

## Creative Suffering

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1 Peter

What I would like to do by way of introduction today is to read to you a story from Max Lucado's book *In the Eye of the Storm*:

"Chippie the Parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said 'hello' when 'sssopp!' Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie—still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do...she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. 'Well,' she replied, 'Chippie doesn't sing much anymore—he just sits and stares.'"

How many of you have felt like Chippie over the last several weeks? You have been vacuumed up, drenched, and blow dried. You don't sing much anymore. You just sit and stare.

Over the last few weeks I have been teaching on spiritual warfare – the great cosmic battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan. I don't know, statistically, because we don't keep records like this, if we are encountering a great deal more difficulty and trials, problems than a church this size normally does. But, subjectively as I have talked with many, many people and as we have gotten prayer requests into the church and into our staff for various kinds of issues, I can tell you that there has been, it seems, a marked increase in the kinds of difficulties, accidents, sicknesses, and financial distresses in the last few weeks.

Now, let me begin by setting a background for today's message. I would like to read to you from 1 Peter 1. This morning we are going to be surveying the book of 1 Peter. In 1 Peter 1:3 the apostle Peter writes:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the

resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."

Peter speaks about various kinds of trials and his book is really a book about handling various kinds of trials. Literally in the Greek it is multi-colored trials—trials in all of their manifestations, trials in all of their varieties.

Now, there is a tendency to think about trials and sufferings in the New Testament as referring to extreme persecution like that of the Nazis against Christian believers or Mao Tse Tung or various communist regimes against Christian believers. Or in those pockets of persecution around the world today in Iran, in Muslim countries, in China today.

And so, we lose the benefit of the various encouragements in dealing with trials and sufferings for the normal course of events in our own lives. Interestingly, as you catalog the types of trials or sufferings that Peter speaks about, they are the very types of things that we believers in the United States living in the 1990's undergo all the time. In fact, the one type of suffering Peter does not mention is martyrdom. He speaks of the pressure and trial of working for an unfair boss. So he is talking about workplace problems and trials. He speaks about the pressure in 1 Peter 3 of living with an unbelieving spouse. And he is talking there about marital strife and marital troubles. He speaks about the pressure that might come from the government and there are those of you who are beginning, in your occupations, to feel pressured by different changes in governmental regulations. Those of you in the health care profession or in the insurance profession, in social services, are encountering different kinds of governmental pressure.

He speaks of the trials and sufferings encountered by strained relationships between brothers and sisters in the church. And we all know what that feels like. The emotional drain and pain of being at odds with someone in the church as a Christian with someone you are supposed to be in harmony with.

To this list of trials we can add the trial of sickness, our own sickness. Many of us in the church have been ill over the last number of weeks. The illness suffered by a spouse or by a parent, by a child in our family. The trial of accidents and disasters that befall us. Financial pressures and worries. The death of family members.

It is not necessary for us, as Christians, to sign up for a course called "Suffering 101". Just living life in a fallen world will cause us to encounter trials of various kinds, multi-colored trials of every kind.

So you say, "What does all of this have to do with the topic of spiritual warfare?"

Turn with me to 1 Peter 5:8-9. Peter links up trials and sufferings with spiritual warfare very clearly when he says,

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in

the faith because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering.”

There is a connection between the trials that we suffer and the prowling around of Satan as a roaring lion. What is that connection?

Are you saying, Rich, that the financial disaster that I have been undergoing has come directly from the hands of Satan?

Or the illness that has struck my parents or my family? Are you saying that the government pressure that is being brought to bear now on my job, the opposition from my employer, the strain that I have been experiencing in my relationship with someone in the church, or the pressure in my marriage—are you saying that that has come directly from the hands of the devil to me?

I am not saying that at all. Sometimes we can, because of the timing of a particular trial, because of the ferocity of a particular trial, because of the way a particular trial undermines the work of the kingdom of God, we can pretty well determine that this particular trial or suffering seems to be laid right at the feet of Satan. It has his mark on it, his calling card. It is so ferocious, it is timed so unusually, and it so directly affects the work of the kingdom that this seems to be demonic opposition of a direct nature.

But many of the things that we undergo we would have to say that no, they are not directly from the hand of the devil. They are, part and parcel, of living in a world that is under the curse of God for sin. This world was cursed at the fall of Adam and Eve and we live out the consequences of a fallen and cursed world every day of our lives—in employment, in relationships, in our bodies.

But there is something we must see in the very choice by Peter of the word “trial” in 1 Peter that hints of spiritual warfare.

