

New Suffering

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- [0 : 00] 30th of July, 1967, when she was 17 years old, Johnny Erickson broke her neck diving into shallow water.
- During the two years of her rehabilitation in hospital, she said that she experienced anger, depression, suicidal thoughts and serious doubts about her faith in Jesus Christ.
- She's written over 40 books since those days and a regular conference speaker, advisor to US presidents, so on and so forth, but she wrote this in a foreword for another book around about five years ago.
- When a broken neck ambushed my life and left me a quadriplegic, I felt as though God had smashed me underfoot like a cigarette.
- At night, I would thrash my head on the pillow, hoping to break my neck at a higher level and thereby ending my misery. After I left hospital, I refused to get out of bed.
- [1 : 14] My paralysis was permanent and inside I died. You don't have to be in a wheelchair to identify. You already know that sad situations sometimes don't get better.
- Problems don't always get solved. Conflicts don't get fixed. Children die. Couples divorce and ultimate untimely deaths rock our world and shake our faith.
- When we feel utterly overwhelmed, we try soaking in the tub, sweating on the treadmill, splurging on a new dress or heading to the mountains for the weekend.
- We smile and we say we are trusting God, but deep down we know it's a lie. We're only trusting that he won't load us up with more.
- A remarkable woman who has helped countless people through the process of suffering and navigating suffering.
- [2 : 18] She is the woman who once said, I would rather be in a wheelchair for life with God than on my two legs without him.
- If you've just tuned in for us for the first time, we're in our vision series, annual vision series on new life.
- The new life that we have in Jesus. What we're doing is we're building up to Easter where we are looking at resurrection life, what it looks like for us right now and how this new birth, new life in Jesus, how it changes and transforms every aspect of our lives.
- And today we're looking at a new way of viewing suffering, managing suffering, experiencing suffering, processing suffering.
- So I've got four points on the St. Paul's app if you want to go there. The first one is the certainty of suffering. I get that from verse six. If in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.
- [3 : 28] Notice how that reads. You may have had to suffer grief. That statement is communicating a term from the original language, which means it is necessary to suffer grief.
- It is necessary. It's a certainty that you will suffer grief. Peter is saying that suffering is a certainty rather than a possibility.

That is, we live in a broken world and so we should expect it rather than be shocked when it happens. Chapter four, verse 12, Peter says, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

We should be prepared for suffering because if we are not prepared for suffering, then we're in fact not prepared for life.

We're not ready for life itself. There is no way possible in this world to create some kind of designer life that is free from bereavement, illness, financial challenges, personal betrayals, and whole range of other trials.

[5 : 00] Even Jesus, the perfect man, suffered terribly to bring about God's redemptive purposes. So why would we expect anything different for ourselves? Sometimes I reckon that half of the pain that I personally experience when I suffer from a trial is from the shock of actually going through it in the first place.

It's because they're not expecting it. And yet this world is deeply broken, deeply, deeply broken.

So that raises the second point, which is the problem of suffering. Every single culture, every single worldview has to have some kind of response to the reality of suffering, the reality of trials and the brokenness of this world.

If a worldview does not have a response to it, it's a defective worldview there and then. It's the issue that every single human being faces, rich or poor, no matter what culture you are from.

So how does it deal with the big question of suffering? Human suffering poses questions like, for instance, the Christian, how could a loving God allow so much suffering?

[6 : 28] How can the hypothesis of a loving, powerful God stand against the crushing weight of human suffering? What's your worldview?

What's your answer to that question? Well, the famous atheist Richard Dawkins looks at all the weight of human suffering and declares that our universe has precisely the properties we would expect, we should expect, if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

That is the secular human response. The atheistic response to human suffering is that there is no meaning at all. At all.

So what Dawkins does, and Sam Harris and other, you know, more prominent atheists do, and the atheistic worldview, is that if you remove God from the equation, then what you have is relief.

The problem with human suffering is God. So take God out of the equation and somehow you will have relief. In other words, there is no meaning, there is no reason, there is no hope, so stop worrying about trying to find some greater purpose in life when you're in the midst of trauma and trial and you'll feel better about yourself.

[8 : 00] Already feeling relieved. But it is an incredibly bleak view of the universe. It in fact erodes the very foundations of which we balance life and our humanness itself.

If there is no good and there is no evil and there is no purpose to it at all, why is there in the human heart an instinct to lament in the face of suffering?

Why has evolution not removed that? If that's all we are, byproducts of evolution. If human sympathy for others is just simply a byproduct of evolutionary kinship, which is evolutionary biologists claim, then why do we empathise with the suffering of those outside of our tribe?

Why do we even empathise with suffering even in the natural world? Especially weaker beings than human beings. Why do we care about that?

