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Suffering Is Redeemable

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to 1 Peter 3:13-22 as we continue our series from this message of encouragement to the troubled church scattered throughout Asia Minor. We have noted how that Peter, the “Apostle of Hope,” addressed the believers as God’s elect “strangers in the world,” who were facing mounting opposition and the beginning of more severe persecution. In Chapter 2, Peter gives instructions on how to relate to the worldly culture in which these scattered believers found themselves. As much as possible, we followers of Jesus are to live in a spirit of submission to those God has providentially placed over us, whether in government, employment or marriage. And last Sunday, we noted from 3:8-11, that even during our sojourn in a hostile worldly environment, we are to be a blessing and God’s will is to bless us. We are to bless and be blessed in our efforts to love one another in the Body of Christ and also those in the unbelieving world around us.

In today’s text, Peter comes to the main theme of his letter of encouragement, which is the fact of the believer’s suffering for doing good, which is the pathway of blessing that God has chosen for us. Today we will note that the suffering to

which we have been called is redeemable, that is, can become a blessing, something of great benefit to us and to those around us.

Follow as I read **1 Peter 3:13-22**.

“Redemption” is one of the key words in Scripture to describe what God has done for us in Christ, and is one of the ways we speak of our salvation through faith in him. It was primarily a market term, used in referring to the process of paying the price to liberate a slave and to purchase his or her freedom. Slaves could be redeemed as well as personal property that had belonged to someone else and needed to be bought back, or redeemed. A “ransom” is the price paid to liberate or redeem someone held hostage, such as the one million US dollars that were paid recently to liberate Paul and Rachel Chandler from their one-year-long and arduous captivity by Somali pirates (See <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/east/British-Couple-Kidnapped-By-Pirates-Arrive-Home-108531234.html>). Jesus said that he had come on a rescue mission to give his life as a ransom for us (Mark 10:45). Jesus’ redemption becomes efficacious through our faith in Christ, as we see in passages like Romans 3:24f (Marshall, 560, *NDT*).

In addition to the biblical meaning of salvation and “to buy back from captivity,” “redeem,” among other uses, means to “convert into something of value” (Webster). Certainly, when Christ saves us from sin and death, he transforms our lives and our everlasting destiny into something of great value in his and in our sight. Our new life in Christ through the new birth (1:3) has given us a living hope, and we were redeemed, Peter also says, at the ransom price of the precious blood of Christ. The price for our redemption was far more than the worth of perishable things such as silver and gold,” or even the million dollars that freed the Chandlers (1:18f).

Christ redeemed us from “the empty way of life” we had inherited (1:18) and has made our lives of inestimable worth in his sight. And in our text for today, we see that Christ also redeems all of our life experiences, including the experiences of suffering and trouble. As Peter gets into the heart of his message to encourage believers facing suffering and persecution, he makes it clear that suffering will not be in vain or useless, but will be transformed into something useful to us and in God’s Kingdom. Christ transforms suffering, for our good and his glory.

I recall how my mother redeemed by converting the otherwise useless into something of value. In the old days of my childhood, I recall grocery shopping with my mother and noting how, with every purchase, she received sometimes pages of what were known as S&H Green Stamps. She had empty Green Stamps booklets, and she would paste the Green Stamps into the pages of the booklets until a booklet was completely filled. Being a large family of big eaters, our grocery purchases were sizable, so she would fill the booklets fairly quickly. Once she had the required number of Green Stamps booklets filled, she would go to an S&H Green Stamps Redemption Center, as they were called, in order to use these booklets to purchase an item she could use in our house. She would purchase a small appliance like a toaster or an electric

mixer, or whatever she needed that could be bought with these otherwise useless stamps. A redemption center offered the possibility of receiving something of value by means of something that otherwise was totally useless.

Our text tells us about the possibility of a great work of redemption. Suffering and trouble are in themselves, not just useless but are negative, potentially destructive forces. Apart from Christ's work of redemption, suffering and trouble, which are initiated by the Satan himself, have great potential for evil. But a look at our text will show us that suffering is redeemable, can be transformed into something of true value. First, suffering is redeemable because...

Christ transforms suffering

As we noted in the previous passages of this letter, Peter urged believers to do all within their power to obviate accusations that this new "movement" of followers of Jesus of Nazareth was a subversive threat to the culture around them. So Peter is saying by implication...

