

Living with Suffering

1 Peter 3:8-22

30 August 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How do you respond to suffering in a godly way?

Big Idea: Christians fear God even if that means suffering because blessing comes from doing good and not evil.

Introduction

What does the good life look like to you?

Perhaps it'd be receiving an inconceivably large amount of money so that you can retire and spend your days doing whatever you want.

I'm not going to lie, the idea of being able to freely travel the world and then have a tropical paradise to return to sounds pretty appealing to me.

Most of us are much more realistic and modest in what we think the good life looks like though.

The good life might look like those few moments of quiet you can snatch for yourself in the morning.

Perhaps it's coming home after a long, hard day and being able to sit back and relax.

It might be getting married to that girl who you know is WAY out of your league.

Maybe being able to get that toy that you've been really, really wanting.

I think that most Australians would agree that the good life – whatever it looks like – is a life of pleasure rather than pain.

The blessed life is a life that's free from any kind of suffering.

If you don't believe me, listen to the way our community talks about the controversial topic of euthanasia, sorry, "voluntary assisted dying."

We're so committed to the idea that pain and suffering are bad that people feel justified in going to the most extreme lengths to try and avoid it.

It's inconceivable to many people that anything good could possibly come out of suffering.

Which is why our passage today mightn't just sound weird, but downright wrong to our ears.

Peter says that suffering is something that can be embraced when it's put in a heavenly perspective.

I want to be really clear so that you don't misunderstand: this isn't a call to chase suffering.

However, Christians approach suffering differently, when they suffer for doing good.

Outline

We're in this middle section of Peter's letter which's all about living as a strangers in a hostile world.

Living as someone who's in the minority and doesn't quite fit in with the world around them because of believing in Jesus.

Peter says the game plan is to avoid evil and do good in a hostile world.

And the hope is that will win people over to glorify God as they see your good deeds, 2:12.

Peter showed us what this looked like with a few case studies which all had submission in common.

By submitting doing the good thing of submitting to the authorities, Christians will be pleasing God and doing good, 2:15.

Not-yet-Christian husbands would be "won over without words by the behaviour of their wives," 3:1.

However, there are no guarantees.

Sometimes, you'll do good and it won't be seen that way at all.

In fact, it might be interpreted as being aggressive and argumentative.

You might be pestered because you're trying to do good and in more extreme cases, it might mean suffering persecution and even martyrdom for your faith.

This week, we turn from looking at strangers in submission to strangers who suffer.

The big question is: How do you respond in a godly way to suffering?

Christians fear God even if that means suffering because blessing comes from doing good and not evil.

- Our Temptation in Suffering (vv8-12)
- Our Response in Suffering (vv13-17)
- Our Hope in Suffering (vv18-22)

Our Temptation in Suffering (vv8-12)

Our temptation when we suffer for doing good, is to allow the hostility of the surrounding culture to change us.

Avoid the temptation to conform and instead stay strange.

Be a strange community of believers.

Peter gives a neat little description of how strange a church is in verse eight.

Most of us would probably agree that it sounds idyllic with everyone being on the same page and caring for each other like a loving family.

Who wouldn't want the kind of life that will bring happiness and harmony?

Who wouldn't want to belong to an enclave that's a beacon of positivity in the world?

Churches should be different to other groups.

1 Peter 3:8 NIV11 ⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

But that doesn't just happen, it takes constant work and so Peter explains a principle that applies both inside and outside the church.

When we get hurt, often every fibre of our being wants to do whatever it takes to get even.

When you insult me, then right back at you baby.

If we're on the receiving end of someone being downright cruel, then we want them to be on the receiving end the same thing, or worse, because nothing would be too bad them.

That's the temptation we all face.

Yet Peter says that God's way is different.

Instead of responding in kind, respond with kindness and blessing.

Blessing is showing favour, rather than trying to injure.

You have to be really deliberate about doing it, devoting yourself to doing good.

Jesus himself showed his disciples this radical way:

Luke 6:28–29 NIV11 ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.
²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

As we've already seen with the example of slaves and masters, you might get treated harshly for doing what's right.

