

# The Reality of Suffering

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[ 0 : 00 ] So I want to start with a poem. It's a poem I often come back to. Some of you probably know it. It's called The Road Not Taken. It's by Robert Frost. It begins, Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. I'm sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler. Long I stood.

And the speaker of the poem, I'll not read the whole thing, but the speaker of the poem wrestles with the choice that he must make because he can only take one path. The poem ends. I shall be telling this with a sigh. Somewhere ages and ages hence, two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by.

And that has made all the difference. What has this got to do with Jesus or this passage? Well, one of the deepest challenges that comes with following Jesus is that it is not easy.

Jesus once said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. So we can hardly say that this is surprising. Jesus himself was pretty clear from the start that the cost of following him was going to be dear.

Like walking up a hill to one's own crucifixion with the weight of the beam pressing down every step. And yet, very often, Christians struggle with this idea that following Jesus might entail difficulty, opposition, or hardship.

[ 1 : 29 ] Why is that? Why is that? The late Tim Keller observed, the problem is that contemporary people think life is all about finding happiness. And we decide what conditions will make us happy.

And then we work to bring those conditions about. And the problem is that as Christians, because that's what's going on in the world around us, very often we consciously or subconsciously buy into that worldview.

That life is all about our personal happiness and fulfillment. But here's the rub. Following Jesus won't guarantee personal happiness in this life.

So the question is, why do we follow him? And this is the issue that Peter now engages with as he continues in this first letter. Because the Christians he was writing to were wrestling with the same kind of issues.

And following Jesus was hard. And every day, following Jesus entails making a choice. Like the poet standing in the wood at two diverging roads.

[ 2 : 39 ] Every day offers up opportunities and challenges. Forks in the road where we need to choose which way we're going to go.

The Jesus way or the world's way. Following Christ or pursuing personal fulfillment. The road less traveled is the way of Christ.

Where we take up our cross and follow him. And it will make all the difference. But it's not going to be easy. And Peter wants in these verses here to encourage his readers.

And by extension, Christians today. To choose the road less traveled every time. To choose Christ. Because following Jesus is worth more than our happiness or our fulfillment or our security.

And I hope as we work through these verses that it will become clear why. So the first choice that Peter thinks about, the first fork that he comes to, is about relating to others.

[ 3 : 45 ] Why? Why? Well, because I guess other people can often be difficult. I suspect everyone feels that many aspects of life would be made much easier or more efficient.

Perhaps even more pleasant. If other people weren't involved. And yet, we exist in community with all sorts of people. Each one made in God's image.

The choice that often lies before us when it comes to our relationships and our dealings with others. Is how we respond to people that we do find difficult. Do we respond in like manner?

Or do we respond in love? And the first fear that Peter thinks about is the church itself. He says, finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

The church is the people of God. And so, you would hope that there is a shared understanding about many things. Not least, Jesus, the gospel, and the way that we're called to live.

[ 4 : 52 ] You would hope that in the church, that people would be sympathetic to the needs of others and the challenges that they're facing. You would hope that there would be a love for one another.

Remembering that Jesus has loved us first. And so, we are called to the same kind of selfless love. You would expect compassion to those who are our brothers and sisters.

And it's worth noting here that the words that Peter uses in this verse are often uniquely used in Greek literature to talk about family relationships. Finally, you would hope that in the church, people would be humble and sacrificial.

Because Jesus was the humblest man who ever lived. God became man. God who washed feet. Who died on a cross. God who died on a cross. You would hope to find no pride or lust for power in the church.

And yet, so often, these qualities are absent. So often, we want to be Jesus' people, but don't want to act in Jesus' ways. The church is a family.

[ 6 : 05 ] It is God's family. And as a family, it's filled with all the challenges which that brings. But though families can have their challenges, we all recognize that the ideal family relationship is one characterized by love.

And so, there might be people that we find difficult in church. And the temptation is to not make the effort with those who are different to us or who we maybe don't naturally gel with.

But that's not the Jesus way. And Peter says, all of you, be like-minded. Be sympathetic. Love one another. Be compassionate and humble.

Go the extra mile to love your church family because you have all been saved by the same Savior. But what about folks outside the church who really do make life difficult for you?

What about people who actively dislike you or who make your life miserable? What about those who perhaps even insult you for being a Christian or treat you differently to others because you're a Christian?

