

AN EXAMPLE OF SUFFERING

1 PETER 3:18-22

Last night I ran across a Top Ten list. Here are “**The Top Ten ways the Bible would be different if it had been written by College Students...**”

10) The Last Supper would've been eaten the next morning... cold.

9) The Ten Commandments would've been reduced to five, typed double-space, and printed in a large font.

8) The Prodigal Son would've come home with his dirty laundry.

7) Peter, James, and John would've fallen asleep during a boring lecture – rather than in the Garden of Gethsemane.

6) The forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was cafeteria food.

5) The coin Peter found in the fish's mouth would've paid for tuition.

4) The reason Cain killed Abel... *they were roommates.*

3) When Peter and John told the lame man they met in the Temple, “*Silver and gold have I none...*” They were last semester seniors.

2) Instead of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh. He would've goofed around playing video games for six days, waited until the night before the seventh day - then pulled an all-nighter.

1) The Battle of Armageddon would be renamed, “*Finals.*”

Last year 302,000 students attended Georgia's public colleges and universities. It was a record enrollment. *This year I plan to break even...*

Nick graduated this past spring from UGA - while Mack enrolls as a freshman this fall at Augusta State. *My last kid is heading off to college...*

Well, the Apostle Peter was also a student in an institution of higher learning... Over the years Peter had come to realize when you decide to be a follower of Jesus you gain admission into *the College of Suffering*.

As a pastor it's my duty to be honest with you... Some folks become Christians because a well-meaning friend promises them *an easy street...*

Someone told them, *"Come to Jesus and you'll be healed, and helped. You'll be made happy, and prosperous. Jesus fixes all our problems!"*

But that's not exactly what Jesus promised... In John 16:33, He said, *"In the world you will have tribulation..."* Following Jesus isn't going to instantly solve all your problems. In fact, it may create for you a few new problems.

Folks, who become Christians thinking God will get them a new job, are sometimes surprised when their stand for Jesus gets them fired from their old job... Come to Jesus looking for love; and you might end up lonelier when you no longer fit in with the crowd... Believers do

gain God's acceptance, but they also feel the sting of rejection from former friends...

In John 16:33 Jesus goes on to speak triumphant words, "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." He guarantees ultimate victory, but that doesn't usually come until we first pass through some difficulty.

I'm glad you're a follower of Jesus – and you'll be glad too! Does Jesus offer us a joyous life, a victorious life, a better life, an eternal life... *yes!*

But Jesus also requires us to take a few semesters of suffering.

Even when threatened with the fiery furnace, three amigos of the Hebrew variety - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – refused to bow before the king of Babylon... "*Stoke it hotter*" the tyrant commanded...

The brave men of faith were so sure of their God! *Our God will deliver us... but He didn't!* All three were tied up and tossed into the flames...

Yet it was in the midst of those fames that another man appeared – the Son of God walked among them. God didn't deliver them from the fire, but He protected them in it. In the midst of their fiery ordeal they got to know Jesus - they experienced Jesus – in a way they would've never done otherwise. They all graduated with honors from the college of suffering.

Peter is warning fellow Christians to expect suffering. Think about it... our Lord Jesus was no stranger to suffering. John 1:11 tells us, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.” *Why would they accept us?*

Isaiah 53 refers to Jesus as “despised and rejected...”

It calls Him, “A Man of sorrows... acquainted with grief...”

It goes on to say, He was “stricken, smitten, afflicted, wounded, bruised, chastised...” Even the “stripes” from His scourging are mentioned.

Jesus’ anguish culminated at the cross, but Scripture tells us He bore the burden of His suffering from the foundation of the world. Jesus was born to die. His lot in life – His ambition - was to suffer in our place.

Professor Jesus occupies the highest chair in the college of suffering. Now why do you think it strange if His followers taste a little of it too?

Last week, we learned that not all suffering is created equal. As Peter puts it in verse 17, we can suffer for doing what’s good - or for doing evil.

Sometimes suffering is the result of **stupidity**. We’re in a hurry – we grab a knife to open a package - and almost cut off our thumb in the process. Its stupidity - we suffer surgery, splints, and physical therapy.

At other times our suffering is just and deserved... it’s because of our **sin**. *You’re texting while you’re driving...*

*You're swimming in a heavy undertow under a red flag...
You're sleeping around... you were warned!*

You knew the risks. Now the negative consequences that result – *the expensive fine - the near drowning - the rash you've contracted* – you're reaping what you've sowed... *Do the crime and you'll have to do the time!*

We suffer because we're *stupid*... We suffer because we're *sinful*...

And at times we suffer because we're **stuck on earth**. We live in a fallen world, stained by sin. Mankind's sin threw a wrench in God's gears.

The corporate sin of the human race has invited randomness – *a harsh and cruel arbitrariness* - into God's perfect order. This is why hurricanes, and disease, and earthquakes strike indiscriminately. Jesus put it this way, **"It rains on the just and the unjust."** Some suffering is inevitable for fallen creatures in a fallen world, and can't be tied to any one direct cause.

We suffer because we're *stupid, sinful, and stuck* - but at other times the cause of our suffering is a **secret**. We search for a reason, but there's no sane, logical explanation. We *cry* to know *why*, but it stays a mystery.

This was Job's dilemma. God chose Job to defend His honor before the angels. Satan had scoffed... the only reason men serve God was because of His goodness toward them. God was just a meal ticket. Satan thought,

“Let a little hell break loose, and man will turn on God in a heartbeat...”

And God chose Job to prove otherwise, yet Job never knew what His faithfulness *on earth* was accomplishing *in heaven*. Job never got a reason.

There’s a final type of suffering. It’s experienced by folks who **stand for what’s right**. The sinful world we occupy is *a world gone wrong* – that’s why it hates **what’s right** and it hates **who’s right**. Thus, when you dare to stand for Jesus sake - or for righteousness’ sake - you’ll be persecuted...

This is why Jesus suffered. He was persecuted for righteousness.

In our text, Peter raises the subject of Jesus’ suffering as our example. He tells us in verse 18, **“Christ also suffered...”** In short, *you’re not alone*.

Jesus has been right where you’re at! He knows your pain...

No matter the reason for your dilemma you’ll find encouragement in the sufferings of Jesus. If you’ve been *stupid - sinful - stuck* – taken a *stand* - even if it’s still a *secret*... Peter is adamant, you can learn from Jesus!

The circumstances of our suffering may be different, but pain is pain – and Jesus’ sufferings exposed Him to the severest forms of agony.

In fact, the sufferings of Jesus teach us four lessons that we can apply to all forms of suffering. First, suffering **builds bridges**. Second, it **reveals truths**. Third, it **produces new starts**. And fourth, it **creates confidence**.

In a sense, there are lessons all sufferers can glean from the suffering of Jesus, but in another sense His sufferings were unique...Peter says in verse 18, “**For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust...**”

Jesus “**suffered once for sins...**” His suffering had to be so profound and monumental it would only have to be done once to accomplish its goal.

At Calvary Jesus suffered for the sin of the rapist, and child molester, and serial killer, and corporate swindler. A punishment appropriate enough for all sin, over all time, was satisfied by God in one, bold sweeping stroke.

On the cross all that needed to be done was done for you, and me, and every other human to be reconciled to God. As Jesus cried, “**It is finished.**”

This is why the Roman Catholic mass is an insult to the cross of Christ.

In Catholic theology when the priest breaks the wafer, and serves the wine He sacrifices the literal body and blood of Jesus all over again. This robs Jesus of the sufficiency of what He did 2000 years ago on the cross.

Any time, anything is added to faith in Jesus – a ritual, a rule, a holy day it dilutes His sacrifice. Jesus *“suffered once for sins”* - and it was finished!

And in all Jesus did - from the day He was born - Jesus was *just*, and *right*, and *good*. And you can be sure the Jewish establishment had Jesus under a microscope. If the *Jews-a-razzi* could've Dredge up a single spec of dirt they could've discredited His claim to be the Messiah. Yet even at His trial the best the Jews could muster were a few flimsy lies.

No one could deny, Jesus just... He suffered not because he was *stupid* or *sinful* - nor *stuck* on a fallen planet. And there was nothing *secretive* about His suffering! What Jesus suffered became a slice of the gospel – the good news God ordered us to take and tell around the world.

Without a doubt, when Jesus suffered, it was *“the just for the unjust...”*

Even if I wanted to die as a proxy for someone else's sin I'm guilty of my own. I'm sentenced for my own crimes. But not Jesus, this is why He could bear *our sin* on *His shoulders*. *“The just”* stood in the place of *“the unjust.”*

Jesus suffered for my stupidity... He suffered what my sin deserved...

He took on Himself the consequences of the fall of all creation. Nature will one day be restored because of what Jesus did on the cross... Even Job drew comfort in his

mysterious suffering by looking unto Jesus. He said, “I know my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth.”

Unlike all other suffering, verse 18 tells us Jesus suffered, “that He might bring us to God...” - *and we had such a long, long way to come...*

Human beings were the apple of God’s eye! Of all He created, God saved the best until last. The apex of His creation – its highpoint - was man.

Yet when sin entered the universe no one fell further than mankind.

The relationship we had with God was now cracked, and confused, and estranged, and painful... The heart of God was *bleeding and broken...* The heart of man was *willful and wayward...* The whole universe wore a frown.

The best way to understand this is to put on the shoes of a father, a dad.

I’ve worn those shoes now for 27 years, and they’ve come with just about every kind of emotion you can imagine. I’ve learned so much about God by being a dad. I know what it’s like for my kids to sin against me...

All four of my kids are sinners... even Natalie, my sweet, adorable, precious Princess. Once, when she was three years old, I told her to eat her spinach, and she refused... she sinned. But if it ever happened again, I must’ve missed it... *Yet my three sons... oh boy... oh yes, they’ve sinned!*

They've been arrogant, defiant, deceptive, wayward, weak-willed, and disobedient... and my emotions have run the gamut with those boys...

I admit I have high hopes for my kids... that's why I can get as mad as a hornet... and worry too much... and stay on their case... and get in their grill. On occasion I doubt my parenting and go looking for help... on other occasions I've let issues with my kids push me to the edge of depression...

But I've never given up! I can't quit loving my kids and hoping for them. I care about my kids deeply... *and the deeper the love, the bigger the hurt.*

Kids will break your heart... I'll be honest, after living now through four teenagers at times my heart feels like a headlight after a head-on collision.

But here's the deal... What I feel in regards to my kids is just a fraction of what God feels about the sinful, prideful waywardness I've shown Him.

The relationship between a father and a child is a complicated one.

A dad is *just*, but he's *merciful*... he's *demanding*, but he'll *show grace*... he's *patient*, but there're *limits*... he's trying to raise another man.

I'll tell you what's always on a father's mind – He wants to fix what's been broken. He wants to *make it right* – and *keep it tight*. His kids are always percolating on his heart. He desires things to be right with and for his kids. If a kid

is “*out there, somewhere*” He’s trying to bring that kid back.

And as a dad suffers to bring back his son, God has suffered to bring us back. Everything a father wants to do for His son - God has done for us through the suffering of Jesus. He satisfies justice, and extends mercy. He offers grace, and teaches obedience. He saves us, *and* straightens us out.

The suffering of Jesus reconciled all the heartache, and pain, and angst, and awkwardness that our sin had caused in our relationship with God.

Believe in Jesus and it makes it all right again between you and God.

If you’re a student currently enrolled in the college of suffering there’s hope for you in Jesus’ example. Just as God did on the cross, perhaps He wants to **build a bridge** from you to someone else through your suffering.

Empathy is a by-product of suffering.

Not too long ago, Shane Taylor called me to say his dad needed to see me. Larry was dying, and had reached out to his son. Shane and I prayed at dad’s bedside, and watched him get right with God. A dad and son had sweet days together, but it never would’ve happened apart from suffering.

Suffering breaks down defenses, and helps people get over their pride.

Stubbornness and prejudice that loomed large when we thought we had decades to live, suddenly looks trivial when life shrinks into days and hours.

Suffering opens us up in usual ways - *and it becomes a blessing when it gives us an opportunity to mend some fences.* The suffering of Jesus teaches us that suffering in general has the capability to *build bridges.*

Verse 18 says Jesus suffered “that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison...” Notice, Peter mentions two events.

Jesus was “*put to death in the flesh*” – *the crucifixion.* He was “*made alive by the Spirit*” – *the resurrection.* These two events were separated by three days. And we assume what happened during those three days is explained in verse 19, “*He went and preached to the spirits in prison.*”

Here we find one of the most cryptic passages in the Bible. Martin Luther said “*this is a strange text.*” Presumably, Peter explains what Jesus did in the 3 days – the 72 hours - between His crucifixion and resurrection.

