

Theme: Suffering is a Blessing

Their world had become a peer pressure cooker, and the pressure was on. The young faith of these Christians was being pressurized from all around by old friends and bad habits that died hard. You see, these new-to-the-faith Christians were not far removed from the day when they would go and join in all the fun—religious festivals turned into wild drinking frenzies that even deteriorated further into all kinds rampant sexual immorality. In their former lives, all this was done in the name of religion, a form of worship to their gods.

It really was worship, but not of any god that deserved to be worshipped. It was idolatry, the worship of false gods so despicable they could be honored with wild drunkenness and blatant immorality. Now, however, these Christians living in the 1st century had come to know a much different God and had walked away from their former lives with its old habits. But their friends and their family, the ones they were leaving behind, didn't get it. **“They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Peter 4:4).** They couldn't understand why suddenly their old friends had now become “too holy” to go out and have some fun like the old days. As a result, life for these young Christians became a peer pressure cooker set on high. They were faced with two options. 1) Give up, give in, and go back to sin, or 2) Stand firm and suffer for it, suffer on account of life in Christ.

What a bitter pill that is to swallow—suffering, and especially when it's for following God's will! But why did it have to be so difficult for them? Why so difficult for us? Jesus told us to expect this reality of suffering, that the world would hate us because it hated him first. But suffering is still a reality we hate and loathe in our bones! How it makes us doubt God's control over all things. How it makes us despair of his love for us. How it saps our strength until we think we can't endure it any longer. It sends our accusing finger up at God because we cannot fathom why he would allow his own to suffer! Why won't he just get rid of the wickedness and suffering brought about by wicked people?

If we think back to the parable of the wheat and the weeds in today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus indicated that the wheat and the weeds will grow together until the harvest, so that none of the wheat are uprooted. This decision is made for the ultimate good of the wheat, the righteous, even if it means they have to suffer to grow alongside the weeds until the harvest.

As we consider our text today from 1 Peter 4, we can understand Peter's words addressed **“to God's elect, strangers in the world”** as instruction and encouragement for how to live as wheat among weeds in this world. Peter's whole goal in writing to these 1st century Christians was to testify to the true grace of God and encourage them to stand fast in it, as if to say, **“Dear Christian, endure until the harvest.”** One of the main concerns he addresses throughout the letter is the problem those new Christians were facing, the problem of suffering, and particularly suffering on account of Christ.

Peter isn't just giving a nice pep-talk. “Keep on keeping on! You can do it.” He is writing to transform their whole perspective from viewing suffering as a terribly unfair problem to viewing it as a blessing in disguise. That's our theme for today. **Suffering is a blessing.**

If you don't believe that truth right this instant, I don't blame you, because I've struggled all week to believe it myself. How can suffering be a blessing when it brings so much pain and anguish? You have to be kidding me! That sounds like words coming from somebody who had never suffered anything. But that assumption could not be more false, because the One who

gives these words to Peter is the one who suffered everything! That's the first blessing of suffering. **1. It points us to the cross.**

Peter bases his whole point in these verses on this truth. **“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body...” (1 Peter 4:1).** That one little statement is jam-packed with truth. Christ the beloved Son of God faultlessly suffered the world's condemnation, the ultimate wrath of God, in his body on the accursed tree for you. As Peter says just a few verses earlier, **“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).** The God who created everything perfectly made suffering a part of his own existence and filled the life of his Son with it too. This suffering which was ended only by death produced the ultimate good for you.

And now when you share in a small piece of his suffering, it points you to the cross. It could be you there on the cross. It should be you there suffering far worse than whatever you happen to be suffering in the moment. But it's not, because the Righteous One suffered for you instead. Your suffering in this life is in no way proof that God doesn't love you, it's a reminder that he does love you because your suffering is temporary. For the Righteous One suffered to bring you to God and so he guaranteed that your suffering will not last beyond this life. **1.**

Suffering for Christ points us to the cross where Jesus suffered for our good.

Peter's encouragement is founded on this basic gospel truth. “Christ suffered” for you. He also uses that same truth to call us to action. **“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God” (1 Peter 4:2).** There we see a second blessing displayed by suffering: **2. Suffering like Christ shows us that we're done with sin and living for God.** There's maybe no better example of what Peter is saying than what is seen from looking at Peter's own life.

