

Why I Want To Be Part Of The Suffering Church

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Statistics tell us that more than one in 10 suffer from depression.¹ Life is hard. Life can be particularly hard for Christians. Last week we learned why Christians can feel incredibly lonely in this world. We don't fit into this culture. A desire to live a holy life doesn't mesh with modern society. Last week we also learned the great antidote to a Christian's loneliness in the world. It is the church. The church is a place where the Word of God creates intense love between the people of God. If you want deep community and loving friendships, the place to find them is the church.

This week we move from a loneliness that is cured by the church to suffering because we are part of the church. Paul wrote:.

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... 2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

Why do Christians suffer? Is there any hope in our times of suffering? What good can Jesus possibly bring out of our suffering? These are all questions we will answer this morning.

If you are new, my name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors at CrossWinds Church. We are a multi-campus church with campuses in Spirit Lake and Spencer. We stay in sync across all campuses to do together what we couldn't do alone. Both of our campuses are in a series of studies in the book of 1 Peter called *Hope in Hard Times*. In this study we are learning how God carries us

¹ <http://www.everydayhealth.com/health-report/major-depression/depression-statistics.aspx>

through the tough spots of life. This morning we are in 1 Peter 2:4-10. Let's read this passage.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:4–10 (ESV)

We will study these verses under three headings. They are: Why is Jesus called the cornerstone? Why is suffering part of the church? Why is a suffering church the place I want to be?

Why is Jesus called the cornerstone?

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious... 1 Peter 2:4 (ESV)

You hear them at airports. Beep. Beep. Beep. When you hear that sound you know a motorized cart is behind you. These overgrown golf carts help those with trouble walking make it to their next flights. When I travel I inevitably find one of them heading straight for me. I need to make a choice. Do I jump to the left or the right? The one place I cannot stay is the middle. The drivers of those carts will hit you. Jesus is similar to one of those motorized carts. You have to decide what you believe about him. Do you reject and hate him or embrace and

love him? There really is no middle ground. This is what the Bible means when it talks about Jesus as the cornerstone.

What is a cornerstone?

For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹ Peter 2:6 (ESV)

Peter quoted from Isaiah 28:16 where we learn that God promised to lay a stone in Zion. Zion simply means Jerusalem. Isaiah told us God promised to do something in Jerusalem that was going to be the cornerstone for a new people of God. Whoever believes in him, *not an it*, because this cornerstone is a person, will never be put to shame.

To understand where Peter was heading with his stone illustration we need to understand the way ancient architects designed buildings. Buildings in the ancient world were typically made of rocks that were individually cut and shaped to create walls and the floors. The architect designed the building so every stone in the building measured off one stone, the cornerstone. The cornerstone determined the rest of the stones. It was the most important stone in the building. It needed to be laid exactly level because the level of the others bricks were determined from it. It had to be in the perfect location. The cornerstone was connected to everything.

What Isaiah and Peter taught is that in Jerusalem God laid a cornerstone to a new building called the church. The cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ. As members of the church, each of us is a stone in God’s new building, God’s new people. Everyone in the church derives his or her identity in the

church from Jesus, just like every stone in a building was connected to the cornerstone.

Isaiah also said whoever believes in this cornerstone, Jesus Christ, will never be put to shame. If Jesus is the cornerstone of your life, you will never be ashamed. That is a promise from God. If Jesus is to be the cornerstone of our lives, everything in our lives must be measured off him. This means money cannot be the cornerstone that determines our lives or we will fail miserably. Our children cannot be our cornerstones. If you live for your children you will crash and burn. A spouse cannot be a cornerstone. If you live for your spouse, he or she will disappoint you. A job cannot be our cornerstone. If we live for our jobs, we will be fired. Nothing else can hold the weight of being the cornerstone in our lives other than Jesus.

Those who reject Jesus will stumble over Jesus.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious... 1 Peter 2:4 (ESV)

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 1 Peter 2:7–8 (ESV)

Peter quoted from Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14. The Old Testament doesn't simply tell us God would send a cornerstone to Jerusalem that everyone should build their lives upon. The Bible also tells us that many people will reject Christ. People will not simply ignore Christ but they will be offended by him. They will hate Christ. They will persecute Christ and ultimately kill Christ.

