

Faith in the Fire

I have titled my sermon this morning – “Faith in the Fire.” We will look at the connection between faith and suffering. Living by faith, the risk, the excitement of doing God’s work, is all well and good until something goes wrong or tragedy strikes. What happens to our faith then? This sermon is a survey of the topic – a birds’ eye view. It will be broad in scope but will not go into depth in any area. Any of the four points this morning could be a sermon by itself, or a series of sermons. My purpose today is to get us thinking about the connection between faith and suffering – the big picture, so that you might begin to view suffering differently in your own life as well as suffering in our world.

Here are the four questions we will look at briefly in the next few minutes. First, Should Christians Expect to Suffer? Second, What Is Suffering Anyway? Third, How are faith and Suffering connected? Fourth, What Do You Do When You Suffer?

Should Christians Expect to Suffer?

Kids’ listen to this, I want to ask you about it. Several years ago I was flipping the channels on a Saturday morning and I came across a Christian kid’s show on TV. The show had a Western motif, and the sheriff gathered a bunch of kids around the campfire. He said, “Kids – If you have strong faith in God – God will bless you.” But he continued, “Did you know that there is no need for you to ever get sick? If you get sick - just pray against the sickness, and if you have faith, you will become well.”

The question raised by the Sheriff is this, “Should a Christian Expect to Suffer?” The sheriff’s answer to that question was, “no.” Kids I wanted you to listen to me - you need to learn at

an early age that not everything you see or listen to on TV – whether it is Veggie Tales or a Christian TV show – not everything is true. Where must we go to find whether something is true?

That's right – the Bible. Let's look at these Scriptures:

- “Now, a little while you may have to suffer grief.” 1 Peter 1:6 Peter said – hey get ready for it – it is coming.
- “Consider it joy when you suffer.” James 1:2 James says not “if”, but “when.”
- Suffer hardship with me...as a good soldier.” 2 Timothy 2:2-3. Paul issues a command – I'm suffering – come join me – an invitation to suffer for Christ.
- “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow. 1 Peter 2:21. Christ suffered, not so that we would not have to suffer, but to give us an example of suffering.

Should Christians expect to suffer? Kids? Yes. Even those who believe in God will face sometimes very difficult and sad situations. Larry Crab wrote: “God has not promised us a better life of blessings in this world. Blessing may come to faithful people. They may not come to faithful people. Rain falls on the godly and the ungodly. So does hail.” Larry Crab, Soul Talk, p. 85

What Is Suffering, Anyway?

But now we move to our second point – “What is Suffering Anyway?” You might now wonder what it is I am talking about. I would like to briefly share with you four different types of suffering in the Bible.

First, we can suffer, as a consequence for our sinful choices. I lie and that breaks trust in my marriage. I steal from my Mom's purse, and I get a consequence. Also, God sometimes punishes our sins, creating even more discomfort in my life. This type of suffering is self-induced suffering -

avoidable suffering. Peter says, “Make sure none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublemaker” (1 Peter 4:15).

The second type of suffering is suffering as a test of your faith, *from God*. The Greek word for this type of suffering is “*peirasmos*” which means “An attempt to learn the nature of character of something through a test or trial” (BDAG). 1Pet. 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you (*peirasmos*), which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

You might say – “That doesn’t sound right!” – that God Himself would allow difficulty into my life! But think of the disciples. Didn’t Jesus lead them into life-threatening storms, financial challenges and political nightmares – as part of His discipleship program? I love the way the English Poet put it:

What need of faith, if skies were always clear?
‘Tis for the trial-time that this was given.
Though skies be dark, the sun is just as near,
And faith may find him in the heart of heaven.
- Gerald Massey

The third category of suffering is suffering because you are a believer. This is a large category of suffering in the Bible – this is the suffering that Christ modeled for us. You may suffer as a Christian because you will not compromise at work and lose a promotion. You may face rejection or embarrassment because of your faith. You may be called narrow minded. Someday, we may join the persecuted church and face loss of homes or lives. 1 Peter 4:16 says, “But if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in His name.” While suffering for our own foolishness is not commended, to suffer for Christ’s name brings the highest glory to Christ.

The fourth category of suffering is suffering because we live in a fallen world. This catches all the other general tragedy and suffering that we face, like the death (James 1:27), sickness, pain

(John 16:21) and life just going wrong (Acts 7:10). The Greek word that describes this type of general suffering is *thelipsis*, which means pressing, pressure – trouble that inflicts distress, oppression, affliction. (BDAG). We live in a fallen world that presses us from the outside and squeezes us. The visual picture is squeezing until something bursts. Have you felt like that recently? Pressure that just squeezes you? That is the reality of living in a fallen world.

