



“Sanctified Suffering”

1 Peter 3:13-22

by **Pastor Tim Dodson**
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1 Peter 3:13-22 *And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; 16 having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. 17 For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, 19 by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, 20 who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. 21 There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.*

We have been plowing through this book with the greater spirit of Peter's letter in mind. The call of Peter, and yes even ultimately Christ Himself, was and is that we “grow up.” Spiritual Peter Pan syndrome is a chronic blight upon the kingdom of God today, and our oft childish actions and responses are not just stunting our **own** development and blessings, but is having detrimental effects upon the lives of those around us. The child in us can so easily act with selfish disregard and we are then motivated by our emotions and lust. The outcome is the “stumbling” of those around us, and God has promised a response befitting of “tying the milestone around your neck and throwing you into the sea.” And rightfully so, for our actions can thus essentially “hold open the door to hell” for those that we say we love by living out behaviors that encourage them to say “*See! I told you God wasn't real...or God isn't all loving...or that faith and your church are bogus!*” In that air of practical confirmation we can push them away from God, and it ultimately comes because **we won't grow up!** We refuse the difficult aspects of life and faith!

One of the attributes of spiritual immaturity is the need...*the preoccupation*, to avoid discomfort at any price. Part of being an adult is enduring hardship and pain, for indeed life is not easy and to have a life that matters means some pain along the way. Yet it is the way of the world that seeks fervently to avoid suffering at all cost. It doesn't matter whether it is emotional, physical, financial, or spiritual, we want out of it and frankly will generally spare no expense doing so. Such is more than just a “quest” but often incorporates the whole of our being. Every purchase we make, every decision we effect, every relationship we hold dear, every value we embrace, tends to have built within it the seeking of comfort and the avoidance of pain.

Verse 15 calls upon us to “sanctify our hearts.” Such a call represents one of multiple passages that call upon us to participate in the process of the sanctification of God. Many folks will try to lie to you and tell you that you play no part in your sanctification...that it is “all God.” That sounds so spiritual and so holy! Too bad it's not also

“so true.” The problem lies not in our church doctrine but simply a cursory look at scripture will shine light on this simple false doctrine, including this passage before us: “You *sanctify the Lord God in your hearts...*” Jos 3:5 says “*Joshua said to the people, ‘Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.’*”

Regeneration is birth; sanctification is growth. In regeneration, God gives us desires that were not there before: desires for Him, for holiness, and for serving and glorifying His name in the world; a desire to pray and worship; a desire to love and bring benefit to others. In sanctification, the Holy Spirit “works in you, both to *will* and to *work*” according to God’s purpose, enabling His people to fulfill their new, godly desires (Phil. 2:12, 13). Christians become increasingly Christ-like, as the nature of Jesus is progressively formed in them (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19; 5:22–25).

Regeneration is a momentary act, bringing a person from spiritual death to life. It is exclusively God’s work. Our part is merely the decision to let it happen. Sanctification however is an ongoing process, dependent on God’s continuing action in the believer, and the believer’s continuous struggle against sin. God’s method of sanctification is neither activism (self-reliant activity) nor apathy (God-reliant passivity), but “human effort dependent on God’s enabling” (2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 3:10–14; Heb. 12:14). We choose to “abide” in Christ, and asking for His help, we receive it. (Col. 1:11; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:7; 2:1).

One of the problems with an “all God” sanctification motif is that if I am not living holy then in essence it is *His* fault! That’s a blasphemous stance. Sanctify means “*to cleanse, purify, and dedicate our lives in holiness to God....to be “set apart for His exclusive use.”*” We are in truth called to set apart our very hearts and lives, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, to live in the loving of God and to further the kingdom of God. Sanctification is the result of a redeemed and Spirit-filled life and our response to Him who gave it all to us.

It is exactly here that the “fork in the road” of Christianity occurs. Because salvation is a gift and requires only our acknowledgment of our lost state and the surrender to Christ. But sanctification is much more. It is the *reply...the response* to that redemption! Salvation is free. But sanctification is an act of discipleship that can be quite expensive! Sanctification is our “growing up.” Sanctification is our “response.” There will be blood, sweat, and tears. There will be effort, work, and sacrifice. There will indeed be “discomfort.”

Within sanctification lies the acknowledgement of our understanding of the sacrifice and the miraculous that occurred in order to redeem us. And what God is seeking in response is not merely a verbal affirmation, but a physical one. A lifestyle one. Such a forward step is the “proof” of our salvation. Lots of folks will desire the blessing and benefits of redemption by Christ, but are unwilling to actually trust and give back to the redeemer and to “the cause.” They want blessing without sacrifice. They want salvation, but not sanctification. And what a mess that heart causes! No peace. No lasting joy. No strength. No continuance. This is the fella who certainly will fail to “finish well.” We *believe*, but we fail to *sanctify*. We believe *of* Him, but not *in* Him, and therefore are ultimately lost.

The fact is, real growth and its eventual faith *overflows*. It is a living thing. When someone asks us about our lives, we have the answer. It may not be in Greek or with long theological terms. But we know why we are saved and we know what that means to our being! And even more, we *live that grace out*. We speak our testimony via our lifestyle. We express the reality of our redemption through our response to Him...though our very living when the trials come, when the sacrifices are requested, and the enemies of Christ come knocking. And they *will* come. In that moment, we can jump to verbally defend our reputation, or we can live out our lives in such a way that says that Christ is real and is within us. A pastor once told me “you worry about your character, and let God worry about your reputation.”

