

SERIES: "THE RICHES OF SALVATION"**MESSAGE #6 "PAIN AND SALVATION" Part 2
I Peter 1:5-7**

The first letter of Peter has been called the best encouragement literature in the New Testament. The recipients of this letter were refugees and needed encouragement. He refers to them as "strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." (v.1) These were five provinces in the Roman Empire and they had been scattered there under the Roman Emperor Nero's persecution. Before it was over the Apostle Paul had been put to death.

These Christians were experiencing pain in many forms. Peter told them: ***"You are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein you greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, you are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."*** (vs.5-7)

These words are also for us today. If we will admit it we are all refugees looking for a refuge; hurting people looking for help; sufferers waiting for ultimate salvation. When you look around at the people who attend church what do you see? Do you see people who never have any problems – people who always have it all together – people who are always on top of the world? Or do you see people who recognize their need of God? Do you see some people in need of comfort; troubled people in need of peace; sick people who need healing?

ILLUST. Christian writer Marshall Hayden wrote an article a few years ago entitled, "Would Every Non-Hurter Please Stand Up?" He pointed out that people come to church wearing their best clothes and their best smiles. Everybody looks happy, so we assume everything is okay. But he suggests that we need to look beyond the facade and realize that the pews are full of hurting people. He wrote, "Over here is a family with an income of \$450 a week and an outgo of \$800. Over there is a family with two children who's Dad left the family to fare for themselves. The lady over there just found a tumor that tested positive. The Smith's little girl has a hole in her heart. Sam and Louise just had a nasty fight. Each is thinking of divorce. Last Monday Jim learned that he was being laid off."

He continues, "That teen over there feels like he is on the rack, pulled in both directions. Parents and church pull one way, peers and glands pull the other. Then there are those of us with lesser hurts, but they don't seem so small to us: an unresponsive spouse, a boring job, a poor grade, a friend or parent who is terminally ill ...on and on the stories go. The lonely, the dying, the discouraged, the exhausted, they're all here."

Why do Christians suffer?

This is a question that I have been asked many times as a Pastor and Christian leader. I have never known anyone, Christians included, who has not suffered in some sense. In order to answer for myself and others the question, "Why do Christians suffer?" I have come up with the following seven scriptural answers that I now share with you. God permits suffering:

1. TO EDIFY THE BELIEVER.

“Edify” is a Bible word and “edify” and “edification” are found more than a dozen times in the New Testament. The term means “to build up” and is used in reference to instruction, experiences and relationships that build one up in the faith.

Writer and teacher John Stott said, “Suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith.” It is not God’s purpose to tear us down but to ultimately build us up – but sometimes we have to get down to be built up! Faith is strengthened, not when everything is going our way, but when the heat and pressure of pain, adverse circumstances and trials are experienced.

ILLUST. Diamonds are produced by heat and pressure over time. Gold is formed through the same process. Job said, “When he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” (Job 23:10) God is building into our lives the character of Christ – He is more interested in our character than our comfort while we are here on earth. He has promised an eternity of comfort hereafter.

David wrote: “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes.” (Psalm 119:71) He is saying, “I was built up when my suffering drove me to the Word of God.” Job came to a deeper understanding of God through suffering and is the prime example of one whose faith was built through trials.

And remember Joseph; he was thrown in a pit and sold into slavery by his brothers. What did he say about that painful experience? “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.” (Gen. 50:20) In other words, God orchestrated the entire scenario. Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, had his faith tested severely. Yet he wrote, “Affliction is the best book in the library of my soul.”

Are we learning through our trials? Are we being edified – built up? Don’t ask, “*How* can I get out of this situation?” But rather, “*What* can I get out of this suffering?” One of the main reasons why we Christians suffer in the body is to be edified – built up in our souls. Another reason is:

2. TO MAGNIFY JESUS CHRIST.

Listen to the Apostle Paul’s desire as expressed in Philippians 1:20 – “that Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.”

ILLUST. What is the function of the Magnifying Glass? Does it make things larger? No! It does not change the size of the object at which we are looking. Does it make things closer? No! The distance from the object to the eye is the same. What is the function of the magnification glass? It makes things *clearer!*

Our bodies are like a Magnifying Glass – Christ should be clearly seen in us whether we are well or ill, by life or by death! In the process of suffering Christ wants to become dearer to us and clearer to those who see us going through trials. Why do Christians suffer? To continue:

3. TO UNIFY THE CHURCH.

How can suffering help the Body of Christ? Suffering provides us with an opportunity to:

A. Be A Caring Community.

I Cor. 12 is the classic New Testament passage on Body truth. Here is part of Paul's teaching: "God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care one for another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it." (I Cor. 12:25-27)

ILLUST. I got a miniscule steel particle in my eye once and my entire body was affected. Not only did my eye hurt but I could not move my head from side to side without my eye scraping across the small piece of steel shaving; walking made my eye move; all movement of my body was restricted; I could not concentrate on anything else but my painful eye. I was not joyful (my wife said I was grouchy!) so finally I went to the Emergency Room at the hospital where they removed the offensive invader.

