

Suffering Isn't Wasted

1 Peter 1:6-7

Introduction

Many of you know that my family and I lived in Indonesia for a number of years. We were blessed with many wonderful Muslim friends while we were there and it was very unusual, though it did happen, for one of us (normally me!) to be on the receiving end of any aggression or opposition from Muslims because we were Christians. However, our Indonesian Christian friends could have a very different experience. There were times when we deeply grieved by the suffering and pain which they experienced because of their allegiance to Jesus in the world's largest Muslim country. What do you say when someone experiences such discrimination and opposition? Do you write to Amnesty International? Or launch a petition with the government? What about arranging for Christians to flee to a safer country? Do you pray that God takes away their suffering? There's a certain validity in all of those suggestions but they may miss something of how God uses suffering.

This morning we're going to see the advice which Peter has for Christians when they experienced suffering for Christ. It's worth remembering that although we experience suffering generally, including during this time of restrictions, economic uncertainty and time away from family, etc., suffering in the New Testament is almost always focused on being the result of persecution because of one's faith or because of spiritual attack from Satan or demons.

Present Sufferings Don't Take Away Reason To Rejoice (v.6)

Peter links his teaching on suffering to what he has said earlier. Looking back to the hope which Peter's readers have as Christians, Peter says, "In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." So their hope, which includes having an assured and secure inheritance, is so great that they can rejoice even though they're currently suffering.

Let's take note of few things here: First, the suffering which these Christians were experiencing is real. Christianity does not have an attitude to suffering that it is merely an illusion to be dealt with by letting go of our attachment to things. Peter affirms here the reality of what his readers were going through. Being able to rejoice in the midst of suffering doesn't deny the reality of that suffering.

I've just mentioned that suffering in the New Testament is related to opposition or spiritual attack, but this principle of rejoicing in the midst of pain can be applied more broadly. Too many times Christians have been told that they shouldn't grieve or mourn over people, or painful circumstances or hurts as if mourning was somehow a sub-Christian activity. Such thinking is wrong and does more harm than good when you recognise the damage it does to people's mental health. A biblical response to experiencing hurts, painful circumstance, loss, as well as suffering, is to mourn, to grieve and even to cry out to God expressing our pain. However, we can do all this while knowing that we have a greater hope before us and so we, somewhat counter intuitively, can mourn and rejoice at the same time.

Second, Peter says, "though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." Another translation states, "though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials." The reference to "for a little while" has been taken by some to mean that the suffering that these Christians were experiencing was sporadic in nature whereas others have taken this as an encouragement from Peter to say to his readers that in the face of eternity any suffering in this life is only for a little while. While it could be either, when you combine this time limitation to Peter's comment that they "may have had to suffer grief" or "if necessary, you have been grieved." We learn that suffering is not actually compulsory for Christians (or at least not at all times). The point here is that as suffering is not always going to be experienced by Christians, it should not necessarily be sought out by Christians. In The New Testament Christians are given permission to flee persecution at times (while not denying Jesus) and called to stand in place in the face of persecution at other times, but we're not instructed to chase opportunities to suffer.

Third and finally, Peter says that the grief is suffered “in all kinds of trials.” There is not only one thing which is described as persecution. Some Christians I know have suffered tremendous spiritual attack, others have been physically hit because of their faith in Jesus. Others I know have been spat on or experienced discrimination at work or place of study and others put up with snide comments at home. These are all forms of suffering and shouldn’t be belittled with the thinking, “I haven’t been beheaded like those Christians at the hands of ISIS.” Not all kinds of suffering is the same but suffering comes in all kinds of trials.

Suffering Has A Purpose (v.7)

Not only can we rejoice even in the midst of suffering, Peter next goes on to point out that suffering has a purpose. “These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Gold is purified by heating it up so that dross rises to the surface of the molten metal and can be removed. The result was that the pure gold would remain. Peter states that the our faith, which is more valuable than gold, is shown to be genuine in similar way, through experiencing the fire of suffering. Primarily, the intent of suffering is to reveal genuine faith, not to inflict punishment.

Now I’ve heard some wonderful illustrations on the similarity of faith being purified like gold is. I wonder if you’ve heard of the man visiting a goldsmith and asking why he was destroying the gold in the furnace? The goldsmith replied that he wasn’t burning it but was melting it so that impurities would rise to the surface and he would only keep this up while the impurities were coming out and would stop when the gold was pure. Before the man left the goldsmith called him back and said that the way he knew that the gold was pure was that he could see his reflection on the surface of the gold.

What a wonderful illustration. Suffering won’t go on longer than what’s necessary to remove impurities and God looks at our lives and knows that we’re pure

when he sees his reflection in us. Now, I'm happy to be proven wrong but I think this story falls into the category of 'why let the truth get in the way of a good illustration.' You have to heat gold to around a thousand degrees celsius to melt it. If there was enough gold for you to be able to see your face in it, by the time you got close enough to see your reflection it would probably melt your face off!

Rather than give you a questionable illustration, I want to focus on what Peter emphasises. Suffering has a purpose and that purpose, similar to the purpose of smelting gold to reveal the pure metal, is to reveal the genuineness of our faith. The result of our faith being shown to be genuine is that there is "praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Praise, glory and honour are almost exclusively focused upon the Triune God in the Bible and that's probably the focus here but I think there is a flow on effect such that when Christians have endured suffering and had their faith shown to be genuine they hear, "well done good and faithful servant" and so also receive a reflected honour if you like.

[culture shock illustration if time]

Conclusion

So we've seen that the hope that we have means that we can rejoice even in suffering and that suffering is real and takes on various forms. Suffering shouldn't surprise Christians but neither should Christians seek it. We were also encouraged that suffering isn't primarily about punishment but has the purpose to show our faith to be genuine which results in praise to Jesus as well as an acknowledgement of us who have been faithful.

We're going to respond to God's Word by singing our willingness to receive this work in our lives in the song, Refiner's Fire.