

1 Peter 4:12-19

John 14: 23-27

June 9, 2019

Pentecost

Holy Suffering

A billionaire loved hosting parties at his home. In his very large swimming pool he kept a great-white shark. At each party he'd issue a challenge: "Half my fortune or my daughter's hand in marriage to the man who swims across the pool!" He never had any takers. Then one evening, after the dare was issued, a tall, muscular guy hit the water. Arms churning, feet kicking, he raced across the pool, climbing out just in the nick of time, the shark's razor teeth nipping his heels.

"Bravo!" cried the billionaire father, "That's the greatest act of courage I've ever seen. One half my fortune is yours!" "No thanks," the dripping young man replied.

"Then, I'd be proud to call you son. You can marry my daughter."

"I don't want her either," the young man responded.

"What do want?"

"I want five minutes with the guy who pushed me in the pool."

Wow! I sure hope none of us find ourselves in that swimming pool! But then, how should a person respond when bad or difficult or even tragic things happen to them? It's hard to grasp when you're young, especially if you've been brought up in a relatively stable and loving family; it's hard to grasp that life isn't easy or pain free. So when bad things happen to us we may feel we've been unjustly targeted and easily become angry and bitter.

British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge (in an interview with William F. Buckley) said: "... looking back on one's life ... The only thing that really teaches one what life's about ... is suffering." It is not in the still calm of life that great characters are formed. Adversity brings forth virtue.

No body wants to suffer. But the fact is most of us do not learn very much from good health, happy days, money in the bank, and good fortune. We enjoy those things, but we don't learn much from them. Can there be any genuine courage or sympathy or unselfishness without suffering? St. Peter teaches us, as one who knows from experience, that through our suffering for the faith God can teach us and grow us in His grace. It may seem odd, that on this day, Pentecost, the day we celebrate and cheer Jesus's gift of the Holy Spirit, that I talk about suffering. But here's the truth: Jesus imparts the Holy Spirit to carry

us through the suffering the world may dish out to us when we obey Him. Jesus promised: *... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you, John 14:26.* Here's what we can learn:

I. Holy Suffering Develops Christian Character

Everyone faces the usual trials of life: illness, accident, injustice, and even death. Our Lord has not promised to take them away, for he himself suffered. But he did promise to be with us through it all.

Yet there is another suffering that comes to those who claim the name of Jesus. At some point in time all genuine Christians can expect persecution ... just because Jesus offends the sinful. Every faithful believer will have some resistance. For some it may be ridicule, while others, for God's own purposes, will endure extreme suffering. *In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 2 Tim. 3:12.* We might call this holy suffering. This is a message the American church needs to hear. Discipleship is tough. Suffering is part of the Christian life, even painful suffering.

I often wonder how many American Christians look to Jesus as successful, bountiful, and the protector of most things religious. He doesn't do persecution or difficulty – only blessings and bounty for the faithful... right? We live in an age where one of the bestselling books in America is called *Your Best Life Now*. Here's the Apostle Peter saying, "Living for Christ is the best life you can have, and it always includes suffering." You can't escape it. Believers in other parts of the world understand this better than we do.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you, 1 Peter 4:12. I think Peter means this: "God loves you deeply and profoundly. Therefore, don't be surprised when you suffer as a Christian." That's a hard connection for many of us to make... if God loves me why would he allow me to suffer, especially for being faithful to Him? Most of us don't think that way. We are surprised when trials come, how they come, and where they come from, because we think we don't deserve them.

Thank God that we live in a country where we can, for the most part, freely live and share our Christian faith ... but there is no guarantee it will always be so. In the 20th century more Christians suffered or were martyred for their faith than in all the previous 19 centuries. The 21st century looks to be on the same track. You don't have to look far at all to see, hear, and read of brutal persecution suffered by Christians around the globe. We easily find reports of the suffering believers in China, Nigeria, Eritrea, Korea, Pakistan, the Sudan, and Indonesia.

We hope and pray for them and we hope and pray it does not come to America. What's surprising are the acts of courage and faithfulness that arise from among the persecuted. Many testify to the truth of Scripture: *Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith produces endurance*, James 1:2-4. Great necessities call out great virtues.

