

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: August 10, 2014  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“SUFFERING INNOCENTLY”**  
**First Peter 2:21, 3:17-22**

We - know - suffering, do we not?

{Ecc1 3:1, 4} Suffering is part-and-parcel of the human condition. We all have **“a time to laugh” and “a time to weep,” “a time to dance” but also “a time to mourn.”**

{Jn 16:33} Jesus was not speaking only to first century disciples when he warned, **“In this world you will have trouble.”** I know suffering. You know suffering. Everyone you will ever meet knows suffering. We know suffering.

? But *do we know innocent suffering?*

📖 **“Innocent suffering”** typically refers to undeserved suffering, suffering that happens even though the sufferer has not done anything wrong.

A family rendered homeless by flood or fire or tornado, a young child wracked by cancer, civilians slaughtered by the army – this is what is we usually mean by **“innocent suffering.”** It is all too common.

📖 However, **“innocent suffering”** can also refer to suffering innocently, in a blameless manner, without sinning against God or neighbor.

{Mt 5:39} Turning the other cheek – not in craven fear but in courageous obedience to Christ – is **“innocent suffering.”**

{Mt 5:44} Praying for – not against – one’s persecutors is **“innocent suffering.”**

{Mt 18:21-22} Freely forgiving the enemy **“who sins against”** us is **“innocent suffering.”**

This is not so common. I suspect it is a relatively *rare* phenomenon. Have we witnessed it first hand? Have we ourselves suffered innocently?

? *Do we know this kind of innocent suffering?*

■ Please turn with me to First Peter 3:17.

As for undeserved suffering, some of Peter’s readers have already “[suffered] **grief in all kinds of trials**” for their faith (1 Peter 1:6). The entire group will soon be subjected to a more **“fiery ordeal”** (1 P 4:12) and some will be martyred by the Emperor Nero.

■ Here in verse 17 Peter emphatically states: **“It is better, if it is God’s will to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”**

**“For doing good.”** Suffering as a consequence of random catastrophe is hard enough to take. It’s worse when we are deliberately harassed by a person who actively wishes us ill. And it is doubly offensive when they target us, not because we have done something wrong but because we have done something *right*.

We might suffer for doing right. Following Jesus can trigger hostility and rejection anywhere, even here.

But a word of caution is in order. Many Believers are quick to cry “Persecution!” where none exists.

It’s *not* persecution if the Wal-Mart greeter says “Happy Holidays!” It *is* persecution if it is illegal or dangerous to celebrate Christmas.

It's *not* persecution if you get fired for witnessing in an aggressive, obnoxious manner. It *is* persecution if you can't get or keep a job because you are a Christian.

It's *not* persecution if congress passes laws that violate our religious convictions. It *is* persecution if the reasonable exercise of our convictions is outlawed.

Millions of our brothers and sisters around the world are being threatened and abused. You and I are *not*.

★ Still, though we might not suffer greatly for *being* Christians we all suffer as Christians. We get sick. We take a financial hit. A friend turns on us. A loved one dies. Our child ends up in prison.

? *Will we suffer innocently* the next time around? Will we suffer in a blameless manner, without sinning?

● Innocent suffering is a *core component* of Christian discipleship. First Peter 2:21:

**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**

**“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”**

**When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.**

**“To this you were called.”**

A headache or upset stomach can make me feel irritable. When I am patient instead of lashing out, I am suffering innocently.

A setback can make me feel defeated. When I persevere in hope and gratitude instead of wallowing in self-pity, I am suffering innocently.

{1 P 3:9} A personal offense can make me feel defensive and vengeful. When I **“repay evil with blessing,”** I am suffering innocently.

And so on. Innocent suffering is the intentional exercise of faith, hope and *αγαπη* love in hardship.

{2 Ti 3:16-17} **“To this you were called.”** God's word **“is useful”** to **“thoroughly [equip]”** **“all God's people”** **“for every good work.”** The **“you”** in **“to this you were called”** includes us. Although Scripture was not written *to* us, it was written *for* us.

{Lk 9:23} **“To this you were called.”** This word puts innocent suffering at the center of discipleship. Denying myself, daily taking up my cross and following Jesus is more than suffering innocently, but it not less!

**“To this you were called.”**

{Col 3:12-14} This gives pause for thought, does it not? It is not easy to put on **“compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”** in adversity. It is not easy to **“bear with”** those with whom we have **“a grievance.”** It is not easy to **“forgive”** an enemy.

*How can we fulfill our high and holy calling?*

□ Let's go back to First Peter 3:18-22.

◆ Verses 18, 19, 20 testify to Messiah's victory in death. **“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.... He was put to death in the body....”**

We are called to suffer innocently because that is what Jesus did. We are empowered to do it insofar as his cross is not merely a doctrine we confess, but a reality in which we participate.

{1 Co 1:18, 23} **“The message of the cross is [folly] to those who are perishing... a stumbling block to”** those who **“demand signs”** or **“look for wisdom, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”**

{Ro 6:10, 3} Christ’s Death equips us to suffer innocently. For **“the death [Jesus] died, he died to sin,”** and **“all of us who were baptized into [him] were baptized into his death.”** If we are united with the Son, his victory in death is our victory. Amen?!

◆ Verses 20 and 21 testify to Messiah’s victory in resurrection. Peter refers to the salvation of Noah and his family through the great flood, and then says: **“This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”**

{Ro 6:5, 10} Christ’s Resurrection equips us to suffer innocently, for **“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his”** – and this **“life he lives to”** his Father. If we are united with the Son, his victory in resurrection is our victory. Amen?!

◆ Verse 22 testifies to Messiah’s victory in ascension. He **“has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”**

{Ro 8:34-35; Heb 4:16} Christ’s Ascension equips us to suffer innocently, for he **“is at the right hand of”** his Father and he is **“interceding for us.”** Hence, we are able to **“approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”** It follows that neither **“trouble [nor] hardship [nor] persecution [nor] famine [nor] nakedness [nor] danger [nor] sword”** can separate us from God. If we are united with the Son, his victory in ascension is our victory. Amen?!

*Words* are one thing, experience is another. How can we move from speech to action, from ideal to reality?

Allow me to propose three practices that can unite us more closely with Jesus in innocent suffering. I am numbering them (for clarity), but they aren’t sequential; they are simultaneous.

✈ First, press into the historical ministry of Jesus.

Dig into the Gospels. Pay attention to what the epistles say about the Savior. Get acquainted with Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Come often to the Lord’s Table. Keep the Sabbath and other Holy Days.

Our goal is not just to amass information. It is to establish a solid base of knowledge from which to remember what the Living God has done.

This kind of remembrance does not end with passive reflection. It instills trust in God that leads to active obedience, and grateful joy that inspires celebration.

✎ Second, press into the presence of Jesus.

Pursue sustaining relationship with him in prayer, worship, Christian fellowship, and ministry.

{Mt 11:28} Suffering wears us out, but he says:

**“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”**

{Jn 6:35} Suffering empties our souls, but he says: **“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.”**

{Jn 7:37} Suffering parches our souls, but he says:

**“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.”**

✎ Third, press into the grace of Jesus.

I have grown, but it is still too easy to indulge in irritation, speak harshly, fan the flames of resentment, and wallow in self-pity. Can you identify with me? That is the bad news!

{Ps 103:10} The good news is that God **“does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”** To the contrary, he delights to pour out undeserved mercy and unearned kindness upon us! The LORD is ready and able to forgive.

{1 Jn 1:9} The next time we fail let us come before God, confess our sins, and press into his grace. **“He will forgive us...and purify us.”**

May you and I know innocent suffering!