

Title: The sunny side of suffering
Date: November 25, 2018
Subject: Suffering has a purpose
Scripture: 1 Peter 4:12 - 19

Hagar the Horrible is the Viking warrior who's in trouble with his wife as often he's raiding castles. In one comic strip he scales a mountain. His dad is waiting for him. "Son, I've asked you up on the hill of wisdom to pass on the one great secret of life...A secret that's taken me 75 years to learn! When I was younger I was confused...But it's all so clear to me now. Lean close, son, and I'll whisper the secret to you!" Hagar leans in. "Great! What is it, dad? What **is** it?" His dad whispers, "Life is tough."

Contemporary thinking about suffering is it's an unavoidable part of life and it's worthless. It happens in unpredictably senseless fashion and serves no legitimate purpose. It's garbage. Nothing to be learned.

Some followers of Jesus Christ get sucked up into this thinking. Need to realize it's counter to God and his way of doing things. Suffering does happen, even to good, nice people, even to committed Christ followers. It's not a negative experience to be thrown into the garbage. There's value to it.

READ 1 Peter 4:12 – 19. We've already seen several ways to respond to suffering. Here are a few more.
I. Two more responses to suffering vv. 12 - 16

A. Don't be surprised v. 12. Most people like to be surprised by good surprises – birthday gifts, Christmas presents, going to be grandparents. Granddaughter Sophie is at that stage where she likes to play peek-a-boo or have me hide around the corner and pop out when she gets there.

Some people are hard to surprise. They seem to be always on guard. Can't pull anything over on them. Can't go "Gotcha!" That's idea here. Don't be caught off guard. Don't be surprised when bad things come.

Jews were used to being mistreated. It was part of their long history – slaves in Egypt, attacked by the Philistines and other Canaanite tribes, captives in Babylon, oppression of Rome. Things didn't change much when some of them placed their trust in Christ. They traded one kind of suffering for another.

It was different for Gentile believers. They were part of the Empire. They were citizens or at least decently treated as members of the servant class. They had worshipped pagan gods and no one bothered them. They assumed it would be the same when they switched to worshipping Christ. However, they suddenly found they had a target on their backs, especially during the tumultuous reign of Nero. They may also have thought that suffering was contradictory to the promises and blessings promised in the Gospel. The same is true for many today who expect only good things will happen because they have come to the Good Shepherd.

The call is for followers of Christ to not become unduly alarmed when they suffer. Don't be bewildered. Don't think of suffering as an abnormal experience. The depth of the suffering is marked by the wording – painful trial or "fiery ordeal." Don't be surprised by the fact of suffering or the power of suffering.

Reasons to not be surprised. This is the fourth time Peter dives into the subject of suffering. It's almost as if he has a complex. He can't get away from the topic. So if they've been following along as the letter was being read they should have caught on by now that suffering is going to happen.

The Jewish members of the church could have reflected on their history. The Old Testament is filled with stories of mistreatment of the nation and individuals. Joseph suffered at the hands of his family and the Egyptians. Jeremiah was thrown into a well to die. According to tradition Isaiah was sawn in two by wicked king Manasseh. Jesus said his contemporaries were guilty of the blood of righteous men since their ancestors had martyred men from Abel to Zechariah.

Jesus foretold that his followers would suffer. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

Add in personal experience. They'd probably seen or heard about other believers suffering. They had ample opportunity to know that suffering was part of life.

There are various causes of suffering. We live a fallen world that suffers under a curse from its original creation (Romans 8:18-25). It can come as the result of personal sin (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). There's suffering that comes as discipline from our loving Heavenly Father to his children to strengthen our trust in him and obedience (Hebrews 12:1-13). There's suffering because we identify with Christ and strive to live a godly life. That's the common theme in 1 Peter (1 Peter 2:12, 18-25; 3:15-17; 4:1, 12-19).

We aren't talking about first world suffering. "There's too much foam on my latte." "The Wi-Fi isn't working." "The lines were so long on Black Friday."

Trials come as a test. This idea is a little hidden in the older version of the NIV which I read earlier. Most translations talk about testing or trying of our faith. Don't view ourselves as victims.

