

Suffering: The Privilege and The Paradox

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[0 : 0 0] conversations to a close. I'm sure there'll be time at the end for you to carry on chatting. Our reading this evening is from 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 12 to 19 and that's on page 1220 in the pew Bibles. So 1 Peter chapter 4 reading from verse 12. 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, but rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good. Amen.

Well, good evening and do keep your Bibles open at 1 Peter 4, verses 12 to 19. Let's ask God for help. Let's join together in prayer.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word to us this evening. By your Spirit, awaken our souls to the gospel truth. Soften the hard hearts and attune them to your will. Prepare us as your people to stand firm in our faith. Give us the right attitude and the right perspective to endure opposition.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we live in a culture today where personal comfort is the goal. In most cultures throughout history, suffering is accepted as inevitable and can be seen as a means of strengthening you in the long run. But ours is a secular culture that avoids suffering at all costs, where you're encouraged to do whatever makes you happy in this life. And that can be commodified. You can make money out of that if you can take the pain out of people's lives. I used to work in a design firm. And when we were rebranding, we worked with consultants. And one of the first things we did was to establish what are the pains? What are the pains that our clients feel? What are their pains and how can we relieve them?

Because once we'd worked that out, we could come up with a strategy that would be attractive to potential clients who wanted to avoid risk and pain wherever possible when they're investing large sums of money in complex projects. Suffering is something that our society goes out of its way to avoid. Now, we've just read a bit of a letter where the author of Peter is realistic about suffering in a broken world. He's realistic. The Christian is not immune to suffering this side of eternity. In fact, the whole letter is bookended by this very idea. At the beginning of the letter in chapter 1, verse 6, he's candid. We're going to be grieved by various trials, suffering for a little while.

[4 : 28] And then at the end of the letter in chapter 5, verse 10, after we've suffered a little while, God will restore us. And as we're going to see in our passage this evening, there's a particular kind of suffering that a Christian can expect to face. Perhaps you're here this evening and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. You're just seeing for yourself what the Christian faith is all about, finding out about it. You may be scratching your head at this point, wondering, why on earth would I want to be a Christian if there's suffering involved? I hope that by the end of the talk this evening, you'll see that suffering a little now looks a bit different when viewed with an eternal horizon. Actually, suffering's not the problem for Christians, according to Peter.

That's inevitable. But rather, it's our attitude towards it that matters. Now, if we can get our attitude and our perspective right, then Peter lets us into a secret. According to Peter, it's possible not just to survive suffering, but for God who's sovereign to use it according to his will for our benefit and his glory. Friends, we've got two headings this evening. Firstly, in suffering, do not be surprised, but rejoice. That's suffering with the right attitude. That's verses 12 to 16. In suffering, do not be surprised, but rejoice. And secondly, in suffering, entrust yourself to God. And that's suffering with the right perspective. So verses 17 to 19. The first heading then, in suffering, do not be surprised, but rejoice. Suffering with the right kind of attitude. Dear friends, Peter writes,

Do you notice the warmth of his address? Beloved, as some translations have it. He's writing from Rome to Christians who are in a minority in what we'd call is modern-day Turkey and who are experiencing opposition for their faith in Jesus. So he's writing in a pre-Christian context to help Christians who are currently experiencing a low-level kind of persecution so that they can stand firm and persevere through various trials. And so that has a very particular relevance for us today in our context in the post-Christian West, where our rapidly secularizing society is fast becoming more and more intolerant of Christians. Where increasingly we can find ourselves marginalized for our faith in Jesus on the receiving end of hostility. Taking stick for sticking out as believers or sticking out as healthy thumbs, as someone put it. So it's into this that Peter says in verse 12 of chapter 4, don't be surprised. Don't be taken aback as if something unusual are happening. This is par for the course.

It's not if, but when. When you're taking flack at work for being a Christian, when you're cancelled by friends, don't be surprised. They can't understand why you won't join in with them with certain things like you used to, why you think differently about certain things. And it can get quite heated sometimes when we enter into debates and discussions. And in these situations, we might even begin to question ourselves when we're taking flack. Especially as a new believer, perhaps, you've accepted Jesus into your life, your new creation. You've turned away from the wild living, all those things in chapter 4, verse 3, that many around us live for. And in response to the gospel, you're making choices to please Jesus.

But when we meet a bit of resistance, we can feel buffeted from all sorts of directions. We can question, is it me? Is it something I've done wrong here? By the way, there's a place for healthy self-reflection.

[9 : 16] In verse 15, we need to ensure that we're suffering for Christ and not for evil. Peter's saying, if we're living for Christ, it shouldn't be a surprise that we meet hostility. So Peter's very realistic about the troubles we face. He's saying, your friends might be surprised that you no longer conform to their lifestyle. Your friends might be surprised, but we shouldn't be surprised that we're encountering hostility. Now, if we are to not just simply get through it, but for suffering to benefit us, then we need to approach it with the right attitude. And if we're to do that, then we need to understand something about the nature of the suffering involved. So Peter describes it as being like fire. It's a fiery ordeal. He's speaking figuratively. It's not yet the days of Nero when Christians are literally lit up as human torches. The particular persecution that Peter has in mind here, we can see from verse 14, is being insulted for the name of Christ. So it's a kind of low-level persecution that is all too familiar to us in our context.

