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1 Peter: Truth and Hope for Sojourners
“A Christian Response to Suffering”
1 Peter 4:12-19

Take a first look.

I. **Barry Zito** was once known as one of the most dominating pitchers in Major League baseball. But in 2010 Zito had reached his lowest point: He was removed from his team's starting roster. The next season he was plagued by injuries and poor performances. By the end of 2012 he had returned to his peak performance, winning his last 14 starts and playing a pivotal role in the San Francisco Giant's World Series victory.

“In a 2012 interview Zito explained how God had used suffering to get his attention and to lead him to commit “his life to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” Zito said:

Sometimes you have to go through difficulty and physical trials to really get broken down. In 2011, I got broken down physically as well as mentally. In August of that year, I had this very odd injury in April of 2011 I came off the field that day after never being hurt in 11 years, and I said, “All right, something bigger is going on here. A message is being sent, and I've got to listen.” A few months later, I realized I'd been doing it alone. My best friend told me an old story I really love. A shepherd will be leading his sheep, and one of the sheep will be walking astray from the pack. The shepherd will take his rod and break the sheep's leg, and the sheep will have to rely on the shepherd to get better. But once that leg is completely healed, that sheep never leaves the side of the shepherd ever again.

That's a really beautiful metaphor. A lot of things happen to us as people, and we realize we've been relying on our own strength for too long. Last September, I got a tattoo, and it's the only one I have, of a golden calf on the inside of my right bicep. I show people that, and it signifies idolatry and that I was putting things before God. I haven't talked much about this. When I committed with my chaplain, he said, “You don't need to go around telling people this stuff. There will come a time and a place.” I guess that's a change for me too. I used to kind of dig attention. Now I'm seeking deeper fulfillment.¹

II. Our stories are all different, but I have a hunch that some measure of struggle is necessary for every person to grow into the person God intends. Let's take a closer look at forming a Christian response to the experience of suffering.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 4:12-19.

Translation:

¹² Dear friends, Stop being surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which has come to you^{p2} for a test as though a strange thing was happening to you^p, ¹³ but in so far as you^p share in the sufferings of the Christ, rejoice, in order that also in the revelation of His glory you^p may rejoice while being overjoyed. ¹⁴ If you^p are being reviled for the name of Christ, you^p are

¹ Tim Keown, "A Man in the Game," *ESPN Magazine* (12-1-12).

² The superscript “p” indicates that the pronoun is plural in the original Greek.

blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God is resting upon you^{p.3 15} Do not let any one of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddling spy,¹⁶ but if as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but glorify God in this name^{4. 17} Because, it is time for the judgment to begin from the house of God; and if first from us, what will the end be for those who disobey the Good News of God?¹⁸ And,

“If the righteous is being saved with difficulty,
Where will the ungodly and sinner appear?”⁵

¹⁹ Therefore let those who are suffering according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing good.

I. When we suffer as Christians, we enter the sufferings of Christ. v. 12-13a.

1. Peter says, “Don’t be surprised when you suffer as followers of Jesus.” The logic goes, if our Master suffered for the truth He came to embody and proclaim, then so will we, His servants. Jesus said as much Himself (John 15:20, FJV): He said, “Remember the word which I spoke to you^p, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you^p; if they kept My word, they will keep yours^p also. But all these things will happen to you^p because of My name, because they do not know the One who sent Me.”

2. When we suffer as Jesus’ followers, we are entering into His sufferings. The Apostle Paul wrote that this was one of His great desires as both a follower and an ambassador for Christ: to be united with our Lord in both His suffering and in His resurrection-victory over sin and death. Philippians 3:10-11 (FJV) reads, “[I want]¹⁰—to come to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, to be conformed to His death,¹¹ —if somehow I might make my own⁶ the resurrection from the dead.” Paul knew that to be united with Jesus Christ in the spiritual, mystical union of grace and faith meant to be united with Him in every way: in both His death and resurrection.

A—Are we willing to be united with our Lord both in His victory and in His suffering?

I—This is the meaning of baptism, after all. It is a vivid picture of both death and resurrection. It reminds us of our Lord’s suffering in the cross and His death on our behalf; then, it reminds us of His resurrection. Under the water in death and burial of the old life and rising out of the water in resurrection. See Romans 6:1-5 (FJV).

^{“1} Therefore what shall we say? Shall we continue in the sin so that grace may abound?
² May it never happen! We are the very ones who died to sin; how will we still live in it? ³ Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized in relation to His death? ⁴ Therefore, we were buried together with Him through baptism in relation to death, in order that just as Christ was raised from among the dead through the glory of the Father, in this manner also we may walk in newness of life. ⁵ For since we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, we will also be united with Him in the likeness of His resurrection....”

³ See Isaiah 11:2.

⁴ An alternative in the manuscripts to ονόματι (*name*) is μέρει, which would be translated “matter, affair” (BDAG).

