

“There is a Balm in Gilead”

April 26, 2026

1 Peter 2:19-25

In seminary I served 2 years as a student pastor for a Church in Carnegie, PA. Other than being the Sunday morning liturgist, my main role was working with the **Junior High through High School youth group**. They were a nice bunch of young people and more importantly, I had a committed and a well-organized group of adult leaders to work alongside. The group met every Sunday evening, went on retreats at least twice a year, and attended summer conference with us. Our newborn son, Chris was a big hit with the girls who would rush over and take turns holding him. At times, I wasn't sure they were going to bring him back.

I was responsible for the Sunday programming. Being we had an active, athletic, full of energy group, I would usually begin the evening with some kind of group game, which they affectionately called **Stupid Preacher Games**. Of course, that didn't stop them from participating in or enjoying the games. It had the added benefit of running off some of their excess energy.

On occasion I would create an **obstacle course** in the dining room slash gym area as a way of introducing a bible theme. The course might have the youth pick up objects with their toes and carry them a certain distance, toss frisbee into a laundry basket, walk backward on a low balance beam, or go over, under or around arranged chairs. Often there were two teams just to add to the excitement.

One of our Bible topics focused on how we overcome obstacles in life and still hold on to faith. Interestingly, **1 Peter** focuses on this theme also and for good reason. Christianity wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms in the Roman Empire. As small Christian communities formed the Empire saw them as obstacles to be removed rather than be understood. In his book *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado cites these as reasons for the rest of the culture to see them as "different, odd, and even objectionable."

First, *Christians refused to honor the Roman gods* upon whom the pagans believed the social and political order of the empire depended. Followers of Jesus had no images of their deity, no altars or sacrifices, no temples or shrines, and no priesthood. As such, they were not considered to be a "religion" and, in fact, many Romans considered them to be atheists. These Christians did not worship the emperor instead they claimed a crucified man as a king who had been raised from the dead seemed to be not only foolish but a dangerous notion.

Second, *they were a "bookish" people who read sacred texts in their gatherings*, which included men and women of different social classes as well as slaves all gathered together as equals. In the Roman world, religious texts were only read by priests to an elite few, not the masses.

Third, *the early church challenged the social behaviors* of the Roman world. Whereas Romans often exposed unwanted babies to the

elements leaving them to die, Christians raised their own children and even adopted some of those who were rejected by their neighbors.

Women were expected to be faithful in marriage, but men could fool around at will. Christians, on the other hand, insisted that both women and men needed to be faithful to one another in monogamous, lifelong marriage. While Romans enjoyed the blood sport of the gladiator arena, it was the Christians who refused to play along. Indeed, many would die in the arena themselves as a result.

Christians were seen as a blight on society and a disruption of the social order. So how were they to live in the world of Rome? 1 Peter is urging the early church to live respectable lives, to honor those in authority, even masters who were harsh to their servants. While this last idea may rub us wrong, we have to remember the Roman Empire was run by a workforce of 60 million slaves. Any sign of rebellion would have brought Rome's swift retribution down on them, of which there were actual instances. The writer of 1 Peter speaks to a people under pressure. Even though we don't usually experience the same struggle, we know a certain amount of suffering in following Christ. How do we stand firm in our faith when the world lives in contrast to it?

I. USE YOUR PAIN AND SUFFERING AS A TEACHER

Many years ago I practiced martial arts. One of the first exercises we learned was the called the **Horse Stance** or **Ma Bu** – in Chinese. This position received its name because it looks like you are riding a horse. You move your legs apart and then squat down with your toes pointed

forward. To make it more difficult you squat until your thighs are parallel to the floor. Now one is to hold this position for at least 2 minutes.

The first minute is not all that difficult for me, but when you moved past that the pain starts, then your legs begin to shake, and your body is screaming at you to stand up and stop this nonsense. What's interesting is your legs are not actually being hurt. Yes, they feel pain but there is no real damage. In fact, the Horse Stance is an incredible exercise for strengthening knees and hips in just a couple minutes. The pain you feel is more **Mental** than it is **Physical**. By practicing the horse stance, one builds their **endurance** and strength against the pain.

1 Peter writes, “**For it is a commendable thing if, being aware of God, a person endures pain while suffering unjustly.**” The author mentions “**endurance**” 3 times in the first 2 verses. The Greek word for this is **Hupomone**. It means steadfastness or perseverance in ones convictions, actions, and integrity while under trials, challenges, and even persecution. Hupomone is staying power in the face of adversity. It is about one's strength of character and is considered a fruit of the spirit. **Endurance**, is a necessary quality for believers in their spiritual journey.

