

Our Cross: Hopeful Suffering

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's New Testament lesson is a reading from the first letter of Peter as printed in your liturgy, page 2.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to God's elect, exiled scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

[1 : 36] In all this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith, of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. For you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Brian. Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew.

I'm one of the pastors here. And I just want to ask you to join me in prayer as we open up God's word and hear what he has to say to us. Lord God, we so need you.

We so need to hear from you. And I ask that you would shape our hearts to view your word as the bread of life that it is.

[2 : 59] Our daily bread. Would you fill us with your life-giving word through the power of your Holy Spirit? And would it be a word of joy?

A word of genuine joy because of the good news of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. You know, while I was reflecting on this passage this week, right here, 1 Peter chapter 1, we're focusing on verses 6 through 9 today.

I was reminded of a funeral that I performed about two years ago. It was for my Auntie Lisa. She was only 54 when pancreatic cancer took her from, you know, my uncle, my two cousins, and from the rest of our family.

And from many people who she meant a lot to. And one thing you should know about Auntie Lisa is that she was like a passionate Christian. She was, like uncomfortably so sometimes.

She was a passionate Christian. But no one could doubt her love for Christ. And no one could doubt her faith in God's promises and her desire to see other people know and experience God the same way that she did.

[4 : 09] She was a decades-long BSF leader, if that means anything to anyone, Bible study fellowship, a student of the scriptures. She and my uncle gave very generously financially to the church, to our church even, when I was raising money here as a resident.

And not only that, but in my first couple years here, when we had some Chinese international students come and visit and worship with us and explore Christianity here, I brought a whole bunch of them over to our Fong family Christmas dinner.

This is my mom's side of the family. And of course, Auntie Lisa loved it. She really spent a lot of time trying to get to know them. She independently on her own got their contact information, met up with them afterward, followed up.

She really just wanted to tell them more and more about her faith in Jesus. But anyways, what got me remembering my Auntie Lisa this past week was this line here in verse 6 where Peter writes, in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

And when I saw this paradoxical juxtaposition of great rejoicing and at the same time suffering grief, it reminded me of the day my Uncle Gary, Auntie Lisa's husband, my mom's brother, he called me about three days after Auntie Lisa had passed and he called me asking me to perform her funeral.

[5 : 32] He told me it would have meant a lot to her and then he said something that really struck me. He said, Andrew, Auntie Lisa really wanted the gospel to be preached at her funeral.

And I'll always remember that because for those of you who don't know what the word gospel means, it literally means good news, right? And maybe for those of us Christians in the room who've grown up in the church, been in the church a long time, it's like, of course you preach the gospel all the time, of course you preach the gospel at a funeral, but if you really pause to think about it for a second, if you pause to consider what a funeral is about, right, the loss of life, the loss of a spouse, the loss of a mother, a daughter, a sister, of a friend, of an aunt, it shouldn't be lost on us, it should actually be quite striking to us, really, how strange and paradoxical it is for a woman on her deathbed to request that good news be preached at her funeral, right?

It should strike us how seemingly antithetical it is for a widower of three days to request that good news be preached at the burial of his beloved wife.

Some might not even call that a paradox, right, but a straight up contradiction, an absolute impossibility. And so this is the question I want to consider this morning, can good news be preached at a funeral?

And not just some trite, sentimental, wishful thinking, kind of good vibes, temporary good news, but can actual, soul-satisfying, heart-lifting, hope-inspiring good news be preached at a funeral?

[7 : 09] Can great rejoicing and genuine joy be held at the same time as sorrowful suffering, taking that sorrowful suffering as seriously as it should be taken?

Is this paradox possible or is it a contradiction? Now, you could probably guess what I'm going to say, but you know, at least in this country, honestly, less and less people are able to believe in the possibility of this paradox, less and less people are able to believe that we can greatly rejoice and suffer grief at the same time.

Did you know that in 2023, more than 50,000 Americans died by suicide? 50,000, the highest number on record, the highest suicide rate since during the Great Depression and World War II in the 30s and 40s, is the highest rate since then.

That's up 36% in the last 20 years. And if you do the math, that's one American, right, one person made in the image of God, created to be fruitful and to flourish, one person in this country committing suicide every 10 minutes and 50-something seconds throughout the year.

