

1 PETER 4:12-19
IF YOU SUFFER AS A CHRISTIAN

Today has been designated as the “International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.” So this morning, we take a break from our year long journey through the Old Testament, to ponder these words from 1 Peter.

I take this break, because this touches a deep passion in my heart. My prayer is that my passion, will flow to your heart today.

Our family loves to learn big words. Hardly a week goes by that we don’t discuss the meaning of a big word.

Here is a big word: “vicarious.” Do you know what it means? When something is vicarious, it is “experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person.”

When you watch a movie, and you see the long-lost lovers finally reunited, you experience their feelings vicariously.

When you see the news, and you see people devastated by a natural disaster, you experience their feelings vicariously.

When you watch a sporting event, and your team wins (or loses), you experience their feelings vicariously. As others mourn, you mourn. Or as others rejoice, you rejoice.

When we talk about persecution, we are talking about an issue that most of us have experienced only vicariously. Today is also Veteran’s Day, and we give thanks today for veterans who have fought and died to keep us free. As free people, most of us can only imagine persecution, and what it feels like.

Yet just as we watch that movie or news or sporting event and wonder what it would be like to feel those feelings for ourselves, we think about a subject like persecution and we wonder...

* Could it ever happen?

* How would I face it?

Today, I want to use Peter’s inspired words to:

* Stir heartfelt prayer for those who are suffering, and

* Spur heart preparation for whatever suffering God may bring us.

I would rather proclaim the truth than predict the future, so I do not claim to know what God will bring to us as Christians in this country.

But I know other believers suffer, so prayer for them is essential. And I know freedom is fragile, so preparation for us is vital.

Peter’s words offer us two great truths. Here is the first: YES, WE REALLY CAN SUFFER.

WHAT IS THIS? What exactly is Peter writing about here?

Let’s start at verse 15. Peter urges his readers not to suffer as murderers, thieves, criminals, or meddlers. If you do these things, you might suffer, and you should suffer!

Peter is not writing about that suffering, or even the general suffering of all people. He is writing about suffering “as a Christian.”

We think of such suffering, and we think of physical suffering. Indeed, Peter’s readers sometimes suffered from physical violence.

Yet in verse 14, Peter writes of being “insulted.” Then in verse 16, he writes of “not being ashamed.” Peter’s readers also faced insult, and false accusations of wrongdoing, and people who would snub them, just because they were Christians. They were made to feel ashamed for their faith.

So what is this? Peter is writing of physical, verbal or emotional abuse, that you receive because you are seeking to live for Jesus Christ.

Is this just “vicarious”? Is suffering for Christ just for other people in other places? Maybe not.

Maybe your husband treats you poorly, for loving Jesus well.

Maybe your classmates mock you, because you are “religious.”

Maybe your co-workers beat you with their words, because you want to faithfully do the work you are paid to do.

Maybe it is not vicarious for some of you. But maybe it is, and maybe it is, because you profess faith in Christ, but you do not express that faith in a Christ-like habit of living.

I am often reminded of the Amish man who was approached by the evangelist. “Brother,” the evangelist asked, “Are you a Christian?”

The Amish man asked the other man to wait a few minutes. He wrote out a list of people who knew him well. He said, “Go to them, and ask if they believe I am a Christian.”

What about your neighbors? Your co-workers? Your friends? The parents of your childrens’ friends? Your employees? Your enemies?

What in your life, demonstrates that you are a Christian? Your words? Your business practices? Your service? Your stand for what is right? The way you forgive those who mistreat you? Or are you a “stealth” Christian, who flies so low that you avoid everybody’s radar?

What is this? Abuse, because you want to live for Jesus.

WHERE IS THIS?

In verse 12, Peter urges his readers not to be surprised that they are suffering for their faith. He says, don’t act as if this were strange.

Here and elsewhere in the New Testament, you sense that Jesus and the writers expect Christians to suffer for their faith. After all, what did Jesus say to his disciples? The world will love you? No - the world will hate you.

This suffering is everywhere.

Do what I did this week: find the website of “Voice of the Martyrs.” Here are this week’s headlines:

*”Church Set on Fire in Israel.”

*”Militants disrupt prayer service, beat believers in India.”