[ 7 : 12 ] This is harder. Peter says, do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

When or if someone actively goes out of their way to insult you or disrespect you or intimidate you or bully you, when someone is out to make your life hard, particularly when the reason is your faith, Peter is saying we ought to bless them.

And it goes without saying that this is not easy. When we're mistreated by others, I think we often feel that we have a right to resent them.

We don't feel so bad about hating them. Perhaps we don't retaliate in turn, but maybe we fantasize about how we would retaliate if consequences be damned.

And yet, look at Jesus. Hanging on the cross, he cries, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Do you sometimes wonder just how Jesus can say that after all he's been through?

[ 8 : 23 ] The judge of all the world pleads for his killers even as he draws his final breath. He repays evil with blessing. He calls his people to do the same.

If we know Jesus, we will inherit a blessing of eternal life. But until the day comes when we can receive that inheritance, we need to bless and love others, even the most unlovable, because this is the Jesus way.

And it's at this point that Peter then quotes from Psalm 34, a psalm we've come back to a few times in our time together already, and he applies it to the Christian. So in the psalm, in its original context, it's written by King David, and he's writing from exile, his exile in the land of the Philistines. He was a stranger in a strange land. And so this psalm is particularly applicable to Peter's theme throughout this letter, because this is a letter to Christians who feel like exiles and strangers in a culture that bears them no love.

And so Peter quotes this psalm, saying, whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good. They must seek peace and pursue it.

[ 9 : 42 ] For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. Peter's not saying, when he quotes this, that we must reach a certain standard of holiness if we're to receive the blessing of Christ.

Our salvation is by faith, not by us attaining to an ideal standard. And yet, as James might say in a different letter, faith without deeds is dead.

And Peter's applying that same principle when he quotes from Psalm 34. He's saying that, in many ways, we shouldn't expect God to look on us with favor and happiness if we're not actively trying to live out the love of Christ in our relationships, even the most difficult ones.

And so just as David recognized that as he lived amongst the Philistines, the enemies of God's people in the Old Testament, well, so we must recognize that in our own context.

And so the choices before us, it's retaliation or blessing, hatred or love. One is easy. The other is Christ. So if the first choice, then, that Peter discusses is primarily about our actions, and our actions especially towards others, the second choice drives deeper into our emotional life, into our hearts.

[11:08] Because when things get difficult, the Christian has a choice between fear and hope. So Peter follows up his quotation from Psalm 34 by asking, who is going to harm you if you're eager to do good?

The point being that when you respond to people who are making your life difficult with love and blessing, it can radically change their perception of you. However, this isn't always the case.

And so Peter follows this up by saying, but even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats. Do not be frightened.

Is there anything more demoralizing than suffering for doing the right thing? It just makes doing what is right seem so futile, so pointless.

And it can be very easy then to fear those who have power over us and who can make our lives miserable if they so please. But Peter offers a different way. He says, but in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord.

[12:16] Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

For it's better, if it's God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. When Peter says, revere Christ as Lord, he's literally saying, set Christ apart as Lord in your heart.

Consecrate him in your heart even. It's language that's evocative of the temple where God dwelt in the past. And now he dwells in us.

And Christ dwells in you through his Holy Spirit. And so what Peter's saying is, Christ is with you. Things are hard, but Jesus is right with you in the thick of it.

And he is much more powerful than anything or anyone that we might encounter in life. The almighty power of the one true God, the consuming fire of his holiness, the rock of ages, who causes people to fall down at his throne in terror and awe.

[13:33] He dwells in you. Because we have Christ, this almighty God, we can have confidence. I mean, the musical film, *The Sound of Music*, is Maria is heading to Captain Von Trapps for the first time.

She builds herself up to conquer her fears and her nerves. And she sings, with each step, I am more certain everything will turn out fine. I have confidence.

The world can all be mine. They'll have to agree, I have confidence in me. But we all know that having confidence in ourselves is not the firmest foundation for confidence.

It's sentiment over substance. But for the Christian, Christ provides the substance. Even in the darkest valley or deepest despair, Jesus is with you.

And he gives you an unshakable hope. So to the Christians that Peter's writing to, instead of fearing those who are making life hard for them, he says, stand your ground, having confidence in Christ.

[14:47] And with that confidence, respond in confidence. That is, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

And he encourages them not only to be ready to confidently defend why they have a hope in Jesus, but to do it in a way that is gentle and respectful with a clear conscience.

