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GROWING SOLID THROUGH SUFFERING

1 Peter 5:6-14

by

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1 Peter Lesson 23

Growing Solid Through Suffering 1 Peter 5:6-14

One of the most crucial lessons to learn as a Christian is how to handle suffering. In this fallen world, suffering is a certainty. It may be the physical suffering that goes with living in these frail bodies that get sick and die. It may be the grief of watching a loved one suffer and die. It may be problems stemming from your own sin or from others' sins against you. It may be the common pressures of life, of providing a living and wondering how you're going to pay all the bills. It may be the emotional suffering of struggling with feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, anger, worry, or fear. But wherever it comes from, suffering is inevitable. And, it will make you grow bitter or better, depending on how you handle it.

It is significant that in Jesus' parable of the sower, two of the three soils that failed to produce a crop represent people who did not know how to handle suffering. The rocky soil, Jesus explained, pictures those who receive the word joyfully at first, but do not sink down roots, so that when affliction or persecution comes, they fall away. The thorny ground reflects those who seem to grow for a while, but then allow, among other things, the worries of the world to choke out the word so that it does not bear fruit unto eternal life (Mark 4:16-19). If you don't learn how to handle affliction, worries, and other kinds of suffering, you will not persevere as a Christian. On the other hand, if you do learn how to handle suffering, you will grow solid through it.

Peter here gives us four strategies for growing solid through suffering:

- To grow solid through suffering, humble yourself
before God, resist the devil, trust the Lord,
and stand firm in God's grace with the saints.
1. To grow solid through suffering, humble yourself before God (5:6-7).

“Therefore” connects 5:5 with 5:6 & 7. I would paraphrase (bringing out the nuances of the Greek text): “Because God sets Himself in battle against those who lift themselves up, but gives unmerited favor to those who view themselves as lowly, therefore, lower yourself under God’s sovereign dealings with you, that He might lift you up in due time. You lower yourself by throwing all your anxieties on Him, knowing that He cares for you.”

The Greek word translated “anxieties” comes from a word meaning to divide. Anxieties divide our minds, so that we cannot concentrate on anything else. Someone has defined “worry” as “a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.” Thus worries and anxieties distract us from the productive things God wants us to do and consume us by diverting all our thoughts into these channels of fear.

Why is there a need for humbling yourself in a time of trial? Because at the heart of anxiety is the proud notion that I can handle things by myself. We all have a sinful tendency to lift ourselves up and to pull the Lord down. Even we who have trusted in Christ as Savior, who talk about trusting Him for everything, when it comes right down to it, really trust in ourselves and in our ability to work our way through life’s difficulties. We’ll call on God for a little boost now and then, to get us through something. But we don’t know what it means to cast ourselves totally upon the Lord until He yanks the rug out from under us through some trial that is bigger than us. Even then we tend to scramble to regain control without submitting to God’s mighty hand over us.

At the root of this self-reliance is pride. Suppose you were on a ship which encountered a fierce storm at sea. You don’t know anything about handling a ship in such rough waters, but the captain is a seasoned veteran who has brought his ship safely through many such storms. Wouldn’t it be the height of arrogance for you to go up on the bridge and tell him how to run the ship or, even worse, to take the helm from him? If you were anxious in the storm, your fears would subside if you stopped to think about the captain’s competency. If you had a chance to talk to him, and he assured you that he had been through many such storms, you could relax and trust that he will get you through this one. You still may be in for a rough ride, but you can go through it without anxiety

because you humbled yourself (by not taking control) and exalted the captain by trusting him.

George Muller used to tell the story of a boy who was walking along the road carrying a heavy load. A man came along in a horse-drawn cart and offered him a ride. The boy climbed in the cart, but he kept the heavy load on his shoulders. When the man asked him why he didn't put the load down on the cart, the boy replied that he didn't want to burden the horse! We've climbed into the cart of salvation through Christ. He is in fact bearing our load. Why don't we let go and put it all on Him?

