

Wrestling With God 3) To Understand Suffering

Matthew 16:21-26 • 2020-09-13 • Wrestling with God Series



Have you ever wanted to argue with God? Be honest. Think about all the times when God's working didn't fit into your plan. How did you respond? Perhaps you wanted to give him a little advice on how to do things better. I think most people have struggled with some aspect of God's working at some point. All of us try to wrestle with God. This especially happens whenever we find ourselves facing some kind of suffering. It can be hard for us to understand why we must go through pains and hardships. Today we continue our series, "Wrestling with God." We will be considering a time when Peter wrestled with God over suffering. In response to Peter's grappling, Jesus helps him and all of us to better understand suffering.

Peter was a believer, but he still wrestled with God. Unlike the others we have seen so far in our series, he did not wrestle by holding tightly to God's Word. He was upset with what he had heard God say. A little background could probably help us further understand why he became upset. Peter knew how powerful and majestic Jesus was. He had just confessed Jesus to be, "the Christ the Son of the Living God." And Jesus affirmed that Peter was correct. He said he was going to build his church on Peter's confession. Jesus then explained the glorious power he gave to his Church to offer forgiveness of sins. And he assured his disciples that they would not fail against the forces of evil. "The gates of hell will not prevail." Peter had no problem with this amazing part of Jesus' person and work.

But what Jesus explained next shook Peter to the core. *"From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again."* The Son of God was making clear to his disciples where his path was headed. Yes, it led to a glorious victory over sin, death, and the devil. But that path led through a hard road of suffering and death.

Peter couldn't bear to hear such talk. He then acted like the coach of a professional wrestler. He jumped into the ring. He pulled the champion Redeemer aside for a corner talk. He then gave him a strong rebuke. Like a coach redirecting the mindset of the match Peter told his champion wrestler, "That's loser talk! Get back out there and fight!" Peter rebuked Jesus, "Lord! This will never happen to you." God's plan for suffering made no sense. Peter wanted Jesus to snap out of it.

He wasn't alone. There are many who want a Christ without the sufferings mentioned in the Bible. In 2013 a major American church body wanted to remove the phrase "wrath of God" from a popular Christian hymn. Why? They rejected the idea that God's Son actually had to suffer his wrath on the cross. Jesus mentions it so many times. All four gospels record it. So many prophecies speak of the sufferings of the Christ. Yet the mention of his suffering is sometimes nearly absent from the message of many churches. God is clear on the matter. He presents his plan as "I must go to Jerusalem to suffer many things." Yet many have cried with Peter, "May it never be!"

Instead of preaching about suffering they preach a message of prosperity. They present a God who only designs that things will always go well for his people. They present a message that basically says, "If you truly love God then you will have success and never face troubles." I have seen Christian-themed children's literature that nearly avoids mentioning death, suffering, and the many pains which Jesus bore on the cross. After all, "Who wants to hear about suffering?"

Peter didn't. And we could list many reasons why he recoiled from the idea of Christ suffering. He may have been confused by it. He may have felt embarrassed or ashamed of a suffering Savior. But I think we can safely say there was at least one more reason. "Lord, This will never happen to you," Peter says. Why? Peter would struggle with his fear of pains so much that later on he would end up denying that he even knew Jesus. He would see Jesus bound and beaten and on trial. He would be asked if Jesus was his Messiah. And he would reply, "I don't know that man. I don't know the man. I don't know the man..." Why? "Because I don't want to suffer too."

It won't be easy for you to follow a Savior who suffered so greatly. People hate it and don't want to hear about it. The Christian faith was mocked in the ancient world because they worshipped a man who suffered crucifixion. And still today the Church is mocked because it worships a God who said he must suffer many things and who died a horrible death on the cross. Not every Christian is prepared to stand up under this attack. They will downplay or even deny that the sufferings of Christ are part of the core teaching of the Christian faith.

Like Peter we are part of that same Church. We confess Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. We know that God will build his church on that confession and nothing can withstand the advance of the gospel. God is on our side! And Like Peter we might sometimes only want the glory of Christ and want to entirely avoid the message of the cross.

We wrestle with suffering because we don't want to see it as a part of God's plan for Christ and for us. We begin to see it as part of his failure. We wrestle with God and ask, "Couldn't God stop the pains? Doesn't God care about those who suffer?" And instead of listening to him for the answer we try to find our own answers. We demand better if any suffering comes our way. We don't want to acknowledge that suffering comes as a result of evil and evil is found in the world because of us. We blame God for failing us. But the failure isn't found in our God. It is found in our inability to examine our hearts and see God's proper response to sin and evil.