"If the righteous God, who has established a moral order in creation, not only allows well-doers to suffer, but Himself wills that they should, it must be for some good reason and purpose. Far from such suffering being a penal consequence of their own evil-doing, in being thus ordered to happen to them, it must be intended to be a creative cause of good. God must intend that some profit or benefit should come out of it—for his own glory, for others' good, or for the personal good of the sufferer himself" (Alan Stibbs, Tyndale Commentary, The First Epistle General of Peter, p. 137). The Lord "causes all things to work together for good, to those who love God and are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

A little girl who needed surgery was terrified. As an encouragement, her parents promised to give her something she'd wanted for a long time—a kitten. The operation went well, but as the anesthesia was wearing off the youngster was heard mumbling to herself, "This sure is a lousy way to get a cat!" The Lord has much better things in store for us than a pet.

B. Choose to rejoice vv. 13 – 16. There are several reasons.

1. Make sure suffering is for the right reasons. V. 15 specifies some of the wrong reasons. A person in prison for murder can't truly claim that he's improperly suffering. The same is true for the thief or other criminals. Or for giving company secrets to the competition or lying to the boss. Jail time, demotion, dismissal is getting what they deserve, a natural consequence. Meddling doesn't seem to rise to the level of the others. A meddler is a busybody, one who gets into other people's business. It could be an agitator, one who likes to stir up trouble. It's like the rest as it's improper behavior, sin, that doesn't please God. It would be wrong for this person to claim he's suffering for Jesus. There's no reward from God for enduring that kind of suffering.

2. We choose to rejoice because it's a privilege to be treated like Christ. "For it has been granted (as a privilege) to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29). The suffering in view comes as a result of a person's relationship with Jesus Christ. We share, partake, participate in his sufferings. We're "insulted because of the name of Christ." Suffering reinforces the connection with Christ. Our fellowship with him is strengthened.

3. We choose to rejoice because we'll be rewarded. This promise will take place in the future when Christ's glory is revealed. We are to look ahead, beyond what we experience, to what will be experienced. Rejoice now so that will be overjoyed, have exceeding joy. 1 Peter, the whole Bible for that matter, is filled with commands to keep looking forward to the coming of Jesus and the reward he brings with him.

4. We choose to rejoice because of the work of the Holy Spirit. V. 14. The text says the Spirit rests on Christ followers. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came down on him in the form of a dove. God the Father spoke from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Similarly, the Spirit resting on believers is a sign of the Father's approval. He speaks his pleasure over his children.

Resting on us also means that the Spirit helps in the same way the angels ministered to Jesus after his 40 day temptation (Matthew 4:11). He is present to comfort, encourage and stabilize us.

The Holy Spirit is interested in our growth. His job is to orchestrate the changes in us to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. One of the methods he uses is suffering/trials/difficulty. Hear the comforting words of Scripture. "We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:3-5). "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

Amy Carmichael was a missionary to India. One day she watched a village goldsmith sitting on the floor of his hut as he refined gold. He held a metal container filled with gold ore over a fire. As the gold and impurities turned to liquid, he removed anything which wasn't gold. Amy asked how he knew when it was purified. The man simply answered, "When I can see my face in it." The Lord wants to see himself in us.

5. Don't be ashamed. One day the apostles had been teaching and the Lord was healing many people through them. The religious leaders were upset. They had the apostles arrested and rearrested as an angel of

the Lord brought them out of jail. The leaders reprimanded the apostles, had them flogged and then ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus. How did the apostles respond? They ran like a bunch of scared rabbits, apologizing over their shoulders, “Oh, we’ll never do it again. Not us. So sorry.” No. They rejoiced they “had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41).

A young Christian soldier was often ridiculed and attacked by his fellow soldiers when he knelt by his bunk to pray before going to bed. He sought the advice of a chaplain who counseled him to omit the nightly prayers. The young man did as suggested but soon his heart couldn’t take it. He resumed praying though it meant persecution rather than have peace without talking to his Father. Eventually his entire 12 man outfit knelt with him in prayer. He reported to the chaplain, “Isn’t it better to keep the colors flying?”

We are to take a stand with Jesus. If suffering happens, we should rejoice and praise the Lord.

II. Suffering is part of God’s judgment vv. 17 - 19

These verses bring up some perplexing thoughts. READ 17a. Judgment begins with the people of God. God isn’t judging believers as to whether they will be with him in heaven. That issue has already been decided by Christ’s work on the cross and the person’s acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice for their sins.

