

# “Aliens and Exiles: 5) When Suffering Comes”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

July 15, 2007

**Text: “But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (I Peter 4:13).**

One of the Academy Award winning films this past year was the film “Marie Antoinette” that was produced by Sophia Coppola. It was based on the life of Marie Antoinette and her husband, King Louis XVI. She is often depicted as a silly, frivolous person, but as her biographers suggest, in her later years there appeared a character and determination in her that before had not been manifested. So that when the French Revolution became a reality and all of the magic of the castle at Versailles disappeared, she emerged as a strong and courageous woman. “Tribulation,” she wrote in a letter to a friend, “first makes one realize what one is.” One of her biographers put it like this: “She had played with life and had never wrestled with it; but now, in the face of so formidable a challenge, her energies answered the call to arms.” Those who knew her best said that she may have lived like a fool, but she died like a Queen.

## I.

Over the past weeks we have looked again at the Epistle of I Peter. It is a letter addressed to a group of “exiles and aliens.” The churches to which this letter is addressed were clustered in the region of Asian Minor, what is today the western shore of Turkey. They lived a long way from Jerusalem. They had never seen Jesus, never heard him preach or teach. Moreover, they were a minority presence in a culture that was pagan and profligate in every conceivable way.

Throughout the letter, the writer speaks of the tribulations and ordeals that these Christians face. He speaks of a “fiery ordeal” that they must past through. He reminds them that Christ himself has suffered and that there is a redemptive quality in suffering.

It is not entirely clear what this suffering was. Certainly the Roman government was suspicious of the Christian community. There were persecutions in Rome under Nero and Pliny, but Christianity was not declared illegal in the Roman Empire until A.D. 249.

But whatever the exact nature of these sufferings might have been, it was clearly a reality that the letter addresses. But throughout the letter of I Peter there is a resounding affirmation of the redemptive nature of human suffering.

## II.

Consider for one thing that trouble, finely used, can call out the very best in all of us. Ernest Campbell, who for a number of years was the minister at the Riverside Church in New York City, once told of a conversation he had shared with a young man, who confessed to Campbell that he was in the midst of a crisis of faith and he was not sure if he believed in anything. Now, this young man was a person of great privilege. He was raised in a godly home and his every need had been provided. Campbell finally asked him, “What would you do with more faith if you had it? What do you need it for?”

If I understand the Bible correctly, there is an economy with God regarding the gift of faith. It is only as we attempt great things for God that we receive great things from God. If all we are doing in life is trying to get by, then we really don’t have much need for faith. It is only when we are really tested in life that faith becomes a factor.

In 1873 a lawyer from Chicago by the name of H.G. Spafford placed his wife and four children on the ocean liner *Ville du Havre*, sailing from New York to France. Spafford was planning to join them three weeks later, after he had finished some business in Chicago. The trip started beautifully for his wife and children, but on the evening of November 21, 1873, the *Ville du Havre* was struck by another ship and quickly sank to the bottom of the ocean. Only a handful of passengers were rescued. Spafford’s wife was one of the few people that were saved. His children did not survive. Mrs. Spafford sent a message to her husband that read: “Saved alone.” Spafford was devastated by the news of the loss of his children. Later he said to a friend, “I am happy to trust in God, even when it costs me a great deal.” Several weeks later this attorney sailed the Atlantic to join his wife in England. On that voyage he wrote a hymn that he dedicated to the memory of his children:

“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.”

Trouble, then, is something that comes to all. It is like the rain that falls on the just and unjust alike. But I Peter urges us to make something out of trouble, to use it for good, to find in it a redemptive quality. “We rejoice,” writes the Apostle Paul, “in our troubles.”

## II.

Then, too, there is another redemptive aspect of trouble. It can often be used to deepen our sympathy and intensify our usefulness to others. One of the greatest English writers of the Nineteenth Century was Charles Dickens. His novels “Oliver Twist,” “A Tale of Two Cities,” and “Nicolas Nickleby” are some of the great treasures of the English language.