Verse 18 gives us a very important idea from the use of a very little word: *also*. We indeed will share in unearned persecution and perhaps unearned suffering, but let us remember that we share also in unearned grace. Jesus Christ suffered upon the cross in shame, innocent of any guilt except our guilt which He voluntarily carried to His death. The just suffered for the unjust. He did so because He was willing to keep the priority of eternity over the immediacy of the temporary comforts of this life. He taught us both in word and living that a life of Christian faith is endowed with an other-centered love. Now he is asking us to live that out.

“*For Christ also suffered...*” Christ did it first! All for the bigger picture: to bring us to God which we could never do on our own. He was the grand and final sin offering, putting to death the penalty and the power of sin for us, if we so choose to receive it! Whatever we endure because we are people of faith...however we might be dis'ed because we are children of the light, however we might suffer in this life, Jesus endured it first.

“We are constantly on a stretch, if not on a strain, to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations to advance the Church and secure enlargement and efficiency for the gospel. This trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man, or sink the man, in the plan or organization. God’s plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than of anything else. Men are God’s method. The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men.” (E.M. Bounds)

Our suffering can come from several sources. Sometimes our pain is simply a result of living in a fallen world. After all, things are broken! But let’s be honest, other times our suffering is at our own hand. Free will is a great gift, but it comes with great responsibility. God chose that instead of making us mindless robots or slaves that must do His bidding at every moment, He would rather make us in His image and likeness giving us the power to make decisions that will affect the world around us. We have the power to choose our own path. And whether we choose the right path or the wrong one, there are consequences.

There are “outcomes” when we follow God. We are rewarded with the benefits of living in relationship with Him, His grace flows freely and generously into our lives. There are also effects for rejecting Him and effects for turning away from Him as well. In this life there are always earthly consequences for our decisions and our actions. We “reap what we sow.” Yet we want to find ways out of those consequences...ways to do what we want and for such decisions and actions to not cost us anything. This type of suffering has no righteousness to it, and no redeeming value to the child of God except perhaps a lesson learned! This type of suffering is not dealt out by God, but is a direct result of bad decisions that we will have to live with. Every action has a reaction. Even Newton saw this in his study of physics:

“To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction.” — Newton’s 3rd Law of Motion

As long as we remain faithful to God, come what may, God has got us. If we die, God allowed it. If we live, then He provided it. And the one to fear is not emperor Nero...not any *man*...but a God who can condemn us to an eternity away from him, where our time suffering under the Nero's of this world will seem like a cake walk! Matthew 10:28 reminds us: *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”* No one can truly harm you if you are doing right and pursuing God...no matter how they might try or what they might say.

Throughout the centuries and around the world, there are believers who will quietly affirm that God uses hard times to draw us to Him, to give us a profound happiness in Him, and to build greater Christlikeness and dependence. We cringe when we hear it, because once again, in the flesh, we all abhor suffering! We pray “bring me closer to you, Lord,” and inevitably somewhere in His answer lies a round of trials and suffering. For there’s no nearness to God without dependence on God. And nothing makes us more dependent on Him than when the bottom drops out.

We all admire such a journey, as long as someone else lives it. We go to antique car shows and stand and marvel. Yet the owner could have simply went down to the car lot and bought a new minivan and acquired all the amenities that go with such, including that “new car smell!” But many hours of labor and sweat later, we look at that renovated ride and we are so impressed! You can see the same in a ballet dancer, a pro football player, an astronaut heading to the moon, or an Olympic gold medaler. To win...*to really win*, we must apply effort and endure the pain and suffering to achieve. In the “why” lies the answer. They go through it all for the love of it. They are driven by passion...by thanks...*by love*. Because they love, they “strive”...

Lu 13:24 "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

Ac 24:16 "This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.

Ro 15:30 “Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me...”

We Christians will be delivered from all pain...all “tears...all crying.” But God never says we’ll avoid hardships and suffering now. In fact, He specifically promises them, in verses we seldom post on the refrigerator. “*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). I smile when I read this. It’s like God is saying, “Whatever gave you the idea you wouldn’t suffer?”

The apostle Paul told believers he was sending Timothy to them “*to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this*” (1 Thessalonians 3:2–3). If we don’t know this, we should! When we think of what God has destined us for, abundant life and resurrection come to mind, but trials rarely do. Yet God assures us that that in many cases He Himself, *not the curse or Satan*—has actually *destined* us to suffer. Afflictions are not just inevitable; they’re purposeful. Though they may appear random, they are sometimes the product of God’s intelligent and loving design.

What can suffering do for me? For one thing it can show me the impossibility of finding true happiness outside of God. When what I might have once leaned on for happiness—my health, career, wealth, or popularity—crumbles into dust, the way is cleared for me to see that God is my only solid foundation.

There is no sin in asking God for relief. Nevertheless, every time we ask Him to remove difficulty, we may also be asking Him to forgo an opportunity to declare His greatness or deepen our relationship with Him. When did you last hear someone say, “I grew closest to God when my life was free from suffering”? If asked, “Do you want to be closer to Jesus, and more like him?” we all know what we should say. Yet, if God answered all our prayers for relief from suffering, He would so often be delivering us from the very thing we say we want. Christlikeness is something to long for, not be delivered from. No doubt this is why Christ, in teaching His disciples how to pray, instructed them to pray “Father, *your will be done...*”

It’s not easy to pray, “Please do whatever it takes to make me more like Jesus.”

Since suffering builds strength and character, no wonder the Bible tells us, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness*” (James 1:2–3). How can we possibly welcome difficulties instead of resenting them? By trusting God when He tells us trials draw us closer to Him, mature us, expand our ministry, and prepare us for eternal joy. By deciding it is time to “grow up.” For when we are in love...*truly in love*, “wild horses cannot keep us away...”