“In this you will greatly rejoice though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials...”

The word “trial” is deliberately ambiguous or vague in the original Greek. This word translated “trial” can just as easily be translated “temptation.” You are suffering various kinds of temptations, Peter says.

Here is the connection between trials and spiritual warfare. While we may not know the direct origin of the trial, whether the trial is from Satan directly or whether it is simply the product of living in a fallen world, or the consequence of our own choices - while we may not know the origin of the trial, we can know that every trial comes to us as a temptation and not just as a problem. In other words, every trial, whatever its source, whether demonic or not, contains with it an opportunity to break fellowship with God. No matter what you undergo by way of suffering, suffering comes to you as a temptation to break fellowship with God. To call the character of God into question. To begin to walk down a path in which you say, “God, are you really good? Do you really care about me? Will you really provide for me in this moment of need?”

Every trial is simply the packaging for temptation. An opportunity by the devil to drive a wedge between you and God; you and the church; you and your faith. To sow in your mind the idea that you are alone. There is no one good or benevolent overseeing the universe. There is no one in control. No one who will help you. You have to make your own way. You have to go at it alone. If you

don't help yourself, no one will help you. Maybe you need to cut corners. Maybe you need to lie. The pressure is building. You are out of work. There is nothing opening up. You can't seem to get a job honestly, maybe you need to exaggerate or lie on your résumé. Maybe you need to lie to a future employer regarding the circumstances for your loss of a job in the past. Or lie about your academic credentials; lie about what you know.

Haven't you experienced this? That trials are one of the major weapons that Satan uses in your life. They don't necessarily come from Satan, but are one of the major weapons that Satan uses to dislodge you from the hands of God.

Now, all the while that Satan is working through trials to break your fellowship with God and break you down, God is working, we are going to find out, even harder to use that trial to build you up.

Now this morning, in speaking of the ways that God wants to use trials and suffering to build us up, I am going to borrow a term from a psychiatrist who happens to be a Christian named Paul Tornier that I found very helpful. Paul Tornier, a Swiss psychiatrist, coined the term *Creative Suffering* in a book by that same title. And he begins the book, *Creative Suffering*, by referring to an article written by a Dr. Pierre Renchek in 1975 entitled "Orphans Lead the World."

And what Dr. Renchek discovered from the life stories of history's most influential politicians is that nearly 300 of them were orphans. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, George Washington, Napoleon, Charles IV, and even some of the really awful characters like Lenin, Hitler, Castro, Stalin—religious leaders like Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed; they were all orphans.

Tornier draws the conclusion, in looking at this article and also his clinical experience as a psychiatrist for fifty years, that while suffering is not the cause of growth or creative change, suffering is the occasion. Suffering offers the opportunity for growth and creative change. Depending on how a person chooses to relate to a trial, how a person chooses to react and respond, a person can grow, a person can mature, or a person can be destroyed, a person can shrink, a person can move backward. It comes down to your choice and my choice regarding relating to suffering and relating to trials.

See, as I said, trials are like wrapping paper around temptations to be dislodged from God, but they are also wrappings around opportunities for maturity and for growth. Trials are occasions, they are invitations to shrink or to grow. And what I see in 1 Peter are a number of lessons laid out for us in creative suffering. So in the midst of the spiritual warfare that you and I are undergoing, what I would like to do is to quickly go through some of Peter's lessons in creative suffering. Let's pray.

As I mentioned before, trials are an opportunity for temptation or an opportunity for creative suffering. So, what I would like to do is to look at the first way to creatively suffer - that means to grow through trials, to mature, to have them be of maximum benefit to us. Peter says you can choose to be joyful. And we look at 1 Peter 1:3-6

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that

can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”

Now, Peter, in verse 6, lays out that wonderful balance, the paradox that runs through trials and suffering; that wonderful balance of grief and joy, which he says, “You greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”

See, the nature of the Christian life, and particularly as we experience suffering and trials is that grief and joy are to run side by side in our hearts. It is an absolute lie that as a result of trial or suffering you must sink into self-pity. One of the great temptations offered to you in trial is to sink into self-pity and to begin to say to yourself, “No one understands me. No one knows the trials that my family or I have experienced. No one cares about me. I am totally isolated and totally alone. And I must pity myself and lick my wounds. Withdraw from the church. Withdraw from God.”

