

## **Week Three**

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*SUFFERING*

## Call to Worship

*Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

[SELECTED VERSES FROM PSALM 118]

## Confession

Holy Lord, I have sinned times without number, and been guilty of pride and unbelief, of failure to find thy mind in thy Word, of neglect to seek thee in my daily life. My transgressions and short-comings present me with a list of accusations, But I bless thee that they will not stand against me, for all have been laid on Christ; Go on to subdue my corruptions, and grant me grace to live above them. Let not the passions of the flesh nor lustings of the mind bring my spirit into subjection, but do thou rule over me in liberty and power.

[VOV]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man?'"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

[MARK 11:27-33]

### DEVOTIONAL

Lent is the season leading up to Easter. It is a time of preparation and repentance in which we remember Jesus' suffering and anticipate his resurrection.

The question you often hear is, "What did you give up for Lent?" Throughout history, Christians have observed Lent by fasting or other acts of self-denial. The danger with tradition, of course, is that it can become mere ritual, or even a source of pride. We want to recapture a spirit of faith in this season.

Unlike repentance and humility, which happen in and through us, suffering and persecution simply happen to us. The former is a response of faith to the grace of God at work. The latter requires a response of faith in the goodness and wisdom of God, even when it seems he is not at work.

The subject raises a difficult question: Why does God allow us to suffer? We are always searching for answers to this question, for ourselves and for our world. Not knowing “why” is part of the suffering.

One day when Jesus and his disciples were walking, they passed by a man blind from birth. “And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). They were looking for answers.

Based upon God’s covenant promises with Israel, Jews were inclined to expect God to invariably bless them materially in response to pious living. Conversely, they expected that those who did evil were to experience divine discipline in various forms. In short, they expected God to bless them for doing good, and to punish others for their sin.

We see this mindset revealed by Job’s friends in the book of Job. In truth, Job was being tested with adversity because of his piety, and not because of sin (Job 1:1-12). Job’s friends persisted in trying to force him to confess that his suffering was the result of some sin he had committed. If he but forsook his sin, they insisted, then God would again bless him.

Perhaps Asaph had the same assumptions about prosperity and poverty. He was frustrated and angry with God because the wicked appeared to prosper while the pious did not (Psalm 73:1-14).

This is why the disciples framed the question the way they did. Their explanation for suffering was that someone was being punished for sin. But Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

Jesus was not offering a trite explanation of all suffering, but rather pointing to his own suffering that would explain the love of God. Jesus voluntarily and unjustly endured suffering, even unto death. Not because he sinned, but because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). He did this so that the works of God might be displayed in him, “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:25-26).

We do not have all the answers about why we suffer, but we do know what the answer cannot be. It cannot be that God doesn’t see or care, for he sent his own Son to enter into our suffering. And it cannot be a hopeless situation, for he conquered sin and death by raising his Son from the dead.

**REFLECTION**

1. *How does the reality of suffering challenge your faith?*
2. *Have you tried to explain suffering in ways that might be unbiblical?*
3. *How does Jesus' death and resurrection give you strength and hope?*

**Closing Prayer**

Help me to be resolute and Christ-contained. Never let me wander from the path of obedience to thy will. Strengthen me for the battles ahead. Give me courage for all the trials, and grace for all the joys. Help me to be a holy, happy person, free from every wrong desire, from everything contrary to thy mind. Grant me more and more of the resurrection life: may it rule me, may I walk in its power, and be strengthened through its influence.

[VOV]

## Call to Worship

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

[1 PETER 1:3-9]

## Confession

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Almighty God, our Redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[BASED ON PSALM 130:3-6]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they*

*perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.*

[MARK 12:1-12]

## DEVOTIONAL

Whenever I try to make sense of suffering, I end up in the same dilemma. On one hand, I know that my hardships and afflictions are relatively insignificant compared to what I see around me; much less, what I am aware of around the world. On the other hand, I cannot deny that I get sick, stretched, slandered, and snubbed. Privileged as they are, I feel burdened by my circumstances and frustrated with my struggle against sin. It's dishonest to say I don't suffer, at least from my perspective.

So how are we to view the various forms of hardship and trial that we face? What is the relationship between our faith and suffering?

