

Glory in Suffering

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[0 : 00] At the cafe, we overheard a woman who was sitting next to us in brazen mockery of what we were saying, say to her boyfriend sitting across from her, Hey, so do you want to believe in Jesus too?

In a sarcastic tone. And it stung a little bit, but I mean, it's not a big deal. We just kind of brushed it aside. But that's kind of an example of maybe the small degree of hostility or persecution you might face as a believer in this country, in this part of the world.

But Christians throughout the world have encountered far severe persecution and suffering. You guys are probably aware of what happened last year. ISIS going through some of the Christian villages, marking Christian homes with the letter N in Arabic to mark that they're Nazarenes or followers of Jesus of Nazareth and systematically killing them.

And even that is not as extensive or even as horrific as the suffering that the recipients of Peter's letter that we just read would experience in a few years' time after having received this letter.

Because in 64 AD, the city of Rome suffered a really big fire. About three-fourths of the whole city was burned. And a lot of people had the theory, which has some empirical backing, that the emperor Nero himself burned down the city for his own entertainment.

[1 : 31] And because that rumor was spreading like wildfire, in order to find a scapegoat, Nero decided he's going to blame the Christians. Well, no one really likes these guys anyway.

They believe in a foreign god. They don't worship the gods that we used to traditionally worship. So it's the Christians that burned the city down. And Tacitus, a Roman historian, he's not a believer, writes about this in his account.

He says, Therefore, to stop the rumor that he has set Rome on fire, Emperor Nero falsely charged with guilt and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were generally hated for their enormities.

Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius. But the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out yet again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also.

In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport, for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to. And when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights.

[2 : 40] This is an unbelieving historian writing about the suffering of Christians, which is actually a wonderful historical confirmation of not only the historicity of Jesus Christ, but also of the suffering that Christians experienced.

And so suffering for a Christian really has characterized the church throughout its entire history. It's small, belittling, like we experience to even to martyr them.

There's a full range of it, but suffering and persecution has always characterized believers. And I think you would agree with me that it's never pleasant, right? Even if it's just a small thing, it's never pleasant.

Yet, in this passage, Peter teaches us that the glory of sharing in Christ's suffering enables us to rejoice even in our suffering. That the glory of sharing in Christ's suffering enables us to rejoice even in our suffering.

And he explains this, first, by telling us that Christian suffering is to be expected. And then secondly, by telling us that Christian suffering is glorious. And then thirdly, by telling us that Christian suffering is Christ-like.

[3 : 43] That it's expected, it's glorious, and that it is Christ-like. And if you look around, I mean, the world we live in, especially the secular worldview that people are steeped in, largely avoids suffering and thinks of suffering as meaningless and unnecessary.

So they invest a lot of money and time to try to avoid suffering at all costs, right? We plan for all kinds of contingencies, emergencies, insurance for everything. And so that we can ensure a healthy life and a wealthy family and very carefully, you know, select a group of friends, right?

And for, so people, because they are so adverse to suffering and try to avoid at all costs, when suffering overtakes them, people are often unprepared, right? And because they do not have a way to deal with suffering.

But Christians, this passage tells us, are not to think of suffering in the same way. Especially when it comes to suffering for being a Christian. When you suffer for being a Christian, Peter tells us in verse 12, look with me there, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you.

Let me just note here how Peter addresses us, addresses the church. He begins with Beloved, right? So this is the address, the exhortation, encouragement of a loving, kind of a fatherly figure, of a leader of a church.

[5 : 04] Which he's not speaking fatalistically, saying, oh no, suffering is inevitable, so just deal with it. No, he's saying, beloved, don't be surprised when a fiery trial comes upon you to test you. And you could think of it this way, about being surprised by suffering.

Because if you're blindsided by someone, let's say you're not, you're facing a different direction and someone tackles you or hates you from behind or from the side, and you're more likely to get injured, right?

Because you were unprepared, you couldn't brace yourself, or you couldn't fall properly, right? And that's exactly the reason why Michael Lewis writes in his book, *The Blind Side*, you guys have probably heard of it, about football, that the left tackle, which is an offensive lineman in football, in the game of American football, is one of the highest-paced positions, even though no one really knows about it, but because they protect the quarterback on their blind side, on the left side, usually because they're tossing, throwing the ball with their right hand.

And so in a similar way, when we're blindsided, we're unprepared, and that could lead to shock and greater injury. In the same way, Peter doesn't want us to be blindsided by suffering, right?

So he tells us, do not be surprised at the fire trial when it comes. He wants to prepare us so that we're not blindsided when suffering, which is to be expected, comes to us. And why is it to be expected?

[6 : 19] It's because these fire trials come upon us to test us. God's testing us, God's refining us. It's because we're pottery in the fire, right? Being finished by a great potter, our faithful potter.

