

Our Trials: Union with Christ

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This morning, our New Testament lesson is a reading from the first letter of Peter.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

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.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

[1 : 1 9] But rejoice as much as 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.

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 God's household. 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?

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Thank you so much, Cherubah, and good morning, Christ Church. We have, over the past three months, been exploring this amazing letter from the Apostle Peter.

[2 : 3 9] And as we draw near to the end of this letter, Peter is just kind of gathering up various themes that he's laid down. And today we're going to talk about one of the great themes of the letter, which is suffering.

And he uses that word four times here in this text. And I want you to know up front that Peter's not addressing generic human suffering, the kind of suffering that comes through unmet needs and disease and loss and grief and death.

Every human being has to experience and endure those forms of suffering to varying degrees. And, of course, the Bible gives us a theology for how to endure that kind of moral evil and natural evil.

But Peter is talking about something altogether different than that. He's talking about something more specific and more particular. And if you just draw your eyes to verse 13, he talks about participating in the sufferings of Christ.

What does that mean? He talks in verse 14 about being insulted because of the name of Christ. And then he talks in verse 16 about suffering as a Christian.

[3 : 57] Now, we become so used to that word, Christian, that we forget its original intended meaning was an insult.

It was meant as a nickname of derision and contempt. If you look at the Acts of the Apostles, they go to the city of Antioch in Acts chapter 11.

And it's there that the disciples of Jesus are first called Christians. And this word, this insulting word means little Christ or Messiah people. So the gist of the insult is it's basically like saying Messiah freaks.

That's what a Christian is. And Peter wants to talk to us about suffering as Christians. And his basic assumption is that if we live as a minority group of Christians in a majority culture that does not know Christ or follow the way of Christ, then we're very likely going to be insulted because of the name of Christ.

We're very likely to suffer because we're Christians. And Peter's goal, his project, I think, with this whole letter is to toughen us up, to toughen Christians up, to give us thicker skin, and to give us more resolve, more resilience.

[5 : 24] In fact, as we'll see in a moment, more rejoicing in the midst of our suffering as Christians. Does this make sense? Where he's coming from? Maybe just a nod or, yes, I'm awake.

I'm alive, awake, alert, enthusiastic this morning, and so excited for this sermon that's coming my way. Yeah. So I want to engage two questions.

The first question is, what is Christian suffering? Not generic suffering, but Christian suffering. And then I want to ask the question, how does God want us to respond?

What is Christian suffering? How does God want us to respond? So let's explore this idea of Christian suffering. In chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this letter, Peter is talking about these Christians he's writing to as being reviled, being slandered, being maligned and verbally abused, and socially rejected.

And he says in chapter 2, verse 12, he says, Gentile, the Gentile pagans, they accuse you, Christians, for doing wrong, and they speak against you as evildoers.

[6 : 31] Now, why in the world are these Greco-Roman family members and friends and coworkers and neighbors seeing these Christians as evildoers? What's up with that? What are these Christians doing that is causing their culture to judge them as doing something intolerable or something wrong?

Or chapter 3, verse 14, Peter says, you Christians are suffering for what is right. You're suffering for righteousness' sake, and you're being reviled because of your good behavior in Christ.

What is that? What is the righteousness? What is the good behavior in Jesus Christ that's being disapproved as unacceptable to the broader culture?

Well, I want to suggest a few things. First of all, like Israel, these Christians were theological exclusivists. So every day in Israel, morning and evening, people would confess their faith with Deuteronomy 6, and they would say, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, or the Lord alone.

And basically, in these polytheistic cultures, the people of God, they were committed monotheists. And so they said that all the gods of the nations around us are actually false.

[7 : 53] They're not real. They're just blind, deaf, and dumb idols. And there's only one true, living creator God. And that was a reason why Jewish people were not very liked from Egypt to Babylon back then and maybe even still today.

And likewise, these Christians were monotheists. They were monotheists with a Christological twist, right? Because they said, there's only one God, and Jesus is Lord.

But they didn't stop there. They said, Jesus is Lord, and therefore, we're calling everybody to abandon their money gods and their sex gods and their power gods, and we're calling all of you to come and worship this Jesus and follow this Jesus as Lord with us.

And as if this were not provocative enough, in this Greco-Roman society, it was your civic duty to burn incense in honor of the emperor, right?

It was your duty to pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord of all. And of course, the Christians couldn't do this. They were refusing to do this. And they were seen, therefore, as subverting the stability of their families, of the city, and of the empire as a whole.