Chuck Swindoll says, "Maturity in the Christian life ... is measured by our ability to withstand the tests that come our way without having them shake our foundation or throw us into an emotional tailspin." God can use our trials, even persecution, to authenticate and grow our faith and to express His love and grace to a lost world.

II. Holy Suffering Brings Us Closer to God

***But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you*, 1 Peter 4:13-14.**

The fact is the world's ways are counter to Christ's ways. And as long as we do not buck the world's ways too much the world will leave us alone. Many of us like the idea that following Jesus means never having to stand up for anything that might be uncomfortable, or bring us negative experiences, or keep us out of the "cool kids" circle (and that exists with adults too!). It's okay to be a Christian as long as you aren't really serious about it, or you keep it to yourself, or don't let it influence your decisions in business or elsewhere. That's why the world does not persecute a worldly Christian—only a godly one. They do not hate us. They hate Christ in us. They do not persecute us. They persecute Christ in us, because our Savior's ways judge the world and they will do anything to extinguish His influence.

Peter writes: *rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...* That word “participate” translates the Greek *koinwneite* which is usually translated as “fellowship.” Most of us think of fellowship as a potluck meal, or dinner for eight, or our small group prayer and study time. But here Peter means that our sufferings for Christ join us more closely with Jesus than anything else. We all know that when we read the Bible, pray, worship, sing, praise, share our faith, give our money, listen to sermons, exercise our faith, use our spiritual gifts, spend time with other believers, and so on, we can come closer to Jesus. Peter wants us to understand that nothing moves us closer to Christ than when we go through hard times for His sake. It’s not suffering per se, but what suffering does in us. God intends that our trials for our faith move us from where we are to where Christ is.

III. Holy Suffering Should Lead to Serious Self-Examination

***If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”* I Peter 4:15-18.**

Sometimes we bring trouble on ourselves. Just remember: God will bless a person who doesn’t make excuses for their bad behavior. Like Peter says: if you do wrong, you should expect to suffer, *“but if you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed.”* In the vast Roman Empire of the first century, they enforced a cult of Caesar-worship; kind of like totalitarian states today. The early believers refused to say, “Caesar is Lord.” That is why the early church was persecuted. The lines were drawn very early over who is Lord of life and has our ultimate allegiance: Caesar or Christ!

What if it comes down to this—Caesar or Christ? What will you do? What if they threaten you because of your faith? Peter’s answer is clear: “Let him not be ashamed.”

IV. Holy Suffering Teaches Us to Trust God in New Ways

***So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good,* I Peter 4:19. Peter is teaching us that every trial that comes our way has already passed through**

the Father's loving hands. He is greater than our trials and He loves us with an everlasting love. And perhaps we won't be convinced of God's love unless we focus on the cross of Christ. There we see how the evil purposes of the world serve the eternal purposes of Almighty God. There we behold untold human suffering accomplishing our eternal salvation. Apart from the cross it makes no sense to rejoice in our suffering. When our eyes are properly focused on the cross, our own troubles will come into proper focus. What God did for Jesus, he will also do for you. St. Paul reminds: *... be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes*, Eph. 6:10-11.

It almost seems hypocritical for me to be talking about suffering for our faith in Christ, as most of us have never faced real persecution. At most, perhaps some of us may have faced ridicule, maybe we've been deemed unintelligent by some, or left out of some conversations or activities, and some have given up many pleasures and possessions because they gave to God instead. But for the most part we've not had to answer for our faith or sacrifice much. We've not faced the flames of persecution, as have Christians in so many places around the globe. Is that because we've been quiet and so easily blended in with the world's ways? But the day is coming, and is very near, when being a Christian may well marginalize if not ostracize you – God forbid we come to a time of fiery persecution. But if so what will be our response ... your response?

Here's Peter's message for us today: Never be surprised by hard times. Never be ashamed of Jesus. God uses adversity to make your life a jewel fit for heaven. We must commit our souls to God and continue to serve him in every season of life. Amen.