Some teach that Jesus suffered so we wouldn't have to, but an honest assessment is that no one escapes suffering in a fallen world. It is more than physical hardship. It's also emotional pain, relational woes, soul unrest, and spiritual attack. Jesus' death does not take away our suffering, but it gives profound meaning and purpose to it.

Consider James' exhortation to those who suffer: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).

I said previously that suffering happens *to* us. We cannot control our circumstances, but we can control how we think about them. Dan McCartney comments, "Knowing how to interpret events and actions is a large part of wisdom, and the faithful attitude of the Christian is one of joy."

We can rejoice on two accounts. First, suffering provides a context for our faith to mature. The "trials of various kinds" represent the pressures of life that threaten our sense of well-being. When we are sick or stuck or grieved, we tend to doubt God's sovereignty and goodness in our lives. Every test of our body or mind or emotion is fundamentally a "testing of our faith" (1:2). In other words, the quality of our faith is proven in suffering, tested and shown to be genuine. In the way that an object is proven to be gold in the fire, the "proof" of our faith is in the "fiery trial" (1 Peter 4:12). Whether we are talking about common adversities or more acute hardships, we can embrace and even rejoice in suffering because we know that it produces character and hope and maturity (Romans 5:3, James 1:2-4).

Second, suffering focuses our hope on the consummation of all things, when God "will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:4). Just as Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrew 12:2), so too we look to the day when the steadfast will receive the crown of life (James 1:12).

Wisdom, suffering, and maturity are all bound together in the person and work of Christ. He “became to us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30), and he was “made perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10). So then: we are justified by Christ’s suffering and sanctified by ours. By this we are reminded that suffering is not a setback to our agendas, but rather an orientation to God’s agenda, which is to form the character of Christ in us.

Ultimately, God does not ask us to explain suffering. He asks us to rejoice in it and endure it.

### REFLECTION

1. *How have you questioned God’s sovereignty or goodness in your life?*
2. *How does the desire for comfort over character play out in your life?*
3. *Are you willing to ask God to purify your faith?*

### Closing Prayer

O God Whose will conquers all, there is no comfort in anything apart from enjoying thee and being engaged in thy service; Thou art All in all, and all enjoyments are what to me thou makest them, and no more. I am well pleased with thy will, whatever it is, or should be in all respects, And if thou bidst me decide for myself in any affair, I would choose to refer all to thee, for thou art infinitely wise and cannot do amiss, as I am in danger of doing. I rejoice to think that all things are at thy disposal, and it delights me to leave them there. Then prayer turns wholly into praise, and all I can do is to adore and bless thee.

[VOV]

## Call to Worship

*Praise the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord, give praise, O servants of the Lord, who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God! Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing to his name, for it is pleasant! For the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession. For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. Your name, O Lord, endures forever, your renown, O Lord, throughout all ages. For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants. O house of Levi, bless the Lord! You who fear the Lord, bless the Lord! Blessed be the Lord from Zion, he who dwells in Jerusalem! Praise the Lord!*

[PSALM 135:1-6, 13-14, 20-21]

## Confession

Lord, You come to us, but we do not recognize You; You call, but we do not follow; You command, but we do not obey, You bless us, but we do not thank you. Please forgive and help us. Lord, You accept us, but we do not accept others; You forgive us, but we do not forgive those who wrong us; You love us, but we do not love our neighbors. Please forgive and help us. Lord, You showed us how to carry out Your mission, but we still insist on our own; You identified with the poor and needy, but we seek our own wants and desires; You suffered and died for all, but we turn to our own comfort. In the midst of our lack of faith, You are always faithful! Please forgive and help us, You are the faithful one! Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him.*

[MARK 12:13-17]

### DEVOTIONAL

The forty days of Lent parallels the forty days that Jesus went without food in the wilderness, so one of the ways we identify with his suffering is by practicing self-denial. Whether it's food or TV or "me-time," we deny ourselves particular comforts and

pleasures as a way of remembering what he endured. The point is not to manufacture suffering, as if we could earn some kind of righteousness through self-denial. Our heart in Lent is simply to de-clutter our self-absorbed lives. Making room to remember how our Lord suffered for us.

It began in the wilderness: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry” (Luke 4:1-2).

The striking thing in this story is that Jesus went into the desert under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He chose this suffering. Indeed, his whole life was a choice to enter into our suffering. Again, we are not to go looking for hardship. “Each day has enough trouble of its own trouble” (Matthew 6:34, NIV).

