

Finding Peace in Humility

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- [0 : 0 0] So, I've been doing my best to homeschool our children, like many of you have, since they're not going to school during this epidemic.
- And I've been doing my best, I have to say, for those of you who are teachers, I'm thanking God for you every day and realizing more and more that I am not one.
- But thank you for the work that you do. I'm trying to do my best in your absence. And in the afternoons, part of our school time is watching programs on TV that are either about science or nature.
- And we've had a great time doing that. But there was this one particular show we watched about predators like mountain lions and how they hunt. And it talked about how these predators will intentionally seek out and hunt the weakest animals.
- So, they look for animals that are sick or tired or injured or too young to defend themselves. And then they go after them because it's an easier kill.
- [0 : 5 9] Now, 1 Peter was written to prepare Christians for all kinds of suffering. Originally, it was about facing persecution, the widespread persecution that Christians faced at this point in history.
- But really, everything that he says in this letter could speak to any form of suffering we might face, including, for example, a global pandemic. And right at the end in 1 Peter 5, verses 6-11, what we just read, Peter says something very crucial for us to hear.
- He says essentially that Satan is like one of those mountain lions. He's like a predator. And he seeks out people who are suffering.
- He seeks out people who are sick or who are lonely or who are depressed or who are tired. He says, your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.
- In other words, when we suffer, when we suffer like many of us are in various ways during this pandemic, that makes us uniquely vulnerable to spiritual evil.
- [2 : 1 1] Suffering makes us uniquely vulnerable to spiritual evil. And so this passage shows us two things that we really need to hear right now. First of all, it shows us why suffering makes us vulnerable.
- What's the connection between suffering and spiritual vulnerability? And then the second thing it shows us is how to stand firm in our faith. How to stand firm in our faith. Let's pray and then we'll open God's Word together.
- Lord, we thank you for your Word and we ask that as we sit in our homes all around the city and all around the world, Lord, we pray that you would, through your Holy Spirit, open your Word to us.
- And through this written Word, we pray that we would come face to face with your living Word, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So the first question we want to ask is, why does suffering make us vulnerable?
- And I want you to notice how Peter says, be sober-minded, be watchful in verse 8. To be sober-minded means that you are thinking rationally. It means that you're thinking clearly.

- [3 : 15] And the connection is this. When we suffer, it's very easy to stop thinking rationally and to stop thinking clearly. Because suffering has a way of distorting the way that we think.
- It distorts our perceptions. It distorts our beliefs. And I want to give you a few examples of how this works. Some of us, when we suffer, might begin to believe that we're all alone.
- That we're all alone in our suffering. Some of you are actually physically alone right now. And you know that loneliness is its own form of suffering. That loneliness is its own pandemic right now.
- And there are all kinds of studies that are telling us that the physical detrimental effects that loneliness can have on a person over time. But even if you're not physically alone.
- Some of us, when we suffer, can begin to believe that there's nobody out there that really understands what it's like to be me. That there's nobody out there that really gets it.
- [4 : 17] That there's nobody who has experienced or had to go through what I'm going through right now. Or you can begin to believe that there's nobody out there that really cares about you.
- That even if people say they care, that they don't. That's an extraordinarily lonely way to suffer. That kind of thinking can make suffering that is difficult, can make it so much more intolerable.
- If you think that you're all alone. Another danger of beginning to believe that we're all alone in our suffering. Is that that can pave the way to self-pity.
- And by self-pity I mean having a kind of exaggerated or inflated view of your suffering. And the importance of your suffering. Maybe even wallowing in your suffering.
- Or sort of overdwelling on your suffering. Now I don't bring this up to scold anybody. I actually bring it up because self-pity can be extraordinarily destructive. If you begin to give in to self-pity it leads you to begin to see yourself only as a victim.
- [5 : 23] It leads you to believe that you're powerless to do anything to change your circumstances. And it also changes how you relate to other people. Self-pity can sort of rob you of the ability to understand other people's points of view.
- To empathize with them. Because your own suffering becomes so big it blots out everything else. And so suffering is hard. It's difficult enough.
- But if you begin to believe that you're alone in your suffering. Or if you begin to give in to the temptation towards self-pity. This can make that same suffering utterly unbearable.
- So this is one way that our thinking can become distorted. But there are other ways. Some of us when we suffer might think that things are never going to change. You think that no matter what this suffering will always be in your life.
- And if you're in a lot of pain it's easy to begin to think that way. You know some of us struggle with depression. And I know some of you have really struggled with deep depression. Some of you are on medication or going to therapy for depression.
- [6 : 28] And it's easy to believe that when you're feeling like that that it's never going to get better. And maybe many of you have struggled for years. And you think this is never going to change. Some of you are in a stage of life that you don't want.
- Like unwanted singleness. And you think it's been years and years and years. I'm never going to get married. Things are never going to change. Or if you're married but you're in a hard marriage. And you've tried and tried and tried and worked on it.
- And you just feel like this is never going to get better. It's never going to change. I've heard people say that about this pandemic. It's hard to imagine life ever returning to any kind of normal.

