

The Glory of Christian Suffering

Scripture: 1 Peter

Code: 80-285

As you well know, I week in and week out share with you the fruit of the effort of my own study. On a special occasion like this when we're a little out of the ordinary flow of things, I exercise a little bit of liberty. And that's welcome, by the way, because there are things I like to deal with that we don't deal with in the normal book studies that we do on the Lord's Day.

And in the last month or so, I completed writing a commentary on 1 Peter. It was a spiritually cathartic experience for me. I have preached through 1 Peter several times in the many decades that I have been here. I have studied it numerous times. I've gone in and out of it in connection with other studies. But this particular exercise of writing the commentary took me down and kept me down in a condensed period of time in which I found some riches and some wonders in 1 Peter that don't necessarily grab me when I'm going so slowly through it.

I want to have you open your Bible to 1 Peter for just a moment, and I want to do something that's really out of character - I just want to give you an overview of the whole book. I said overview, right? This is the bird's eye view, not the worm's eye view. Carrie sang that beautiful song, "The Way of the Cross," "I will walk the way of the cross," which was written in honor of the Scottish covenanters who were martyred and persecuted for the cross, who were thrown out of their churches and hunted down and burned at the stake and occasionally drowned as well.

The way of the cross, for them, symbolized suffering, and that's the way Peter sees it also. And I want to draw you into a very practical aspect of the cross. At the heart of Peter's letter is the cross. Chapter 1, notice verse 18. "Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ."

In chapter 2 and verse 24, again Peter makes reference to the cross and Christ's sacrifice there. Chapter 2, verse 24, "And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds, you were healed, healed from sin." In chapter 3 and verse 18, Peter again goes back to the cross. "For Christ also died for our sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit." And then in the fourth chapter and the thirteenth verse, one more time Peter refers to the sufferings of Christ.

Peter's references to the cross, the blood of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ, the substitutionary death of One who was just for the unjust give us the heart of this letter. He wants to make sure that his readers understand and are refreshed and reminded, as we heard in that last choir song, to remember the sacrifice of Christ. And Peter affirms that it was His death that purchased our salvation. It was His death that was a substitution for us. He reminds us that it was one death, one time, once for all that is applied to all who believe.

And so Peter made very clear the necessity of the sacrifice of Christ, the efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ, the aspect of imputation, the aspect of substitution, the aspect of propitiation or satisfaction. But while that is the heart of this letter, it is not the body of this letter. It is the beating heart of this letter, but the body of this letter is about something other than the cross. The body of this letter is about handling suffering.

Go back to chapter 1 again. Handling suffering. This was written to suffering Christians. This is not an evangelistic letter. Peter is not rehearsing the glories of the cross as a means of evangelism. In fact, in verse 1, he says that he is writing to those who reside as aliens in this world, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood. And he offers grace and peace to them in the fullest measure. He is talking to believers here, and yet he makes such a repeated point about the cross.

His intention, however, is not to use the cross as a means of evangelism, these are the chosen, these are the sanctified, these are the obedient, these are those who have made their covenant with Christ. These are the ones who receive grace and peace in the fullest measure. These are the ones, according to verse 3, who have been born again, born again to a living hope, born again through the resurrection. These are the ones who have obtained an inheritance, in verse 4, an imperishable inheritance reserved in heaven. These are the ones who are protected, verse 5, by the power of God through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the last time.

So he's writing to believers, and yet the heart of the letter is the cross. But the body of the letter is about their suffering. Let's look at chapter 1, verse 6, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while if necessary you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

Peter's talking about triumphing in suffering. He's talking about going through various kinds of trials, which prove the validity of your faith, which test it the way fire tests gold, and which yields to you praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ, the full outcome of the salvation of your souls. This is about triumphing in suffering.

In chapter 2, there is also this same emphasis. Verse 19, We have been blessed, of course, to have had the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf, but that does not preclude our suffering. In fact, verse 19 says this finds favor, favor with God, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. Verse 20, "For what credit is there if when you sin and are harshly treated you endure it with patience? But if, when you do what is right and suffer for it, you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God."

