

## Eternal Glory Overcomes Temporary Suffering

Whenever we suffer, it's easy to think that we're alone in that fight. It might be a feeling of loneliness, knowing that no matter how hard others try to support you and check in on you, they can't physically take the burden away from you. It might be the frustration of feeling like no one understands what you're going through, or the challenge of trying to put into words the things you're feeling and experiencing. It might just be because of pride. It's hard for us to admit that we need help, or that we're having problems, and so isolation and pushing down those scary feelings is easier than opening up and sharing those struggles with someone else.

The same can be said about our faith. The suffering and pain of life is still there. God doesn't just magically take away all of that because we believe in him. But then you add in the special pain that comes along with seeing a loved one take their final breath, knowing how hard you have tried to share the gospel with them, remembering the continued rejection and even frustration over you bringing up the subject again. It's the pain of seeing sadness and guilt and hopelessness, knowing the comfort that Jesus has brought to you, wanting others to have that, and yet for some reason, they continue to push that comfort away, seeking out earthly solutions or answers to their struggles.

Jesus wants you to know that you're not alone in your struggles. The hardship that you face...the pain and sadness that rejection of the gospel brings... it's not something specific to just you. Christians all over the world are dealing with those very same sufferings! Peter writes, **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed... However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”** (4:12-13, 16)

You're not alone in this struggle against the world and its rejection of Jesus! After all, that's something that Jesus himself endured during his time on earth. And you can bet that if those who witnessed Jesus' power with their own eyes and heard the very words of God from his lips still rejected him, then we'll have to face that as well! Jesus even said it himself, **“If they persecuted me, they will persecute me also.”**

Now, it's easy to hear these things and promise ourselves that, when the time comes, we'll remember the words of our Savior, shrug off the worries and doubts, and stay totally focused on the eternal glory that he promises for us in heaven. But as you probably know, it's way harder to do so in the moment... to **“rejoice...as you participate in the sufferings of Christ...”** Why is that?

If we're going to be honest with ourselves, part of the challenge is in how God has chosen to work. When hardship and suffering comes our way, especially when it's because of the faith that we're putting into action, we throw up a prayer to God, and the hope is that he answers it immediately in a way that totally puts our opposition to shame, and fixes everything right away! So, what do we do when he doesn't do that? When we're feeling overwhelmed by the pain and sadness? What should we do with this fear and anxiety when, from our point of view, it seems like the message may not have been heard upstairs?

That's the great danger in suffering. We get so focused on what we need to feel better or just get through what we're struggling with that we get desperate. God isn't answering our prayers fast enough, or in the way that we think he should, so we start to look for anything else that can give us some relief. Maybe it's self-medicating, with drugs or alcohol. Maybe it's finding an escape, in a hobby, video games, binging a TV show. Whatever it might be for you, I have a feeling you know, just as I do, exactly what it is that you're tempted to run to *instead* of God when you're in need of comfort or support.

And that's why Peter emphasizes what he does in chapter five. These verses highlight the dangers of chasing after worldly fixes for the suffering that we face. But he also gives us an amazing reason to go to God and place our trust in him.

**“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand...(5:6)** In my humble opinion, from the couple of years that I have on this earth, one of the hardest things for just about anyone who’s suffering is simply letting go. I’m not talking about letting go of the pain or frustration. No, it’s the letting go of control. All God wants us to do is let go of how *we* want things to go, and instead place our trust complete in him. Why? **That he may lift you up in due time.** (vs 6)

It may not be when we want it, but God promises that he will carry you through your challenges. And as you struggle and fight, you’re not on your own. You have a “safe space” to vent all your worries and struggles. And yes, even your doubts and fears about what God’s doing in your life. **Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.** (vs. 7) He wants to hear all of it! He’s the perfect Father, who cares deeply for you. He wants to hear from you about what you’re struggling with, even if he already knows it. He wants to be involved in your life and keep you and your faith safe. That’s why you’re here this morning. To be reminded that you *always* have that lifeline, no matter how dark or desperate life looks.

And as Peter reminds us in the next verse, it can look pretty scary. **Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.** (vs. 8) Keep your head on a swivel! **Be alert.** Clear your mind of any distracting thoughts or earthly focused thinking. **Be of sober mind.** Or (as one of my favorite Harry Potter characters likes to say...) Constant vigilance! The devil, whom the world has often tried to diminish and even humanize to the extent that he doesn’t even seem that bad... He’s your enemy. And he’s not just sitting back, hoping that you make a mistake. No, he’s waiting to pounce. Like a lion, lying in wait for unsuspecting prey to let its guard down, the devil stalks us all, watching for that moment of weakness. For us to turn our gaze away from God in our sufferings and start to look somewhere else, and he goes in for the kill. His goal is not just to scratch you up a little bit. He wants to take you away from God and his promises of eternal life. He wants to take away the perfection that is yours by faith in Jesus.

So fight him! You’re not alone in this. There are believers worldwide going through exactly what you are. **Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.** (vs. 9) That’s the simple trap that many fall into. “No one could understand what I’m going through. I’ve fallen too far. I’ve done something too horrible. There’s no way they would understand or want to help me. All they would think is that I’m a disgusting, horrible person.”

But what does God promise for you when you seek out his help? **And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while...(vs. 10)** There’s our reason why we can hold on, no matter how hard or scary things may be. This is why it’s worth fighting the devil in the first place!

God’s promise to you of life and glory is far better than *anything* we will ever experience in this life on earth. It’s permanent. It’s something that will last forever. And it’s nothing like the suffering that we will face here on earth. It may seem like an eternity, but when compared to the perfection that waits for us all in heaven, that suffering pales in comparison. In heaven, **“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”** (Rev. 21:4)

This isn’t something that we have to figure out for ourselves. We don’t have to dedicate a lifetime saving up enough good works and favor to hopefully cover a cushy retirement in heaven. This is something that God has called each of us to *in Christ*. It’s based entirely on his work and his sacrifice, not yours. It’s something that is yours *by grace*... God’s undeserved, unearned, unending love for you. It’s yours by the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross, and is yours now by faith in him.

But that doesn’t mean that God’s left us to wallow in our suffering now. This calling into his grace, away from the burden of trying to do it yourself and into his loving arms... it’s also something that fills us with purpose and the ability to weather any storm. God **will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.** This is a personal guarantee from the all-powerful, all-mighty God of the universe that he *will* do for you.

- Through the power of his Word, as you hear it here today and see it play out in your life, he will **make you strong**. He'll strengthen you in your convictions. He'll continue to prove to you that you've put your trust in the right guy.
- He himself will **make you firm**, giving you strength, not physically, but spiritually, to fight the repeated attacks of the devil. You know that Jesus defeated that enemy, robbing him of any true power that the devil had when he offered his life as a payment for sin. "**There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**" (Rom. 8:1) That's your shield against that devious lion. You have no power here! Jesus has freed me from my guilt Satan! Be gone with you!
- Finally, he will **make you steadfast**. You have his guarantee that heaven is yours, simply by faith in Jesus. That brings security and peace...an inner strength that we can look to over and over again, keeping our eyes focused heavenward. Nothing has the power to take that from you. Amen.