

Why is There So Much Suffering? 1 Peter 4:12-19

The rain has finally stopped. The flooding has devastated so many in our surrounding counties. Thankfully, most of you were spared the worst of it. And our church had such minor flooding. Most of the water we sucked up was clear rainwater. But you can't help but look around and ask age old question, Why is There So Much Suffering?

When I think of suffering I think back to December of 2003. I was home alone on a Monday night when the doorbell rang. Some of you will remember Mike Riley. He was standing on my porch and his first words to me were "Doris is dead." Mike's wife Doris died suddenly and Mike drove to my house first. Those were difficult says for Mike who was left with a four year old son and no mother. There have been other tragedies in our body over my eighteen years here. Thankfully, I can almost count the number of funerals I have done on two hands. But death is not the only form of suffering, is it? We all face trials or watch others face tragedy. Each of us wants an answer to this vexing question: Why is there so much suffering?

The apostle Peter has the most concentrated emphasis on the topic of suffering in all of the Bible. The apostle Paul mentions suffering 24 times, but that is spread over eleven books. Peter mentions suffering 18 times in this one book of 1 Peter. If you need answers to the important question of suffering, then you will want to start in this book. We will not be able to cover everything Peter teaches on the topic, but I believe this passage in 1 Peter 4 will give us some solid answers to this difficult question.

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

*"If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"*

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

1. Suffering is to be expected.

I like the way Peter begins this passage. *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* The first principle I see in Peter's message is that suffering is to be expected. Don't be surprised when you have painful trials. Right from the start Peter just lays it all on the line: suffering is a regular part of this life. Therefore, we should not be surprised when it happens.

Summer is almost over and the snow will be flying all too soon. It never ceases to amaze me at how many people suffer from short-term memory loss when it comes to driving in snow. You

see people barreling at top speed down a snow-covered road and you just know that odds are they are going to get into an accident. I want to keep my road rage in check, but I also want to scream out at these people, “Don’t you remember that snowy roads are slippery and dangerous!?” If you live in Wisconsin, you should expect that snow will come and it will be slippery. In a similar way, what Peter is saying is that if you live in this world you should expect suffering to be a part of your life.

Now I am not suggesting we become pessimistic, droopy-headed, gloomy kind of people. The classic pessimist is the Eeyore character from Winnie the Pooh. There is no need to take on that kind of martyr complex or “woe-is-me” attitude: “I’m always suffering—something bad is always waiting around the next corner!” That is not what we mean when we say suffering is to be expected. But if you align yourself with Biblical truth you will realize that we live in a fallen world of sin, and suffering happens on a daily, continual basis.

But who is to blame when we suffer? We want to reduce our suffering and pain to a simplistic formula. Kind of like going to the doctor and saying, “Hey doc, it hurts when I do this.” And the doctor says back to us, “Well then, stop doing that!” We think that if our suffering has a simple cause then it will have a simple solution. But this is not the Biblical record. Look what Jesus had to say about people who were suffering.

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.² And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

In summary Jesus said, “suffering and death come to all people, so make certain you have repented of your sin so you will not suffer for all eternity.”

Like the disciples, Job’s so-called friends tried to play the blame game by accusing Job of enormous sin. One friend said this to Job, “*Consider now: Who being innocent has ever perished? Were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish.*” In the minds of Job’s three friends, it was inconceivable that Job’s suffering could be anything but his own fault. You see, his friends had to believe this. Otherwise they would be forced to believe that suffering in the world is sometime random and chaotic. Think about Job’s suffering. He lost all of his wealth, most of his family and his health was destroyed. All of the things we hold dear in this life were stripped away from Job. The notion that suffering of the magnitude that Job experienced could come upon even them was terrifying to Job’s friends. They didn’t want to believe that a similar fate could overtake them. Someone had to be blamed for Job’s suffering and the most logical explanation was that the one who suffered was guilty and fully deserving of his suffering. It helped make sense out of life—if I live a good life I won’t experience much suffering. Isn’t this what we believe about life as well? We think that somehow

we can control the amount of suffering that comes our way. We don't want to believe that oftentimes suffering comes to people for no discernible reason—that suffering can be random.

Jesus said something similar to his disciples in John chapter 9. *As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.* ² *And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* ³ *Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."*

Much suffering in life is random and not specifically caused by the person who is suffering. But like Job's friends, we don't like to accept the randomness of suffering. We are so driven by our own comfort we mistakenly think we can eliminate most or all suffering in our lives.

Much suffering in life has an apparent randomness to it because of the fallen world in which we live. But in other places in Scripture we are told that suffering and even death can be due to sin in a person's life. We saw this last Sunday in Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper. Some who had observed the supper in an unworthy manner were sick and some had even died. Paul makes it clear that at least some suffering and even death is due to our own sin.

Some suffering is random, some is directly our fault. Also, some of our suffering is directly caused by God to get us to listen to him. You may have heard CS Lewis' famous quote: *Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.* The fact is we tend not to listen when everything is going OK with our lives. But when pain and suffering is applied to our lives we tend to be more receptive to the voice of God. Think about the story of Jonah. I can tell most of the story in two verses.

Jonah 1:3 But Jonah headed away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

Jonah 3:3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.

We all know what happened between chapter 1 and chapter 3, don't we? In chapter one Jonah would not listen to God. In chapter two Jonah was in pain, he was suffering and he was scared to death. The pain of chapter two accomplished its goal so in chapter three Jonah was ready to listen to the Lord. Now we know the rest of the story, don't we? Despite the suffering and pain that God applied to Jonah's life, he obeyed, but very reluctantly. By the end of chapter four Jonah is hardly an obedient servant but rather a ball of hatred and self-pity. God uses pain to wake us up, but, like Jonah, we don't always listen to even that kind of warning.