God does not tell us to choose suffering, but that does not mean he will always keep it from us. Jesus was in the wilderness because the Holy Spirit led him there. Further, the Apostles were adamant that Jesus’ death at the hands of sinners was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). The testimony of Scripture is that Christians need to embrace suffering as part of our calling and endure it as part of our witness:

- » “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).
- » “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).
- » “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Our wilderness is not literal, but it is very real. We are tempted – perhaps even determined – to sustain ourselves, to escape our vulnerability, and to chase our aspirations without thought of others.

But Jesus offers us another way, a humble way that waits patiently – despite the suffering – for the Spirit of God to direct our steps. He reveals to us what it means to embrace our humanity without short cuts.

“The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread’” (Luke 4:3). Certainly Jesus could have done this, but the lack of bread revealed a deeper hunger for God, and a deeper satisfaction of being sustained by God.

“And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him ... worship me, it will all be yours” (4:5-7). It would all be his eventually, but to have it now would be to have it without suffering and death. How often do we worship whatever promises to give us what we want now, without inconvenience or discomfort? But Jesus worships God alone, not because it is easier, but because it is truer and far better.

“And [the devil] took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you’” (4:9-10). Had Jesus done this, he could have ended all this temptation and trial. How often do we call upon God for miraculous solutions to our suffering, not because we trust him in our circumstance but because we want out of it? But Jesus would not put God to the test.

We live into our in-Christ-humanity by surrendering to the Holy Spirit, wherever he may lead us. This season is about waiting, maybe even suffering the loss of things that have come to define us, because we know that our life is dust, and because we are looking forward to resurrection life.

### REFLECTION

1. *How does your inclination to avoid hardship hinder your ability to follow Jesus?*
2. *How does the Spirit’s presence in your suffering comfort and strengthen you?*
3. *Is the Spirit currently leading you somewhere you don’t want to go?*

### Closing Prayer

O Holy Spirit, as the sun is full of light, the ocean full of water, Heaven full of glory, so may my heart be full of thee. Vain are all divine purposes of love and the redemption wrought by Jesus except thou work within, regenerating by thy power, giving me eyes to see Jesus, showing me the realities of the unseen world. Give me thyself without measure, as an unimpaired fountain, as inexhaustible riches.

[VOV]

## Call to Worship

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them. The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!*

[PSALM 115:1-8, 16-18]

## Confession

O Christ, out of your fullness we have all received grace upon grace. You are our eternal hope; you are patient and full of mercy; you are generous to all who call upon you. Save us, Lord. O Christ, fountain of life and holiness, you have taken away our sins. On the cross you were wounded for our transgressions and were bruised for our iniquities. Save us, Lord. O Christ, obedient unto death, source of all comfort, our life and our resurrection, our peace and reconciliation: Save us, Lord. O Christ, Savior of all who trust you, hope of all who die for you, and joy of all the saints: Save us, Lord. Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us. Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us. Jesus, redeemer of the world, grant us peace. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong."*

[MARK 12:18-27]

## DEVOTIONAL

There are many prophecies in the Old Testament about the Messiah, some of which describe the suffering that he would endure. In Psalm 22, David's prayer depicts the anguish that Jesus would experience in his death. Notice how accurately this foretells the words and experience of Jesus:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? ... But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" ... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet; I can count all my bones; they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:1, 6-8, 14-18).

This psalm was written about six hundred years before Jesus was born, before crucifixion was even invented. So when Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was revealing himself as the Messiah. But more than that, he cried out because the pain of abandonment was overwhelming. What he had tasted in the garden was now being poured out in its fullness upon the beloved Son.

Jesus suffered more than anyone has ever suffered. If you experienced the wrath of God against sin in this way, it would still not approach the degree of suffering that Jesus endured. He had never experienced sin or separation from God and he bore the entirety of humanity's sin on the cross. No one has ever suffered like Jesus suffered.

We also see here that nobody has ever obeyed like Jesus obeyed. He turned to God even while he was being condemned. He was faithful even while being forsaken. No one has ever trusted and obeyed like this.

Jesus is described as a worm and not a man. This is an interesting metaphor in the context of persecution. When I am insulted or accused or mocked, my inclination is to defend myself. The human tendency is to be annoyed, envious, resentful, anxious, and proud. We are not like worms. We are more like a snake that rears up and strikes back. But Jesus is a worm and not a man. He was willing to let men tread on him. He did not strike back or defend himself. He went humbly and willingly to the cross.

