*Suffering*

1 Peter 4:12-19

4/23/23

This morning we will tackle the subject of suffering. This theme runs through the entire letter because Peter’s original readers were experiencing persecution. The letter focuses on living faithfully for Christ despite persecution and opposition. Our text is the climax to this discussion.

Christians need a robust theology of suffering. It is something we all face in life; yet sadly, many Christians have not thought this issue through well. The challenge is compounded by false teaching. The prosperity gospel, which permeates much of North American Christianity, teaches that if you are giving like you should be giving, acting like you should be acting, and exercising sufficient faith, then you will be blessed with health, wealth, and comfort. When this is our theology, we automatically think that suffering is either God failing to provide the abundance I have earned (His promises have failed), or God is dealing out retribution for some failure in my life (I have failed to keep the formula). Such thinking reflects the faulty theology of Job’s friends, not the Bible’s teaching on suffering. God regularly uses suffering as a tool for His glory, our good, and the advance of His purposes. We need to expand our understanding of it to include more than punishment for sin. Some suffering is a blessing and cause for rejoicing.

Now, our goal today is not to develop a full-orbed theology of suffering. We don’t have enough time for that. If this is a topic you would like to pursue further, I highly recommend D.A. Carson’s book *How Long O Lord?* It handles this subject biblically and pastorally well.Our goal today is simply to understand the place this paragraph has in the flow of 1 Peter. I will make four straightforward observations about the text.

First, we need to think biblically about suffering. It is at this point that we must remind ourselves that Peter is talking about persecution. When 1 Peter was written, the full-fledged, systematic attack of Christians by Rome was still a year or two away. The persecution Peter addressed was local opposition. Yet that does not remove the hardness of it. In vs. 12 it is described as a fiery ordeal. Slaves could be taken from their families, sold, abused, or even sent to the gladiator ring for their faith. Freed men were subject to fines, jail, and other hardships. These things were early tremors of the suffering that was about to engulf the church. God, in His kindness, had Peter write this letter to teach the church how to be faithful in the ‘fiery ordeal’ of persecution.

The text opens by saying suffering is to be expected. *Do not be surprised by the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.* These trials tested their faith. What was happening to the early church was not strange. In the same way the world sought to eliminate Christ for the way His holiness revealed their sinfulness, it will seek to eliminate Christ’s witnesses for the way their message and lives do the same. This is why the leaders of the moral revolution today try to brand Christians as oppressive. Anyone who dares to speak truth into the confusion is shouted down as a bigot. We ought not be surprised by this. It simply provides an opportunity for our faith to be tested.

Instead of being surprised by persecution, we should rejoice in it. This is where our theology is counter-intuitive to worldly minds. Our culture views suffering in all forms as bad and to be avoided. Yet vs. 13 says that persecution is a cause for rejoicing because it is participating in the suffering of Christ. Our union with Christ in salvation means that we enter, not only into His life, but also into the fellowship of His suffering. This does not mean our suffering plays a part in accomplishing salvation. Jesus walked that road of suffering alone, for only He was able to pay that price. The suffering we participate in is the opposition He experienced from those who resisted His message and attacked His character.

To the degree that we share in this suffering, we are to rejoice so that also at the revelation of His glory, we may rejoice with exultation. The more we suffer for Christ, the more cause we have for rejoicing! We rejoice for two reasons. We rejoice because God deems us worthy to suffer for the glory of His great name. That rejoicing will give way to a greater rejoicing in heaven when we are vindicated before our enemies, rewarded for our faithfulness, and enter the fullness of Christ’s glory. When we consider how much Christ suffered so we could be reconciled to God, we should consider it a small sacrifice yet a great privilege to suffer for His name’s sake, that His glory might be made known to the world around us.

For this reason, we should see suffering as a blessing. Vs. 14 says *If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed.* Why? *Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* The blessing of suffering is two-fold. First, God ministers His grace to us in ways we would not other-wise know. Many of you who have known seasons of suffering can attest to this. God’s presence becomes real, and His strength and comfort are felt in ways not known outside of suffering. Charles Spurgeon once commented after a particularly hard season of suffering that, although he would never choose to return to that season, he would also never give it up either because of the graces he received in it. He saw it as a blessing from God. We should view our suffering in the same way.

The second thing that happens when we suffer for the sake of Christ’s name, is that it bears witness to our faith. Suffering is a test. When we endure it well, our faith is strengthened. Faithfulness gives us confidence that we are God’s people, for His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. The Spirit of glory and of God rests on us when we suffer. This strengthens our faith; and it displays the power and glory of God to those who watch us endure hardship for the cause of Christ. Both things are a blessing.

So, we need to think biblically about suffering, for rejoicing in it and seeing it as a blessing are counter-intuitive to our flesh. It is only when our relationship with God is our highest joy, and His glory is our chief aim that we will face suffering with the joyful worship described here.

The second thing we need to see in the text is that when we suffer, we need to ensure that it is for the right reasons. Peter does not want Christians suffering because they sinned. They were not to be drug into the courts for things like murder, thievery, evildoing, or troublesome meddling. That last title had to do with political or relational agitating. As Christians, we should not do such things. If we do, we bring shame to the name of Christ and deserve punishment.

But, if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. The term *Christian* in the 1st century was a pejorative term given to Jesus’ followers by the world. It associated them with the crucified Christ of Palestine. Such an association would be akin to someone joyfully associating with a convicted criminal today. Yet *Christian* was a title Jesus’ followers gladly owned, for it identified them with their Savior. Thus, when one suffers *as a Christian*, they are not to be ashamed, for they glorify God in the name of Christ. This reminds us again how suffering for our faith is a privilege. It gives us the opportunity to make the glory of God known through our response to it. We should not be ashamed if we suffer for our faith; nor should we be ashamed to associate with others who suffer for their faith. Such people should receive a high standing among us because God’s blessing rests upon them.

