

What Difference Does Jesus Make
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(1 Peter 1:3-9 NRSV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, {4} and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, {5} who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. {6} In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, {7} so that the genuineness of your faith--being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. {8} Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, {9} for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:3-9 (The Message)

What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you'll have it all—life healed and whole.

I know how great this makes you feel, even though you have to put up with every kind of aggravation in the meantime. Pure gold put in the fire comes out of it proved pure; genuine faith put through this suffering comes out proved genuine. When Jesus wraps this all up, it's your faith, not your gold, that God will have on display as evidence of his victory.

You never saw him, yet you love him. You still don't see him, yet you trust him—with laughter and singing. Because you kept on believing, you'll get what you're looking forward to: total salvation.

Can you imagine ever saying anything like this?

“In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me — of God not being God — of God not existing.”

“I find no words to express the depths of the darkness.”

“Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me — that I let Him have [a] free hand.”

“If I ever become a saint,” “I will surely be one of ‘darkness.’”

I have felt just like Mother Teresa did when she wrote those painful remarks to a variety of friends.

There have certainly been times in my life where I have felt totally abandoned by God. As I imagine many of you have.

November 9, 1985 — the day my Dad called me collect from the hospital telling me that if I want to see Stewart before he dies that I need to come home NOW!

January 1995 sitting on a hillside in Jamaica — wondering what God wanted to do with me

Somewhere along the line we have gotten the idea that if we become a Christian — then all of our problems will go away.

And, unfortunately, the flip side to that — if things are bad in my life, it is because God is punishing me for not being a good enough Christian.

It is almost as if Christians have decided that saying the right words — believing the right things gives one an easy button.

You know what an Easy Button is don't you?

A couple of years ago an upstart office products store came up with a brilliant marketing strategy.

Now they have all kinds of wacky commercials in which some crazed persons problems are solved by pushing a little red button.

One click of the button and the problems magically disappear.

Wouldn't it be cool to have an easy button!

The pastor shows up and the house is a mess — poof — taken care of.
Big project that needs to get completed but time is running out — poof — taken care of.

Getting the kids to bed at night — poof — taken care of.
 Got that flu bug that's running around — poof — taken care of.

Staples may have an easy button — but life does not

Staples may say: "That was easy."

Jesus says: "This might hurt."

Our scripture this morning suggests — not that God offers an easy route — but rather that God might be saying to us: "this might hurt."

We have all heard that phrase before"

You go to the doctor and they want to give you a shot: "this might hurt."

You go to give blood and as they get ready to stick you: "this might hurt."

The classic one however is when you get ready to spank your child — "This is gonna hurt me a lot more than it hurts you."

But we also heard it this morning in our passage from 1st Peter

v. 6 "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials"

v. 8 "Although you have not seen him"

Clearly there are elements in life and the Christian journey that are hard. And if we're honest, we all want God to make things easy for us — a bit like a genie emerging from a lamp to grant us wishes.

I saw a great bumper sticker in the Target parking lot the other day: God is my insurance policy.

I don't know how many of you watched the TODAY SHOW on Thursday morning. They had a powerful interview with Whitney Cerak the young Taylor University woman who was thought for five weeks to be dead, while everyone mistakenly thought Laura Van Ryn was seriously injured.

It was a powerful and gut-wrenching interview with Whitney and her family along with Laura Van Ryn's family.

At one point in the interview — Matt Lauer asked her about survivor's guilt,

and Whitney answered:

“I was really angry one day, and I was crying, and I was like, ‘Why me? Why me?’ ” Whitney told Lauer. “And my dad said, ‘Whitney, why *not* you?’ It is so humbling and so amazing that God would choose me.”

And most of us would say the exact same thing — wouldn’t we.

But when we say that God **CHOSE** Whitney — we are also saying that God didn’t choose the five people who died in that crash. That God didn’t choose to let Laura Van Ryn to live.

But it doesn’t work that way.
And neither does God.

Life and faith are often bumpy roads.

We have just finished a season in which we have been invited to walk with Jesus through his life — a life that was uniquely connected to God — Yet a life that experienced horrendous suffering — not because he didn’t believe the right things nor because God had abandoned him.

Jesus suffered for the same reasons that you and I experience suffering — because that is just the way that life is.

And while we often think we know suffering — the reality is that there are many different ways that we can experience suffering.

EMOTIONAL

Those living with depression or anxiety describe it as being like an emotional prison. Others live in the shadow of childhood traumas that impact their self-worth almost daily. Many people suffer under self-inflicted food disorders — overeating for perceived comfort or self-punishment through anorexia.

PHYSICAL

Whether temporary or long-term, sickness plagues many in our community. Studies show that up to 20 percent of people deal with some form of chronic pain. The physically disabled live with a lifetime of suffering that few able-bodied people can imagine.

FAMILY ISSUES

Discontentment and hopelessness wrack many marriages. Some families have special needs children who are functionally all consuming and lifestyle controlling. Families experience miscarriages and infertility with dream-

shattering pain.

SPIRITUAL

Many are wracked with doubts. They face unanswerable questions. They feel disconnected from God.

RELATIONAL

Loneliness, hopelessness, a sense of being passed over consume many. Think of all the dysfunctions that divide family and friendship circles.

Last year the private, angst-ridden correspondence between Mother Teresa and her confidants was published, most notably in a must-read book called *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. Teresa laments, “Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of your love and now become as the most hated one, the one you have thrown away as unwanted, unloved. I call, I cling, I want — and there is no one to answer, no one on whom I can cling ... The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable. Where is my faith?”

No person is immune to potential suffering in life and faith. But this text can offer some hope amidst affliction.

So how do we find HOPE in the midst of suffering?

I am not sure that I really have the answer to that, but I think that the author of 1 Peter gives us some pretty good suggestions.

SUFFERING MUST HAVE MEANING

A lot of people will suffer for a good cause — but if we cannot figure out the value of the suffering — we begin to complain.

I was talking with someone about their son who had played football in High School — I asked if he was going to play in college and he said that his son decided not to because he didn’t want to deal with the pain anymore. The price of the suffering was too high.

The letter of 1st Peter is challenging us to be sure that we understand that we are to live as examples of God’s people in the world.

Look at verse 7: suffering “so that the genuineness of your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor.”

If our suffering doesn’t have meaning it soon becomes unbearable.

SUFFERING CAN BRING TRANSFORMATION

One of the ways that we find meaning in suffering is when it helps change us.

That doesn't mean that we seek out suffering — it just means that in the midst of suffering it can make us better, or make us bitter.

And perhaps as much as meaning in suffering, we need greater perspective on it. In most of our “this may hurt” life experiences, we understand that short-term pain prevents long-term suffering. While a shot or a swat have momentary hurt, they help avoid a lifetime of debilitation through sickness and recklessness. Despite our levels of needle angst, all of us would prefer 10 seconds of anguish from an injection rather than a lifetime of suffering through polio or smallpox.

SUFFERING WELL MEANS FINDING GOD IN THE MIDST OF PAIN

There is no red button that we can push to ensure “that was easy.”

There's only a cross that says, “This might hurt.”

But remember — Suffering is not the last word!

verse 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The hope of salvation is the blessed assurance that the trials that we are going through will not be ultimately victorious.

The following prayer is attributed to Archbishop Oscar A. Romero of El Salvador who was martyred by assassins while celebrating mass in 1980:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always

lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.