In 2021, according to the CDC, 42% of high schoolers reported persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness. 22% of those high schoolers seriously considered suicide.

[8 : 27] 18% made a suicide plan and 10% attempted it. One out of 10. Couldn't believe that. And I bring up these suicide statistics because I think they indicate that we live in a nation and in a cultural moment in which, again, less and less people can believe that there is news good enough to keep living for, hope worth waiting for, or something trustworthy enough to place their faith in that things can and will be better.

And I know suicide is complex and mental health is multifaceted. It's a multifaceted struggle. It affects the body and the mind. It involves many, many factors, but the common theme that runs across every suicide, the one thing that every suicide and every suicide attempt has in common and the most significant and decisive factor, in my opinion, in every suicide attempt is really just a person's sense of hopelessness, right?

Or as I might put it, a person's lack of better news. This country, the United States, the most powerful and influential nation in the world, we're undergoing a crisis of good news.

For an increasing number of people in our population, the bad news outweighs the good. And hopelessness seems more real than hope. And suffering and shame and sorrow far outweigh the joy and the gladness of life.

In this individualistic, consumeristic culture that we inhabit where not God but every individual gets to determine for themselves what is good and right and worth pursuing and where the whole point of life is to accumulate experiences of pleasure and to avoid experiences of pain and where we all sweat and toil and labor and place our faiths in ourselves or in the God of chance that we might just come to the end of our lives with more pleasure points than pain points in this kind of a culture and in this kind of a world.

[10:23] Suffering and grief cannot have any meaning or purpose in that kind of a framework. Suffering is just the yin to the yang of joy, right? The dark side of the force equal and opposite to the light side.

That ominous villain that threatens to steal our joy at any moment no matter how hard we fight against it. So see, according to this prevailing spirit of the modern secular West, we cannot rejoice in suffering.

This is what the dark spirit of American culture has to say, whispering its demonic voice into our ears and it's what our neighbors and our family members and our colleagues and our friends are increasingly believing that joy and grief are impossible.

Impossible to experience at the same time, that there is no such thing as simultaneous joy in grief. The paradox is impossible. But what does God have to say?

What alternative truth, what alternative reality might He want us to hear and believe and live into as followers of Jesus? What might He be shouting from the heavens trying to get our attention with, to have our eyes open to the possibility of this paradox of genuine joy in the midst of sorrow and suffering?

[11:36] You know, you could say that the whole letter of 1 Peter exists to insist upon this paradox of genuine joy in the midst of sorrow and suffering. That's why we're calling this sermon series Elect Exiles.

Right? Elect Exiles. It comes right out of Peter's introductory remarks here in verse 1. Peter, an apostle of Christ Jesus, to God's elect exiles scattered. This is how He identifies these suffering Christians scattered across what we know as modern-day Turkey.

He identifies them as living paradoxes, as those who are elect, that is chosen and loved by God, treasured and precious in His sight, and yet at the same time, exiles.

Religious minorities, afflicted and oppressed, suffering persecution, socially and economically disadvantaged misfits, foreigners, pilgrims in their own home.

So throughout this letter, we're supposed to feel this, this both-and feature, this tension of the Christian identity. We're supposed to feel the tension and the complexity and the nuance of being loved and held secure in God's perfect plan and purposes, while also keeping it real about the grief and the suffering and the trials that even God's beloved children face and experience, sometimes precisely because they are His children.

[12:54] Peter invites his readers, even challenges us to embrace this paradox and to live into our paradoxical identities as elect exiles. Elect exiles who are able to paradoxically celebrate good news at a funeral.

Elect exiles who are paradoxically able to rejoice and grieve at the same time and without contradiction. But now, where might this ability come from?

How do you rejoice even while you suffer grief? So in verse 6, picking up from where Jonathan left off last week, Peter writes, in all this, you greatly rejoice.

And when he writes, in all this, the all this he's referring to, which gives cause to rejoice, it's all the wonderful things that Jonathan preached about last week in verses 3 to 5. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He's given us so many things. He's given us mercy. He's given us new birth, new creation identities. He's given us a living hope rather than a dead hope. He's raised Christ from the dead and along with all that, he's given us an imperishable inheritance that we cannot lose.