The Bible knows nothing about that at all as an attitude of choice for the Christian. There is no such thing for the Christian as pure despair, pure self-pity, pure gloom, pure unbroken depression. Because over and over the Bible teaches this incredible paradox of grief mingled with this miraculous joy as a possible choice for the Christian. And the paradox of the Christian life is laid out in places like 2 Corinthians 6 where Paul speaks of being genuine and yet being regarded as impostors; being known and yet being regarded as unknown; dying and yet we live on; beaten and yet not killed; and here is the key verse: “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.”

Do we experience sorrow? Yes. But never so much sorrow as to have to destroy our joy. Jesus says that in the midst of the worst kind of pressure, “Blessed are you,” in Matthew 5, “when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil about you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”

James says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds.”

There is no such thing as pure gloom for the Christian. The demonic temptation in trials is to choose depression. To cover yourself with a blanket of self-pity and say, “I have a right now to feel bad.”

Now understand what I am saying - there is no joy in cancer. No joy in an accident suffered by a loved one. There is no joy in unemployment or in relational tears, or in poverty, or in hunger, or persecution, or divorce, or the discovery that your child is on drugs or is sleeping around. There is no joy in evil. We Christians do not mindlessly go around pretending that evil or sickness is anything other than evil or sickness. The Bible does not teach Christian Science, that evil is just an illusion. I am not talking about pretending. I am not talking about denying pain. I am not talking about trying to put the best face on it.

No. We look at pain squarely in the face and we say, “In that, I grieve.” And God grieves, we are going to find out. God grieves because of AIDS. God grieves because of abortions. God grieves because of your child’s or your

spouse's sins or what you go through because of your child's or your spouse's sins.

But the balance must be maintained, that in the midst of grief, there can be profound joy.

You say, "Rich, how do I possibly find that paradox, that joy in the midst of grief, so that I can learn how to grow and mature through suffering?"

We must note the strong connection in the Bible between joy and the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:52 says:

"And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

Romans 14:17 says:

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

1 Thessalonians 1:6 says:

"You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message [that means the gospel message] with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."

Here is the idea. If you want to experience joy, you must be filled up with the Holy Spirit. You start on the inside and work out. Most of us, when we are experiencing the press of trials, job pressures or relational pressures or financial pressures, our solution is to change our outward circumstances. "I need to change jobs immediately." "I need to change the city I live in." "I need to change relationships." Change majors, change roommates, change spouses. And if I make these outward changes and rearrange life, then I will find joy.

Now, you may need to do some changing and wisdom may dictate that you make some plans for change. But biblical thinking doesn't primarily involve buying a new wardrobe, changing from the outside in. Biblical thinking says that joy comes from the inside out. We can make all of these changes in our lives and still not find joy, unless on the inside we are filled up with God.

See, Jesus is joy. He is joy. There is no joy without Jesus. And unless somehow in your heart, you are experiencing a free-flowing relationship with Jesus who is joy, unless you are filled with Jesus, Jesus, abiding in Jesus, living in him, experiencing him, it doesn't matter what kinds of changes in circumstances you are experiencing. You will not have joy in your life. You can have a great house and a great car and a great body and feel totally empty as many, many people do.

Or you can have pressures and trial and undergo tremendous suffering and be filled with joy that can't be taken away because it is inside of you. Now, we have had a couple of witnesses of that to our church. One of the things over the last several months that I have noticed about a few of the speakers that have come to the Vineyard—Richard Foster, who did a conference for us on prayer; and then John Wimber, who came in last week—one of the things that are so noticeable about both men is how full of joy they are. It is certainly not because life has been easy for them.

If you know John's story, life has been extremely difficult for him. Since the age of 23, he has been told by his doctor at every appointment that he is shortly going to die. He has three major, life-threatening illnesses right now. The last

year was a physically battering year for him. The treatments were very difficult for him personally. They are sometimes not as difficult for other people. He went in for cancer treatment. And in the particular kind of cancer treatment that he underwent, he had to go in for radiation in which he was stuck in a long thin tube. What he discovered is that he is unbelievably claustrophobic. And every day when he went in that long thin tube, he experienced an emotionally battering kind of fear.

He then lost his hearing. Lost his ability to swallow. He lost about 100 pounds in weight. He couldn't walk. He certainly had his share of grief. Yet, what I see in John is not just grief, but joy.

Brothers and sisters, it is possible for us to find the life of God in trials. And I know that religious people are often grim, often mean, often angry, often intellectual, but very sharp-edged, sarcastic, but that is not what I see in John Wimber. And that is not what I saw in Richard Foster. I saw the joy of the Lord.

