

Suffering is Hard, Judgment is Worse

1 Peter 4:17-19

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Our study of 1 Peter has us looking at the subject of suffering. Has anyone gone through something this week where you thought, *this is that hardship thing we talked about Sunday?* Yeah, I had a few things myself. It is eerie how whatever text we are on parallels what's going on in my life. I've wondered if it's God making my life relevant to the text or showing God's Word to be relevant to my life.

So what did we see last week? Peter is pastoring a group of people experiencing all the normal aches and pains of life. "Normal" suffering. We saw that this is to be expected. We live in a broken world of around 7 billion sinners, so that's a formula for regular and ongoing trauma. Remember this chart?



But this group is also dealing with persecution from the society and people around them. What should they do? Peter says, expect suffering. Know God is testing you. Rejoice that it shows we are true Christians. Don't be ashamed of Jesus or of being a Christian. Glorify God in the trial.

None of those are easy. What would be easy is to think, if the Christian life is guaranteed to be hard, no thank you. *I want pleasure not pain. Christianity, don't count me in.* C.S. Lewis said the same, *"I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."*¹

Peter has very sobering words for Christians and for unbelievers. While Christianity is difficult, the options without Christ are far more terrifying than whatever trials come with him.

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

¹ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, pp. 58-59.

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." (1 Peter 4:17-19 ESV)

This can be a confusing passage. Part of our confusion is that it says judgment begins with the household of God. This seems to contradict other passages that say we as Christians don't face judgment. An example is Romans 8:1, "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" So which is it for Christians? Do we face judgment or not?

Scripture will sometimes give seemingly contradictory answers and the key is to realize the answers are to different questions. Paul is answering the question, how does a sinner gain righteous standing before a holy God? Answer? Justification by faith. This acceptance by God eliminates eternal condemnation by God as we are declared righteous forever.

Peter is addressing a different question: why the difficulty and sufferings in the Christian life? This is a theology of trials and judgment.

God "Judges" Christians in Order to Purify, Strengthen, and Refine Us

He calls the "us" here *house* or *the household of God*. This is the Greek version of the name of our church, Bethel. Beth – *house*. El – *God*. *House of God*. To get a bit technical because it matters later, the household of God is the place where God makes his dwelling. He has said in chapter 2 that we are a spiritual house made up of living stones. So don't think temple or building but rather people and dwelling. This is important as Peter is drawing from Old Testament imagery where there was an actual building, a temple in Jerusalem. God's presence was there. He is most likely referring to Malachi 3, which says God's presence in the temple is refining the priests like fire (i.e. those in the temple), but that this fire of God will break out with terrifying judgment on unbelievers. So according to Malachi 3, the fire of God's judgment that refines *in* the temple is a fire that judges and destroys *outside* the temple.

Think of it like a fire in your fireplace. On a winter night, that fire warms your family room, cooks the s'mores, and makes for a romantic evening. That same fire which does well in the house can be an ember that floats through the air and burns your neighbor's house down. Same fire, different effect.

So now we come back to Peter where he says, "*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?*" (1 Peter 4:17) Suffering because we live in a sinful world and/or suffering that comes because we are Christians are all part of God's refining judgment at work in us.

The judgment of God starts with the church. It is temporary. It is only during this life. It comes from our loving heavenly Father who is shaping us into the likeness of Jesus. Is it judgment? Yes, not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of the "fire" of God's holiness and holy purposes at work within the church. He is purifying his church by purifying his people away from sin and toward holiness of life.

He was doing it in the persecuted Christians in Asia Minor when Peter wrote this. He was doing it through all the persecutions of the first three centuries of the church. He was doing it in all the hardships and pain suffered by his people down through history. He is doing the same thing now right here in our church. *What is this trial or hardship I am going through about? What is God teaching me? How is he using this?* God refines the church by refining

the people of the household of God. Can you see your trial through that prism? God's doing his good work in your life.