That's why this fire trial is to be expected, right? It's because we're gold being refined in the fire. That's why this trial is to be expected, right? And if you're a, I mean, we're right next to Kendall Square.

A lot of startups here, people doing software work. And if you're a software developer and you release a beta version, right, then you're not disheartened or surprised by it when you discover that the beta version has a lot of bugs that you have to work out, right?

Because that's exactly what's supposed to happen in the beta version. You're testing it to make sure that those things are, so that you can find them, get feedback, and work them out, right? So that's exactly what you're supposed to do in a beta version.

And that's exactly the same for us because this life is not all there is. Really, this life here is preparation, right, for the life to come. This is the foretaste of the greater glory to come, right?

[7 : 30] And so we're in the fire. We're supposed to expect trials. They're going to come. They're going to test us. They're going to refine us. So we should not be surprised when they come to us.

I mean, I have to qualify it a little bit because we're living in a different context than Peter is, right? So in Peter's time, people, if you live as an honest Christian, if you try to follow God, then you're guaranteed to find opposition, right, and meet persecution.

We live in the U.S. and in the Western civilization that's been steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition for years, for centuries, really. And because of that, there's a lot of shared values still, right, to this day.

And so we don't encounter the same kind of opposition. But we are in a time when increasingly U.S. is described as post-Christian, and New England is at the forefront of that.

And for that reason, we will encounter more and more of that, you know, sifting of clash of values and clash of, and we might be vilified and slandered as a result when we try to follow Christ.

[8 : 41] So this is just as relevant for us, and I'm sure. And even in this context, a lot of people do leave the faith because of peer pressure or societal pressure. I mean, a lot of college students, for example, when they go for the first time and they have independence, and a lot of their peers are not Christians following God, they abandon the faith when they go to college.

So we see that. But Peter tells us, he prepares us. Christian suffering is expected. It's not, we should not be surprised. Now, knowing that it's expected is helpful because it helps us to cope when we encounter suffering.

But I don't think it quite teaches us how to rejoice in the midst of suffering. Right? And yeah, you expect it, but it's still not pleasant. So how am I supposed to rejoice in suffering?

But Peter tells us, nonetheless, in verse 13, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings. So the reason why we cannot, we do not merely endure suffering, but we're able, we're enabled to rejoice in suffering, is because the suffering is also glorious.

Right? Christian suffering is glorious. And that's what he means that the rest of verse 13, he says, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

[10 : 02] Right. This doesn't mean that we rejoice in the suffering in and of itself. So we don't, you know, when we're having a hard time, we're going through suffering, we don't airbrush it and say, you know what, that really painful thing is actually very pleasant.

I enjoy it. You know, or this really difficult trial in my life, you know, it's actually, really, it's good. It's good. I like it. You know, I mean, no, that's not what we're meant to do. We don't put on a face as Christians.

That's not what he's calling us to. Rather, we're not rejoicing in suffering in and of itself, but we rejoice in what the suffering points to. And the suffering points to the truth that our vindication and our glory is near.

Right? We will ultimately, as God's followers, be vindicated and be sharing God's glory if we're suffering and sharing Christ's suffering in this age. Right? So then suffering as a Christian, then it's not a cause for shame.

He tells us it's actually, should be considered glorious. It's not a curse. It's not a sign of God's curse. Rather, it says in verse 14, it's a sign of God's blessing because you are blessed. Right?

[11 : 04] Suffering for being a Christian is not a reason to despair or become bitter, but rather it says in verse 13, it's a cause to rejoice, to have joy. Right? And this is a helpful teaching because I've seen this in so many people's lives.

I see this in my life as well. It's that, you know, when life is going smoothly, it's very easy to be beaming with confidence and optimism. You know, everything's going to work out.

You know, I'm going to be fine. It's God's good. I mean, He's faithful. It's easy to say that when life is going well. But as soon as things start to go south, right, and that life is hard and there's suffering and trial, then we start to ask, what did I do wrong?

Did I just mess up something? Did I have something of God's plan? Did I, it's why are all these bad things happening? Does God really care? Right? In a similar way, like if we suffer for being a Christian, people who once were full of faith could all of a sudden be plagued with doubts.

Well, why do all of these, so many people around me don't believe this if this is really true? Maybe Christianity really is as nonsensical or offensive as people say it is.

[12 : 20] Right? Maybe God's not real. Right? But in those times, right, Peter wants to reassure us, do not be surprised by suffering.

Rather, rejoice because when you suffer as a believer for being a Christian, that's not a sign of God's abandonment. Rather, it's a sign of God's abiding presence.

And that means that you will, in the end, be vindicated and share in God's glory because you are sharing in the suffering of Christ. And that's why he says in verses 17 to 18, 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? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?

