

Breaking the Grid.¹ (slide.1)

As many of you know, we've been spending these fall months looking at Peter's first epistle. This is not a work of fiction, but a letter written to real people living in the real world. People with struggles and difficulties and pain. To that end they are people not unlike us. So as Mark shared at the start of this series, though many centuries have passed since Peter first penned these words, this letter remains vital and applicable even now. As you probably guessed from the title as well as Laura's reading of the text, we will be looking at suffering. But let's first begin by first looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

I have a book at home (slide.3). It examines the history of graphic design and in particular the history of this thing called "page layout." And you hear that and you wonder how could anyone ever write a history about something like that. But someone did, and thanks to me the author sold at least *one* copy of his book. The argument of the book is that, up until the later part of the 20th century, most graphic design saw the "grid" as its overall organizing principle. There were different versions of this grid. There was the (slide.4) column grid, the (slide.5) modular grid, the (slide.6) hierarchical grid, and other grids. But the observation made in this book is that most layouts (slide.7) created up until the later part of the 20th century—and for that matter, most layouts created even today, whether in a book, magazine, or website—*generally* fit into one of these grids (slide/black.8).

But then something happened around the later part of the 20th century. We begin to see a shift. It's a shift born largely in (slide.9) Germany, but we see these ideas in (slide.10) other countries as well. And the work (slide.11) these designers produce is (slide.12) different and weird and (slide.13) challenging, and at times (slide.14) disconcerting.² These designers (group.15) were not "conforming" to the grid but (in a real sense) were "breaking" the grid (slide/black.16).

So here's Jesus. He shows up on the scene and (in a sense) does the same thing—*He breaks the grid*. He brings a new ethic and a new set of priorities that are different, and challenging, and (at times) disconcerting. His kingdom is an "upside-down" kingdom. The first are last, the last are first, the poor are blessed, the humble inherit the earth, retaliation is condemned, reconciliation is praised. Jesus pushes the envelope. He pushed it for those who first heard these words. He pushes it for us as well. **And one of the *strangest* parts of the Christian faith is Christ's radical teaching on suffering.** After all, according to the Christian faith, the suffering we go through is not meaningless. Rather, Scripture teaches that God accomplishes His purposes—

not *despite* suffering, but *through* it. We see this most notably through the sufferings of God's Son on the cross, but we also see (it in ways that are often mysterious and inexplicable) through our sufferings as well.³ And of all the epistles, we see this taught most clearly in Peter's first letter. Any way we measure it, nearly every single section of this epistle (well over a quarter of the entire letter), contributes something to the apostle's teaching on suffering—hands down, far and away more than any other letter of the NT.⁴

Peter's Five Points.

So in our reading Peter makes five points. **First off** (slide.17), he states that those who follow Christ should not be shocked by difficulties. He writes: "*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*" The word translated here as (slide.18) test means to "prove" you—to reveal what is there. As we look at church history, we realize that suffering is not the surprising exception for the Christian, but the norm. After all, in John 16:33 (slide.19), Jesus told His followers, "*In this world you will have trials and sorrows*" (it's part of the package). Yet Jesus also said, "*But take heart! I have overcome the world.*" As Mark shared a few weeks ago, if Jesus suffered hostility and trial, the follower of Christ should also expect to follow their Lord's pattern and path.⁵

Which is Peter's **next point** (slide.20). He writes that they should "*rejoice inasmuch as [they] are participating in the sufferings of Christ, so that [they] may be overjoyed when Christ's glory is revealed.*" After all, "*If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*" To us that may sound crazy, but during the years of persecution the early church showed amazing courage. A good example of this comes from a man named (slide.21) Polycarp. Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the Apostle John. As an older man, he's arrested for his faith, brought into the arena, and ordered to burn incense to Caesar. He's told that if he curses Christ and worships the emperor, he'll be released." But this was Polycarp's reply; he said (slide.22): "*Eighty-six years I have served Christ and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*" For that, Polycarp was tied to a stake and martyred.⁶ Polycarp understood what Luther would put into a hymn some 1,300 years later; he wrote (slide.23): "*The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever!*" The (slide.24) ancient church participated in the sufferings of Christ, and throughout the world that same participation takes place, even today.