And we've had this idea of a fiery trial already in the letter way back in verse 7 of chapter 1. We face trials as Christians to prove the genuineness of our faith.

So a fiery ordeal is a refining fire that proves or tests us to show us what we're made of, who we really are. Let's just think about that for a minute. You put a metal ore into a refining fire to remove impurities.

The ore contains both the pure and the impure, and they're stuck together. The dross and the pure metal. And the only way to get rid of the dross is to put the whole thing in the fire.

The pure bits can handle the fire, but the false cannot. Our hearts are like the metal ore. It's in trials and troubles that these show us what we're made of and what we trust in.

[11 : 37] Our hearts are like an amalgam, a mixture of the things we trust in. We might profess faith wholeheartedly in God, but functionally we might also be depending on other things like our status or career or comfort.

As we stick our heads above the parapet as Christians, that's when it's going to be costly. That's when we're going to draw flack. That's when we're in the fire and we discover where our allegiances lie.

So whenever we have to choose between Jesus and comfort or Jesus and popularity, we're in the fire. So God uses these trials to refine our faith.

The question is, are we ready? Richard Wurmbrandt was an evangelical minister in Romania in far more difficult circumstances than we face today after the Communist Party swept into Romania.

And on one occasion, he and his wife were forced to attend an event at the Congress of Cults. And about 4,000 people were there, and the event was broadcast live throughout the country.

[12 : 56] And many religious leaders publicly forsook their faith. Richard's wife, Sabina, leaned into him and whispered in his ear, Stand up and wash away the shame from the face of Christ.

Richard knew the cost. Richard stood up and declared to all that their loyalty was to Christ. He was kidnapped by the secret police and spent the next 14 years in prison, suffering all kinds of atrocities.

And he'd later reflect on his time in prison. It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. Whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating.

A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of sharing the gospel. So we accepted the terms. It was a deal. We preached, and they beat us.

We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us. So everyone was happy. But Wembrandt was not surprised when suffering came his way.

[14 : 04] He even rejoiced in it. And isn't this just the most surprising and astonishing part in our passage? Peter says that not only should we expect to encounter opposition, but when these trials come, verse 13, we should actually rejoice.

Now this is seriously counter-cultural. Seriously counter-intuitive. Counter-cultural.

Rejoicing in suffering. Of course, Peter's writing tenderly to these Christians from a position of experience. He's been there.

He's done that. He's got the T-shirt. We can read about the fiery ideals that Peter faced in the book of Acts. It's the hostility of the religious leaders who after releasing him from imprisonment, strictly ordered him to stop telling people about the Lord Jesus.

Well, how did Peter respond? He told them, we must obey God rather than human beings. Then after they were flogged, we're told that Peter and the apostles went out rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus.

- [15 : 23] Well, this gives us a little bit of insight, I think, into why we can rejoice when suffering comes. So we've already seen that our suffering is not without purpose.
- God uses it to refine our faith. But Peter now shows us that our suffering for Christ finds its significance in Christ's suffering for us. How so?
- Well, read along with me in verse 13. Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.
- So what does this mean, to participate in Christ's sufferings? Well, it can't mean that by suffering we contribute to our salvation, which is by sheer grace.
- We can contribute nothing to our own salvation. Only Christ was truly righteous, yet he suffered on the cross for our sins.
- [16 : 29] It was God's purpose that Christ should suffer for us and by his suffering save us. So we should rejoice when God wills that we should suffer for him.
- Our suffering connects us somehow to Jesus. And if, like Jesus, we should participate in his suffering, then we know that like Christ, we shall participate in his glory.
- When overjoyed, we shall see him face to face. Jesus' suffering is what made him glorious. And the pattern of Christ's life is the pattern of the Christian life.
- But there's more. So not only does this give us a future hope, but the glory of Christ is a present reality for us in verse 14.
- If you're insulted for Christ, you're actually blessed. For the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.
- [17 : 33] Now this is an extraordinary privilege because that very promise of the Holy Spirit given originally through the prophet Isaiah was applied originally to Christ himself.
- And then Peter had proclaimed the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. And now Peter connects this blessing in a special kind of way to those who are participating in Christ's sufferings.
- It's very often, isn't it, that when we're most needful, that we're most aware of God's enabling presence with us. The world will try to shame the Christian for our hope in Christ.
- But verse 16, we're not to be ashamed of bearing Christ's name in the fiery ordeal. Instead, we're to rejoice. And praising God, we're to entrust ourselves to him.
- So this leads us on to our second and final section, in suffering, entrust yourself to God. And this is suffering with the right kind of perspective.
- [18 : 43] Now I'm aware that for many of us, this is a difficult message. It's perhaps an aspect of our Christian life that we've struggled with in the past.
- And I know that sometimes it's been the case in my own experience. Sometimes it's just easier, isn't it, to keep quiet and to blend in and to speak up for Jesus and risk ridicule or mockery.
- And so for our encouragement, I want us to see that Peter himself hadn't always been the finished article and it came to having the right attitude and perspective to standing up for Jesus.
- He hadn't always triumphed with such boldness and rejoicing. In fact, it was after he'd been following Jesus for three years that he failed spectacularly in a couple of ways that illustrate for us two typical human responses to conflict, two reflexes that we have to conflict.
- And I reckon that depending on your personality type, you're either a rhino or a hedgehog when it comes to confrontation. If you're a rhino, you tend to charge when provoked.