God uses these fiery trials to transform us. Shape us. Mold us. I heard Pastor Gary last week speaking at a funeral describe how he meets with engaged couples. He sees the stars in their eyes. He sees them holding hands under the table. He sees their happy expressions. He said, I tell them, "You are going to suffer." All the married people laughed. Is Pastor Gary a good pastor for saying that? Does that mean they shouldn't get married? What it means is they have to be realistic.

Is Peter a good apostle? Does the difficulty of the Christian life mean one shouldn't follow Jesus? No. But we had better be realistic and understand that no one escapes the purifying judgment of God. As a Christian, that judgment is with loving intent and glorious purpose. The future judgment seat of Christ will be a real judgment, but a judgment of the quality of our lives offered to God. It is a judgment of commendation, rewards gained or lost. Now that may sound undesirable to you, until you consider the alternative: *"And if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"* (1 Peter 4:17)

If Our Experience is Painful, How Bad Will it be For an Unbelieving, Rebellious World?

"For those who do not obey the gospel." This doesn't mean those who don't obey the Mosaic regulations of the Old Testament. To not obey the gospel means you don't believe the gospel. We often present the gospel as an offer and from one sense that is true. But the gospel is also a demand and a requirement. To not believe in Jesus is to not acknowledge his glorious person or his sovereign rule over your life. Unbelief itself is a sin and a rebellion. So Peter is describing the large percentage of humanity who remain apart from God's saving grace and gospel. What about them?

His argument is from the lesser to the greater. If God uses suffering to purify his sons and daughters, how horrific will it be for his enemies? The fire that purges us will consume and overwhelm them.

- *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Matthew 10:28)
- *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* (Hebrews 10:31)

Peter asks the question, how terrible will it be for the unbeliever? He doesn't answer; he lets the question hang in the air. It's worse that we begin to imagine. Far worse.

To prove his point he refers to Proverbs 11:31 in verse 18, *"If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* Some translations say, *"if the righteous is saved with difficulty."* The ESV uses, *"scarcely."* This isn't the difficulty for God to save, but our difficulty on the path of salvation.

Tonight at our Feast prayer gathering we are going to pray for Pastor Saeed Abedini (see picture below).



He was arrested three years ago in Iran. By all accounts, he has suffered greatly in the Iranian prison. Why is he there? He converted from Islam to Christianity. He became a pastor in America and was involved in the house church movement in Iran. While there on a visit, he was arrested and for three years he has endured some very terrible things.

How does this passage work for Pastor Saeed? Well, if you could push a button, who would you rather be, Saeed or the guy guarding Saeed? Saeed or the Ayatollah? Let's bring it home, Saeed or the comfortable middle class unbeliever who lives next door to you? Saeed or a famous atheist billionaire like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg? Saeed or a celebrity Scientologist like Tom Cruise? Who would you rather be? Who should our young people admire? Which is worse, the jail of Iran or the eternal jail of God?

Peter is urging an eternal perspective. Yes, God's refining fire is sometimes painful for us. It weans us off the world. It forces us to live by faith in the dark. It drives us to our knees in despair. As hard as the hardest moment is as a Christian, it is nothing compared to the ongoing and eternal moments for those apart from God. The suffering of the unrighteous is permanent and eternal. We shouldn't be vitriolic about this, but sobered. It should motivate us to see with compassion the unbeliever and seek to save them from a terrible judgment through the gospel of Jesus. Live it. Share it. And pray.

Verse 19 is a summary verse. Grudem calls it the summary verse of the whole book. *"Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."* (1 Peter 4:19) Here we have it one verse. Righteous suffering is not random. It comes to us according to the will of God. He is in control. There is nothing that comes into our path which God has not ordained. Think of that thing in your path, you know, the one you wish wasn't there. God knows all about it. God ordained it all in the past. We are living it in the present. Nothing will ever happen to us that God has not ordained and which God is not working a good through it and from it. So...

What Should We Do in the Midst of a Trial?

