

Peter's Epistles #6

Grace in Suffering

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Revised Translation 1st Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who, though outcasts dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, were yet selected in the foreknowledge of God the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit's consecration, for the obedience in and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace and peace be multiplied unto you!

Review: Let us take a moment to recall the connection between our current topics of suffering and spiritual growth and the passage above. Peter's readers were experiencing hard times, and in their distress, began to question God, thus jeopardizing their spiritual growth. By calling them "elect outcasts", Peter both acknowledges their suffering, and yet reminds them that God has not forgotten about them.

The Challenge of Life: To explain this apparent contradiction of being both elect and outcasts at the same time, we saw in our discussion of His plan (see especially lesson #3) that God does not take believers out of this world as soon as they believe, but instead leaves them here so that they may grow spiritually, and help other believers do the same. This test of our free will gives us the opportunity to demonstrate that we love the Lord more than anything else despite the vicissitudes of life, and also gives God the opportunity to show us that He can protect us, bless us, and grant us His perfect happiness no matter what hardships life brings our way.

The Limitless Resources of God: The unbeliever experiences suffering in this life without God's help and support and can look forward only to punishment after death. We believers, on the other hand, have the benefit of God's great grace resources to handle and deal with the suffering that comes our way in life, and we have the confident assurance that in the next life we will never suffer again. Moreover, we know that by continuing to trust God in spite of suffering, we will grow spiritually, and will be rewarded for our growth and production in eternity. The Christian life is a constant struggle, and that struggle will never end until we meet our Lord face to face.

The Battleground: The primary battlefield on which this struggle takes place is our mind, or heart (our inner self). Therefore we need to be vigilant in maintaining the correct perspective about suffering. While temptation to sin is a rather obvious tactic of our adversary, Satan, the experience of suffering or hard times is a more subtle form of attack. Such adversity was the devious trick to which Peter's readers were being subjected. Adversity tends to make the believer lose faith in God's ability to help. The experience of hardships makes the believer want to say "Why me, God?" Now this is a very dangerous frame of mind, because if such an attitude remains unchecked it will inevitably lead the believer either to blame God for the problem ("God doesn't care about me!"), or blame himself ("I must have committed some terrible sin!"). Let us examine these common doubts in a bit more detail:

False Query #1: *"It still hurts! Doesn't God care about me?"*

Suffering, as we have seen, is a part of God's plan for every believer (1Pet.4:12). Without suffering, there can be no spiritual growth (Jas.1:2-5). God tests us with adversity to solidify our faith, to prove His faithfulness to us, and to demonstrate (to ourselves and others) that we have made spiritual progress, and that we are ready to trust Him in good times and in bad.

The second false conclusion (the idea that suffering must be some sort of a "divine payback" for past sins) is also dangerous. Really, the word "suffering" in the case of believers is somewhat of a misnomer, for the believer's experience of difficulties is fundamentally different from that of the unbeliever. The only negative reason that God allows adversity to come our way is for divine discipline (Heb.12:1-13), and we have seen that when God punishes us, He does not do so as an angry judge, but as a loving Father whose only desire is to correct us for our own good. Furthermore, by confessing our sin, any residual suffering that results from our lapse is now *suffering for blessing* (because once we have been restored to fellowship with Him, we then have His comfort and help to get through it). All other suffering (see lesson #5) which comes our way is a part of God's plan for our good (Rom.8:28). We need to learn to lean on Him at such times of trial, for He certainly does "care for us" (1Pet.5:7).

False Query #2: *"It still hurts! Is God still upset with me?"*

When we admit our sin to God, He forgives us immediately and unconditionally (1Jn.1:9). As we enter back into fellowship with God by acknowledging our sins to Him, all the adversity in our lives is no longer for harm but for blessing (1Cor.11:31). Although an attitude of contrition is indeed appropriate and we may well repent of what we have done (and we surely regret the discipline), feelings of *inordinate* guilt are just as out of place as feelings of resentment toward God. Even in adversity, God wants us to be happy and experience His blessing and power. If we remember this, there is no reason to be overly depressed by anything we shall encounter in this life. God has given us the means not only to persevere in His plan, but to experience His peace and joy in the process. If it still "stings" after we confess, we must remember that God is not "mad at us": such residual pain in discipline is for our good, our edification, and a help to avoid such lapses in the future, provided by a loving God who no more enjoys our suffering than a loving parent who has disciplined a wayward child.

God's Grace Resources for Coping with Suffering:

1. God's Overall Policy of Grace: The scripture tells us that we are saved "by grace, through faith", and that this is "a gift which comes from God" and not "from our own works" (Eph.2:8-9).

Grace is God's perfect policy of dealing with sinful man. *He* does the work, *we* reap the benefits; and the scripture is quite clear about the fact that our work contributes nothing to salvation, but that salvation is available only because of the work of Jesus Christ. On the cross, Christ suffered and died for us all. This God did for us as a matter of "grace", that is to say He did it freely and graciously, giving us a gift rather than rewarding us for anything we had done. Consequently, we are saved when we believe in Jesus Christ. As a result of this salvation, we can look forward with confident expectation (*elpis*, "hope") to the day when we shall never have to suffer again. By being judged for our sins and in our place, Jesus Christ accomplished the only truly meritorious work in the Plan of God, and thus opened up the great "treasure chest" of God's grace to all believers.

