

1 PETER 1:6-13

THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

Last week we began a study of the book of 1 Peter and discovered that 1 Peter is a book of encouragement with three main themes that run throughout it: Suffering, grace, and glory. Today we will begin looking at the theme of suffering, something which I am sure we can all relate to.

When we covered 1 Peter 1:1-5 last Sunday, you recall that Peter taught us that **the Son of God, Jesus Christ, had to die on the cross for our sins, or we could not have salvation.** Peter also taught us that the same God who made possible our salvation also makes possible the means to that salvation, the preaching of the Gospel of the grace of God. If you don't hear the Bible taught, you won't know the road to salvation and eternal life, and therefore will not be able to exercise your free will to choose Christ. In Romans 10:14, 17 NAS, Paul writes:

*14 But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him?
And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him?
And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them.
17 So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.*

Peter continued teaching us that because of Christ's resurrection, Christians have a **hope** of eternal salvation that is an absolute certainty, for it is as verse 4 tells us: "*beyond the reach of change and decay.*" It is guaranteed and protected by God Himself. Whatever feeble glory mankind has will eventually fade and disappear; **but the glory of the Lord is eternal.** The works of mankind done for the glory of God will last and be rewarded (1 John 2:17). But the selfish human achievements of sinners will one day vanish to be seen no more. Let's now continue our study beginning in 1 Peter 1:6-9 NLT:

*6 So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while.
7 These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.
8 You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy.
9 The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.*

Peter had some inside information from Jesus, and he knew that a "fiery trial" was about

to begin, and that trial would be an intense persecution against all Christians by the Roman Empire (1 Peter 4:12). When the Church began in Jerusalem, it was looked on as a branch of the traditional Jewish faith. The first Christians were Jews and they met in the temple compound. The Roman government took no official action against the Christians since **the Jewish religion was accepted** and approved by Rome. But when it became clear that Christianity was not a branch of Judaism, that it was a religion with its own unique belief system, Rome had to take some action.

Several events occurred that helped to jump start this “*fiery trial*.” To begin with, Paul had defended the Christian faith before the official court in Rome (Philippians 1:12–24). He had been released but was then arrested again. His second defense failed also and Paul remained in prison (2 Timothy 4:16–18). Secondly, when the city of Rome burned, the Romans believed that their insane Emperor, Nero, had set the city on fire because he was possessed with the thought of building an entirely new city that would be more spectacular than any other city in the known world. Their suspicions about Nero were right on, because in order for that new city to be built, the existing city had to be destroyed. So by all accounts, sometime during July A.D. 64, Nero did set fire to Rome.

The Romans were totally devastated by this fire. Their culture, in many ways, went down with the city. All of their religious figures were destroyed. This had tremendous religious implications because it made the Romans believe that their gods had been unable to deal with this disaster and were also victims of it. Many Romans were homeless and many more had been killed. As you can imagine, the Romans were outraged. So Nero realized he had to find a scapegoat for what he had done.

The emperor chose the Christians as his scapegoat because Nero knew that the Christians were already hated because of their association with Jews and because they were thought to be hostile toward the Roman culture. **Nero spread the word that the Christians had set the fires.**

A vicious persecution of Christians followed throughout the entire Roman Empire including the cities we read about in verse 1 of 1 Peter.

Peter was most likely in Rome about this time and was probably executed by Nero while all this persecution was going on. Nero was also responsible for executing the apostle Paul. But before he was executed, **it was Peter’s desire to prepare the churches for this coming persecution.**

Not all Christians in every part of the Empire were going through the same trials to the same degree at the same time. It varied from place to place, though suffering and opposition were pretty common throughout the empire (1 Peter 5:9). Nero introduced official persecution of the Church, and other emperors followed his example in later years. Peter’s letter must have been a tremendous help to Christians then as well as for those who were to suffer during the reigns of Trajan from AD 98–117, Hadrian from AD 117–138, and Diocletian from AD 284–305. Christians in the world today also have

Peter's letter as a source of comfort and hope when their own "*fiery trials*" of persecution begin. There is mounting evidence that we could be approaching the end times, the seven-year tribulation, and the return of Christ. We can't be certain of this of course because nobody knows the time other than God, but we can tell you that all the prophecies regarding the Tribulation are in place, and I do believe that these latter days, whenever they come, **will bring** a great deal of suffering and persecution to the people of God. Therefore, this is a most appropriate time for us to take comfort in Peter's message.

Today personal "*fiery trials*" for North American Christians include many things: the boss or co-worker that picks on you for your faith, teenagers who are making bad decisions and messing up their lives, physical illness of your own, dementia or physical illness in your parents, financial or legal problems. The list is long and the trial is unique for each individual. But God's promises apply in these trials also.