*”Imprisoned Christians sentenced to five years in Indonesia.”

Actually, this was an unusual week, because there were no new reports of Christians dying for their faith.

Elsewhere on the website, you can read specific reports on nations where there is persecution, and there are over 60 countries on the list.

Where is this? It’s everywhere!

But you say, “That’s there. I’m here. That’s them. This is us.”

No. They are in Jesus. You are in Jesus. So you are in them, and they are in you. You are united with them, in a common faith. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

So what do we do? What can we do? We can pray. We must pray.

How? Here is one idea.

Have you noticed that for the past year, I have put a prayer request from the persecuted church in the e-newsletter? Have you seen the suggestion that you take that request, put it on your bathroom mirror, and pray about it for the next week as you do whatever you do in front of that mirror?

Here is another idea.

When you watch or read news about another nation, you can be pretty sure that Christians suffer for their faith in that nation. As you hear of a nation, how about praying for Christians in that nation?

Yes, we really can suffer. As we think about ourselves, we need to ask whether our lives are Christian enough for people to see. And as we think about our brothers and sisters who are suffering, we need to ask if we have our Savior’s concern for them, so that we would pray for them.

Yes, we really can suffer. Yet a second truth comes to us from Peter’s inspired words: YES, WE REALLY CAN REJOICE.

From now on, I will speak to you as sufferers for Christ, because we need to prepare our hearts for whatever God may bring. Yet hold those brothers and sisters in your heart and mind, for the heart of our preparation, should be the heart of our prayers for them.

Peter writes in verse 13, “Rejoice.” Rejoice?

Rejoice that we suffer? No. But rejoice as we suffer.

How can we do this? How can suffering Christians do this?

I offer you three words. With these words in our hearts and minds, we can rejoice as we suffer, and we can pray them for suffering Christians.

You know these words, because Paul groups them together in the famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. The words are faith, hope and love.

Let’s take them in the order Peter presents them to us.

First, LOVE. Peter writes in verse 13, “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...”

What does he mean by “participation”? As he writes, Jesus is not still suffering. So how can we participate with him in his sufferings?

The word here is the word that gives us the word “fellowship.” So Peter is saying that when we suffer as Christians, we are in fellowship with Jesus. We are entering with him into a deep, life-changing place.

In that relationship, there is great blessing. In the next verse, Peter writes that if you are insulted because of Jesus’ name, you are blessed, because “the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” He seems to be saying that in those times of suffering for Jesus, God’s glorious Spirit especially ministers to us.

John Patton was a missionary to cannibals. He was once hiding in a tree from some hostile of the hostile ones, as they raged below him. Patton later wrote, “Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among these chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone!”

How suffering stirs love for Jesus, and how love for Jesus sustains us in our suffering! In this, there is...

1. A greater understanding of Jesus' love for us, in suffering for us.

As we suffer, we realize that Jesus suffered this and immeasurably more, so that we might be reconciled to God. He was abused physically. He was abused verbally. He was abused emotionally. He suffered this, for us!

We are amazed again at the gospel, and the love of Jesus for us.

2. A greater experience of Jesus' love for us, as we suffer for him.

While we suffer, we can go to Jesus for grace, mercy and help in our time of need. We realize that even when no one else is with us, he is with us. Like John Patton said, we are alone, but not alone.

We see in a new way, how his love carries us through even the worst of physical, verbal, and emotional suffering.

Love. Suffering for Jesus, fires our love for Jesus. If this is so, can we not rejoice through it, and even in it?

Now a second word for our preparation and our prayers, as we strive for this rejoicing in suffering: HOPE.

Peter writes in verse 13 that you are to rejoice, "so that you may be overjoyed when (Jesus') glory is revealed."

In the original language, the words are tumbling out of Peter's pen. He is writing of "rejoicing with exultation." This is "super" rejoicing. This is "extra-biggie" rejoicing. This is "rejoicing upon rejoicing."

This is the joy that is ours when all is not well, but the Lord provides.

You have an accident. But the Lord provides protection.

Your heart sinks from depression. But the Lord provides peace.

Your finances fall apart. But the Lord provides provision.

You could have taken the easy, high-speed express lane to be with your Lord in glory, but he has given you some bumps in the road. Maybe some seem more like mountains. But you finally reach glory. It has been tough, but you are there. You overflow with joy. You rejoice with exultation.