God deals with us after salvation in the same essential way in which He dealt with us before salvation: in grace. After salvation we enjoy a multitude of wonderful blessings as His children. The first and greatest blessing is salvation and the confidence it imparts of eternal life (a blissful future existence where all pain and hardship will be forever absent). But, on account of Christ's work (and our non-meritorious acceptance of His work through our faith in Him), we believers are now beneficiaries of God's grace in this life as well (Rom.6:14-15).

The Greek work for "grace" is *charis*, and *charis* means "favor", and "goodwill". As human beings, we are born sinful (our heritage resulting from the Fall of Man; cf. Rom.7:20), but when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, God's attitude towards us is transformed from one of hostility to one of kindness (Eph.2:3-7). We are now His children, and He looks after us in love. The psalmist puts it this way: "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread" (Ps.37:25). It would be difficult to delimit the power and scope of the "grace" or favor of God in which we believers now stand, for it touches every aspect of our lives. God now treats us as His beloved children, constantly providing for and attending to all of our needs (Matt.6:25-34). There has never been a time when God has not been faithful to us in supplying all of our needs. He never fails to do His part; our part is merely to remember this fact and to trust that He never will fail us.

2. God's Primary Grace Means of Coping with Suffering: Truth is the primary tool whereby we may effectively meet and deal with life's problems. This requires a bit of explanation. The type of "truth" which helps us through our difficulties is the "truth" in our hearts, fully understood, believed, and applied to those difficulties. Information located in the Bible but not in our hearts will be of no use when the hard times come. Furthermore, if we are familiar with Bible verses and biblical principles, but choose not to believe them, they will be of no use to us in coping with adversity. Indeed, what chance would we *ever* have of effectively coping with suffering if God had not made provision for us (Rom.10:14-15)?

But God has made provision for us. He has supplied the food, shelter, and clothing, the textbook (the Bible), places of assembly, teachers, and a vast array of support staff (every believer, after all, has some spiritual gift designed to promote the spiritual growth and welfare of the whole Body of Christ) to deal with all of our needs. We have, therefore, everything we need to pursue spiritual growth. All we need to do is contribute the faith. God intends for all of the Truth of His Word to mix with faith in our hearts (in the same way it did when we believed in His Son, Jesus Christ). So in order to handle adversity in the way in which God desires, we need to find out what He says about this subject (as with everything else), believe what He says, and apply His words to the problems which confront us. Ultimately, spiritual growth requires that we set ourselves to learning all of God's counsel, rather than confining ourselves to selected topics that happen to apply to our current situation or pique our interest. God intends for us to prepare ourselves for all of the circumstances of life (including suffering) by hearing, believing, and using the truth contained in the Bible. He has provided us with the Bible, teachers, and the means and opportunity to learn His principles of truth.

3. Principles of Truth Relating to Suffering:

1. *God is working everything in our lives (including suffering) for our good (Rom.8:28; Gen.50:20).*
2. *We can have happiness in the midst of suffering, knowing that our endurance is producing spiritual growth and will be rewarded (Rom.5:3-4; 2Cor.4:17; 1Thes.5:18; Jas.1:2-4; 1Pet.1:5-8; 4:13).*
3. *We can take comfort in the knowledge that the Lord will never ask us to bear any burden which we are unable to bear, and will always provide us with a way out, whether that "escape hatch" leads around or, perhaps, through ,the current suffering (1Cor.10:13).*
4. *The Lord often has a purpose in allowing suffering which may not be readily apparent at the time. The death and resuscitation of the widow's son lead to her belief in the Lord (1Kg.17:24). The death and resuscitation of Lazarus was very painful for our Lord, but he was glad for it because of the belief it fostered (Jn.11:15). The cripple of John 9 was not born so because of anyone's sin, but to manifest the glory of God when he was healed (Jn.9:3). Job underwent such suffering that his patience in enduring it has become proverbial, but he was unaware that the Lord was using him to manifest His power and glory (Job 1:8; 2:3; and see Job 42:10). We may not fully understand the reasons for all the suffering that we and our fellow Christians undergo in this world, but we must remember that the Lord does have the best reasons for permitting it. Let us continue to trust Him.*
5. *The suffering which we undergo does pay a certain dividend: it gives us an experience out of which we can help others in their hour of trial, for all of us will have to endure hardships of some sort in this life (2Cor.1:3-7; 1Pet.4:12; 5:9).*

6. *We can also draw encouragement in our suffering from the examples in the Bible.* The scripture is replete with case studies of fellow believers, many of whom had to undergo suffering beyond our own imagination. We need only read of the troubles of Job and Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel, or one may almost say, of practically every believer of note with whom God was pleased. These believers not only managed to survive personal hardships, but also to thrive in that they continued to love and trust the Lord, and to maintain their spiritual progress in spite of suffering. The writer of Hebrews catalogs this phenomenon in chapter 11, telling us that "by their faith", all the great believers of the past were able to overcome the various trials and tribulations life offered them, knowing that God had something better for them than all the riches the world could offer. After all, our Lord *suffered for us*, so that we might live forever in peace and happiness in eternity (1Pet.2:21; 4:1).

Conclusion: Finally, let us not forget that God has given us his comforter, the Holy Spirit (Jn.14:16). If we only relax and trust the Lord, His Spirit will help us, comfort us, and fill our hearts with a joy that transcends our present pain, no matter how deep the pain, no matter how intense the suffering (1Pet.4:14; Rom.5:3-5).