And yet a Christ-like response is to bless.

That's only possible because Peter's got his sights on the end.

In one of God's glorious ironies, if you bless rather than retaliate, you will be blessed.

Blessing others will be rewarded by God.

Have a look at verse nine:

1 Peter 3:9b NIV11 On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

That might make some Christians a little bit nervous, so we need to be clear about what the blessing is.

The blessing you will inherit isn't a cruisy life in this world with power, health and wealth.

If anything, Peter's saying that you should expect the very opposite – suffering.

The blessing in Peter's mind since the beginning of his letter has been the eternal hope that we're headed towards.

Heaven itself.

And to make his point, Peter quotes from Psalm 34.

If you were to flick back in your Bible, you'd find that it was written by David.

And it was written "When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left."

This describes a time when David was in a tricky spot because he was a wanted man.

He was on the run from the Philistines, King Saul and now he'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire by seeking refuge with a king who knew his history and didn't want to support him.

David knew what it was like to suffer unjustly.

King Saul wanted to kill him, but David refused to do anything to harm the king, even though he was next in line to the throne.¹

Saul even walks into the cave where David's hiding and yet he refuses to harm God's anointed.

Turn from evil and do good, David's quoted as saying in verse eleven, which is exactly how he treated Saul.²

God looks with favour on those who do good, but he stands against those who do evil, verse twelve.

Peter's singing the very same tune that David did.

Keep yourself from evil and do good.

God listens to the prayers of the righteous person, which sounds really similar to what we saw last week in verse seven about husbands treating their wives with respect "so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

Don't give into the temptation to repay insult with insult when you suffer.

Instead, it's an opportunity to bless.

Our Response in Suffering (vv13-17)

Next, Peter moves onto our response in suffering.

Our response is to look beyond our suffering and keep doing good.

Be full of confidence rather than fear because you have the promise of an eternal inheritance.

It seems all very well to bless other people, but does that mean they'll treat you well in return?

"Who will harm you?" Peter asks in verse 13.

That really depends on the timeframe you're looking at.

If you're looking at the short term, suffering may well be the reality.

God gives no promise that you'll escape hard stuff now, but it's got to be put in perspective.

Suffering shouldn't be expected all the time, but it could be at any time.

Remember also that Peter's not just talking about just any kind of suffering, he's talking about suffering because of righteousness.

And he dares to say that if you suffer for righteousness, you'll be blessed.

Verse fourteen:

1 Peter 3:14 NIV11 ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."

No one will be able to do lasting harm and stop you from getting divine favour.

1 Peter is all about living for Jesus in sight of the end.

If you suffer for what's right now, then you will be blessed on the last day.

The only way you can view suffering that way is you take a longer term view.

You won't suffer harm in the ultimate day of judgment when God will reward faithfulness.

As Paul says in Romans:

Romans 8:31 NIV11 ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

We need to remember that, especially when it doesn't feel like you're being blessed.

That might sound extraordinary... that's because it is.

Yet Jesus says exactly the same thing in the beatitudes.

He's not talking about suffering for being rude or evil, but if you suffer for righteousness it's a good thing in God's eyes.

So we need to ask, "Is it really for righteousness sake or am I just being a jerk?"

If it's for righteousness, then take comfort from Jesus' words:

Matthew 5:11–12 NIV11 ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You don't need to fear what unbelievers do or be frightened by their intimidation.

You don't need to fear suffering either, but you do need to have a reverent fear of God himself.

Christians should be the biggest buyers of the surf brand "No fear".

I'm just kidding, but "No Fear" would work well as a Christian brand.

Peter quotes from Isaiah 8, which was an encouragement to God's people to stay the course – keep trusting God – even when it looked like they were going to be creamed.

Instead, Peter says to be ready to give a defence, an apologia, for what we believe.

That's the word we get apologetics from.

You don't have to know all the arguments to be able to give a defence not just about what the Christian faith is, but why it brings hope.

It simply means being able to understand the essentials of the Christian faith and explain it to others.