We're prone to doubt two things in a time of intense trial: God's sovereign control over circumstances: "Where is God in all this?" And, we doubt His concern for us: "If God is in control and cares, then why is this happening to me?" Peter says that we must bow and acknowledge God's mighty hand—His sovereignty and power. He wasn't asleep at the helm when this trial hit me. And, we must bow and affirm His loving care—He cares for me personally, in spite of how it may seem in the middle of my crisis. No doubt Peter was recalling Jesus' teaching that if God cares for the birds and for the lilies of the field, then obviously, He cares for each of us (Matt. 6:25-30).

Having acknowledged these two things--God's control and His care--we then cast all our anxieties on Him through thankful prayer: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). F. B. Meyer (*Tried by Fire* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 173) helpfully advises, "Treat cares as you treat sins. Hand them over to Jesus one by one as they occur." I find that often I have to do it repeatedly all day long, confessing my lack of faith, praying at times, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

2. To grow solid through suffering, resist the devil (5:8-9).

No sooner has Peter got us to relax by casting our cares on the Lord than he yells, "Wake up! Be alert! There's a lion on the prowl, and he'll eat you for lunch if you aren't careful!" George Morrison put it: "God does not make His children carefree in order that He may make them careless" (*Morrison on James through Revelation* [AMG Publishers], p. 34). The fact is, in a time of trial,

you are especially vulnerable to the enemy of our souls. You must be sober and alert so that you can resist his attacks.

When it comes to dealing with the devil, Christians often go to one of two extremes: Either they see the devil behind every bush; or, they ignore him altogether. The former are more prevalent in Christian circles now than the latter. These folks see the devil everywhere. They go around casting out the demons of every common cold, the demons of car trouble, the demons behind emotional problems, etc. They often blame the devil for problems that stem from their own sin or mistakes. Many popular books teach elaborate methods to overcome demonic forces, both personally and as a church. But the Bible just tells us to resist the devil. While I enjoyed reading Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness* [Crossway Books], I think we need to be careful to derive our understanding of Satan and demons from the Bible, not from such popular books.

On the one hand, Satan is a powerful unseen foe, so powerful that Michael the archangel did not dare to pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9). We dare not get arrogant and start barking orders at Satan like some tinhorn general, or he will make quick work of us. Probably none of us has ever encountered Satan himself, although he has legions of demons to do his will. But on the other hand, Satan is neither omnipresent nor omnipotent. And, he is a defeated foe. The cross of Jesus Christ spelled his doom and the resurrection sealed it. So we can resist him, firm in our faith, and know that he will flee from us (James 4:7).

Peter describes him as "your adversary, the devil." "Adversary" means an opponent in a lawsuit. "Devil" means "slanderer," one who throws things against you. He is described as the "accuser of the brethren" (Rev. 12:10). His strategy is often to hit you when you're under some intense trial by suggesting either, "God isn't strong enough to deliver you," or "Obviously He doesn't care. If this is how He treats His people, then why are you following Him?" Or, if you've fallen into some sin, he will accuse your conscience, even after you've confessed your sin, by saying, "Some Christian you are! What makes you think you can be forgiven for that one?"

Or, as suggested by Peter's reminder in 5:9b, the devil will get you to think that you're the only one in the world going through the kind of suffering you're experiencing. Your trial is unique! Surely, no one else understands! "They have slain your prophets, and I alone am left!" But Peter says, "No, you're not alone. Your Christian brothers throughout the world are going through similar trials."

Remember that verse 6 comes before verse 9: We must bow before God before we stand against the devil. Resisting the devil is a defensive posture. I don't advise stalking him like a lion hunter. But if he roars against us, we stand firm in the full armor of God and he will flee. Also, we need to understand that we are to flee certain sins, but resist the devil. If you're tempted with sexual immorality, don't stand around rebuking Satan; get out of there (1 Cor. 6:18)!