Is this ever going to end? And again, suffering itself is hard enough. But if you begin to believe, if you begin to think that things are never going to change. That it's always going to be this way.

That same suffering can overwhelm you. One last example I'll give of distorted thinking is this. Suffering can lead us to begin to look at our lives and to look at the world.

[7 : 27] And to begin to believe that all of this is meaningless. The pain of childbirth or the pain of surgery, that kind of pain has meaning. And so we will readily endure that pain because it has a meaning behind it.

That has a purpose behind it. But imagine that same pain. The pain of childbirth or the pain of surgery. Imagine that same pain but with no meaning attached to it. With no purpose attached to it.

If you were made to suffer through that kind of pain and it had no purpose and no meaning, you wouldn't be able to endure it. It would completely overwhelm you. You know, Richard Dawkins, when thinking about all the suffering in the world, famously described the universe as a place where, quote, there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

And if you apply that grid, that way of thinking to all of the suffering in your life, it makes it completely overwhelming. It makes it very, very, very hard, if not impossible, to endure.

Suffering is already hard, but it'll crush you if you truly believe that it's meaningless. And so these are some examples of how our thinking can become distorted when we suffer.

[8 : 42] But we still need to answer the question of why Peter sees this as being spiritually dangerous. What's the spiritual danger in this if it's just in our heads? And I have no doubt that as Peter wrote these words to the people that he was writing to, he was thinking about a specific episode in his own life.

And you read about it in places like Luke chapter 22. In the last moments before Jesus' arrest, his disciples are utterly disoriented, and they're utterly terrified, and they're filled with fear.

And Jesus turns to Peter, and he says, Behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. But I've prayed for you that your strength may not fail.

When you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. And then, of course, Peter protests, and in spite of his protests, Jesus goes on to tell him, Before this night is out, you will deny me three times.

And, of course, we all know that that's exactly what happened. In other words, Jesus is saying to Peter, If Satan had his way, he would take your fear and your anxiety and your terror, and he would use them to drive a wedge between you and me.

[9 : 54] He would take your suffering, and he would use it to drive a wedge between you and me. And then he would devour you. He would sift you like wheat. And the point is this.

When we suffer, when we suffer, if we allow our thinking to become distorted, if we begin to believe I'm all alone, no one understands what it's like to be me, if we begin to believe it's never going to end, if we begin to believe all of this is meaningless, there's no purpose to any of it, then our suffering can become a wedge that drives us away from God.

Either we decide that we want to abandon God and the holy idea of God because it doesn't seem to make any difference, or we begin to believe that God has abandoned us, or maybe there is no God at all.

And that leaves us all alone in the world, and it convinces us that the best thing that we can do is to try to take control of things as much as possible. And so much of our anxiety is rooted in that desire to take control.

In other words, the spiritual danger of suffering is this. When it begins to distort our thinking, we begin to believe the lie of Satan that was first uttered in the garden to Adam and Eve.

[11 : 10] And the lie is this. You're better off without God. You're better off without God. You don't need Him. So if this is the lie, and this is the way that we become vulnerable through suffering, then how do we stand firm?

How do we, as Peter says, resist this? And, you know, it's interesting when we think about fear and anxiety and all of those things. Often these days you hear about practices like meditation or mindfulness practices as a way to cope with these things.