This could be a formal legal defence in a court of law, but it's more likely a personal conversation.

The way you give this defence matters – it shouldn't be aggressive because abusing isn't going to help.

The point is to win the person, not the argument and so we do that with gentleness and respect.

Not trying to shove it down anyone's throat or acting arrogantly.

In fact, I suspect that the apology, as we've seen already, will be as much about your life as it is about your words.

I remember talking to a family member who would call himself a Christian, but I'm not so sure from the fruit in his life.

The was telling me about how he managed to get rid of the Jehovah's Witnesses who came to the door.

He was so proud of the way he could use arguments to tear them down and send them packing.

I thought, "So what?" Anyone can get rid of someone by being obnoxious, but winning someone for Christ takes grace.

The temptation – as we saw in the first point – is to respond harshly to those who make us suffer.

The good thing about those tough situations is that they give opportunities to testify about Jesus!

A bit like Paul in Philippians 1, who's thankful for being banged up in goal because it's the only way that he gets to witness to Caesar's household.

When we're willing to suffer, it's an opportunity to explain why we're suffering.

Remember that there'll be a day when those who speak against you will be ashamed for what they've done.

There'll be day when God judges the world and shows what they've done was wrong.

So, keep a clear conscience in the way you respond, verse 16:

1 Peter 3:16 NIV11 ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

This's one of the reasons that we need to be careful of reading our circumstances as guidance from God.

Suffering isn't necessarily a sign of God's displeasure towards us.

Christians often talk about God closing a door and sometimes he does that.

But sometimes he sends suffering so that we push through and are refined by it, not so that we'll avoid it.

Suffering isn't necessarily a sign of punishment from God.

Remember the disciples who, in John 9, asked Jesus who sinned – the man or his parents.

Jesus replied that neither the man nor his parents sinned.

His suffering blindness wasn't a punishment for his sin, but a way that the works of God could be displayed.

We praise those who persistently push on in faith through suffering, even though we don't always do it ourselves.

The truly blessed life comes from honouring Christ as Lord whatever our circumstances.

Peter's not saying that suffering is rare, or that it's pleasant, but it is short-term.

Don't be afraid of people who treat you mean, verse fourteen.

The only one that you need to fear is God himself.

Don't let anyone stop your interest in Christ from being keen.

The cost of giving up is much more than the cost of pressing on.

In the words of the missionary, Jim Elliott:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Or in the words of Jesus,

Luke 9:24 NIV11 ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

Be eager to do good, verse thirteen.

Eagerness is that feeling like you've got ants in your pants – you just can't wait to do good and your whole body's full of anticipation.

Our response in suffering is to keep saying no to evil and doing good.

1 Peter 3:17 NIV11 ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Our Hope in Suffering (vv18-22)

What's our hope in suffering?

Well, that's Peter's next point and the last one we'll look at today.

It's heaven, like we've already alluded to.

The hope of heaven is guaranteed on the basis of Jesus' victory.

Don't withdraw due to suffering because Christ is your example and the one who's paved the way.

He's the one who's already gone through suffering to appear in glory.

Even for our Saviour, it was a case of cross before crown.

It was through his suffering on the cross that he was glorified.

What we experience now is temporary and we're just passing through until we'll ultimately share in his resurrection.

These are some really challenging verses – another one of those sections that people say are some of the most difficult in the Bible.

When the passage was read for us earlier, you might've thought, "Wow. What on earth does that mean?"

There are some tricky bits which we'll deal with later, but I don't want us to miss the forest for the trees.

So, we'll start with what's really clear: that Jesus died, rose and ascended into glory.

Jesus knew what it was like to suffer.

He died an agonising death on the cross, which was nothing less than a tortuous death.

Some people say that's proof that God wasn't happy with Jesus – otherwise why let him suffer?

The Bible gives us a different explanation.

As the Son of God, Jesus lived a perfect life and he was sinless.

He'd never done a single thing wrong and yet he was executed as a criminal, sentenced to die on a Roman cross

It was a painful and agonising death.