The picture Peter gave us from Isaiah is somebody walking down the path in their sandals. A rock is sticking up in the path and he strike his toes on the rock, falls on his face and knocks out his front teeth. Blood is running out his nose. He is screaming in pain holding his toes. What would you do to the stone in the path? I would take a sledge hammer to it in my anger. This is the kind of reaction that Jesus produces in some people. He is offensive. He makes them angry. This is the kind of reaction the Jews had to Jesus. They wanted to snuff him out at all costs.

As the people of God, just as the cornerstone was loved by God but rejected by this world, as living stones in God's house who are all connected to the cornerstone we are also loved by God but rejected by the world. The world will hate us because we are Christians, just like it hated Jesus. There is no middle ground on this. People will either love or hate Jesus. They will either hate or love you because of your connection to Jesus. Jesus is like a motorized cart in the airport. Beep! Beep! Beep! What will you decide?

Is Jesus your cornerstone or your stumbling stone?

The Bible doesn't give us a lot of wiggle room on this one. Is Jesus your stumbling stone so you find him offensive? Do you discount his words? Do you not believe he will answer your prayers? Do you think you can trust him? Are you willing to build your sex life, home life, business life and family life measured off him as the cornerstone of your life? That is the Christian life. If we are part of God's house, Jesus needs to be the cornerstone of all things.

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:11–12 (ESV)

You may not want Jesus as your cornerstone but there really isn't much discussion on this one. That is the way God chose it to be.

Why is suffering part of the church?

...you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:5 (ESV)

In Peter's language he inferred there is a close parallel in this world between Christ as the living cornerstone and the rest of us who are stones in God's house, the church. Just as Jesus was precious to God and chosen by him, as living stones in God's house, we are precious to God and chosen by him. Just as Jesus suffered because people hated and rejected him, as living stones of the house we must expect they also will suffer a portion of what Jesus suffered. Suffering will be part of the Christian life.

Just as Jesus experienced suffering in this life before receiving glory from the Father, as living stones in his house, we can expect to experience suffering in this life before we receive glory from the Father.

We must expect the pattern of our lives will follow the pattern of Christ's life. We will experience earthly suffering before we receive heavenly glory.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church... Colossians 1:24 (ESV)

Paul said that Christ's sufferings were not all of the sufferings that the church, God's house, would endure. Paul was thankful he was privileged to suffer for Christ and add to what was lacking in the total sufferings of God's

people. Clearly Paul expected the church to suffer just because it is the church and connected to Christ.

One of Peter's consistent themes in 1 Peter is that just as the sufferings of Christ preceded the glories of Christ, as living stones who are part of God's house connected to the cornerstone we will experience suffering in our lives before God gives us glory. Our lives will follow the same patterns as Jesus'. Let me show you some of the verses in 1 Peter where Peter taught this again and again.

...inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. 1 Peter 1:11 (ESV)

Peter told us the prophets of the Old Testament predicted these two aspects of Christ's life. Sufferings first, glory second.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:13 (ESV)

Peter said we should be thankful for the privilege of suffering for the sake of Christ because it whets our appetites for the day when Christ is revealed. When life is soft and comfortable, we don't look forward to the day when Christ returns. Suffering whets our appetites for Christ's return and his glory is revealed. We are recipients of it.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you... knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 5:6–11 (ESV)

At the end of his book, Peter acknowledged we will go through times of suffering. He doesn't say they are all limited to persecution for the sake of Christ but we will have times of anxieties, worries and depression. We will have times where our hearts are broken. As Christians, life will be hard.

When we go through those times he tells us to remember a few things.

1. **Remember we are not suffering alone.** We have brothers and sisters around the world going through times of anxiety and suffering just like us. Be encouraged. If they can make it by relying on Christ, so can we.
- 2) **Remember hard times do not last forever.** All hard times are only for a little while. Even if hard times last for the rest of our earthly lives, in the grand scheme of things from the perspective of eternity, they are just a little while.
- 3) **Remember God promises to restore, strengthen and establish us forever in his eternal glory.** When all is said and done, we will be basking in God's presence for all eternity. We are recipients of the maximum amount of glory and grace that God can display. That makes eternity sound pretty good! The pattern is always earthly suffering followed by heavenly glory. That is something to look forward to.