And I will say there's a lot of benefit to those things, and I've benefited from them myself. But they don't offer any spiritual protection in the way that we're talking about this morning. If you want protection from the spiritual dangers of suffering, which is that's the point that we want to focus on, look at what Peter says in verse 6.

It's very counterintuitive. Humble yourselves. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God. Now, what's the connection, right?

We don't often connect humility and anxiety. How does humility help us with fear and anxiety? Well, what does it mean to humble ourselves? It means this.

[12 : 23] It means accepting that we're not in control. Now, that's a theme that we've hit over the last several weeks, every week, but I think that if you're anything like me, I need to hear this again and again and again.

Accept that we're not in control. It means accepting the circumstances of our lives. Rather than wishing for a different life or fantasizing about a different life, accepting that this is the life that I've been given.

What am I going to do with it? And then thirdly, humbling ourselves means accepting our limitations as human beings, recognizing that as much as we might like to be, we are not gods.

We don't have the omnipotence of gods. So in short, humbling ourselves means recognizing that we have a king. That we have a king.

And that's why I love that we're talking about this on Palm Sunday of all Sundays. When Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem, as he did on that first Palm Sunday, he was announcing to everyone, by visibly fulfilling prophecy, he was announcing to everyone that he has come as the true king of the world.

[13 : 36] And what that means is that Jesus is the one who made this world. Jesus is the one who can restore this world. And Jesus is the one who is meant to rule over this world.

And everything and everyone in it, including you and I. And so if you humble yourself before him, that means you allow him to become the king of your life. You recognize his kingship and his authority.

And if you do that, if that's your starting point, that will begin to counteract all of the distorted thinking that creeps in when we face suffering. So to go back to our earlier examples, even if you're suffering and you feel alone, having Jesus as your king reminds you that you're never alone.

Verse 9 says, the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. In Jesus, if he is your king, you become spiritually connected to all of the brothers and sisters who belong to Jesus all throughout the world across time and space.

You're part of a global family called the church. And when one suffers, we all suffer together. When one rejoices, we all rejoice together. We all share in one another's experiences because we're all one.

[14 : 56] You're never alone. You're never alone. And right now, there are many brothers and sisters all around the world who are suffering in exactly the same ways that you are. More than that, when Jesus is your king, the Bible says that unlike any earthly king, Jesus himself knows what it is like to suffer as we suffer.

That there's no form of suffering or temptation that Jesus has not personally experienced as a human being. So he knows what it's like to be you. He knows what it's like to be me.

He knows what it is to suffer, not just theoretically, but viscerally. Number two, even if it feels like things will never change, even if it feels like this will never end, King Jesus reminds us that they will.

Maybe you've seen the clip of Governor Cuomo talking about COVID-19 where he famously sort of held his fingers out and he said, it is this much time, right? He said, is it three months?

Is it six months? Is it nine months? I don't know, but it's this much time and we can get through this much time. And it's a very inspiring thing for him to do as a leader, but listen to this. That's how the Bible talks about all human suffering.

[16 : 09] It talks about all human suffering, everything that we might ever experience in our whole lives. The Bible says, it's just this much time, right? In this passage, Peter says in verse 10, after you have suffered a little while, he's talking about all Christian suffering in the world.

He says, after you've suffered a little while, right? Paul says something that has always astounded me. He refers to all human suffering as a light momentary affliction.

Doesn't that blow your mind? Now, he's not making light of suffering. Paul suffered as much as any human being I know and probably more than any of us. And yet he refers to all of his suffering, all of our suffering, as a light momentary affliction.

Now, why would they do that? Well, because it's the kind of perception that comes when we compare this present suffering to all of eternity. And compared to all of eternity and all of the grand promises that God has given to his children, all that we experience now is just a light momentary affliction.

That's all it is. So all of this will pass. All of this will end. The suffering will one day be no more. That is a promise that King Jesus gives to his world.

[17 : 18] And then thirdly, even if it still feels like your suffering is meaningless, even if it feels like all of this is pointless, if Jesus is your King, you know that that is simply not true.

Johnny Erickson Tata is someone I like to refer to a lot because she's such a source of inspiration. She had an accident at age 17 that left her paralyzed from the shoulders down.

And even though she was a Christian, this, as you can imagine, understandably, it deeply shook her faith. But then she began to dig deeper and deeper into God's Word and she spent years thinking about suffering and evil in the world and she began to realize this.