This is why Peter said that suffering is to be expected: *do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.* Peter fully acknowledged that suffering is painful, but he was not willing to admit that suffering should take us by surprise. Suffering is unavoidable. Some suffering will randomly come upon us. Some suffering will come when we make bad choices and have sinful lifestyles. Some suffering will come when we refuse to listen to God's voice and heed his commands. These things are all unavoidable. But what about if we strive our hardest to live a good Christian life—maybe God will reward us and bless us with minimal suffering? That doesn't work either. Paul responded to this notion in 2 Timothy 3:12, where he wrote: *Everyone who wants live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be*

persecuted. Living a godly life will not eliminate our suffering. In fact, the Bible says it might even increase our suffering.

This is what Peter meant in v. 15. *But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler*. Peter was saying in effect, “You’re going to suffer anyway, so you might as well suffer for doing good and not evil. In fact, this is exactly what he said in 3:17, *It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil*. Suffering should be expected. We have no right to think that we should be exempt from suffering.

Many years ago, some friends of ours went through the great pain of the stillbirth of their daughter. The dad worked through the pain and moved on with his life, but the mom continued to be overwhelmed and stuck in her pain. After weeks and months of counseling with her pastor, the pastor finally said this to her one day: “Why do you think you have the right to be free from all suffering?” This is certainly not the first thing you say to a suffering individual, but the Holy Spirit used his bluntness to break through to our friend. After this Biblical perspective was explained to her, she was finally able to start working through the pain of her loss.

2. Suffering is necessary to fully know Christ.

Not only is suffering to be expected in this life, but I believe that Peter and other Biblical authors argue that suffering is necessary to fully know Christ. Look again at vv. 14 and 16. . ¹⁴ *If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.* ¹⁶ *Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.*

Suffering is a blessing. Suffering is a participation in the sufferings of Christ. Think of all of the ways we get to know Christ. We study his word, we pray, we obey his commands and seek to live a holy life. All of these things are part of growing in Christ, but all are insufficient without the missing ingredient of suffering and pain.

In his book on the story of the Old Testament Ruth story, John Piper titled the book [A Sweet and Bitter Providence](#).

And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” ²⁰ *She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.* ²¹ *I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”*

Naomi means sweet and Mara means bitter, which is why Piper gave it the title of A Sweet and Bitter Providence.

You can download this book for free. I’ll put the link in my sermon on our website.

In his book, Piper quotes from one of John Cowper’s hymns. Cowper dealt with severe depression all of his life and his best friend and counselor was John Newton, the former slave trader and author of Amazing Grace. I love this verse.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace

Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

Ruth knew that and Cowper obviously did as well. And so did Rinaldy Damanik. Rinaldy was a pastor who lay dying in an Indonesian prison for sharing the gospel. While in prison, he wrote poem to his daughter, Nanda, whom he calls the “apple of my heart”, he wrote this: *If I have to stay in prison for however long, rest assured, nothing could imprison the love and faithfulness of Christ.* Christians around the world for 2000 years have been drawn closer to Jesus Christ through their suffering. This is what God intends for every Christian, so why should we would be any different? Are we better than all of those who have suffered? Are we more righteous than the apostle Paul? Do we deserve less suffering than the disciples? Are we more godly than Job?

Do you see the difference between the first two points on your outline? Point one says that suffering should be expected in this life. Point two says that suffering is not just to be expected, but that it is necessary to fully know Christ. Therefore, if suffering is unavoidable and necessary for growth in Christ, then each person has two options: either you suffer outside the will of God and don't receive the blessing of spiritual growth and Godly comfort, or you suffer within the will of God and be proud to suffer for the name of Christ. There are no other options. I loathe pragmatism as a philosophy of life, but even from a purely pragmatic standpoint, suffering within the will of God is far superior to suffering outside the will of God.

I have some breaking news for all of us: our suffering is going to get worse as time goes on. We just finished celebrating the first coming of Christ and are now awaiting his second and final coming. But the longer Christ tarries then the more pain and suffering will increase. This was Peter's thought in v.17, *For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.* Now let's make sure we understand what Peter meant here. Almost two thousand years ago Peter said, *For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.* When he said this the gospel had not spread very far. When he said this the church had not had time to become very corrupt and filled with false teaching. When he said this Jesus second coming was two thousand years further removed than it is today. With all of this in mind, if 2000 years ago Christians needed the purifying flames of God's judgment, do you think today we need it more or less? Today we need it more, not less! It's going to get worse before it gets better. Indeed, one day all suffering, tears and pain will be forever removed. But until that day, the family of God needs a tremendous amount of purifying.

Let me read two news items and you tell me which is true persecution. From Clinton Iowa: A self-described street preacher who climbed onto a city fountain and repeatedly yelled “you're damned to hell” into a crowd of Halloween parade-goers was found guilty of disorderly conduct and fined \$100 plus court costs. This man, Mike Anderson, believes he is being persecuted for his faith.

News item two from Pakistan: A 15-year old boy Pakistani Christian boy was kidnapped and taken to a strict Islamic religious school where he was beaten into submission and forced to declare he is a Muslim. They warned him if he tried to flee or return to Christianity, they would kill him. It should be obvious which of these represents genuine persecution. Some Christians

suffer ridicule, like the man in the first story, simply because they are obnoxious kinds of people. This is not persecution and hardly deserves the title of suffering.

As you endure suffering in this life, some of it will be random suffering because of the sinful world we live in; some of it will be your own fault; and some of it will be the purifying flame of the Holy Spirit given to us because God loves us too much to watch us go astray. I think Peter said it best when he wrote, *do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*

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September 9, 2018