In my mind, I always ask the question, "Why?" Why does God want his people to go through times of earthly suffering before he gives us heavenly glory? Here are some reasons:

God has a good purpose in hard times.

1. **We learn obedience through suffering.**

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.
Hebrews 5:8 (ESV)

The sufferings of Christ taught him obedience to his father. When we suffer it teaches us to obey our heavenly father. We learn to seek God more in suffering. God uses suffering in our lives to increase our obedience to him.

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. Psalm 119:67 (ESV)

If we never suffer, trust me, we would not be very obedient to God and his Word.

2. Suffering puts an end to sin.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin... 1 Peter 4:1 (ESV)

We all know what it is like to dabble in sin. We know what it is like to get full of our ourselves, to become proud and egotistical. We know what it is like to rebel against God. When God brings suffering in our lives, it clears our heads. We get humble in a hurry when someone we love is diagnosed with cancer. We get humble when we are sick. We are quick to repent of our hidden sins. We are quick to get on our knees and find time to pray when we were too busy for prayer. God uses suffering in our lives to strip our lustful, sinful desires from us like a vacuum sucking dirt out of a carpet.

3. Suffering helps us to comfort others.

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation... 2 Corinthians 1:5–6 (ESV)

When we suffer, God comforts us in our suffering. One of the reasons God comforts us in our troubles is so we can comfort others in their troubles. If we never suffered, we would be very egotistical people with absolutely no

compassion. Once we have suffered, we weep with those who weep. We cry with those who cry. We take time to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. Suffering makes us incredibly useful to God when it comes to our ability to help others in their suffering. Suffering teaches us compassion. If you have never suffered you will be an irritable stuck-up snoot that does little spiritual or practical good for others with your life.

4. Suffering teaches us to rely on God rather than ourselves.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 (ESV)

It is good for us to come to the end of our ropes. When we come to the end of our ropes we discover God is the one holding us, not our ropes. When we have nothing in ourselves left to rely on, we discover that God is the one who gives us our daily bread. I have faced those end-of-the-rope moments. Some of you have faced those moments. In one sense I wouldn't wish them on anyone because they are hard. In another sense, I wouldn't trade away those times because it was in those times I learned that God is large and in charge and he cares about us. He is actually involved in life. He rescues his children because he loves them. It is by passing through those moments that God does his deepest and most significant character changes in our lives.

The pattern of all stones in God's spiritual house is suffering first with glory to follow. Do not despair. God always has a good purpose in our hard times even when they are not easy.

The reaction at this point for many people is to play it distant from the church. Why would you want to be a living stone in God's house if that guarantees you will suffer because you are connected to Jesus? Peter told us the glory that comes from being part of the church outweighs the sufferings of the church.

Why is a suffering church the place I want to be?

Peter assembled a constellation of texts from the Old Testament that describe the incredible blessings given to ancient Israel in the Old Testament. He told us they all apply to the church.

The church is a chosen race.

But you are a chosen race...that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)

Peter quoted from Isaiah 43:3 where Isaiah told ancient Israel that they were God's chosen people. In that passage God said through Isaiah that he would rescue his people out of exile in ancient Babylon. He would rescue them from their suffering because God chose them out of all the people of the earth. They didn't earn it. They don't deserve it. It was all by God's amazing love. That is the church. Everyone in the church is chosen by God and loved by God. We don't deserve it. It is all a gift from God's love. Isaiah went on to say why God was rescuing them.

...the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise. Isaiah 43:21 (ESV)

The reason God chose to love and rescue ancient Israel was so the Israelites would always speak of the greatness of God. They were to always talk

about God's excellencies and kindness. One of the reasons God lets the church go through times of suffering is because when he rescues us, we will forever talk about his greatness and kindness for rescuing us.