⁵ Cf. Proverbs 11:31.

⁶ Or, “lay hold of,” BDAG on vv. 11-12. See also Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 1017, and *Word Pictures*, ad loc.

Peter is reminding us of the reality of this baptismal picture: when we respond with faith in the grace of God expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are truly united with Jesus in every way, in both suffering and death, and then also in resurrection!

II. 1 When we suffer as Christians, it is to be a cause for joy, not sorrow. Vv. 13b-14, 16

¹³ ... But in so far as you^p share in the sufferings of the Christ, rejoice, in order that also in the revelation of His glory you^p may rejoice while being overjoyed. ¹⁴ If you^p are being reviled for the name of Christ, you^p are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God is resting upon you^p.

1. We can rejoice even in suffering, knowing that the glory of God will certainly come. Psalm 30 is one of my favorite Psalms. I wrote a song based on it some years ago. One key line in the Psalm is v. 5b: "Weeping may stay for the night/ but rejoicing comes in the morning." I called the song, *Waiting for the Morning*. I did not mean that we are knocking on wood and hoping to get lucky tomorrow when the morning dawns. I meant that we are waiting with God-based hope—the subjective response to the objective truth of God and His promise for our future.

2. There is a special blessing attached to the follower of Jesus who shares in His sufferings.

Consider this sampling of teaching from the Scriptures, that should help to adjust our perspective toward suffering:

Romans 8:18 (FJV): *"For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not comparable to the glory that is about to be revealed in us."*

Matthew 5:10-12 (ESV): ¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹ *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

John 16:33 (FJV): *"I have spoken these things to you^p in order that in Me you^p might have peace; in the world you^p have affliction, but have courage; I have conquered the world."*

Philippians 3:10-11 (FJV), again: *"[I want] ¹⁰—to come to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, to be conformed to His death, ¹¹ —if somehow I might make my own⁷ the resurrection from the dead."*

Psalms 119:67-71 (ESV, my emphasis):

⁶⁷ *Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.*

⁶⁸ *You are good and do good;
teach me your statutes.*

⁶⁹ *The insolent smear me with lies,*

⁷ Or, "lay hold of," BDAG on vv. 11-12. See also Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 1017, and *Word Pictures*, ad loc.

but with my whole heart I keep your precepts;

⁷⁰ their heart is unfeeling like fat,

but I delight in your law.

⁷¹ *It is good for me that I was afflicted,*

that I might learn your statutes.

James 1:2-4 (FJV): ² *Consider all joy, my brothers, whenever you may fall into various kinds of trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your^p faith keeps on producing perseverance. ⁴ But continue to let perseverance have a complete work, in order that you may be completely mature and whole, lacking in nothing.*

A—So, if we are facing some sort of suffering because we are followers of Jesus, we can and should rejoice.

I—This is the example set for us by the Apostles of our Lord. Consider the story told in Acts 4-5. In the first few years of the Christian movement, after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostles of the Lord were empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak the truth of Jesus boldly. Many came to believe in Jesus. Luke tells the reader that there were about 5,000 men (heads of households) among the believers in Jerusalem. That must have created quite a stir. After the healing of a seriously sick man, the religious leaders among the Judeans took action. They had Peter and John rounded up and stood them in the Sanhedrin. They threatened them to stop teaching in the name of Jesus, but Peter and John would not do so. Some time later, the Sanhedrin arrested all the apostles, furious that they had not ceased to proclaim the good news of Jesus. The religious leaders almost had them executed, but the counsel of Gamaliel saved them. They had the apostles flogged and again commanded them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Here is how that incident concluded (**Acts 5:41-42, FJV**): ⁴¹ *Therefore, they were going out rejoicing from the face of the Sanhedrin, because they were considered worthy to be dishonored for the sake of the name, ⁴² and every day in the temple and from house to house they were not stopping teaching and telling the Good News concerning Jesus the Christ.*

"Worthy to be dishonored for the same of the name" of Jesus. Yes.

III. When we suffer as Christians, it should be for righteousness, not evil. V. 15: ¹⁵ *Do not let any one of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddling spy...."*

Some kinds of suffering have nothing to do with our faith, but rather with our ungodly actions.

A—Peter says, "Don't let this be true of us as Jesus' followers!"

I—If a follower of Jesus commits murder and then is arrested, convicted, and sent to prison, is that person suffering for Christ? No, rather, the murderer is suffering justice for sinful (and criminal) behavior. If a follower of Jesus commits theft, is caught, convicted in court, and sent to prison, is that Christian suffering for Christ? No, rather, the thief is experiencing justice for criminal activity. Peter says it is the same for any kind of evildoer or even a "meddling spy" (an interesting Greek word that suggests such a translation).

The point here is this: bad behavior deserves bad consequences. We should avoid the bad behavior, if we are followers of Jesus Christ.