Because then these people who are making life hard for these Christians will have nothing on them. The accusations will not stick. And they ought to feel ashamed. And so Peter here is not saying that we must always be able to give the most perfect answer to every question about Christianity that might be posed to us.

It's good to study God's word so that we can answer people's questions when they come. But that's not the point. The point is always being prepared to respond to people with the reason that you have the hope in Christ that you do.

We all hope in Christ and therefore we all do have a reason that we hope in him. The point is to be confident in that hope and share that hope when accusations or questions or mockery come.

[16:06] And they will. Just to take two examples from popular culture this week. Mary Black described the views of her SNP colleague Kate Forman as archaic and quite extreme.

These are views which have been held by Christians for over 2,000 years but they're now considered extreme and very much out of step with the rest of the world. And so it's an accusation that we will and do face.

The second example is Friday night's Olympic opening ceremony which presented a parody of the Last Supper in one of its segments. Christianity is the only religion that seems to be consistently treated with that kind of degree of mockery and derision.

And it makes it hard for people to take it and therefore us seriously when we say that we are Christians. But when these challenges come, when these accusations or mockeries come, we'll do Christ no service if we're ashamed of him or embarrassed by him.

We will win no one to the faith if we don't display that we are confident in Christ. People say that confidence is contagious.

[17:22] When we have confidence in Christ, we will show people, even those who seem like the most unlikely candidates to love Jesus or follow him, we will show them that he is worth following.

And that confidence will also sustain us even when we're being mistreated. As Peter reminds us, it's better if it's God's will to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

But here's the crucial question. What gives us that confidence? Why can we be confident in a crucified Messiah and a mocked archaic religion?

Why can we be confident in Christ to such a degree that we would be willing, should it be God's will, to suffer? Well, it all comes down to understanding what the cross of Christ has achieved.

Last week, in the passage, we looked at Peter was at pains to show us that the cross brings us back to God like lost sheep to their shepherd as Jesus bears the sins of his people on the cross.

[18:26] In these verses, Peter goes again to Jesus' suffering, but he wants us to understand in no uncertain terms that the cross was not a moment of defeat, but a moment of victory.

Because the choice that lies before the Christian in their darkest moments is this. Do we understand Christ to have won the victory over evil or not?

If we do, we can withstand anything. If we don't have a deep understanding of that, however, then we will inevitably choose a different path.

The way Peter explores this is somewhat complicated, but what he's trying to convey is that because Christ suffered, he won a victory over evil and gave you salvation from every evil power. Therefore, you can endure with confidence. And so Peter writes, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

[19:36] He was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

So Peter here is summarizing what happened when Jesus died. He was put to death in the body, on the cross, and he was then laid in a tomb for three days.

On the third day, he rose again and was, in Peter's words, made alive in the spirit. Indeed, he had a renewed body, what Paul might describe as a spiritual body.

And after being made alive, he ascended into heaven. Now, why does Peter mention the imprisoned spirits from the days of Noah?

Well, here he's drawing on Jewish tradition that takes its cue from Genesis chapter 6. So there were evil spiritual beings in the days of Noah who wrought terrible evil on the world.

[20:43] In fact, Genesis 6 speaks of how these spiritual beings in the days of Noah came down and had sex with human women, giving birth to what Genesis calls the Nephilim.

And they seem to have had a role in increasing the evil of the world and the evil of humanity, such that God felt he had no other option but to send a flood in order to save creation.

And now, the Nephilim stuff is all a little mysterious and it raises lots of questions, most of them we don't have answers to. But it seems from what Peter writes that these beings who had caused so

much damage and evil and darkness to creation and to humanity they were imprisoned after the judgment of the flood.

And as Jesus goes into heaven after his death defeating sin and his resurrection defeating death, he proclaims victory over evil and over every spiritual power before he takes his seat at the right hand of the Father's throne.

This is a declaration that Jesus has been victorious. But what does that mean for Christians? What does it mean for Christians that Christ has been victorious?

[ 22 : 02 ] Well, this is where Peter segues into the story of Noah that he's mentioned and the story of Noah and the flood and shows that it is a pattern for what Jesus has done.

What Jesus has done is save his people. So Peter writes in it, that is the ark which Noah built, only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.

