



LIVING IN LIGHT OF HOPE PART III: HEAVY BEAMS

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Federal Way, WA
August 1, 2004h*

This is our third Sunday in the book of 1 Peter. The first week, we looked at how Peter describes the incredible hope we have in Jesus. Last week, we talked about how that hope should impact the way we live our lives.

Today we're taking a slightly different turn. We said from the start that Peter was writing to churches that were going through difficult times. What did he have to say to them? What does it say to us about similar circumstances?

Peter's comments are sprinkled all through the letter, but I'd like to begin by looking at a passage in chapter 4.

1 Peter 4:12-17

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

There are many kinds of suffering in this world. There are the general injustices of life. You get struck by a major health problem out of nowhere. You get in a car accident. You lose your job.

Then there are issues of global suffering. Wars. Starvation. Disease. What is all that pain about?

That's a big question. And we're not even going to talk about it today, because that's not what Peter was concerned with here. We're looking at suffering in a very narrow scope, which is suffering that is a direct result of being a Christian. Christ called us to pick up the cross and follow him, and sometimes the beams get heavy.

I have to admit, I wasn't so sure I wanted to speak on the topic of suffering. It's a pretty depressing-sounding topic for a message. Not exactly one you'll pack the house with.

But beyond that, I think most of us Christians in America don't have any idea what suffering is all about, because it isn't something we've had to experience.

When I was in seminary, one of my classes was in Tacoma. There was a Korean woman in the class who barely spoke any English. She didn't talk much, and quite frankly, I'm sorry to say I dismissed her in my mind as not having much to contribute since I couldn't understand her and she didn't seem to be able to understand much of the class.

One evening, the class topic was suffering, and one by one, different students would chime in with their views on the proper Christian attitude, causes of suffering, and so on. It was all pretty theoretical and clinical. And then this woman spoke up.

In her broken English, she said, "I grew up in Korea. My father was a Buddhist. When I became a Christian, I would go to church, and every Sunday, my father would beat me for going to church. Each week on my way home, I knew that I would be beaten when I got there."

The entire conversation stopped, as the rest of us realized how empty our words had been on the subject. Here I had written off a woman who had so much to teach me about what it means to suffer for Christ. Suddenly I felt very small, and like my faith was very small.

The reality is that we've got it pretty easy here. But in other parts of the world, Christians are still dying, being imprisoned and tortured for their faith. We tend to think of persecution as something that only happened back in the early church, but more Christians died for their faith in the 20th century than any time prior to that in history. It still happens regularly in countries such as China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq.

But that's the other side of the world. What can American Christians take from Peter's message on suffering? How does it apply to us here?

It's important for us to consider, because the way we think about suffering will shape how we interpret life and God's activity. If suffering has no place in our understanding of Christianity, then when it happens to us, we will believe it is because we're doing something wrong.

According to Peter, that's not the case at all. In fact, Peter says that when it comes to suffering we should

Expect it.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

Apparently, in his mind, there was nothing unusual about suffering at all. On the contrary, he considered it the norm.

1 Peter 5:9

Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

Christians everywhere experience hardship related to their beliefs. And we should not be surprised by that.

This wasn't just Peter's opinion. John shared it as well.

1 John 3:11-14

Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.

Maybe it was an easier concept to grasp for the first disciples who watched all that Jesus went through. It made logical sense to them that his followers would encounter similar resistance. But it must have caught the church off guard, otherwise we wouldn't have records of two disciples telling them, "Don't be surprised."

It does surprise us. Why? Because we come to Jesus for comfort. We come for God's love and acceptance. We want his blessing. Those are the things we expect, and we're not all that prepared for the way some people will respond when they learn of our faith. We don't expect to suffer.

Particularly here. This is a land where freedom of religion is a basic right. We feel entitled to our beliefs. Peter tells us that's exactly when we need to watch out. We can't be surprised by the uncomfortable side of being a Christian.

But why should that be true? If God really is loving and is offering us hope of a better life, why would suffering be part of the deal? Didn't Jesus say, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light?"