[9 : 17] In fact, in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, the Christians are accused of, quote, turning the world upside down, right? Because when it came to this question of who is in charge, who or what has authority over the cosmos and over society, Christians had distinctive doctrinal beliefs that answered that question.

And that was not very popular. And they were being critiqued by their peers. They were being critiqued by the elites and the intelligentsia of the time. In fact, if you fast forward about 50 years beyond this letter to the early 2nd century, there was a guy named Suetonius.

He was a Roman historian. And he writes about Christianity as a, quote, wicked superstition, right? Another of his colleagues and contemporaries, Tacitus, another historian, and he said that Christianity is a dangerous and destructive superstition.

Or think about in the late 2nd century, about 100 years after this letter, there was a cultured despiser of Christianity. His name was Lucian. And this is what he says. He says, So how does this cultured critic of Christianity define a Christian?

And he says, A Christian is a person who lives under the laws of the crucified Christ. And Lucian, I think, was right. In addition to these distinctive doctrinal beliefs that there's only one God, only one Lord, only one Savior, only one hope of the world that can cause us to live for all time, Christians had these distinctive ethical practices that were tied to the laws of Jesus, or the commands of Jesus, concerning the character and the conduct of his followers.

[11 : 31] And what were some of these Christian practices that these Christians were suffering for? Well, earlier this summer, I introduced you to the work of a scholar, and I'd like to put him back on your radar.

And if you weren't here to teach you about it for the first time, his name was Larry Hurtado. He was a professor at the University of Edinburgh. He's since passed away.

But he wrote a book in 2016 called *Destroyer of the Gods*. And the subtitle is *Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. And what he argues in this book is that the early church engaged in a Christian social project and that they were seeking to be this unique kind of human community that defied the categories of their time.

And what Hurtado says, he said that the Christian social project had at least five elements. First of all, they were committed to multi-ethnicity and the equality between the races.

They said that we all have a common identity in Jesus that's more fundamental than our racial identities, which are still important, but they've been radically relativized because we're all now one in Jesus Christ.

[12 : 47] The second aspect of the Christian social project is that they were unusually generous with their money. They were highly committed to caring for the poor, for the weak, and for the marginalized, to caring for vulnerable widows and orphans and strangers.

And they weren't just caring for those from their own group. They were caring for people of all backgrounds. And the third aspect of this Christian social project for which these Christians were suffering was this commitment to be non-retaliatory.

They were marked by a commitment to forgiveness, radical forgiveness, especially toward the people who were criticizing them and excluding them. They said, we're going to be bridge builders and peacemakers toward those who are insulting and accusing us.

You with me so far? This Christian social project had a fourth element, and Hurtado says that they were strongly and practically against discarding unwanted babies, either through abortion or infant exposure.

These kids, mostly girls, were thrown out and left on the garbage heap to die or to be sold into slavery or prostitution. And the Christians came along and said, no, that's wrong.

[14 : 02] And they rescued them, and they brought them into their families. And then fifthly, he says the Christian social project was all about this revolutionary ethic of sex. And they regarded, they prohibited all sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

And they said that sex is not this irresistible appetite, but it's rather a way for us to imitate the God who's given himself to us in Jesus Christ.

And Hurtado says each of these five practices are there because Christians sought to submit themselves to biblical authority and to the lordship of Jesus. And as we said before, the first two of these practices, ethnic diversity and caring for the poor, those sound liberal.

They sound like they're coming to us from the left, right? And the last two of these practices, sanctity of life and sexual ethics, they sound conservative, like they're coming to us from the right.

And yet this third practice of non-retaliation and forgiveness sounds like no particular party on offer, no particular platform or agenda in our society.

[15 : 12] And that churches today are under enormous pressure, incredible pressure, to jettison either the first two or the last two of these practices and not to keep them all.

And yet to give up on any of them would be to make Christianity the handmaid of a particular political program on the left or on the right and would undermine the church's missionary encounter with our culture.

Now why am I refreshing your memory and putting this back on your radar? Because this category-defying Christian social project, in addition to their Christian beliefs, was deeply offensive.

It was deeply offensive. The earliest Christians, they were ridiculed as a threat to the social order because they would not honor all deities and all identities, all teachings and all practices, all doctrines and all ethics.

And so they were accused and seen to be exclusive and narrow. And this is again why Peter says in chapter 2 verse 12, the Gentile pagans accuse you of doing wrong and speak against you as evildoers.

[16 : 22] Chapter 3 verse 14, that you suffer for what is right, for righteousness' sake, and you're reviled because of your good behavior in Christ. And yet, this Christian social project that was so deeply offensive was also somehow mysteriously attractive.

