

INTRODUCTION

I’m a little reluctant to speak on the topic of suffering, because several years ago I got a letter from a lady who said, “Pastor, I didn’t really know what suffering was until I heard you preach—now I know.” I didn’t quite know how to take it. It’s like the church bulletin that printed this announcement: “Since today is Easter, our Pastor will come forward and lay an egg on the altar.”

Many of you know I love golf. One of my favorite players was Payne Stewart who won his second United States Open Championship on July 25, 1999. With his plus fours and Tam O’Shanter cap, Payne was one of the most recognizable golfers in the PGA. He lived in Orlando and his two children attended the Christian School that is part of FBC Orlando. Their homework included Bible Study, so they began to talk to him about the Bible and becoming a Christian. After talking to his kids and some Christians friends, he underwent a spiritual transformation. He seemed calmer and more at peace with himself and with others. He started wearing something else that set him apart. On his wrist was a cloth bracelet with the letters WWJD? It stood for What Would Jesus Do?

Three months later, Payne got on a jet to fly to Dallas. He never made it because the jet crashed in South Dakota. Payne and the other five passengers were killed. Because of his new-found faith in Jesus, his family and friends are certain Payne is in heaven. At his funeral, the PGA players who attended were all given a WWJD bracelet.

You might think “WWJD” originated in the 1990s when everyone was wearing the cloth bracelets. But the question, “What Would Jesus Do?” was first popularized a hundred years earlier by a pastor from Topeka, Kansas, named Charles Sheldon. In 1896 he wrote the book *In His Steps*. The chapters in the book were actually story-sermons he shared with the members of Central Congregational Church. The fictional story was about a young, unemployed man who moved to a community to find a job. Most of the members of the local church considered him a tramp, and none of them chose to help him. One Sunday, the young man asked to speak to the congregation. As he stood before them sick and hungry, he quietly asked why the members claimed to be Christians but their actions denied their faith. He posed the question: “What would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following in His steps?” Then he laid his hand on the communion table and collapsed—dead. The church members were so shaken, they began to ask themselves the question, “What *would* Jesus do?” That simple question changed their lives, their church, and their community. It’s a classic story every Christian should read.

What *does* it mean to walk in the steps of Jesus? In all of the Bible, the phrase “In His Steps” only appears once and it used in the context of suffering.

It is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 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. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore

our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

As we talk about what it means to walk in His steps, let’s study the footprints of Jesus. When you examine His footprints, you’ll find they are filled with three different elements:

1. HIS FOOTPRINTS ARE FILLED WITH PAIN

In verse 21 we read: “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.” So, if I am going to walk in His Steps, my first step is

First Step: Understanding that Jesus is my pattern to react to suffering

The question, “What would Jesus do?” doesn’t work in every situation. First of all, we may not know what Jesus would do in any given situation. He was always doing the opposite of what people expected. In addition, if we knew what Jesus would do, that doesn’t mean we could do what Jesus would do. For instance, when Jesus saw his disciples out on the Sea of Galilee, He simply walked out on the water to meet them. If you’re fishing out on Lake Tyler and I’m standing on the shore, and I want to join you, I know the answer to “What Would Jesus Do?” But that certainly doesn’t mean I could do what He did! The only time we can be 100 percent sure we can ask and answer the question WWJD? is when we are suffering.

That’s good to know, because from the cradle to the grave, our lives are full of suffering. No one is exempt. Chances are you or someone close to you is dealing with physical or emotional pain. My friend Ron Dunn was a pastor and Bible teacher. On one Thanksgiving Day, while Ron and Kay were away, their teenage son committed suicide. Later Ron told me, “I buried all my easy answers when I buried Ronnie.” There are no easy answers, we just have to walk in His footprints and they are filled with pain. In the Old Testament, there was a man named Job who knew a thing or two about suffering. In the midst of his pain, he observed: “Man is born for trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.” (Job 5:7) Watch a bonfire sometime. The law of thermodynamics observes that heated air is lighter than the oxygen, and it will always carries sparks upward. There is another law woven into the fabric of humanity that suffering is a part of our existence.

In this passage of scripture, Peter identifies **two different kinds of suffering**. Some suffering may come as the **(1) results of my bad choices**. There is some suffering we deserve because we bring it on ourselves. In verse 20 Peter asks, “How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?” The Bible says in Galatians 6:7, “Don’t be deceived, God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”

We have a saying, “If you do the crime, you gotta do the time.” Nobody receives a good citizen award for enduring a jail sentence for a crime they committed! All bad choices have bad consequences. Some choices are dumber than others.

