

KENNETH BOA

WITH JENNY ABEL



SHAPED BY
SUFFERING

HOW TEMPORARY HARDSHIPS
PREPARE US FOR OUR ETERNAL HOME



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THE CRUCIBLE OF SUFFERING

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

1 PETER 1:6

AS MY LONGTIME FRIEND lay in his hospital bed, weak and dying in the spring of 2018, he looked up at me with inquisitive eyes, as if asking—pleading—“What do I do now?” Of all the shared years of ministry and friendship with Barry Morrow, one memory flashed in my mind and stood out from all the rest: Barry and me punting down the Cherwell River in a short afternoon getaway during a summer program at Oxford in England. It was the summer of 1996. The journey was filled with the things we both loved: reveling in the beauty of God’s creation, talking of great literature, and exchanging quotes and ruminations on one of our favorite writers, C. S. Lewis.

But that pleasurable memory faded as a tinge of bitterness grew into a heavy weight of sorrow as I recalled the path Barry’s



Barry Morrow and Ken Boa

life had followed in the years since that summer. Yes, Barry was a man saved by grace. He, of all people, knew it was by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, that would lead him into the presence of the Father in a matter of days. He was a man who had spent a lifetime teaching and coaching others about finishing well in life, yet here on his deathbed he lay estranged from his former wife and now-grown children—alienated by the wreckage infidelity had wrought and all the lies, deceit, and cover-up that so often accompanies it. He was, by all indicators, *not* going to finish well.

The irony was obvious to everyone around him. But it didn't make the situation easy. Conquering human pride never is.

The cancer that wreaked havoc inside Barry's body was eroding the earthly shell of this man who once stood at my side as a partner in ministry. But his soul was fully alive, and there was still time. I knew exactly what Barry needed to do, but I wasn't sure if he

would do it. He'd resisted my and others' past urgings to be reconciled with his earthly family.

But now was different: with nothing left to hold onto, keenly aware that he didn't have much longer to live, his heart had become tender. He was open and ready to hear the truths God had put on my heart to share. I urged Barry to make his relationships right—his relationship with God and his relationships with his former wife and children. Leave no unfinished business, I told him.

Shortly after I talked to Barry in the hospital, which wound up being my last time with him, Barry called for his ex-wife, Caroleeta, to join him at his bedside, and they spoke for over an hour. Forgiveness was requested and granted. When he called for his two grown children immediately thereafter, he spoke these words of reflection on his encounter with Caroleeta:

It's like sitting down with someone for the first time. You know them but yet you don't. It was amazing, there was no pretense. . . . The love and forgiveness I've been shown from her, you all, and friends would not have happened apart from this [disease]. There's a great line from C. S. Lewis, who wrote a letter in *A Severe Mercy*; what Lewis is saying is God has given you a severe mercy—you would never in your life have asked for this—but you've been given tragedy, and it has saved you. We are all going to die, but if this illness had not come I would never have known of love.¹

At that moment, Barry's daughter Anna looked in the eyes of her tear-filled father and said, "Dad, you're finishing well." At his memorial service weeks later, she remarked, "Isn't disease ironic like that? It takes all we have, leaves us in a position of surrender, and then in our brokenness and emptiness we can begin to learn of love." This profound insight is echoed by the psalmist:

Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word. . . .
It is good for me that I was afflicted,
That I may learn Your statutes. (Psalm 119:67, 71 NASB)

THE CRUCIBLE

The crucible of affliction can come in the form of cancer and sickness, as it did for Barry, or in numerous other physical forms, ranging from a physical disability or injury to poverty or other difficult external circumstances to physical abuse or mistreatment on the level seen during the Holocaust, to name just a few examples. The crucible also includes countless forms of nonphysical affliction—mental, emotional, and spiritual—such as depression, anxiety, anguish over a family member’s death or spiritual lostness, the sting of social rejection or loneliness, career-related discouragement—the list goes on.

Suffering can be chronic, recurring, or lasting only a moment or a season. It can be externally caused, self-inflicted (as a result of sin or poor decision making), or a combination of the two. Suffering encompasses those unwanted things in our lives we contend with as well as the lack or loss of things we wanted.

Truly, if there’s one topic every human being can relate to on some level, it’s suffering, and yet suffering is unique to every person not only in its forms and causes but in the ways it is experienced. I might endure the same kind of affliction as you do, but we could each react to it very differently. Adversity that paralyzes one person may only briefly faze another.