We as Christians should especially rejoice in the assurance of our salvation, even during earthly trials. Our goal should be to demonstrate the kind of faith that will "*bring us much praise and glory and honor*" when Christ returns. Let's remember that all God plans for us, whether in times of joy or trial are a preparation for what He has in store for us in Heaven. He's preparing us for the life and service yet to come. Nobody knows all that might await us in Heaven. But this we do know: life today is a school in which God trains us for our future ministry in eternity. This explains the presence of trials in our lives. They are some of God's teaching methods in God's Christian School.

Peter shared several facts about trials. There are special times when God knows that we need to go through trials. Sometimes trials discipline us when we have disobeyed God's will as the psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:67 NLT: "*I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.*" At other times, trials prepare us for spiritual growth, or even help to prevent us from sinning. Listen to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 NLT:

1 This boasting will do no good, but I must go on. I will reluctantly tell about visions and revelations from the Lord.

2 I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know—only God knows.

3 Yes, only God knows whether I was in my body or outside my body. But I do know

*4 that **I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.***

5 That experience is worth boasting about, but I'm not going to do it. I will boast only about my weaknesses.

6 If I wanted to boast, I would be no fool in doing so, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it, because I don't want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message,

7 even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

8 *Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.*

9 *Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.*

10 *That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

We don’t always know the need being met, but we can trust God to know and to do what is best.

Trials are not easy. They can bring grief and pain, the same kind of grief and pain that Jesus suffered in Gethsemane, and that the Christians suffered at the death of their loved ones who were executed. Trials are, however, controlled by God. They do not last forever; they are for a season. When God permits believers to go through *fiery trials*, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. If we rebel, He may have to reset the clock; but if we submit, He will not permit us to suffer one minute too long. The important thing is that we learn the lesson He wants to teach us and that we bring glory to Him alone.

Peter illustrated this truth by referring to a goldsmith. A goldsmith wouldn’t deliberately waste valuable gold. He’d put it into the smelting furnace long enough to remove the cheap impurities. Then he’d pour it out and make something valuable. It’s been said that the Eastern goldsmith kept the metal in the furnace until he could see his face reflected in it. So it might also be said that God keeps us in the furnace of suffering until we reflect the glory of Jesus

This glory will not be fully revealed until Jesus returns in the end times for His church. Our trials today are preparing us for glory in eternity. When we see Jesus Christ, we will bring “*praise and honor and glory*” to Him if we have been faithful in the sufferings of this life. Listen again to the words of Paul in Romans 8:14–18 NLT:

14 *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*

15 *So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.”*

16 **For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children.**

17 *And since we are his children, **we are his heirs.** In fact, together with Christ **we are heirs of God’s glory.** But if we are to share his glory, we **must also share his suffering.***

18 *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.*

While we may not be able to rejoice over what constitutes the trial itself, we can rejoice in the God who controls the trial and we can rejoice as we look ahead to what is waiting for us. Just as the assayer tests the gold to see if it is pure or counterfeit, so the trials of life test our faith to prove its value. A faith that can't stand up to trials and testing is of little value. Too many people who claim to be Christians don't have a true faith, and that will be revealed as trials come up in their lives, for they turn to other things rather than to the Lord.

Jesus spoke of this in a parable. Listen to what He had to say in Matthew 13:1–6, 18–21 NLT:

1 Later that same day Jesus left the house and sat beside the lake.

2 A large crowd soon gathered around him, so he got into a boat. Then he sat there and taught as the people stood on the shore.

3 He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one: “Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds.

4 As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them.

5 Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow.

6 But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died.

18 “Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds:

19 The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts.

20 The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy.

21 But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.

The seed that fell on shallow soil produced rootless plants, and the plants died when the sun came up. The sun in the parable represents “*trials*.” The person who abandons their faith when the going gets tough only proves that they had no real faith at all.

Job went through many very painful trials, trials much more severe than any of us will ever go through. Listen to what he said in Job 23:10 NLT: “*But He (God)¹ knows where I am going. And when He tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.*” And Job did come out as pure gold. Isn't it exciting to know that we were born for glory, that we're being kept for glory, and that we are being prepared for glory?

1 Peter 1:8, 9 NLT:

¹ Parentheses added.

8 You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy.

9 The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.

Our love for Christ is not based on seeing Him physically, because we cannot yet see Him. It is based on what the Bible has taught us about Him. In Romans 5:5 Paul tells us that

The Holy Spirit within the believing Christian has poured out God's love into our hearts. This love He offers us allows us to love Him in return. When you find yourself in some trial, and you hurt, immediately lift your heart to Christ in true love and worship. Why? Because this will give you a sense of hope even while you're going through the trial.