A few years ago in Louisiana, a guy walked into a liquor store with a shotgun and demanded all the cash. After the cashier put the money in the bag, the robber pointed to a bottle of scotch behind the counter and demanded it as well. The cashier refused saying, “I don’t believe you are

over 21.” So the robber pulled out his wallet and showed his driver’s license to the cashier. The cashier looked it over and agreed he was 21 and put the bottle of Scotch in the bag. When the robber left, the cashier called the police and gave them the robber’s name and address. He suffered. Sometimes our bad choices bring suffering on ourselves. But this message is *not* about that kind of suffering.

The second kind of suffering is **(2) undeserved (life isn’t fair!)** In verse 19 we read, “It is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.” There it is—circle it. There is something in this world called unjust suffering. Sometimes, people are going to treat you in ways you do not deserve.

Have you heard of the cartoon strip named Earnest and Frank? In one cartoon Earnest and Frank are standing in front of an exhibition hall with many different flags displayed. The sign in front of the building says “The World’s Fair.” Upon reading the sign Frank says, “Oh, no it’s not!” He’s right, the World Isn’t Fair. Life isn’t fair—but God is good.

Sometimes you suffer and it’s okay to recognize you are not to blame. That’s when you should walk in His steps because that’s exactly the way Jesus suffered. He didn’t deserve to be beaten and crucified, yet He endured it. The footprints of Jesus are filled with blood. He has already suffered, and showed us how to react. Now, we must walk in His steps. Sometimes our suffering comes not from the big crises of life, but from a continual series of irritations that frustrate us.

Here is some advice from an oyster:

There once was an oyster whose story I tell,
Who found that sand had gotten under his shell.
Just one little grain, But it gave him such pain,
For oysters have feelings although they’re so plain.
Now did he berate the harsh workings of Fate
That brought him to such a deplorable state?
“No,” he said to himself, “Since I cannot remove it,
I’ll lie in my shell and think how to improve it.”
So the years rolled by as the years always do,
And he came to his ultimate destiny—stew.
And the small grain of sand which had bothered him so,
Was a beautiful pearl, all richly aglow.
Now this tale has a moral—for isn’t it grand,
What an oyster can do with a morsel of sand?
Think...what could we do if we’d only begin,
With some of the things that get under our skin?

Jesus gave us the example of how to deal with irritating people and irritating situations. He refused to strike back at those who hurt him. He embraced the pain, and He turned His terrible suffering into the pearl of great price—our salvation.

2. HIS FOOTPRINTS ARE FILLED WITH ENDURANCE

In verse 20 we find how we should respond to suffering: “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.” So, if you are going to walk in Jesus’ footprints, you must say: my second step is

Second Step: I won’t retaliate when people hurt me

I read a story about a missionary couple who were living in Pakistan a few years ago. They had a daughter, and at age six, she contracted a childhood disease and died. The family was heartbroken, as anyone who has ever lost a child can understand. The mother said an old Punjab from their village came to sit with them in their grief. He said, “Human tragedy is like being plunged into boiling water. If you are like an egg, your pain will make you hard boiled. But if you like a potato, you will emerge softer and more pliable.” The missionary wife never forgot those words, and when faced with trouble, she would often say, “God, let me be a potato!”

What about you? When you face the boiling waters of suffering, are you more like an egg or a potato? Does the suffering make you harder? Or does it make you softer. Does it make you *better* or does it cause you to be bitter?

You may not have any control over the suffering you face, but you *do* have the ability to control the way you react to suffering. Here are four different reactions:

(1) Aggressive reaction: “I’ll get even—revenge is sweet!”

Some people get angry and say, “It’s not fair! They can’t treat ME that way! I’m going to DO something about it!” American’s favorite indoor sport is getting even. There’s even a website called “Revenge Unlimited” where you can buy products to extract revenge on people who have hurt you.

The visitors in Yellowstone Park watched as a grizzly bear fed on some garbage. Two other bears tried to approach, and the grizzly ran them off. He was claiming the food for himself. While he was chasing off the second bear, a skunk trotted out of the forest and started eating the bear’s garbage. The bear returned, and grumbled, but he didn’t disturb the skunk. He understood the high cost of seeking revenge. A bear can kill a skunk, but it’s not worth the fight. Revenge isn’t sweet—it stinks!