You see, the irony is that today at the core of secular humanism is that they don't actually believe in human beings any more than they believe in a creator God.

[9 : 46] That's the problem with secular humanism. The secular humanists, for them, both God and humanity is a delusion.

When you remove meaning from suffering, it doesn't solve the problem. It unravels our humanity.

It unravels our very sense of self. secular humanism's answer to suffering leaves you with no hope whatsoever.

Human beings are nothing more than little kids trying to build sandcastles in the face of a relentless rising tide.

Your life is purposeless. And so let me just say, and I say this with all gentleness, but with intention, if that is your worldview, if that is your worldview, and especially right now, and I say this pastorally to you, if that is your worldview, and right now you are in the face of suffering, can I please encourage you in this moment not to reach for the placebos of false hope?

[11 : 21] Too many who hold to the secular human worldview will still say things like the universe has got some kind of plan in this.

It's not God's got some kind of plan, but the universe has got some kind of plan in my suffering. It's a placebo and nothing more for you in the face of suffering.

If there is no God and we still suffer, there is no universe to care.

There is no purpose in the universe for your suffering. There is nothing but blind, pitiless indifference for you in the face of your suffering.

And I'm saying this gently. You are doing yourself an enormous favour in the midst of your suffering as a secular humanist to stare in the abyss of your worldview.

[12 : 26] Do not reach for placebos. Stare into the abyss of your worldview and all of its implications rather than reaching for platitudes that are inconsistent with your worldview.

Well, that's one side. One other alternative, one of the favourite options in the Western world these days, those who are dissatisfied with Christianity on the one end, but not wanting to jump entirely into the bleakness of a secular humanist worldview on the other end, is to go middle way and go for Buddhism and its response of suffering.

Buddhism's response to the inevitability of suffering is to break the ties of attachment that bind us to life.

In other words, in Buddhism, to love is to be vulnerable and to be vulnerable is to hurt. To desire and to strive for things is to risk disappointment.

I won't go into unpacking it all, but again, you end up with the same problem. to detach yourself from love, from striving, from desire, is in fact to detach yourself from everything that's joyous in life, purposeful in life, and therefore detach yourself once again from your humanness.

[14 : 11] So let me just jump to my third point. What's the Christian response? I want to say the Christian response is very broadly a good potential for suffering. Despite the inevitability of suffering, Christianity declares there is a good potential.

The Christian worldview says that we can pursue desire against Buddhism, we can pursue desire, we can cling to attachment, we can strive for good things, while also finding meaning in the suffering that comes to us, as well as hope for the future in the midst of that suffering.

Peter gives us a really helpful image of suffering here, and it would do well for us to reflect on it for a moment. Verse 7 of chapter 1. Gold, I don't know really anything about mining, so this is Google for you, right?

Gold goes through a furnace and is purified. What Paul is saying here is the same thing happens to our faith and to our lives, to our character, when we go through suffering.

It's good because our faith is far more valuable than gold, so we should want to go through it because it's more precious than gold.

[15 : 46] Gold, in the end, will disappear like everything else on the face of this earth. earth, but faith in Jesus Christ will not disappear. It will be on for eternity, so this is a good process for us, preparing us for that day in his presence.

The furnace, the gold furnace, does not destroy the gold, but it deals with the impurities. The furnace separates the valuable gold from the worthless impurities.

It separates the impurities in such a way that what it does is it brings the impurities to the surface so they can be seen and removed.

What Peter's saying here is that our faith and our lives have lots of impurities in them. In so many cases, we have this mixture of faith in Jesus Christ and yet at the same time, faith in other things as well.

Faith in relationships and in status and in children and our financial security and the list goes on and on and on. The New Testament, the Old Testament refers to it as idolatry. We worship God, but we also worship these other things as well.

[17 : 02] We look to these particular things to give us meaning, our self-worth, our self-esteem, our self-image in life. Whatever it is, that's what we trust.

That's where our faith is. They can even be great things. But we overinvest our hearts in them and they become things that we hope in.

And whenever any of those things, whatever it might be for us, whenever any of those things are rocked, we feel so fragile in life. We feel fragile because the things that we have our trust in are so fragile.

Their impurities rising to the surface. They're fragile because everything in this world is fragile. And the furnace of life, suffering, rises to the surface, the fragility of what we have put our hope in.

The furnace of life shows us just how little we actually trust in Jesus Christ. suffering shows us that his love and his power is often not real to us.

[18 : 27] And when this happens, there's really only two ways to respond. Either it's the case of God, you are not enough for me right now, and I've got to also have my wealth, I've also got to have my reputation, I've got to have my beauty, I've got to have the accolades, I've got to have the status.

Or it's a case of holding on to God and asking him to purify you so that he is your greatest wealth, he is your greatest stability, he is your acceptance, he is your love, he is your status.

