

Perspective on Suffering

1 Peter 1:1-2:12

Memory verse: 1 Pet. 1:23, *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

Max Lucado once commented, “If hair were hurts, we’d all be grizzly bears.”

Several weeks ago, Gene preached a message entitled, “Jesus Is...A Storm Chaser” based on Mark 4:35-41 in which Jesus calmed the “*mega sismos*” that came upon the experienced fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

Gene commented that there are “two kinds of people: 1) Those who are in a storm, and 2) Those who are about to enter a storm.” **Yikes**. Life is FULL of challenges is it not? Another author commented, “Life NEVER settles down and behaves. Here’s the challenge:

SLIDE: Do we see the squalls of our lives through the lens of faith or through the lens of fear?

Easier said than done, especially when the sea is relatively calm. Not so easy when the doctor gives you “the news”, you have cancer and the hospital bills pile up, or you’re served divorce papers, or must endure a job loss, a pay cut, or a betrayal.

Wrestling with the “Whys” – LET’S ROLE by Lisa Beamer

Her dad, when Lisa was 1 and ½ suffered an aortic aneurysm and died. Her world fell apart. Dad was everything.

In her words she was “scared, hurt, and angry...I railed at God, sometimes overtly, but most of the time expressing a silent rage. God, you could have prevented this tragedy if you wanted to! Why didn’t you? Don’t you love us? This isn’t the way things are **supposed** to be! My faith was severely shaken. Questions pummeled my heart and mind. Why, God? Why did you allow this to happen? Why did you allow our father to be snatched away in the prime of life? You’re supposed to be a good God. Dad was a good man; he was serving you the best he knew how. I still believe in you, but this just doesn’t seem fair!

Because my struggle was more internal...I kept my grades up...but inside I was seething. I had always tried to do what was right; now I decided **I had been duped by God.**

Every person who has grieved the loss of a loved one has known that awful feeling. Despite our faith, sometimes LIFE JUST HURTS. Eventually I came to realize that God knew what was going to happen to my dad. He knew the difficult circumstances my family would face and yet, for some reason I still can't comprehend, he chose not to change the course of events.

SLIDE: When we face difficulties, we often make two categorical mistakes:

1. We look for quick, obvious answers, and
2. We blame God for not protecting us or providing in the way we expected.

In short, **we feel out of control**, and we believe we have to be in control to be happy and successful.

Psychologist Sandra Sanger observed her clients and herself:

The issue of control is ubiquitous in my practice as a therapist. Clients wish they could control others, detest feeling out of control, fear being controlled by others. And let's face it, there are times when my own illusion of control directs fantasies of wielding more influence in my clients' lives than is surely possible. If only I could wave the magic wand that, spoken or not, many clients seem to long for.

The Point of Pain

As we know, there's another dimension to life, including our pain. Throughout the Bible we see godly men and women endure heartaches and adversities of all kinds. In many cases they realized much later God's divine purposes for their pain, like Joseph (Genesis 50:19-21), but in some, like Job, **they never got an answer to the *why* question.**

When we suffer, we seldom see the reason during the pain (unless the suffering is a direct result of sin, and even then we may not connect the dots easily, quickly, or well). When we're in pain, our instinctive conclusion is like the disciples in the boat in the middle of a terrific storm while Jesus slept. Above the noise of the wind and waves, they shouted to him, "**Teacher, don't you care if we drown?**" (Mark 4: 38).

When we're tempted to conclude that God doesn't care, we need to look at the cross. In that moment, God poured all the evil, sin, and horror of the human condition on his

sinless son. There has never been and will never be any greater act of love. In Christ's willing, sacrificial death for sinners, he has made the ultimate statement of his affection for us. We may not know the reasons for our pain, but we can be absolutely sure that one reason is ruled out: it can't be that God doesn't care, because he entered into our pain in familiar ways. Here's three:

SLIDE:

1. NO ANSWER FROM HEAVEN, "*My Father, if it is possible, do not give me this cup of suffering. But do what you want, not what I want*" (Matt. 26:39).
2. NO HELP FROM THE PEOPLE, "*With (Judas) were many people carrying swords and clubs who had been sent from the leading priests and the older Jewish leaders of the people...Then the people came and grabbed Jesus and arrested him*" (Matt. 26:47,51). Note: **The very people he came to save had came to save had now come to arrest him.**
3. NO LOYALTY FROM HIS FRIENDS. "*All of Jesus' followers left him and ran away*" (Matt. 26:56).

In Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, Tim Keller wrote:

According to Christian theology, suffering is not meaningless-neither in general nor in particular instances. For God has purposed to defeat evil so exhaustively on the cross that all the ravages of evil will someday be undone and we, despite participating in it so deeply, will be saved. God is accomplishing this not in spite of suffering, agony, and loss but through it-it is through the suffering of God that the suffering of mankind will eventually be overcome and undone. While it is impossible not to wonder whether God could have done all this some other way-without allowing all the misery and grief-the cross assures us that, whatever the unfathomable counsels and purposes behind the course of history, they are motivated by love for us and absolute commitment to our joy and glory.

Peter's Perspective

The theme of the letter is...HOPE for Christians during times of acute SUFFERING.

SLIDE:

- He addresses slaves (employees) who suffer unjustly at the hands of cruel master,
- wives who live with unbelieving husbands, and

- all others who suffer for the sake of righteousness and must submit to a painful trial.

Here is an example in each of the five chapters.

SLIDES:

1 Pet. 1:6-7, *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith --of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire --may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

1 Pet. 2:18-19, *Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.*

1 Pet. 3:15-16, *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.*

1 Pet. 4:12-13, *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.*

1 Pet. 5:8-9, *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

Peter's purpose is to remind Christians that painful times are not an end in themselves, but that their pain has a purpose.

As Benjamin Franklin said, 'Those things that hurt, instruct.'"

Six Reasons **Why** We Can Be Joyful While We Hurt (1:3-9):

1. **We have a living hope, not wishful thinking** (1:3) *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

One author put it this way, “Who can mind the journey, when the road leads home”.

2. **We have a permanent inheritance** (1:4) *an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you*

Nothing can destroy it, defile it, diminish it, or displace it.

Paul wrote, “*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him*” – 1 Cor. 2:9.

3. **We have a divine shield** (1:5. See Job 1:1-12) *through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation*

There is no way that we will be lost in the process of suffering, now matter how chronic or acute the pain may be.

4. **We have a purified trust** ((1:6-7) *You may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine.* See Job 23:10; 42:5

Job 23:10; 42:5 “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold...My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.”

5. **We have a present Savior** (1:8), *You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with an inexpressible joy*

Although we haven't seen God, we trust that His plan is above our own.

6. **We have a guaranteed destination.** (1:9) *you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

The totality of our salvation: Justification, Sanctification, Glorification.

Responding in Faith

Happy Memories of Bad Times
By Philip Yancey
CT - March 8, 1993

Last Christmas when I was discussing my visit to Russia to witness the fall of communism, my 94-year-old grandmother piped in, "Oh, yes, I remember when the Communists first took over (in 1917). That was scary." Being older than the century gives one a certain perspective: she has watched the full cycle as a powerful ideology appeared on the scene, burst into light then faded away like a dying star.

As I probed my grandmother's astonishing memory, I noticed a trend that seems almost universal in the reminiscences of older people: they tend to recall difficult, tumultuous times with a touch of nostalgia. According to polls, 60 percent of Londoners who survived the Blitz now remember that period as the happiest of their lives. Somehow a new spirit of community and patriotism sprang up to eclipse even the horror of bombs and V-2 rockets. In the U.S., the elderly swap stories about World War II and the Great Depression; they speak fondly of hardships such as blizzards, the child-hood outhouse, and the time in graduate school when they ate canned soup and stale bread three weeks in a row.

For the last several years I have been writing the biography of Dr. Paul Brand, a missionary surgeon who is approaching his eighth decade of life and sixth decade of marriage. As I interview him and his wife, Margaret, about their years of life together, they too keep circling back to the crisis moments.

For example, there was the interval in 1946-7 when Paul had preceded Margaret to Vellore, India. In that year of independence and partition, unrest between Hindus and Muslims began spreading across the northern part of the country. In southern India, though, especially the region around Vellore, Hindus and Muslims lived together in reasonable harmony. Thus Paul wrote and asked his young wife to bring their two infant children and join him as soon as possible.

Back in England, things did not look so rosy. London papers reported that violence was sweeping across India, forcing the greatest human migration in history. Four million refugees had fled to the city of Calcutta alone. In the north-west, Sikhs boarded trains, made men pull down their pants, and killed all those circumcised (Muslims); Pakistanis waylaid trains going the opposite direction and killed the uncircumcised (Hindus).