Satan wants to use life's trials to bring out the worst in us, but God wants to use these trials to bring out the best in us.

If we love ourselves more than we love Christ, then we won't experience any of the glory now. The fire will burn us, not purify us.

Faith in Christ means that we surrender everything to God and obey His Word in spite of our circumstances. Love and faith go together. When you love someone, you trust them. Faith plus love equals hope, a formula you might want to commit to memory (Faith + Love = Hope). Where you find faith and love, you'll find confidence for the future.

How can we grow in faith during times of testing and suffering? The same way we grow in faith when things are going well. Paul tells us in Romans 10:17 NLT, that: "*faith comes from hearing, that is hearing the Good News about Christ.*" The only way our faith will grow during times of trial is when we turn to the Bible, not just to read it, but to study it, to internalize it, and to pray to the God who wrote it. We will grow during times of trials if we apply what we have read and studied in the Bible to what we are going through. Merely to read it, though important, is not sufficient for dealing with big trials. We must, as Ephesians 6:17 tells us, implement the Word of God as our weapon in the battle, for it is "*the sword of the Spirit.*" Such familiarity with the Word of God will also help us to resist the temptations that will come from Satan during those trials.

You've heard of resistance training? Perhaps you engage in it during your workouts. But in case someone is not familiar with resistance training, it involves using machines with graduated weights. You push or pull these weights, depending on what part of the body you are exercising, and as you do so specific muscles become more developed. As the muscles develop you increase the weight so as to become even stronger. Previous levels that once seemed so difficult become easy for you. Well, rest assured Satan will keep bringing his heavy guns against you, but as you practice resisting him your spiritual muscles will grow stronger. Our relationship with Christ through His Word not only

strengthens our faith, enabling us to resist Satan more effectively, but it also deepens our love for the Lord.

You may not feel like rejoicing over the circumstances, but you can rejoice in them by focusing your heart and mind on Jesus Christ. Each trial offers us the opportunity to learn something new about the love of Christ. Abraham discovered new truths about God on the mount where he was willing to offer his son as a sacrifice in obedience to God's command (Genesis 22). God had no intention of allowing Abraham to go through with this, but He wanted to test Abraham's faithfulness before He gave him the awesome responsibility of founding the Jewish nation. Three Hebrew young men discovered His nearness when they went through the fiery furnace (Daniel 3). Paul learned the sufficiency of His grace when he suffered with a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12). The joy God produces is "*glorious and inexpressible*" according to 1 Peter 1:8. This joy is so deep and so wonderful that we can't even describe it. Words fail us.

1 Peter 1:10-12 NLT:

10 This salvation was something even the prophets wanted to know more about when they prophesied about this gracious salvation prepared for you.

11 They wondered what time or situation the Spirit of Christ within them was talking about when he told them in advance about Christ's suffering and his great glory afterward.

12 They were told that their messages were not for themselves, but for you. And now this Good News has been announced to you by those who preached in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. It is all so wonderful that even the angels are eagerly watching these things happen.

The Old Testament prophets faithfully recorded God's promises of eternal salvation, even though they realized that they would never see the fulfillment in their own lifetime but that they were recording those words for future generations. In the same way, the angels, though they're not fallen creatures and therefore don't need redemption, are interested in the subject of salvation as well.

If we love God, trust Him, and rejoice in Him, then we can receive from Him all that we need to turn trials into triumphs. Someone once told me that "*Every adversity is the seed of a greater benefit.*" Charles Spurgeon used to say, "*Little faith will take your soul to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your soul.*" It is not enough that we long for Heaven during times of suffering, for anybody can do that. What Peter urged his readers to do was exercise love, faith, and joy, so that they might experience some of the glory of Heaven in the midst of present suffering.

The amazing thing is that this "*salvation*" we are awaiting—the return of Christ—was a part of God's great plan for us from eternity. The Old Testament prophets wrote about this salvation and studied closely what God revealed to them. They saw the sufferings of Jesus the Messiah, and also the glory that would follow; but they could not fully understand the connection between the two. In fact, in some of the prophecies, the

Messiah's sufferings and glory are blended in one verse or paragraph.

When Jesus came to earth, the Jewish teachers were awaiting a conquering Messiah who would defeat Israel's enemies and establish the glorious kingdom promised to David. Even His own disciples weren't clear about the need for His death on the cross (Matthew 16:13–28). They were still inquiring about the Jewish kingdom even after Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:1–8). If the disciples weren't clear about God's program, how could the Old Testament prophets understand it?

God told the prophets that they were also ministering for future generations. Between the resurrection of Jesus and His return in glory in the end times, we have what is known as the "church age." The truth about the Church was a hidden "mystery" in the Old Testament period. Now let's look again to Paul's writing about this *mystery*, Ephesians 3:1–11 NLT:

1 When I think of all this, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the benefit of you Gentiles...

2 assuming, by the way, that you know God gave me the special responsibility of extending his grace to you Gentiles.