[13:57] It's kept in heaven and salvation is on its way, as it says in verse 5, to be revealed in the last time. Peter is saying, in all that, you greatly rejoice.

But now notice something with me. Notice how in verses 4 and 5, sure there's this imperishable inheritance waiting for us in heaven and this salvation to be revealed at the end of time that's coming.

There are all these things in the future for God's children to look forward to, right? This living hope. It's a future focus. But then here in verse 6, Peter doesn't write, in all this, you will greatly rejoice later or eventually.

He writes in the present tense, in all this, you greatly rejoice. Like right now. Even though now, for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

So the question is, how can we rejoice now? In the present? When we're still waiting for our inheritance and our final salvation to come?

[14:59] What kind of authentic rejoicing can we enter into now in the midst of grief and trials when all the good stuff is said to be in the future? And this is a critique that many people have of Christianity, right?

That it's just like a pie-in-the-sky religion and just so spiritual and otherworldly and future-focused that it does no good for anybody in the real world and in the here and now. So what does Peter have to say in response to such a critique?

How can he be so confident that his readers have reason to rejoice in suffering now? That we have reason to rejoice in our suffering now? Well, the first thing he says in verse 7 is that contrary to the consumeristic, pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding spirit of our age, which would have us believe that suffering is just an unfortunate, purposeless interruption in our lives, like a wasted chapter in our stories.

Peter says no. Peter says that no suffering is ever meaningless, purposeless, or ultimately ending in doom and destruction for those who place their faith in Christ.

He says in verse 7 that we can rejoice through suffering and grief because such suffering and grief, though of course awful and agonizing, such grief can still be used by God to refine our faith is what he says.

[16:21] As it says in verse 4, like gold refined in a fire, only better. A refining process even more valuable because a refined faith is far more valuable than a chunk of gold, right?

And I've seen this in my life. I've seen this in many of your lives. The hard things that you've been through, I've seen it. For those of you who've suffered tragic losses, even while recognizing how terrible those losses have been, has not God refined your faith in him and his promises?

Has he not drawn you closer? And I'm not saying that it justifies your suffering or makes your suffering okay or not so bad, but has God not used it to refine your faith and to draw you closer to him?

In all those moments of loss and instability and insecurity, when we lose our jobs, when we face disappointments in our relationships, when our health fails us, when our kids don't turn out the way that we dreamed, our faith is refined.

It's refined and it's proven genuine. While all these things we hold onto and place our faith in are ripped out of our hands by the suffering that God puts into our lives. It's through suffering that God applies his burning fire to our compound, amalgamated faiths, full of so many impurities.

[17:42] He purges them from us so that we stop trusting in and depending on all the thousand other things that cannot actually hold us up and sustain us through our seasons of suffering.

That's the value of a refined faith. Like, Peter's not just commending a refined faith to us so that we can just have something nice and shiny to look at and brag about.

No, a pure and refined faith is a faith that holds more tightly to Jesus and therefore lets go of all the other false gods and false messiahs and shaky hopes that we're all so drawn to but that will only ever inevitably lead us to destruction and let us down.

Tim Keller likes to use this illustration a lot of the lumberjack and the bird in the forest. There's this lumberjack who knows that every tree is about to be cut down but he notices a bird building a nest in one of those trees and he doesn't want her labors to go to waste or for her eggs to get destroyed so out of compassion he shakes the tree he rattles it and the bird is terribly disturbed and annoyed and frustrated and she moves to another tree only for the lumberjack to go and shake and rattle that tree as well until she moves again and this goes on and on and on and by the fourth or fifth or tenth tree the bird is looking down and sees the lumberjack as an enemy right?

