

“Suffering”

1 Peter 5:5-7; 1 Peter 1:3–5; 1 Peter 3:17–18;
1 Peter 2:9–10 (NRSV)

Community, Cross, and New Creation: How are we to live in the face of suffering?

This week we turn to 1 Peter and the question of how we respond to suffering, the inevitable suffering that at one time or another afflicts us all. Writing from Rome (see the reference to “Babylon” in 5:13) in the early 60’s AD, Peter encourages the Christians in Asia Minor who “have had to suffer various trials” (1:6) and are living as “aliens and exiles” (2:11). He reminds them that they are “a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people” called to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9).



These Christians are not exiles in a literal sense; rather, as Achtemeier et al write, they are “people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.”¹

As difficult as such ostracism might be in our world, it was much more powerful in the New Testament world, a social world driven by status and community, a world in which the goal of life was to acquire honor and avoid shame. It is a hard thing for us to grasp the societal alienation that came with a commitment to Christ in the first centuries after Jesus.

In the face of such trials, Peter urges Christians to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (4:13). How are the Christians to respond to their persecutors? Peter writes, “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.” (3:9). Peter even goes so far as to instruct these believers to “Honor the Emperor” (2:17).

The truth of suffering

We rage at the suffering and injustices that surround us. There is something profoundly wrong with a world in which a child gets cancer. Philosophies and theologies don’t really get us very far. We look to God and ask why. Why don’t you do something about this? Why don’t you save this little girl?! Why do we suffer? That is the question we always come back to. We are like Gideon. When an angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because “The LORD is with you,” Gideon replies, “But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us” (Judges 6:13). We would ask the same question of that angel.

Too often, we are so desperate for answers that we concoct all sorts of reasons, many of which can be found in the explanations offered by Job’s friends when the world falls in on him. Terence Fretheim lists a few of these:²

- Suffering is the will of God.
- Suffering has been sent by God for a purpose.
- God could have prevented the suffering but chose not to.
- Suffering is specifically allowed by God, at least for a time.

¹ Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans. This is an excellent survey text on the New Testament.

² From Fretheim’s book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010.

- Suffering is God’s judgment because of sins committed.
- Suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs.
- To suffer is to bear the cross.

Why?

The problem *isn't* that these explanations are *all* wrong, but neither are they all right. As Fretheim puts it, when we come to the Bible we have to be prepared for nuance. We might like the Bible to set things out in black and white, but the Bible simply doesn't when it comes to many of the questions we have. The bumper sticker reading "The Bible says it; I believe it" does an injustice to the full glories of the God-breathed Scriptures we have been given. There is no escape from interpreting the Bible. The only question is whether we will strive to read the Bible well or settle for reading it poorly. Fretheim again:³

Faced with the realities of suffering and evil, Christians can say something, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say. They cannot "explain" suffering or "resolve" the problem of evil or provide "answers" to these issues or develop an airtight "theodicy." . . . [However,] the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and "explanation."

Here's a few thoughts that might be helpful.

Suffering is a function of human limitations. We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. Jesus was anxious and fearful in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus grieved over Lazarus. And Jesus was without sin. Could Jesus have cut himself using his carpenter tools? Of course. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg. Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that "subduing" creation (Genesis 1:28) wasn't any easier back then than it is now. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won't say by whom, but the candidates were limited).

Suffering results from the freedom we are given. From the beginning, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply, but there is no magic spell for making babies; a man and a woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties of roses have humans created? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. The challenges of this world are often the means of our growth. How many parents believe that the best way to raise loving, responsible, well-adjusted adults is to give them everything they want and remove every obstacle and source of potential pain? Imagine for a moment that beginning thousands of years ago, all of humanity worked together to feed, to clothe, to cure disease – rather than pouring limitless energy and wealth into making war, taking from others, and protecting ourselves from the takers. Where would we be today in our taming of disease and suffering?

Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the LORD God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans. This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, chose to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would no longer be thinking, loving, and free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Yes, there is mystery in suffering, but it isn't all mystery. And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us. Far from any sort of remote absentee deity, the God-Who-Is has created a cosmos that is ever-changing and ever-challenging. We proclaim a God who not only suffered and died on the cross, but has always been deeply involved with us and with suffering.

³ *Creation Untamed*, p. 100

Persecution of the Christian Church

Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about AD 250. Instead, in the first centuries of the church's life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from to time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the middle 60's AD were limited to Rome.

Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted and ostracized (1) for their unwillingness to worship Caesar, and/or (2) their "anti-family" philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices. Roman governors were focused on keeping the peace and because the Christians tended to stir things up, though it was not always of their own doing, they were often at odds with the authorities. Rumors and legends about the Christians' weird practices, made them easy and tempting targets. For example, stories were told of the Christians' cannibalistic practices, such as gathering to eat the body and blood of a man, a god(?), named Jesus. Think about it!

This is the power of the cross as a focal image for reading 1 Peter – we can interpret our own suffering through the image of the cross and the suffering that Christ endured for our sake. Likewise, the image of community teaches us that we need not endure suffering alone, we have countless brothers and sisters in Christ who can help to carry our burden and ease our pain. And, of course, the image of new creation is the ever-present promise that suffering does not win, that in the fully consummated kingdom of God, suffering will be no more.

The God-Who-Suffers

Like so much else in our admittedly odd proclamation to the world, all these questions come to Jesus on that cross. We proclaim that Jesus is God incarnate, but how often do we stop to contemplate that this God whom we proclaim really and truly suffered, just as the rest of humanity suffered? Or that his mother suffered as she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her tortured son die a humiliating death? Or that his Father suffered as his only begotten son met the worst that fallen humanity has to offer? That the one through whom, in whom, and for whom all things were created . . . yes, that One suffered and died.

We throw our accusations at God, failing to grasp that God has already received the worst from us. Jesus' own suffering shows us the incomprehensible extent of God's love for each of us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . ." There is no one for whom I would allow my own child to be crucified. I am simply not capable of loving as God loves. In contrast, even in the most terrible circumstances of our lives, it is God's concrete love expressed in Jesus' suffering that grounds our own worth.

Each of us is defined by God's love for us. It is God's love and our knowing that we are loved, that not only sustains us through suffering but enables us to put it behind us, always pressing forward to the future. Just as Jesus' crucifixion is the concrete expression of God's love for us, Jesus' resurrection is the concrete affirmation, indeed fulfillment, of our own eventual freedom from evil and suffering. Thus, we can echo Julian of Norwich who wrote: "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

Daily Bible Readings

(More on suffering)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday | Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-8 | God suffers with his people. (This is what implied by the Hebrew verbs applied to God) |
| Tuesday | Hosea 4:1-3 | The moral order affects the cosmic order |
| Wednesday | Ecclesiastes 9:11 | There is randomness in God's created order |
| Thursday | John 15:1-17 | On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus speaks to his disciples about true love (see v. 13) |
| Friday | 1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19 | The early Christians were well-acquainted with suffering, even suffering for doing good |
| Saturday | Revelation 2:8-11 | A letter to the suffering believers in Smyrna |