

Suffering Is Redeemable

Our second Scripture reading is 1 Peter 3:13-22, Peter's message of encouragement to the troubled church scattered throughout Asia Minor. Peter, the "Apostle of Hope," addressed the believers as God's elect "strangers in the world," who were facing mounting opposition and the beginning of more severe persecution. In today's text, Peter comes to the main theme of his letter of encouragement, which is the fact of the believer's suffering for doing good, which is a strange pathway of God's blessings.

1 Peter 3:13-22:

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

There was a time in my ministry as a young pastor when the subject of suffering seemed very distant to me, and my preaching usually focused on the overt suffering of the persecuted church or those faithful believers undergoing horrible circumstances. But even though my life has been spared overt persecution, I can identify as one who knows emotional and spiritual suffering, and some of it came despite doing good in life and ministry. And most Christ followers that I know have suffered difficult trials, none of which were through their errant ways. But the good news in today's Scripture is that our suffering is redeemable.

"Redemption," which today is misused to refer to a sports team's exacting revenge after a former defeat, is one of the key words in Scripture to describe what God has done for us in Christ. In addition to the biblical meaning of salvation and "to buy back from captivity," "redeem," among other uses, means to "convert into something of value." When Christ rescues us, he transforms our lives into something of great and eternal value. We were redeemed, Peter says, at the ransom price of the precious blood of Christ, showing we are worth far more than the "perishable things such as silver and gold," or even the ransom paid to free a hostage (1:18f).

Christ redeemed us from the futile way of life we had inherited (1:18) and has made our lives of inestimable worth in his sight. Christ also redeems all of our life experiences, including the experiences of suffering and trouble. As Peter gets into the heart of his message to encourage believers facing suffering and persecution, he makes it clear that suffering will not be in vain or useless, but will be transformed into something useful to us and in God's Kingdom. Christ transforms, i.e. redeems suffering, for our good and his glory.

I recall how my mother redeemed by converting the otherwise useless into something of value. In the old days of my childhood, I recall grocery shopping with my mother and noting how, with every purchase, she received sometimes pages of what were known as S&H Green Stamps. She had empty Green Stamps booklets, and she would paste the Green Stamps into the pages of the booklets until a booklet was completely filled. Being a large family of big eaters, our grocery purchases were sizable, so she would fill the booklets fairly quickly. Once she had the required number of Green Stamps booklets filled, she would go to an S&H Green Stamps Redemption Center, as they were called, in order to use these booklets to purchase an item she could use in our house. She would purchase a small appliance like a toaster or an electric mixer, or whatever she needed that could be bought with these otherwise useless stamps. A redemption center offered the possibility of receiving something of value by means of something that otherwise was totally useless.

Suffering and trouble are in themselves, not just useless, but are negative, potentially destructive forces. Apart from Christ's work of redemption, suffering and trouble, which are initiated by Satan himself, have great potential for evil. But a look at our text will show us that suffering is redeemable, can be transformed into something of true value.

Peter implies that there's a suffering that is not redeemable, which is suffering for doing evil or causing offense by unlawful or ungodly conduct (13, 17). He notes that in normal life, we can usually avoid unnecessary suffering through good conduct. By being respectful of laws and society's norms, we can normally avoid unnecessary trouble. But there are those, today as in the 1st Century, who, even though they live good lives in submission to societal authorities, will suffer for doing what is right. In fact, some are "so twisted" that they will persecute believers precisely because they *are* right. Godly behavior often infuriates the ungodly. The Apostle Paul says that persecution is not a possibility but is predictable (2 Timothy 3:12).

In this Western culture of Christendom, there is still at least a degree of protection for Christians from overt, physical persecution. But that doesn't mean there isn't suffering and persecution of other kinds, such as verbal abuse or job discrimination. Even when you're the most conscientious, respectful and responsible student or employee, you can expect criticism, discrimination and verbal attacks. As Paul reminds us, we're not fighting against flesh and blood, but are in spiritual warfare against Satanic forces, as sophisticated, socially acceptable and politically correct as they are (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus said that following him will bring conflict even in households because of the division between those who follow him and those who reject him (Luke 12:49-53). Believe it or not, as some of us can testify, we can even suffer at the hands of fellow Christians and church members.

Suffering of tribulation or persecution comes in different forms and varying degrees. There's the suffering distinct to the believer, what is suffered for the cause of Christ. We also can most certainly expect the suffering that occurs among humankind in general. As followers of Christ we're definitely not exempt from illness, accidents, natural disasters and other forms of trouble and suffering shared by all humankind in this fallen world.

But what is distinctly different for followers of Christ is the way we respond to these common forms of tragedy and suffering. In fact, it seems that often those who suffer the greatest degree of personal and/or family tragedy are some of God's choicest people. We therefore consider the "health and prosperity gospel" of some faith healers and televangelists to be heresy. Paul himself sought to have the prevailing "thorn in his side" removed, whether it was

a physical ailment or an inveterate enemy. But God's answer to him was simply, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I played football for ten years, from middle school through college. I wasn't especially big as far as football players are measured, but I was competitive and durable. I have strong bones and a hard head! Never once in ten years did I miss playing in a game. I was often hurt (by blows from bigger players and hard contact) but I was never injured.

