*Living For God*

1 Peter 4:1-6

3/26/23

Our text last week turned our attention to Jesus’ ministry as Savior for the fifth time in the letter. As we have noted throughout the study, these truths should sustain us in suffering and motivate obedience. In teaching us this Peter is echoing a major theme in Bible. Salvation is not a business transaction where we pray a prayer, write a date in our bibles, and then return to our former way of life. It is conversion. It is a new birth where we pass from spiritual death into spiritual life. This new life transforms our behavior. Believing in Christ causes us to turn from our former way of life to follow Him because we love Him. Loving Him means we keep His commandments. This is the basis for every command Peter gives in this letter.

Nearly every paragraph in 1 Peter is built around a command. The command today is that we *arm ourselves for the purpose of suffering.* In Peter’s mind, this is the logical response to Jesus’ suffering. He makes this connection by using the word *therefore*. Christ died for sin once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God. *Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh,* we are to do the same. We are to imitate Christ’s suffering on our behalf when we suffer in the world.

To do this well, we must remember some of the basic elements of Christ’s suffering. First, His suffering was unjust. Crucifixion remains one of the cruelest forms of execution ever devised by man. Jesus experienced it unjustly because of false accusations and corrupt rulers. Second, although His suffering was intense, it was also temporal. He died to pay the penalty for sin once for all. He rose from the dead, never to die again. Finally, His suffering accomplished the will of God. Jesus was willing to endure the temporal horrors of the cross so that He could accomplish the eternal will of God. Jesus said *this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I lose nothing but raise it up on the last day* (Jn. 6:39)*.* God’s will was our salvation through the suffering of Christ, resulting in our eternal good.

Since Jesus suffered in the flesh for God’s glory and our eternal good, we also should be prepared to suffer in the flesh for God’s glory and the eternal good of others. Peter’s readers were also suffering unjustly. Yet, their suffering would be temporary, for suffering only touches believers this side of eternity. When we go into His presence, there will be no more sin, pain, or sorrow. Therefore, we should be willing to endure it now if it advances the purposes of His kingdom or points people to Christ the Savior. Historically, the church grows the fastest when it is suffering for their faithfulness to Christ.

Suffering well does not happen by chance. We must prepare for it, hence the command to arm ourselves for this purpose. The word translated *arm* was often used by the military to describe two kinds of preparation. First, it described the harnessing of horses to a chariot, preparing them for battle. Second, it described a soldier’s training. Soldiers must be taught how to use their weapons for attack and armor for defense. They are drilled and taught to follow orders. They learn strategy and anything else that might equip them for battle. This word points to the process of preparation for conflict.

Believers are to prepare themselves to imitate Christ’s suffering. Christ shows us what this preparation should look like. He armed Himself for the suffering of the cross through three hours of intense prayer in Gethsemane. If He, the perfect One who only ever did the Father’s will, needed this preparation, how much more do we need to arm ourselves for the spiritual conflict we daily engaged in? Preparation comes in three ways. 1) through a growing knowledge of God in His word; 2) through prayer; and 3) through doing the things that God commands. As good soldiers for Christ, we need to gain the knowledge of God’s word, learn the art of prayer, and establish the discipline of obedience before suffering comes if we want to endure it in a way that honors God.

The principle of this text is that, since Christ suffered for our sake, we need to prepare ourselves to suffer for His name’s sake. We do this knowing that, in the same way the suffering of Christ accomplished the Father’s will for us, God will use our suffering for His glory, our good, and the salvation of others. God uses suffering to carry His good designs for us forward in two ways. First, He uses it to bring victory in our battle against sin; second, He uses suffering to focus us on doing His will. We see these principles identified in vs. 1 & 2. Then vs. 3-5 expands on God’s purpose for suffering in relation to sin, while vs. 6 expands how suffering advances His gospel purposes.

Preparing ourselves to imitate Christ’s suffering helps in our battle against sin. Vs. 1 says that the one who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. Now, does Peter mean that through the right formula of suffering matched with appropriate responses to it, that we can achieve sinlessness, if not permanently, at least for long periods of time? John Wesley and some of his theological descendants taught that Christians can achieve sinless perfection in this life. Is this the best understanding for this statement?

I would say no, for two reasons. 1) vs. 3 indicates that, although the believer is to leave off sinning, it is still possible for them to engage in it; and 2) many passages in the Bible, most prominently Ro. 7, make it clear that believers will struggle with sin until the day they die. Salvation gives us a new nature in Christ that desires to live for Him, yet it is housed in a body of flesh that is still corrupted by sin. There is a daily battle we each must engage in to *kill the flesh with its evil desires* and to *walk by the Spirit.* Peter is not arguing for the absolute ceasing of all sin for those who suffer for Christ.

What he means is that the believer’s relationship with sin has substantially changed. Salvation breaks the power of sin. Before we are saved, we are slaves of sin and captives of Satan, bound to do his will. Yet Christ *breaks the power of canceled sin and sets the prison free.* Although sin remains a powerful foe, we are not longer enslaved to it. Now we are under the mastery of Christ, which changes our disposition towards sin. We used to love our sin and joyfully pursue it; but salvation changes that. Instead of loving it, we learn to see it as the spiritual treason against our loving God that it is. We seek to irradicate it from our lives.