Because God reigns over all, she says, nothing happens outside of God's control and plans. Even if we can't grasp at this side of eternity, our suffering, our suffering has a place in God's plans.

Which means, she says, we don't suffer in vain. Our sufferings have meaning because God uses them for His purposes. Now that's what it means to humble yourself under the mighty hand of God.

[18 : 31] It means recognizing and trusting that our suffering, even if it doesn't make sense to us, has a part to play in God's purposes. Now that doesn't mean that God likes suffering.

And at one point, Johnny says, sometimes God allows what He hates to accomplish what He loves. Now I don't pretend to fully understand that.

I don't think any human being can fully understand that. But that's coming from somebody who knows probably more than most of us what it means to suffer and to trust God despite your suffering. And we may not always understand God's motives.

I don't think any of us will ever fully understand God's motives. But as Johnny says in one place, real satisfaction, and by that she means peace, the kind of peace that we're after.

Real satisfaction comes not in understanding God's motives. Even if we did fully understand it, it may not give us the peace that we're looking for. She says real satisfaction comes in understanding God's character.

[19 : 34] And how do we understand God's character? Where do we look to give us insight into the character in the heart of God? And of course, we prayed this prayer.

We said this at the very beginning of our service together, of our worship together. We said, today we greet Jesus as our King, though we know that His crown was a crown of thorns and His throne, a cross.

If you want to know the heart of God, if you want to know the character of our King, that's where we look. We recognize that unlike any other king in the world, His crown was a crown of thorns and His throne was a cross.

We understand that His coronation was actually a crucifixion. Because no one in history, no one in history has suffered more than Jesus Christ. No one in history has suffered more physically or psychologically or emotionally or spiritually than Jesus Christ.

And we recognize that He didn't have to suffer. He didn't deserve to suffer. He suffered because He chose to in order to one day be able to bring an end to all suffering everywhere.

[20 : 42] There's a place in Revelation where Jesus says that He will one day wipe away every tear. And the only way He's able to say that is because of the cross. Because of all of the tears that He shed, He's able to wipe away all of our tears.

And this is why we know that no matter how bad things may get here and now, as Peter says, after you've suffered a little while, the God of all grace who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

King Jesus is not going to send an emissary or a messenger. The day will come when Jesus Himself, King Jesus Himself, comes to you and brings you to Himself so that He can restore and confirm and strengthen and establish you.

That's a promise worth holding on to. And listen, just to be totally honest with all of you, I'm preaching this to myself as much or maybe even more than any of you.

I just found out this last week as I was reading this passage that my dad has tested positive for COVID-19. And he's a pulmonary critical care doctor and we worried about this and in fact he has.

[21 : 57] And my mom is there with him and I just ask that you pray for them. That's been a lot of what I've been thinking and praying about this week. And so I would love your prayers. But the point is this, right now, regardless of your circumstances, you and I have a choice to make.

We have a choice that we need to make in our hearts. Either we choose not to fear God, which means that we're going to end up fearing virtually everything else in the world.

or we choose to fear God, which means humbling ourselves under His mighty hand, allowing Him to be the king of our lives and the king of circumstances that we don't understand.

But we humble ourselves under that king and the Bible says that if we make that choice, then we have absolutely nothing to fear in this world because this world belongs to Him.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You that we have a king.

[23 : 01] And we thank You that He's not like any earthly king. And we thank You that when He rode into Jerusalem on that day so long ago, He knew where that journey would lead. He knew that it would lead to the cross.

But in a week, we will remember and celebrate the fact that it didn't end at the cross. It went through the cross, into the resurrection, Lord. And it is in the hope of that resurrected king who has overcome death itself that we live, Lord.

And it's because of that hope that we know now that we have nothing to fear. Lord, that we can face suffering and be clear and sober-minded knowing how the story ends. And I pray that right now, Lord, through Your Holy Spirit, You would fill everybody listening to this, everybody watching it.

I pray that right now You would fill them with Your Spirit and fill them with that otherworldly, unearthly hope, Lord, as we wait for You. And I pray this, Lord, for our good, but also that You would be glorified in and through us as we stand firm for You.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now let's sing together. I pray this in Jesus' name.

[24 : 21] I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.