And in the midst of suffering, you hold on to him, I want to know you, God, in a way that I've never known you before. And that is why suffering has the potential to turn us into pure gold.

For instance, suffering humbles you and gives you a far more self-knowledge than you've ever had before. Suffering teaches you not to over-invest your heart into good things in such a way that they become ultimate things.

Suffering significantly enhances your experience of God's love in his presence. Suffering makes you more wise and compassionate, loving and generally, and might I say this as well, generally more useful to other people, especially those who are suffering themselves.

[20 : 02] A couple of weeks ago I used the illustration of the forester going in to cut trees and there's a bird building a nest and he's whacking on the tree.

Get off there. This tree's about to fall. I'm going to cut it down and the bird flies to the next one. So he whacks on that tree and whacks on the other one and then whacks on the other one and sometimes we have the experience of that with God.

God, what are you doing? Like this little bird, what's your problem, lumberjack? What are you doing here? And what he's doing each time is he's moving us from every tree that's going to fall until we eventually land.

And the bird notices when the bird sits on the rock and builds its nest on the rock. Lumberjack leaves him alone. That's what God does for us in life.

That's what suffering moves us to a deeper, deeper security. The only hope is Jesus Christ. Malcolm Muggeridge was an English journalist in the last century.

[21 : 06] He was an agnostic most of his life, but he became a Christian late in life in his 60s. When he was 75 and reflecting on the numerous challenges that he faced in life, some, in fact, I would probably say many were self-inflicted challenges he faced in life.

He wrote this, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I've learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained.

In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo-jumbo, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it so banal and trivial to be endurable.

This, of course, is what the cross signifies, and it is the cross more than anything else that has called me inexorably to Christ. So my last point is how do we pursue this good potential in life?

Notice there's three things in some verses here that I want to pull out, and there's multiple things, I just want to mention three. These are, if you like, three disciplines to pursue in order to experience the positive outcome of suffering in our life.

[22 : 38] The first thing, really simply, is cry. Is cry. Verse six, in all this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

When Peter writes, in all this you greatly rejoice, he's referring to what he said previously here, all the great things that are gifted to the Christian, gifts of new birth, a living hope in Jesus, resurrection, all the stuff he's referred to.

And then he writes about all the kinds of trials in the present, the bad things that are happening, loss, bereavement, relational breakdowns, betrayals.

In all these bad things, he says we suffer grief. And the word that he uses there for grief is a word that means agonising pain.

Agonising pain. He says we hurt. We hurt deeply. And yet at the same time we hurt deeply, he's saying that the Christian is rejoicing.

[23 : 58] They're in searing pain and rejoicing. And both words are present tenses in the original language. They are happening at exactly the same time.

Rejoicing and searing pain at exactly the same time. I think too many Christians think that rejoicing in the midst of suffering is what some Greek philosophers would be called stoicism.

The stoics in Greek culture, and in fact I would say many shame and honour cultures that exist today, work with the view that when trials come you just simply don't let it get to you.

Don't let it get to you. I can't tell you how many people I've heard as a pastor when in the midst of trial and suffering I've asked them how are you managing, I'm not letting it get to me.

The point of 1 Peter is let it get to you. Let it get to you. It's not Christianity, stoicism is not Christianity and secondly it's not even healthy.

[25 : 22] Read the book of Job. It's a great bit of advice in the midst of suffering. He wrenches his robes and covers himself with ash.

Seven days he sits on an ash heap mourning in such a way, in such mourning that his friends see him and don't even recognise him.

They don't even go near him. He wrestles with God throughout the book. He complains to God throughout the book.

He didn't run from God, he directed it all to God. He was pouring his life out to him and at the end of the book God vindicates him.

It's a remarkable thing. At the end of Job, God slams his gates and says that my servant Job was faithful to me. The first principle is when you hurt, hurt.

[26 : 27] Cry. Cry out to God. Stoicism is not Christianity. The second principle, is keeping a clear conscience.

I get that from chapter 3 verse 16 that Merle read out for us. Do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

What's the connection here? Chapter 3 is talking about suffering. The suffering of being persecuted. It's a particular kind of suffering. The suffering of being persecuted because of your faith in Jesus Christ.

It was very real in Peter's day and for those who are reading this letter for the first time. So the instruction here basically is do not return like for like.

Don't lie, don't attack, don't destroy reputations. Keep a clear conscience. Continue to live the Christian life, obey God. Now one of the things that happens, the reason I'm raising this as a principle, one of the things that happens, and Johnny Erickson has already raised this in the quote that I just read out to you earlier, is that when something happens to you, self-pity kicks in.