Many of God's people are vulnerable to Satan's attacks because they're not alert to spiritual danger. If a real lion were on the prowl and had just been spotted outside, would you go for a casual stroll, admiring the flowers? Would you let your children play out there? And yet so many Christians watch filth on TV or in movies, and let their kids watch it, and wonder why they aren't more interested in spiritual things.

Or, they're going through trials, but they forget that they are especially vulnerable. They tolerate their own grumbling or complaining, not realizing that they are playing right into Satan's attack to devour their faith and to discredit the goodness of God. If my children always complained about how meanly I treated them, it wouldn't speak well of me. As God's children, we need to be careful to speak well of our Father, even when He's taking us through trials. To grow solid through suffering, humble yourself before God and be alert so that you can resist the devil.

3. To grow solid through suffering, trust the sovereign Lord (5:10-11).

Trust is implicit in 5:6-7, is stated explicitly in 5:9 (be "firm in your faith"), and is strongly implicit in 5:10-11. Peter is saying, "God hasn't forgotten you in your trial. He is the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ in the first place. Thus you can trust Him to use the trial for His purpose in your life, be-

cause He is the sovereign Lord who has all dominion forever and ever!"

But trusting God has fallen on hard times in Christian circles. It is viewed as about the most impractical thing you can do. If you came to me with a big problem in your life and asked, "What should I do?" and I said, "I think you should trust God," you'd probably go away thinking, "What worthless counsel!" And yet from cover to cover the Bible extols the practical benefits of putting our trust in the living God as the way to deal with our problems!

You ask, "How can I trust God? It seems so hard to do when I'm in the middle of a crisis!" There are at least four ways to nurture your faith suggested in these two short verses (9 & 10):

(1) *Put the trial in perspective.* It will only last "for a little while." You say, "For a little while! I've been going through this suffering for years!" But even a whole lifetime is a little while in light of eternity. Paul had this perspective when he wrote (2 Cor. 4:17-18), "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

(2) *Put God in perspective.* He is "the God of all grace." He is not the God of a little bit of grace. He is not the God of a lot of grace. He is the God of all grace. His grace is like the ocean, a limitless supply, that keeps breaking over our lives time and time again. It will never run out. But remember, God withholds grace from the proud, but gives it to the humble (5:5), those who lower themselves by admitting their total need. So in your time of trial, come as a needy soul and ask, and He will give you abundant grace to meet your need.

Also, to put God in perspective, remember that He is the God of dominion or strength, both now and forever (5:11). He is mighty to save His people from every trial, if it be His will. Even more, He is mighty to save us from eternal destruction. Nothing can separate us from His love and care. In your trial, rehearse in your mind God's mighty strength as seen over and over in the Bible.

(3) *Put God's calling and purpose for you in perspective.* He "called you to His eternal glory in Christ." You didn't come to Him by your own strength or effort. He called you. He didn't call you to condemn you, but to bring you to His eternal glory in Christ. You will dwell in His presence throughout eternity. In your trial, look ahead to what God has promised for those whom He has called, and you can trust Him to bring you through it.

(4) *Put God's purpose for trials in perspective.* He Himself will "perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." Trials are to burn away the dross and refine the gold. "Perfect" means to equip, repair, or render complete. It was used of Peter "mending" his fishing nets (Matt. 4:21). God will put you back together after the trial so that you will be useful to Him. "Confirm" means to fix, set fast, or strengthen. Jesus told Peter that after he was restored from his denial of Jesus, he would "strengthen" [same word] his brothers. The next word, "strengthen," occurs only here in the Bible and rarely in extra-biblical Greek. We don't know how it differs from the previous word. "Establish" means to lay the foundation. Jesus used it to describe the house founded on the rock that withstood the storm (Matt. 7:25).

Thus the overall idea is that the sovereign God will use the trials to establish you in your faith and to equip you to serve others in His cause. So you can trust Him in the process. Thus, to grow solid through suffering, humble yourself before God, resist the devil, and trust the sovereign Lord. Finally,

4. To grow solid through suffering, stand firm with other saints in God's true grace (5:12-14).

This section is the concluding greeting of the letter. But it contains a powerful truth, stated also at the end of 5:9, that you don't go through suffering alone. And there is a strong testimony that what Peter has written is God's true grace and an exhortation to stand firm in it.