Why did he do this? Because he had his mind set on something else.

Those who have their minds set on earthly things are, in Paul's words, "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18). This phrase indicates that those who spurn suffering and make their primary aim comfort, success, and pleasure are at odds with the cross of Christ, the very symbol of his suffering. To shun our suffering is to shun his. To embrace his suffering is to embrace our own. Paul's deepest desire was "to know Christ and the

power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (3:10).

For this to become our deepest desire, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). So meditate on his life. Let the magnitude of his sacrifice sink in. Let the pain of his suffering be real to you. Let his victory be a groundswell of hope in your soul. Indeed, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:2-3).

### REFLECTION

1. *Have you felt abandoned or forsaken by God? Have you felt mocked or persecuted by others?*
2. *How have you tried to find comfort?*

## Closing Prayer

Strengthen me against temptations. My heart is an unexhausted fountain of sin, flowing on in every pattern of behaviour; Thou hast disarmed me of the means in which I trusted, and I have no strength but in thee. Thou alone canst hold back my evil ways, but without thy grace to sustain me I fall. Keep me sensible of my weakness, and of my dependence upon thy strength. Let every trial teach me more of thy peace, more of thy love. Thy Holy Spirit is given to increase thy graces, and I cannot preserve or improve them unless he works continually in me. May he confirm my trust in thy promised help, and let me walk humbly in dependence upon thee, for Jesus' sake.

[VOV]

## Call to Worship

*Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the inheritance of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy; they are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!*

[PSALM 111]

## Confession

God of mercy, whose Son, Jesus Christ, longs to gather us in the wide embrace of his love, we confess that we have been wayward children. We have disobeyed your commands; our ears have been deaf to your call; our hearts have been cold to your love. In thought, in word, and in deed we have hurt others and dishonored your name. In your great mercy receive us yet again as your well-beloved children, not because we are worthy but for the sake of him who loved us and gave himself for us. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

[MARK 12:28-34]

## DEVOTIONAL

In his letter to those who had been scattered because of persecution, Peter exhorts believers to look to the example of Christ in order to endure their suffering:

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:21-24).

Two themes are woven together here: the example of Christ’s suffering and the saving purpose of Christ’s suffering. Since Jesus suffered for us, leaving us an example, belonging to him means following “in his steps.”

Peter’s elaboration of Jesus’ example clearly identifies him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, where the Messiah is portrayed not only as one who bears our sin on the cross, but also carries the burden of sin to the cross. Just as the Suffering Servant “surely has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4), Peter knew Jesus as one who grieved over sin and as a man of sorrows. Just as the Suffering Servant was “oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth” (53:7), Peter recalls that, “when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten.”

The example of Christ was to endure accusation and insult without responding in kind. He determined to entrust himself to God, who “judges impartially according to each one’s deeds” (1:17). Thus, Peter’s exhortation is to “let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (4:19).

Peter not only saw Jesus as one who fulfilled the actions of the Suffering Servant, but more importantly as the one sent by God to fulfill the purpose of the Suffering Servant. Edmund Clowney draws out both aspects when he writes, “In Isaiah’s songs, the Servant is both identified with the people of God and distinguished from them. He suffers for them, stands in their place, and bears the judgment of their sins.”

In whatever suffering or persecution comes our way, we are to follow in Jesus’ steps: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” This verse underscores the important connection between the example set by Jesus and the means by which we are able to follow his example. We are justified by his suffering, and we are sanctified by ours.

For Peter, Jesus’ sufferings were not merely an example, for apart from the saving purpose of Christ’s suffering, the example is of little value. This is why Peter grounds the imperative in the indicative. We can endure suffering because Jesus suffered for us. We have hope because we have been healed.

That Jesus “committed no sin” and yet was crucified speaks to the injustice of his death,

humanly speaking. However, Peter would have remembered that on the day when Jesus the innocent one was sentenced to death by Pilate, Barabbas the insurrectionist was set free. Likewise, because of the cross the guilty are set free because of the “unjust” substitution of Jesus in their place. This is the just justification of God: “the righteous for the unrighteous” (3:18).