[20 : 03] If you're a hedgehog, you tend to curl up and withdraw. I'll not ask you now to turn to your neighbor and discuss which personality type you are, but somehow Peter managed to display both types on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion.

When the guards arrived in Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, Peter's rhino instinct kinked in. He drew his sword and struck the high priest's servant before Jesus rebuked him.

And possibly Peter took a mental note there and then to suffer not as a murderer or an evildoer. But it was later on that very night that Peter failed the other way, withdrawing and disowning Jesus.

Maybe he thought that sometimes we're inclined to. I don't have to suffer if I don't talk about Jesus. If I don't identify as a Christian.

So not even a hedgehog, more like a chameleon trying to blend in. And Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus, even though he stuck out like a sore thumb.

[21 : 15] This was a fireside trial, a fiery trial that would have stuck with Peter for the rest of his life. I don't doubt his own failure then in not standing firm under pressure would have been part of his motivation for writing this part of the letter.

So what changed with Peter? How did failure at Calvary turn to triumph just a short time later? How could he go from denying Jesus one day to boldly proclaiming him the next?

Part of it was realizing what he'd almost forfeited and appreciating the gift of forgiveness when Jesus restored him and then empowered him by the Holy Spirit.

I think that part of the answer also lies in this last part of our passage, verses 17 to 19. And it's to do with getting our perspective right.

So read with me. For it is time for judgment to begin with God's households. And if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

[22 : 26] Judgment begins with God's people. Now this isn't condemnation, but the fiery ordeals that Christians experience in this life, a refining fire of the Lord who's come to his temple to purify his people with his faithful hand.

Testing does not destroy us, but refines us. But if his own people are purged by fire, then perish the thought of what end awaits those who reject the gospel.

It's about getting our perspective right and understanding that enduring for a little while the fiery trials of this life is nothing, nothing compared to the fiery torment that awaits those who continue in their rebellion against the Lord.

And it's the very same idea with the Old Testament quote in the following verse. If it's hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?

Now it's not hard in the sense that it was God only just managed to do our salvation, but rather it's hard in that it's not without difficulty and serious cost.

[23 : 51] Christ's suffering on the cross in our place was infinitely costly and our own fiery trials are not easily endured.

But here's the thing that we really need to wrap our heads around. Getting our perspective right is essential. A comfortable life now apart from Christ is not better than a life of Christian suffering for Christ.

The former ends in judgment to everlasting suffering. The latter looks forward to an eternity of everlasting joy.

Our suffering now looks a little bit different when we look at it with this end in sight. So let's not be short-sighted, but entrust ourselves to God in doing good, verse 19.

Because as we're being transformed more and more into Christ's likeness, the more we're going to be sticking out like healthy thumbs, even though for a little while it's going to be pretty uncomfortable at times.

[25 : 12] Richard Wembrandt said, persecution has always produced a better Christian, a witnessing Christian, a soul-winning Christian. Communist persecution backfired and produced serious, dedicated Christians such as are rarely seen in free lands.

These people cannot understand how anyone can be a Christian and not want to win every soul they meet for Christ. So maybe it's not about going out of our way.

Maybe it's not about going out of our way to avoid situations in which we're going to take flack for our faith in Jesus, but being ready and seeing these as our privilege, opportunities to rejoice and bring glory to God.

For it's as we stick out as healthy thumbs for Jesus with the spirit of glory and power resting on us, that we can be confident that our lives and our suffering are in the hands of the Father, even our Creator God, as He faithfully works out His purposes for creation to their glorious end.

Well, amen. And let's join together in prayer before the band come up and lead us in praise. Heavenly Father, we praise You that You are faithful.

[26 : 40] As You have accomplished Your great design of creation, so You will bring it to glorious completion in the new creation.

Therefore, we entrust ourselves to You. And until that day when Christ returns, grant us opportunities to share with those around us the good news of salvation in Jesus.

Help us then by the Holy Spirit to endure for a little while with rejoicing the suffering that refines us and testifies to Your grace in our lives for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, we're now going to respond with a song that was born out of great suffering and which acknowledges the trials ahead but which declares with confidence it is well with my soul.