

1 Peter 4:12-19
(Matthew 24:3-14)
“Rejoicing in Suffering”

Introduction

We return this morning, after a few weeks of focusing on the passion, death and resurrection victory of our Lord Jesus, to this wonderful little letter written by the apostle Peter to Christians facing persecution. He has encouraged them not to see suffering as something unusual, something to be avoided at all costs, something that might thwart God’s loving purposes for them. He has reminded them that it was through his suffering that Christ set us free from bondage to sin and death and reconciled us to God, and that through our suffering Christ invites us to share more deeply in his life and mission.

While Peter specifically addresses issues related to persecution, his words are also intended in a larger sense to address all the ways that we face pain, suffering and disappointment while following Jesus. He concludes this section by writing, “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (4:19). This is not theoretical for some of you this morning. Sooner or later it will not be theoretical for any of us. If we follow Christ for long, there will be times when we find ourselves at odds with our culture, our friends, even with our own deepest human inclinations. If we live long enough, life will hurt us through sickness, failure, betrayal, any number of heart-breaking disappointments that may tempt us to think that God doesn’t really love us, or that he isn’t really sovereign over the circumstances of our lives.

But Peter tells us of a different way of seeing and of living life in the light of the gospel and through the power of the resurrection. He encourages us to face whatever comes with a clear-eyed confidence that, in the words of the apostle Paul, “for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose ... [that] in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us ... [and that nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:28).

Body

1. Don’t be surprised at suffering (4:12).

Isn’t it interesting that we say, “The only things you can’t avoid are death and taxes,” and yet we act as if all we should ever have to face is a life of pleasure and success? All the while, we know that death and taxes are certain, and Peter reminds us that suffering is another of those sure and certain things that life has in store for each one of us.

But why talk about it? Why not just focus on happiness? If trouble comes, then it comes, but isn't it morbid to talk about it this way? We talk about it to prepare for it – to be ready when it comes and not to miss the good things that God intends to accomplish in us through our suffering. As Peter has been reminding us throughout this letter, suffering comes at last to each of us, and it will either break us down and confuse us or be the crucible in which we become something new in Christ. How can something good come out of pain and suffering? Peter tells us that suffering serves as a test. What kind of test? Just this: It shows us whether our faith is real or not, whether or not we really trust the Lord to carry us through and to fulfill his promises to us when we cannot see our own way through or find the heart to press on.

So, Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised." But, in fact, we are surprised by suffering. Most of us tend to cruise along pursuing our hopes and plans, expecting a life of happiness, when suddenly our little world comes crashing down and we wonder what is going on. We are shocked, and hope that it is an awful nightmare from which we will awake. "Don't be surprised," warns the apostle, but rather be prepared to make the most of such times and to grow up to maturity through what God permits you to endure.

2. Don't be depressed at suffering (4:13-14).

Once the initial shock wears off, depression usually sets in. The shock numbs the pain for a while, but when we realize that this is no dream from which we will awake, we become depressed and wonder if the sun will ever shine on us again. Peter gives a rather arresting antidote: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

Now I do not for a moment think that Peter is calling us to a goofy sort of false smile and hollow, "Praise the Lord, I'm just great!" when our hearts are breaking. But he is calling us to learn to rejoice in whatever circumstances we are in, because we have been granted the privilege of sharing in our Lord's sufferings here and now that we may also share one day in his glory. We either believe this or we don't, and if we believe it, it is only in suffering that faith gains the power to transform us from people whose joy is context-specific and dependent on circumstances into those who can rejoice in the Lord whatever life may bring.

It is essential that Christians in our culture hear our Lord's radical call to discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). When we begin to grasp that our life in Christ involves, not only his cross, but our cross, we will no longer be surprised or depressed when suffering comes, but will begin to rejoice at the privilege of sharing in some small way in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings that we might also know the power of his resurrection, as "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon [us]" (4:13).

3. Don't be ashamed of suffering (4:15-16).

The so-called prosperity gospel is destroying lives and creating an expectation that Jesus suffered and died in order that we all might be healthy, wealthy and successful in this present age, as well as creating a sense of shame in those who suffer or are sick or impoverished. Peter, who along with the other apostles had suffered threats, imprisonments, beatings, and would soon suffer death by crucifixion, tells us that when we suffer as Christians we should not be ashamed but “glorify God in that name,” that is, we should give praise to God for the privilege of suffering as one who bears Christ's name. The word “Christian” means one who follows Jesus Christ. If you suffer as one who follows Jesus Christ, you should rejoice, for you are sharing in the sufferings of your Master.

Peter makes sure to distinguish suffering as a Christ-follower from suffering as a result of one's own sin. When we suffer for sin, God in his great mercy can use that suffering to bring us to our senses and to a deep repentance. He can use anything to bring us to himself. But what Peter has in view here is the kind of suffering that comes to us as we seek to follow Jesus and find ourselves deeply comforted and strengthened by the honor he gives us of sharing in his suffering. God uses this kind of suffering, not only to sanctify us, but to draw others to himself, as they see the difference between those on the one hand who either go to pieces or merely endure stoically, and those on the other hand who by grace rejoice in the midst of suffering because of the presence and comfort of the great lover of our souls.

4. Don't be deceived by suffering (4:17-19).

Don't be deceived into thinking that God has abandoned you because you think that Christians should never suffer. Christ has borne the judicial punishment for our sin, but that does not mean that God's people are never judged. God still begins with his own people, cleansing his own household, putting things in order, shaking us loose from everything that encumbers us and diverts us from our high calling. Judgment begins, Peter tells us, with the household of God.

Do we ask God, in times of difficulty, merely to get us out of trouble, or do we ask him to use pain and suffering to loosen the grip that this world's passing show too often has on us and to purify our hearts until we rest in him alone?

Conclusion

Finally, Peter says, we can trust God to work out his loving purposes in and through us in times of joy and in times of trouble, because he is our Creator who made us for loving intimacy with himself and who has promised to keep safe until the final day our eternal inheritance in Christ. “Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good (4:19).”

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