That is our hope!

In John Bunyan's classic story of the journey of our lives, "Pilgrim's Progress," we meet a character named Mr. Standfast. He has struggled through this life of serving Jesus, yet as he prepares to go to heaven, the "Celestial City," he says,

"The thoughts of what I am going to do, and of the conduct that waits for me on the other side, doth lie as a glowing coal upon my heart. I see myself now at the end of my journey; my toilsome days are ended. I am going now to see that head that was crowned with thorns, and that face which was spit upon for me..."

"I shall be with Him in whose company I delight myself."

How suffering stirs hope in Jesus, and how hope in Jesus can sustain us in suffering! In this, there is:

1. A great hope today.

When we suffer, we realize that our troubles are "light and momentary" compared to the life of exultant joy that awaits us when we are with Jesus. This does not stop the pain, but it provides a perspective on the pain.

We are able to carry on through the pain, for we fix our eyes on the hope of Jesus that far outweighs what we suffer now.

2. A greater joy tomorrow.

Think of what rejoicing there will be with the Lord, for those whose lives were not confined to comfort, but were captured by Jesus Christ!

What rejoicing will there be for believers in Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Turkey, and many other places where Jesus Christ has been so precious to them, that they have given up all, even life, to serve him!

What rejoicing will there be for us, if we are willing to suffer insult and even worse, through living lives that are all for Jesus!

Love. Hope. Then our prayer for others and our preparation for ourselves is driven by this word: FAITH.

In verses 17 and 18, Peter writes of "judgment" starting - first for the household of God, then for unbelievers.

But what kind of "judgment" is this?

One sense of the word is God's "condemning" judgment. As believers in Jesus, we do not face this. Jesus has given himself for our sins, so we do not fear being condemned to hell.

But while there is no "condemning" judgment, there is what we might call a "reckoning" judgment. God "adds up" how we have lived for him.

In a real sense, he is always doing this. He is always "adding." Why? Because he wants us to grow in our faith. As Peter described early in the book, our faith is more precious than gold, and he will bring suffering to us, because he wants to refine, purify, and mature our faith.

This is hard for us to understand. We think God just wants us to be happy. But more than that, he wants us to be holy. He wants us to live before him with a holy faith in him - a holy trust, in all situations.

Suffering stirs our faith in Jesus, and faith in Jesus sustains us in our suffering. In this...

1. We commit ourselves to our faithful Creator.

We entrust our souls to the One who gave us life. We are not afraid of those who can take our bodies, but not our souls. We realize that God has sent Jesus to give his life, so that we might have eternal life.

So we may suffer for him. It may be God's will. But with love for Jesus and hope in Jesus, we have faith in God's mercy, grace and help, and in his ultimate deliverance of us to be with him.

When we commit ourselves to him, we declare, "Lord, you are faithful. Help me to have faith in you."

2. We continue to do good.

We keep doing what God wants us to do. We seek to be faithful to doing what God declares is right, and we trust in him to do what he will, with this.

We do what he commands, and we leave the outcome to him. With faith in Jesus, we continue to do good.

Love, hope, and faith.

Yes, we really can rejoice. Yes, our brothers and sisters really can rejoice. We prepare for it, and we pray for it, with these words, with confidence that as these qualities fill us and flow from us, we (and they) will rejoice.

The story is told of a man from Afghanistan, who turned from the false god of Islam, to the true God, revealed in Jesus.

The local leaders tried to play nice. A handful of money was presented to him. "Return to your faith, and you can have all this...There is enough here to keep you in comfort for quite a long time to come."

He said in response, "I am a Christian. And though you were to offer me a hundred times the money in your hand, I shall never return from following after Christ."

So what happened? The storyteller did not know. The Christians with him were warned that the leaders would no longer play nice.

We do not know what will happen in our lives, and our world. But I call us today, to renew our pledge to "never return from following after Christ," and to be committed to praying for those who suffer for that commitment.

May we prepare for the future, by growing in love for Jesus, hope in Jesus, and faith in Jesus.

May we pray for our brothers and sisters in the present, for their love for Jesus, their hope in Jesus, and their faith in Jesus.

May this be our passion.