Trials can do many things to us. Rob our health. Rob our finances. But they cannot rob you of the freedom to choose joy as a response. No one can take that from you. Nothing can take that from you.

Here is a second lesson in creative suffering. You can choose to be refined. Verse 7: "These [meaning these trials] have come so that your faith of greater weight than gold which perishes, even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor, when Jesus Christ is revealed."

It is lie that I must view and you must view trials as destructive, as debilitating, as things which necessarily must rip you off and rob you of life. The temptation is to view every trial as destructive.

But creative suffering means that I look at the pressure in my life, I look at what is coming down on me at my job, what is coming down on me in relationships, what is coming down on me in this illness and I say, "This can be used constructively, to build me up, to mature me, to grow me." Or in Peter's words, "This particular trial is refining me."

God's intention is to refine you and to purify you and your faith, which is like gold. Now, what does it mean to have your faith purified or refined? I don't believe that Peter is talking about the doctrinal content of faith. Trials are not necessarily designed by God to straighten out your theology. Your theology may be fine. But trials are getting to your heart responsiveness to God, that personal subjective element to faith. Trials call into question your real connectedness to the living God. When pressed, when pressured, the Lord is saying to you, "How well do you really know me?"

Not what is in your creed, your statement of faith, what you have been taught in doctrine class. How well do you really know the Lord? How connected and intimate are you really with God? How convinced are you that God is really in control when things seem so totally out of control? How sure are you that God is really good when things seem so bad? How tough is it for you to say "yes" to God and "yes" to integrity and honesty when you are called to account? When push comes to shove, what is really going on with you and what do you choose?

That is what is really being boiled to the surface. God wants you to trust in Him from your heart, not just a doctrinal content about God. So that all that is in us that does not contain a heart-trust in God, all the impurities are put in the fire. All of our doubts, all of our fears, all the ways that we judge God to be other than what he is. All of our viewpoints that are false, these all get boiled to the surface. You say, "How long will the boiling last?"

Well, you know, when refiners were heating up gold, they knew they were done when they could look into the cauldron and see their reflection in the gold. When the impurities are scraped off and the refiners could look into that cauldron and see their reflection they said, "I am done now."

What Jesus Christ wants to do is to be able to gaze at us and see his reflection in us. He wants us to look like him. So he boils and he heats and he turns the flame up to get rid of all the dross that is in our hearts and all the independence and the self-sufficiency and the "I can make it on my own." Because he is looking for himself in us. And then he is done.

Well, we miss so much in the way that God loves us. He hasn't chosen us just for heaven. He has chosen us to be changed into his likeness. And biblically, over and over again, we are told that he loves us so much that he prunes us like a vine dresser with a vine. He loves us so much that he refines us. He loves us so much that he disciplines us. This is part of the love of God for us.

We can choose to see trials as constructive—God is refining me. Or Satan's viewpoint—all of this is serving just to destroy me.

Here is the third thing. We can choose to retaliate when we are pressed by people or we can choose to be a blessing. Creative suffering, third of all, means that you choose to be a blessing in the midst of your trials. 1 Peter 3:9 says:

"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

Creative suffering means that you always keep in mind that one of your primary callings as a Christian is to be a blessing to other people around you. Even if those people have hurt you or slandered you, have broken relationship with you, have caused your integrity to be called into question, have abused you or persecuted you, it is a lie that you need to get even. When trials come at the hands of someone else, the demonic temptation is to return evil for evil.

-Well, if they are talking about our church, we are going to talk about their church.

-If they criticize my child, I am going to criticize theirs.

-If they give me a bad report at work, then I am going to talk about them in the lunch room.

Let me say something about being a blessing. You know, trials do not take away our responsibility or our need to be a blessing. Very often people say that because of what I am undergoing, I must stop being a blessing to those around me and practically, what we often observe, is that someone who is going through some kind of personal life crisis, at that moment says, "Well, it is time for me to stop helping other people. I am going to withdraw myself and isolate myself



while I undergo counseling or while I go through the process of being healed personally.”

You know, even if you are bleeding from every pore, it is so important for your own healing to bless somebody else. There is virtually never a time, no matter how sick we are, how unhappy we are, how depressed we are, how insane we are—there is virtually never a time when we don’t both need to be healed and to be healers. There is no one here who should say to himself, “Now is the time for me to stop serving.”

You say, “Well, I am absolutely distressed.”

Get prayer. Get counseling. And then as part of the healing process, pack a bag of groceries at our food ministry. As part of your healing, plant flowers around the church. As part of your healing, make a meal for somebody. Invite a neighbor over for coffee. Drive someone somewhere. Wait for them at the doctor. Share your faith. Especially that, as part of your healing, share your faith. Invite someone to church.