Now, this is teaching us about God's ultimate judgment. Right? And we often speak as Christians that, oh, as Christians, we are no longer under God's judgment.

[13 : 23] And that's a true statement. And by that, we mean that we're no longer under God's condemnation. Right? Because of what Christ has done for us. But we're still all going to be judged by God.

Right? In the end, the sheep and the goats, if you look at the scene in Matthew of God's final judgment, they're both judged, the sheep and the goats. The God's people and the people who are not God's people will all be judged.

But the fact that we're not under God's condemnation means that we're safeguarded from the just punishment that we deserve as sinners. So we are no longer going to, we're no longer subject to that punishment because Christ bore that punishment for us.

And this is, and Peter kind of goes on a little bit of the side. It says, but don't suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or a meddler. Right? So he's making sure that we understand that the suffering, that's a sign of our ultimate vindication and glory, is not the suffering for doing evil things.

Right? I mean, you may suffer for doing evil things. Like if you murder or if you steal, if you meddle in people's lives in an unhealthy way, that you might suffer as a result of that, but that's not the suffering that points to God's glory.

[14 : 33] Because that's deserved suffering. Peter's talking about undeserved suffering. When you suffer undeservedly because of your faith in Christ, then that's a sign of God's ultimate glory.

And what does Peter mean by that? You know, that God's judging, that this is God's judgment, that it's beginning with the household of God. That's the people of God.

Right? It's beginning with the family of God. So this is why I don't, we talked last week about the fact that we are living in the end times. Right? Because Christ ushered in the end times.

So since the death and resurrection of Christ, we have all been living in the end times. Right? And we're at the final stage of God's redemptive plan, salvation plan. And that's what it means to be, we're in the end times.

So because we're in that end times, the judgment that which is going to happen at that final stage of God's salvation is already happening in a way. Peter's saying.

[15 : 31] And this is how it's already happening. It's that God's separating out people who are his and people who are not his. And the mode of that separation, the measuring line, the plumb line of God's judgment is Christian suffering.

It's suffering for being a Christian. So when you suffer as Christians, when you are persecuted for your faith in Christ and for your allegiance to him over everything else, that itself is a sign that you have, that God's judgment has begun.

And he's saying that you are my people. This is God. This is my people because they're undergoing suffering. So ironically, when hostile unbelievers oppose Christians and persecute Christians, they're unwittingly declaring judgment upon themselves and saying, no, these are God's people.

Right? And that God's judgment has already begun. That separating process, distinguishing process has already begun here and now in the suffering that we endure for Christ's sake. And if you're not a believer here with us, or you may be listening to this sermon elsewhere, you undoubtedly find this idea of judgment and punishment for unbelievers unpalatable, to say the least, maybe even horrific.

If you think about it, the concept of God's eternal judgment is not a pleasant one. It's not in at least two Western sensibilities. We like a God of love, right, and not a God of judgment.

[16 : 51] But I would like to submit to you that we all, in fact, believe in judgment. In fact, we as people who live under the rule of law as citizens or residents of the United States of America, and we submit to the judgment of the court of law every single day.

Day in and day out, the court's passing judgment, and we submit to that. And when we think of judgment, we can't merely punish, and punishment, we can't merely think of the fact that, well, punishment is intended to deter future offenses, and it's supposed to rehabilitate offenders.

Yeah, it does do those things. But punishment, I think actually the primary purpose of punishment is to affirm the value, the dignity, and worth of the person who has been victimized.

In making the offender, the perpetrator of injustice suffer, you're affirming the value and dignity of the person who was made to suffer. So that's justice.

And so to illustrate this, just a few months ago, a college student from California raped a 22-year-old woman who was unconscious after getting drunk.