Think of this in regard to ancient Israel's exile in Egypt. It was the exile, the hardness of Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh's insistence on the genocide of the Hebrew babies that brought ancient Israel to the point of sheer desperation. That was the workbench God needed to fashion a famous rescue that would make his name famous forever. God brought one of the most powerful nations on the planet to its knees through plague after plague. The plague of death of the firstborn and the splitting of the Red Sea so Israel could walk on dry ground followed by the swallowing of Pharaoh's army was all ultimately done to make God's name famous forever through the great rescue of the people he loved. This way God's people would speak about the greatness of their God forever. One of the reasons God has suffering as part of the life of the church is so we find ourselves at points of desperation so God has something to rescue us from and make his name famous in our lives and through it.

My friends, nothing is different for us today! We will suffer now so in this life, or for sure in the next one, we will forever sing God's praises for the rescue God gave us when facing hopeless circumstances or a hopeless eternity. That is why you want to be part of a suffering church. He is writing a story of his amazing rescues through our lives.

The church is a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

...you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. Exodus 19:5–6 (ESV)

God's plan is that the people of his church would be close to him. They would be priests. In most religions you have some people who are closer to God than others. You have levels. God's plan is that all of us can be intimate with him. We are to be a people where everyone is a priest and can go directly to God. In addition, God's plan is that all of us would be holy and not dominated by sin in our lives.

It was God's plan that the ancient Israelites would be close to him and their lives would not be dominated by sin. That didn't work for ancient Israel. The people rebelled. Peter said that where ancient Israel failed, it is now fulfilled in the church. We are people where everyone is close to God. We are people that are not dominated by the cancerous life-taking affects of sin.

This is why I want to be part of the suffering church. Everyone in the suffering church is close to God and everyone in the suffering church has Christ's victory over the power of sin in their lives.

The church is God's personal possession.

...a people for his own possession... 1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)

This is great. Peter quoted two Old Testament texts that say ancient Israel was God's personal possession. Ancient Israel was like God's wallet. A wallet is very personal. You keep the photos of your loved ones in it. You keep your credit cards in it. You keep your money in it. You never leave the house without it. In the same way, as members of the church and part of God's household, we are his prized personal possession. We are close to God's heart. He loves us and will never leave us. We are precious to him.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine...
Exodus 19:5 (ESV)

the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise. Isaiah 43:21 (ESV)

As the suffering church, we are a chosen race that was chosen by God for rescue so we would forever proclaim his amazing kindness and love. We are priests that can directly talk to God and a holy people that is not dominated by sin. We are loved by God more than anything else in his vast created universe. We are his own personal possession because we are identified with Jesus.

The church is God's restored bride.

It gets even better! In the days of ancient Israel, the heart of God's people turned away from God. Many times God sought his people but they ran away. God raised up a prophet named Hosea who had an interesting ministry. He was to marry an adulterous woman named Gomer. Even though he loved her, she kept leaving him for other men. I am thankful God didn't give me that ministry. Hosea's faithful love for his unfaithful wife was a living picture of God's faithful love to his unfaithful people.

There were three children born in Hosea and Gomer's marriage. They were given interesting names by God. The second child was named *No Mercy*. God was about to be done extending mercy to his adulterous people. The third child was named *Not My People* because God was done with calling his adulterous people his own. Shortly after Hosea's ministry the Assyrian's conquered Northern Israel. Israel was wiped out and annexed into Assyrian

territory, just as Hosea predicted. God was done having mercy and he was done with his people.

In the book of Hosea there is an interesting twist. God tells us he will not be done with his people forever. There was coming a day in the future where God was going to show mercy upon his people again and he was going to take his unfaithful people and bring them back to himself and he would passionately love them like a husband loves his wife on her wedding night.

Peter quoted from Hosea and said that day is now.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:10 (ESV)

Why do we want to be part of the church that suffers? Through Jesus, the cornerstone of God's new building, God is restoring his people to himself. The time of God withholding his mercy is over. The time of God putting away his unfaithful people is over. Through the cornerstone of Jesus, who paid for our sin, God is creating a new people that he loves with the same kind of passion as a groom on his wedding night. That is how much God loves us. That is you and me. *The suffering church, just like the cornerstone, will go through suffering before glory, but there is no better place to be.*



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