### REFLECTION

1. *How does Jesus’ life challenge you?*
2. *How does his death move you?*

## Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord Jesus, no human mind could conceive or invent the gospel. Acting in eternal grace, you are both its messenger and its message, lived out on earth through infinite compassion, applying your life to insult, injury, death, that I might be redeemed, ransomed, freed. Blessed be you, O Father, for contriving this way; eternal thanks to you, O Lamb of God, for opening this way, praise everlasting to you, O Holy Spirit, for applying this way to my heart. Glorious Trinity, impress the gospel upon my soul, until its virtue diffuses every faculty; Let it be heard, acknowledged, professed, felt. O unite me to yourself with inseparable bonds, that nothing may ever draw me back from you, my Lord, my Saviour.

[VOV]

## Call to Worship

*The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. O you who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!*

[PSALM 97:1-5, 10-12]

## Confession

Lord, we have denied you by refusing to know you. We have betrayed you by keeping our distance. We have mocked you by pretending we are not yours. Lord, we are lost; let your forgiveness find us. Welcome us into your strong, forgiving arms and let us feel reconciled again. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, “How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, “‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?” And the great throng heard him gladly. And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

[MARK 12:35-40]

### DEVOTIONAL

During Lent we give extended thought to the suffering that Jesus endured, but we know the outcome—an empty tomb. For us, this is an exercise in reflection, but for the disciples it was a testing of faith. We see what God was doing in the garden of Gethsemane, and we know the great necessity of the cross of Christ. Otherwise, we too would fall asleep and run for safety. It’s easy to look back.

Jesus saw it coming. Luke says, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Knowing what had to happen, Jesus stayed the course. A serious reflection on his suffering must account for the fact that our Lord looked forward, never back.

We look back all the time, longing for comforts past, wondering what might have been. Even though we have taken up life with Jesus, seasons of suffering challenge our resolve and fix our attention to how things used to be. Our hunger for restoration and relief from burdens turns our heart to the past, but Jesus has only an eye for what is set before him.

The Israelites experienced this in the forty years they spent wandering in the desert. They argued with Moses, idealizing their life in Egypt and questioning the goodness of the Lord. They complained about the Lord's provision, not because he didn't provide, but because they weren't content with what he provided.

The paradox of suffering is that it is actually a gift – one we might like at times to give back – but a gift nonetheless. God gives us suffering as a way of giving us himself, for it is in our suffering that we become acutely aware of his presence and power. Hardship empties us of our self-reliance so that we might soak in what it means that we are children of God, chosen by God and in covenant relationship with him—the very covenant purchased by Christ's blood.

The Israelites in the wilderness and Christ on the cross both stand as a testament, old and new, that God does not forsake his people. More than this, they remind us that suffering is a gift from God that very tangibly embeds his promises in our daily life. Of course, we have to be looking to him to receive it as such.

Ultimately, suffering is about learning to receive whatever God has placed in our hands as his goodness for us today. For Jesus, the journey to Jerusalem was a gift. Gethsemane and Golgotha were gifts. They were not easy gifts to receive, which is why he had to say, “Not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). And it is why he taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done” (Matthew 6:10), because if we are not looking for God's kingdom come, we always be looking back for our kingdom gone.

### REFLECTION

1. *What do you long for from the past?*
2. *How can you see God's goodness in your present hardships?*
3. *What do you need from God to move forward in obedience?*

### Closing Prayer

Fill me with thy Spirit that I may be occupied with his presence. May his comforts cheer me in my sorrows, his strength sustain me in my trials, his blessings revive me in my weariness, his presence render me a fruitful tree of holiness, his might establish me in peace and joy, his incitements make me ceaseless in prayer, his animation kindle in me undying devotion. Send him as the searcher of my heart, to show me more of my corruptions and helplessness that I may flee to thee, cling to thee, rest on thee, as the beginning and end of my salvation.

[VOV]

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve. We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[FROM A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH]



I hear the Savior say, "Thy strength indeed is small;  
Child of weakness, watch and pray, Find in Me thine all in all."

Lord, now indeed I find Thy power and Thine alone,  
Can change the leper's spots and melt the heart of stone.

And when before the throne I stand in Him complete,  
"Jesus died my soul to save" my lips shall still repeat

Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.

O Praise the one who paid my debt  
And raised this life up from the dead

[ELVINA HALL AND KRISTIAN STANFILL]