How are Suffering and Faith Connected?

Christian should expect to suffer. We may suffer, unfortunately, as a consequence to sin, or as a test from God to test our faith, perhaps just because we claim the name of Christ, or because we live in a fallen world. Now our third question – What is the connection between faith and suffering? There is a strong connection.

First, which we have seen already is that suffering tests our faith. God wants to see what is there, is it a genuine faith or not? Think of it this way. God tests our faith and desires us to succeed. Satan, tempts us to leave our faith and desires our failure. It is like tests in school. We might not like them, but it gives the teacher an indication on whether we have learned anything. God is interested in us growing and will give us not easy tests, but difficult tests that challenge and stretch us.

Second, suffering matures our faith. Suffering causes our faith to move from being an immature faith to a grown-up faith. Suffering produces in us endurance and maturity, James 1:3-4, it molds our character Romans 5:1-5, and brings glory to Christ, 1 Peter 1:7. Dr. Stanley Toussaint told us in class one day, “Show me a Christian who has not suffered, and I’ll show you a spiritual wimp. You can’t have maturity without suffering. It is just that simple.”

Third – Suffering keeps our faith in God. When everything is going well, we tend to trust ourselves. We say, “Look at what a good parent I am!” “Look at what a good pastor I am.” “Look at what a dynamic businesswoman I am.” Suffering, though, draws us back to Christ. Paul said, “We

had the sentence of death in ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” 2 Cor 1:9. Peter said of suffering, “You were straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd.” (1 Peter 2:25)

What Do You Do While Suffering?

Should you Expect Suffering? Yes – What kind? It could be a result of your own sins – that is the type that could be avoided. It might be a test from God to prove your faith genuine, or suffering because you are a Christian, or just pressure from a fallen world. Suffering and faith, therefore are strongly connected and suffering has a positive outcome in God’s economy – proving our faith to be the real deal, maturing us and drawing us back to Christ.

Now, the final question, and this becomes an application point for us – “What do you do when suffering?” If you are suffering today in some way – I want you to listen. I have found three things that we should do while suffering.

First, is to pray. James said, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” The most difficult hour of D.L. Moody’s life came when traveling from England to the United States, there was an explosion and the ship was sinking without power. He wrote in his autobiography, “It was the darkest hour of my life. I could not endure it. I must have relief, and relief came through prayer.”

The second things for us to do while suffering is to be comforted. Often when going through a bad time – we want to be alone – isolate. And while that might be OK for a time – it can be devastating. We need one another – God uses people to provide comfort – allow yourself to be comforted by others. Paul said, 2Cor. 1:4 (God) comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

The third command for us during times of suffering is to endure. There are many, many scriptures on this. The one I have memorized is Romans 12:12. τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες. In affliction, suffering – bear up under it. When everyone else runs, you hold your ground, the Bible says. In the early church people who had originally professed faith in Christ were abandoning ship, because of suffering. This is not what I signed up for! To lose my house, face punishment, ridicule. I'm going back to Judaism, or to my Greek Gods. And the same thing happens today. And this is not limited to leaving Christianity. 30% of students at Dallas Seminary who start their degree do not ever finish. Why? Many times because of difficulty – and so they quit. Studies show that people are leaving the church in record numbers – why? Difficulty – conflict – rather to endure and work through it – we flee to what we think is safety. When you face difficulty – endure it. Persevere through it. And bring glory to God.

Conclusion

I don't know everything you are going through this morning, or what you might face later today, or this week, or this year. But I hope it will not catch you off guard. Suffering will come. When it does – take some time to think about what type of suffering it is. Did you bring this on yourself? What responsibility do you have in this? Do you think this might be a test from God in your life? Are you being persecuted because of your faith? Or are you facing yet another difficulty that comes from living in a fallen world?

Then, remember to rejoice in your faith – because faith in the fire produces some good things – it shows where you are at spiritually – it is a test. It will grow your character in ways not otherwise possible, and if you were straying like a sheep – suffering will get your attention – it is God saying – come back to the Shepherd. And while this is going on – Pray – pray for peace, pray for wisdom, pray for endurance. Second – accept comfort from others. You are human and you need the body of Christ. Let me pray with you – accept a friend to bring you a meal or take you out for

coffee. And through it all – endure - because the Bible wants us to endure through difficulty – don't give up. I know it is hard. Our faith will not always be in the fire – one day it will be in the Son – forever at peace and forever free from suffering. But not yet – not yet. Let's pray.