

## Nothing Strange at All

1 Peter 4:12-19

Some years ago I ministered to a dear older woman in her mid-80s. I always remembered her birthday and knew her age because she was born on Veterans Day, November 11, Armistice Day as it was first known when it marked the end of WWI. Actually, she was born 7 years before Armistice Day. She was born 11/11/11.

She was widowed very early in life, and had been a widow for over 40 years when I knew her. She had one daughter. She had walked with the Lord faithfully since childhood. And she was a very hearty woman. I remember one particular pastoral conversation with her during a period when she was uncharacteristically infirm. She had a series of non-life-threatening ailments, and for a period of a few months, she even missed church services. Never before in her life had that happened. It bothered her to the point that she even doubted her salvation. As she reasoned to me, she had prayed to get well and regain her strength and the Lord hadn't answered that prayer. So maybe, she concluded, maybe she wasn't a Christian after all.

It was a sad conclusion for her to reach, one based upon an absence of good biblical teaching in her early years. It was a sad occasion for me as her pastor, as I tried to encourage her with the promises of God's faithfulness to his people—and with the encouragement that trials and afflictions are actually nothing strange at all. That's really the point, and it is the point of this whole book of First Peter which we have been studying. It is certainly the point of this text we come to this morning, which in a general way summarizes and focuses the whole teaching of the entire book.

Most likely, Peter wrote the book shortly before the tribulation period initiated by Emperor Nero in 64 AD, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he writes to warn the church and to encourage them about what is about to come. History tells us that persecution of Christians did, in fact, begin after the burning of Rome in 64. Nero sought to make Christians scapegoats for his own negligence in leadership, and knowing that gives particular emphasis to what Peter has to say to us. Peter uses that context as an example for all of life. There is nothing strange at all about suffering in the lives of Christians.

That is what that dear saint whom I sought to shepherd needed to know in her situation. Sufferings didn't mean God no longer loved her. Trials and afflictions didn't mean that her faith was faulty or that her salvation in jeopardy. And that's what you need to know in your situation.

v.12 “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.”

Don't be surprised. Don't be shaken. Don't be alarmed. Don't be discouraged. Don't despair. Why? Because,

### **I. SUFFERING SHOULD BE SEEN AS AN ORDINARY PART OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.**

Ordinary. That's Peter's point. Not strange! Not strange at all. Notice how Peter describes that suffering in verse 12. A fiery trial.

I don't like the image of fire. I've learned by experience not to like the idea of a flood, but a fire seems even more disastrous, more frightening. Even more intense and painful. The Bible references are far too numerous to mention. The flaming fire.

The unquenchable fire. Fire burning with brimstone. Devouring fire. Consuming fire. All very accurate in their description.

And here, “the fiery trial.” “Painful trial” isn’t quite accurate enough. The image is more intense. It is the pain of the fire that is being emphasized. Point number 1 of the sermon this morning, that such suffering is a reality for the lives of Christians. It is real.

#### **A. Trials are real and painful.**

They are normal. They should be expected and anticipated, an ordinary part of the Christian life.

Now, I won’t leave you there, for Peter doesn’t leave you there, but I don’t want to pass over this point too carelessly. Because I don’t want fiery trials to come upon you like they did that woman I cared for a a pastor. I don’t want you to be startled nor dismayed. As Jesus said to his disciples,

John 16:33 “In the world you will have tribulation.”

With that, a second reality of life with regard to suffering.

#### **B. Trials are designed by God for your testing.**

This isn’t all that Peter says about our trials, but it is at the foundation of all his teaching in that regard. God uses trials to test us, to test our faith.

v.12

All three of my daughters are in college at the moment, and a large part of their weekly experiences are tests. Calculus and chemistry for Ruth, as she gets adjusted to her first semester of college. Accounting and statistics for Elizabeth, as she attempts to finish her degree and graduate. And for Gabrielle, the same experience. Tests.

But tests are designed to make students fail, not good tests from good teachers. Just the opposite. They are designed to make you learn. So it is with God. God’s testing is for purification. Peter has already made that perfectly plain.

1 Peter 1:6 “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Your faith is compared to gold. It is more precious than gold. And gold is made pure by the melting heat of a fire that consumes all the impurities. Nothing left but pure gold. That’s the purpose of God’s testing.

So please learn to acknowledge this reality. It is a great measure and mark of your maturity. There will be trials in your life, sufferings and afflictions. And God designs them, not to cause despair or to doubt your salvation, but to build and strengthen your faith. That is the bald reality, and the sooner in life you learn that, the more mature you will be. The sooner and the more deeply you embrace this reality, the more able you will be to maintain a strong and vibrant faith, the type so well expressed by Habakkuk.

