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CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

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Embracing Brokenness

By Mike Sorenson

"…He who has suffered in the flesh is done with sin"

- *1Peter 4:1b*

In working with people through some of the darkest periods of their lives, I have often been struck by how consistently God keeps us in our struggle a little longer than what we would like. I regularly sit with people who are praying for a breakthrough or just for relief from their pain, and I long to give them an answer that will make it a little easier. Sometimes, the truth is that God is just not ready to bring them out of it yet. Since I don't believe in a sadistic God who enjoys watching us suffer, I am left with only one conclusion: He sees value in our suffering and doesn't want us to miss it. The apostle Peter seemed to recognize this when he penned his first letter to Jewish exiles. He was well aware of the suffering and persecution being endured by those who had been scattered from Jerusalem after Christ's death and resurrection. His letter doesn't give them any "name it and claim it" quick-fix philosophies, but instead focuses on suffering's value in freeing us from sinful patterns (4:1) and building closeness with Christ (4:13-14). The way of suffering and pain is often the last thing we would choose for ourselves, but it is often the one thing that will bring us the victory, peace or joy that we so desperately want in our lives. When suffering comes, and it inevitably will, Peter's summary of his letter (1Peter 5:6-10) offers us a great framework for embracing it, showing us the proper attitude, dangerous pitfalls, and strengthening hope that await as we grow through the difficulties God has chosen for us.

Peter's admonitions to "humble yourselves…under God's mighty hand" (5:6) and "cast all your anxiety on Him…" (5:7) speak of an attitude of acceptance and trust that will prepare us to get the most out of whatever trial we have to endure. The first instinct of most people, upon seeing a painful path in their future, is to avoid it at all costs. We all have our breaking point where we get desperate and will do anything to avoid that thing that we fear most. We beg for another chance to save the relationship we know is over, or we run away from the relationship rather than face the intolerable pain of having to forgive the person who has deeply hurt us. Not that we should seek out suffering. Ours is a life of joy in following Christ, not masochistic, unending self-denial. But when faced with a call from God to do the very thing we least want to do, we must trust His reasons for leading us down that path. He sees things from a different perspective and knows the greater benefit our suffering will accomplish, both in our own life and that of others. We may not know it or anticipate it from our perspective, which is the reason for our anxiety in the face of difficulty. The cure for it, as Peter sees it, is to remember God's care for us. He does not subject us to suffering unnecessarily, but for a purpose that will ultimately draw us closer to Him and bring us great joy. It is often the vulnerability of our suffering that makes us most open to the deeper work He wants to do in our hearts. Rather than run from and avoid the painful paths ahead of us, we must accept the pain and trust God's purpose in it.

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The same vulnerability that opens us up to God's influence can also be the thing that sets us up for a fall. Peter warns of this pitfall when talks of the devil, who "prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (5:8-9). When lions hunt, they do not generally go after the strong or the healthy. They look for the easy kill, the animal that is separated from the pack, injured or slow. Our enemy knows our favorite sins and the tricks and temptations that lead us astray. He also knows that we are most likely to slip back into old habits (or acquire new ones) when we are frustrated, hurting, grieving or angry. We must be very careful about how we choose to comfort ourselves during such times, staying aware of this ongoing battle for influence in our lives, lest we miss the blessings that are in store for us on the other side of it.

If we will choose to accept our suffering and trust God with His purpose in it, resisting the temptation to run to our bad habits for comfort, we are given a very comforting hope that can sustain us during even the most difficult times. Peter finishes this summary with a promise that the "God of all grace… after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (5:10). Peter makes sure to emphasize God's personal role in our restoration. He does not merely promise that things will get better or that the suffering will end. He promises that He will do it Himself. Even in our darkest hour, when it seems we are all alone, our Father is intimately involved in the process of restoring us and making us strong. He knows our suffering and grieves along with us. He will not allow it to continue one second beyond what is necessary. Though it may last longer than we think we can handle and may be worse than we ever thought we would have to endure, we must embrace the tough path ahead of us and set our eyes on the restoration and joy he has prepared for us. While I may not have an answer that will bring relief to my clients who suffer, I trust a God that is faithful to redeem their suffering for great purposes and will work tirelessly to restore them through it if they will trust Him. It may go against everything in us, but if we will endure, He will make sure it is worth it.