

June 1, 2014
Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
1 Peter 4:12–19, 5:6–11 (ESV)

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¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

1 Peter 5:6–11 (ESV)

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

On July 1, 1523, two Augustinian monks were burned to death in Brussels, Belgium, by the Inquisition. Their names were Heinrich Voes and Johann Esch. What was their crime? you might ask. They were teaching the doctrines taught by one of their Augustinian brothers—a man named Martin Luther. These were the first men ever killed for teaching Lutheranism. Luther himself was so overcome when he received word of their death that he did something he had not done before. He wrote a hymn, “*A New Song Shall Be Begun.*” It was published in a pamphlet, and soon all across Europe people were learning about the heroism of Heinrich and Johann as they died, proclaiming their trust in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Their suffering for Christ became glorious, as they are to this day recognized as the first blood martyrs of the Reformation. Even to our day, their sacrifice has been sung as a greatly shortened, two-stanza version of this, Luther’s first hymn, our sermon hymn for today: “Flung to the Heedless Winds” (*TLH* 259).

It’s this sort of persecution Peter describes as a “fiery trial” coming upon us because of our faith (1 Pet 4:12).

But, let’s face it: it seems a little strange for us in our country today to think about persecution, doesn’t it?

We in this country aren’t likely to be burned at the stake or thrown to the lions or beheaded for being Christians. And that makes it tougher than we’d like to admit, I’m afraid, to get our heads around our text this morning.

Yet Peter begins, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you”* (v 12).

The fact is that persecution of Christians, in one form or another, has been the normal state of affairs throughout most of the history of the Church. Peter is writing from Rome a few years before the end of his life.

Persecutions are still common here or there, but at this time, they are still small, local events. Often the persecution simply comes in the form of insults. The big persecutions by the Roman Empire would not start for a couple more years. But Peter is anticipating that day. He is warning his fellow believers, particularly his fellow pastors, that they need to be prepared.

See, Peter makes the point that persecution should not be viewed as strange. Rather, persecution is the normal state of affairs. Those who are of the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh will always hate those who trust in Christ. Look how Christians are treated in the Middle East. Even many secular countries such as Japan, in which traditional religions have died out, resist the Gospel.

We in America have experienced something quite unusual. But even here, we see Christians persecuted for their beliefs. How often are political candidates mocked in the press if they are creationists? How often are they mocked in the press if they are pro-life? If a political figure, someone in the entertainment field or even someone in the business world shares their views about homosexuality or same sex marriage, even if they were asked, calls spring up for a boycott or their immediate dismissal.

And how often are we dismissed by other Christians for not agreeing with radical prophetic views of some Christian groups?

Yes, sometimes the persecution comes from others who are supposed to be brothers and sisters in Christ.

Seems strange, doesn't it? But God has a purpose in allowing such persecutions. These trials, Peter says, are "to test you." There's the sense here that sufferings purify the Christian. Because we are always sinners and saints, we are never pure enough. Christ is always striving to purify our hearts and our minds. The Christian, in standing firm, shares in Christ's life and death. He suffers and dies with Christ. And this fellowship does not end but then continues into eternity.

The devil will use such persecutions as a trick. He "*prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*" (v 8). But the roaring lion of satan is a toothless lion, who only creates fear to drive his prey into the clutches of the hunting lions. He cannot actually harm us. He roars loudly to create fear. He would use such fear to get us to deny Christ. But God is also using "fiery trials" for a purpose, *His purpose*. "*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you*" (v 14). Strange as it may seem, it can actually be a blessing when we suffer for the name of Christ.

Suffering, however, is not in itself to be viewed as a good thing. Peter isn't speaking here of physical ailments or the like. He's speaking of things that are being done to us. In Peter's day, this would have including floggings, imprisonment, and even being put to death. Peter himself would experience all these. But these things could be done to a person for other reasons. If one was a thief, they would be punished according to the law. This is not a blessing. This is not a good thing. It is just a person paying an earthly consequence for committing a crime.

Christians should not be criminals, looking for an excuse or finding a way to suffer for Christ. Peter is clear to make this distinction: *“Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler”* (v 15).

Strangely enough, some early Christians took Peter’s words, and the words of other apostles, so to heart that they would go out of their way to be arrested and put to death in times of persecution. While suffering for Christ is a great honor for the Christian, it is an honor we cannot seek. We must be chosen. So the Early Church began to teach that Christians should avoid persecution if they can do so without compromising their faith. It was wrong to be a martyr if one had opportunity to escape. So, for example, if a person knew Christians were being arrested in his town but not in another, he was to flee. Always, though, if confronted and arrested, he was to confess Christ. If one can flee and proclaim the Gospel on another day, all glory be to God.

So was Peter here telling his readers to suck it up and take one for the team? No, not at all. What Peter was telling the Christians of that time, and the Christians of today, is that we are preserved by Christ in the face of trials. We do not preserve ourselves. Christ keeps us safe from true harm.

And what is true harm? True harm is denying Christ. We cannot save ourselves. Christ must save us. If we deny Him, we are lost. Peter reminds us that God is also our Creator and is ever faithful to us. And Christ Jesus Himself is no stranger to persecution. He gave His life on the cross so that we would never be separated from God. So we can entrust ourselves to God’s care, even in the face of death. Thus we need not lose faith. *“Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. . . . Therefore let those who suffer*

according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (vv 13, 19).

Our sufferings are for but a little while; the glories of heaven last forever.

As we move from Easter into Pentecost, we are reminded that the Christian is always under pressure from the world. The world does not want to be confronted with the truth of its own sin, its own inhumanity.

From the time of Peter, beginning with Stephen, until the present day, Christians are under attack. It is said that more Christians died for the Christ in the twentieth century than in all the previous centuries combined. The persecutions have not ended. They never will end, until the return of Christ in the final judgment of this world. The world will be condemned. Those who reject Christ will be rejected by Christ and cast into hell. But those who stand with Christ will remain with Christ, forever. Nothing strange about being persecuted, because Christ, who suffered all, will always be right there with us. We stand with Christ because Christ will stand with us.

We will not be left to stand on our own. Christ never abandons us. For He is our Creator and Redeemer. He is the God of all grace, the one who will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish us. He has died for your sins and through faith in Him as your Savior, you are forgiven.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Amen.