Many people know that Charles Dickens was a great author, but few remember that he was a political reformer as well. He was instrumental in one of the great humanitarian movements in England that abolished debtors’ prisons, improved the condition of English schools, and ameliorated the conditions of laborers throughout the country. Dickens could write about these things because he had experienced them. Micawber was his father. His father had been in a debtors’ prison. As a young boy, crushed with shame and crippled by poverty, Dickens had visited his father in prison. When Dickens was ten years old he worked long hours in a blacking factory, pasting labels on bottles. As a student, he suffered some of the terrible abuses that afflicted the English school system.

Then something happened to Charles Dickens. He rose above his adversity, transmuted by magic its lead into gold, made of it deep insight, profound understanding, keen sympathy, and widespread public service. That is trouble finely used. The Apostle Paul understood this. In his letter to the church at Rome, he wrote, “...we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-5).

There are lessons in life that are only taught by suffering. There is a poem by Robert Hamilton that goes like this:

“I walked a mile with Pleasure,  
She chattered all the way;  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.  
I walked a mile with Sorrow  
And ne’er a word said she;  
But oh, the things I learned from her  
When Sorrow walked with me.”

## III.

Then, too, suffering has a way of pointing us to Christ and reminding us of the suffering that he experienced. That is a point I Peter makes on a number of occasions. He urges his readers to rejoice insofar as they are sharing the sufferings of Christ.

During the terrible days of World War II, a Roman Catholic cleric, Cardinal Mercier, was in Rome when he received the terrible word that his cathedral in Louvain had been bombed by the Nazis. The cathedral was in ruins, many of his students had been killed, and all the priceless

books in the library lay in ruins. At first, when this news came, the Cardinal was in great shock. “Why all this sorrow, Lord?” he asked. Then his eyes fixed on the crucifix that was before him in the chapel and those around him heard him say, “A disciple is not above his master, nor a servant above his lord. We will rebuild.”

None of us wants trouble. All of us, if given the chance, would avoid it. But it will happen to us, when it comes, as inevitably it will. Sometimes, however, we are called to choose trouble. Sometimes we cannot avoid a cross, any more than Jesus avoided a cross. And when those occasions come, we are called to “take up our cross and to follow Jesus.”

#### IV.

Then, too, suffering has the power to open in us deep resources that we never knew were present when in us. Paul says that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Sometimes suffering produces bitterness, rebellion, self-pity, and depression.

On a number of occasions Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke with great affection of his friend Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Fosdick said that if you had attended the Riverside Church in New York and had met Bill Wilson, you would have thought that here was a person who had it all. He was a successful businessman with a wonderful wife and family. On the outside he appeared to be a success in every way possible. But, what you would not have known, said Fosdick, was that this man was a hopeless alcoholic. He was drinking a bottle of gin a day, then two, and finally three. When he finally had himself checked into a hospital, the doctors confirmed what his family and close friends knew quite well: he was a hopeless alcoholic. Bill Wilson was also an agnostic. He had no God to whom to turn. Then, one day in a fit of depression, he went on his knees and prayed that somehow there might be some power that could save him.

Explain it however you will, from that day forth Bill Wilson never took a drink of alcohol. As for his agnosticism, Fosdick observed, “you should hear him talk about God—quietly, with a deep sense of mystery, not supposing he knows much about theology but certain, absolutely certain of one thing—that there was a power greater than himself that had rescued him from certain destruction.”

Paul Tillich once observed that sin and grace are two of the strangest, yet most important words in the Christian vocabulary. Sin is the terrible separation that all of us experience from God, from other people, and finally from ourselves. But if sin is separation, then grace is God’s love that bridges the terrible chasms in our lives and unites us to our God, to other people, and to ourselves.

“Where sin abounds,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “grace abounds even more.” Sometimes in the midst of suffering we imagine that our suffering has separated us from God. In fact, it is not our suffering that produces this separation, it is our sin. That is why the Christian notion of forgiveness and the notion of providence are not two distinct things, but different sides of the same coin.

The Apostle Paul deals with this strange dichotomy when he writes, “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor heights, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

Thanks be to God. Amen!