And it was convincing many people. There was a growing number of converts, a staggering number of converts, especially in the urban centers of the Roman Empire. And the question is, why is that?

What was attracting them? And what's interesting is that Hurtado, he basically, the same year he published this book, he went around giving these lectures.

He published these lectures in a book with a wonderful title called, Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries? And he's exploring this question, why did people begin to follow the way of Jesus knowing full well that it had serious negative consequences?

Why would you take on obvious relational costs, social costs, financial costs, and political costs? Right, given that Christians at this time were met pretty much with negativity and disapproval, given that Christians were seen as different, strange, bizarre, weird, odd, out of step with and intention with the dominant culture, why become a Christian?

[18 : 01] Hurtado says, if what you desired was greater social acceptance, early Christianity was hardly the sensible route to take. So with a full awareness of all these Christian teachings and practices, with a full awareness of all the consequences and the costs, why become a Christian?

And Hurtado says, it's because of the Christian message, because of this message of the gospel, that this one, true, radically transcendent, almighty, sovereign God was moved with powerful love to come and seek you.

He was moved to take on flesh and to come and give himself in sacrificial love to save you. And he came to welcome you into a direct personal relationship with him so that when you worship him, he draws near to you.

And when you pray to him, he bends his ear and he listens to you. And when you die, he's going to share his life with you forever.

And Hurtado says, the logic of these converts was this, that this God is so powerfully loving that suffering for him because of distinctive beliefs or practices, that's not a loss for us.

[19 : 31] Given his powerful love, it's a gain for us. Does that make sense? The question is, do we believe this?

Do you believe this? Are we as a church willing, like our mothers and fathers in the faith of old and our brothers and sisters around the world today, are we willing to link arms and suffer together for the way of Jesus Christ in this world?

That's the question that Peter puts before us. That's what he wants us to think about in terms of Christian suffering. Does that make sense? I've done my best to try to tell you what Christian suffering is all about.

But I also want to engage this question of how does God want us to respond? How should we respond to it? Well, you've got to remember that Peter is an authority on suffering as a Christian.

In fact, in the Acts of the Apostles, we're told that two times when the church was being initially planted, Peter was arrested, thrown in jail, and put on trial before the authorities.

[20 : 38] He was flogged. A few years after he writes this letter, he's going to be executed by the emperor. And of course, many Christians are suffering like this in the world today, in North Korea, in Iran, in Libya, in Bangladesh, if you've been following that news this week.

And yet, the challenges that the church is facing in our mission to Western culture are quite different than those challenges, right? Our challenge is that we are entering into an era in which there's not only no more social benefit to being a Christian, if there used to be one, there is one no more, and there's now an actual social cost to being a Christian.

Right? As beliefs in God, in truth, in sin, in the afterlife are increasingly disappearing in our society and in our culture, Christianity becomes more and more offensive and more and more incomprehensible.

And suffering, then, as a Christian, in the secular age, it's subtle and it's nuanced, but it's real. It's real. And I want us to think about a few examples and a few illustrations of how we might suffer as Christians and how we might respond to that.

Think about your work and your career. You might be, as a Christian, excluded from circles of influence and business because your faith is perceived not as an asset but as a liability.

[22 : 08] You might be passed over for a promotion because of your standards of what's right and what's wrong and because of your convictions about how we, as Christians, are committed to treat other people.

Or think about your school and your friends. If you're in high school, you might not get invited to social gatherings because you're a Christian because they know that you're not going to join in with the drinking and drugs and all the other aspects of that party culture.

Or if you're in middle school and you're a Christian and because you're a Christian, you don't laugh at that cruel joke. You don't engage in that inappropriate conversation. You don't join in making fun of your classmate.

Because you don't go along, you might be the next person to be made fun of. Or think about your family and your friends. People might say to you, gosh, you know, I thought you were smart.

I mean, how can you, how can you say there's only one God, only one way of salvation, only one hope of the world? I thought you were smarter than that. Or how can you go along with this Christian social project?

[23 : 13] I thought you were more caring than that. And Peter says, if you're in one of those situations, how do we respond?

And he gives us several imperatives, several exhortations, starting in verse 12, he says this. He says, Dear friends, do not be surprised. Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

And when Peter talks about this fiery furnace, he's referring back to Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, and this idea that God puts his people through the fire to test them and to refine them.

And the picture there is that, you know, when we dig up out of the earth this piece of, this hunk of metal ore that contains both metal and dross, right, both the pure and the impure, both the worthy and the worthless, both the true and the false, that the only way to separate those things from one another is with fire.

