

“A Long-Suffering Love”

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1 Peter 4:1-11

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Pastor Paul

In 1991, I was accepted to Appalachian State University. After a lifetime of being sunburned, I thought that going to the mountains was going to be the end of sunburns as I knew it. I would never be sunburned again. Wrong. My first football game was a balmy 60° with a breeze in the air, and I got one of the worst sunburns of my life. From that moment on, I began avidly wearing hats, using sunscreen, and wearing long sleeves even when it is hot outside. I decided I was done suffering.

Suffering—Peter says in the fourth chapter of his first book, “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.” If you have decided to follow Jesus, you are embracing the path of suffering. Christ’s path led him to Golgotha. If they crucified him, what do you think they will do to you? There is a difference in the suffering a Christian partakes in. We don’t do anything in vain.

Paul said in Philippians 1:12 “Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.” This passage focuses on two things. First, what it means to die to sin and decide that you are going to suffer in a way that gives Christ glory. And second, that love shows itself in a visible, usable way.

Die to Sin—In Verse 1, we read “. . . because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. “The kind of attitude you must have against sin has got to be a militant attitude. He says “. . . because of what Christ has done, arm yourselves.” I can count on one hand the number of times people have told me to arm myself. Most of the time it has to do with paintball. But this whole idea of getting ready to go into battle, take a battle stance, and to arm yourself means to prepare prior to the battle. No one walks

into a tight spot or conflict (i.e. Iraq or Afghanistan) with nothing and then stops and says “Hang on. Let me go back and get my armament.” To arm yourself means to prepare prior to. Before sin—even before you have a chance to struggle with it—arm yourself against it. Take a militant, hateful attitude against sin.

Verse 2 says “As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” That does not mean that we will never sin again, though that is the goal. It means we are going to stop allowing sin to control our lives. This is backed up by how Peter fleshes this out in verse 4 when he says, “They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you.” They are surprised that sin doesn’t control your life anymore.

In the first part of verse 3, Peter brings in a second component into what sin does to us. He says, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do.” He brings in this idea of time—the idea that sin wastes time. It’s a little ironic that he says look back and see how much time you have wasted. Instead allow that to make you look at God’s will for your life instead of something that is stealing your joy or fun. Look at God’s will and realize you are supposed to enjoy God’s will. God’s will is there to bring you joy.

In verse 3 he talks about the sins of this former, wasted life “. . . living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” Christ can redeem those things but Peter is using this idea of time. He says there is sexual sin. The sin of giving ourselves over to someone other than the Lord or our spouse. Drunkenness is a desire to not participate in the reality of life that Christ has given us but instead to escape it and retreat somewhere else. Idolatry is placing our affections somewhere where they were never intended to be. But then Peter would say the reason you are not like that is because of what Christ did. You are now a child of God.

Verses 4 and 5 come together—they are surprised you do not join them. As a past life often comes with past friends just as a former life comes with former friends. I use that intentionally because one of the most sobering parts sometimes is when we come to Christ later in life. Our lives look like a complete U-turn. We turn from our sins. We think to ourselves that this will be great. Everyone will see it, and they will want to know.

Last week in 1 Peter 3:15 we read, “We will give them a good answer for the hope we have.” But that’s not always the case. It beautifully is sometimes, but quite often people see us and say “What’s wrong with you? Why are you such a stick in the mud now? Why are you a holy roller.” They are perplexed that sin doesn’t control your life anymore.

These verses (4-5) are absolutely juxtaposed to what happens in verse 6. Because in verses 4-5 Peter is reminding us “But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”

In verse 6, we sometimes think this has to do with Jesus coming and preaching to people and people being saved outside of death. That someone dies and this somehow reveals this idea of purgatory. This is not at all what this text is talking about. This text is saying that those who received Christ as savior in this life will meet him as savior in the next life. Those that received him *not* as savior in this life will receive him as judge in the next life. So it’s simply that even though those who receive Christ suffer the punishment of death and their bodies die, their spirits will live with him forever.

Near—Verse 7 brings us to this word near. “The end of all things is near.” When we use it we think it will happen right away. If it’s midnight on Christmas Eve, Santa is coming. It’s imminent. It’s going to happen, and it’s going to be any minute now. In the same way imminent is what is Peter is talking about in this text. Christ’s return is imminent. We know it will happen, we just don’t know when it’s going to happen but we should be ready as if it’s going to happen.

So anytime you see this idea of imminent, it’s also followed with what our attitude should be. We need to be sober minded and attentive to prayer. Now part of this is because it stems a frenzied lifestyle. We don’t know when Jesus will be back so let’s not do anything. We think we should just sit here and wait. We are going to analyze every piece of history through Scripture. We don’t do that. We actually look at Scripture first and allow scripture to dictate how you see everything else. Not have a frenzied attitude but a sober attitude.

