

I understand you have something called movie stars. Also; professional wrestlers, and I understand you have one in particular, who is both. Dwayne Johnson is his name but his, nickname? “The Rock.” Well, whatever “movie star” or “professional wrestler” is, Mr. Johnson is a copycat. I was the first to be named The Rock, and I got that name from Jesus himself.¹

Truthfully, though, I don’t feel much like The Rock at the moment. I feel like a rock that has been crushed, ground, and sifted into little pieces of sand. Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said Satan wanted to sift me.² For the last three I decades have experienced all sorts of persecution, along with my fellow church members. However, when I start feeling sorry for myself, I go to a writing³ you know as the book of *Hebrews*.

My very good friend wrote that book, and in it he described the suffering that other God-followers have endured while staying faithful. You can find this in Chapter 11, the chapter that many of you call the “Faith in Action” chapter. In verses 35-37 it says: “Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trials of cruel mockings and floggings, and chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawn in two, tempted, killed with swords; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted and tormented.”

History shows these same types of treatments were inflicted on Christians from time to time, but the author was describing the treatment of Old Testament saints. When you talked to people in my time, this is what they thought of when you said the words “persecution” and “suffering”: Flogged, imprisonment, sawed in two, destitute.

You might be saying to yourself, “That Peter is no ray of sunshine today.” Or you might be wondering why I have gotten off on such an unpleasant topic. Well, the first observation is right. There are few days anymore when my body doesn’t hurt so badly that I am a ray of sunshine. And, the second observation is also correct. I got off on an unpleasant subject, but I got to it for a reason. First, however, I need to talk about the nature of God.

We early Christians struggled to understand the nature of God, even those of us who had lived with Jesus for three years. We grew up knowing God as the God of the Old Testament. Creator

¹ Matthew 16:18

² Luke 22:31

³ Although the NIV says it is a letter, most versions do not do so.

and owner of all, just, and jealous of idols. He wanted to have a relationship with the Jewish people, but we were typically obedient only because we were scared of him, not because we loved him. Then, Jesus opened our eyes so we could understand that God is a loving God, who had sacrificed his most precious possession so that he could love us as children, and we could love him as a father. A huge change for us was the beginning of understanding that God is good, and wants what is good for us.

God is good, God is loving. Suffering exists and is the natural course of life. We saw no contradiction in those statements. I didn't, the rest of the apostles didn't, James didn't, and Paul didn't. Frankly, neither did most Christians for the next many, many centuries. God is good. Suffering exists, but that does not mean God is not good.

Here is why I bring all of this up. I understand that one of the main reasons people of your time choose not to be Christians, or choose to quit being Christians, is because they cannot resolve their understanding that a good God would allow suffering, especially to people who seemingly don't deserve it.

I certainly don't have time to resolve that issue to your satisfaction, but I do want to point out a few things so that you can better understand what James wrote about the topic.

First, when James wrote about suffering, he was writing about it in the terms I previously mentioned: flogged, imprisonment, sawed in two, destitute. And, he was mainly talking about suffering for the cause of Jesus Christ, not suffering for other reasons.

Second, the assumption that a good God would not allow people to suffer is contradictory to the New Testament. It presents suffering as both something natural to happen in a sinful world, and as a tool that God sometimes uses for his benefit or our benefit. Jesus and some writers of the New Testament tell Christians to expect to suffer. The existence of suffering does not mean God is not good. It means that God does not behave as you want him to.

Lastly, God wants and expects us to remain faithful to him when we do suffer. God wants and expects us to remain faithful to him even if we are not suffering. We are to remain faithful, even joyful and thankful, in all circumstances.⁴

So, our understanding of God and of suffering was quite different from that of many people in your modern world... Another thing that differs from your era is our view of time.

Jesus said he will come back. We early Christians took him at his word, and imputed our own timing. We expected him not only to come back, but to come back soon. With a firm expectation of his coming back, we thought of suffering as a very short-term situation where

⁴ 1 Thess. 5:18

the pain was certainly worth less than the reward.⁵ Christians of your world probably believe Jesus will return, but don't really expect it any time soon, so the price of suffering seems very high to them.

James was a very practical man. He knew that unmet expectations were often the source for discontent and unbelief. He knew that if Christians only expected good things to happen in their lives when they became Christians, that they would soon be disappointed, and maybe lose their wavering faith. He knew that if they expected suffering, they would not be disappointed.

With those thoughts in mind, let's examine a few passages that my friend and colleague, James, wrote:

Count it all joy when you fall into all kinds of trials; knowing this, that the testing of your faith produces patience.⁶

Blessed is the man that endures temptation: for when he perseveres, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him.⁷

Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, patiently waiting for the early and late rains. You too, be patient, having firm hearts: for the coming of the Lord is near. Brothers, don't hold grudges against each other, or you will be condemned: look, the judge stands before the door. My brothers, consider the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. We count as blessed those who endure. You have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen what the Lord has done. The Lord is very compassionate and full of tender mercy.⁸

Even in the face of suffering, the Lord is very compassionate and full of tender mercy. Even when you don't feel like it's true. Even when you don't feel faithful and strong. Even when you don't feel like The Rock...either one of us.

⁵ 2 Cor. 4:17-18

⁶ James 1:2-3

⁷ James 1:12

⁸ James 5:7-11