Don't ask for trouble

Perhaps this passage was written a year or two before intense persecution against the church broke out under Emperor Nero. Otherwise, the answer to Peter's rhetorical question in verse 13, "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?" would have been a resounding "Nero!" At least at this time, not all were being aggressively persecuted, and Peter is saying that no one should unnecessarily ask for trouble or "be too quick to paint themselves as martyrs" (Jobes, 227f).

Peter implies that there is a suffering that is not redeemable, which is suffering for doing evil or causing offense by unlawful or ungodly conduct (13, 17). He notes that, in normal life we can usually avoid unnecessary suffering through good conduct. As we noted in the preceding passage beginning in 2:13, followers of Christ are called to submit to and honor authorities as much as possible, short of having to resist human authorities in order to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Peter's message agrees with Paul, who says that "If it is possible, as far as it depends on (us), live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). We are to pray "for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness," which allows for the free proclamation of the gospel (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

By being respectful of laws and society's norms we can normally avoid unnecessary trouble, and if we act disrespectfully and irresponsibly, we bring discredit to the gospel message. Also, we ask for trouble when we are disrespectful of and insensitive toward others by being too aggressive with our evangelism. I recall a boyhood classmate, who not only looked offensive in his personal appearance carrying around his big black Bible, but also alienated

and offended people by his preaching judgment in the hallways of the school. He asked for trouble but always thought of himself, with a martyr complex, as suffering for Jesus.

But Peter moves on to say, that though suffering may not be the norm of the way you are treated, when it comes...

Don't be surprised

There are those, today as in the 1st Century, who, even though they live good lives in submission to societal authorities, will suffer for doing what is right. In fact, some are "so twisted" that they will persecute believers precisely because they are right. Godly behavior often infuriates the ungodly (Davids, 130). The Apostle Paul says that persecution is not a possibility but is predictable:

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be* (emphasis mine) persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

In this Western culture of Christendom, where there is still at least a degree of protection for Christians from overt, physical persecution. But that doesn't mean there isn't suffering and persecution of other kinds. As one evangelical theologian says, some Christians today suffer verbal abuse (and possible job discrimination) for suggesting that the simplest (and cheapest) prophylactic against the spread of AIDS is the practice of Christian sexual morality, which holds that the only context for the right enjoyment of sexual intercourse is heterosexual marriage (Marshall, 114, *I Peter*).

Even when you work as the most conscientious, respectful and responsible spouse, student or employee, you can expect criticism, discrimination and verbal attacks. As Paul reminds us, we're not fighting against flesh and blood, but are in spiritual warfare against Satanic forces, as sophisticated, socially acceptable and politically correct as they are (Ephesians 6:12).

There is the suffering of tribulation or persecution of different forms and varying degrees. This is the suffering that is distinct to the believer, what is suffered for the cause of Christ. We also can most certainly expect the suffering that occurs among humankind in general. As followers of Christ we are definitely not exempt from illness, accidents, natural disasters and other forms of trouble and suffering shared by all humankind in this fallen world.

But what is distinctly different for followers of Christ is the way we respond to these common forms of tragedy and suffering. In fact, it seems that often those who suffer the greatest degree of personal and/or family tragedy are some of God's choicest people. We therefore consider the "health and prosperity gospel" of some faith healers and televangelists to be heresy. Paul himself sought to have the prevailing "thorn in his side" removed, whether it was a physical ailment or an inveterate enemy. But God's answer to him was simply, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In any case, whatever its form in our lives, we are to...

Replace fear with faith

Verse 13 is likely a rhetorical question, such as Paul asks: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:32). As Edwin Blum (239f) points out, in the same passage, Paul says that we are “considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (36) but also, on the other hand, are “more than conquerors through (Christ) who loved us” (37). If so, then Peter is asking, “Who of any significance can do any lasting harm to you?”

I played scholastic American football for ten years, from middle school through college (university). I wasn't especially big as far as football players are measured (these days I would be considered too small for a lineman!), but I was competitive and durable. I have strong bones and a hard head! Never once in ten years did I miss playing in a game. I was often hurt (by blows from bigger players and hard contact) but I was never injured.

Christ reign over our lives to make certain that even though we are often hurt, we will never be injured. I think this is what is meant by this rhetorical question in Verse 13, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” God's people are not sheltered from being attacked or hurt, or even from physical suffering and untimely death from martyrdom. But we are kept from injury to our spirits and to our faith, which is triumphant through Christ.