- [17 : 59] And you guys have probably seen the viral letter that she wrote to her rapist and read at his sentencing.
- And the sentence that he got for raping this woman who was unconscious was six months in jail. Six months, not years. And a lot of people protested across the country.
- They read the letter and submitted, you know, just bewailing the fact that that was unjust. It was too lenient. This person ruined this woman's life in a way, right?
- And raped her. But the reason that the judge cited for the lenient sentence was that this would have a severe impact on the young man. And to have a longer sentence.
- And the woman protested in her letter, well, his assault has had a severe impact on me, right? And why are you then being so lenient and saying a six-month sentence?
- [19 : 04] I mean, it's really kind of unprecedented. It's usually, you get, it's a far heavier sentence. And so people are all up in arms about it, all across the nation, saying that is unjust. That person should suffer for what he did.
- More than that. The punishment did not fit the crime. It should be commensurate with the crime. But in that case, it did not fit the crime. And why are people all up in arms about this, right?
- It's not because people are masochistic and they just want to ruin a young man's life and want to see him suffer. I don't think that's why people are up in arms about it. They're up in arms about it because they feel that this woman was wronged.
- That her value and her dignity was not affirmed in that judgment, right? And that's why they're up in arms about it, right? And that's exactly, I think, the reason why God must judge.
- God must mete out punishment, right? In the same way because, I mean, just a small analogy. I just killed a fly this afternoon in the kitchen because it was bothering Hannah, right?
- [20 : 04] None of you guys are going to protest and give me a hard time about it. Say, I can't believe you killed a fly, right? I mean, no one's going to sue me for that. But imagine if, let's say, Taylor had a dog and he doesn't.
- But let's imagine he had a dog and he was really abusive to his dog, right? That actually could be, is a misdemeanor according to the law. So he could be charged \$1,000 and he could actually spend up to a year in jail, right?
- Because that's a little more serious than killing a fly, right? Squatting a fly. But imagine someone harmed a person, right? A husband was abusive to his wife, domestic abuse, right?
- That now, right, can be, is a felony, right? And in some states they could spend up to a lifetime in prison. Now why do these punishments differ, right? It's because of the value and dignity of the person that was inflicted, that the suffering was inflicted upon, right?
- The dog is more valuable than the fly and the person is more valuable than the dog, right? In the same way, God is of infinite value. He's eternally holy and he has done only good to us and has been benevolent toward us and gracious to us.
- [21 : 15] Yet we have offended him. We have sinned against him and wronged him. And the only punishment that is commensurate with the crime is eternal punishment, is eternal judgment.
- So it is not unfair that God inflicts judgment. It's right. It affirms his worth, his dignity, and his glory. And that's why judgment, the Christians never have, you know, airbrushed judgment.

We do not try to, you know, put it under the rug and not talk about it. We talk about God's judgment because we believe that it affirms God's glory. Something that we're called to, something that we're committed to, right? So punishment is inescapable.

If you have sinned against God, and all of us have, every single person in this room and in this world has sinned against this holy God and deserve eternal punishment. And there's only one way in which God has made a way for our justification.

So we can be declared innocent. So that we can be vindicated. And that brings me to my final point. It's that Christian suffering is Christ-like. Christian suffering is expected.

[22 : 19] And Christian suffering is glorious. And Christian suffering is Christ-like. Verse 14 says, If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.

Because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. This phrase, the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you, is an allusion to Isaiah 11, verse 2.

Which says, The spirit of the Lord will rest on him. And the him that Isaiah is talking about is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, right? So then in alluding to Isaiah 11, 2, Peter's making a deliberate connection between Christ and his people.

In the same way that Christ suffered, right? And when he suffered, the spirit of God rested on him. And when we suffer for Christ's sake, the spirit of God, the same spirit of God rests on us.

And verse 19 says, The believers who suffer according to God's will, they are to entrust their souls to a faithful creator. This again is following in the footsteps of what Christ has done.

[23 : 23] In chapter 2, verse 23, it says, When Christ suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. That's what Christ did.

Christ suffered. He did not deserve to suffer. He was the one man who ever lived that did not deserve to suffer, was never sinned against God, yet he suffered. And why did he suffer?

Peter told us in chapter 3, verse 18. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

The righteous one suffered for the unrighteous, right? Christ bore the punishment that we deserve, and because of that, we are able to be declared innocent, justified.

And because we are justified in Christ, that's what assures us when we share in Christ's suffering that we are his people, and that in the end, we will be vindicated, and we will share in God's glory.

[24 : 21] Friends, I hope you understand the import of this. This is the same gospel I preach every week. If you guys have been here since the beginning of our services, you've heard it every week.

But this is the gospel that Paul said, Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. It's the only gospel that can save us. It's the only gospel that can transform us. And until it sinks in, the penny drops, your life will not change.

And if you're not a believer, I want to enjoy you. Repent of your sins. And believe in the fact that Christ died and rose again for your sins.

And that's the one and only way which you can be reconciled to God and come to him. And if you are a believer, then I want to encourage you that when you suffer, when you're sharing in Christ's suffering, and when you suffer for being a Christian, that's a sign that we are part of God's people, that God's judgment has begun, and we're on the right side of God's judgment that we belong to him.

That's why we share in Christ's suffering here and now. And that, beloved brothers and sisters, is what enables us to rejoice in our suffering, as Peter is teaching us.

[25 : 39] We began talking about Nero and persecution that they endured, and according to the tradition passed on by the church history, Apostle Peter, the author of this letter, was himself crucified in Rome under the Emperor Nero.

And the story has it that he was crucified upside down, at his own request, because he said, he insisted that he is not worthy to be killed in the same manner of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

He lived what he's preaching here. He understood that suffering, we're sharing Christ's suffering, that he needs something to rejoice in, because we get shared in the glory that's in the end waiting for him.

And that's what enabled him to suffer in that way. So in the same way, I pray that we would be able to do the same as believers, to suffer for being a Christian. B