IV. When we suffer as Christians, we recognize the ultimate judgment of God. Vv. 16-18:

“¹⁶ but if as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but glorify God in this name⁸. ¹⁷ Because, it is time for the judgment to begin from the house of God; and if first from us, what will the end be for those who disobey the Good News of God? ¹⁸ And,

*“If the righteous is being saved with difficulty,
Where will the ungodly and sinner appear?”*

1. There is no shame in suffering “as a Christian,” but rather such suffering is a cause for glorifying God. See the points already made about this.

2. Followers of Jesus know that God is the ultimate judge of behavior—whether good or bad.

3. Followers of Jesus also know that God holds His people to a higher standard of behavior. “Judgment will begin from the House of God,” Peter says, but it surely does not end there. The followers of Jesus are saved solely by the grace of God; where does that leave those who reject that grace?

A—As Jesus’ people, we must not go around with a chip on our shoulders, just daring someone to knock it off. Rather, we should seek to be peacemakers (see Matthew 5:9). However, we must know when the time has come to say, “We must obey God rather than mere people” (see Acts 5:29), and be prepared for whatever temporary consequences may come.

I—On March 15, 2004, five Southern Baptist Christian missionaries were gunned down in Mosul, Iraq, in a drive-by shooting. Three were pronounced dead on the spot, a fourth died after surgeons tried for several hours to save his life, and the fifth remained in critical condition shortly thereafter. Larry and Jean Elliot (ages 60 and 58 respectively) were career missionaries who had served in Honduras since 1978. They had just been transferred to Iraq in February, 2004, along with Karen Watson (aged 38), and David and Carrie McDonnall (ages 28 and 26), to research the possibilities of humanitarian aid in the area. Larry, Jean, and Karen were all pronounced dead at the scene of the shootings. David McDonnall died later. His wife Carrie remained in critical condition.

The questions that accompany such a tragedy include: Why were they attacked? Why were they in Mosul? Why did they go to such a dangerous place at all? And the questions are not always easy ones. The purpose of the attack and the people who launched it were unknown as I was preparing this message. As to why they were in Mosul, they had gone there to minister to the needs of the Iraqi people in the name of Jesus. Why did they go when the situation was so dangerous? They were intent on serving the needs of the Iraqi people as a witness to the truth of the Christian message. As a report from the IMB says, “Before they left for Iraq, the Elliots visited their long-time home church, Baptist Temple Church in Reidsville, N. C. ‘A lot of people were asking them, “Why would you go?”’ recalled George Fox, pastor of the church. The Elliots said, “You could die in traffic in Raleigh. It’s safer to be in the center of God’s will.” Larry was excited that God could use some of his skills from Honduras to help people in Iraq get clean water.”⁹

⁸ An alternative in the manuscripts to *ονόματι* (*name*) is *μέρει*, which would be translated “matter, affair” (BDAG).

⁹ “Why?” in “Headline News: Worldview,” from www.imb.org, 3/17/04.

These folks brought the total to 9 of our SBC Christian missionaries who were attacked in a space of 14 months, 8 of whom were killed by Islamic terrorists (3 in Yemen plus 1 in The Philippines, along with the 4 killed in this attack).

Is such risk worth it? You ask Larry and Jean, or Karen or David after the Resurrection. I think they will tell you that the fate worse than death is to miss the calling of God for one's life and fail to *live*.

V. When we suffer as Christians, we commit ourselves to our faithful Creator and continue to do good. V. 19: *"Therefore let those who are suffering according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing good."*

1. Note that Peter affirms that suffering can be "according to the will of God." We must make a place in our theology for suffering, according to Peter, because sometimes, we suffering "according to the will of God," not just the whims of fate or chance.

2. When suffering comes within the will of God, we must be ready to respond rightly: to "entrust [our] souls to a faithful Creator in doing good." Here is the calling of faithfulness.

A—Trust God and keep doing what is right.

I—Everyone should know the story of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He has the Soviet Army Captain who was sent into the GULAG (the prison system of the USSR) for insulting Joseph Stalin in a letter to a friend. After eight years there and a bout with cancer, he came out the other end a man of renewed Christian faith with a mission: he believed that he lived through the ordeal so that he could tell the stories of those who did not. He wrote with a passion for the remainder of his life. He came to thank God for his prison experience as the primary means of his formation spiritually and morally. He thanked God for allowing him to live through it, and he devoted the balance of his life to tell the truth about the GULAG, which was the dirty little secret of the Soviet Union. His work embodied a Russian proverb: "One word of truth will outweigh the whole world."

We must trust God, tell the truth, and keep on doing what is right.

Take it home (applications).

I. Is suffering a part of our present experience in this temporary world? What might God be trying to accomplish through it, both in the world in general and in our personal lives?

II. Will we trust God and keep on doing what we know is right, even through such afflictions?

III. Can we shift our focus to Jesus, Who suffered such indignity and pain for our salvation? (See Hebrews 12:1-3).