Thirdly, we need to view suffering from God’s perspective. Vs. 17-18 state one principle two ways. In these verses, Peter is arguing from lesser to greater. Vs. 17 opens by saying that *it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.* Peter realizes that God is sovereign over our suffering. He uses it as a tool in the lives of His people. It is not a tool of retribution. God is not secretly angry with His people for their continued wrestling with sin. He is not looking for an opportunity to make us pay. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* God is not a petty monarch who vents His frustration on the citizens of His kingdom. He is a loving Father who disciplines His people for their good. Sin is a death inflicting, relationship destroying, joy sucking, life draining disease. Because it reeks such havoc, God disciplines His people so that they might leave sin and learn obedience. Nothing trains us in the love of God, dependence on His Spirit, abiding in Christ, or gives us humility like the fires of suffering. While we go through life, God will discipline us in various ways because He wants to purge sin from our lives and draw us into deeper fellowship with Him. Those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines, and He chastens every son whom He receives.

In addition to this, believers will be judged by God in eternity. We are not condemned the way non-believers are, but our lives are evaluated. 1 Cor. 3:10-15 likens the believer’s life to a building built on the foundation of Christ. This building will be tested by fire. The things done for God’s glory will endure and be rewarded by God. Everything done from sinful motives or in pursuit of the pleasures of this world will be consumed. Some Christians will see their entire lives evaporate in the fires of God’s judgment and the text says suffer loss. Yet, they will be saved, not because they deserved it, but because of the kindness of the God who saved them.

Peter’s point is that, if God hates sin so much that He deals with His precious children whom He purchased with His own beloved Son’s blood in this way, then what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God. This is where the argument moves from the lesser ‘judgment’ that believers receive to the greater judgment that sinners will receive. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But for those who have rejected the gospel, there is certain and terrifying judgment. They will be condemned eternally for their sin. God’s wrath abides on them, and they will spend eternity drinking the cup of God’s wrath in a terrible place called hell. Their eternal torment will be the knowledge that they rejected the eternally good, loving, and kind God of the universe for the folly of sin.

Vs. 18 repeats this argument, quoting from Pr. 11:31. If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? The answer: eternal ruin! It is not because God is unwilling to save. He demonstrated His love for sinners by sending His precious Son to die the death sinners deserve, absorb the wrath they have earned, and secure eternal life by rising from the dead. Yet the sinfulness of man causes them to reject the loving God of the universe because they want to be god in the place of God.

These verses are a warning to you if you are still lost in your sin. Hebrews 9:27-28 says that *it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.* Each of us will give an account to God for how we have lived. Because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we all deserve the sentence of eternal death as the wages our rebellion. Yet Christ *died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.* His death paid the penalty for our sin. He freely offers salvation to you. It can be yours, if you will turn from your sin to trust Him alone for salvation.

For the believer, the reminder of their enemies’ certain judgment is a comfort. Although they may appear to have the upper hand now, they do not win. They will receive the wages of their sin when God vindicates His people. This knowledge strengthens us to stand firm today.

This leads to the final observation, which is the application. Vs. 19 begins with the word *therefore*, indicating that this is how we respond to the principles laid down in vs. 12-18. When we suffer for our faith, we are to entrust our souls to God. The verse opens with the reminder that nothing happens to us outside of the will of God. That includes suffering. Peter’s readers’ suffering was *according to the will of God.* Nothing happens in life outside the sovereign rule or providential purposes of God. God does not originate or cause evil; but He rules over it so He can accomplish His good designs in the face of it. One thinks at this point Job, and how God brought him to Satan’s attention and allowed him to attack Job. God was in complete control of the circumstance, only allowing Satan as much liberty as God ordained. God was working in that mess, not only in Job’s life, but also in the life of his wife and friends. Ultimately, God used Job’s terrible circumstances to produce the book of Job, which has been spiritual nourishment for countless suffering saints through the millennia. Greater than that is how God ordained the events of the cross to accomplish our salvation. He is not responsible for the evil that took place there; but He used the evil designs of Jesus’ enemies to accomplish the greatest good imaginable: our salvation. God providentially orders all the affairs of life. His rule is perfect; just because suffering is hard, it does not mean God has slipped off His throne. Instead, it means He has some good purpose in mind for us.

That is why we entrust our souls to our faithful Creator. Knowing that He is the Almighty, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, and the great I AM, means that we can trust Him with both the good and the bad of life. Knowing that He uses suffering to test our faith and to draw us into deeper fellowship with Him, we entrust our souls to His care when we suffer. He is a good God who only does what is right. We can trust when we face a fiery ordeal to consume the dross of our lives and refine the gold of our faith.

But how do I know if I am entrusting my soul to God? Because trust bears fruit in our lives. The evidence that we have entrusted our souls to God is doing what is right in the face of adversity. This is Peter’s message to these suffering saints. Keep doing what is right even though you are being mistreated for it. Let your love for God control your actions irrespective of the temporary consequences. As we humbly and faithfully walk with God, He will be glorified, the gospel made known, and our relationship with Him deepened no matter what we face in life. This principle applies to all suffering, not just persecution. Entrust your soul to God, for He is good. He loves you more than you know, and He will only do what is right in your life. That trust will cause you to live for Him no matter how difficult life becomes. His designs are only for your good.