

Alex Honnold is known for a method of rock climbing called free-soloing. You can easily find a picture of him climbing a rugged cliff, suspended high above the ground. What's interesting about these pictures is the tension between the struggle of the rock climber and the inspiration of the setting.

Looking at the rock climber, we see Alex, with only his hands and his feet holding him to the stone. His body leans into the rock, his hands are lodged in a crevice, and his face is close to the stone.

Looking at the setting, though, we see what inspired him to do this. The vast expanse of rock jutting up into the heavens. The stunning clear, blue sky above him. The amazing landscape below.

In one picture, we see the tension of free-soloing. Alex's vision is limited. He has to concentrate on what's in front of him. His struggle is intense. But the world is much larger than what is right in front of him. He is part of a beautiful creation that evokes awe in those who see.

While Alex Honnold is not a Christian, his experience is similar to that of Christians. Discipleship is hard. It's often an intense struggle. We find ourselves drawn into the difficulty of discipleship, with our face pressed against the wall, and we need one small glimpse of that larger vision, that inspiring view that gives us the motivation to keep moving forward.

In our text this morning, Peter writes a letter to some churches and offers them an inspiring view. Peter is writing to churches in various cultural settings: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1). While these are different churches in different cultures, there is one thing they all hold in common: They're **struggling**. They're **all** having difficulty with discipleship. As Christians, they struggle with how faith interacts with the world. And Peter's message offers them an inspiring view. He offers a larger vision of God's glorious work in Christ that helps them endure.

This morning as we meditate on Peter's words, our goal is to know that confidence in Christ will encourage us to endure all the challenges and difficulties of being a follower of Jesus in this world.

When we go through times of suffering in this world, it's tempting for us as believers to interpret this as if something were wrong with us. Here's one example. Maybe you can relate to it: Bill and Janel were having trouble with their friends. They had been part of a group of couples for years. Their children had been in scouts together; they had watched their kids play in soccer games and baseball games, basketball and volleyball; they had celebrated graduations from high school and college, weddings, and the birth of grandchildren. But now with all those years behind them, it seemed like things had changed. Everything was becoming political. Events reported on the news became sources of argument. Bill and Janel tried to articulate how they as Christians would react, but their faith was putting a strain on their friendships. Bill and Janel were wondering if they should just keep their faith to themselves. "I must be doing something wrong," Bill once said. "Having friends that you can be honest with shouldn't be this hard."

But it was, and it is. When our Lord called us to follow Him, He called us to take up our cross. Discipleship is not easy. Not now. Not ever. Satan would tempt us to believe that we're doing something wrong, to believe that the Christian life should be easy and, if it's not, to believe that we should just be quiet about our faith. Peter, however, offers us a different vision. Peter encourages us to "always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15). Why? Because we know the power of God that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Peter offers us a way of dealing with the difficulties of discipleship. He encourages us to look to Christ. When we think about the disciple Peter, we often think of what he did. We remember how Peter wanted to walk on water, how he wanted to build booths on the Mount of Transfiguration, how he claimed he would follow Jesus even to death, how he denied Jesus in the courtyard, how he preached about Jesus on Pentecost. Peter's life had all kinds of amazing experiences and we might think that Peter could give us some advice from his life of discipleship.

Yet, Peter does not ask us to focus on what he did as a disciple. Instead, he asks us to consider what he *saw*. At the end of his letter, Peter

writes, "I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ" (5:1). Peter wants to be remembered not for what he said and did but for what he was: a witness of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. As a witness of the sufferings of Christ, Peter has seen something. Something that he wants to share with Christians. Peter has seen how God enters into suffering and triumphs over it. God is able to use suffering in His kingdom. Suffering is not something insurmountable for God.

As Peter writes to Christians who are suffering in their discipleship, he reminds them that God works salvation through suffering. He says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (3:18). Through Christ's sufferings, sinners were brought to God. Without the sufferings of Christ, we would remain in our sins, separated from God by what we say, think, and do. But because of Christ's sufferings, because of His death on the cross, the wrath of God is appeased. The Righteous One has died for the unrighteous that we might be members of the kingdom of God.

Jesus took on suffering. He struggled with the power of sin, death, and the devil. He died so that we could be saved, and He rose from the dead that we might know that nothing can separate us from the love of God and nothing can overcome God's work in the world. Jesus Christ is able to enter into suffering and work through it to bring about the reign and rule of God. Although our situations of discipleship may be difficult, we can endure them with bold confidence that God is working in all things for our good. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is able to enter into suffering and use it for His purposes. So, we have no need to fear or run away from tough situations, but instead to follow our Savior, confident in His power.

Albrecht Altdorfer was an engraver and painter working in Germany during the time of the Reformation. Altdorfer was known for his ability to place biblical scenes alongside vivid landscapes. In his work, you will see Jesus and His disciples in moments of suffering, and around them, there is a much larger landscape of vivid colors. Such juxtaposition captured the tension of Christian living. Suffering for the faith always happen within a much larger vision of God's work in the world.

In one painting, Altdorfer depicts Jesus praying in Gethsemane. The painting is both powerful and instructive. In the painting, you see the disciples in the foreground. Peter, James, and John are asleep. Peter rests on a rock, with his back to the scene. John is asleep on his back. James is looking downward. Behind them, in the center of the painting, is Jesus. He is kneeling before the face of a cliff and an angel is bringing Him the cup of suffering He will drink. Finally, much further in the distance, behind Jesus, we see a delegation. They come out of a background lit with the fires of hell. Led by Judas, we see the religious leaders and the temple guard about to come and seize Jesus.

What's so remarkable about this painting is the way the figures are arranged teaches a lesson. The disciples are obviously defenseless. They've fallen asleep! John is actually lying on his back, facing those who are coming to arrest Jesus, his entire body is left wide open to attack. And yet, kneeling between the disciples and the forces of darkness is Jesus. His prayer is their defense; His willingness to bear the cup of God's wrath is their salvation; His weakness and willingness to bear the wrath of God are the power of God that protects His people.

Because Jesus stands between the disciples and the forces of darkness, nothing will be able to come to them that has not come through Jesus. Jesus is the Victor. He has triumphed over all evil by His death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. All suffering that comes to us has already been conquered by Him.

In his letter and in our text, Peter gives us a glimpse of this glory of God. He relates to the churches how Jesus not only suffered for their sin but how He rose from the dead in victory over all evil. He descended into hell to proclaim His victory over the powers of hell, and He ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of God, where He now rules over all things.

That's **our** larger landscape. That's **our** larger vision. When suffering enters our lives, when difficulties endanger our discipleship, Peter encourages us to see this larger vision of our risen and ruling Lord. God calls us to see our lives in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus and to trust that He rules over all things for our good, even now. Amen.