The bible never makes light of suffering and pain, nor does it say just ignore it. The scriptures recognize pain and suffering as a reality of life. What it recommends is that we use our pain and suffering as a teacher. The apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 5:3-5**, “**And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character**

produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Paul is not telling us to like suffering or pain. He is saying use it to grow, to learn, to become a better version of yourself. Pain has the ability to get our attention, to refocus our lives, to reset our priorities, and is an opportunity for growth both spiritually and in character. Because God is working in us, through pain we can grow closer to God and learn to trust God in deeper ways.

Robert W. Service "**Be master of your petty annoyances and conserve your energy for the big, worthwhile things. It isn't the mountain ahead that wears you out -- it's the grain of sand in your shoe.**" If we endure and make suffering our teacher, we will discover it can equip us, refine us, make us more compassionate and ultimately set us free. And we will begin to imitate Christ who though:

He was tempted as we are to follow the social norms as the path of least resistance, but "he committed no sin".

He spoke the truth. Rather than bend his truth to sound better to the itching ears of the culture, "no deceit was found in his mouth".

He did not use violence. When he was abused physically and verbally, he did not return that abuse. In fact, he was silent in the midst of such abuse, only uttering forgiveness. That's a lesson we can learn in a day when social media all but begs us to retaliate!

He did not use threats. When he suffered, even on the cross, he did not

threaten people with his wrath, but rather relied on God's justice to set things right.

In short, Jesus provided the example for those who would follow him. Running the race isn't about staying on the sidelines, bypassing obstacles or retaliating against those who malign us, but about running with perseverance knowing the ultimate goal. For Jesus, that goal was saving the very world that crucified him. For his followers, it is doing our best to join him in that race.

II. USE YOUR PAIN FOR A GREATER PURPOSE

Rick Warren, in his book, "**Why Does God Allow Pain?**" suggests that pain helps prepare Christians to serve. He cites the apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:4, "He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us." Warren comments, "Everybody needs recovery of some type. Nobody's perfect. Who can better help an alcoholic than somebody who has struggled with alcoholism? Who can better help somebody dealing with the pain of abuse than someone who was abused themselves? God wants to use and recycle the pain in our lives to help others, but we've got to be open and honest about it."

Peter wrote, **"...but if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God. For to this you have been CALLED."** The second action we can take is to use our pain and suffering for a greater purpose. It is not enough simply to endure for personal edification. In Christ we are called to a higher purpose and Christ

can use even our brokenness as an instrument of healing and to be a force of good in the world. When we tap into God's greater purpose, we discover strength and power to endure and overcome.

Franciscan Monk, Richard Rohr shared a daily devotion this week that read, "Lately, I've been reflecting on something so simple that it almost feels obvious: **Nearly everything that Jesus does in his ministry is to heal broken people.** He did not heal people so they could go to heaven; he healed people so they could live fully in this world now. It's obvious. How did we miss that?"

The healing focus of the gospel became corrupted when we made it about securing a "ticket" for the next world, rather than experiencing aliveness in this one. Many of us are tempted to seek an escape from this moment instead of trusting that God's healing is possible for us now — that even this moment can be good. We have treated "repentance" as the price of our heavenly ticket, when it actually means "a change of mind" — a transformation for the better.

We are living in a time that is crying out for healing. We see the tears of personal and collective grief flowing. We see the anger over injustice, understandably boiling. We see people tempted toward despair and cynicism. At the same time, we see so many people meeting this moment with courage and compassion, as instruments of God's universal ministry of love, healing, and peacemaking."

To be a Christian in the Roman world meant running a tough course and having a hard climb ahead. We can argue that it's no different today

in a culture that pushes us to worship the gods of consumerism, wealth, racism, sex and violence; that values what is new and novel over that which is ancient truth.

The fascinating thing, however, is that the early church grew exponentially in spite of these obstacles. It wasn't because of their excellent preaching or attractive worship (things we value today), but because of their patient suffering amid persecution. Many pagans, observing these early believers maintain their faith and their virtue in the face of terrible suffering, wanted to know how and why they did it. They were attracted to people who didn't play by the usual Roman rules -- rules which left people ultimately empty -- and who seemed to have a greater purpose in mind.

Our call in the face of hardship is to endure, to take up the cause of Christ, and to take heart because the shepherd and guardian of our souls is with us. The obstacles before us will not stop the crucified one and his kingdom. **Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, April 26, 2026

Second Scripture Lesson

I Peter 2:19-25

19 For it is a commendable thing if, being aware of God, a person endures pain while suffering unjustly.

20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God.

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

23 When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

25 For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.