Love—Verse 8 is the most misunderstood verse in this text. We read it and it says that love covers a multitude of sins. Typically, what we mean is that we can be as sinful as we want to as long as we are loving. Then that love will cover all of the sinful things we do and that makes everything okay. That is absolutely not what this verse is saying. Love is not condoning sin. Love is not accepting sin. Love is not saying sin is okay or making a way for sin. What this text is talking about is Peter’s take on Proverbs 10:12 “Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.” Christ’s love can cover even the most hardened sinner. Christ’s love covers us from our sins. It covers us from the wages of sin. The wages of sin are death but Christ’s gift through his grace on the cross is the free life we have. Christ covers us against the instigator of sin. We are not under the dominion or control of Satan any longer. He says “If you put on that love and love one another deeply” that same transformative love that comes through Christ is now mirrored and reflected through you, and the love of Christ covers a multitude of sins can change even the most hardened sinners heart.

Verse 9, 10, and 11 are a joint idea. Peter says love in Christ always reveals itself practically. Christ comes and demonstrates his love for us in this that He died on the

cross to show us. God has given us gifts so we can practically show the love of Christ to the world by teaching, preaching, showing hospitality, whatever you do, do it all to bring glory to Christ.

And so this whole idea of suffering and love come together in the 4th chapter and Amy will talk about what does it mean to suffer for the glory of Christ.

Pastor Amy

When we read this passage together as a staff earlier this week, Pastor Bob very wisely noted that there are a whole lot of possible sermons in these 11 verses. For my part, I saw several single verses that I think I could have made into an entire sermon. But as you've heard us say from our pulpits before, Scripture isn't designed to be dissected in a way that we just pull one verse out of context and consider it alone. Each chapter, each book, the whole canon exists together for a reason. And so we have this apparently broadly-focused 11 verses. If it felt a little scattered when Pastor Lori read it earlier, that's because there's a lot going on here. And, honestly, there's a lot we won't be able to cover in one sermon. But we'll do our best to hit the highlights.

This section of 1 Peter 4 is one of those rare parts of Scripture that makes the best sense to me if we read it backwards. There's a good reason for that. The biblical writers—much like the great writers of today—know that readers and hearers are impacted by a crescendo, as the writing builds to its climax. This passage models that approach. Where it ends is the most important part of what Peter is saying in this section. If you get nothing else out of worship today, I want you to really get verse 11—“. . . so that in all things, God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

That's it. In its simplest form, that is the task of every Christian. Above all else, in all things, live a life that brings glory and praise to God. Amen.

But what if we want to flesh that out a little more? I also think this text gives us some good evidence of *what* a life that brings glory and praise to God looks like, and *how* we can go about living it. First, let's deal with the “what,” and then we'll move on to the “how.”

What does it look like to live a life that brings glory and praise to God? That's a good question, and thankfully one that Peter addresses in this very passage. Remember, we're reading backwards here, so from verse 11, we only have to go back a short distance to verse 8 to find the answer. Peter stretches the answer out over three separate verses. “Love each other deeply” (v 8). “Offer hospitality” (v 9). “Use whatever gift you have received to serve others” (v 10).

We heard Wes talk earlier in the children's message about how gifts aren't made to be held onto—they're made to be given away. Whatever gifts you have, use them.

Whatever hospitality you have to offer, share it. Whatever love you have been given, freely give it to others. That's a really good summary of the "what" of the Christian life. Love God. Love others. Take whatever God has given you, remember that you're just a steward—not its source or permanent owner—and share those gifts with others. And by doing so, above all else, in all things, live a life that brings glory and praise to God.

Simple, right? Yes, and no. We are now right on the edge of diving deep into one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith—where things are at the same time incredibly simple and profoundly complex. We have come to the great big question of "how." *How* do we love, and give, and serve in a way that brings glory and praise to God?

As I read 1 Peter 4, I see the key that unlocks the whole passage tucked into verse 1. "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude . . ."

It's easy to skip over that line for a couple of reasons. First, most of us in this congregation have been in church for most of our lives. There are some exceptions (for whom we are incredibly thankful!), but a large majority of us have been learning about the Bible for decades. The story of Christ's suffering—the passion and crucifixion—are not new to us. In some ways, they're so familiar that they can become unremarkable. So on the one hand, we don't take Christ's suffering nearly as seriously as we should because time has desensitized us to it. On the other hand, it is deeply ingrained in the 21st century, middle- and upper-middle-class American ethos to avoid suffering at all costs. And if we can't avoid it, we do our best to mitigate it and shorten its duration. As a result, I'm willing to argue that by and large, we don't really understand suffering.

