

## Welcome

One of the great promises of technology is a pain-free life. Many of the great works of science fiction, from Star Trek to the Jetsons, imagine that the future is an age of miracles, where everything from cooking to transportation to work will be made effortless. Social ills like disease, racism and poverty will be eliminated all by the matchless efficiency of technology.

Of course as we've dipped our toes into the age of miracles, we've seen that technology doesn't make people more kind or more generous. So some of our science fiction has begun to wonder if in fact this brave new world is actually *good* for us.

[Poster] One of my favorite is the Pixar film Wall-E. It's set in the far future, where Earth has become uninhabitable for humans. Wall-E is a cleaning robot who winds up on a spaceship, where he finally encounters the humans of the space age.

They're... not impressive. To put it nicely. Humans have become fat blobs who float in space, eat and watch iPads. It's funny because it's true - one look at a group of friends on our phones at a restaurant and we can see Wall-E isn't far off.

But today I don't want to talk about the dangers of technology. I want to push below that to the underlying philosophical assumption behind progress: we assume that the goal of life is a pain-free existence. Because pain hurts - we call it suffering, after all, we assume it's bad, and that we'd be better off without it.

But Wall-E offers us a caution: that a life without resistance, without work, without *pain* is perhaps not really life at all. I want to suggest that we can view trials and pain as other than purely bad experiences to be avoided. I want to look for the good in pain, to ask how we might discern the work of God in our pain.

So as we sing today, consider a painful time in your life. Consider what good you've seen come from that time.

## Message

We're in the season of Eastertide, between the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is the season the Church spends asking what it means that Jesus was raised from the dead.

This year, our series is called Strangers in a Strange Land, which is a riff on a classic Robert Heinlein sci-fi story. During this series, we're looking at some classic science-fiction visions of the future. Sci-Fi is how our culture dreams, how we express our wishes and hopes for the future. And for many of the great Sci-Fi visionaries, what will save humanity is progress - our ability to make ourselves better, to pull ourselves up by our own collective bootstraps.

The season of Eastertide challenges this belief. Eastertide agrees the world is getting better, but not because of human progress. Rather, because of Jesus' resurrection, God's rule is breaking forth in the world. The Spirit is bringing more and more people under the rule of God, in a body called the Church.

In other words, it's Jesus' new life that's healing the world, not our own efforts. And the good news of Eastertide is that the Spirit invites us to join our efforts to God's, to be part of healing the world!

So, with that framework in mind, let's turn back to the problem of suffering. Is the goal of existence a pain-free life? That's not just an assumption science-fiction makes. Plenty of Christians think a relationship with Jesus is supposed to be a ticket to a pain-free life. We wonder why, if we go to church and read our Bibles and give money bad things still happen to us.

We wonder why, if we follow the way of God, if we are faithful to forgive and pursue peace and extend kindness, why we still suffer, why people still hurt us, why life is still hard.

Of course we're not the first generations to wonder that. This has been a question plaguing the Church since the beginning.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Peter 1. We're going to be in the book of 1 Peter throughout Eastertide. It's a letter written by an early church leader to Christians scattered across the Roman Empire. Because they worshiped Jesus instead of the Roman gods, they were strangers - the Romans actually called them atheists (because they didn't believe in the Roman gods). And it was specifically their choice to follow the way of Jesus that led to their suffering.

So a lot of the book is concerned with helping these Christians understand why, when they're living in the power of Jesus' resurrection, they are still suffering. Why hasn't Jesus' new life made everything easy? And since life isn't easy, what are they supposed to *do* when they face these trials and challenges?

These are important questions, and as vital today as they were 2,000 years ago. So let's read the opening verses of the book, to see how the author frames this conversation:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see.

We have been born anew in Jesus' resurrection. As God's children, we have a priceless inheritance coming, an inheritance protected by faith. It's all pointing to the Last Day, when Jesus returns and finishes what he started in the resurrection. This all sounds amazing.

It's not until the next bit we get some hints that things are not great for those first Christians.

So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

Clearly, these Christians are enduring some hardships. We don't know exactly what, but Peter challenges them to see what they're suffering as trials. Testing. Refining. He suggests that through what they're experiencing, they're being made stronger - not just stronger, but *fit* to inherit the life God has planned for them.

