

“Where is God When I Suffer?”

I Peter 4:12-19

Series: Hope Rising Week 6. Enduring Hope

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Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said “hello” when “ssssopp!” Chippie got sucked in. The owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned.

Covered with dust and soot, she grabbed Chippie, raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held the parakeet under the running water. Realizing that Chippie was now soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate person would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted her pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him. When asked how the bird was recovering, his owner replied, “Well, Chippie doesn't sing much anymore. He just sits and stares.” Sucked in, washed up, blown over. It's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.¹

Have the last fourteen months of Covid made you feel a little like Chippie – stunned and speechless? Do you ever feel like letting out a long, low groan? You get your final back from your teacher and it's covered in red ink: groan. Your boyfriend or girlfriend wants to break up: groan. You open the credit card statement, peek at the new balance, then you get the bank statement: groan. There's a shooting pain in your back, a tense pain in your neck, a cramping pain in your gut: groan. Then there are those painful life changing moments that make you cry and shout. As a physical therapist, my wife asks every patient to rate their pain from 1 to 10. Do you feel like you're at 11?

- There are nine months of excitement and expectation. But when the baby is born there is something wrong: a rare disease, a premature birth, a birth defect. You can't bring the baby home from the hospital. Perhaps there is no baby to bring home.
- Your parents don't understand your feelings and problems. They interrupt you and discipline you. The child you bounced on your knee, now rebels, defies or ignores you. The parents who raised you can't take care of themselves without you.
- A car accident leaves a victim crippled, paralyzed or in a coma. Only an hour ago she was so healthy, he was so strong. Now it takes a machine just to take a breath.
- Months of lock down put you on furlough, ended your job, shut your business.
- A case of Covid, a stroke, a heart attack, a spreading cancer seizes your loved one.

¹ Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Word Publishing, 1991, Page 11

- You lose someone close to your heart. You built your whole life around him. You can't live without her. But now there is an empty chair, an empty bed, an empty house to remind you your beloved is not coming back.

What do you do when suffering and pain come into your life? Routines are interrupted, plans cancelled, expectations crushed. A torrent of feelings grips you: despair, exhaustion, depression, fear and loneliness. "Where are you God? Why is this happening to me? Why don't you do something? Don't you care?" Where is God when I suffer? Why does God allow suffering? For centuries, philosophers pose the puzzle this way:

A. God is all-powerful B. God is all-loving C. Evil exists.

One of these three must be false. Some say God is strong enough to remove suffering. He simply does not care about us. He is angry or indifferent to us. Others believe God loves us deeply, but He is unable to wipe out evil. He'd like to help, but He's too weak or too busy. Some deny suffering exists – pain is an illusion, try some meditation or mindfulness. The debate continues but intellectual puzzles doesn't make the pain go away.

Religions of the world offer different explanations. **Punishment:** Suffering is God's punishment for our sins. Some ask me if Covid is a punishment from God. But if God smites us with suffering, why is it so random? Why are so many good people afflicted? **Payback:** Other religions teach suffering is payback for sins in a previous life. Yet wouldn't it be better if God paid you back during the life when you committed the sin? At least you could learn from your mistake. **Pointless:** agnostics and atheists say you just have to deal with it. There is no help and no hope from above.

What do Christians believe? The first letter of Peter is a message of hope rising. Yet the theme of suffering also appears in almost every chapter.

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. I Peter 1:6

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. I Peter 2:20

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." I Peter 3:14

These believers faced real, raw suffering. So how does Peter advise them to handle it?

Don't Be Surprised by Suffering. It's Part of Life. Peter writes,

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. I Peter 4:12

When you're in pain, it's natural to ask, "Why?" That's not wrong. Yet Peter tells us not to spend time wrestling for a reason. Suffering is a fact of life in a fallen, broken world. It will come. Don't be surprised. Expect it. Peter lived in a world where famine, war, pandemics and persecution were constant and clean water, grocery stores, hospitals, antibiotics, anesthetics, and vaccinations were non-existent. We should praise God every day for these blessings and do everything we can to stop suffering.

Yet suffering still comes. So how will you handle it? Wrestle with "Why?" Run from it in denial? Rage against it in anger? I've rarely seen those work. Peter says, 'Don't be surprised by it. Turn and face suffering.' He describes suffering as a "fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you." Now please don't misunderstand. God is not testing you. Pain and suffering are not God's cosmic SAT, His Suffering Aptitude Test. What Peter describes is your attitude about suffering. How you look at it. Attitude makes all the difference. What is your approach? Do you let struggles drive you to despair or do you view them as the pathway to grow deeper and stronger?

Gold and silver are heated over fire until they melt. At this moment the impurities rise to the surface and are skimmed off to make these precious metals more pure. This is the process Peter has in mind. Earlier in the letter he writes,

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. I Peter 1:6-7

You and I are more valuable to God than all the gold in the universe. If you let Him, he will use all the experiences of your life, even suffering, to strengthen and deepen you. When you look back over your life, I imagine the moments you gained the greatest insights, the deepest discoveries, the most important personal growth were not easy and smooth but disruptive, difficult, even painful. These are the moments which humble us and drive us to ask God for help. What happens next?