So it is in church fellowships. Paul said, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." In the book of Romans he tells us how a caring community responds to hurting members: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." (12:15) Suffering provides an opportunity to practice Christian compassion. Suffering aids in unifying the church when it becomes a caring community.

B. Be A Sharing Community.

I have heard ladies sharing recipes, men sharing views about various events, youth sharing news about school, sports, etc. There is a great need to share comfort when we gather together.

Paul, again, is quotable when it comes to this subject. Said he: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." 2Cor.1:3-4

Each time we are comforted by God in our suffering, our capacity to share comfort with others is increased. Freely we have received – freely give! The suffering of church members can facilitate unity in a body of believers that seeks to comfort one another.

C. Be A Bearing Community.

Gal. 6:2 is a command: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." God wants to use us to help others bear their burdens.

ILLUST. I am indebted to the Daily Bread devotional booklet for the following story: "A visitor to a leper colony in India saw two lepers, one riding on the back of the other. The one riding had no feet and the one carrying him was blind. The rider had good eyesight and the one carrying had two good feet. They teamed up to help one

another.” The article concluded by saying, “Imagine a church like that – each member using his strength to make up for another’s weakness.” All of us have weaknesses, but all of us also have strengths. Let us lift someone today! Why suffering? Here is another reason from scripture for suffering in the lives of saints:

4. TO QUALIFY FOR A CROWN.

We’ve heard the saying, “No cross, no crown.” Pain, hurt, suffering, hardships, persecution are forms of crosses. How we bear up under them will determine the type of crown we ultimately receive.

Jesus sent this message to the suffering church in Smyrna: “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer..... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev.2:10) This is the crown awaiting faithful sufferers. Paul reminds us that “if we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him.” (II Tim.2:12) Since we all suffer in various ways, let’s suffer with a sweet spirit and get a crown for it! Yet another reason why Christians suffer is:

5. TO TESTIFY OF GOD’S SUFFICIENCY.

God is sufficient for every trial we face. There are many times when we think that we can’t keep going, but we do, by God’s grace. Here are some testimonies that confirm that God is sufficient when suffering:

Paul’s testimony: “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (II Cor. 12:9)

Job’s testimony: ““When he has tried me I shall come forth as gold.” (Job 23:10)

John Bunyan’s testimony: He suffered in prison for preaching the Gospel and while he was imprisoned he wrote that great Christian classic “Pilgrim’s Progress” – what a testimony!

Fanny Crosby’s testimony: What would we know about Fanny Crosby and the over 8,000 songs and hymns she wrote, without her suffering a life of blindness?

My son, Don Jennings II’s testimony: He has pastored the same church for 30 years – with M.S. – Muscular Sclerosis, and sits down to preach much of the time. He has been an encouragement to me and many others as he struggles onward and upward. His special verse is I Corinthians 15:10 as *The Message* translates it: “Because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am. And I’m not about to let his grace go to waste.” And he doesn’t!

We are either overcomers or we are overcome. God has grace sufficient for every trial. When He said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you” (II Cor.12:9) we can take that as His personal word to us as well. Let us carry our crosses with a smile and thereby testify to God’s sufficiency – the world is watching, and so is heaven!

Yet another reason why Christians suffer is:

6. TO VERIFY OUR HUMANITY.

Job said, “A man is born to trouble as surely as the sparks (flames) fly upward.” (Job 5:7) And Christians are not immune to the troubles and trials of life. I have met some Christians who gave the impression that they are so sanctified and superior that they never have any problems. At least, this is the public impression they give. I have a sneaking suspicion that in private they are just as human and vulnerable as the rest of us. Suffering reminds us that we:

- are not super-human;
- that we are frail and fragile human beings;
- that we are not vaccinated against all germs;
- that the old Adamic nature has not been eradicated;
- that we live in a sinful environment as long as we are still on Planet Earth;
- that we are mere mortals and that we are not immortals yet!

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the great resurrection chapter that: “This mortal must put on immortality, this corruptible must put on incorruption.” (I Cor. 15:53) That’s future! Until then we are mortal and as such are susceptible to sickness, disease and death. Suffering is the inevitable consequence of being a sinner and living in a sin cursed world. “As by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin, so death has passed upon all for all have sinned.” (Rom.5:12)

Suffering is the result of what happened in the Garden of Eden and is part of the human condition experienced by all; it is part of living – we are all in a state of decline. Vitamins, diets, exercise, lotions, notions and potions have their temporary benefits but the fact that most do not want to face is that, unless the Lord comes for us, we are going to die. We started dying the moment we were born. Life on earth is just a pause before we are ushered into eternity and is a period of time granted us to make preparations for where we will spend that eternity. That is all part of our humanity.

All of my life I have heard people say, when they became ill or experienced the pain of rejection, disappointment and/or disaster, etc.: “Why me?” Well, you are human and humans hurt, have pain and suffer. Suffering verifies the fact that we are mere mortals living in a sinful world. This is not heaven. If it were we would not be getting ready to go to heaven and looking forward to the place where “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” (Rev. 21:4)

Why do Christians suffer? We have seen six reasons: To Edify The Believer; To Magnify Christ; To Unify The Church; To Qualify For A Crown; To Testify Of God’s Sufficiency; To Verify Our Humanity. There is yet one more reason I will cover in this message: We Suffer To Glorify God.