Number three (slide.25), Peter offers a warning. If you're going to suffer, don't suffer for the wrong reasons. He writes, *"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler."* The lumping together of (slide.26) "meddler" with the thief, murderer, and criminal is no accident. As far as Peter is concerned, there is no merit for the one who is persecuted for being a busybody, or obnoxious, or abrasive, or judgmental, or self-righteous.

Number four (slide.27): *"However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."* In the ancient world, the word "Christian" was an insult, it was a pejorative term and used in a less-than-flattering way. Yet here in verse 16, Peter embraces the term, and owns it, and wears the name proudly.⁷

Finally (slide.28), Peter calls his readers to embrace their sufferings. He speaks of judgment *"beginning with God's household."* The judgment of the household of God is not a condemnation of the household of God (it is after all, the household *of God*)—our standing rests completely on the atoning work of Christ. But it is the idea that, through suffering, out of love, God prunes and disciplines and shapes those who are His. The letter to the Hebrews (slide.29) exhorts the believer to *"not make light of the Lord's discipline,"* or to *"lose heart when He rebukes."* After all, *"the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastens everyone He accepts as His son"* (Heb 12:5-6). Now, that discipline and rebuke can be, and often is painful. But if that's the case for those who believe and obey the gospel (slide.30), how much more so for those who do not believe and obey the gospel? If we as God's sons and daughters are first in line for God's pruning shears, if it starts with those who believe, what will it be like for those who do not believe and openly refuse the gospel?⁸ *"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good"* (slide/black.31).

Trials and Sufferings.

Now even though Peter wrote these words some 2,000 years ago to a community of men and women who were under strong persecution (certainly more than anything we experience here in the West), there is still application in these verses for us, even today. After all, as followers of Christ we're not immune to persecution, especially when we first come to the faith. Friends and family learn that you're a Christian, and they're scratching their heads in bewilderment, or ready to ghost you if you dare try to share the gospel. In addition, forms of suffering and persecution can come about from employers or customers who might ask you to do something unethical. Suddenly your employment or your customer base is on the line because there is something you know you as a Christian cannot do in good conscience.

But more broadly, this text can apply to the pains and difficulties and trials and sufferings we run into as we live out our day-to-day lives. Illnesses, finances, disappointments, stressful jobs, difficult relationships. Facing these things can be especially tough in certain church environments. Many of the more popular churches in the West teach that the Christian faith guarantees a life that is happy, healthy, and prosperous.⁹ Far too many modern pulpits affirm that **it's God's job** to make sure your bank account is filled, and your boss is nice, and your life is free of pain, difficulties, and storms. And if you are suffering, well then, **it's your job** to "fake it" and to keep a big happy smile on your face. But the pages of Scripture are far more honest than that.

I think the best example of this in all the OT is (slide.32) the book of Lamentations. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Jeremiah writes five poems. True to the name of the book, each is a poem of lament. Each drips with anguish. Each is like a raw wound that is thrust before God. Jeremiah (slide.33) speaks of a city that was once full of people, but is now deserted. A city that was once queen of the earth, but is now a slave. A city that (slide.34) sobs through the night, with none left to comfort her. A city whose friends have betrayed her and have become her enemies. Jeremiah confesses (slide.35) that he feels like God has walled him in so he can't escape. Even when he cries out for help, he feels no one is listening to his prayers. He feels like God has blocked his way with a high stone wall and has made the road in front of him crooked (slide/black.36). And yet, nowhere in Jeremiah's book is he rebuked by God for his lament. Nowhere is he admonished for voicing his grief. Instead, for sixty-two verses Jeremiah does not waste this moment, but instead pours out an unbridled/unfettered/unrestrained cry before God.

And the Lord lets him do it.