(2) Self-centered reaction: “Poor little me...I’ll have a pity party.”

A second reaction is to sink into the quicksand of self-pity and just feel sorry for yourself. This reaction is really anger turned inward and it usually produces bitterness. A self-centered person is always thinking about “me, my, and mine” and little else. The old nursery rhyme goes: “I had a little party this afternoon at three; ‘twas very small, three guests in all, just I, Myself, and Me; Myself ate up the candy; and I drank up the tea; ‘Twas also I who ate the cake and passed the pie to Me.” If you’ve been hurt, don’t strike back, and don’t have a pity-party.

(3) Denial reaction: “Who, me? I’m not hurting.”

This reaction refuses to recognize the pain and suffering you may be feeling. In *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara seldom dealt with her problems. Instead, her famous line was, “I can’t think about that now. I’ll go crazy. I’ll think about that tomorrow.” You may be the King or Queen of Denial—by refusing to admit you’ve been hurt.

(4) Spirit-filled reaction: “I’m hurting, but with God’s strength, I’ll endure it.”

That’s the way Jesus reacted and if you walk in His steps, that’s how you’ll react. The Bible says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame...” (Hebrews 12:2). That’s the example He set for us—when we think about the joys of heaven, we can endure the present suffering.

Let me add that walking In His Steps does not mean you must endure abuse without a word. For instance, if you are the victim of crime or abuse, you should report it to the authorities. God has established the law to deal with criminal behavior. If you are in a situation where someone is physically hurting you, and it is possible, you should remove yourself from that situation. Enduring suffering means you won’t seek to hurt that person personally—let the law do its job.

Jesus had the power to extract revenge, but He refused. When the sadistic Roman soldiers were shredding His back during His beating, He could have called on His father to send 72,000 Special Forces Angel-Warriors. Those angels could have wiped out the entire Roman garrison—but Jesus didn’t retaliate. When they put a crown of thorns on His head and hurled their insults at Him, He didn’t respond with angry words. When they pounded the spikes into His quivering flesh, He didn’t say, “One day, I’m going to get you good.” No, during it all, He said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” That’s endurance, and it is our example.

Have you ever walked behind someone at the beach or in snow and stepped in their footprints? Tim Roberts told me when he was a kid; he went with his family to South Padre Island. The sand was so hot, and there were pieces of broken shells there, so his dad told him to be sure to step in his prints. His dad wore size 12 shoes, so Tim carefully stepped in his dad’s big footprints. His dad’s feet dispersed the hot sand and buried any broken shells there. So as Tim stepped there, the sand was safer and cooler.

Tim said on one occasion, he wandered away to explore a sand dune. He got out of his dad’s footprints, and he got in trouble. He cut his foot badly on a broken shell—all because he got out of the safe footprints. Our job is to stay in the footprints of Jesus—that’s where we’ll find the strength to endure.

3. HIS FOOTPRINTS ARE FILLED WITH TOTAL TRUST

The key is found in verse 23: “When he suffered he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” So, if I am going to walk in His steps, my third step is

Third Step: I will surrender my pain to the Perfect Judge

You’ve probably heard the story of David and Goliath. But Goliath was not the only giant who troubled David. The Bible says King Saul was so tall he stood head and shoulders above the other men. After David killed Goliath, Saul became terribly jealous of David. The people sang, “Saul has killed thousands and David has killed tens of thousands.” David played his harp and sang for Saul, yet Saul hated David and on many occasions threw a spear at him. Has anybody ever thrown a physical or verbal spear at you? The natural reaction is to pick it up and throw it back. But David endured the suffering. He didn’t hang around to be a target for Saul’s violence and abuse, he left the city. Saul and his army pursued David to kill him.

On one occasion David and his buddies were hiding in a dark cave. Saul happened to enter the cave to relieve himself. He couldn’t see David, but David could see Saul. David could have taken that moment to run his sword through the king. Instead he sliced off a portion of Saul’s robe.

When Saul left the cave David ran out and showed him the piece of cloth. He said, “Look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you...I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life...May the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you.” (I Samuel 24:11-12)

David refused to get even. He handed his suffering from Saul’s hand over to God, and God ultimately took care of the problem.