He did say that. But he also said this:

John 15:17, 20

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

The reason we should not be surprised by suffering, the reason we should expect it is because of what happened to Christ.

We call the church the body of Christ. Look what people did to his body – his physical body. We now represent him in the world. If we take that seriously, there's no way around it: At some point, in our dealings with people, we're going to experience some pain for associating ourselves with Jesus.

That pain can take on many different forms, and the Bible talks about all of them. Peter talks about people insulting you for your beliefs. They might ridicule you. You might experience broken relationships, where old friends or your family want nothing to do with your faith. That hurts.

There can be financial suffering – either because someone doesn't like you, or because you choose not to pursue certain opportunities that would not be consistent with being a Christian. Or you choose to give a portion of your money to God, and find that you're not able to afford some of the things you wanted.

We talked about physical suffering earlier – which is probably the easiest to recognize as persecution. The early church read Peter's letter with the prospect of being fed to the lions in the arena hanging over their head. Watching Christians die was a bloodsport event.

The world has not changed much, and although we can thank God we don't live with the threat of death for our beliefs, we still will find that in general, there's a big cloud of hostility toward Christ that still exists, and we shouldn't let it surprise us when we see it for ourselves. We should expect suffering. Peter goes on to say that we should

Embrace it

But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

I don't like pain. I try to avoid it at all cost. When I know that something is coming that is going to hurt, like a dentist appointment, I dread it. So if the potential for suffering is out there for us, you might think that would be a cause to be afraid.

Who would have thought it's really a reason to rejoice? Peter tells us "Don't run from suffering – embrace it." We are more inclined to run from suffering.

As I said before, as Americans, most of us haven't had to do much suffering for Christ. But I find there's a nagging question in the back of my mind. I wonder if sometimes the reason I personally haven't suffered for Christ in one situation or another is because I was running from the possibility.

I don't know how many times I've had the opportunity to talk about my faith and I let it slip by. I was concerned about looking stupid or concerned about what somebody would think of me. Chances are, it wouldn't have been as devastating as I imagined. But the threat of a little suffering caused me to take the easier way and not speak up. What I didn't realize was what I would be giving up if I didn't put up with a little discomfort.

Are we embracing suffering? Are we ready to plunge ahead courageously and actually be happy about it? Jesus said this:

Luke 6:22-23

*Blessed are you when men hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.*

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

Leap for joy? That's pretty direct. We're not supposed to just enjoy suffering because we're masochistic. The joy isn't in the suffering – it's in knowing that the suffering is accomplishing something. Nothing about it is in vain.

Jesus said we're blessed when it happens. He said there's a great reward waiting for us in heaven, but we're also blessed now.

In 1 Peter, we're told that the reason we're blessed is because God's Spirit rests on us. If you read stories about these incredible, brutal deaths that Christians have suffered, you go, "How could anyone endure that?" And the only valid explanation is the Holy Spirit. God pours out an extra measure of his Spirit on us when we need strength. It is in a way that those of us who haven't suffered can never understand.

God doesn't leave us in our hour of need. He's right there with us in perhaps the most tangible way we could experience. That's what makes suffering something we can embrace. It (suffering) gives us a closer look at Jesus. That's why Paul wrote,

Philippians 3:10

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.

Suffering for Christ is a way of knowing and appreciating him on another level. We can expect suffering because Christ suffered. We can embrace it because it brings us closer to him. Finally, Peter says we should

Excavate it

To excavate something is to dig it out. There is always opportunity in the things we experience in life. Peter would have us look at suffering and see what we can dig out of it, what we can make of it. **What opportunity can we dig out of suffering?**

1 Peter 3:13-17

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be

prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the 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.

Suffering opens up the door to share Christ with people. It's not just something to grit our teeth and get through – it's a chance to demonstrate to the world the power of Christ.