Creative suffering means that I always remember that my call in life is to be a blessing to someone else.

Continuing with our lessons in creative suffering, we come to the fourth lesson which is found in 1 Peter 4:1-3:

“Therefore since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, for he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result he does not live the rest of his earthly life for human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do. Living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.”

Creative suffering means that a person chooses not to sin. As they go through trials, we see them as breaking the power of sin in their lives.

Now 1 Peter 4:1 is notoriously tricky for people to interpret. If you read the commentaries, you are going to find a wide variety of interpretations. It says, “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.”

Now, what is the precise relationship between suffering and being done with sin? How does suffering break the power of sin in our life? This is a most important lesson. One of the keys to creative suffering is to understand that suffering can literally break the power of sin in your life. Not sins, but sin. You see, the essence of sin is an independent spirit from God. The core of sin is the viewpoint that “I can make it on my own. I can manage my own world by myself, for myself without any reference to God at all. I am the captain of my own ship, the master of my own fate.”

The beauty of trials and sufferings are that they strike at the heart of my independent spirit. I begin to lose control. Something has invaded my secure world. I have done everything that I can to make everything comfortable and convenient and easy for myself, but something invades my secure little world that I can’t manage or master.

I cannot, on my own, shake this illness. I cannot, on my own, make a family member feel better. I cannot, on my own, find a job that will fulfill me. I am

getting the doors slammed in my face. I cannot, on my own, manage the pressure that I am feeling at work or with my marriage or in my ministry.

Something difficult invades our secure world, our independent world and shows us that we, in truth, have never been in control and that we, in truth, have never been the captain of our own ship or the masters of our own fate. And that pressure that builds through suffering can, if we react correctly, throw us into the arms of God.

You see, the death blow to the power of sin consists precisely in this: A trial can lead us to a greater and greater dependence on God and loose us from our ridiculous pride. And this loosing from pride and independence from God is a pattern that I have seen repeated over and over in my own life. I have gotten used to the rhythm of becoming very independent – independence, and then pressure, and then dependence on God in prayer. Haven't you? We get real independent; the distance between us and God grows – then something comes along and shakes us, and if we are smart, which all of you are, you come running back to God in dependent, desperate prayer.

Now, as I said, every trial carries with it not only the opportunity for growth and maturity, but carries with it temptation. And in this particular case, the temptation of suffering is to anesthetize your pain with some sort of addictive behavior and that is what verse 3 is talking about.

“You have spent enough time in the past doing what the pagans choose to do, living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.”

Here is the flip side of what I have talked about. Instead of going to the root of creative suffering, being thrown into greater dependence upon God, trials can bring with it the opportunity, the temptation to find a quick fix as the response to inner pain.

It is interesting that he mentions the two things that many of us will turn to when we are in pain—sex and some kind of substance, drugs or alcohol. You can watch this addictive cycle at work in your life. Those of you who find yourselves caught in an addictive cycle, you experience pain at your work, some kind of relational pain or tear or trial, you experience pain financially, you are under stress. So what do you do?

Well, that stress can throw you toward dependence on God—Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, in the words of John Wimber. That is creative suffering.

But it can also push you toward wanting to relieve the pain quickly by getting your fix. And so you turn back to a sexual relationship or you turn back to alcohol, or to pornography or some kind of other addictive behavior. It is like that shot of heroin in the arm. It just goes into the body and breaks the pressure of pain in your life.

You have to see this cycle because that is precisely what God doesn't want you to do, he wants you to turn to him in dependence.

Here is the fifth lesson in creative suffering. You can choose not to be surprised!

1 Peter 4:12 says,

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you.” Every trial contains with it the temptation to say that there is something terribly abnormal here. Why am I not happy with my job? Why is nothing opening up for me? Why is that ministry opportunity that I have been banging my head against the wall for, why is that not occurring? There is something terribly abnormal here.

And, inevitably, we say to ourselves in trials, “There must be something wrong with me. What have I done wrong to deserve this? I wouldn’t be experiencing this kind of pain unless I had done something wrong.”

Now, it is appropriate that we do an inventory and see whether the trial and suffering is of our own making and if we can correct our mistakes! But if after the inventory we say, “No, this does not seem to be of my own making” then the lie must be exposed. There is simply nothing abnormal about suffering or trials in a fallen world.