*3 As I briefly wrote earlier, God himself revealed his **mysterious plan** to me.*

*4 As you read what I have written, you will understand my insight into this **plan** regarding Christ.*

*5 **God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by his Spirit he has revealed it to his holy apostles and prophets.***

*6 And **this is God's plan**: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus.*

*7 By God's grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving him by **spreading this Good News**.*

*8 Though I am the least deserving of all God's people, he graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the **endless treasures available to them in Christ**.*

*9 I was chosen to explain to everyone this **mysterious plan** that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning.*

*10 **God's purpose in all this was to use the church** to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*

11 This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Old Testament believers looked ahead by faith and saw, as it were, two mountain peaks: **Mount Calvary**, where Jesus was crucified and died (Isaiah 53), and **Mount**

Olivet, where He will return in glory (Zechariah 14:4). They could not see the valley in between, which is the present age of the Church. Even the angels are interested in what God is doing in and through His church.²

The same Holy Spirit who taught the prophets and, through them, wrote the Word of God, can also teach us the truths that are found within it (John 16:12–15). Furthermore, we can learn these truths from the Old Testament as well as from the New Testament. You can find Christ throughout all of the Old Testament Scriptures. Listen to the words of Christ in Luke 24:25–27 NLT:

25 Then Jesus said to them, “You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures.

26 Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?”

27 Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

In times of trial, you can turn to the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, and find all that you need. When we trusted Christ, we were born again and this time born for glory. We are being kept for glory. As we obey Him and experience trials, we are being prepared for glory. When we love Him, trust Him, and rejoice in Him, we experience the glory here and now.³

1 Peter 1:13 NLT:

13 So think clearly and exercise self-control. Look forward to the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world.

The revelation of Jesus Christ in verse 13 is another expression for the “*living hope*” and “*the appearing of Jesus Christ.*” Christians today live with the expectation of one day seeing Jesus Christ. When you focus your thoughts on the return of Christ, and live accordingly, you’re able to divorce yourself from worldly attractions that would lead you into all kinds of unnecessary temptations which could bring many unwanted consequences. What you think about most generally determines what you will do. What you put in your mind is what you become. A Christian who is looking for the glory of God has a greater motivation to do what is right in the eyes of God than a Christian who ignores Jesus’ eventual return. The contrast is illustrated in the lives of Abraham and Lot.⁴ Abraham had his eyes focused on the throne of God, so he had no interest in the world’s real estate. But Lot, who had tasted the pleasures of the world in Egypt, gradually moved toward Sodom to take all the land he could. Abraham brought blessing to his home, but Lot brought judgment. What each of these men allowed themselves to think about determined what they practiced in their everyday lives.

² 1 Corinthians 4:9 and Ephesians 3:10.

³ Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 1 Pe 1:8

⁴ Gen. 12–13; Heb. 11:8–16.

The fact that Christ is coming again is cause for confident assurance in the way we live each day (1 Peter 4:7). The fact that Satan is on the prowl is another reason to keep our minds under control (1 Peter 5:8). We should also have a positive outlook on life. The result of submitting one's mind to the control of the Holy Spirit will bring the grace of God into that person's life. We'll experience grace when we see Jesus Christ upon His return. We can, however, also experience that grace today as we look for Him to return. **WE HAVE BEEN SAVED BY GRACE** and we need to depend on that grace every living moment. Thinking frequently of the return of Christ will strengthen our faith and hope in our times of trial and provide us joy in the good times. I feel that Titus 2:11–14 NLT states this as well as it can be said:

11 For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people.

12 And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God,

13 while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed.

14 He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds.

The assurance of Heaven is a great help to us today. As Dr. James M. Gray expressed it in one of his songs, “*Who can mind the journey, when the road leads home?*” If suffering today means glory tomorrow, then suffering in a way becomes a blessing to us. The unsaved have their “*glory*” now, but it will be followed by eternal suffering *away from the glory of God* (2 Thessalonians 1:3–10). In the light of this, let's close by reading 2 Corinthians 4:7–18 NLT and rejoice:⁵

7 We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

8 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

9 We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

10 Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

11 Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies.

12 So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you.

13 But we continue to preach because we have the same kind of faith the

⁵ Wiersbe, Warren W.: The Bible Exposition Commentary. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 1 Pe 1:5

psalmist had when he said, "I believed in God, so I spoke."

14 We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus, will also raise us with Jesus and present us to himself together with you.

15 All of this is for your benefit. And as God's grace reaches more and more people, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory.

16 That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day.

17 For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!

18 So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.