The key to responding to suffering of any kind is to replace fear with faith. Faith teaches us that God is sovereign over our circumstances and also is a God of perfect love, faithfulness and wisdom. He is able and faithful to enable us to overcome our circumstances with faith, which he says is the victory that overcomes the world (John 16:33; 1 John 5:4). Jesus teaches us that the way to overcome fear of the world or of our circumstances is to fear, that is, reverence him. When we fear him, that is, make him Lord and trust in his love and care and seek to honor him, we don't need to fear anything or anyone else (Luke 12:4-7; Matthew 10:26-31).

And so Peter says we need to worship Christ, stay focused on him as Lord and everything else will be in proper perspective. Our enemies and obstacles will appear relatively small. As Peterson paraphrases Verse 15a, “Keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master” (*The Message*). As is true throughout the gospels, Christ commands the fearful to replace fear with faith, as when he rebuked the fear of the disciples in the storm (Matthew 8:26). The replacing of fear with faith is “the fundamental exchange” which needs to happen throughout the disciple's life (Clowney, 145).

It's this faith perspective that subdues and controls our fears and enables us to trust that even though we don't know what the future holds, we know who holds the future. And we trust that even though God doesn't initiate evil in this fallen world, he allows our circumstances and transforms them into occasions for victory when we exercise reverent faith in him.

During a former pastorate in the US, I visited with a lady in her hospital room, providing what I thought was good pastoral care. After discussing her condition and sharing some verses of Scripture, I offered to lead us in prayer. Before I began, she asked me, "Pastor, what are you going to ask for in your prayer?" I replied that I would ask God to give her successful surgery and heal her according to his will. She then requested that I also pray that her experience of illness and surgery would not be wasted on her, that she would experience everything God had in mind for her.

That was a great reminder to me that God allows our circumstances, including suffering for our faith and faithfully enduring illness and trouble, in order to teach us and to draw us closer to his presence, to teach us to have faith and to not fear. We are not to fear "what they fear," what is intimidating to the unbelieving world (14), but are to focus on Christ who works everything together, including suffering, for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28f).

Peter says we are blessed if we suffer for what is right, and this is exactly what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount. He promises his blessing, his fullness of joy and peace and everlasting reward when we are "persecuted because of righteousness," and suffer insults and false accusations. We are to meet these circumstances with joy and gladness as an act of faith instead of fear, and then we are blessed through suffering (Matthew 5:10-12).

Suffering is redeemable, can be made of great value, Peter continues, because...

Christ testifies through suffering

During times when we suffer persecution or simply the human conditions of illness or tragedy, Christ calls us to be his voices as he testifies to the unbelieving world, as he makes himself known through us. In verse 15 Peter says we are to...

Be prepared to speak

The imagery in our text could imply that believers in 1st Century Asia Minor could expect to be called before Caesar's court to give an "apologia," a defense of their faith as followers of Christ. But Peter is also including the opportunity all are given to share a testimony about the message of Christ and what he has done in our lives. Today when Christians give testimonies it's usually in front of a congregation of fellow believers, but the context Peter sets for us is to speak before unbelievers (Jobes, 230).

Peter says we are to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone" who asks us about our hope in Christ (15). This means we should not live in isolation from unbelievers, but should welcome opportunities for conversation and even friendship with them. And we should know what we believe about Christ and the gospel and be able to articulate the message about him. We don't have to have all the answers, but we should be able to share the essential

truths of the faith and offer to assist the unbeliever in finding the answers that she or he sincerely is seeking.

Jesus instructed his disciples when sending them out on mission to not worry about what to say beforehand when arrested and brought to trial. The Holy Spirit would speak through them the words they would need to say (Matthew 10:19f). But this instruction to the first disciples doesn't rule out the need to prepare a coherent understanding of the faith and practice in rehearsing it. Jesus' saying in the above citation is meant to rule out worry and not preparation, which the Holy Spirit honors and uses as we depend on him (Marshall, *1 Peter*, 114).

With preparation *and* dependence on the Holy Spirit we are to...