Hab. 3:17 “Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls--18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 19 The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.”

That enables me to move on to the second point, and my progression is not one of mere logic or good sermon order. My point is to move more deeply into the thoughts and motives of your heart. Now we move inside the heart. It is not just that suffering is an ordinary part of your Christian life, but,

## **II. SUFFERING SHOULD BE SEEN AS AN OCCASION TO ENJOY FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS.**

So we move to the subject of joy. Joy in the midst of suffering.

### **A. Suffering does not contradict the experience of joy.**

Now, how can that be? That's the challenge I have before me in preaching from this text. How can that be? How can I exhort you to joy without sounding dispassionate? Unsympathetic. Simplistic.

How can I describe suffering as a joyful part of the Christian life without sounding, well, just like a preacher who is supposed to say that sort of thing? How can we enter into this subject in a way that is encouraging to you who suffer but aren't exactly joyful about it? In other words, how can I preach so that so are enabled by God's grace to experience that joy rather than frustrated that I just don't understand your suffering.

First, let me say this. We are to weep with those who weep. This is not a triumphalistic, emotionalistic, superficial denial of reality. We don't ignore the reality of suffering. It is not that suffering disappears. It is not that the feelings associated with sufferings are illegitimate, or worse, considered to be ungodly. It's not that you are supposed to be happy all the time, smiling, as if every in your life was fine when it isn't. That isn't the point I'm trying to make. Rather, that in the midst of suffering, there can still be a real sense of joy. Suffering does not contradict the experience of joy.

So how is that possible? Look at,  
v.13

How is joy possible in the context of your suffering. Please, listen carefully and be sure that you get this. This is absolutely crucial, and really the focal point of this whole sermon. If you miss this point, then nothing else will make any sense or be any help whatsoever. How can you have joy in the midst of fiery trials? Look again at,

v.13 "...but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings."

You partake of Christ's sufferings. The word partake is the word fellowship, communion. Koinonea in the Greek. You have fellowship with Jesus. You are united to Jesus, in his experiences, when you suffer. You share in his sufferings, and are, therefore, united to him in the bonds of fellowship.

So the joy is in that fellowship, not in the suffering itself. The joy is in your communion with Jesus.

Paul describes his suffering this way,

2 Cor. 4:7 "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; 8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

And, Phil. 3:7 "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than

that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

There is the joy, the joy of life that comes through faith in Jesus. The joy of hope, that enables you to know that you shall inherit eternal life.

And, therefore,

### **B. Suffering enables you to anticipate Jesus’ return in glory.**

It’s a matter of perspective. It is a matter of hope.  
v.13

You who suffer with Jesus, you will live with Jesus.

This is what is so wrong with so much of modern religion and church life, in which the superficial feeling of comfort and external happiness become the preeminent goal and object. I have a friend who labels such churches and such worship services as “happy clappy.” Just clap your hands and be happy. Put on a smiley face. And wrap yourself in the shallowness of a emotional experience contrived or stirred up by a certain mood or style of music.

But shallow sentimentalism doesn’t cut it, not when there are real trials. Not when there are real burdens to bear. Singing an upbeat chorus while clapping your hands isn’t sufficient for those

moments. But this is sufficient, the reality of genuine, spiritual communion with Jesus Christ, with the hope of eternal glory!

People of God, when you suffer, you are united to Christ in his sufferings. You are joined to Christ. Therein is the joy. And there is the great hope. The confident expectation of glory.

This is no grim fatalism. This is no morbid endurance. This is a focus upon our great hope, that when Jesus returns, we shall be with him. When his glory is fully and finally revealed, we shall be with him!

And so, says Paul,

Rom. 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

That’s the foundation of your in the midst of the tribulations of this world. Namely, the contrast with the glory that shall be revealed in you. The glory which you shall have, the glory of Jesus in which you will share.

So rejoice in that hope. Rejoice in that sure and certain expectation. And rejoice, knowing that the path to that glory is to be united with Jesus in his suffering. In that way, suffering becomes a blessing. That blessing is identified in verse 14, “Blessed are you.” And then again in verse 16, with the negative, “Let him not be ashamed.” In other words, “Let him be blessed.” There is not shame in suffering, just a blessing. So,

### **III. SUFFERING SHOULD BE SEEN AS A BLESSING.**

Again, that’s not the superficial happy-clappy brand of Christianity so in vogue with the popular culture of our day. These are not words of simplistic sentimentalism perhaps characteristic

of much Christian experience a couple generations ago. But in the deep often troublesome reality of your own life experiences, suffering embodies significant blessings.

