

1 Peter 4:12-19

Thankful in Times of Suffering

Main idea: Suffering not only has a good purpose, but a godly purpose in all of our lives.

There's a story¹ about a janitor at St. Peter's Church in London. One day, the new, young, naive pastor of the church discovered that the janitor was illiterate and fired him, citing something about not sorting the mail correctly. Jobless, the man invested his meager savings into opening a tiny shop, where he prospered, bought another, expanded, and ended up with a chain of stores worth several hundred thousand dollars. One day, he realizes that he really should put all this money into the bank, so he goes to open an account. The banker is amazed at all the money the man wanted to deposit, and happily accepts it upon the condition that the man read over the account agreement and sign his name, to which the man replies that he can't read or write. The banker was shocked, and said, "You've done extremely well for an illiterate man, but where would you be if you could read and write?" "Well," replied the man, "I'd be a janitor at St. Peter's Church in London."

I think one of the most important things we can talk about in terms of being thankful is how to be thankful in times of suffering. Because it's great to be thankful in general, and when times are good, but the real test of whether or not we're truly content is being content even when things aren't going well.

So when things are going poorly, like when you're fired, or your family is falling apart, or you just can't find the motivation to get out of bed in the morning, what do you do? Do you wallow in self-pity? Or do you praise the God who gives and takes away?

The Bible actually talks a lot about suffering, and a lot of it gives us hope to endure suffering, reminding us that God will deliver us at the proper time.

Psalm 34:19 says:

One who is righteous has many adversities, but the Lord rescues him from them all. (Psalm 34:19)

Peter wrote:

The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little while. (1 Peter 5:10)

And of course in Revelation 21, we read that:

[God] will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

Suffering for a little while now gives us the opportunity to see that God is faithful to deliver us. But I don't want to imply that that's the only reason to be thankful in times of suffering. Suffering can even have a godly purpose at the time of the suffering itself.

James tells us:

Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (James 1:2-3)

¹ "The Vicar's Revenge" by Somerset Maugham

We're also going to study Romans chapter 5 in January, which says something similar:

We also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

You see, suffering doesn't need to make us miserable, but can actually be occasions to grow in our faith, and praise the Lord.

So we can actually be thankful for suffering because 1) we know that God is going to deliver us, and 2) it molds us into who God would have us to be.

But there's one more reason to be thankful in times of suffering, and it kind of ties both of these reasons together. That's what we're going to look at this morning. 1 Peter 4:12-19.

Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name. For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good. (1 Peter 4:12-19)

Father, help us to entrust ourselves to You. And help us to rejoice, even during times of great suffering, so that we might see Your glory revealed. In Jesus's name, Amen.

We have five commands in this passage concerning suffering.

Verse 12.

Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12)

So first, don't be surprised when you suffer. It's not unusual. It's normal. It happens to everyone, especially when you start to live out your faith. Instead of being caught off guard, wondering, "Why me," we ought to be ready and prepared to face suffering because our faith is becoming less and less acceptable in the eyes of the world.

In a world that celebrates sin, denies the existence of God, and denies the need for salvation through Jesus, our faith is intolerable. It's insane to me how just about every other religion on the planet is being celebrated as good, contributing to the world's diversity, and yet Christianity is beginning to be seen as the one unacceptable religion. Have you noticed that?

And yet, we shouldn't be surprised about this. This has been happening for 2,000 years. When Jesus walked the earth, He came preaching good news, and we nailed Him to a cross. Our unrighteousness caused the only Righteous One to suffer, and the same is true for us today. We live in a fallen world, which means that we will all suffer. So our first command concerning suffering is simply to not be surprised when it happens to you. Verse 13.

Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1 Peter 4:13-14)

Now, this is when it gets kind of crazy. Not only should we not be surprised when we suffer, but second, we should rejoice when we suffer. That's crazy! But notice that it's only talking about a certain kind of suffering. It says that we should rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ.

You see, not all suffering is good to simply endure. Many of the things we suffer in this world simply ought not to happen, and we should avoid them and stop them when we can. Don't be content to suffer so that evil doers can continue doing evil. If you suffer from your spouse abusing you, call the police. If you suffer from friends taking advantage of you, help them, but you may need to also set firm limits to truly help them rather than just enable them. If you suffer from hunger, fix yourself a plate of pizza rolls. They'll satisfy you.

And even Jesus, when the Pharisees attempted to capture Him, often evaded them. You don't need to rush toward suffering!

So we're not really talking about rejoicing in suffering that we can and should avoid or stop. We're talking about rejoicing in the sufferings of Christ. When Jesus went to the cross, He laid down His life for us. Sometimes, and in fact all the time, we're called to lay down our lives for Jesus. You're called to consider others as more significant than yourselves, so that you serve them. You're called to turn the other cheek. And you're even called to rejoice and be glad when others insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Jesus, for great is your reward in heaven.²

Someone once asked C.S. Lewis:

"Why do the righteous suffer?"