In addition to being an individualized experience, suffering is, in many ways, mysterious—something our modern science-steeped, pain-averse selves have trouble accepting. If only some over-the-counter pain medicine, or something stronger, could fix

it, whatever *it* is, permanently! Yet without pain we would not know something is wrong. And that something wrong runs deeper than any temporary hardship, no matter how difficult it is, we'll ever face. Pain is, in spite of itself, a gift. Pain is not the problem itself; it's the symptom of (and even a warning signal pointing to) the bigger problem of evil in a world that God created to be good.

Although this book is not a theodicy, at this juncture you may desire an explanation of the very complex problem of evil and suffering, and how they fit within a biblical view of the world. If so, stop right now and turn to appendix 1 for a brief summary to that end.

The last thing I want to do is to downplay the complexities or difficulty of evil and suffering. I do not want to appear to be “dropping a Romans 8:28 bomb” on those going through trials, as though saying “Hang on! God is working all of this out for your good!” will suddenly dissolve the difficulty you're enduring.² My wife and I have personally experienced the pain and insensitivity of such comments regarding adversity in our own lives. They don't help much and in fact can be more injurious than helpful.

This book may amplify your questions about suffering because a central theme is the fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Christ himself. The suffering of Jesus was anything but light. In fact, it was the worst the world has known, encompassing every type of affliction, even to the point of experiencing alienation from his Father for our sakes—a curse you and I never have to bear. The suffering of the sinless Christ was also wholly undeserved *in every instance*.

But this book's purpose is not to try to explain this very difficult reality (which our limited human minds will never *totally* comprehend) but to consider suffering from an eternal perspective. Specifically, I want to examine how God uses suffering in our

lives—regardless of the form it takes or the reasons we’re undergoing it. In other words, what role does adversity play in achieving God’s goal of conforming us more to the image of his Son so we’ll be ready to meet him face to face?

There’s no doubt from the witness of Scripture and human history that God uses difficulties of all kinds to break his people of self-reliance and self-trust, and to teach us to rely on him, trust him, and find our true hope, identity, and security in him alone. We call this the crucible or furnace of affliction. Sometimes, this is a furnace of our own making, which is not praiseworthy in itself. Even then, however, God can use that pain for good in our lives. He has a way of allowing the heat to rise just enough in the crucible of affliction to produce a beautifully molded character in us as soon as we’re open to his redemptive work in our lives.

TWO OPTIONS

To be sure, adversity doesn’t automatically produce something beautiful in a person’s life. It can and often does have the opposite effect. Suffering can either make us bitter or make us better.

Russian writer and historian Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn exemplified the “better” outcome. After turning against the communist Soviet regime and being sent to a labor camp in the mid-twentieth century, the atheist found Christ (or, rather, Christ found him). In addition to raising awareness of the brutalities of the gulag, Solzhenitsyn’s writings have ministered to tens of thousands since then. Yet think of the millions of prisoners who suffered in those camps and grew bitter, not better; Solzhenitsyn wasn’t alone, but he certainly wasn’t the norm in being able to honestly say, “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!”³

Suffering always changes us in some way. The person we were before our suffering is never who we are after the suffering. The

critical question is not so much what happened (or what is happening) but what's our response?

Knowing who God is in advance and preparing for suffering when it comes (since Jesus promised it would come to all of us [John 16:33]) enables us to evaluate our circumstances in light of his unchanging character rather than to evaluate God in light of our changing circumstances. This, in turn, allows us to maintain an eternal perspective in the midst of our suffering. Instead of a narrow vision of what's happening to us right now, we will have a long-term view, recognizing we're seeing just a part of a much larger and very *good* story that God is writing—one that we know *will* end well—despite present appearances.

1 PETER: JOB OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Although the theme of suffering and its use by God to grow us and prepare us for eternity runs throughout the Bible, the Pauline writings are often a go-to body of Scripture for helping us gain perspective on the obstacles we face. But the first epistle of the apostle Peter, not a Pauline letter, is often called the “Job of the New Testament”—Job being the iconic example of godly endurance of suffering in the Old Testament. *Shaped by Suffering* stays closely tethered to 1 Peter, which I believe has growing relevance and parallels to our current context.

Writing shortly before intense persecution of Christians broke out under Roman Emperor Nero in AD 64, Peter, in this letter, was preparing his readers for the suffering they would endure and some had already endured.⁴ While persecution up until that time had been sporadic and localized, AD 64 marked the Great Fire of Rome, which devastated the city and was blamed (by Nero) on the Christian community, though it was likely ordered by Nero himself.⁵ Discrimination against Christians heated up from there

with intensifying, organized persecution—ten waves in total—by the Roman government. The pervasive mistreatment continued until AD 313, when Christianity was officially legalized in the Roman Empire under Constantine.

Nero's own reign began less infamously than it ended. After five years of “tolerable” rule, a horrifying environment unfolded—the environment Peter was readying his readers for in his epistle. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* gives us a glimpse of the kinds of events that swept through the Roman world:

This monarch [Nero] . . . gave way to the greatest extravagancy of temper, and to the most atrocious barbarities. . . . The barbarities exercised on the Christians were such as even excited the commiseration of the Romans themselves. Nero even refined upon cruelty, and contrived all manner of punishments for the Christians that the most infernal imagination could design. In particular, he had some sewed up in skins of wild beasts, and then worried [strangled] by dogs until they expired; and others dressed in shirts made stiff with wax, fixed to axletrees, and set on fire in his gardens, in order to illuminate them. This persecution was general throughout the whole Roman Empire.⁶

Peter wanted believers to determine ahead of time to hold fast to their faith, not allowing difficult circumstances to cloud their long-term vision or diminish their hope in God. In fact, Peter emphasized how their sufferings could actually be to their benefit, helping to prepare them for eternity. And this is exactly what happened. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* goes on to tell us that the widespread persecution “rather increased than diminished the spirit of Christianity.”⁷ In the absence of earthly security and hope, believers had to radically depend on God and each other.

Although 1 Peter was written in the context of the coming Neronian persecution, the letter does not concentrate only on suffering for the name of Christ. First Peter alludes to other types of suffering as well (1 Peter 1:6 speaks of their trials as “various” [NASB]). While 1 Peter’s theme is often said to be hope, adversity—as the consistent *context* of that hope—is mentioned in every chapter of the letter, with the last two of the five chapters heavily focused on suffering. This is one reason for the letter’s label as the Job of the New Testament.

ORIGINAL READERS: A MIXED AUDIENCE

A general epistle, 1 Peter was written to a broad audience of Christians. Its first verse makes clear that Jews were included in Peter’s original readership. In particular, he was addressing Jewish people who had been dispersed from Judea due to persecution and scattered into multiple regions of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey): Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. These five groups were not evangelized in the book of Acts and may very well have been in places Peter visited. Across Asia Minor, these Jews faced growing opposition from their non-Christian neighbors. Christianity was not yet officially banned by Rome at the time of Peter’s writing, but it would be within about a year. Part of the occasion of the letter, then, was to warn the people of this coming vilification—emphasizing that their problems would increase, not decrease.

But while persecuted Messianic Jews were clearly among Peter’s audience, the text gives us reason to believe Gentiles were among his intended readers as well. Several verses suggest this fact. First Peter 2:9 characterizes his readers as “called . . . out of darkness into his wonderful light,” and the next verse says they “once . . . were not a people, but now are the people of God,” suggesting a non-Jewish audience. In addition, Peter mentions “the empty way

of life handed down to [his readers] from [their] ancestors” (1 Peter 1:18), also implying a pagan background. Peter references that background again in 1 Peter 4:3: “For the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries” (NASB).

Peter was addressing a mixed audience, and the letter’s truths extend to believers today who are undergoing sufferings of all (various) kinds. The one exception is suffering that is a direct consequence of personal wrongdoing (cf. 1 Peter 2:20; 4:15). That kind of suffering, Peter emphasizes, is not admirable or praiseworthy, but the logical, natural result of individual sin. That being said, such suffering can still be used for redemptive purposes—this was certainly the case in Peter’s life. But through that type of suffering, we cannot be said to share in the sufferings of Christ, who suffered sinlessly.⁸

THE AUTHOR: A TRANSFORMED MAN

Peter wrote his first epistle from what he calls “Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13), likely a figurative designation for the city of Rome commonly used by early Christians. A future martyr himself, killed at the hands of Nero in AD 68 (just a few years after penning this letter), the apostle Peter was well qualified to speak not only on suffering but also on two other key themes of 1 Peter: grace and glory.

A supreme example of a transformed life, Peter had heeded the call to follow Jesus early. During Christ’s life on earth, Peter went with the Lord both to the heights of his glory and to the depths of despair. He was among the three disciples privileged to see the manifestation of Jesus’ preincarnate glory at the Transfiguration—an event recorded in three of the four Gospels and referenced in 2 Peter 1:16, with an additional possible reference in 1 Peter 4:13.