Not the removal of dirt from the body but the plunge of a clear conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

When God sent the flood he saved Noah and his family through the building of an ark that rode the waves as the waters rose.

This water, says Peter, is a symbol or a type of what Jesus would do through his resurrection. Let me explain. The waters of God's judgment in the past are a picture of God's judgment in the future.

[ 23 : 17 ] There is a day when the books will be opened and God will judge each and every person for what they have done. And without Christ we would be swallowed up by the waters because we are by nature drowning in sin.

No matter how hard we try, no matter what we do, we cannot perfect ourselves or stop ourselves thinking, saying, or doing that which is wrong.

But in Christ we have hope. In Christ we have salvation. Noah and his family sheltered in an ark but Jesus is our ark to shelter us from the storm.

When Jesus died he took the fullness of God's judgment upon himself for the sins of the world. He was swallowed up by the waters of death and was engulfed by the power of death and the sting of sin.

A death and judgment which we by rights deserve. His resurrection from death was then a vindication that by entering the floodwaters of God's judgment on behalf of sinners he was victorious over the powers of evil, over the power of death and over the power of sin.

[ 24 : 46 ] And now Jesus has ascended to the Father and all angels authorities and spiritual powers all of them submit to him.

The reign of evil has been cut short and its power has been destroyed. Because the power of evil cut humans off from God because of the cross and the resurrection we can return to God.

We don't need to fear any power human or spiritual because Christ is Lord. And this says Peter is what is symbolized in Christian baptism.

When he says that baptism saves what he means is what baptism symbolizes. Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ. Christ. When we believe in Jesus something truly mystical happens.

We are united to him spiritually. His Holy Spirit dwells in us and the death he died for our sins becomes our death.

[ 25 : 52 ] As if we have paid the price for our sins. And as Peter shows when he says it saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection he experienced becomes our resurrection.

A promise that when we die we will be raised with him. This is the Christian hope. This is the blessing of our glorious union with Christ.

And Peter reminds us that this is symbolized in baptism. But baptism isn't the end of the story. Baptism is a visual declaration of the work of Christ on behalf of his people.

But that baptism pledge must become our own. And that's what Peter urges Christians to do.

Baptism, said Peter, is not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God.

That is because we are united to Jesus and the power of his resurrection there is a new way to live. Baptism is a sign that our sins are forgiven but it doesn't magically wash away all our sinful inclinations.

[ 27 : 11 ] The dirt in that sense isn't removed. Rather, in Peter's words, baptism entails a pledge of a clear conscience towards God. That is a new way of life in keeping with our salvation and our resurrection hope.

Because we've been baptized into Christ, we are now called to live for Christ. We have passed through the floodwaters in Jesus but now, like Noah and his family, stepping out of the ark into a new world, we have a mission to be beacons of Christ in the world that is still filled with evil and darkness.

We are ambassadors, messengers of salvation. And so as we start to wrap up, I want to remind you that Jesus is your salvation from sin, from death, and from the power of evil.

That is the gospel. This is what Jesus' death and resurrection have done for you. If you're trusting in Christ and following Christ, in Christ, you are victorious, he is your salvation.

And this means that there is a wonderful future waiting for you, a future where sin, death, and the power of evil will never rear their monstrous heads again.

[ 28 : 37 ] The dragon has been slain and eternity is beckoning for all of us. Which is why when we understand deeply that the work of Christ means victory and not defeat for us.

Even when we suffer, we can choose to love those who make our lives hard, and we can choose to be confident in Christ and not be broken by fear.

Our happiness is not the most important thing in the world, because we have something better if we're following Christ, and that something is Christ.

It's Christ himself. Christ and all the blessings of his salvation and his victory. If happiness or pleasure or security is your goal in life, you may well be able to find it, at least for a time, but it will be fleeting.

It may be the road more travelled by, but it is a dead-end journey. joy of knowing Christ, of knowing his salvation, that will sustain you.

[ 29 : 52 ] That will sustain you to the end of your life and into the eternal life that's waiting for you. And so, if you know Jesus, you face the choice of following him each and every day.

and so choose to walk in his way by doing good to all, by having confidence in him and by trusting in his salvation and his victory.

Keep walking the way that Christ is leading us as we take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow him. and if you don't yet know him, you stand at a crossroads with the most important decision before you.

Take the road less travelled, the way of Christ, for that will make all the difference. Let's pray.