The word “entrusted” is the word *para didomai*, it carries the idea of handing something valuable to someone. This is the same word used in Luke 23 when it says Jesus breathed out his last breath on the cross and cried, “Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.” If I handed my wallet to Mike and said, “This is valuable. It contains my identification, pictures of my family, and all my credit cards. But I trust you, so I’m going to ask you take care of it for me.” That’s what it means to entrust your pain to God. When you entrust your pain and problems to God, you are taking your hands off your suffering and allowing God to settle the score in His way and in His time. After all, He *will* judge justly.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps nobody in our generation is more qualified to speak about suffering than Joni Eareckson Tada. She became a quadriplegic as a teenager because of a diving accident. But her positive outlook on life in the midst of suffering has inspired me and millions of others. In her book, *Heaven, Your Real Home* she writes: “Suppose you had never in your life known physical pain. No sore back, twisted ankle, or decayed molars. What if you never had to use those crutches or that walker? How could you appreciate the scarred hands with which Christ will greet you? If you were never embarrassed or felt ashamed, you could never grasp how much He loved you when He endured the spit from soldiers, the spinelessness of His disciples, the callousness of the crowd, and the jeers from the mob. All for the love of you.” (from *Heaven, Your Real Home*)

There is Someone who loves you so much He endured unthinkable pain and agony just for you. He is the one Who holds out His nail-scarred hands and says, “Cast all your cares upon me because I care for you.”

Take your hands off your pain, and put it in God’s hands. It all depends on whose hands it’s in. A baseball in my hands is worth about \$7, but in the hands of A-Rod it’s worth \$40 million. A basketball in my hands is worth about \$20, but in the hands of Dirk Nowitzki, it’s worth \$20 million. It all depends on whose hands it is in. A golf club in my hands is an implement of frustration, but in the hands of Tiger Woods, it’s worth \$40 million. A stick in my hand can repel a dog, but a stick in Moses’ hand can part the Red Sea. A slingshot in my hand is only a toy, but in the hands of David, it’s a giant-killer. It all depends on whose hands it’s in. Five loaves and two fishes in my hand is a couple of fish sandwiches, but in the hand of Jesus, it’s a feast for thousands. It all depends on whose hands it’s in. Nails in my hands can build a bookcase, but nails in the hands of Jesus will produce salvation for anyone who will call upon His name. It all depends on whose hands it’s in. So, place your pain, your worries, your fears, your sins in the nail scarred wounded hands of Jesus. The last seven words of verse 24 says it all, “by his wounds you have been healed.”

The hand that will greet you in heaven is a wounded hand. If you walk in His Steps and endure suffering as He did, then the sufferings of this present age will not be able to compare with the glories that are to come.

OUTLINE

1. HIS FOOTPRINTS ARE FILLED WITH PAIN

First Step: Jesus is my pattern to react to suffering

Two kinds of suffering:

- (1) results of my bad choices.
- (2) undeserved (life isn't fair!)

2. HIS FOOTPRINTS ARE FILLED WITH ENDURANCE

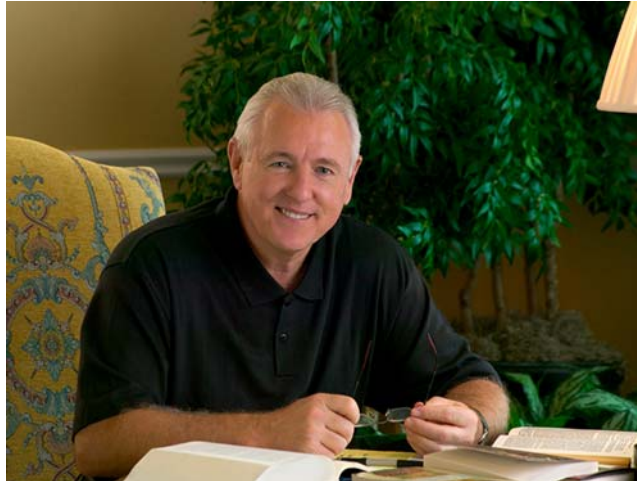
Second Step: I won't retaliate when people hurt me

Four different reactions:

- (1) Aggressive: “I'll get even—revenge is sweet!”
- (2) Self-centered: “Poor little me...I'll have a pity party.”
- (3) Denial: “Who, me? I'm not hurting.”
- (4) Spirit-filled: “I'm hurting, but with God's strength, I'll endure it.”

3. HIS FOOTPRINTS ARE FILLED WITH TOTAL TRUST

Third Step: I will surrender my pain to the Perfect Judge



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes