

Sermon: Suffering as Christians

Text: [I Peter 4:12-19 ESV](#)

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Introduction: There is no positive, redemptive purpose for suffering outside our relationship with Christ. Or as a former teenager in my Youth Group (Alexus Shellhammer) once said: “Suffering people should turn to God and keep on doing faithful things.”

From a story taken from *A Godward Life*, Book Two, pp. 143-145 by John Piper: David Brainerd was a missionary to the American Indians of New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He lived from 1718 to 1747. His was a short life. But, O what a life! What an agonizing, burdened, painful life. But what a testimony to the long-suffering, severe mercy of God. Brainerd also said: “Oh, how precious is time. and how it pains me to see it slide away, while I do so little to any good purpose. Oh, that God would make me more fruitful.”

From entries in Brainerd’s diary we know his father died when he was nine. His mother died when he was fourteen. Brainerd died of tuberculosis when he was twenty-nine. Virtually the whole of his missionary life he coughed up blood with painful spasms. There was no cure. And God did not heal him. He suffered almost relentless attacks of depression which they called ‘melancholy’ in those days. It was like a death, and when it lifted it was glorious. An entry dated:

‘Tuesday, May 6, 1746. Enjoyed some spirit and courage in my work: was in a good measure free from melancholy. Bless be God for freedom from this death.’

Brainerd was expelled from Yale a year before graduation and was never allowed to have his degree. He had said that one of the tutors ‘had no more grace than a chair.’ That was grounds for expulsion in those days. So he was bumped from the normal ministerial route, became a missionary, and changed the face of history. He never married and felt keenly the loneliness of the wilderness.

‘Wednesday, May 18, 1743. I have no fellow Christian to whom I might unbosom myself and lay open my spiritual sorrows and with whom I might take sweet counsel in conversation about heavenly things and join in social prayer (207).’

‘Tuesday, May 8, 1744. My heart sometimes was ready to sink with the thought of my work, and going alone in the wilderness, I knew not where (248).’

Life in the wilderness was hard. ‘Most of my diet consists of boiled corn, hasty pudding, etc. I lodge on a bundle of straw, and my labor is extremely difficult: I have little appearance of success to comfort me...I have taken many considerable journeys...and yet God has never suffered one of my bones to be broken...though I have often been exposed to cold and hunger in the wilderness...have frequently been lost in the woods...Blessed be God that has preserved me’ (484). This sounds like the Apostle Paul ([II Corinthians 11:21-33](#)).

But in it all was the restless pursuit of God and holiness. ‘When I really enjoy God, I feel my desires of him the most insatiable, and my thirstings after holiness the more unquenchable...Oh for holiness! Oh, for more of God in my soul! Oh, this pleasing pain! It makes my soul press after God...Oh, that I might not loiter on my heavenly journey! (186)’

Why is David Brainerd so encouraging to me? Because God took this pain-wrecked, moody, lonely, compulsive, struggling young lover of God and used him to lead several hundred Indians to eternal glory, to spark the founding of Princeton and Dartmouth colleges, and to inflame two hundred years of missionaries with his radically dedicated four-year missionary life. William Cary had Brainerd’s *Life* with him in India; Henry Martyn in Persia; Robert M’Cheyne in Scotland; David Livingstone in Africa; and Jim Elliot in Ecuador.

The Gentile Christians to whom Peter writes may not have experienced religious persecution yet, but he begins talking about suffering for Christ not in theoretical terms, but with the understanding that the persecution in Rome under Nero very well may be coming to visit their doors.

[I Peter 4:12-19 ESV](#) 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.

I. Suffering Should Not Surprise Us (v. 12).

A. Suffering is a normal Christian experience.

“The very goodness of Christianity can be an offence to a world in which goodness is a handicap.” - Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, p. 306

Sometimes we make people feel guilty, uncomfortable, and judged even if that is not our intent. **John 3:20 ESV** 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. - People may avoid us!

As Christians we should not be surprised that we have loss in our lives. The **I Peter** text here can read “fiery trial” (ESV) rather than “painful trial” (NIV). It does carry through the idea of how fire helps to purify and refine us, to improve us, as Christians. Suffering is supposed to accomplish that in us.

B. Suffering is the lot of everyone.

Matthew 5:43-45 ESV 43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

i.e., no special treatment should be expected by followers of God/Jesus.

Anybody can lose a loved one to cancer or accident, but who does the non-Christian have to help them through that valley when it happens to them?

For the Christian:

II. Suffering Is Cause for Rejoicing (vv. 13-16).

The kind of joy talked about in **verse 13** is translated “overjoyed” in the NIV and “exceeding joy” in the KJV. The word is not used by secular writers; and biblical writers use it to relate a “spiritual joy” (Grudem, *I Peter*, p. 60).

This joy is what Mary, the mother of Jesus, expressed before the birth of Jesus: **Luke 1:46-47 ESV** 46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

It is the kind of joy the Philippian jailor expressed at his conversion: **Acts 16:34 ESV** 34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Even David of the OT where he says: **Psalm 51:12 ESV** ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Suffering Is Cause for Rejoicing, but Christians are not masochists.

A. Suffering is a form of fellowship (koinonia). - something shared...

Family shares good and bad, happy and sad times maybe in the same day (a 21 year-old driver misses a stop sign and survives, but causes the death of 5 people). Our union with Christ our Lord, and Brother, begins at our baptisms. In that act of faith, repentance and confession we die with Christ. We are buried with Him. And someday we will be raised with Him if we have died before Jesus comes for His Church. This is a promise from God: **Romans 6:5 ESV** ⁵ For if we have been united (*planted*, KJV) with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

B. Suffering can be a blessing.

Even though it may not feel like it, if suffering is entered into properly, it can actually bring us closer to God. It can make us stronger. Suffering can provide a witness to help comfort and to aid in winning others to Christ.