On the other end of the spectrum, Peter denied Jesus in his final hours as the Lord was mocked and beaten before going to the cross. Peter wasn't alone in abandoning Jesus, of course; all the other disciples fled too. But Peter's denials are notable given that he was the one disciple singled out by name as confidently asserting to Jesus before his arrest, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matthew 26:33). The shame he felt in letting his Lord down is clear from the Gospel accounts: after Peter realized his failure, the apostle was overcome with sorrow and "went outside and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62; see also Matthew 26:75).

Peter's fearfulness for himself *before* the resurrection starkly contrasts with his eager and courageous witness immediately *after* it, and with his ultimate willingness to die for his faith. Prior to the crucifixion, for example, we see Peter fearful of Jesus' presence in an early encounter (Luke 5:8), faltering in his faith as he starts to walk on water (Matthew 14:30-31), and (as mentioned earlier) three times denying Jesus in his darkest hours (apparently to save himself from being associated with one arrested and taken into custody). Yet this was the same man Jesus called the "rock" he would build his church on (Matthew 16:18); imagine the doubt, even confusion, cast over that promise as Peter betrayed the Lord! Would Jesus' words be fulfilled? (How many of us have asked that same question in the midst of a deep valley or crisis of faith?)

God wasn't finished with Peter, though. After the resurrection, the Gospel of John reports Peter as the first disciple to enter the empty tomb (John 20:4-6). Later, when Jesus appeared at the Sea of Galilee, Peter jumped half-dressed off his fishing boat and into the lake at the moment he recognized that Jesus was the one standing on the shore (John 21:4-8). A handful of verses later (John 21:15-17), we read of Jesus' recommissioning of Peter—three times—providing a beautiful picture of God's power to

completely cover all of our failures and sins, even the most heinous ones, and to restore us for his good purposes.

Doubt of Peter's faith and character dissipates by the time we reach Acts 2, which records Peter as confidently and fearlessly announcing the good news of the risen Lord to a crowd that included Jesus' murderers. Peter's newfound confidence wasn't self-focused but Christ-centered, the fulfillment of the Lord allowing Satan to "sift [Peter] like wheat" and Jesus' prayer for him that his faith might not fail in the end (Luke 22:31).

Peter went on to occupy a central role in the early church and in the spread of the gospel, particularly to the Samaritans and other Gentiles. Throughout the rest of Acts, Peter is far from the tempestuous character seen in the Gospels, though he's still far from perfect. Both Peter's own epistles and Paul's letter to the Galatians depict a chastened Peter—someone with greater depth as a result of adversity.

We don't know much about Peter's later life, except that he apparently traveled and ministered with his believing wife (1 Corinthians 9:5), and there is good historical evidence of his crucifixion under Nero. Tradition has it that, when he was on his way to be executed, Peter requested to be crucified upside down, since he didn't feel worthy to be crucified in the same manner as the Lord.

TWO CRITICAL TRUTHS

If the book of 1 Peter has a thesis, verse 10 of chapter five is it: "The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

Besides encapsulating the hope of our salvation and the surety of future glory, this verse communicates two key truths about suffering.

First, suffering is a given for every believer; it's a required course in the university of life. Notice Peter does not say “*if* you suffer,” but “*after* you have suffered.” Jesus communicated this reality in John 16:33: “In this world you *will* have trouble.” Paul, too, reiterates the inevitability of believers’ suffering in his second letter to Timothy: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Pain and adversity are not optional—they *will* come.

The idea that our sufferings will decrease when we place our faith in Jesus is a false gospel. The philosophy that Jesus just wants us to be happy, healthy, safe, and materially blessed is a far cry from the picture Jesus presented for his disciples about what to expect when we follow him:

Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. . . . They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. . . . [T]hey have seen [my miraculous works], and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: “They hated me without reason.” . . .

They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them. (John 15:20-21, 24-25; 16:2-4)

Too many of us have failed to remember Jesus’ warnings, favoring more palatable verses instead—often taken out of context (for example, his promise of peace [John 14:27], of rest [Matthew 11:28-30], and of comfort [Matthew 5:4]). Without the full counsel of Scripture,

a prosperity gospel can easily take root—and it has. Today, that gospel is preached in both blatant and subtle forms from many pulpits. This is one reason I believe 1 Peter is so pertinent to us in the twenty-first century: it provides a godly perspective on suffering so desperately missing in churches today.