1 Peter 3 and Ephesians 4 combined to suggest Jesus went to Hades.

Some of you from liturgical backgrounds will recall quoting the Apostles Creed. It says of Jesus “*He descended into Hell...*” That’s not the right terminology.

The NT term is “*Hades.*” *Hell* and *Hades* are different places.

Today, when you die you go straight to either heaven or hell. Do not pass “Go” – do not collect \$200... But in the OT, people went to Hades.

In Luke 16 Jesus describes Hades as a duplex – two sides separated by a chasm. The good side was called “*Abraham’s belly or bosom.*” Jesus referred to it as “*Paradise.*” Apparently, it was a lot like heaven, but without Jesus... The opposite side of Hades was a place of fiery torment - like hell.

When the spirits of people went to Hades, their side of the duplex was determined the same way heaven and hell gets decided today – *by faith.*

Did they trust in God’s promise, or did they rely on some other way?

Ultimately, both compartments of Hades will be eventually emptied out.

According to Ephesians 4 Abraham’s side was transported to heaven when Jesus was resurrected... Revelation 20 tells us at the end of time, spirits in the hellish side get judged by God, and cast into the Lake of Fire.

And apparently, between His crucifixion and His resurrection Jesus went to Hades to preach *the wonders of grace* and *the power of the cross.*

But Jesus' preaching was not for *salvation* – it was for **validation**.

The afterlife has no mulligan - no second changes. We're playing for keeps. The heavy thing about death is that it seals our fate forever.

Some days I preach, and no one gets saved, but I think God still had a purpose. I have an eerie feeling God validated someone's choice. There was a person present who will end up in hell, *and will have no excuse...*

Nobody who ends up in hell will be confused over what stamped their ticket. You don't wake up in hell, and wonder "*Wow, how did this happen?*"

God sends us warning signs we have to step over - *or bust right through.*

God will make certain that all hell's residents are experts at the meaning of the Gospel - and the consequences of not believing in His promises.

Before Hades emptied, every ear heard Jesus, and every knee bowed to Jesus. After hundreds of years, each person that had scoffed at God's promise was proved wrong. All who had trusted, their faith was validated.

Here's what's interesting, while the body of Jesus lay dead on a cold slab, in a dark tomb, Jesus was preaching. Missions were ongoing in the spiritual realm. More was happening than what the naked eye could see.

And this is what we need to remember in times of suffering... God is still at work. Doors may have closed. Hope might seem dead. But God is still active in my situation. He's working behind the scenes - under the surface.

I can't see Him at this moment, but that's not to say He's not on a mission that'll affect me mightily. The suffering of Jesus **reveals truths**.

Suffering comes in layers of meaning... you've got a terrible headache and you have to stay home, *but there's more...* you learn later the headache was caused by a blood pressure problem you needed to address, *but there's more...* that headache hit the very day a terrible traffic accident occurred at the intersection you navigate about the time you would've arrived... *and on and on it goes*. Suffering reveals layers of truth.

At the time, Peter had no idea Jesus was preaching in Hades.

What he thought... what he saw... was not the whole story. And every sufferer needs to remember this truth. Don't rush to judgment. Don't get overly discouraged. An exciting and meaningful purpose of God may yet to be revealed that might just make your suffering worth every tear and tissue.

And this subject of *"the spirits in prison"* causes Peter to tell more of their story. Verse 20, **"who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in**

the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”

When pastors get discouraged they need to recall Noah. He preached faithfully for 120 years, and only 8 souls took heed and climbed on board.

The entire human race was salvaged by the faith of Noah, Mrs. Noah, his three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth - and their wives.

It’s been said Noah was the most successful financial manager of all time. “He kept his stock afloat while the rest of the world was in liquidation.”

Noah’s flood has tremendous historical relevance. It’s one of antiquities most validated events. Some variation of a worldwide flood - survived by a man and his family - appears in the lore of every culture on the planet.

All ancient civilizations have some *corrupted*, but *compatible* accounts.

In addition, geologists have a tough time accounting for the earth’s fossil record without factoring in the massive effects of a global flood.

The story of Noah has incredible geological and historical significance.

But the flood’s real relevance isn’t just *historical*, it’s also *typological*...

Verse 21, “There is also an antitype which now saves us - baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the

answer of a good conscience toward God)...” Here’s Peter’s point - the flood was to Noah what the Holy Spirit’s purifying is to us... It was a cleansing *and a new crack at life...*

It’s no accident that throughout the Bible God is always bringing His people through water. He opened the Red Sea, and Moses brought the Hebrews out of Egypt... Joshua led the Israelis into the Promised Land across a dried up Jordan riverbed... Noah gets a new start via a washout.

The flood purged the earth of its perversions. Noah and his family walk off the Ark into a new world - to live a new life. Mankind got a new start.

And this is what happens when we give our lives to Jesus and get baptized into the body of Christ. He cleanses us and gives *us* a new life.

2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” Every new believer is like a Noah... You get up from the altar of repentance with new power - new friends - new directions - new motives - new adventures.

And notice, Peter isn’t talking about a literal washing, or *water baptism*. It takes more than water to cleanse a conscience. It takes *a deep clean!*

Peter is speaking of the spiritual baptism that occurs at our conversion.

When you come to Jesus - before you're ever baptized with water - the Holy Spirit baptizes you, or initiates you into new life and the body of Christ.

Lest we misunderstand, Peter adds a parenthesis in verse 21, **“not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”** You can bathe a thousand times, until your whole body is pruney - and your soul will be just as dirty as when you started... It takes *God's Spirit* to cleanse *our spirit!*

And here's more comfort to a sufferer... Some suffering gets severe.

Suffering can seem like the end – the end of joy, happiness, prosperity, health, even life itself. Often we think that the suffering is going to kill us.

But just the opposite is true. Suffering is always an opportunity for a new beginning. *Even if it does kill me, I'll start over again with Jesus.*

All suffering in some degree *clears the slate*, and **creates a new start.**

It purges the former landscape. New situations emerge - with new people, new goals, new gains, new measurements, and new potentials.

A tough illness - a painful divorce - a long lay-off... can be a new start.

Suffering can turn your life on ear in an instant. Sufferers will tell you how their whole world - all their

priorities – changed in a single day. When you suffer realize God may be redirecting your life in a new direction.

Peter closes in verse 22 speaking of the risen Christ, “**who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.**” We talk a lot about Jesus’ *crucifixion* and *resurrection* – and neglect His *ascension* back to heaven.

But the fact Jesus was received up into heaven assured His disciples the Father was pleased with His Son. God had accepted His sacrifice.

His ascension proved Jesus now had authority in heaven to do God’s bidding. The excited disciples realized *they had a friend in high places!*

If you want to one day ascend to heaven you need to know who’s got the clout and can get you in. Who in heaven has the pull? Moses is a wanna-be... David is a has-been... In God’s heaven, Jesus is THE MAN...

Trust me you need to deal with Jesus if you want to go to heaven.

I love how Peterson paraphrases verse 22, “**Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. He’s standing right alongside God, and what He says goes.**” Jesus is heaven’s champion!

For a sufferer this **creates confidence**. What kind of hope is there to pray and not know who’s on the other

end? When you pray in Jesus' name you're jumping to the head of the line. You've got the CEO on the line!

Everything in heaven and earth lies under the feet of Jesus. He's the ultimate authority and the final appeal. Thus, there's sweet rest in His will.

Let me close by quoting Pastor John Ortberg. This was from his last year's Easter message. "People have not gathered for the past 2,000 years to say, *"The stock market has risen. It has risen indeed."* They have not gathered to say, *"The dollar has risen. It has risen indeed."* Or, *"the employment rate has risen."* Or, *"the gross domestic product has risen."* Or, *"General Motors has risen."* Or, *"The value of your 401(k) has risen."*

The only hope that's held up human beings across every continent and culture for two millennia - through the difficult times of poverty, disease, pain, hardship, [and] death itself - is *"Christ is risen. He is risen indeed."*

This July 4th be thankful you live in America. Pray for the troops who defend our freedoms... But if you're a sufferer - if you want to graduate from the school of suffering - it's not Uncle Sam you need as your tutor.

You need to reach out to the King of Suffering. Jesus knows your pain. He's overcome. Today, He sits at the right hand of God in heaven. He's your hope - your comfort - your example. Trust in Jesus with all your heart!