Paul Brand's glowing reports of the situation in Vellore contradicted the frightening headlines Margaret was reading in London: "Slaughter in the Punjab...Brink of Civil War...Massacre of Europeans Predicted." Her family, not realizing the nearest trouble spots were a thousand miles from Vellore, thought it the height of folly for her to take two babies to such a place. But Margaret, trusting her husband, took a leap of faith and did so.

There were other family crisis as well, and I have heard versions from both Paul and Margaret. At the time, these dramatic intrusions seemed to call into question their entire relationship. But now they retell the stories with nostalgia, for **the crises fit together into, indeed helped form, a pattern of love and trust.** Looking back from the vantage point of 50 years, it seems clear that the Brands' mutual response to the stormy times was what gave their marriage its enduring strength.

Every marriage has its crisis times, moments when one partner (or both) is tempted to give up and lose sight of the long view. Great marriages survive these moments; weak ones fall apart. When divorce happens, tragically, both partners lose out on the deeper strength that comes only from riding out such stormy times together. If, for example, Margaret Brand had judged her husband crazy for beckoning her in India in the midst of political turmoil, and filed for divorce--how sad that would have been. A splendid marriage and partnership in God's work would have been irretrievably lost.

THE PATH WE CHOOSE

Great relationships take form when they are stretched to the breaking point and do not break. Seeing this principle lived out in people like the Brands, I can better understand one the mysteries of relating to God. Abraham climbing the hill at Moriah, Job scratching his boils in the hot sun, David hiding in a cave, Elijah moping in a desert, Moses pleading for a new job description -- **all these heroes experienced crisis moments when they were sorely tempted to judge God uncaring, powerless, or even malign.** Confused and in the dark, THEY FACED A TURNING POINT: whether to turn away embittered, or step forward in faith. In the end, all chose the path of trust, and for this reason we remember them as giants of the faith.

The Bible is littered with tales of others -- Cain, Samson, Solomon, Judas -- who flunked such tests. Their lives, like the marriages that fail too soon, give off a scent of sadness and remorse: Oh, what might have been.

TAKING A LONG VIEW

In America, I've noticed, a consumer mentality tends to infiltrate relationships as well as commerce. Some people treat marriage partners like automobiles; every few years it's time to upgrade to a new model. Some Christians treat churches the same way. And some even approach God with a consumer spirit: when God performs satisfactorily, her merits our worship, but when God seems distant or unresponsive, why bother? Why bother? Because THE DEEPEST STRENGTH ONLY COMES THROUGH TESTING. Partly from listening to elderly people, I have learned that faith means trusting in advance what will only make sense in reverse. Fifty years casts another light on a marriage; the century looks different from a 94-year-old view.

And that brings me to the resurrection: the holy day we celebrate gives a sneak preview of how all history will look from the vantage point of eternity. Every scar, every hurt, every disappointment will be seen in a different light, bathed in an eternity of love and trust. Nothing -- not even the murder of God's own Son -- can end the relationship between God and human beings. In the alchemy of redemption, that most villainous crime becomes our healing strength.

A couple of application points:

1. When Jesus is at the center of your life, peace will be at the center of your soul.
John 14:1-10, 27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Peace is not an absence of conflict, but a calm in the midst of the storm.

2. Stop looking **at** the storms and start looking **through** your storms.

Phil 4:6-7, Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

3. Remind yourself often, that if God is for us, who (or what) can be against us?

2 Kings 6:15-17 (NLT), When the servant of the man of God got up early the next morning and went outside, there were troops, horses, and chariots everywhere. "Oh, sir, what will we do now?" the young man cried to Elisha. "Don't be afraid!"

Elisha told him. “**For there are more on our side than on theirs!**” Then Elisha prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!” The Lord opened the young man’s eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire.

The Applause of Heaven by Max Lucado, in a chapter entitled, “The Kingdom of the Absurd”

A monologue by Peter the Apostle:

The last thing I wanted to do was fish, but that's exactly what Jesus wanted to do. I had fished all night, my arms ached. My eyes burned. My neck was sore. All I wanted to do was go home and let my wife rub the knots out of my back.

It had been a long night. I don't know how many times we had thrown that net into the blackness and heard it slap against the sea. I don't know how many times we had held the twine rope as the net sank into the water. All night we had waited for that bump, that tug, that jerk that would cue us to haul in the catch...but it never came. At daybreak, I was ready to go home.