I realize that I'm about to completely lose some of you. You want to throw the remote at the TV or whip out your computer to send me an email about all the ways you've suffered. Hear me well—I'm sure you have endured suffering, I know a lot of you are suffering right now, but I don't think that the suffering 1 Peter is talking about is the *same* suffering that you and I most frequently talk about.

Last night, I did a quick search of my email boxes. I found a lot of "suffering" in it just in the past week or two. Someone is suffering from dementia. Someone is suffering from Covid-19. Someone is suffering homelessness. Someone is suffering with an addiction. Someone is suffering with loneliness. Someone is suffering from chronic pain. Someone is suffering from job loss. Someone is suffering from cancer.

Are those very real problems that have the potential to create tremendous physical and emotional and psychological pain for the people involved? Yes. Absolutely. Individuals, families, whole social networks can be rocked to their core by each one of those and so many other things. So if that's what you have in mind when you think of suffering, believe me, I am not trying to diminish or dismiss your pain or your struggles. They are yours. They are real. They matter. And I know they hurt.

But I don't believe they are the kinds of suffering that Peter is talking about.

“Therefore,” he begins, “since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude . . .” (1). The key to this passage is “attitude.” Peter does not say, “since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves for the same experience.” No. He says “attitude.” “Arm yourselves with the same “attitude.” What attitude?

Philippians 2 probably gives the best summary in the entire Bible and shines a helpful light on what we’re talking about today. “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:5-8)

Christ’s attitude toward suffering is *choosing it*. Think about those examples from my email search. Dementia. Covid-19. Homelessness. Addiction. Loneliness. Chronic pain. Job loss. Cancer. Nobody is *choosing* to suffer these things. They get at the experience of suffering, but they have nothing to do with an attitude of choosing suffering.

There are certainly God-honoring and Christ-like ways to endure the experience of suffering, but there’s nothing inherently Christian or God-glorifying about enduring experiences that are common to all of humanity. Christians and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and atheists all suffer from illness and pain and loss. The experience of suffering isn’t unique to us.

There is, however, something radically counter-cultural, and profoundly Christ-like about *choosing* suffering. Jesus, more than you or me or anyone else who has ever walked this earth, had power and privilege in overabundance. And he chose to give them up for the sake of people who could do absolutely nothing for him in return. He didn’t deny the existence of his power or privilege, but he also didn’t cling to them. He held them with open hands, and chose to sacrifice them for the benefit of those who could not through any amount of striving or effort “get the job done” on their own, and who could never repay him for his choice. It is the most ludicrous thing he ever could have done. And he did it. And he calls us to do the same.

Peter lays out a laundry list of sins that the pagans choose to do. The specifics of the list aren’t that important. The idea is that when armed with the attitude of Christ, we stop living in ways that mirror the world. We stop chasing after the momentary highs of what Peter calls “wild living” and we start chasing after opportunities to love each other deeply, offer hospitality, and use whatever gifts we have been given to serve others.

Our world does not need more people who can *endure* suffering, but it is in desperate need of those who will *choose* suffering. The list of sufferings that we can choose is almost endless.

You can choose to risk your social status or reputation by using whatever platform you have to speak out and take action for a cause you believe in—like racism or sexism or environmentalism or a whole host of other -isms. You can choose to risk your financial security by giving beyond what is easy to help those who are in need. You can choose to risk your physical comfort by going to uncomfortable and unfamiliar places to meet God’s people wherever they are—in the Hickory Soup Kitchen or in the slums of a foreign country. You can choose to risk your emotional comfort by investing your time and energy in a relationship with somebody who needs you, but has nothing to offer you in return.

The list goes on and on, but the point remains the same—you can choose to endure some suffering. No one is asking you to do what Jesus did and go to the cross. But I am suggesting that we all could spend a bit more time cultivating the kind of attitude that would make us willing to see the needs of those around us, take meaningful risks, and choose to suffer for something that matters.

I came across a great quote in a commentary this week. I loved it so much, I sent it to Pastor Paul and then I put it in your bulletins today. “There is more at stake than simply enduring suffering until God’s judgment rights the injustice. The Christian community provides new relationships that break apart the abusive hierarchy of power and the fellowship in passion-driven excess that its audience knew from bitter experience.” (Pheme Perkins)

Passive suffering that endures whatever comes and waits for God to fix it is not the kind of suffering Christ chose or called us to. Jesus saw hurt and jumped in head-first. He took on the pain and messiness of others. We have the same attitude as him when we take seriously the fact that we are part of the body of Christ. We pray for open eyes to see brokenness, we pray for the courage to join the rest of the body in its suffering, and we love deeply, offer hospitality, and share our gifts as we serve one another. Including—and especially—those who have nothing to offer us in exchange for our suffering. Amen.