Here you find that though God saved you, you find favor with God when you suffer triumphantly. In fact, in verse 21, it says, "You've been called for this purpose." You've been called to suffer and to suffer triumphantly.

In chapter 3, verse 9, the assumption in chapter 3, verse 9, is that somebody is doing you evil and somebody's insulting you, and he says you are not to return evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead, for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. And the implication is when you receive evil and you receive an insult, you give back a blessing because that's what God ultimately is going to give you in glory for all your suffering. Down in verse 13, he says, "Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?"

Verse 14. "But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed; and do not fear their intimidation, do not be troubled, but set apart" - or sanctify - "Christ as Lord in your hearts, maintain your submission to Christ in the midst of your suffering, always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence. And keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." And again he says just hang in there and take the suffering because you've been called to this.

Now you drop down into chapter 4 again and you look at verse 12. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you." Another way to describe suffering. "Which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." Don't be surprised when you suffer, that's not a strange thing, that's not an alien experience. "But to the degree" - verse 13 - "that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exaltation for if you're reviled for the name of Christ, you're blessed."

Down in verse 19 of chapter 4, he says, "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God and trust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." You're going to suffer, you have to endure it with a right attitude, keep on doing right, set your hope on the inheritance to come in the future, on the revelation of Christ's glory, rejoice in the midst of your suffering, be blessed because the Spirit of glory, the Spirit of God rests on you. All that is calling us to triumph in suffering.

Now you come down to chapter 5, verses 7 through 9, and again the implication is you're in the middle of life's problems. You're going to have anxiety, casting all your anxiety on Him, or all your care upon Him, because He cares for you. Just remember this, be of sober spirits, sober mind, be alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. But resist him, firm in your faith knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. You're going to suffer at the hands of persecutors, you're going to suffer at the hand of slanderers, you're going to suffer at the hand of evil people.

You're going to suffer at the hand of those who revile you. You're going to suffer from Satan, that prowling roaring lion who is your adversary. But you're not alone. The same experiences of suffering that you're going to go through are the very ones that your brethren have always gone through in the world as well.

So the heart of the letter is the cross and the body of the letter is suffering. How does it all come together? It is exactly here that Peter does something that no other New Testament writer does. He does a most interesting thing. He does something you would never really think to do. He uses the death of Christ - follow this - he uses the death of Christ not as his main point. That in itself is remarkable. Because everywhere else in the epistles where the death of Christ appears, it's the main point. But here, it's not the main point. In fact - can you believe this? Peter uses the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross as an illustration of another point.

This is the only place I know of in the New Testament where a writer does this. The issue is suffering and triumph in suffering. And in order to triumph in suffering, you must be able to commit that suffering to the purposes of God, right? You must. You have to be able to know - as it says in chapter 1, verse 7 - that it's proving your faith, that it's testing your faith and refining it, that it's going to result in eternal praise and glory and honor when you see Jesus Christ. You have to know that someday your suffering is going to cause you to have joy inexpressible and full of glory, that someday your suffering is going to bring about the full salvation of your soul.

You have to know that in your suffering, you find favor with God. And when you bear up under sorrow while suffering, God is pleased. You have to know - chapter 2, verse 25 - that your suffering brings you to the shepherd and guardian of your soul, it drives you to God. That your suffering - in chapter 2, verse 23 - causes you to keep entrusting yourself to God. You have to know, in chapter 3, that your suffering, verse 14, brings blessing. That your suffering, verse 15, causes you to submit to the lordship of Christ in your life, whatever the cost.

That your suffering also - chapter 3, verse 15 - allows for you to give an account for the hope that is within you in the midst of that suffering. It causes your faith and your hope to be put on display. It causes - in chapter 3, verse 16 - your critics to be ashamed when you triumph in suffering. When you triumph in suffering, it's not something strange happening to you. According to chapter 4, verse 13, you should rejoice because when Jesus comes in His glory, you will rejoice at the reward for your suffering. Chapter 4, verse 19. Suffering, again, according to the will of God, causes you to have a greater trust in your faithful Creator, and it purifies you so that you become more righteous.