Just as I was about ready to leave the beach, I noticed a crowd coming toward me. They were following a lanky fellow, who walked with a broad swing, and wide gate. He saw me and called my name. 'Morning, Jesus!' I called back. Though He was a 100 yards away I could see His white smile. 'Quite a crowd, eh?' he yelled, motioning at the mass behind Him, I nodded and sat down to watch.

He stopped near the edge of the water and began to speak. Though I couldn't hear much, I could see a lot. I could see more and more people coming. With all the pressing and shoving, it's a wonder why Jesus didn't get pushed down into the water. He was already knee deep when He looked at me.

I didn't have to think twice, He climbed into my boat, and John followed. We pushed out a bit. I leaned back against the bow, and Jesus began to teach.

It seemed that half of Israel was on the beach. Men had left their work, women their household chores. I even recognized some priests! How they all listened! They scarcely moved, yet their eyes danced as if **they were in some way seeing what they could be.**

When Jesus finished, he turned to me. I stood, and begun to pull anchor when He said, 'Push out into the deep Peter, let's fish.'

I groaned! I looked at John, we were thinking the same thing. As long as He wanted to use the boat for a platform, that was fine. But to use it for a fishing boat--that was OUR territory. I started to tell this carpenter-teacher, 'you stick to preaching, and I'll stick to fishing.' But I was more polite: 'We worked all night. We didn't catch a thing.'

He just looked at me. I looked at John. John was waiting for my cue...

I wish I could say I did it out of devotion. But I can't. All I can say is there is a time to question and a time to listen. So, as much as with a grunt as with a prayer, we pushed out.

With every stroke of the oar, I muttered. With every pull of the paddle, I grumbled, 'No way, No way. Impossible.' I may not know much about other things, but I know fishing. And all we're going to come back with are some wet nets!

The noise of the beach grew distant, and soon the only sound was the smack of the waves against the hull. Finally we cast anchor. I picked up the heavy netting, held it waist high, and starting to throw it. That's when I caught a glimpse of Jesus out of the corner of my eye. His expression stopped me in mid motion.

He was leaning out over the edge of the boat, looking out into the water where I was about to throw the net, and get this, He was smiling. A boyish grin pushed His cheeks high, and turned His round eyes into half moons-the kind of smile you see when a child gives a gift to a friend and watches as its being unwrapped.

He noticed me looking at Him, and He tried to hide the smile, but it persisted. It pushed at the corners of His mouth until a flash of teeth appeared. He had given me a gift and could scarcely contain Himself as I opened it.

"Boy, is he in for a disappointment," I thought as I threw the net. It flew high, spreading itself against the blue sky, and floating down until it flopped against the surface, then sank. I wrapped the rope once around my hand and sat back for a long wait.

"But there was no wait. The slack rope yanked taut and tried to pull me overboard. I set my feet against the side of the boat and yelled for help. John and Jesus sprang to my side.

We got the net in just before it began to tear. I had never seen such a catch. It was like plopping down a sack of rocks in the boat. We began to take in water. John screamed for the other boat to help us.

It was quite a scene: four fishermen in two boats, knee deep in fish, and one carpenter seated on our bow, relishing the pandemonium.

That's when I realized who **He was**. That's when I realized who **I was**: I was the one who told God what He couldn't do!

"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.' There wasn't anything else I could say.

I don't know what He saw in me, but He didn't leave. Maybe He thought if I would let Him tell me how to fish, I would let Him tell me how to live. It was a scene I would see many times over in the next couple of years-in cemeteries with the dead, on hillsides with the hungry, in storms with the frightened, on roadsides with the sick. The characters would change, but the theme wouldn't. When we would say no way, He would say, My way. Then the ones who doubted would scramble to salvage the blessing, and the one who gave it would savor the surprise.

Two articles:

The *Why* of Pain by Samuel Chaird
Finding Gold in The Garbage by Max Lucado

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From the divine perspective, here are a few conclusions that can perhaps help us endure on our trials:

- God never abandons us, even when we can't sense his presence.
- Our faith and character are developed most powerfully in times of adversity.
- God sometimes delivers us *from* pain, but more often he delivers us *through* it.
- When we trust God in difficult times, our stumbling blocks become stepping-stones of growth.
- When we face our deepest fears, our faith grows because we find God to be faithful.
- When doubts cloud our minds, it's time to refocus on God's grace, greatness, and wisdom.
- We may not like the path God has chosen for us, but we need to humbly accept pain as part of his plan.