His suffering was utterly undeserved.

Why would Jesus suffer if he never did anything wrong?

The wonder of the cross is that it's the Great Exchange.

The perfect, sinless Son of God stepped in as a substitute for sinners.

To use Peter's language, it was the righteous for the unrighteous.

Jesus was offered as a sin offering.

Not for his sin but for ours.

If he wasn't sinless, he wouldn't have been a suitable sacrifice.

He was the full and final sin offering that needed to be made.

He was sacrificed to bring US to God.

Instead of us having to pay for our sins ourselves, Jesus has done it for us.

He was paying for OUR rejection of God and OUR rebellion against him.

Jesus died so that people like you and I could have OUR sins forgiven.

All kinds of religious people subject themselves to suffer all kinds of things to try and get close to God.

Some people harm themselves by literally flogging themselves, others deny themselves pleasure, others deny themselves the basic things that we need to live.

Every single one of us have tried to do earn our way back to God one way or another.

Sure, we mightn't be quite as crude as that, but we still think that God should be impressed with us giving money to people who are needy or suffering through church each Sunday.

Thinking that'd be enough is nothing short of wishful thinking because it underestimates just how big our sin problem is.

There's absolutely nothing we can do that'll make us right with a holy God.

Even our best efforts aren't enough to atone for our sin.

The one and only thing that can restore our relationship with God is the perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus died for sin, but that's not the end of the story because he also rose again.

The grave couldn't hold him, death didn't own him.

He was put to death in his body, but God made him alive by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It was through the power of the Holy Spirit that God raised Jesus from the dead, Romans 8:11.

No spiritual force of darkness could hold him in the grave.

Jesus' resurrection shows us that he really did have victory over death – his sacrifice worked!

And to really prove it, he was welcomed home, accepted back into heaven.

From there he rules over the whole universe.

And every single spiritual power is subject to him.

1 Peter 3:22 NIV11 ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

We don't need to fear anything else, nothing else can possibly harm us because Jesus is victorious!

That much is clear: Jesus died, rose and ascended into glory.

He's our hope in suffering.

We can have confidence that suffering won't stop us from getting to the blessing of glory.

In fact, nothing can stop us from getting there.

But after that, things start to get a bit tricky.

What do we do with the imprisoned spirits, Noah and baptism?

They're obviously connected in Peter's mind, but the connection isn't immediately clear to me!

Peter says that Paul's writings can be hard to understand... I'm not sure Peter's any better!³

If you don't get this next bit, that's okay.

It's hard to understand and I'm not sure that I can explain it well.

We don't use it very often, but the Apostle's Creed is a creed that Christian churches have used for a very long time.

It says that after he was buried, Jesus descended into hell.

*He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

Because we're going to learn the Apostle's Creed as part of the New City Catechism, it's important to know that this line was quite a late addition to the Creed.⁴

That line in the creed explains one view – that between his death and resurrection, Jesus descended into hell and preached to dead souls who were alive in Noah's day.

If he preached the gospel, some people have seen this is a kind of second chance draw.

If God would give that generation a second chance to repent after death, then he'll do it for everyone.

I don't think it's likely that's what's going on here.

Peter could be talking about Jesus speaking to the wicked people in Noah's day by his Holy Spirit.

Noah preached righteousness to a very sinful world while he was building the ark.

If Jesus was speaking Noah, as a mouthpiece, you can kind of make it fit.

I don't think that's the most likely thing Peter's talking about either.

Most recent commentators – for a number of reasons that I can't go into – offer an explanation that sounds a bit crazy at first, but seems to me like it's probably right.

The point Peter's making is that Jesus was defeated all supernatural evil forces in his death and resurrection.

I think that's the main point, supported by verse 22 which talks about Jesus' victory over "angels authorities and powers".

What about Noah?

The connection with Noah is the disobedient angels in Genesis 6:1-4 who overstepped God's boundaries in rebellion to him.

Towards the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 6, God gets fed up with humanity's sin.