Here was a man with two radically different stages of life. Peter always had streak of boldness to him, but his brave heart would turn to mush at all the wrong times. There was the time Peter boldly confessed Jesus to be the Christ the Son of the Living God, and a short while later began to rebuke Jesus for talking about his impending suffering and death. Peter couldn't suffer the thought of Jesus suffering.

Then came the evening of the Last Supper. Peter boldly proclaimed that he was ready to go with Jesus to prison and death, **“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Matthew 26:35).** Later that evening, Peter was cutting off the ear of one of the men arresting Jesus because he wasn't ready to suffer. Later that evening Peter screamed and cursed and disowned Jesus three times before the rooster crowed just as Jesus had warned. The next day, Peter was nowhere to be found as Jesus suffered and died alone. Peter wasn't willing to suffer rather than sin, but he certainly suffered the anguish of his sin.

Then came the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus appeared to Peter to forgive him, restore him, and call him to follow once again. Jesus also gave him this prediction, **“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (John 21:19).**

From this time on, Peter began boldly proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and he began to suffer for it: threats from the religious leaders, prison, floggings. Yet Peter and the apostles **“rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the**

Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:41).

Peter was done with sin. That doesn't mean he was perfect, but he was now willing to suffer for Jesus rather than sin. He lived out the rest of his life not for his own human desires, but for the will of God. We see that most of all by Peter's suffering and death for the name of Christ. Tradition tells us that Jesus' prediction came true. Peter was led where he didn't want to go, stretched out and crucified upside down. He was ready to suffer for Jesus with the attitude of Jesus.

So Peter was uniquely qualified to encourage these dear Christians to endure the pressure, and how his words still apply to you, dear Christian, so many years later. **“You have spent enough time in the past, doing what the pagans chose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.”** Maybe we hear that list and think, “Wow, they were really terrible once upon a time.” Just because those are all big abstract words for sin, doesn't mean they don't apply to you and me. Desire plants the seed, a few drinks pave the way, and then a few more drinks throw caution to wind as the heart has free reign to worship its disgusting idol at the bottom of a bottle, at the end of a few secret clicks.

Peter pleads for them and us to withstand the temptation to go back to a life of sin and unbelief. God is ready to judge the living and the dead and the wicked will reap the wild oats they have sown. But the gospel has been preached so that even if we suffer and are condemned in this life by sinful human beings, we will live with God in bliss when he judges the world by his standards. **2. Suffering for Christ reveals that we are living for God and so it proves to be a blessing for us.**

There's one final way to look at suffering as a blessing for us. So allow me to use kind of a farfetched but powerful illustration from a writer named Matt Papa (*Look and Live*). “Imagine you were taken from your family and brought to a different planet. The atmosphere of this planet is different from earth. You're still able to breathe, but every breath is cold and painful. The people who kidnapped you leave you with two instructions. 1. There is a spaceship somewhere that will take you home, but you have to find it. And 2. It will only be a matter of time before your lungs collapse.

As you begin searching, you notice boils popping up on your skin, and every breath is more painful than the one before. Every breath reminds you that you must find the ship to get home or die. The suffering makes you constantly aware of your goal, the fact that you are not home, but you need to get the ship, back to your family, back to your home.

Now consider an alternate possibility. If you had been dropped off at an all-inclusive resort in the Bahamas with the same directions but not the slightest amount of discomfort, you might still want to get home eventually, but who really cares when! It's so nice there you take a nap, lounge by the pool, eat the buffet, enjoy all your hearts desires and sooner or later you forget about home altogether.

In terms of your ultimate goal, getting home, which place is better? The pleasure filled Bahamas or that terrible miserable planet where you are constantly aware that the end is near and you can't spend a single moment doing anything but getting home. The suffering is actually a benefit that puts you in the right frame of mind to get home.

So Peter reminds us, **“The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. (1 Peter 4:7).** Suffering is a blessing because it makes you alert. **3. It reminds you that you're not home yet,** but the harvest is coming soon. Endure until then

with self-control and prayer, thanking the Father for his preserving hand and pleading for his continued blessing.

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

Suffering has the tendency to turn us bitter while we wait. The world has certainly proven that lately, but suffering is also an opportunity to love each other while we are hurting, to understand each other while we are confused, to forgive each other when we sin. **Suffering gives an opportunity to love with the same long-suffering love of Jesus.** Peter was right. As hard as it is to believe, suffering is a blessing. Amen.

Dear friends, rejoice that you participate in the suffering of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. **(1 Peter 4:13).**