But God's plan is always good. Any other plan is of the devil. *Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men."* The wrestling match is over quickly. The "Christ, the Son of the Living God," turned to his self-appointed coach, Peter, and basically said, "Shut up and get out of the ring. You're not on the right game plan or even the right team! That's not how this match is going down."

He then tells all of us how this match will go down. *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."* We must march forward forgetting about all that our selfish sinful self-desires. And we must march forward knowing there will be a heavy burden to bear and pains to suffer. Following Christ means bearing a cross. To be a disciple of the Christ means to suffer for the sake of his gospel. You will be mocked for embracing the Christ. The more you put him first the more the world will make you last. You will lose out on so much of this life. Your career will not advance as much. You will not be as popular with your peers. You will constantly be turning aside from sin and its temptations with a constant struggle. You will endure persecution, hardship, and loss. You won't necessarily be wealthier. And you'll be dedicated to supporting a cause that many around you will spurn as a worthless waste of time and money. You might forfeit a relationship with any of your friends and family who don't want anything to do with the true Christian faith. You will forfeit nearly 90% or more of what is considered top entertainment today as you deny self and regard those things as worthless. In many parts of the world you will be a second-class citizen with threat to your family's safety. Some Christians will even forfeit their very lives for the sake of following Christ. Did they plan on losing their lives? Jesus had it in his plan for them! How about you?

How much suffering would it take for you to desire to step aside from following Christ? Is it peer pressure to fit in? Is the feeling that you'll miss out on your hunting, fishing, hiking, or miss out that RV or boat you've always wanted? Is it the pressure that you'll need to give up ten minutes a day to read the Scriptures? How little a cross does it sometimes take for us to lose sight of what we must do to follow Christ in faith?

Jesus rebuked Peter's desire to avoid suffering as a satanic desire. Our spiritual enemy wants every believer to reject a suffering Savior. He wants every one of you to think first about what you can do to make yourself comfortable, even if that means putting aside Christ. We are all constantly under the devil's tempting lie that a suffering Savior is a cheap and worthless Savior. We are made to think we deserve better than a God who allows his Son and us to face suffering.

But it is a lie. What we deserve is indeed far greater suffering. We deserve far more than all the pains that the people of this world face every day. The physical and emotional hurts of this world are real. They are a result of what the devil has led us into: sin. We deserve to face great pains and agony for our own wickedness. We deserve to suffer as God's enemies. And facing that suffering would leave us forever as those who hate God. Arguing with God about how much suffering we deserve is not a battle we ever want to fight because it is one which we can never win.

Peter needed the sharpest rebuke possible for wanting to avoid the cross. It isn't surprising that Peter once ended up denying Christ instead of self. It isn't surprising that we struggle to bear a cross. The real marvel is that Christ willingly came to bear the cross. He never wavered. He immediately rejected Peter's idea to avoid the cross. He took on human flesh and denied every right that he held claim to in order to bear suffering in our place. He let himself become the very last as he suffered the many things we deserved. He did this with the "things of God" in mind rather than "the things of men." God's plan was for the Christ, the Son of the Living God, to bear the curse for every sinner.

God's plan involved suffering for the Christ and it involves suffering for us. His plan is always good and always ends with his purpose in mind. After he suffered many things Jesus also rose to life just as he said. And because he rose to life, we know that his Word is true, and our sins are covered. We will indeed also face suffering. But we will not end in defeat. *"In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* It doesn't matter if you are mocked for following Christ. You've gained every promise of God's favor and blessing. It doesn't matter if your career doesn't advance because you put Jesus first. With him you have everything and eternal life!

Because Jesus suffered to pay for sin and bring God glory, we can now suffer for following him to bring God glory. Our sufferings for the sake of the gospel bring glory to him who suffered all for us on the cross. Why is there suffering? We understand this much: Jesus suffered so that we might belong to God and that through his suffering God might be glorified. We suffer because we belong to God so that in our suffering God might be glorified.

Peter would later suffer greatly to follow Christ. History records him being literally crucified upside down. This was to God's glory and not to Peter's shame or end. When Peter considered how Jesus bore his cross and rose to victory, he was able to deny himself take up his cross and follow. He saw the things of God as far greater than the things of men. So have every other believer who has suffered for the sake of Christ.

There may be times when we want to pull aside our God like Peter and give him a little talk. Those are times when we do not have in mind the things of God. So, God pulls us aside and says, "Following me will in fact involve trials and hardships. Following a savior who died and suffered on the cross won't mean life is full of roses and rainbows. It will have thorns and storms. And if anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."