Peter’s comments around ceasing from sin points to these realities, which drive our spiritual growth. Suffering has a purging, refining, and accelerating effect on the process. Those who have set their minds and hearts on serving Christ no matter what the consequence, will take seriously their battle with sin. Suffering for Christ will only steel their resolve and strengthen their ability to remain faithful. A soldier with battle experience is better in a conflict than a soldier just graduated from boot camp. It is not to say the new soldier is not effective; but we all recognize that experience increases our effectiveness. Suffering helps us become more accurate reflections of Christ to the world.

Vs. 3-5 carry this theme of suffering and sin forward. In vs. 3, Peter argues that the believer’s experience with sin before salvation was sufficient. *The time already past was sufficient for you to have carried out the desires of the Gentiles.* Gentiles here are representative of the world. When we were numbered among the sinners, we had ample time to pursue sin. But once we understand the horror of sin, its eternal death-inflicting consequences, and the agony Jesus endured to deal with it for us, we should want to be done with it.

Peter says that when they were engaged in their former manner of life, they pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. I am not going to define each of these sins. Three of them speak to forms of sexual immorality, while two of the speak to the misuse of alcohol. Idolatry applies to anything that rivals our affections for God. Sexual promiscuity and substance abuse are not new issues to our day. They are long-standing snares for humanity that remain sinful draws for God’s people.

Peter is saying that you have had enough time to pursue these vices. Therefore, you should be fleeing them. We need to have a healthy hatred for sin. We often approach sin with the attitude of *I wish I could do that, but I guess I better not.* There are Christians who wish they could party, wish they could sleep around, wish they could be like the world, but because God is a spoil-sport, they hold back. And many do not hold back. It alarms me how many Christians are flirting with alcohol. No, the bible does not say that for alcohol to touch your lips is a sin; but it does say that the very moment it exercises influence over you, it has become sin. And many Christians struggle with sexual immorality, even harboring or pursuing it. Yet any thought or action that provides the slightest hint of sexual satisfaction outside the God-ordained institution of marriage between one man and one woman is sin. Jesus died the excruciating death of the cross to pay the eternal consequence for getting a buzz at a wedding or the lingering lustful look. Peter says we have had sufficient time to engage in such behavior. It is time to reflect the holiness of God, not the wickedness of the world.

The pursuit of holiness will not make sense to the world. Vs. 4 says they are surprised when we do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation. Because they are slaves to sin who constantly seek self-gratification through momentary pleasures, they simply cannot understand why we would not join them in their dissipation. Holiness makes no sense to them.

Holiness does two things in the world: 1) it reveals the beauty and power of the gospel. 2) it exposes the wickedness of sin. This will always garner a response. It is either the fragrant aroma of Christ to those who are being saved, or the stench of death to those who are perishing. When our holiness reveals people’s wickedness, their response is to malign us as if we are the evil doers. This is the reason for persecution. When believers refuse to conform to the world’s mold, the world will try to force them into it anyway.

Yet the world’s excessive pursuit of sin does not escape God’s notice. They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (vs. 5). Every person ever conceived in the womb of a woman will give an account of Himself to God. That knowledge should drive the sinner to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ; and it should drive the repentant sinner to flee their former sins as an expression of love to God for giving so great a salvation. Suffering should fortify that pursuit.

Finally, let us deal briefly with the second way God uses suffering for our good. Vs. 2 says that we should want to spend the remainder of our time on earth living, not for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. Yes, suffering can have a positive impact on our struggle against sin. But the believer has a higher goal than not sinning. Ultimately, our goal is to live for God.

What is God’s will for His people? 1 Thess. 4:3 says that God’s will for you is your sanctification. John 15 teaches us that God wants us to abide in Christ, that we might bear much fruit for His glory and the advance of His kingdom. Micah 6:8 tells us that God’s desire is that we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him. God’s will for His people is that they enjoy an abiding relationship with Him through their faith union with Christ. That union causes them to lay aside sin and seek to serve Him. Salvation is so much more than escaping sin. It is about living the life God intended for us to live. Sustained, meaningful victory over sin happens when our focus shifts away from the *don’t do that* of sin to *do this because God’s glory is your highest pleasure.* Christians are not morally chaste because they feel compelled to do so by the moral strictures of God. They are moral because they see the inherent goodness of it and desire that goodness for themselves. We live for God’s pleasure and the glory of His great name.

Vs. 6 advances this theme by directing our attention to our evangelistic efforts. The gospel is preached to those who are dead for this purpose: although their acceptance of it might bring them under the harsh condemnation of their fellow man, they will gain life in their souls through faith in Jesus Christ. We preach the gospel to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins in the hopes that God, who is rich in mercy and great in love, might make them alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5). Yes, many will reject our preaching; but some will see how God has broken the hold sin has on us; they will see the way Christ is shaping our lives; they will see our joy, hear the reason for our hope, and turn to Christ for salvation. If Jesus was willing to suffer the horrors of calvary for our salvation, we also ought to be willing to suffer for the will of God, that others might gain the salvation we have found.

We will continue to think about what it means to live for the will of God next week. Let me close with a simple question: *Are we intentionally preparing ourselves for Christ’s service by abandoning sin and seeking to live for God’s will?* May we be those who lay aside sin and every hindrance so that we might run with endurance the race God has set before us. May we do so with our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, who despised the shame, endured the cross, and has now sat down at the right hand of the Father ever to live and make intersession for us. To Him alone be the glory.

*May the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! – 2 Thessalonians 3:16*