an unnecessary nuisance and the bird cannot understand why the lumberjack won't just leave her alone to rest in all these trees that seem perfectly like perfectly good places for a nest and to lay

eggs but the compassionate lumberjack will not let her place her faith in any of these trees that are about to come down and he shakes and disturbs every single one until finally the mother bird flies away from all the trees and begins to build her nest on a high strong rock which she actually finds to be far superior a far superior option that she wished she started with in the first place and then all the other mama birds begin to do the same because they see how secure she is on that rock and how she and her baby birds are thriving this is how God uses suffering in our lives to refine our faiths to purge the untrustworthy things that we place our trust in and when we have eyes to see that that is what he's doing with our suffering that is how we can rejoice in our suffering even now even in the present because we know he's drawing us nearer to him it doesn't make the suffering easy or okay or even justified but we can rest assured that the result of this refining of our faith as it says in verse 7 is ultimately going to result in something amazing praise and glory and honor the praise and glory and honor of Jesus Christ and ours as well when the spirits of this age tell us to build our nests in this tree or that tree but God shakes us again and again until we build on the solid rock of Christ even when it's less conventional and less comfortable and harder and more costly the result is that Jesus receives praise and glory and honor our refined faith brings glory to Christ the supreme object of our faith a refined faith bears witness to the world that Jesus is enough that Jesus is better and that he is a higher more solid and more trustworthy rock than any other there is no God like him and this is what a refined faith looks like in verse 8 according to Peter this is what it looks like he says though you have not seen him you love him and even though you do not see him now you believe or better it could be translated you have faith you place your trust in him and are filled with an inexpressible or unspeakable and glorious joy for verse 9 you are receiving the end result or the goal of your faith the salvation of your souls that's what a refined faith looks like according to Peter but you know

[21 : 55] I struggled a lot as I came to these last two verses 8 and 9 thinking about how to teach and apply this part of the passage for us today because how do you commend this experience that Peter's talking about in verses 8 and 9 how do you commend and apply that to someone how do I get someone to love and trust someone they haven't seen someone I haven't even seen myself how do I convince people of this unseen person to the point where they're filled with inexpressible joy glorious joy and faith and to the point where they're experiencing the salvation of their souls as a Christian I could say that this is something I've experienced and I know that many of you many of us have experienced this as well what Peter describes here many of us do love and trust Jesus even though we haven't seen him and many of us can attest to this inexpressible glorious joy that he's filled us with but we also know that it really is an unspeakable joy an inexpressible joy it's hard to describe it's hard to communicate it defies purely rationalistic categories of explanation and understanding like somehow while we haven't seen him with our physical eyes somehow many of us have still beheld him with the eyes of our heart somehow to use Paul's language but I totally get how this could sound super weird and super spiritual and super like religious and pious and just not accessible and difficult to relate to if you haven't experienced it and honestly there's no special argument that I could share nor technique that exists that can automatically like instill this kind of faith in you it's really a gift as Jesus said to the doubting Thomas blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed it takes being born again by the Holy Spirit it takes faith to experience this it takes faith to be able to preach good news at a funeral and to rejoice in the deepest grief it takes faith to accept that this paradox is possible but where does that leave us now today particularly for those of us who struggle with faith whether you struggle to believe and accept the future promises of God about the living hope of the resurrected Christ the salvation to come the imperishable inheritance that he offers or whether you struggle to believe in the present promises of God that we can rejoice in suffering right now and that God can use our present suffering to refine us and draw us nearer to him where do we go from here you know there's a very simplistic method of Christian counseling that drives me crazy that would just kind of it's a very condemning method of Christian counseling and don't worry we won't ever send you to any of those kinds but basically they would just rebuke you and command you to believe harder right try harder have more faith just stop not trusting and believing in God like just stop it right stop your sin of unbelief right now stop it but I've never really seen this work

I've never seen it work and I think it's because this method is more of an authoritarian guilt based and moralistic appeal to the will or at least the human willpower when really what's needed is something that will capture our hearts so I don't have a technique I don't have an argument that will