Peter says, “Don’t be surprised at the fiery trials that you are undergoing.” It is reminiscent of Daniel’s friends being thrown into the fire. Don’t be surprised if from time to time you, too, are thrown into the furnace of trials.

You know, it all has to do with what your fundamental understanding of the Christian life is. If your fundamental understanding of the Christian life is that God is pleased with you and his blessing is on you only when you experience smooth sailing - then you will interpret every difficulty as being horribly abnormal. But biblically, God’s blessing on our life is found in pruning and refining and disciplining us. And the metaphors that are used for the Christian life are not metaphors of tourist, spectator, person in the hot tub. We read about soldiers and athletes and hard-working farmers, people who are used to toughness as the norm.

I love David Parker’s little statement that many of us thought, when we signed up for the Christian life, we were signing up for a trip on the Love Boat. We get on and we look around for the shuffle board courts, we are looking for the little carved swan in ice and to have a drink with the little umbrella in it. But instead we find that we have signed up for a cruise on a battleship and somebody is handing us a mop and calling upon us to serve.

We must rid ourselves forever of the notion of going through trials with our kids, in relationships at work, in ministry, is anything other than a totally normal part of life. That if we were holy or blessed and could figure everything out or had all this tremendous wisdom then there would be no trials. Jesus was holy. Jesus was blessed. Jesus had ultimate wisdom. And Jesus went through trials of every kind. Choose not to be shocked or surprised!

Here is the last and final lesson regarding creative suffering. We can choose not to be alone. Verse 13:

“But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

The great lie, the ultimate lie and temptation in every trial is the thought that we are alone. That we have been abandoned. See, the pain of trial is not just the suffering that you might be undergoing through illness or unemployment or

relational break, or the failure of finance, or anything like that. The great pain in trial is the feeling of God-forsakenness. That God is somehow lounging on a deck chair with a drink in his hand completely unconcerned about how you feel and how you are doing.

The pain of trial consists precisely in the feeling that we are alone and that God doesn't care. And creative suffering means that we call to mind this wonderful truth, that in all of our pain and in all of our distress, as the Old Testament says, God himself is distressed. We share as Christians, we share in the sufferings of Christ and he shares in our sufferings. In all of our distresses, he too is distressed.

This is not too hard for you parents to understand, is it? As you witness the pain of one of your children, the pain of their experience of failure on a sports team or failure in school, or rejection by a friend, the pain of their failure through rebellion, or their illness—can any parent say they don't honestly feel their child's pain more strongly perhaps than their own children do?

This is the tenderness of the heart of God for you. That in perfect love he himself feels our wounds and our pain. That is what Christ said to the apostle Paul as Paul was riding on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. Jesus Christ stopped him in his tracks and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" You are not just persecuting Christians, you are persecuting me, Jesus, by your actions. We are members of his body. We are tied to him as the branches are tied to the vine.

And just as the Lord Jesus feels our pain, the ultimate in creative suffering is to see that we, as Christians, get the privilege of feeling the pain of God. Peter says, "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ."

Now, I don't pretend in any way to have plumbed this at this point in my life. This is a truth that is way down the road for me and way down the road for most of us, although not all of us here. But perhaps the crown jewel of creative suffering is the notion that we, as human beings, get to, in a small measure, feel the pain of God. In our trials and our sufferings, we feel the pain of God as he experiences the rejection and rebellion of a world that has turned its back on the one who made it.

The pain of God as he feels the dishonor heaped upon him and the scorn and the mocking and the jokes about God. As God looks out at the distress of humanity, its hunger, its wars, its disease and divorce, he feels pain because of his love. And in trials and sufferings, the Lord can put that heart of pain in your heart.

Peter says, "Rejoice in so far as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, your heart will be enlarged because then too you will be able to enjoy even more his glory when it is revealed." If you have ever felt God's pain, as you go through pain, rejoice, because you will be able to experience even more – his glory when it is revealed.

Let's pray.

## **Creative Suffering**

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Rich Nathan  
Sermon—Sunday, May 22, 1994  
1 Peter

- I. Various Kinds of Trials
  
- II. Choosing Our Responses
  
- III. Creative Responses to Trials
  - A. Can choose to be joyful (1 Peter 1:6)
  
  - B. Can choose to be refined (1 Peter 1:7)
  
  - C. Can choose to be a blessing (1 Peter 3:9-12)
  
  - D. Can choose to not sin (1 Peter 4:1-3)
  
  - E. Can choose to not be surprised (1 Peter 4:12)
  
  - F. Can choose to not be alone (1 Peter 4:13)