Entrust it to God

To entrust something is to take something valuable to us and give it to someone else. The more valuable it is, the more you carefully think about it.

I was recently encouraging the staff about getting wills prepared for themselves. Guess what the biggest decision is? Who gets the kids? Who parents your kids if you are gone is the biggest decision of all. Why? They are so valuable to us. Their care and provision is a first priority.

That is the sense of it here. Our health is valuable to us. Our reputation is valuable to us. Our relationships are valuable to us. When a trial comes, something valuable to us is being threatened. It's at risk. It might go away. Peter urges us to hold these things with an open hand and when they come, to entrust them to God. How do we do that? There's a second encouragement.

Trust his faithfulness

"...entrust their souls to a faithful Creator." (1 Peter 4:19)

Peter highlights the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God. The one who brings and resolves trials is the same one who made us in the first place. When life hurts and we look around for some hope, is it not the faithfulness of God we rest in? How is he faithful? He is faithful to his promises. Faithful to his love. Faithful to his people. Faithful to his Son's work in our lives. Faithful to the end as the unchanging God. Faithful to his joy in our Christ-likeness. Faithful to his power's ability to meet our needs. Faithful to his glory. In these and many other ways, God is faithful.

When we are in a trial and something valuable to us is at risk, we must look to God's character and believe him to be faithful and to take that valuable thing and entrust it to him by trusting him with the outcome.

My family is in this very process. My three-month-old daughter Madeline has had some health issues. We found out this week that she has a reflux from her bladder into her kidney. This is not itself life-threatening, but it is a very serious problem. They rate them 1-5 with 5 being the most severe. She is a 5 on her left kidney and a 3 on her other kidney. She is likely facing what seems to be a pretty difficult surgery. We are meeting with a specialist this week so we will know more then. She will likely need to grow a little more, so the surgery could be some months away. In the meantime, we have to be very careful with her as any fever is a potential crisis. You may not see Jennifer and Madeline as much as we won't quarantine her, but will be prudent until this problem is fixed.

So how does this apply to the DeWitt family? When you hear severity number 5, your heart sinks. *What will this mean? How will we do this? Will she be okay?* We don't know the future, but the Lord does. He is faithful today and will still be the faithful God on surgery day. We lean into him by reminding ourselves that he created this little girl. She is special to him. He gave her to us to take care of her. He is a God of healing and there is hope in him. So as we wait for that surgery date on the calendar to arrive, we will be handing her over again and again and entrusting her to her Creator's loving care.

Continue to do good

Trials are not excuses to suspend obedience, prayer, service, and loving others. We naturally become self-centered in a trial. Our focus swings to ourselves, which is some of the misery of it. But when my trust is in God and I have given the matter over to him, I am spiritually and emotionally freed from obsessive worry and can continue to love people around me. Fight bitterness by serving others in their needs. Doing that is its own form of encouragement.

I think of a woman in our church, Denise Stewart, who had a terrible bout of cancer and treatment. As she was recovering, she started a ministry to provide warm blankets for other cancer patients in her hospital. She continues to raise money to buy blankets and distribute them in the cancer wards. Trust God. Do good.

Who Does This Sound Like?

"It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last." (Luke 23:44-46)

Even Jesus did 1 Peter 4:19. *"Those who suffer according to God's will."* Who has suffered more by the will of God than Jesus himself? What did he do? He called out with a loud voice, *"Into your hands I commit my spirit."* The Greek word for *commit* is the same as *entrust* in 1 Peter 4:19. He held his life loosely and when the moment came, he entrusted it to his heavenly Father.

If Jesus can trust the Father with his life and hand that over to him, can we trust him for the trials he brings to us? Imagine it in your mind. Can you take that thing or person, wrap it in a ball, and today say, *Father into your hands I commit my trial. My cancer. My child. My broken relationship. My unemployment. My frozen marriage. My pain.* In a prayer of faith, can you hand it to him with trust that he's got this and that whatever comes, it comes from his faithful hand?

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