

“Suffering Well for Doing Good”

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1 Peter 4:12-19

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Pastor Paul

I will start the sermon with the last verse of the text—“So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” Years ago we started a relationship with a village in Guatemala. I thought I should get a guitar to take with me, so we could include music in our ministry. I found one that was really nice but it didn’t come with a case. So the guy sold me a hard-shell case for \$15.

Every time I take a guitar on an airplane, I am a bit scared because they want to gate check it. They want me to put my guitar with the cargo of the plane. It’s cold under there, and that is not good for stringed instruments. On one of the last Guatemala trips, we flew through Miami. While in customs, we could see my guitar going down to the plane. They grabbed my guitar and hurled it up through the cargo door. I figured I would get that guitar back in 85 pieces but when I opened it up, everything was fine. My \$15 case worked.

As we think of this idea of going through trials – just like my guitar case went through trials – the very end of this text says God will never fail you. Peter comes back for the fifth time now in his epistle to talk about sufferings, trials, and tribulations. He wants us to know that we need to expect trials and tribulations. As a Christian, it’s part of the deal. If Jesus went through trials and tribulations, guess what? It says right here in verse 19, it’s God’s will for you to do the same. But he will never fail you. He will always be with you. It doesn’t mean it’s going to be fun. It doesn’t mean it won’t hurt. But God will never fail you. God’s glory is actually revealed when you faithfully persevere through trials and through his strength.

Verses 12-19 are talking about suffering and glory. Suffering is part of what it means to be a Christ-follower. In this text Peter will tell us not to be surprised when there is suffering. Don’t be ashamed when there is suffering. Don’t be confused when suffering comes along. You are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

Verse 12 says, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” He uses the words ‘fiery ordeal’. This is meant to evoke something visual of what fire would do and especially what it would do to metal. Fire would refine metal and purify it. The trials we go through are a simple pain for the unbeliever but refinement for the Christian.

Verse 13 says—in this very counter-American gospel—you ought to be glad when you go through trials. Peter is telling us that if God used suffering to bring glory to himself through Christ, you, as a Christian, are a partner with him in that. If you want joy, joy comes out of suffering. Passing through the fire is actually what brings joy. God will use the thing that brought you suffering to also bring you glory and joy later on. Here on Father’s Day, let’s use childbirth as a visual. That child is in the womb for 9 months. The same thing that causes the pain during childbirth brings joy and brings glory once the baby is delivered.

Verse 14 tells us to be happy when we are insulted for being a Christian. “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” The word here is Shekinah. The glory of God that is revealed blows people’s minds. What was revealed to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of the Transfiguration blew their minds. And it’s what attracts people to the Lord. They get to see his glory. It says, when you suffer and are insulted, it actually brings the glory of the Holy Spirit to you, and God is revealed to other people. We see this idea of partnering with God and the image of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are thrown into the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel, and as King Nebuchadnezzar looks down, he says there is one more in there who looks like the son of God. The Lord is partnering with them in their suffering.

In Verse 15, Peter says to the reader “If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.” Are you suffering because of things you have done that you ought not have done? Or are you suffering because of Jesus? When we read this text it’s easy to say “Nope, I’m not a murderer. I’m not a thief. I don’t steal or make trouble.” But when we get to the end of this verse, it asks if you are prying into the affairs of other people. Are you a meddler? Yes, maybe some of the suffering I incur in this life is because of the things I do not just because I am standing up for the Lord.

Verse 16 is where we really hear Peter’s heart. We have to remember Peter’s own testimony of being in the courtyard of the high priest on the night Jesus was betrayed. Three times people come up to him and ask, “Do you belong to him? Are you one of his?” And three times, Peter says he is not, and that he doesn’t even know who Jesus is. Peter’s own testimony is reflected in verse 16. Are you ashamed to be counted as one of Christ’s own? Or do you correctly see instead the incredible privilege that it is to be called Christ’s own.

God is so gracious that he saves anyone that confesses he is Lord and Savior. Romans 10:13, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” And he is super gracious in that he lets them have his name. 1 John 3:1 “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” The part you need to understand is that you may at some time in your life be ashamed of Christ but he is not ashamed of you. He lets you wear his

name. In this lifetime, I don't know too many people that Jesus has turned off to himself but many people who wear his name have turned people off to him.

I think about Meghan Markle marrying into the Royal Family. Everyone scrutinizes everything she does because now she is not just Meghan. She is under the weight of the Royal Family. We don't think about the weight that is on us—the privilege that we have to be called Christians. To bear Christ's literal name, Peter correctly says "Do you understand the divine privilege it is to be called a Christian?"