This judgment of believers is concerned with this present life. Keep in mind one underlying purpose of suffering is to purify. The Lord is getting rid of sin to prepare his people for a place where there is no sin.

READ 18a. The hardness of salvation refers to what Christ had to do to effect salvation. The price was extraordinarily high. Only a few respond to Christ’s offer which includes a renunciation of trying to earn salvation by themselves and an acknowledgement of need for someone else to save them.

The treatment of God’s family is contrasted with that of those who remain unrepentant. If God allows trials, hardship, difficulties, suffering to come into the lives of believers to refine them and move them toward Christlikeness, holiness, think how much worse God’s judgment will be, what he has planned for those haven’t placed their trust in Christ. Our temporary fiery ordeal is a minute illustration of what they will face forever.

III. Outlook to have. V. 19

We’re reminded that God’s will allows and sometimes sends suffering. Suffering can be hard to handle particularly when we know we’re rightly related to the Lord and think we’re living according to his purposes and we still suffer. When it happens we might as well determine to get the most out of it.

Commit selves to God. The word is a banking term. By in large we trust banks. We have confidence that the money we put into our accounts will be there, will be safe for when we need it for the mortgage, groceries, and Christmas. Plus we put valuables in safe deposit boxes. Banks are to be safe places.

God is a safe place. The things we entrust to God will be kept safe. He will keep us safe. The apostle Paul said he was suffering because he was a preacher, apostle and teacher of Jesus. “Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day” (2 Timothy 1:12).

The reason we can trust the Lord is that he is the Creator God. He is the Supreme, Almighty. He is different from so-called gods. Paul pointed this out to the philosophers and others in the Athens marketplace where they had altars to all sorts of false gods (Acts 17). He directed their attention to one they'd made "To An Unknown God." They were afraid they may have omitted a god and didn't want to get on his/her bad side. Paul told them, "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you...The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." He began with God as The Creator and Giver of Life.

The second part of our approach is to continue to do good. Continue to do what is right, what pleases God. The Bible, the previous chapter, tells us that we'll be rewarded for doing good. English preacher Alexander MacLaren (on 1 Peter 1:22) "Practical obedience works inwards as well as outwards, and purifies the soul which renders it. People generally turn that round the other way, and, instead of saying that to do right helps to make a man right within, they say 'make the tree good, and its fruit good'--first the pure soul, and then the practical obedience. Both statements are true. For every act that a man does reacts upon the doer, just as, whether the shot hits the target or not, the gun kicks back on the shoulder of the man that fired it. Conduct comes from character, but conduct works back upon character, and character is largely the deposit from the vanished seas of actions. So, then, whilst the deepest thought is, be good and you will do good, it is not to be forgotten that the other side is true--do good, and it will tend to make you good. Obedience purifies the soul, while, on the other hand, a man that lives ill comes to think as he lives, and to become tenfold more a child of evil. "The dyer's hand is subdued to what it works in.""

Joni Eareckson Tada became a quadriplegic after a diving accident. It took time for her to come to terms with the Lord and what he allowed to happen in her life. She credits her wheel-chair with pointing out the futility of having an earthly perspective. "I was powerless there until I shifted to a higher battleground and chose a different perspective. Looking down on my problems from heaven's perspective, trials looked extraordinarily different. When viewed from its own level, my paralysis seemed like a huge, impassable wall; but when viewed from above, the wall appeared a thin line, something that could be overcome...Eagles overcome the lower law of gravity by the higher law of flight, and that is true for the soul. Souls that soar to heaven's heights on wings like eagles overcome the mud of earth that keeps us stuck to a temporal, limited perspective. If you want to see heaven's horizons, as well as place earth in your rearview mirror, all you need to do is stretch your wings... and consider your trials from heaven's realm. Like the wall that becomes a thin line, you are able to see the other side, the happier outcome" (Heaven, Your Real Home).

Pete Briscoe on radio Telling the Truth (10/31/18) spoke about pain. He said, "We want to be free of pain. The Lord wants to use it for intimacy." He likened it to a child riding a bike who insists on taking off the training wheels. The parent takes off the wheels. He knows there will be falls and scraped knees and elbows and allows them to happen. When they happen the child will run to the parent and just wants the pain to quit while the parent reaches out to love the child and build the bond.