C.S. Lewis replied, "Why not? They're the only ones who can take it."

As Christians, we're made righteous by the blood of Christ, and it's our immense privilege to suffer with Him. Philippians 1:29 says:

It has been granted to you on Christ's behalf not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him. (Philippians 1:29)

And Philippians 3:7-11 says:

Everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith. My goal is to know him and the power of his

² Matthew 5:11-12

resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)

Many people know that Elizabeth Elliot lost her husband when they were missionaries, when a remote native tribe killed Jim Elliot when he was trying to make contact with them. Not as many people know that Elizabeth Elliot lost her second husband to cancer. Elizabeth was familiar with suffering. She recorded a series of CD's titled, "Suffering is Not for Nothing." In those talks, she said this:

I have never thanked God for cancer. I have never thanked God that certain Indians murdered my husband. I don't think I need to thank God for the cancer or for the murder. But I do need to thank God that in that very situation the world was still in His hands. The One who keeps all those galaxies wheeling in space is the very hand that holds me. - Elizabeth Elliot

God has a plan, and that plan even includes things that we don't understand. And yet even when that happens, we can trust Him.

You see, suffering for the sake of suffering is meaningless. But suffering for the sake of Christ points to the very meaning of all life. Jesus Himself is the meaning. He's the way, the truth, and the life. The life. So even as we die in Him, we live in Him.

But to be frank, that's not usually why we suffer in this life, is it? Most often, we don't suffer because we're righteous, but because we're unrighteous. Verse 15.

Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. (1 Peter 4:15)

While we ought to be thankful and content all the time, that doesn't mean that we should be thankful and content when we do evil. When the Bible talks about being thankful in times of suffering, it's not talking about being thankful that we suffer for the sins that we commit. Godly suffering leads to endurance and rejoicing in God's deliverance, but suffering as a murder, thief, evildoer, or meddler isn't godly suffering. That's just punishment.

Maybe you feel like you're going through a period of suffering. It's easy to blame it on others or even on God, but be honest with yourself. Is your suffering a result of your own sin? And if it is, repent, turning away from your sin. I can't promise you the suffering will go away immediately, but I can promise that God always forgives those who turn to Him in faith, and He will give you a new life as you trust in Him. And for that, you can be thankful. Verse 16.

But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name. (1 Peter 4:16)

So, command number three about suffering: don't be ashamed of it. If you suffer as a Christian, for the sake of Christ, don't be ashamed of your suffering. It's like a badge of honor to suffer with Jesus. Don't be ashamed, but rather, command number four: glorify God. God allows us to be called Christians, and it's an honor to have that describe us. Because the word Christian actually means "little Christ." When someone calls you a Christian, what they're really saying is, "You are like Jesus." What an honor! What a privilege for others to think that we're like Jesus! And what did Jesus do? He suffered and died for the whole world.

Verse 17.

For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good. (1 Peter 4:17-18)

Is it ever God's will for you to suffer? Yeah! I mean, if it's our job to follow Jesus, it's also our job to follow Him in suffering for doing what's right. It strengthens our character, it points to Jesus, and ultimately it allows us to see how God rescues us from all sin and suffering. This is the judgment of God.

But I want you to notice something about God's judgment that we typically just skip over because we don't know what it means. Verse 17 says that the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household. What's up with that? I mean, we usually think of God's judgment being poured out on everyone else! But Scripture says that it begins with us.

You see, the greatest act of God's judgment isn't hell, but the cross. On the cross, Jesus suffered the wrath of God. And when we receive Jesus, yes our sins are forgiven, praise God, amen, but also we agree with God at that point that our sins deserve the wrath of God. So we begin this journey of sanctification in which we give up sin in order to glorify God more. And that's a painful process. But it's also good. So we can be thankful even in times of suffering, because God is faithful.

And if we willingly embark on that journey, and it's difficult for us, Scripture directs us to think about those who disobey the gospel and cling to their sin with all their might. God will not let them cling to their sin forever. In the end, there will be no more sin or sickness or death. So for those who disobey the gospel, giving up sin is going to burn like hell. Therefore, trust in the judgment of God. Trust in Jesus, who experienced the wrath of God for you.

Even when the world seems to be spiraling out of control, God has a plan, and that plan is Jesus.

In the year 1820, there was a little 6-week-old baby who got inflammation of the eyes and as a result of treatment became blind. When she was 9 years old, she wrote this poem:

Oh what a happy soul I am,
Although I cannot see;
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy,
That other people don't;
To weep and sigh because I'm blind,
I cannot, and I won't.

That little girl was Fanny Crosby, and she went on to write over 8,000 hymns, many of which we still sing today. I hope you see that even when we don't understand it, suffering not only has a good purpose, but a godly purpose in all of our lives.

So, I started this sermon by talking about being thankful, and ended it by talking about entrusting our very lives to God. He's faithful. Even while we were still sinners, God loved us and Christ died for us. And if you die to yourself, trusting in Jesus, God raises you up to live a new life in Him.