Verse 17 is a simple truth. Don't read more into it than is actually there. When Peter talks about the judgment that is going to start in the church with God's own people, the judgement the Christian goes under is called refinement. It's not meant to punish us. It's meant to refine us. Christ is refining his church that we, the bride of Christ, might be presented to him pure and holy. God is going to refine the church, purify the church, purify the Christian, to present him to himself at the end of the age without blemish. So the refinement we get is not punishment. We are actually joining with Christ in his suffering. Matthew 16:24 "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." That doesn't sound like he is inviting us to a day at the beach. He's saying in this life where I suffer, you will as well.

Verse 18 is Peter's interpretation of Proverbs 11:31 "If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner." Peter says the righteous are saved but have difficulty here. That we are saved was not an easy thing, and if you think it was easy, look at what happened on Friday to Christ on the cross. It was not easy but we were saved through the difficult work of Christ on the cross. And so we understand that the price of suffering is what bought us our freedom.

Verse 19 is the tough part. Bad things happen in this world. Bad things happen to Christians. Sometimes we don't want God to be on the hook. We think we've got to defend God. We think we have to make excuses for him. "I don't know that God was really on the throne when I was suffering." "I don't know if God was really watching when I was suffering."

This truth in verse 19 says that often it's God's will that we suffer. There is a greater purpose in it. If you ask a mother in those last moments of labor if this is God's will, she will answer emphatically 'no'. In the middle of any pain someone goes through, they hate it. It's hard for them. But Peter very truthfully says it's God's will for you to suffer. Just like Christ brought glory to God through his suffering, so also will you. The verb that is used here is 'to be continuously committed'. I am continuing to commit to you. I wake up every day and decide I am committed to the Lord because I have hope in Christ.

If you do not have faith in Christ, your present is based on what you have done in the past. A Christians present is defined by our future—by what is going to happen at Christ's glorious return, by our coming to him, by our knowing with definitive truth who we are and where we are going and who we live in.

Pastor Amy

If you were able to join us last week, you know that we were looking at the question of what it means to have the same attitude toward suffering as Christ. Christ's attitude toward suffering is choosing it. Jesus chose to give up everything - literally! - for the sake of people like you and me who have absolutely nothing to offer him in return. There is something radically counter-cultural and profoundly Christ-like that happens when we choose to suffer.

Today's passage picks up where we left off last week, helping us to understand how, after we choose to be Christ-like, we might suffer well. Twice in this passage, Peter gives us a "don't do this, but do this instead" framework. He first says, "do not be surprised... but rejoice" (12-13). And then later "do not be ashamed, but praise God" (16). We'll address them in order, to see Peter's answer to the question "What does it look like to suffer well?"

Don't be surprised. We know about surprises; surprise happens when the unexpected crashes into our normal way of being in the world. But suffering shouldn't fall in the category of surprise. Suffering happens to everyone throughout their lives. When we choose to be like Jesus, we choose to encounter extra suffering. Kind of like how we don't get to be surprised when Independence Day falls on July 4, or when summer turns into autumn, or babies become toddlers, or when the day starts in the morning, we don't get to be surprised when life in general (or the Christ-like life in particular) brings suffering. It's just the nature of living a life like Jesus.

Peter refers to "participating in the sufferings of Christ" (13). When you speak and act in ways that reflect what matters to Jesus, you join in his sufferings. I'd go a step further here, and draw a distinction between being a Christian and being Christ-like. That's because you and I are not likely to suffer for calling ourselves "Christians", though it's very likely that we may suffer for being Christ-like. This point is especially important to me, because I get regular updates from several Corinth-sponsored missionaries who live and work in places where they are likely to get kidnapped and tortured, lose their homes or jobs, get kicked out of the country, or even be killed for saying the name "Jesus" to the wrong person. In the foothills of western North Carolina in the year 2020, you are not going to be persecuted like that for identifying yourself as a Christian. Believe me. Around here, that's perhaps the least interesting and least unique thing about you. In this part of the world matters of faith – though they may be the source of some pretty ugly Facebook debates – aren't dangerous topics. So being called a Christian won't cause you to suffer around here, but acting like Jesus might. How? Here are just a few examples:

If you own a business and you want to treat your employees like Christ by offering better wages or more benefits, you shouldn't be surprised if your profits are less than their maximum potential. If you decide to take seriously the idea that God wants us to take care of the earth, you shouldn't be surprised if you need to spend some money or lose some comfort and convenience in order to have a less "disposable" lifestyle. If you read the Bible's directives to care for orphans and decide to take in a child by foster care or adoption, you shouldn't be surprised that your family's normal routines and rhythms get disrupted by the new addition. If

you start speaking out for people who cannot speak for themselves, you shouldn't be surprised if you are laughed at or viewed differently in your social circles.

