

Learnings From Peter: Rewards And Suffering

Contributed by Dr. Madana Kumar, Phd on Jun 2, 2021

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20, Matthew 16:21-22, 1 Peter 1:6-7, 1 Peter 2:20-22, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 Peter 4:12-14, 1 Peter 5:9, 1 Peter 5:10-11

Denomination: Evangelical/Non-Denominational

Summary: The issue of pain and suffering is much known. Yet, we struggle to make sense of it or react to it the right way. Let us learn from Peter on how not to, and how to, address this issue.

Learnings from Peter : Rewards and Suffering

Past 15 or so months have been a series of struggles for many of us. It all started with the Wuhan virus and then it went through the cycle of restrictions to complete lockdowns to partial opening up to elections to the second wave to the complete lockdown once again. Amidst all that several of us got affected personally, several of us lost our loved ones, either due to pandemic or otherwise. Several of us have not met our loved ones for many months and more. I am sure there is not a single soul who can say that we have not suffered during these past several months. One way or the other, suffering and pain has come knocking on our doors. And we have all responded differently to that knock.

That is what prompted me to pick up Peter, and study his responses to suffering from both sides of the cross. I have titled the Study "Learning from Peter: Rewards and Suffering"

Let us look at Peter's response to suffering before the cross.

Let us study Matthew 16:13-20 (NKJV) first. Jesus asks His disciples a very important question. Who do you think I am? The only right answer came from Peter, and that is the time Jesus reveals the plans He has for Peter. Matthew 16:17-19 (NKJV) Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." I want you think about Peter's state of mind here. He had reasons to be proud isn't it? He figured out correctly who Jesus is and he must have felt pretty good about what Jesus said he will accomplish through him, Peter. Jesus is promising to do great things through Peter. He said He will build the entire Church upon Peter, and He will hand over the keys of the kingdom of heaven. It is not a small thing that Jesus is offering Peter. Wow!! That is a great privilege isn't it? I would have been all puffed up if someone offered me something like that. Won't you? I would have wanted that glory to come soon, I would have done anything to reach that stage soon. It was a glorious future that Jesus was offering Peter.

But then comes the dampener. Jesus started talking about the means to reach that glory.

Matthew 16:21-22 (NKJV) From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!". Just Imagine Peter's dismay and disappointment when he finds out

that all the glory that was promised to him is not going to happen, because the one who promised is saying that He is going to suffer and die soon. Suffering and death? Lord, are you joking? I am expecting you to build your kingdom and hand over the keys of your kingdom to me. How can a suffering man, how can a dead man do that? It cannot be. This shall not happen to you. I do want the glory that you promised me, but I do not want to hear anything about the suffering and death stuff.

I would like us to pause here and think for a moment. How close has our own reaction to pain and suffering been like Peter's? "Lord, give me the rewards, your blessings, your healing, and give it now, but Lord, please spare me the suffering and pain". I know none of us would have uttered those words verbatim, but think again. How close have we come to saying such words?

Let us look at Peter after the Cross. For this we have to study the first epistle of Peter (1 Peter). In Chapter 1 Peter talks about suffering being the will of God to purify our faith. 1 Peter 1:6-7 (NKJV) In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,. In Chapter 2 he holds up Jesus as an example to explain why innocent people suffer. 1 Peter 2:20-22 (NKJV) For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth";.. In Chapter 3 Peter exhorts us to consider Suffering as a blessing 1 Peter 3:18 (NKJV) For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,.. In Chapter 4 he says suffering should not surprise us, but be a cause for rejoicing. 1 Peter 4:12-14 (NKJV) Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.. And in Chapter 5 Peter clarifies the role of the church in sharing the sufferings among believers. 1 Peter 5:9 (NKJV) Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

How did this transformation happen in Peter? He understood the true meaning of the Cross. Have you ever wondered why the symbol of Christianity is the Cross? After all, cross is the symbol of execution, death and suffering. Jesus is our Lord and King right? Why not have the crown as the symbol of the Church? Or the throne? Why have this constant reminder of the most painful death that one can imagine as the symbol of the most followed religion in the world? Is there is a message there? I certainly think so. The cross is not there just to give us a reminder of Christ's sufferings. The cross offers proof that God cares about our pain and suffering. It is there to give us the assurance that He was, is and will be part of any suffering that we can imagine. He has Himself gone through those sufferings.

So Peter surely learnt his lesson on this side of the cross. How about you and I? Do we still have struggle with understanding pain and suffering? If so, let us ask God to help us understand the message of the cross a lot better.

During these trying times, there are several people who ask questions. If God is a loving God, why do

we need to continue to suffer? Has God not forgiven us? Is He not a merciful God? Doesn't he care about our suffering? These are legitimate questions for us today. One of the best answers to this question can be found in Philip Yancey's book "Where is God when it Hurts?"

In this book Yancey elaborately describes the studies that were conducted among Lepers. This study interestingly was conducted in India by Dr. Brand , and expert in this field. . He establishes the fact that what lepers suffer with most is not because of the disease per se, but because of the fact that the disease acts as a very very strong anesthetic and takes away their sensation of pain. They cannot feel pain and thus they end up hurting themselves (without feeling anything) over and over again. They put their hands in fire because they cannot feel the heat. They walk on broken glass because they cannot feel the pain when glass pierces their feet. Even common activities like holding a mop or turning a key, or working with a screwdriver could damage their skins and muscles, because they just cannot fathom how much pressure to put on those things. Simple shoes can cause infections because they do not know when the shoe hurts and causes bruises. Imagine a nail piercing your foot when you walk and it staying there, and getting more and more deep into your flesh because you did not feel the nail piercing your foot. Imagine not being able to itch when a mosquito bites you, imagine waking up with your toe missing, because a rat chewed it off and you didn't feel a thing. It is difficult for you and me to fathom this, because we take these things for granted. And we are able to take these things for granted because we can feel pain. Pain helps us to stop doing things that could damage us more permanently. Pain warns us to stay away from activities that could be harmful. Pain tells us when to stop. That is why Dr Brand boldly states "Thank God for inventing Pain. I don't think He could have done a better job. It is beautiful." Dr. Brand knows the value of pain, because he raised and spent millions of dollars to design and manufacture gadgets like special gloves, special shoes, special audio devices etc, to enable lepers to be able to "feel" pain artificially.

Does that help us to make sense of Pain and suffering? Though the example I quoted deals with physical pain, it is same with any kind of suffering. Pain is not a "mistake" that God made. It is a Gift that tells us where to draw the lines and how to enjoy the pleasure of life that He intended us to.

Let us pray that the Lord help us to make sense of this sufferings during the pandemic and afterwards. Let us go with this promise.

1 Peter 5:10-11 (NKJV) But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.