He decided that he was going to do something about it and so said that he'd send a flood to wipe out sinful humanity.

But God was patient in the days of Noah – he didn't just smite people out in an instant.

He gave them time to repent, although they didn't.

There's no record of people having a go at Noah in the Bible while he was building the ark, but it's reasonable that he suffered insults.

One lesson for us is that even while we suffer, God is giving other people time to repent of their sin.

Peter picks up on this idea more in his second letter.

When the ark was finished though, God sent a flood.

It was a literal flood of judgment on a sinful world.

God is also merciful.

Eight people – all Noah's family – survived that judgment.

They were carried in the ark through those waters of judgment and were saved because of God's mercy.

The small numbers should encourage Christians to persevere, even when we're in the minority.

Peter seems to take a really awkward right angle turn in verse 20 when he starts talking about baptism.

He says that the water of Noah's flood is a type and baptism is an antitype.

It's hard to get your head around what this means, but it basically means that there's a pattern of the same image occurring.

An earlier type explains a later antitype.

Peter says that the floodwaters are a type of baptism.

And then he goes even further and says that baptism now saves you.

Baptism saves, just like the flood waters did.

Confused? Don't worry if you are – lots of very clever people are confused by this.

Peter says that baptism isn't the removal of dirt from the flesh.

Baptism doesn't make you clean, that's not the point.

The point is that through baptism, we can have a clear conscience before God because the waters of baptism – just like the water in the flood – is a symbol of judgment on sin.

Going the other way, Jesus' death was described as a baptism – Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50.

The waters of baptism are the agent of death – death of the old, sinful self.

In the first century, baptism and conversion were completely overlapping ideas.

The apostles couldn't imagine someone who was converted and not baptised, so they used the terms interchangeably.

When you talked about one, you were automatically talking about the other.

In Romans 6:3-5, Paul says that we have died to sin because we were buried with Christ in baptism.

By being united with him, we've died to sin.

And so now, we live with the hope of resurrection in the future.

Peter actually gives us the answer to how we're saved.

We have an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, verse 21.

We've saved through the resurrection of Jesus.

We have the hope of new life in the future because Jesus has risen from the grave.

We're going to have some baptisms next week.

Those getting baptised will give their testimonies and then they'll be put under water.

It's a sign of what's already happened to them – that in Christ, they've already died to sin.

That doesn't mean that they're sinless.

But it does mean that they look forward to the day when they'll be raised with him.

Come along and join in this exciting event which serves as a visual reminder of these truths for us.

Jesus died for the unrighteous and rose again in victory to ascend to heaven.

If you've died with him, united with him as is expressed in baptism, then you can be sure that you will also be raised with him.

Therefore, you don't need to fear.

No spiritual force or power can win against you.

Nothing and no one can harm you.

Jesus is our hope in suffering.

Conclusion

What does the good life look like?

It's not a life that's free from suffering.

The good life is the life in the age to come when we'll be with God forever and sin will be dealt with forever.

In the meantime, we fear God, even if that means suffering.

Not because we enjoy the suffering or because God likes to see us go through it.

We suffer because Jesus would have us keep doing good and not evil.

Amen.

¹ 1 Samuel 24 & 1 Samuel 26

² There's also a neat little play on the doing good and evil theme with Nabal and Abigail in 1 Samuel 25.

³ 2 Peter 3:16

⁴ See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

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Big Question: How do you respond to suffering in a godly way?

Big Idea: Christians fear God even if that means suffering because blessing comes from doing good and not evil.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the 'good life'?
2. What are some ways that Peter's approach to suffering is different to the modern Australian approach to suffering? Is suffering good?
3. What are some temptations we face when we're suffering?
4. Is suffering a sign of God's displeasure towards us?
5. How does the quote from Psalm 34 (vv10-12) support Peter's argument?
6. Why should Christians bless, even as we suffer?
7. What kinds of situations might you need to give an answer for the hope you have?
8. "How you say something is just as important as what you say." How does this principle apply to the way we give an account for the hope we have?
9. What is the clear, main point of the tricky verses 18-22?