I know many of you suffer greatly. I know what many of those sufferings are. I serve among you with a tender pastor's heart that would suffer with you. And I know my own sufferings. There is nothing glib nor dismissive in this description of blessing. So you who suffer, you who feel that suffering today, listen carefully. Listen attentively, that you might know these blessings yourself.

### **A. The blessing of the presence of the Holy Spirit.**

Such a blessing that is!

v.14

The Spirit of God is upon you. That's where your strength really comes from. And I know from my experience, the power of that strength that is mine through work of the Holy Spirit is more evident in the midst of suffering. It is what Paul meant when he wrote,

2 Cor. 12:10 "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

That's what suffering does for you. It makes you weak. So that when you are weak, the Holy Spirit can make you strong.

So Paul is willing to declare this:

2 Cor. 12:10 "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Beloved, knowing the strength that only comes from God's

Holy Spirit is a blessing. And you will know that strength most clearly when you suffer!

Such a fascinating phrase Peter uses in verse 14, "the Spirit of glory." The point is that just such a spirit rests upon you. The glory of God, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, rests upon those who are united to Jesus in his sufferings. The glory is in the presence of God. The glory is in the communion with God. And such a glory it is!

I don't want anyone to suffer. I don't want to suffer myself. We ought not to pursue suffering or unnecessarily invite suffering into our lives. But dear friends, when you do suffer, and in Peter's words that means suffering at the hands of other people, you are blessed by God himself.

v.14 "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

Notice then how that sentence continues,

v.14 "On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified."

In other words, those people who are causing you such trouble are actually blaspheming God. But when you endure that suffering you are glorifying God. And that is the second blessing Peter identifies.

### **B. The blessing of being able to glorify God.**

There is, of course, a significant warning. Peter is not talking about suffering that you deserve! He is not talking about any suffering that might be a result of your own sin.

v.15

Just as an aside, that I won't focus on this morning, notice that being a busybody or a meddler is put into the same list as a murderer, a thief, and an all-round evildoer. If you are a busy-body meddling in other peoples affairs, you might likely suffer for it. But that's not what Peter has in mind.

v.16

And then Peter makes a reference to the final judgment, as that will be the time when God's own judgment will be meted out against evildoers.

v.17-18

The ungodly are severely warned. God will repay the wicked for their sin. But in the midst of that, this great blessing is expounded. It is so clear in verse 14, "On your part he is glorified. And verse 16, "let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."

Whenever suffering is present, we are often tempted to ask the question "why." What is God's purpose? What is God trying to teach me? I want to be careful, because those can become very unhelpful questions. Sometimes they have no answer. And you can easily get stumped if you think you have to give an answer. Why did God cause that person to suffer? What good can God possibly be doing by causing that person to suffer? Most of the time, I don't know the answer to those questions. Most of the time, it just isn't obvious.

And what a danger it is for your own soul if you think you need to answer those questions specifically. But maybe there is no tangible, specific lesson for you to learn. The reality of suffering lies at the heart of God's purpose, though, and it is a blessing. You glorify God when you trust him in the midst of suffering. You glorify God when you wait upon him in the midst of suffering. You

glorify God when when you endure suffering with the hope and joy which we have already identified. You glorify God by looking forward to the glory that will be revealed in you when Jesus Christ is revealed at the end of the age. You glorify God by looking forward to that appearing. And in your suffering, you are able to do all of those things, and so enjoy the blessing of being able to glorify God.

In that opportunity to glorify God, in the midst of suffering, you have a great opportunity. Peter calls it the opportunity to do what is good! It is,

### **C. The blessing of trusting God by doing what is right.**

v.19

So when you suffer, and you will, in your suffering, give your life to God. A living sacrifice. Commit your souls to God. Entrust yourself to his care, and trust him, for he is a faithful Creator.

With all of your life, give him the glory. And in all of that, do what is good. Honor his laws and his commandments, even as you suffer. And learn to enjoy all these blessings!

Let those blessings work in you the joy of the Lord, and most especially, the joy of communion with Jesus in his sufferings. Let the joy of Jesus be yours. For you have been crucified with him. You have been united with him in his death. And you shall be united with him in his life.

Let your sufferings be the evidence of that union with Jesus. Don't be surprised when you suffer, nor be dismayed. Rather, cling to Jesus. When you share in his sufferings, rejoice with him in his sufferings.

Heb. 12:2 "...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."