recognized to be about 1200-300 B.C. It wasn't that civilizations didn't have iron before that time – Tubal-Cain was said to have forged tools out of bronze and iron was back in Genesis 4:22; the Philistines oppressed the Hebrews in part because they controlled the iron industry – 1 Sam. 13:19, 20; the huge bed of Og the giant being 15 feet long and 7 feet wide was made out of iron in Deut. 3:11. But the Romans were the ones who basically perfected the art of making steel. This is what gave the Roman Empire its advantage over all other rivals. The Romans had the superior swords and spears made out of refined steel. When a Roman soldier met an enemy on the battle field, his sword would just snap the opponent's weapon in two like a toothpick. Such was the strength of Roman steel.

Now while metallurgy has certainly progressed and developed during the centuries to our day, the basic principle hasn't changed that much. The Romans had their smelting furnaces. Iron ore was taken from the mine and heated to a level where the ore would melt. In a liquid state, the impurities would either be burned up or separated from the pure iron. The impurities would then rise to the top. With the impurities scraped off of the top, the

molten steel could then be put into molds to make swords and spears and plows and tools or whatever else the blacksmith desired to make.

Now it is certainly not happenstance that Peter uses this industrial word to describe the trials that his fellow-Christian friends were suffering. And this is the basis for their response of welcoming these trials as friends. For Peter could see the end purpose and result of these painful trials in his own life and in the lives of his fellow-followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, a Christian has an advantage over others in the world. Whereas everyone has the ability to see the pain and suffering in a trial for these are readily experienced by all, only the Christian has the vantage point to see suffering through the eyes of a loving God who uses trials to refine and purify His children. In fact this Greek word that we have been talking about is *purosis* – the very term that we get our English word *purify* from. Just as the natural iron ore in the ground is useless until it goes through the smelting process where it is heated to liquid form so that the impurities can be removed, so the natural man cannot reach his God-given potential until he goes through the suffering process where the trials help to remove impurities and weaknesses from his life. The Lord Jesus Christ promised suffering to his followers because it is one of those indispensable factors in the maturation process. In fact, even the Lord Jesus Christ had to go through suffering in His life. The author of Hebrews writes in Heb. 5:7-9:

HEB 5:7 “During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death,

and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect (mature or complete), he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Peter writes that we are to rejoice that we can participate in the sufferings of Christ. Just as it wasn't optional but absolutely necessary even for the incarnate Son of God to suffer so that He might be able to reach maturity so that He could provide the sacrifice necessary for our salvation, so it is absolutely necessary for each of us to suffer in order to reach spiritual maturity. There just is no other way.

Now realizing the great blessing that suffering produces in our lives allows us to look at trials with a completely different attitude from those who outside of the family of God. We can actually have our perspective so revolutionized that we greet suffering as a welcome friend. Just as we smile and greet the doctor in the hospital even though he is going to cut us open and hurt us because we know that the process of surgery is necessary for our well being, so we can greet the trials that are spiritual surgeons used by God to remove impurities and weaknesses from our lives so that we might reach greater maturity. Peter did. He had reached that state of spiritual maturity in his life. And he encourages us to rejoice in our sufferings as well.

Malcolm Muggeridge has been called the most eloquent English-speaking lay minister of Christianity. He demonstrated his maturity in the Lord in an amazing statement that he gave in an interview on his 75th birthday. *Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75*

years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness. That was the testimony of a man who has learned the lessons that Peter was trying to teach in this passage.

But we must move to a 3rd shocking response as well. The 1st shocking response is to not be surprised even though this is our natural tendency when trials come into our lives as unwanted guests. The 2nd shocking response is to even rejoice in them – to welcome them warmly as friends. Now let's look at a 3rd shocking response. This moves from mere joy to being overjoyed. READ 1 Peter 4:12, 13:

1PE 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Now this word overjoyed is the same Greek term previously translated rejoice with an additional term giving it even a greater degree of joy. One of my language resource books translated it to *jump for joy*. Whereas the Christian can come to the place in his or her life where he greets trials warmly as a friend, he becomes so excited that he jumps for joy at the prospect of that time when he will see the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ revealed.

This is the type of attitude that the Apostle Paul demonstrated in Romans 8:17, 18:

17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

RO 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

The Apostle Paul did not have an easy life. In the 6th chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote about his beatings, his imprisonments, the riots that he was subjected to, his hard work, innumerable sleepless nights and times of severe hunger (2 Cor. 6:5). Later in chapter 11 of the same book, the Apostle lists the times when he was beaten or shipwrecked or in some other kind of danger. The Apostle Paul knew what painful trials were all about; he knew what it meant to suffer. But he was sustained during those times by the realization that God was using those painful trials to purify him and refine his character, and also by the realization that the greatest of suffering here on this earth is not even worth comparing with the glory that awaits the child of God in heaven for all eternity. Suffering now is just going to make the glory later even sweeter. It is this realization that helps the Christian look at painful trials in a whole different light than those who don't know the Lord Jesus Christ.

In October of 1982, the Spartans of Michigan State University had a most unusual football encounter with the Badgers of the University of Wisconsin. The Michigan State team traveled to Madison with high hopes. And their hopes were not disappointed. For they had an obvious advantage over the Badgers and quickly began to demonstrate their gridiron superiority on the football field. Some 60,000 die hard fans packed the Badger stadium even

though the weather was nasty that Saturday afternoon in October. What made this game so unusual was the fact that the farther the Badgers fell behind the Spartans the more joyous and raucous the Wisconsin fans became. Their team was hopelessly outmatched that year. But even though Michigan State took a quick lead and then just piled up the yards and the score against the hapless Badgers, the fans became more enthused and excited as the game wore on. This would have seemed to be very unnatural except for one related factor. About 70 miles away, the Milwaukee Brewers were playing the 3rd game of the World Series against the St. Louis Cardinals. While being loyal to their football team, almost every fan had a transistor radio to his ear listening to the World Series game. Every time the Brewers would score, the current update would be flashed up onto the large scoreboard in the Badger stadium. So while they were forced to suffer through a humiliating defeat on the football field at the hands of a superior Spartan team in miserable weather conditions, their hope in a World Series victory not only sustained them but it brought great joy to their hearts.

The Christian who practices the presence of God in his or her life knows something that the natural man never realizes. Through his study of God's word and his daily communication with the Lord in prayer, the Christian knows that this world isn't like it was originally created. Sin and wickedness and evil have so distorted God's original creation that there is much suffering and many trials and even death all around. So the Christian isn't surprised when suffering enters his life, but he rather expects it to come because his Savior told him that it would be so. The Christian also realizes that painful trials do not come into

his life for no reason. The same God who was able to bring order and beauty out of chaos with the original creation of the world is able to bring good even out of difficult afflictions that come into the lives of His children. Through his study of the Word, the Christian realizes that God is able to work all things out for good in the lives of those who love Him. So when painful, burning trials come into his life, the Christian is even able to greet them as a welcome guest knowing that this suffering will bring purity and maturity into his life. And as the Christian looks in faith and hope at what is yet to come, to the glorious eternity that God has already planned for His children in heaven, the Christian knows that even the greatest of sufferings that are endured in this present life are not even worth comparing to the glory that will be realized one day. This gives the Christian a completely different perspective on suffering. So as he practices the presence of God in his life and suffering comes his way, he is not surprised as if God has somehow deserted him, but he rejoices and counts himself to be blessed realizing that God so loves and values him that He wants to bring him to complete maturity, and he looks forward in hope to that glorious day when complete perfection will be realized, when all suffering and trials will only be a distant memory for all eternity.