Note first that we go through suffering with other believers. These final verses are brimming with warm relationships. Peter commends Silvanus (Silas), his secretary who probably bore the letter to the churches mentioned in 1:1. He was a faithful brother. He had served with Paul on the second missionary journey. He had sung hymns with Paul at midnight in the Philippian jail, as his back

was laid open and his feet were in the stocks. He was no stranger to persecution. Here he is, faithfully serving the Apostle Peter. What an encouragement it is when you're going through trials to have a faithful brother like Silas, who has been through it himself!

Peter sends greetings from "she who is in Babylon, chosen together with you." This most likely refers to the church in Rome, going through the fires of Nero's persecution. Peter probably used "Babylon" as a code name to protect the believers there, as well as for the symbolism of Babylon as the place of exile and wickedness, the epitome of that which is opposed to God. But there, in that center of evil, God had planted His church, and it was linked with these churches in Asia in the great cause of the gospel.

And there was Mark, whom Peter calls his son. He wasn't his physical son, nor is it likely that Peter was Mark's father in the faith. Rather, the younger man had become like a son to Peter as they served Christ together. Mark, afraid of persecution, had deserted Paul and Barnabas, but had grown now into a faithful man, ready to endure hardship for the gospel.

Peter concludes by encouraging the church to give the customary kiss of love, a warm greeting which consisted of a kiss on the cheek (men with men, women with women), as is still practiced in some cultures today. We need not violate our cultural norms by adopting this literally, but we should be genuinely warm in greeting one another. And he extends peace ("shalom," well-being) on all who are in Christ. When we go through trials, we should go through them together, supporting one another as family in Christ.

But also, we are to stand firm together in God's true grace. Peter is referring to all he has written in the letter. "True" grace suggests that there is a false grace. Jude 4 refers to those "who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." False grace portrays the Christian life as a hang loose, go with the flow, don't worry about sin, be tolerant of everyone sort of thing. True grace exhorts us to be holy, even as the Lord is holy. False grace implies that the Christian life requires no effort on our part. True grace is not passive, but active. It teaches that we exert ourselves to stand firm in it, that we endure hardship as we live righteously in this evil world.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Hanson, a medical missionary in Central Africa, served the Lord faithfully for years. A rebellion broke out in the country and one night the rebels broke into her room and raped her on the dirt floor. As it was taking place, she cried out to the Lord, "Why are You allowing this to happen to me?" In an almost audible voice, the Lord replied, "When you chose to follow Me, you gave me not only your mind and heart, but your body. They aren't just doing this to you, but to Me. I'm with you."

She didn't tell this story very often, but years later, in the U.S., she was lecturing on a technical medical subject when she felt the Holy Spirit leading her to tell her story. She did and then went on with her lecture. Afterwards, everyone left except two young girls. The older girl came up and said, "That's my 13 year-old sister. Two months ago she was raped in the park and she hasn't spoken since." Elizabeth's eyes and those of the young girl met and filled with tears. They embraced, wept, and talked for two hours. Elizabeth led her to Jesus Christ. That girl is serving Christ today because Elizabeth Hanson grew solid through her suffering and let God use her painful experience to minister to others.

Suffering is never easy. But if we will humble ourselves before God by casting all our anxieties on Him, resist the devil, trust in the sovereign God of all grace, and stand firm in His grace with other saints, we can grow solid through our suffering.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we draw the line between wrongful anxiety and proper concern?
2. How can we know if a temptation is from the devil, who needs to be resisted, or from the flesh, so that we need to flee?
3. Agree/disagree: Trusting the Lord is a very practical thing to do in the middle of trials.
4. Is licentiousness or legalism the bigger problem in evangelical circles? What is God's true grace?

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