Matthew 16:21-25

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’23But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

The Cross and Self-Denial

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Suffering for the Right Reason

There are, according to Douglas Hall[[1]](#footnote-1), two fundamental affirmations in the Christian faith: one is the concept of salvation, that things will not always be as bad as they are for us. And that affirmation points backwards to the other, namely that suffering is an inescapable reality. None of us can expect to go through our lives without pain, without agony, or distress or sorrow.

Yet while suffering is a fact of human existence, we spend most of our lives trying to minimize that suffering if not avoid it altogether. The fruits of are labors are spent on objects or devices that either extend life or make it somehow more pleasurable (though we should recognize the irony of addiction as we gain pleasure from precisely those things which shorten life). A substantial chunk of our tax dollars go toward maintaining our military might which is intended to protect our way of life from outside threats. An ever-increasing percentage of our income goes toward health care costs as the industry strives more and more toward extending life and minimizing suffering.

But this quest never ends. Regardless of how much we accumulate, how much we manage our health, how much our armed forces protect us, we cannot escape suffering, physical or psychological. Our bodies wear down. Our defenses fail. Our obsession with leisure and luxury fail to settle our spirit, and it seems that the more we acquire, the more we still want. No amount of manna satisfies our hunger.

Things were no different in Jesus’ time. In today’s passage, Jesus begins by explaining to his disciples that he must “undergo great suffering.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him. “What are you talking about, Jesus? You don’t have to suffer. You don’t have to go to Jerusalem, and even if you do, you can avoid the suffering if you just watch what you say and what you do.”

You might expect Jesus to thank Peter for his friendly concern, but Jesus’ reaction is far from appreciative. “GET BEHIND ME, SATAN,” is his reply. Satan, the one who had tempted Jesus in the wilderness with “all the kingdoms of this world and their splendor.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus is rejecting the idea that anything material will ever satisfy the hunger of our spirit. In fact, the pursuit of such material, such manna, will lead only to an endless cycle of immediate gratification followed by hunger for more. And as we hunger for more and more, we begin to deprive others of basic human needs. Food spoils in our refrigerator while across the world or across the street people grow hungry. We dream of retirement while others dream of their next meal.

And within us, a perverse process takes place; we start to justify our greed. We tell ourselves that we are more deserving than others. We stereotype the beggar. We become racist, sexist, classist. We justify our hunger for more food, more pleasure, more resources by painting those whom we deprive as lesser than us. One of the arguments offered in defense of human slavery in the nineteenth century was that African slaves were not human. Such rationale is the natural product of a mind that desperately needs to justify its own wickedness. It’s a mind that can never find rest because it cannot escape guilt. It must, consciously or subconsciously, face the shame of its own actions. As the oppressed suffer physically, the oppressor suffers psychologically. There are no winners.

This is why Jesus reacts so harshly to Peter’s well-intentioned rebuke. For Jesus to avoid the cross would mean that humanity would be damned to repeat the tragic cycle of oppression. It would mean looking out for #1 instead of saving humanity.

As I mentioned, suffering is inevitable. But there is right reason and a wrong reason to suffer. To suffer because you are never able to find satisfaction through the things of this world is the wrong reason to suffer, and Jesus makes this clear to us. To suffer out of love for others is the right reason to suffer. Jesus loves us. He is God Incarnate, and God is love in essence. When Jesus witnesses those who suffer because of injustice, he suffers. When he sees those whose souls are lost in the pointless struggle for power and wealth, he suffers.

And he expects his disciples (that’s us!) suffer as well. Just as Jesus puts his life on the line for a fallen world, we too are expected to put our lives out there, for those who are lost and those who are deprived. “Those who want to save their life will lose it.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Those who simply pursue their own wants and desires will never truly live life because they will be consumed in the futile pursuit of something they will never find. “Those who lose their lives for my sake will find it.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Only a life lived in Christ is truly life. It is a life lived in freedom as we abide in God’s will, loving indiscriminately (is there any other way to love?) and therefore suffering as others suffer, yet clinging to the promise that God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

1. Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing), 1986, page 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 16:21 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 4:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 16:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)