Being like Christ brings some suffering. Don't be surprised by that!

Rejoice. Our response to suffering also brings with it some choices. In my house, we talk about choices pretty regularly. With the kids, it goes something like this "You don't get to choose how other people treat you, or if your feelings get hurt. That's outside of your control. But what can you control?" And usually, after a little bit of prompting, we come to "I can control me." This is true for adults too — we may not be in control of what our suffering looks like or how long it lasts or how deeply it hurts, but we can choose how we respond to it. And remember, the whole point of this passage is to tell us how to suffer well.

The first choice that Peter encourages us to make is to rejoice in our suffering. At first glance, it's a strange choice. It's certainly not one that comes naturally to me. I can sort of get there eventually with some effort, but I'm still working on that being my automatic response.

I guess I can't say for sure what Peter was thinking when he wrote the command, "rejoice!" But I can tell you what I hear when I read it. "Rejoice... so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (13). Peter is calling us to start celebrating now for the eternal celebration that comes with Christ's return, when the fullness of God's power and glory are revealed. It's not a claim that suffering doesn't hurt, or that our hurts don't matter; it's an acknowledgement that we are moving in the direction of God.

When we act like Jesus, we make the world look a little more like the world God imagines. In being like Christ, we show the world around us a glimpse of what God's eternal kingdom looks like. And doing that can be hard work and put us in some painful places. But we rejoice because by our words and our actions, we can point others to God. Rejoice is a physical response, not an emotion. You can feel hurt, but still rejoice. You can feel tired, and still rejoice. You can even be mad, and still rejoice. When we rejoice in suffering, we stop focusing on ourselves and what we feel, and shift our focus to God and what we know He's up to.

Don't be surprised when suffering comes. And since you know it's coming, get ready to rejoice in it. Like anything else, it just takes some practice. We won't get it right all the time -- I know this from a lot of experience of getting it wrong! -- but daily we have the opportunity to choose to rejoice no matter what happens around us.

Don't be ashamed. Next Peter gives us a short discourse on not suffering as a criminal. I think this goes back to the earlier part of this chapter. This isn't about suffering for doing wrong - if you're suffering because you committed a crime, this passage isn't directed at you. But, Peter says, "if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed."

In the ancient Greco-Roman world that Peter lived in, there was a lot of value placed on social honor and shame. And the tricky part was that it was a zero sum game. Everyone wanted to be honored, and the only way to get that honor was to cause someone else's shame

and “take” their honor. Quite honestly, some days when I watch the news or social media, I’m not sure we’ve changed all that much in 2000 years. We’re still a people jockeying for social status, respect, honor, influence, and power.

Our suffering can look foolish, because the way to suffer like Jesus suffered is to lay down a portion of our status or power for the sake of others. Our world still looks at that kind of sacrifice and asks “Why didn’t you give it all you had? Why weren’t you trying to win? Are you going to let them take advantage of you? What’s wrong with you?”

By worldly standards, there is nothing logical or beneficial about choosing to suffer like Jesus. There is nothing “good” about giving up the power and privilege that seems to be ours. And so, it would be easy to feel ashamed for doing something so foolish. But, God’s standards are different from the world’s, and so we need not feel ashamed.

Praise. Instead, Peter tells us, we ought to praise God that we are bearing his name - following in his path. Praise God for the chance to be different from the world around us. Praise God for open doors to answer the question “Why are you acting so differently?” Praise God because we know that no matter how deep or how long our suffering is, God is in control and God is good.

So, how do we suffer well? First, we’re not surprised that the suffering has happened, and we’re not ashamed of choosing to suffer like Christ. We rejoice and praise God through the suffering. And finally, we pay serious attention to verse 19. “So then,” Peter writes, “those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” Depending which translation of the Bible you read, it might look like there’s a trap door here. This verse can appear to say “because God has created and put a path of suffering in front of you, here’s how you should behave.” I don’t agree with the commentators or translators who lean in that direction. I side with those who read that first phrase to mean, “Those who suffer, [because they are living] according to God’s will.” Those - the ones who choose to suffer, to have the same attitude toward suffering as Christ - they “should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

At the end of the day, that’s it. Being Christ-like brings suffering. Don’t be surprised. Don’t be ashamed. Rather, lean in. Stay faithful to God. Continue to choose to be like Christ. Rejoice and praise God. It’s easy to get discouraged and derailed in the midst of suffering. Resist those urges, and keep leaning in. That’s how we suffer well for doing good. Amen.