

# What about Suffering?

*“...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”*

*1 Peter 4:16*

The last of our 7 *Vital Questions* deals with that one aspect of life in this world that every person – regardless of race, culture, gender or economic situation – has or will and must encounter... suffering. This is by no means an easy topic or pleasant issue to reflect on, but it is a very real and a very relevant one nonetheless and we cannot avoid it. We cannot live authentically intentional Christian lives unless we are able and willing to face up to the reality of suffering in the world, and find strength in God’s grace to offer a courageous answer to this question.

The fact that suffering does not discriminate, that it comes to each one of us, is made clear by Peter’s remark in verse 12 of this passage, *“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering...”* Even the most devout Christian life is not exempt from suffering and we must never be surprised when the inevitable comes across our path. This may seem a fairly gloomy perspective, but this realization actually puts us at an advantage. If we know that suffering will come, and face that fact square in the eyes, then we can deal with the issue and settle on what response an intentional Christian life might offer to the reality of suffering.

There are a number of truths that we can glean from this passage about what such an intentional Christian response to suffering might look like. Firstly Peter tells us to *‘rejoice’*. A response that might appear silly and unrealistic at first, but Peter does not intend for us to be happy, in the frivolous sense of the word, he does not call for a shout of hooray at the presence of suffering, this rejoicing is a deep and abiding joy in the fact that despite AND because of our suffering God is present and at work in us. Secondly, Peter tells us to *‘not be ashamed’*. How sad it is that many people in our world suffer in silence, when we have a family of faith to turn to and who can share the burden of suffering with us. We don’t have to hang our heads in shame when we suffer, as though it is some divine punishment for our wrongs, we can accept our suffering and speak of it with others so that we can be strengthened through others. Thirdly, Peter tells us to *‘commit’* ourselves to God. Because God is faithful – and how often has God proved Himself to be faithful even in our darkest moments? We have this remarkable privilege of not having to go through suffering alone. We serve and know a God who shares our suffering in every way and because of his mercy we can commit ourselves to him. Finally, Peter tells us to *‘continue to do good’*. We are often tempted in the face of suffering to abandon our faith and our moral compass, but it is precisely in times of suffering that we should strive even more to do good. Our good action, our willingness and determination to serve God and others when we are suffering is what redeems our suffering into something quite beautiful and even godly.

This final question brings us face-to-face with reality... there is suffering in the world. What should the intentional Christian life look like in the fact of suffering? Peter's advice does not sit well, we do not hear it easily, but it is truth and it is this truth that will help us overcome our suffering and turn it to good.

As you continue to reflect on this issue consider the following questions:

1. What is a cause of suffering for you currently, in what way are you suffering?
2. Is this suffering an injustice done to you, or is it a consequence of something you have done?
3. How does your answer to question 2 impact on what you can do about your suffering?
4. Which of the four responses reflected on would be the best option for you right now?
5. What will you do in the next day to make that response a reality?

### **Prayer**

Most gracious and loving Father, we know that suffering is a real and unavoidable part of life. So much so that even your Son, our Lord, endured suffering. We ask that you, Holy Spirit, will give us grace and strength to endure our own suffering when it comes upon us. But help us not only endure it, help us respond to the reality of suffering in a way that will give authentic expression to our intentional Christian lives. For the sake of your glory Lord Jesus. Amen.

### **Food for Thought**

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”