But from that, something happens. We see it in the passage (slide.37) James led us in earlier in our service. We see Jeremiah; he's pouring his heart out before God. He says to the Lord, *"Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me."* Jeremiah is saying that he's not at all naïve to his circumstances. There is no denial on his part. He's saying, "I see it, and I get it (slide.38). *But this I call to mind...*" And what is it that he's calling to his mind? It's that (slide.39) *"The steadfast love of the Lord (the covenant faithfulness of God) never ceases; His mercies never come to an end."* They never wear out, they never grow weak; they don't dissipate, they don't diminish, they don't vanish over time. Instead, they are made *"new every morning."* They're made fresh and vital each and every day.¹⁰ So much so that Jeremiah can sing, *"Great is Your faithfulness"* (slide/black.40).

Our Suffering Lord.

One of the greatest works of art is (slide.41) this painting by Rembrandt. The name of the painting is "*The Storm on the Sea of Galilee.*" He painted it when he was just twenty-seven years old. As an aside, the painting (along with twelve other works) was stolen from the Gardner Museum of Boston in 1990. It is considered the biggest art theft in US history and remains unsolved.¹¹

The painting depicts the storm at sea found in the Gospels (Matt 8; Mark 4; Luke 8). The work can be divided in (slide.42) two. One side is light, the other side is dark. On the left (slide.43), toward the *front* of the boat, we see disciples frantically doing what they can to navigate through the storm. On the right, toward the *back* of the boat, we see (slide.44) Jesus and the remaining disciples doing what they can to get the Lord's attention. Those toward the front are trying to do it all on their own. Those toward the back are mostly complaining to Jesus (I guess for not doing His job). They're saying (slide.45), "*Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?*" Both groups are a mess.

Now because we know the story, we assume that there are (slide.46) twelve passengers in addition to Jesus. In fact, there are not twelve (slide.47), there are thirteen. The thirteenth is (slide.48) Rembrandt himself. His self-portrait is located in the very center of the painting and he's looking at us as if to say (slide.49), "*O dear Christian, what say you?*" It's a lesson for us:

Jesus (slide.50) is not here to speak peace to every storm in our lives.

But He is here to speak peace to you *in* every storm.

Jesus is not here to still every trial and to still every wave.

But He is here to "still" you and to "still" me as we face those trials and waves.¹²

So why is Christ able to do this? Why is Christ able to "still" you and me as we face those trials and waves. The reason is found in the fourth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. The author of this letter writes (slide.51): "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin.*" (Heb 4:15)

There are (slide/black.52) certainly bits of wisdom in other religions, but ours is the only faith with a God who so identified with us that He "broke the grid," and took on flesh, and became that which He was not without losing who He was, and suffered and died. This is the *greater* mystery. The mystery of the suffering Christ spoken of throughout Peter's letter.

So why did He do it?

Why did Christ suffer and die?

The answer is that He did so for those He sought to redeem.

Only Christ could bear the weight of our lives.

Only Christ could bear the weight of our souls.

This Jesus who *out of love* paid the price to set us free.

This Jesus who *in lament* lost the presence of the Father so we might have it forever.

This Lord who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

This Lord who does not change, yet changes everything.

Let's pray.

¹ OT congregation reading: Lam 3:19-28.

² Timothy Samara, *Making and Breaking the Grid* (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2002).

³ Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2013), 163.

⁴ Daniel M. Doriani, *1 Peter*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2014), 187.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner "1 Peter," *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 2412; Doriani, *1 Peter*, REC, 188; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 195.

⁶ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 191.

⁷ Schreiner writes, "Early believers did not typically call themselves 'Christians.' The name was first given to believers by outsiders in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Agrippa also used the term when Paul was making his defense in Caesarea (Acts 26:28)." Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 224-25.

⁸ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC, 217, 228; Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 188.

⁹ Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, 167.

¹⁰ Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 368.

¹¹ The museum still displays the paintings' empty frames in their original locations. Every year on the anniversary of the theft, the Gardner Museum issues a press release asking for its return. There is a five-million-dollar reward. Robert M. Poole, "Ripped from the Walls and the Headlines," *Smithsonian*, July 2005; Russ Ramsey, *Rembrandt is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2022), 77-83.

¹² Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Audible.com, 1999).