7. TO GLORIFY OUR GOD.

According to the scriptures, suffering can bring glory to God. Let us discuss this subject from God's perspective. We are prone to view scripture from our immediate human advantage and not from the vantage point of God's eternal purposes.

There is an unscriptural message that says in essence, "It is not God's will that anyone should suffer. And if you are living as you should you would not be suffering." This is an emphasis that has misled many sincere and suffering saints. It has caused widespread misunderstanding and confusion and distorts God's purposes which He desires and designs to accomplish through suffering. The problem stems from a faulty hermeneutic on the part of those who are proclaiming such a message.

(The word "hermeneutic" means "the science of interpretation." The scriptures represent one body of truth. Peter writes that no "scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." (2 Peter 1:20) That means that all scripture on any given subject must be interpreted and understood in the context of what the remainder of the scriptures teach on that subject. To illustrate: God told Noah to build an ark. (Gen.6:14) If we isolate that statement and take that verse out of the context of the remainder of scripture, someone could preach that all of us should build an ark!)

Those who teach that God will deliver all who are "right" with Him from suffering here on the earth are speaking from carefully selected proof passages of scripture. They do not preach and teach all that God says on the subject. They isolate their pet passages from the remainder of God's Word on that subject. In so doing, they invent doctrines to perpetuate their faulty hermeneutic and make God's Word teach what they want it to teach, not what it teaches when taken in its entirety. Toward the end of his ministry Paul said: "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." He was saying that his teaching was balanced by having a "whole counsel" view of the Bible's subject matter.

When we analyze the whole body of revealed truth on the subject of suffering we come to see suffering from God's viewpoint and we come to know that God allows some suffering and He allows it for a variety of purposes, one of which is to bring Him glory through the life of the suffering one. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* first question is:

"Q. What is the chief end of man?"

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

We must remember that the chief end of man's existence upon this earth is not to gratify himself but to glorify His Creator. The unbiblical and unbalanced emphasis upon freedom from suffering while here on earth shifts the focus from what is best from God's viewpoint, putting the emphasis and expectation upon what is best from man's viewpoint.

Who has ever glorified God through suffering?

The list is long. I will reference only a few. Let us begin with Jesus!

Jesus – "These words spoke Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee." (John 17:1)The

“hour” to which Jesus was referring was the hour of hours, the hour for which He came into the world, the hour of the crucifixion. Did the suffering of death on the cross, a horrible form of death, glorify God? Yes! In what sense and in what way was the Father glorified? Jesus said when He came into the world, “I come to do thy will, O God.” (Heb.10:9) Again, after the Last Supper, speaking of going to the cross, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him.” (John 13:31-32) Jesus’ suffering was in the directive will of God and God was thereby glorified.

Lazarus - Jesus said of Lazarus’ sickness and death: “This sickness is for the glory of God.” (John 11:4) Sickness for the glory of God? That is what Jesus said!

Blind Man - Here is a very interesting statement by Jesus. The conversation takes place on the roadside. We read, “As He [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

Old Testament characters – Many persons could be cited as suffering and out of their sufferings God’s will was accomplished and He was thereby glorified: Joseph in the pit and in prison; David hunted by Saul; Daniel in the lions den; Jeremiah in a dungeon are a few examples.

Suffering Persecution - “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” (I Peter 4:15-16)

Others – There is a passage of scripture about the history of the sufferings of God’s People, that we hear very little about, but it helps to bring some balance to the biblical view of suffering. Please read it slowly and thoughtfully:

“And **others** were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith” (Hebrews 11:35-40)

These persons are mentioned in the Bible’s Hall of Faith. They had great faith but were not delivered! These nameless legions are a challenge to us today to persevere regardless of how severe the sufferings are.

I believe in divine healing. That is the only type of healing. There are two ways that God heals: One is through the medical profession and the other through miracle power. The latter is rare, the former common. God is still in the healing business but not all are healed.

There were miracles performed and various sufferers were immediately healed in Jesus lifetime. But those miracles were the exception and not the rule. Jesus did not come to heal all from physical maladies; He came to provide a way whereby all could be healed from the spiritual malady of sin.

One last word from The Word: "Let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him as to a faithful Creator." (1 Peter 4:19)

ILLUST. Susannah Spurgeon, wife of the great English preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, was an invalid much of her life. She was sitting before an open fire-place wondering why she had to suffer so much. There was a log burning in the fireplace and the log began to emit a sound similar to a bird singing. The log had been cut by a woodsman's ax when it was a tree and the wound had grown over trapping air inside. When placed in the fire the heat forced the air out and made the singing sound. As she mused about her misery she heard the sweet sound and said, "Thank you Lord. I now that the fire of suffering brings out the song!"

There is no song quite as effective as the song from a singing sufferer!

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