Now, all of that simply says that suffering is the path to glory, it's the path to victory, it's the path to purity, it's the path to blessing, it's the path to eternal blessing. And the greatest illustration of this is the cross because the cross was the greatest act of suffering in history, is that not so? It was the greatest suffering that anyone has ever gone through.

It was the greatest pain - and I don't simply mean the pain of scourging, a lot of people were scourged, I mean the pain of sin-bearing by a sinless one, the pain of death by the author of life, the pain of hatred by the one who was love, the pain of alienation from the Father by the One who was one with the Father for all eternity. There was no suffering even close to that. That was the greatest experience of suffering by anyone who ever lived, and out of it came the greatest triumph. Is that not so? And that's Peter's whole point.

Go back to chapter 1, verse 21. The One who died, the Lamb, verse 19, who shed His precious blood, the One foreknown before the foundation of the world who appeared in these last times for the sake of you, who through Him are believers in God who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory so that your faith and hope are in God. What happened as a result of the death of Jesus Christ? It was the worst travesty of justice ever in the history of the world, is that not true? It was the most unjust cruelty ever because He was the only perfectly righteous individual.

He didn't deserve to be treated the way men treated Him. He didn't deserve to be treated the way God treated Him. It was the greatest suffering and the greatest injustice, and it achieved the greatest end. It was for the sake of you, verse 20, who through Him are believers in God. How did we come to be believers in God? Through the work of Christ, right? Through the work of Christ. That's the source

of our faith and hope in God.

Turn over to chapter 2, verse 21. Christ suffered for you, it says in verse 21. This is Peter's key, right here, this phrase, "Leaving you an example." You say, "Wait a minute - wait a minute. That's liberal theology. That's heresy. Jesus didn't die as an example." He didn't die only as an example, but Peter's using Him as an example. He's using Him as an illustration. The main point, again, here is not the death of Christ, the main point is triumph in suffering, and Jesus' triumph in suffering is the greatest illustration of that ever because it was the greatest injustice and the greatest suffering that achieved the greatest goal, the greatest end.

And in that sense, He leaves you an example. He leaves you an example. In the middle of the suffering, He committed no sin. He didn't get angry at God, He didn't become unrighteous, He didn't start doing wrong, He didn't collapse under the suffering. He never said anything at all that was in any way sinful. There was no deceit in His mouth. And while He was being reviled, He didn't revile in return. While suffering, He uttered not threats, He just kept entrusting Himself to the One who judges righteously.

There's the principle - folks, listen. When you go through suffering, do what Jesus did. Don't sin with your mouth or in any other way, don't get angry, don't revile, don't seek vengeance, don't utter threats, just trust yourself in the care of God because God has already proven that in the worst possible suffering, He achieves the greatest end. That's the point. There He was, in verse 24, and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. For by His wounds, you were healed.

There it is. Because you were continually straying like sheep but now you've returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls, it was Jesus' suffering, the greatest suffering the world has ever known, the worst injustice the world has ever seen, that achieved the greatest end, the salvation of sinners. He brought us back to God. And in that sense, He's an example to us to trust God's purposes in our pain. You see?

Down in chapter 3, verse 18 - well, back up to verse 17, "It's better," he says, "if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right than doing what is wrong." Why? "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust," - and what came out of that? - "in order that He might bring us to God." If God can accomplish His absolute best through the absolute worst in the life of His Son, believe me, don't ever question what He can accomplish in our suffering.

And Peter concludes it all in chapter 5, verse 10 and 11. "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Does that sound like something you'd like? To be perfected, confirmed, strengthened, and established? God will do that after you have what? Suffered a little while. And Peter can't contain himself any longer, so he bursts out in verse 11 in a doxology: To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

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