Search for Jesus in Your Suffering. Yes we can grow through suffering yet not all suffering helps. A lot of it just hurts. This is why Peter says something surprising:

But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. I Peter 4:13

Again, please don't misunderstand. Peter is not saying be happy about suffering. Joy is different. The Bible calls joy a fruit of the Spirit, a gift Jesus gives in the middle of the storm. Joy is the power of God which pushes back against the crushing force of suffering. Christians believe in a God who suffers. Peter earlier wrote,

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. "He

himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” I Peter 2:23-24

Jesus paid the price. Jesus took the punishment. He didn't just suffer whips and thorns and nails. He paid the price for all of it. All the suffering and all the evil of all of history were concentrated in one single place on the Cross. He tasted all our sin, endured all our suffering, swallowed all the evil. And that means He also is present in every moment we suffer. He was there in the slave ships from Africa, the death camps of Auschwitz and the killing fields of Cambodia, in the plagues of the Black death and in the slums of Calcutta, when the tsunami hit Indonesia and Katrina leveled New Orleans, in the federal building in Oklahoma City, in the Towers on September 11th and in every case of Covid. He is not a God who stays in the safety of heaven. He is not a God who smites us with punishment. He is not a God who is an absent father. He is not a God who has abandoned us in a pointless world of suffering. In Jesus, the only God we know is a God who immerses Himself in our suffering, a God who suffers with us and for us, a God who dies. Why?

So He can be with you and for you and help you bear it. When Peter says, “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ” he invites you to fill your heart with the presence of Christ, the peace of Christ, the power of Christ to endure your suffering. But don't stop there. Peter also lifts our eyes to see that suffering has an end. Pain is not the last word. You will be “overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” Sometimes God's glory is revealed when you are healed in this life. Sometimes His glory is revealed when you enter the next life. Someday His glory will be revealed when He brings His Kingdom and puts an end to all suffering. When you journey with Jesus, the ultimate destination is not suffering but glory and joy.

Until then we must work to **Stop Suffering with Jesus Help**. Peter adds,

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. I Peter 4:19

There is tremendous suffering in this world. Sadly, Christians at times have inflicted it. Even in Peter's day the name “Christian” was gaining a negative reputation. Unfortunately, that's still true today. Let's be Christians who are known for doing good – not to please people but to please God. Let's stop suffering. I am so grateful for all the leaves on the Woodside tree – each one representing the good you are doing in the world. Just this week we received a letter from Charles Orth of the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen

Dear Congregants,

Congratulations on 75 years of service to body and soul in Yardley and beyond. I am the volunteer coordinator at the Trenton Area soup Kitchen (TASK). Throughout my tenure at TASK Woodside Presbyterian Church has provided dedicated, energetic teams of volunteers who are eager and excited to interact with TASK clientele. The church volunteers have helped in various programs, including Adult education, kitchen prep work and of course, meal service.

The current group, led by Helen Hughes and Jim Stevens, has been particularly proactive staying engaged throughout the COVID pandemic. They have been especially helpful by assuming a leadership role in staffing new community kitchens, opened in response to the pandemic. Thank you, also for helping with the RISE/TASK pantry give-away events.

Based on my observations of the enthusiasm Woodside Volunteers bring to TASK I'm certain you're a force for progress throughout our communities. On behalf of the TASK staff and patrons; thank you for your dedicated service to your mission, and we look forward to partnering with you for decades to come.

Suffering is certain in this life. Misery is not. With the help of Jesus, you can choose joy.

His name was Osea. Like the Prophet Hosea his eyes witnessed dreadful suffering. His parents died when he was young. He lived with his siblings in an orphanage. He went off to war and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. His comrades and friends perished all around him. He was wounded yet survived. What sustained him through the tragedies of life? The one gift his parents gave him: a rock solid faith in Jesus Christ. He read and practiced the Scriptures every day. Through all the suffering in His life he held firmly to Jesus' hand. When he returned stateside, Osea Galletta attended a Italian Pentecostal Church. He met a young girl named Rachel who was looking for a husband. She had two requirements of Mr. Right: 1. He had to have a college education and 2. He had to be tall, blond and handsome. The fact that she was looking for a blond man in a church full of Italians proved she believed in miracles. Eventually she must have assumed that since Osea or Chuck was college educated and handsome, two out of three ain't bad. So on December 26, 1948, Rachel and Chuck Galletta were joined as husband and wife before the Lord. They were married 64 years.

At the end of his life, Chuck Galletta said to me, "The Lord has been good to me my whole life and he has eternity waiting for me. What more can I ask?" His beloved Rachel said the same. I marveled at their faith. Here is a man who suffered the loss of his parents, the pain of poverty, the perils of war and still he gave honor and glory and gratitude to Jesus. Chuck Galletta went to be with the Lord on December 18, 2012. This week their daughter Donna wrote me from Italy and said,

God has been good to our family in so many ways. I was present with my mother when my dad passed and Mom's last words to Dad were beautiful. She held him close and said "Hosea, no regrets."

If you want to live a life of no regrets, even when you walk through the valley of suffering, hold on to Jesus' hand.