I saw such a great example of that this week. Thursday night I had a big client dinner that I really was not looking forward to. It was a big fancy dinner at a restaurant up in Bellevue and I didn't know most of the people. I was sitting between my boss and a drunken Japanese businessman who was getting funnier and funnier as the night wore on.

I was listening to his stories when out of my other ear I hear my boss – who's a Christian -- deep into an argument about Christianity. It turned out that the man on the other side of her was an atheist. And he didn't just not believe in God – he couldn't stand Christians. And my boss was getting the brunt of it.

As I caught the drift of the conversation, I thought at the time: Here's my case study on suffering for this week. I can't ignore this conversation. So I turned around and jumped in.

The man was completely ridiculing Christians. He was clearly on the attack, bringing up every objection he could think of. Not only that, he then singled out Baptist pastors as his favorite target, so I had to tip my hand and say, "You're looking at one." We have a pretty non-denominational feel here, but our family tree is definitely Baptist, so I couldn't ignore the slams.

He had a laundry list of why he hated the church, but his biggest argument was this. "How can you say that only people who accept Jesus are going to go to heaven? If your God is that narrow minded, I don't want anything to do with him."

That's a pretty intimidating stance. I was praying that God would give me the words to respond, and he did. I said to the guy, "You've got it flipped around. It isn't exclusive at all. You have to start from the fact that nobody's perfect. The Bible says if you break even the tiniest part of the law, you're guilty of breaking the whole thing. So that means everybody is excluded from going to heaven. Nobody is righteous. Anything from that point on is grace and mercy. God opens the door through Jesus and says, it's open to anybody who wants it. Accept it or reject it – it's up to you. It's not exclusive at all."

He had no response. I don't think he had ever looked at it that way. I think he had also had a bit too much to drink at that point and his head was a little fuzzy, but I couldn't believe the way God had taken a situation of suffering for Christ -- with someone who was heaping insults on me and my boss -- and turned it into a chance to share. The conversation continued, and even though she was being laughed at by the man, my boss kept bringing the conversation back to the gospel, and without ever losing her cool, she

kept to her beliefs without apologizing. By the end of the night, the man said to my boss, "I like you." This is coming from the man who at the beginning of the night was saying how much he hated Christians.

That's why Peter tells his readers this:

1 Peter 3:9

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called...

We turn suffering on its head. Our response to it becomes a tool in God's hands, because it is completely opposite of what would happen naturally. I guarantee you my boss was a blessing to that man, because she didn't return insult for insult. She showed him the love of God under stress. That's what we're called to do.

That's when it counts. We can talk about loving our neighbor, but will it hold up when they're in our face, attacking us?

If we take our Christianity seriously, sooner or later we're bound to encounter resistance. We will understand what Christ meant when he said to carry the cross, which somehow he was able to do while at the same time loving his executors. The beams are heavy.

What will our response be when we're hit by it? Will it take us by surprise and throw us off? Will we be ready for it? Am I prepared for it?

Am I running from suffering? Will we see it coming and run the other way, or will we embrace it? Maybe we have been keeping a low profile with our faith, avoiding confrontations out of fear. Peter encourages us to be glad about opportunities to suffer for Christ, because he'll meet us there. If anybody knows the temptation to run, it's Peter. At Jesus' trial, it was Peter who denied knowing him, hoping to avoid suffering an equal fate. Peter understood both what it means to run and to embrace suffering, as he did many times. Suffering puts the choice before us over and over again.

And when it happens, will we make the most of the opportunity? Do we just struggle to get through it, or do we excavate it – digging out those chances to share Christ in the middle of it.

Jesus said this:

John 16:33

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

Jesus didn't just suffer in this world – He came out on the other side victorious. And that brings us back to our hope. We can take heart knowing that he's secured a win for us, and nothing can take that away. That's why Paul could write,

Romans 8:18

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Suffering is no fun. We expect it, we embrace it, we excavate it. But I'm looking forward to the day we exchange it. We'll hand in all our hurts and pains and Christ will give us a crown of glory. He has overcome the world, and he'll be greeting us with open arms when this present suffering is through.