

**“How to Handle Suffering:  
By Enduring”  
I Peter 2:19-25**

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Sometimes in our lives we have great pain and deep sorrow. Life is hard. It is hard by the yard and it is no cinch by the inch. Suffering is not an option in the school of life. Last Friday night, Larry King assembled a panel of preachers and New Age proponents to discuss the nature of good and evil. It was an interesting discussion. But when you are down in the trenches, doubled over with some pain that won't go away, you are not very interested in a discussion. What you would like is some relief. And if not relief then at least some tips for survival.

Here in the heart of I Peter, that is what we have, a way to endure the sufferings of life. This is not an essay on social justice. It is a letter to powerless Christians in an oppressive culture, to slaves whose masters are not very respectful, and to women who have asserted themselves in a very controversial way by converting to Christianity while living with their pagan husbands. To read Chapters 2 and 3 of I Peter through the eyes of the Western world, and interpret it literally as a guide for Christian behavior in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a tragic misinterpretation of Scripture, to say the least. Maybe that is why the creators of the lectionary omitted the verses about slaves obeying masters and wives submitting to husbands. Some parts of the Bible ought not to be read in church. But it is hard to make Peter's point and ignore his illustrations. Before I got sick last weekend and cancelled a few days vacation, the mantel was hanging over Kaye's shoulder to preach this sermon. She is a Vanderbilt graduate. I was confident she could handle it. About ten days ago she walked into my office with a forlorn look on her face and said, "What am I supposed to do with this passage of Scripture?" With

the wisdom of a senior pastor I replied, “Deal with it!” Then I got sick. Sometimes I find God’s sense of humor unamusing. Nevertheless, here I am and I will try to deal with it. How do Christians handle suffering in an imperfect and often hostile world? Well, you deal with it; sometimes the way you deal with it is endure it!

### **TO ENDURE IS TO HOLD FAST.**

“If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God” (I Peter 2:20). The context of this lofty statement can be found in Verse 18 where Peter says, “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.” While slave owners in the first century Asia Minor were mild-mannered compared to their counterparts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century America, the words still have a chilling ring.

Slavery represents one of the worst tragedies of human history. The stains of it will never be completely erased from the American mind nor should it be. We must never forget what one human being is capable of doing to another. Somewhere between 5 to 15 million Africans were forced to desert their villages, their families, and their relatives to be shipped in deplorable conditions to this country. No more than half of those shipped from Africa ever became effective workers in the New World. The rest died of horrible diseases, committed suicide by jumping overboard, or got here so beaten and maimed by their owners that they were never able to work. Worst of all, slave traders and slave owners used the Bible to sanction their actions. They tried to make slaves believe that it was God’s will for them to be slaves. Some ship captains held prayer services two times a day singing such hymns as, “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds.”

But the strategy did not work. God had something else in mind. Endurance led to a different identity. Even though slaves could not read and were denied an education, they never bought the propaganda that slavery was a part of God’s plan. Somebody might own your body but nobody need possess your soul. So, as the old spiritual says:

I've got a robe, you've got a robe,  
All God's children got a robe.  
When I get to heaven, gonna put on my robe,  
Goin' to shout all over God's heaven.

In time, the freedom train got closer to home. It didn't have to make it to Paradise; it only had to transport a person to Detroit. That is what endurance does for you. It helps you hang on until the time is right and the power is available for radical change.

James Weldon Johnson eloquently says:

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died,  
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come, over a way that with tears has been watered.  
We have come, treading our path thru the blood of the slaughtered.  
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last,  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

**TO ENDURE IS TO KEEP ON KEEPING ON.**

When I was hospitalized for a stem cell transplant a little over a year ago, a friend sent me a quote from Winston Churchill that I have held close ever since. The simple statement is this: "If you are going through hell, keep going." Nurses copied it and shared it with other patients. I have given it to countless other fellow sufferers, and it still hangs on our refrigerator at home. The message is clear. Hell is no place to get off the bus and give up! Perseverance is the wisdom to know that no trouble enjoys everlasting life.

Peter applies that principle to family life. The scoop is this. Some women had converted to Christianity which was unheard of in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Asia Minor. You see, men back then not only controlled the remote; they made all the family decisions about religion. Daddy's religion was automatically everybody else's religion. So before you get too hung up on this submission word, you need to know the rest of the story. The real question is, "How can a Christian woman survive in a pagan family?" Is that not still the question?

When Jane Fonda became a Christian her marriage to media guru Ted Turner dissolved. When Turner's daughter was asked why, she replied, "Daddy couldn't stand Jesus taking time away from him."

So what should a believer do with an unbelieving spouse? Grab him/her by the ear and drag him/her to the altar? Refuse to go to bed with him/her until he/she makes a profession of faith? Peter says no. Just keep on keeping on, trying the best you can to apply your newfound faith to your old-line family for even unbelievers would rather *see* a sermon than *hear* one, any day.

Leslie Strobel writes, "My decision to follow Jesus ushered in the most tumultuous era of our marriage. It was a time of harsh words, stony silence, and raw rage." Lee and Leslie, now both Christians, offer this advice about living with an unbelieving partner:

Don't fixate on your struggles, focus on your Savior.

Make your spouse the number one human being in your life.

Live your faith instead of preaching it.

Give your spouse what God gave you.

Don't fall victim to unrealistic expectations.

**TO ENDURE IS TO FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST.**

Lest the more activists among us write Peter off as irrelevant and too passive about the ills of society, he trumps his argument by noting the suffering of Christ.

Verse 21: “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: “We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christian, we must have some share in Christ’s large-heartedness by acting with responsibility when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real compassion that springs not from fear, but from the liberating love of Christ for all who suffer.”

Jesus did not bring a revolution. He brought redemption. Verse 24: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

Critics of Mother Theresa criticized her for not attacking the causes that leave millions dying in poverty and alone. Yet, few of her critics could say they had relieved the suffering of one, while she went about relieving the suffering of thousands. Never underestimate the power of a single life faithfully lived.

Jesus did not offer retaliation. Jesus offered reconciliation. Verse 25: “For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

For 25 years Glenn Hinson was a leading professor at Southern Baptist Seminary and a major theologian for that denomination. Then in the mid 1980’s Glenn, along with a couple others, got singled out as liberals from whom the denomination needed to be cleansed. Glenn Hinson lost his job. He was also barred from teaching a class at Carson Newman College here in Tennessee. Glenn says, “The precariousness of my situation forced me to search for insight greater than I possessed. My near daily meditations on the matter led me to the Apostle Paul and his responses to attacks on him. In particular, I was drawn to his words, “for the sake of the gospel.” In short, he restrained his freedom and his feelings in order that Christ could be glorified. And I started trying to pray that way.”

For the sake of the gospel, O God, that is my plea.

For the sake of the gospel, help me lay aside all pettiness and  
meanness of spirit.

For the sake of the gospel, let me find ways to overcome conflict  
and division.

For the sake of the gospel, help me know when to yield and when to  
stand fast.

Am I living my life for the sake of the gospel? I do not know much. I have fewer answers now than ever before. But of this I am certain. Life is not about serving me. It is not about pleasing you. Life is not about meeting some institutional goals. Life is about being faithful to Jesus Christ, and enduring our most difficult moments for the sake of the gospel. May we who call ourselves Christians, find the grace to become what we call ourselves.