Speak up boldly and gently

Peter speaks of the need to speak up "with gentleness and respect," or as in the *NLT*, "in a gentle and respectful way." To "set apart Christ as Lord" (15), is literally to hallow, to reverence Christ and his name, as we are taught to do in the first petition of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9). And the "respect" in giving our testimony is probably referring to the awe and reverence we are to have toward Christ, which is the key to the boldness and confidence of our testimony for him. This respect for Christ "drives out other fears and makes possible an honest and effective response to interrogation" (Michaels, 187). Only this focus on Christ and dependence on the Holy Spirit will enable us to speak with boldness, that "freedom of speech" which characterized the witnessing of the earliest church. (One has wisely commented that it takes more boldness to speak freely when put on the spot by sophisticated worldly people than before a formal court of law. Marshall, *1 Peter*, 115).

Even though we speak boldly and fearlessly, we are to speak with gentleness, in the spirit of Christ himself, who was gentle and wasn't loud and strident (Matthew 11:28ff; 12:18-21, and Piper, 4). Nothing is more ineffective and even offensive than an aggressive approach that seeks to overwhelm with arguments. As one has said, we can win an argument with a know-it-all attitude at the cost of losing a lost soul (Wiersbe, 84). Being bold, gentle and gracious means also that we're willing to share even when we feel the least like doing so (Jobes, 232).

Be authentic and convincing

We need to remember that it is not we who are the real testifiers, but Christ himself who testifies through us by means of his Spirit. He is the one who makes our testimony and the example of our faithfulness in suffering to be powerful and convincing (John 16:7-11). But the Lord Jesus uses us who are living before him a righteous and obedient life that gives the power of authenticity to our testimony for him.

Our testimony isn't really about us at all but is to center on Christ himself. Because of our faithful living people will see a difference in their lives,

something that is painfully missing in their lives. Peter says that unbelievers will want to know about the hope that we have (15). “Hope is what distinguishes Christians from non-Christian Gentiles” (Michaels, 188). As Paul says, the Gentile pagans, like us, were “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). We have been given a “new birth into a living hope,” Peter says earlier in this letter (1:3). It is during our times of suffering, either by persecution or personal tragedy, that we are blessed with a profound hope in God, and the world will sit up and take notice.

Peter speaks about the need for us to have the authenticity of a clear conscience. Our conscience is the inner voice of our consciousness that tells us what we think, say and do is right and in accordance with God’s natural moral law and also the Scriptures. The human conscience can be defiled (Titus 1:15), seared (1 Timothy 4:2), and even evil (Hebrews 10:22), which means that our conscience must be alive and in line with the truth and in accord with the Spirit of God. The conscience of the Christian is like a window that lets in the light of God’s truth. If we are not careful in our walk with God, that window of the conscience becomes dirty and prevents the light of God’s word from shining through to our minds and hearts (Wiersbe, 85).

It’s been said that sometimes a good conscience is the result of a faulty memory. It could also be due to a life that has become desensitized to God’s word and will for our holiness. We need to be careful that our conscience is shaped and kept clean by a life that honors God in every way, through a holy life that honors and bears witness to Christ. How tragic it is when those who profess to be followers of Jesus live in a way that dishonors Christ and certainly discredits the witness he would give through the lives of those who claim to be his followers.

This image of living with a clear conscience like a clean window is supported by *The Message*, which paraphrases Verse 16 this way:

“Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They’ll end up realizing that they’re the ones who need a bath.”

And so Peter says that your attackers and accusers will become ashamed of their slander once your integrity shines forth convincingly (16). We need to remember that Christ is testifying through us and will honor our faithful living and speaking, as he speaks his gentle yet powerful, convincing words through us. Suffering is made redeemable because Christ testifies through us in the midst of our suffering.

At face reading, verse 17 sounds like a truism. Likely, however, Peter is contrasting the fate of the faithful witnesses for Christ with that of those who remain under the power of the Evil One, those who slander God’s witnesses and who will stand in shame before God’s throne of judgment (Michaels, 192).

Peter reminds us that we are blessed with our suffering because in our suffering we are following in the footsteps of Jesus, who suffered and died to

bring us into a saving relationship with God (18). In this way we are sharing in Christ's sufferings and are experiencing deep fellowship and unity with him (Philippians 3:10). Also, in our living a life of suffering love we are bearing witness to the reality of Christ in us. In suffering we have the occasion of Christ's testimony through us. This is alluded to when Paul speaks of filling up what is missing in regard to Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24).

But also suffering is redeemed, transformed, because...

Christ triumphs over suffering

This message of Christ's triumph was a great encouragement the church facing and undergoing persecution. Christ triumphs...

Through his cross and resurrection

Christ is not only our pattern for suffering faithfully, but his death and resurrection are the promise of the victory and vindication of all who trust in him. Even though our bodily resurrection remains as our future hope, we already, because we are given new birth, participate in Christ's victory over death and live now in his resurrection power.

Verses 19-20 is "a difficult passage" that has been "widely interpreted" in several ways. Suffice it to say that Peter is saying that Christ "proclaimed his victory over the evil spiritual powers after his resurrection" (Moo, 2,128).

When you visit a bookstore these days, you are likely to see an entire section of books devoted to "spirituality," which will have nothing to do with biblical spirituality, but will offer New Age and Eastern religion-type spirituality (Marshall, *1 Peter*, 117). People in this culture are interested in spiritual powers, which are marketed on television by fortune tellers and astrologers. But we who are in Christ are blessed with true spiritual power that comes through the indwelling Christ, the Co-Creator and great Redeemer, our risen Lord and King.

Because of Christ's victory, our baptism is a witness to our victory over the power of sin and death and our living a new life in resurrection power (21). When we observe baptism here at IBC, we break out into applause when the baptized emerges from the water. We celebrate our common triumph over suffering and our eventual vindication in glory. Christ triumphed over his suffering and triumphs over ours also...

Through his reign with all authority

In the closing verse of our text (22), Peter reminds us that Christ reigns from his heavenly throne and that we can be certain that he knows our suffering and keeps watch over our souls.

In one of his Psalms that was written during a time of trial and suffering, David prays that the Lord will list his tears on his scroll and keep them in his record (Psalm 56:8). I like the more literal translation that says the Lord had put his tears in his bottle and recorded them in his book (ESV). Christ hears, knows and understands our suffering and we can rest in his love and care and depend on his faithfulness now and his final vindication and everlasting reward for his faithful.

In our times of trial and whenever we face suffering, we need to hear Elisha's prayer for his servant, Gehazi, that his eyes would be opened to see the hosts of the Lord's army that far outnumbered the surrounding Arameans (2 Kings 6:17). Our suffering will be redeemed for our good and God's glory because Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth, and his power holds sway over anything that might threaten us (Matthew 28:18).

As Luther said, the devil is the Lord's devil, and as we look "behind the scenes" in Job 1 & 2, we know that the Lord tells Satan, who initiates all evil and suffering, "This far and no more." He places a tether on the devil and allows only that which will work for our spiritual good and for his glory.

Conclusion:

Today we can hear and heed the words of Scripture to not fear or be frightened by suffering, but rather we can face it, even the unknown future, with full confidence in Christ's victory and his grace for us who trust in him.

As the psalmist says, the righteous person, one who walks with and trusts in God, has no fear of bad news (Psalm 112:7f). Christ is sovereign and he is triumphant and he desires to bless us in the midst of and even through our suffering.

Christ redeems suffering. He takes what seems harmful and threatening and makes it useful and even our "unexpected pathway to joy" (Crabb). Just like my mother took books of otherwise useless Green Stamps to a redemption center, so Christ takes our suffering to his cross and makes our suffering a great testimony of his grace and of our hope. He also gives us great peace in knowing he has all authority over our lives and that he is leading us to a glorious future of vindication and everlasting compensation for our faithfulness and trust in him.

I pray that those of you outside of Christ will come to him and receive the offer of his saving, redeeming grace. He has paid the price for your ransom from sin and death and will this very day deliver you to new life and also will make your life of great significance, giving you his loving presence and making your life a great work of art (Ephesians 2:10). Christ the crucified and risen Lord stands ready to redeem your life.

He calls us all today to trust him to redeem us from suffering and use our lives as trophies of his grace.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Look at the dictionary definition of the words “redeem” and “redemption.” What is meant in this sermon about how suffering can be redeemed?
2. In the light of verse 13, how can some believers bring opposition and suffering upon themselves and develop a “martyr complex”?
3. Why should we not be surprised, however, when we suffer some degree of opposition or persecution for our faith?
4. What is the solution to our fears of suffering and trials? Read and reflect on Jesus’ words in Luke 12:4-7.
5. Knowing that godly people around the world are suffering and even being martyred for their faith, what do you think Peter means by not being harmed? Compare verse 13 with Romans 8:32 as you answer this question.
6. In verse 15, how does Christ want us to testify for him? In verse 16, what is meant by keeping a clear conscience?
7. Reflecting on verses 18 and 22, what is the key to our certain and final victory over suffering?

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