While the first critical truth is that suffering is guaranteed, the second is that it is brief. It only lasts for “a little while,” comparatively, as 1 Peter 5:10 says. In relation to eternity, even our worst and longest-lasting pain on earth—regardless of how unending it feels—is a mere blip on the time line of history (in reality, it’s not even a blip!). Peter emphasizes this truth in another verse as well: “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6).

These two truths—the inevitability of suffering and the relative brevity of suffering compared to eternity—undergird Peter’s message. And the crux of 1 Peter’s message is this: our own sufferings allow us to share in the sufferings of our Savior—tasting just a little of what he tasted during his time on earth and ultimately on the cross. Not only is Jesus our ultimate example for how to suffer righteously, but he himself was made perfect through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). God used his sufferings for a greater purpose, as he will use ours. If the One we’re called to follow and imitate suffered, then surely we are not exempt, nor should we be surprised when troubles come our way.

A WITNESS TO CHRIST’S SUFFERINGS

In the final chapter of his first epistle, Peter refers to himself as a “fellow elder and witness of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Peter 5:1). He could have called himself a “witness of the resurrection” or of the transfiguration or countless other miracles of Jesus; instead, he specifically references Jesus’ sufferings (the ultimate of which was his

death on a cross and all the pain entailed in that event—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually). Peter is summoning up the most painful, shame-filled moment of his life—a time that undoubtedly evoked the greatest sense of failure and regret in him as he recalled his three denials—and reminding his readers that no adversity in our lives is wasted or without purpose; he can use our worst failures and pains to teach us the most. Peter was a living testimony to the fact that our God is the God of second chances.

Peter's words aren't shallow; they stem from an intimate knowledge of despair and disappointment, which led to a matured, eternal perspective. At one time, he was the one who, upon hearing the Lord's predictions of his own coming sufferings and death, had the gall to rebuke Jesus, saying, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22). At that point in his life experience, Peter simply couldn't believe such bad things would happen to the Son of God. Jesus had some harsh words for Peter in return: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (Matthew 16:23). How many of us, like Peter prior to the resurrection of Christ, look at our own sufferings with merely human concerns?

Peter had learned a key lesson by the time he wrote his first epistle, and it's a lesson we all need to learn. He had *watched* God incarnate suffer during his final years on earth. The apostle came to understand that the way of glory and grace goes through the cross—that the brutality of the crucifixion was, somehow, not only necessary but "fitting" (as Hebrews 2:10 puts it). Furthermore, Peter knew that the hard goodbye he said to the Lord at his ascension was the only path to receiving his Spirit at Pentecost and to Jesus one day coming back a second time as the reigning King of kings. Peter wanted his readers to see that suffering—though not a good thing in and of itself, but a result of the fall of

humankind recorded in Genesis 3—often becomes an instrument of change, “a grace disguised,” just as it did for my friend Barry Morrow as he was dying of cancer.⁹

God doesn’t abandon us in our suffering. Moreover, he doesn’t look at our suffering from afar but as one who also suffered. *He understands*. He sympathizes. He walks with us in our adversities. And as he does, he will (if we let him) transform us into someone more beautiful than if everything went our way.

Jesus as our exemplar and fellow sufferer is a major motif throughout 1 Peter. As we continually return to this theme, keep in mind that Peter did not speak of Jesus’ sufferings from second-hand knowledge. Unlike Paul, who never met Jesus prior to the resurrection, Peter wrote from the perspective of being one of Jesus’ closest friends on earth—someone who watched Jesus’ ministry and sufferings unfold, and who saw him up close immediately prior to (if not at) his death. Here was a man who understood what it feels like when God’s timeline isn’t ours, the agony of waiting, and the crushing disappointment when all hope appears lost.

Moreover, Peter wrote from the context of intensifying persecution of Jesus’ followers in an increasingly pagan world not unlike ours today. The rejoicing and praising he encouraged in the midst of difficulties (see 1 Peter 1:3, 6) didn’t come from an untested or ignorant heart. He knew deep pain personally; indeed, many of his original readers knew it—and had been forced to flee their homes as a result of persecution. But Peter clung to the promise that the story of our lives as believers really *will* end well. The day will come when our God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes,” and “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

Until God makes everything new, he calls us to fix our eyes on the One who both suffered *and* who conquered suffering once and for all.

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