

New Year's 2022 - Suffering for Greater Glory
Romans 8:18-21, James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 4:12-17

Well brothers and sisters, I think this is a New Year's unlike any other for us isn't it. Ordinarily New Year's is a celebration filled with a lot of optimism and over the top confidence which causes us to extend gratuitous blessings to any and all for the upcoming year to be *"the most amazing and best year of their lives!"*

But this year Covid has changed all that hasn't it. Celebrating a second New Year's under pandemic circumstances is causing us to realize that the relief we felt at the end of 2020, and the expectation that at some point in 2021 - things kind of had to get back to normal - was far too premature.

We know all too well that ringing in the New Year to have *"our most amazing year ever"* only rings hollow for this year because we are all too aware there are forces much larger than ourselves impacting what we are able to do with our day to day lives, and we're realizing that we'll be living with the affects of this pandemic for a lot longer than we anticipated.

And the reason this is difficult for us is because the hardship of living under these pandemic circumstances brings about a lot of suffering.

And brothers and sisters, the truth is that as children of our modern world, as people shaped by our technologically advanced society, as believers in progression of progress, there is nothing that we despise more than suffering.

We can make our peace with death – it takes us all eventually and if we've had a full and blessed life we can make peace with the fact that it is someone's time to go... We are all saddened by Betty White's recent death, but no one is calling it a tragedy of a life taken too soon.

And we can deal with defeat – we know that you can't win all the time,(unless you are Tom Brady) and we know we can learn things from a loss that can help you win the next time... And if you are a Leaf's fan you know that there's always next season...

And we can understand how our weaknesses can be “a strength” – leadership coaches will encourage you to be a better leader by “*showing some of your own vulnerability...*”

But suffering? Brothers and sisters we cannot stand suffering, not for ourselves and not for others – it is anathema to us.

Just consider how much of our technological and sociological development has been motivated by the desire to reduce or eliminate suffering.

It underlines our entire medical system; it has furthered the research and development of painkillers and drugs in the pharmaceutical industry, and ironically it is also the reason for the recent backlash against chemotherapy, and the push to give people medical assistance to kill themselves – we’d rather kill ourselves than suffer.

And it’s our reaction towards suffering which is responsible for some of the major social changes over the past century.

Gay marriage and transgender rights have become established and these behaviors destigmatized because... society has seen that these people are “suffering.”

It was an important catalyst for the movement to abolish slavery and establish women’s rights as well. Abolitionists and Feminists certainly attempted to change society by presenting well-reasoned political, philosophical, even theological arguments which successfully brought about changes in the law on these matters...

But its only when society sees and realizes how much someone is suffering that things will truly change.

Because we despise suffering.

Now as the examples of abolition and woman’s rights show - an aversion to suffering can be a good thing. It would be a cold hard world indeed if we were not moved to compassion to take pity on those who are afflicted and suffering and not do anything to address it.

In fact scripture says *“Suppose a brother is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?”* (James 2:15-16)

And yet when we despise suffering so much that we are willing to allow people to determine that a life is not wanted or would not be worth living and we legislate that people have a right to end that life or choose a doctor to help them end their own life... and we think this is compassionate, normal and loving... and even Christian???

Then it is evident that we have come to despise suffering so much - that we are willing to do ANYTHING to avoid it. There is no price too high, whatever the cost we will pay it to get rid of suffering – for ourselves and for others.

And while this may be a good intention – you know what they say about the road to hell being paved with such.

Do you see what I’m talking about here?

Now brothers and sisters – what the Lord wants to say to us this morning about suffering isn’t really focused on how our society deals with it... but how we deal with it – and if we deal with it in the same way our society does, and its an important issue to consider as we prepare ourselves to follow the Lord and be faithful to Him in 2022.

Because if we, as Christians, spurn suffering with the same disgust that our society does, then brothers and sisters we are going to miss out on the amazing things that God will do in our lives and - the glory that comes through suffering in 2022.

Because brothers and sisters, the biblical truth is that God brings Life through Death, Victory through Defeat, and Strength through Weakness – and brothers and sisters in 2022 the word is that God brings us to Glory through Suffering.

And that is our first lesson about suffering – there is a purpose to it, and that purpose is to bring us to glory, God’s glory!

This was how Jesus accomplished His work as the Messiah and He explains that it had to be this way in Luke 24:25-26 saying *“Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”*

And if this dynamic was part of how God determined that Jesus would accomplish His work to save us... then you can count on it being a part of how God is going to continue to work in our lives to sanctify us and complete Christ’s work us in the coming year.

However, hear what Paul says in Romans 8:18 that *“our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

Now there’s a second lesson for us about suffering, and that is that its purpose, the glory, is always forthcoming. We don’t receive it now – it comes in its completeness later on. Jesus didn’t enter into His glory until He ascended into heaven and was seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty and He was given authority over all things. (Eph 1:21-22)

And when Jesus was glorified in this way there was a change in His appearance - when Jesus Christ appears to John on the island of Patmos to give him the vision of the book of Revelation this is how John describes His appearance; *“I saw... someone like a son of man... The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters... coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”* (Rev 1:14-16)

Brothers and sisters this is Jesus in all His glory!

Now John had already been given a glimpse of this glory while Jesus was still on earth. In Matthew 17:1-2 we read *“Jesus took Peter, James and John... and led them up a high mountain there he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”*

Now there are all sorts of reasons why Jesus allowed Peter, James and John to see a glimpse of His glory – but a big part of

it was so that they would realize that there was still more to come – much better and more amazing things than what they currently knew and had experienced.

In fact this taste of what is to come is so amazing that Peter just wants to stay there and enjoy it. He says *“Lord - let me build a shelter for you and Moses and Elijah!”*

Typical Peter right... he didn't really get what was happening at the time. It wasn't until the disciples had been filled with the Holy Spirit that they understood how this experience was given to them so they could encourage followers of Jesus to look forward to better things to come.

That's why Peter encourages us in 1 Peter 1:4-6 by saying that God has given us an inheritance that will never fade or spoil (*better things than what we have now*) that is kept for us in heaven, until it will be revealed to us in the last time (*its forthcoming*).

And it's why 1 John 3:2 teaches us we not only are we forgiven from sin, not only are we resurrected from the dead back to new life, but that our future in eternal life with Christ involves that same kind of glory.

He says *“now we are children of God, (forgiven of our sins and given the Holy Spirit) and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”* (1 John 3:2)

So we too will be transformed, we will be glorified like Jesus has been glorified, and we get a glimpse of this in scripture. And Peter and John knew this and shared this with us because of the glimpse of that glory they saw revealed in Jesus.

But here is the rub brothers and sisters, Peter also says *“for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”* (1 Peter 1:6) Because glory comes through suffering.

Now, brothers and sisters – do we hear this as good news or bad news?

If we think that suffering is bad news that's because we don't have a biblical view of suffering – we are still being influenced by our society's hopeless view of suffering.

Our society despises suffering – not only because it's painful and agonizing and we don't like pain and we're afraid of agony... but because society sees suffering as pointless.

And they see it as pointless because they believe that reality only consists of whatever you can touch, taste, smell, feel and see or what you personally believe. That is all that there is – or at least it's all that really and truly matters.

And even though we are Christians who believe that there is more to life than what is material, and that the Kingdom of Heaven is real and breaking into our world...

Even though we confess that one day Jesus will return and make all things new and this world will no longer be as we know it to be – in the way that we deal with suffering we are acting like everyone else in our society and not true Christians.

Do you understand what I'm talking about?

So here's the third lesson about suffering. God allows Christians to suffer so that our view of this world and our perspective on life will be changed.

Brothers and sisters the truth is that we are getting too comfortable in this world – in this present age. Now you may be surprised to hear me say that because I'm always talking about having an appreciation for God's creation and how we are supposed to engage with it and work with it.

And that is still true, we must do this – but for all the good that is still in this world, for all the good that we do with it – there is still an age to come where this world is going to be far better than what we can create or even imagine right now.

So without meaning to denigrate God's good creation in anyway, I need to tell us that it is too easy for us to become complacent in this age and not anticipate and long for the glory of what is yet to come.

Brothers and sisters, when we suffer in this age – whether it be outright persecution for following Christ, or simply suffering the curse of living in a fallen world and experiencing sickness and disease and disaster – it takes the shine off and prevents us from becoming too attached to something that is going to pass away.

Again - don't misunderstand me. This is not saying we don't take care of this world, the creation, God's beautiful arrangement, and just let it go to hell in a handbasket.

Instead it's coming to the realization that God's good creation is cursed – and in this age, in these last days as the bible calls them – the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven is still to come when Christ returns and makes all things New.

And that's the forth lesson about suffering. Its continued existence in our modern and technologically advanced world reminds us that the New Age is not yet here and that human effort and ingenuity is not able to usher that Age in.

So, suffering knocks over the idols of human achievement and glaringly displays where they come up short.

Only the return of Christ and our subsequent glorification will bring about the New Heavens and the New Earth where there is no more suffering. That is what Paul is emphasizing in Romans 8:21 when he says *“the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”*

So brothers and sisters, not only are we too comfortable in this present age – but we are far too confident in our human capacities – to the point where we are in danger of believing that we do not need divine intervention anymore.

That is why I will often say, our job is not to go and change this world, but to tell the world it will be changed by God.

So much of our desire to go and make a difference in this world in this present age is really just our desire for significance dressed up with a veneer of Christian motivation.

And that brings us to the fifth lesson about suffering. Nothing else will bring out our true character and motives and reveal which are Godly or ungodly motives like suffering.

And suffering not only reveals this but if you are a Christian... the Holy Spirit uses suffering like a refining fire. For the Christian suffering has a purifying effect to it.

Peter tells us that we endure suffering *“so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* (1 Peter 1:7)

And James explains how the Holy Spirit uses suffering to add what we need to our faith *“so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* (James 1:4)

Biblically speaking, we won't fully mature as a Christian - unless we have undergone some suffering in our life.

So - how are Christians to approach and interact with suffering then? Well we mustn't despise suffering like non-Christians and seek to avoid it at all costs, but neither must we glorify suffering and attempt to seek it out.

We must leave that for God's sovereign direction over our lives and circumstances. As Peter instructs us *“For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”* (1 Peter 3:17)

So brothers and sisters it's very important that we understand this. Because if we don't have a good and proper biblical view of suffering and why it will be a part of our Christian lives, we are likely to react badly to suffering and mess it up.

Let me explain a bit more. I recently watched the Jim Cavieel Apostle Paul movie and it gave a very graphic and accurate portrayal of the Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome – and a very honest portrayal of how many of them want to take revenge for being persecuted.

It was very possible that some of those Christians would be sorely tempted to retaliate by killing the soldiers and guards who had tortured and killed their family members... Or to steal and take food or money from those who had taken their food and money and destroyed their businesses...

It gave me a whole new understanding of why Peter warns us that *“If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.”* (1 Peter 4:15-16)

Brothers and sisters the truth is that we often react badly to the suffering that God allows to come into our lives – and many times understandably so from a simple human perspective. After all it is not easy to suffer for doing good – especially when you love and follow Jesus and you are seek to obey Him.

Or when that suffering is caused by larger issues of systemic injustice in our society, environmental contamination, or another person’s profiteering or negligence...

But, we are not simple human beings... we are in Christ, we are new creations, we are chosen by God.

And when we react badly to such suffering... we undermine the sanctifying and purifying work which the Holy Spirit wants accomplish in us... and we cause more suffering for ourselves from our bad reactions.

That is not to say we can’t grieve a loss, cry in sadness, or feel anger at an injustice, or ask God why He allowed a particular trial into our life?

But it does mean that we must leave vengeance in God’s hands, and we must not harbor anger or give into bitterness towards God, or become fixated on the question of why??? – just to name a few ways we must not react.

And that’s another lesson about suffering. We may not have **all** the answers to trials and challenges that we suffer in this life – but we have **enough** answers.

Suffering leads us to greater glory, it teaches us that the glory is forthcoming, it shifts our perspective from this age to the next, it knocks down our idols, it reveals our motives and our heart, and it purifies us and changes us....

Those aren't all the answers – but these can be enough answers, enough so that when we are faced with the reality that God brings us to glory through suffering, we are able to endure it patiently...

And as Peter says "rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:13)

Now let me close off with one more insight about suffering.

One of the reasons we will be overjoyed when Christ's glory is revealed at His return has to do with how suffering for Christ affects our relationship with Him.

And to understand how this works think about a time where you pursued and accomplished some goal or objective in your life – going back to school to get a degree, starting up a new business, getting a promotion that meant moving across the country or to a new country...

And if anyone in your family or circle of friends made a sacrifice and suffered so that you could achieve your goals – and you saw it and you know they endured it patiently... for your sake... what does that do to your regard for them?

Now how do you think Jesus feels about the fact that you've suffered for Him and for His Kingdom?

Now I can't say that Jesus loves you more because you've suffered for Him... but I can say that your suffering while you wait for His glory to be revealed does not go unnoticed - and it will not go unrewarded.

So brothers and sisters – God brings us to glory through suffering - let me ask what do you think now? Is this bad news... or is it good news?

And how are you feeling about moving in 2022??

Well, if the Lord uses suffering to bring about glory then I think we can be confident that 2022 will be well-used by the Lord. Put your trust in the Lord and in ourselves.

In fact at this time next year we can look back and remember the glimpses of glory that He will have shown us in this coming year just as He did on the Mount of Transfiguration to encourage us that suffering has a purpose and that the Lord will use it to glorify us – all to His glory.

May 2022 be the most amazing year of your life brothers and sisters! Amen.