

# RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

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March 2011

Dear Friends,

This month, I need to talk about suffering.

For some of you, this is your first letter from Ransomed Heart, and you need to know that I normally write about how to find more of the healing, life, freedom, and breakthrough that is available in Jesus. For this I deeply believe – that *far more life is available* than most Christians experience. Isaiah 61:1-3 and John 10:10 are probably two of the pillar passages for us.

However...

Suffering is rising (as if you hadn't noticed). I'm not just talking about the world tearing itself apart. Some of our closest friends, beautiful, holy people have been through an immense amount of suffering these past few months. Stasi and I have as well. I'll bet if you pick ten people in your world, more than six have suffered deeply in the past year. At some point in this life, suffering will come crashing down your door, and most of us have *not* been prepared to deal with it.

Peter says, "arm yourselves" for suffering (1 Peter 4:1). Indeed. We had best arm ourselves. How? Well, he goes on to say, "do not be surprised..." when suffering comes (vs. 12). But we *are* surprised. It sends us reeling. There is not even a close second to the power of suffering to distort our views of God, and to get us making loads of agreements we should not be making. The collateral damage can be worse than the suffering itself. Step One in arming ourselves is simply this: We must not let it throw us. We will suffer. It should not surprise us.

When Jesus knocks Saul off his donkey on the Damascus Road, and turns the raging Pharisee into the most powerful apostle of all, he sends a man to pray for him: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16). Paul would later write that we are all co-heirs with Jesus, "if we share in his sufferings" and in fact that we *cannot* know the power of his resurrection if we do not also know "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Rom 8:17, Phil 3:10).

There is a popular theology out there that goes something like, "If you are a Christian, you can avoid suffering. You can learn to live only in the place of blessing." It is a devastating heresy. Because suffering *will* come, and then what will you do? It shakes your faith in God, because you thought it wouldn't come, shouldn't come. It gets you scrambling; it can level you for a long time if you thought you'd escape it. This is why Peter says, "arm yourselves." It is going to come.

It would be good to pause and clarify why suffering comes. The scripture says that some suffering comes because we've made foolish decisions. This is NOT the only reason, but it is one, and it ought to cause us to want to walk more intimately with God in order that we might avoid it. Suffering caused by foolishness is avoidable suffering. But what happens for most people is this: They live their life as they would like to live it – making the decisions they would like, the plans, trips, relationships, financial choices, lifestyle choices – and then, when the consequences of their foolishness hit, they get mad at God. Foolish (or simply independent) suffering can help shape your character, make you a wise person, drive you to God. So he's not going to prevent it. No good parent would.

Then there is the suffering that comes simply by living in a broken world. Our bodies are not what they were meant to be, and sometimes this brings deep suffering. People around us are not what they were meant to be, and their foolishness and sin can bring us deep suffering. It isn't you. It isn't God. It's this broken world.

And then there is the suffering that comes because you are a friend of Jesus. I would place here not only persecution (which can come from family, friends, and churches as well as governments). I would also place spiritual warfare here as well – because that comes to you as a result of taking God's side in this war. (So, if warfare isn't part of your worldview, this will *really* mess you up because you'll blame something other than the enemy.) After warning that our enemy is a lion looking to maul us, Peter says our brothers and sisters around the world share in this suffering (1 Peter 5:9). It helps to name it – it *is* suffering.

And yes, the scripture also teaches that some suffering comes into our lives from the hand of our Father (Hebrews 12:1-13). But be careful – don't assume all suffering therefore is from God. Which brings me back to “arming ourselves” for it.

Be very, very careful how you *interpret* your suffering. Where is this coming from? How must you deal with it? Can it be overcome? Don't jump to conclusions. *Interpretation* is critical. Pay attention to how you are interpreting this.

Beware the agreements that get in. This is where the enemy can maul you. Things like, *I'm blowing it, God has abandoned me, this is because of my sin, this is their fault*, and a host of others. If you've been making these agreements, you will want to break them. They rip you apart.

Seek breakthrough. Too many Christians simply fold, and give way to suffering. Pray against it; pray hard. If it is warfare, you can shut that down. Much healing *is* available, too. Don't simply surrender.

And when breakthrough is not coming, listen carefully: “For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Cor 1:5). The suffering of Jesus overflows into our lives. This is a great honor – though I confess, I did not see it so until recently. Are not the sufferings of Jesus the very thing we most worship him for? What an honor it is for him to allow us to share in them. And we do share in them, whatever the “blessing” theology might try to say. The promise here is that his comfort is *also* available. We cry out for the comfort of God. He may not heal your body, but he *will* heal your wounded heart; he *will* comfort, and it will be our greatest treasure.

Suffering can do enormous damage in our lives, but it can also do enormous good. It shapes our character; it drives us to God; and it loosens our grip on this world. The entire posture of the Christian life is that while much good is available to us now, our great good is coming in the next chapter. Most of us have set our hopes entirely on our life working out here, now. (Notice your reaction when it doesn't!) This, too, will tear you apart. It will break your heart. Suffering causes us to re-evaluate where our hope lies, and to move it to where it belongs.

This, of course, is a terribly limited summary. Two pages. I hope it causes you to be better armed for the suffering that comes your way. May Jesus be more near to you than he has ever been.

In love,



John