[**Doubting and blaming**] That's not how we usually respond to pain. Particularly in a life of faith, we respond with doubting. We wonder whether God really loves us, if God is good (or even real).

We also respond by blaming - we blame ourselves - search our past for sins that would explain why God is allowing this to happen to us now. We blame people around us (sometimes rightly so!) for the ills we suffer. And we blame God, shaking our fist at the sky, wondering how God could love us if we're suffering so.

Pain wears us down. Hard times make us want to give up. But Peter reframes our suffering for us. He acknowledges that it's hard, but he challenges us to see our hard times as a refining fire.

[**Illustrate this process?**] Refining is a process of purifying metals. When you mine a metal from the ground, it's mixed with impurities. The best way to purify it is to refine - to burn it with fire. Everything that's not the gold or iron or whatever burns away, and after the refining process is finished, the pure metal is left - far more valuable than the mixed-up lump you started with.

Peter challenges us to view our hard times in the same way. The pain of our suffering is the pain of the refining fire. If we approach our pain with the right lens, we can become purified. Our sin is burned away - we become less selfish, less cruel, not so quick to anger.

Of course, that doesn't happen automatically. If we suffer without the perspective of faith, we often just end up more selfish, more cruel, a shorter temper.

But if we cling to faith - the faith that God is good, the faith that God is with us even in our trials, then our faith, our commitment to God becomes more pure. We find a deeper joy, an enduring peace, a brave generosity, a committed kindness. Because we have gone through the fire. Because we know God is with us.

I want to pause for a moment to make something very clear: Peter does not say that God *causes* our pain. It's easy in trials to assume God is punishing us, or that God is doing these things to us to make us stronger. We assume our hard times, our suffering come from God.

But that's wrong. Scripture is clear that God does not invent evil. Romans tells us not that God causes all things, but that God causes all things work together for the good of those who love God. That's an important difference.

James tells us that God doesn't test us, but we're tested by our own evil desires at war within us.

Evil in the world is the result of our sin and the sin of others. The good news isn't that God caused it all or that "everything happens for a reason". The good news is that God doesn't leave us in the mess we made. God wades into the mess, takes it on himself and sets us free.

That's why Peter says, **So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.**

This is a fine line to walk: we don't want to glorify suffering. We don't want to celebrate that we must suffer for remaining faithful to God. But we *should* celebrate that God works through evil to make good.

Many of you know Sarah Frase. Last summer, she had the chance to go to the Ukraine on a mission trip. As you'll hear in a moment, it was a life-changing trip. What you won't hear on the video is how traumatic the trip was for Sarah.

It took her a while to process the trip, to discern what God was teaching her. But watch this video, and hear how she sees the trip now:

[\[Video\]](#)

Through this traumatic, beautiful trip, Sarah found an affirmation of her identity and calling. She is a royal priest of God, sent into the world to live as God is, to represent God to the world. Sarah's faith embodies how Peter closes out his introduction:

**You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls. -- 1 Peter 1:3-9**

Friends, God does not cause evil in our lives. And the bad news is that just because we choose to follow God doesn't mean we get a ticket to easy street.

But perhaps Wall-E reminds us of the truth we find in 1 Peter: when we face trials, we become stronger. Because we live in a world of sin, an easy, struggle-free life leaves us spiritually bloated and lazy. Unrefined.

But God loves us. God is with us. And God wants us to have a pure, priceless faith - the faith of one refined in the fires of struggle.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] Communion reminds us *why* this is good news. Because God did not leave us in sin, at the mercy of our own choices or the choices of others. And God didn't just call down from heaven, "Hope you make it through!" Rather, God entered into our struggles. God became one of us and suffered with us. God experienced the trials that come from remaining faithful to God's way.

Jesus' sacrifice shows us that this sort of faith is possible. And Jesus invites us *into* his sacrifice. His faithfulness makes *us* able to be faithful like him.

1. When in the last week did you trust that God was with you in a difficult time or relationship?
2. When in the last week did you get cynical, mistrustful or doubtful because of suffering?
3. When in the next week might you be cynical, mistrustful or doubtful?
4. How can you choose to be faithful in a difficult time or relationship this week?

### **Assignment/Blessing**

Use an examen this week to reflect on your hard times, hard relationships. How is your faith being refined?

God is with you. God is making you holy. What makes us God's people is not that we live on easy street. It's that we live lives of faith when our lives are anything *but* easy!