Peter says that in our suffering for Christ “the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (v. 14). This is the same promise spoken through Isaiah about the Messiah (Christ). **Isaiah 11:2 ESV** ² And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

The glory that used to reside in the OT tabernacle or the temple in Jerusalem, now, is in us! This holy Resident brings God’s power into every situation where we might be suffering.

C. Suffering should not be because of sinful behavior.

For some things a person deserves to suffer. A Christian should never be found suffering because of sinful or immoral acts. The difference would be like a drunk driver who kills a family member. The drunk driver deserves to suffer. Peter says: **I Peter 4:15 ESV** ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

Being a Christian expects that we will conduct our lives in a moral and upright manner - always doing our best to make God look good!

D. Because of the name of Christ

With the power of the indwelling Spirit of God, we represent Jesus while He is away. Sometimes we suffer because we are being disciplined for sin we have committed - because God loves us enough to provide correction in our lives like any good Parent.

III. Suffering Includes Judgment (vv. 17-18)

A. Judgment starts with the Church.

The word translated judgment (**κριμα**) is a general (neutral) term which may refer to good or bad evaluations. This kind of judgment may mean approval, discipline or condemnation is coming (s. Grudem, *I Peter*, p. 181).

There is an interesting preposition here (**απο**) which can be translated “from.” And the Greek word (**οικος**) translated “family” (NIV) is very often translated “house” or like the ESV - **17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God;**

Let me suggest a different translation: “for it is time for judgment to begin “from” the “house” of God; And you say, what makes the difference?

Peter uses the word (**οικος**) for house only one other time in his letters:

I Peter 2:5 ESV ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

As you may be aware the idea of house, temple and sanctuary has went through quite a transformation from the OT to the NT. But the one thing that is clear is God expects the very best from his own people.

Ezekiel 9:4-6 ESV ⁴ And the Lord said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” ⁵ And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. ⁶ Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the house.

And how does Peter begin **chapter 5** of his letter - “So I exhort the elders among you...”

Malachi 3:1-2 ESV ¹ “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. **only with Jesus can we endure...**

B. Judgment will extend to those “outside.”

I Peter 4:18 ESV 18 And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”[a]

Footnotes: [a] 1 Peter 4:18 Greek where will the ungodly and sinner appear?

“The impious (a godless person, a person without true reverence for God) and sinner will, by implication, find this judgment to be a fire of eternal punishment and destruction.” (adapted from Grudem, p. 184)

IV. Suffering Requires a Proper Response (v. 19).

A. Christians need to “do good.”

We, as Christians, need to be morally pure and ethically straight. We need to do good to represent the only One who can be called good.

The fact that we suffer as Christians draws us into the suffering of our Lord Jesus, and should bring us even closer to His side. We need to persevere.

As a person suffers, it is critically important he/she not lose faith, but:

B. Remain faithful in one’s commitment. - in good times and bad...

A perspective of temporary suffering here on earth compared to eternal joy in heaven helps us weather the storms of life and remain faithful.

Over the last few years we have seen a lot of financial institutions fail or get in serious trouble. There were no banks back in biblical times, only trusted friends. The word “commit” in **verse 19** sometimes relates to the leaving of money with a trusted person for safe-keeping. It reminded me of the *Parable of the Talents* where a man is going on a journey and entrusts his affairs to his servants (**Matthew 25:14-30 ESV**). And Jesus even used this word from the cross: **Luke 23:46b ESV** ...“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” That’s faith; that’s trust. We need to follow Jesus’ example.

We need to be different than the world. Listen to the words of judgment against the church by George F. MacLeod: “The greatest criticism of the church today is that no one wants to persecute it: because there is nothing very much to persecute it about.”

We are too much like the unregenerate world; and when we act like them, one might conclude that the Spirit of God does not abide in us.

Conclusion: Suffering can destroy faith or build it. God gives us opportunities to both suffer and give Him glory by the way we respond. In the final analysis we are trusting in the same God to whom Jesus said: [Luke 23:46b ESV](#) ...“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” Let’s commit ourselves to live for Him - even in difficult times.

Jump, Stories for the Heart, p. 259 (compiled by Alice Gray)

After the long day at work in his cubicle, the young man simply wanted to go home, relax, and prepare for his next day at work. As he made his way toward the elevator, he heard screaming and saw black smoke and flames billowing out of the hallway. Panic gripped him as a succession of thoughts flew through his mind. *I’m on the sixth floor. I’ll never make it down. I’m going to die.*

What he considered to be his only escape - the hallway - was engulfed in flames and impossible to navigate. As his mind continued to race, he heard fire engines and remembered that the office was lined with tall windows all across his floor. He coughed and staggered to the windows in hope of a swift rescue. Instead, when he looked down he could see nothing but a curtain of smoke covering the area.

Through the smoke and flames, he realized that a crowd had gathered and along with the firemen everyone was yelling, “Jump!” “Jump!” The young man felt a cloud of fear envelop him. Over a loudspeaker he heard the voice of what he assumed to be a fireman, “the only way you’ll survive is if you jump. We’ve spread out a safety net. You’ll be perfectly safe.”

As the crowd continued to yell, the young man realized he didn’t have the courage to make the leap without being able to see the net. His feet were cemented to the floor. Then over the loudspeaker came the voice of his dad, “It’s okay son, you can jump.” As the familiar voice reached the young man, he felt the grip of fear lift. The trust and love that had been established between dad and son gave him the courage to jump safely down into the net.

This morning, do we know and trust our heavenly Father’s love that much? Many people before us have asked the same question especially in the midst of suffering, and I am here to tell you, today: Our Lord is trustworthy.

[1 Peter 4:19 ESV](#) ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.