Christ watches over our lives to make certain that, even though we are often hurt, our spirits will never be injured. I think this is what is meant by this rhetorical question, "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?" (13) God's people are not sheltered from being attacked or hurt, or even from physical suffering and untimely death from martyrdom. But we're kept from injury to our faith, which is triumphant through Christ.

By God's grace we can replace fear with faith. Faith teaches us that God is sovereign over our circumstances and also is a God of perfect love, faithfulness and wisdom. He's able and faithful to enable us to overcome our circumstances with faith, which he says is the victory that overcomes the world (John 16:33; 1 John 5:4). Jesus teaches us that the way to overcome fear of the world or of our circumstances is to fear, that is, reverence him. When we fear, that is trust in his love and care, we don't need to fear anything or anyone else (Luke 12:4-7; Matthew 10:26-31). As is true throughout the gospels, Christ commands the fearful to replace fear with faith, as when he rebuked the panic-stricken disciples in the storm (Matthew 8:26). It's this faith perspective that subdues and controls our fears and enables us to trust that even though we don't know what the future holds, we know who holds the future. And we trust that even though God doesn't initiate evil in this fallen world, he allows our circumstances and transforms them into occasions for victory when we exercise reverent faith in him.

I've told you before about my visit with a lady in her hospital room, providing what I thought was good pastoral care. After discussing her condition and sharing some verses of Scripture, I offered to lead us in prayer. Before I began, she asked me, "Pastor, what are you going to ask for in your prayer?" I replied that I would ask God to give her successful surgery and heal her according to his will. She then requested that I also pray that her experience of illness and surgery would not be wasted on her, that she would experience everything God had in mind for her. Essentially she was asking for faith to see that God would redeem this difficulty into something good for her. We can meet all circumstances with joy and gladness as an act of faith instead of fear, and then we are blessed through even suffering (Matthew 5:10-12).

Peter says that unbelievers will want to know about the hope that we have (15). Hope is what distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. As Paul says, the Gentile pagans, like us, were "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). We have been given a "new birth into a living hope," Peter says (1:3). It is during our times of suffering, either by persecution or personal tragedy, that we are blessed with a profound hope in God, and the world will sit up and take notice. Peter speaks about the need for us to have the authenticity of a clear conscience. It's been said that sometimes a good conscience is the result of a faulty memory. We need to be careful that our conscience is shaped and kept clean by a life that honors God. This image of living with a clear conscience like a clean window is supported by *The Message*, which paraphrases Verse 16 this way:

“Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They’ll end up realizing that they’re the ones who need a bath.”

And so Peter says that your attackers and accusers will become ashamed of their slander once your integrity shines forth convincingly (16). We need to remember that Christ is testifying through us and will honor our faithful living and speaking, as he speaks his gentle yet powerful, convincing words through us. Suffering is made redeemable because Christ testifies through us in the midst of our suffering. We are blessed with our suffering because in our suffering we are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Christ is not only our pattern for suffering faithfully, but his death and resurrection are the promise of the victory and vindication of all who trust in him. Even though our bodily resurrection remains as our future hope, we already, because we are given new birth, participate in Christ’s victory over death and live now in his resurrection power. As Scripture tells us, our hope is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Hebrews 6:19).

In one of his Psalms that was written during a time of trial and suffering, David prays that the Lord put his tears in his bottle and record them in his book (56:8). Christ hears, knows and understands our suffering, and we can rest in his love and care and depend on his redemption, both now and future. We can heed the words of Scripture to not fear or be frightened by suffering, but rather face it with full confidence in Christ’s victory and his grace. As the psalmist says, the righteous person, one who walks with and trusts in God, has no fear of bad news (112:7f). Christ is sovereign and he is triumphant and he desires to bless us in the midst of and even through our suffering.

About a decade and a half ago, I went through a terrible ordeal of losing a 19-year ministry in a place and among people I loved, due to a conspiracy of a group of church leaders, which included some who I thought were loyal friends. After God redeemed this bad situation with my relocation to a delightful ministry in Belgium, I began to think that as I entered my senior years, suffering would be over. After all, hadn’t I suffered enough? Then my wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, which brought on difficulty, disappointment and death. But once again, God redeemed suffering with his grace that sustained me, and even by giving me a wonderful wife and new beginning at life and ministry.

Christ redeems suffering and makes it useful and even our “unexpected pathway to joy” (Crabb). Just like my mother took books of otherwise useless Green Stamps to a redemption center, so Christ makes our suffering a great testimony to his grace and our hope. He also gives us peace in knowing he has all authority over our lives and is leading us to a glorious future of vindication and everlasting compensation for our faithfulness and trust in him.

Our suffering is redeemable.