instill faith in you but I have something better I have the Holy Spirit and I have the gospel to preach and what I'd like to do is instead of filling you with guilt I'd like to preach a positive vision a compelling vision for you so that even if you cannot see him you might behold him today and I want to suggest to you that Jesus is the only one that can make sense of the paradox presented in 1 Peter the only one who can make sense of good news at a funeral and of rejoicing in the midst of grief the prototype of an elect exile Jesus is see as far as I can tell every other alternative to the good news about Jesus either ends up downplaying grief and sorrow and suffering as natural or just not that bad or it offers hope that's either an over promising lie or just not good enough to bring any meaningful and lasting hope so for example sometimes in the face of death and suffering people might say or at least be thinking well it was this person's time right she's returned to mother earth and there goes the circle of life and basically what they're saying is that death and suffering are natural and a normal part of life and not really something to be that grieved over right or they might say something like well at least the pain is gone at least their suffering is gone and at least you know many members of the family survived but that's to say well it's bad but it's not that bad not the absolute worst case scenario right or on the other side some might say at a funeral that you know oh so and so so and so is in a better place you know maybe they're reincarnated as something amazing in another life but they don't know that it's just wishful thinking or maybe they might say something like well this person lived a good life and we should celebrate his time on earth as if that's the best that we could ever hope for and then that's it but do you see how flat and one dimensional and how lacking in gravity and seriousness and hope and joy these responses are like all at the same time death and suffering demand our bitterest grief because every being every human being is made in the image of God and so there is really no more fitting response to death and suffering than absolute grief and sorrow apart from the gracious promise of God to make all things new hopelessness and despair and suicide actually make sense to grieve over death and pain is to acknowledge that this is not the way things were meant to be grief even honors the goodness of God's original creation and the grievous ways it has gone wrong ever since humanity turned its back on God if we see death and suffering for what they really are in the light of God's intentions for the world and in the light of Jesus Christ and what he came to do Christians of all people have the most reason to grieve because we confess the devastating effects of a fractured relationship with God on the entire creation and the infinite cost it would take to restore it according to the story of Christianity to grieve this broken world is the most human thing we could possibly do and at the same time the most God-like thing we could possibly do the God of Christianity doesn't indulge the lie that brokenness and death are not that bad he grieves it with an immeasurable passion and he sends for its healing the most radical solution right the son his son he sends for his son to be crucified on a cross that's how bad it is it's really the bitterness and the horror of the cross that's the measure of the despair we should feel in this broken world and if we have eyes to see how bad things really are then surely no wishful thinking no myth no legend no temporal celebration of life can ever overcome or even match our despair right but listen and this is the gospel Jesus can overcome that despair Jesus can and he has Jesus crucified for the sins of the world and risen in the flesh in history not a mere myth tons of verifiable evidence Jesus and Jesus alone can overcome our despair and the wreckage of sin and suffering and he has so he and he alone can make sense of the paradox he's the only way we can rejoice in suffering he's the only way because he himself rejoiced even in the worst suffering the death and torture of the son of God he who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising its shame was seated at the right hand of God it's only because of Jesus and only in his story of suffering subverting good news it's only in and through him that we can weep with those who weep and recognize the awful stench of sin and suffering all around us in all their darkness and despair it's only in and through Jesus that we can face the truth about how terrible things are and yet still get out of bed day after day knowing that he can and will make all things new knowing that salvation has already broken into history starting at the empty tomb it's only in and through Jesus that we can rejoice in faith with inexpressible unspeakable glorious joy because we are even now receiving the end result of our faith the salvation of our souls the salvation of the whole of our lives both now in this age and beyond because of our union and communion with the risen Christ see Jesus preserves the paradox he makes it possible and better than that he makes it beautiful and that is the gospel and that is why our joy is unspeakable it doesn't make sense it's inexpressible because it's a paradoxical joy that can only be found in the crucified and risen Christ crucified for us raised in glory and we with him when we follow in those steps let's do that

Christchurch will you pray with me Lord God would you make us speechless before you unable to articulate the greatness of the mercy and grace that you have poured out upon us in Christ would you make us people who embody the inexpressible unspeakable joy that is full of your glory would that be so evident in us as we meditate upon who your son is and what he's done for us Lord make this a place a church where we can be real about the hard things in our lives and in this world even dramatically real

[33 : 12] God because this world is so broken and sin is that bad and suffering is that unnatural and so far from your design and from your heart but Lord at the very same time would we bear that unique witness as Christ's followers to the joy that we have that only we can have through grief and suffering make us that kind of beautiful unique witness to the world for the glory of Jesus and the good of our neighbors it's in his name we pray amen to the glory to the glory to the exemption to the Jeff and say to of our son and thank you

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