

SECTION 1: ANCHORED IN THE SHALLOWS

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When I lived in central Oregon, forest fires were a regular occurrence. The first time I drove the mountain pass, rounded a bend, and came across acres of blackened sticks and scorched earth, it was shocking and hard to imagine life ever coming back again after such destruction. As I continued driving, though, I came upon rolling, verdant forests that apparently had been burned at one point, too: There were signs that listed the specific year both damage and repair occurred. It was startling to see the lush growth that had happened thanks to time, patience, and purposeful replanting.

This is an apt metaphor for human suffering: It's hard to imagine surviving it, and miraculous to see new life emerging from it. If you're sitting in heaps of post-fire ashes, emotionally speaking, you know: You're in the very unglamorous, pre-regeneration stage. Growing trees takes time, patience, and care. Just like growing spiritual maturity, yet this is a huge part of what the Church was made for.

For some, though, it's too much: It takes too long, is too painful, or too disappointing. In discussing the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32, below, pastor and author Eugene Peterson suggests some folks seek a religion that offers only rewards while making no demands, one that dazzles and entertains without the wait, without the mess.

God provides us everything...and then in a moment of restlessness, of anxiety, of inattention, of boredom, of rebelliousness, we blow it all. "Come make us gods," some pretentious but ridiculous piece of junk—a golden calf!—that we impulsively but naively think is going to take care of everything we need, eliminate the pain of being human, and banish all moments of emptiness and waiting. And then we are devastated.ⁱ

Sometimes I think this is how a lot of folks view the big-C Church today—as The Answer that will take care of our needs, eliminate our pain, banish our emptiness, and eradicate our wait. We'd rather have a pocket-sized golden calf to help us through our days. And if the Church is full of people all seeking the same shortcuts...? What then? What do we do with the unavoidable devastation?

...The pain-pleasure principle (the idea that humans are wired to pursue pleasure and avoid pain) suggests that individuals will do far more to avoid pain than to pursue pleasure—that's how afraid we are of suffering. This principle, which is at the core of every decision, layers our beliefs and choices. So much of this is based on past experiences: If you associate speaking your mind with being publicly corrected and humiliated, then you likely won't be speaking your mind much. If you tried to solve a conflict with a friend and ended up on the outs, you might allow uncomfortable or unhealthy behavior just to keep the peace.

If you see no benefits from suffering—if lessons learned or wisdom gained doesn't outweigh the pain incurred—then you'll avoid it at all costs. And if you see no point in gaining a deeper relationship with an overwhelmingly relational, completely uncontrollable, and mysteriously unknowable God, you'll avoid suffering then, too. Even (or especially) within the Church.

ⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2017), 32-33.