

The Rewards of Suffering

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In Peter's first letter, he wrote to a persecuted group of Christians who were suffering terribly. In this letter, Peter says many things that may be rather surprising to the modern ear. His words are surprising not because it is a new teaching – it is as old as the church itself – but surprising nonetheless because it is a doctrine that is either neglected or radically modified to accommodate the Western Church. Let's have a look at some of the wonderfully encouraging things Peter had to say to these suffering saints, and pick out some of the gems that God would even want to restore to the church today so that we can gain all the benefits which God intends to give us in our suffering.

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It will be surprising for many modern Christians that Peter begins his writing with the encouragement that God had actually chosen them to suffer for Him! (1 Peter 1:1) According to the Scriptures, the difficult times that the early Christians faced had come upon them because of God's perfect will. God had chosen them uniquely and individually to suffer for Him.

Benefits of Enduring Suffering

Many in that time (and today!) would struggle with embracing this theological concept, so Peter spends the rest of his letter explaining why suffering is actually a good thing for us. Peter wants the Christians to know the wonderful benefits that they can reap from their sufferings and so he strings out a long list of good things which flow from difficulties. He mentions:

a.) God promises a greater eternal **inheritance**, which is '*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*' (1 Peter 1:3-6). The more we suffer in this life for Christ, the greater our eternal reward will be. Therefore, though we may suffer for a short while, these sufferings will produce rewards that will last forever.

b.) Our suffering reveals to us (and all those who are around us, including the heavenly host) that our faith is genuine. Though we are *'tested by fire'*, our ability to pass through these difficulties will *'be found to result in praise and glory'* for God (1 Peter 1:7). When we pass through the valley of suffering, like Job did many years ago, and we continue to glorify God, **it shows that we genuinely love Him**. It reveals to all that we are indeed pure.

c.) Peter makes the remarkable assertion that their suffering is actually saving their souls (1 Peter 1:9) in that it is **making them holy** (1 Peter 1:16) and liberating them from worldliness! (1 Peter 1:18-3:12)

There are some other surprising benefits to enduring suffering. Not only is there an **eternal reward promised** to those who endure to the end, but suffering actually **causes us to stop sinning** and even enables us to **live for God's will** (1 Peter 4:1-12). It therefore has benefits for us even in this life.

Unjust Suffering vs Self-Inflicted Suffering

Peter makes one proviso for obtaining all these blessings: we will be blessed in our suffering so long as our suffering is not caused by our own evil – *'For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it you endure?'* (1 Peter 2:20) On the other hand, it is a blessed thing when *'mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly'* (1 Peter 2:19). Therefore a question we must always ask ourselves when going through troubling times is, 'Did we cause the suffering because of our own evil and sin, or are we suffering because of our righteousness and our desire to please God?'

What makes all of this relevant and even crucial for us as modern believers is that this book teaches us that all true Christians will share in Christ's sufferings (1 Peter 4:12-13) and that, because of this suffering, we can rejoice because this reveals that we are truly blessed and that the Spirit of glory rests on us (1 Peter 4:13-5:11). Peter concludes with, *'My purpose in writing is to encourage you and assure you that what you are experiencing is truly part of God's grace for you. Stand firm in this grace [of suffering]'* (1 Peter 5:12).

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Wow! What a paradigm shift this is! It is my firm belief that this is one of the forgotten doctrines that needs to be rekindled for the modern Church if we are to live lives that truly glorify Jesus. After all, Jesus went before us and modelled the kind of perfect meekness and perseverance through suffering that wins the prize.

I pray that this teaching strengthens you, like it did the early Christians, so that you will understand the wonder of what you may be going through and will persevere to the end, for the glory of God!