[27 : 53] And self-pity justifies everything. Self-pity, the sweating it out on the treadmill, the escapes to the mountains, whatever Johnny Erickson said, all those things, the purchasing of new items, because of this, what I've been through, I deserve a new couch.

I deserve this. And as a pastor, let me tell you that I've heard people over the years justify even adultery. because of their suffering in life.

Keep a clear conscience. Run to God. When you're going through trial, be very careful about the voice in your head that says, I deserve this.

All that I've been through, my, you know, all of my bad choices right now, my bad behaviour, it's all warranted. I deserve this. So cry, but keep a clear conscience.

Trust and obey. Keep doing things that God requires you. Keep taking your next steps of faith. Again, as a pastor, over three decades, the number of people in the midst of suffering, how much they pull back.

[29 : 25] how they pull back out of a community group, pull back out from church, pull back from I'm just going through a hard season right now. And so they pull back and pull back and pull back and pull back and pull back.

Be careful of those voices in your head that say, right now, because of what I'm suffering, I deserve this. The third principle to pursue suffering is to look to the suffering of Jesus Christ.

Take a look at chapter 3, verse 18. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. Now, we've been talking here, Peter's been talking about gold being refined in fire, in a fiery furnace.

The Bible tells the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel chapter 3 in the Old Testament. It's the story of three young Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

A decree had been put out through the entire Babylonian empire, where they were captives at this particular point, to bow down and worship an image, an idol made of Nebuchadnezzar.

[30 : 35] And so, Rakshak and Benny refused to do it. They refused to bow down to this image, and Nebuchadnezzar, the king, was absolutely livid.

He gave instructions for these three guys to be bound up, tied up, for the fiery furnace to be heated beyond it had ever been heated before, and for the three of them to be thrown in and burnt to a crisp.

The fire was heated so hot that the soldiers who grabbed them to throw them in were instantaneously killed. And so Nebuchadnezzar gets to a point, he expects to see these three guys sizzling in the barbecue, but instead, instead we read this, Nebuchadnezzar leapt to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?

They replied, certainly, your majesty. Look, I see four men walking around in the fire. They're unbound, unharmed, and the fourth looks like the son of the gods.

Notice, didn't we tie up three? Well, I'm now noticing four untied and unharmed. In the Old Testament, there's a figure called the angel of the Lord, not an angel of the Lord, but the angel of the Lord.

[32 : 07] And when that figure turns up, he speaks as God and embodies God. Now, most commentators agree that it is a manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God in the Old Testament.

And the point is simply this, very simply, when Jesus walks with you through the furnace, when he is with you in the furnace, the only thing that comes off, the only thing that comes off is the shackles that bind you and imprison you.

that's the only thing that comes off. The impurities rise to the surface, the things that controlled you, the things that addicted you, the things that are too important to you.

If Jesus is with you, you will only come out of the furnace free, unharmed, pure gold. That is the only thing that will happen to you.

And how do we cling to him in the midst of the furnace? Verse 18, for Christ also suffered. Christianity is the only religion in the world that says that God knows personally and firsthand the fiery furnace of suffering.

[33 : 31] The only one. The Greek philosopher Aristotle once said that it would be impossible for there to be any friendship between a God and a human being because they don't have anything in common at all.

Christianity says the exact opposite. The God who made all things, who took on human likeness in the person of Jesus Christ, suffered.

He knows betrayal. He knows abuse. He knows rejection. He knows death. He knows physical suffering. He knows it all. He knew what it was to be abandoned on the cross.

Jesus Christ and him alone can be our consoling friend and our sure hope in the furnace of suffering in life because he himself went into the ultimate furnace.

for Christ also suffered once for all for the sins of people, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.

[34 : 44] That's the ultimate furnace. The white hot anger of God for our rejection of God. The only sinless one suffered for our sin.

He got everything we deserve. if we see him going into the ultimate furnace for you, if you can see that, then you can know that he is your safety in the furnace of life.

If he suffered infinitely for me, then the reality is I can suffer infinitely for him, or sorry, finitely for him right now.

He is reliable, he is trustworthy, his word is true, and as we journey through the Christian life with a sure expectation of trials and suffering, our posture is to be one looking to him and him alone.

A posture that might pray something like this, Jesus, you came into this world, you identified with me, you went into the ultimate furnace for me, you suffered and you died for me, glory, but you also rose triumphantly in spectacular glory, you triumphed over sin and evil and death and because of your triumph, you promise a time is coming just around the corner where in your presence there will be no longer any fiery furnaces, just the cool, sweet, delight of your presence and your purity.

[36 : 27] And so in the midst of this suffering right now, Jesus, hold me, hold me, teach me, strengthen me to obey you and walk with you until the great day of blessing comes.

Amen. Maybe pray a prayer like that. Every day. Every day.