And Peter says in chapter 1, verse 7, he says this refining fire of Christian suffering is God proving the genuineness of your faith, God testing you to see who and what you really trust and where your allegiances actually lie.

[24 : 37] And when he puts you through that fire, all those things that you're trusting that are not God, all of your inadequate false trusts, all of your self-interest, all of your disordered priorities, all of your unhealthy attachments, in that fire they're going to be incinerated, right, they're going to be destroyed like dross.

Why? So that the depth and the quality of our Christian faith in God can shine like gold. And so Peter says, if you're suffering for the right reasons as a Christian, don't be surprised that God's using that to refine your faith like pure gold.

Okay? And then what's the next imperative and exhortation that Peter gives? He goes on in verse 13 and he says, but rejoice.

Rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. Rejoice is that same word that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount when He's giving His beatitudes and He gets that final beatitude and He says this.

He says, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad. Really, Jesus?

[26 : 08] Really, Peter? You want us to respond not with sorrowful self-pity? You want us to respond not with stoic toughness?

You want us to respond with joy? Where does that joy come from? How in the world can we rejoice in the midst of suffering?

And Peter's answer is this. He says, because you have the privilege of participating in Christ. Because you have the privilege of being united to Christ.

Think about that union, Peter says. Our union with the highest and most important and most powerful and most sacrificially loving and most joyful person in the universe, that is the source and that is the secret of our joy and suffering.

And that doesn't mean that we don't hurt. It doesn't mean we don't feel sad. It just means that undergirding and infusing all of those experiences and all of those emotions is this kind of unspeakable joy.

[27 : 20] A joy that only Christ can give. And Peter here, he's not theorizing about joy. He's just relaying his own experience. If you, again, go back to the Acts of the Apostles chapter 5.

It says this. He says that they, the authorities, they called Peter and they called the apostles in and they had them flogged and they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore.

And then it says that the apostles left rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name. You see, for Peter to bear this royal title of Christ, of Messiah, for Peter to share in this kingly name of the resurrected Lord himself, for Peter to suffer disgrace for this name that is above every name, that was his source of joy.

And Peter goes on in verse 14, he says, if you're insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you. In verse 16, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed but praise God that you bear that name.

See, to not be ashamed means the opposite of that. It means be honored. Be honored. There's no higher honor than bearing that name at which every knee is going to bow and every tongue is going to confess that Jesus is Lord.

[28 : 52] There's no higher honor than having that same spirit that raised Christ from the dead living inside of you. That same spirit that's going to glorify us and make us like Christ.

You have that spirit, you bear that name, and so Peter says, praise God. Praise God for who you are and what he's made you to be.

And then Peter gives us one final imperative, one final exhortation. He says, dear friends, don't be surprised but just know that your faith is being refined like pure gold.

And then he says, you know, rejoice and consider yourself blessed and honored and praise God because you've been united to God's Son and filled with his Spirit. And then the last thing Peter says is this in verse 19, so then those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good.

And what is the good? What is the good that Peter is encouraging us to do? Well, the passage just before this one that we explored last week is all about building up the church.

[30 : 06] It's all about strengthening and enriching the Christian community. The passage just after this one that we're going to finish this sermon series in next week is all about the elders and leaders of the church and this family of believers standing firm in the faith.

And so when Peter says that we should entrust ourselves to our faithful creator and continue to do good, he's referring to all the good stuff we talked about last week. He says, continue to do the good of persevering in prayer together.

Continue to do the good of loving and forgiving one another so that you cover a multitude of sins. Continue to do the good of loving strangers and welcoming newcomers and practicing hospitality without grumbling and with gladness.

Continue to do the good of speaking truth to one another. Speaking to one another with God's truth. Continue to do the good of serving one another with God's strength.

That is the good that Peter encourages us, the family of faith, the community of believers, those who have the honor to bear the name of Christ.

[31 : 20] That's the good that we're to continue to do. And so the question as we conclude is, is this worth it? Right?

Is it worth it to live the way that Peter and the apostles teach us to live? Is it worth it? Is it worth all the costs? Is it worth all the consequences? Is it worth all the sacrifice?

Well, I want to end with this in verse 13. Peter says, But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.

Peter says, Listen, friends, if you persevere, if you don't give in to the temptation and the pressure to relax your faith so that you can relieve your suffering, if you continue to do the good of building up the church, he says, the time is coming when joy will overwhelm you.

You're going to be overjoyed. Why? Because Jesus is going to reveal the fullness of His glory. And Jesus is going to put this sad and sinful world right.

[32 : 38] And Jesus is going to wipe away all the tears from our eyes. And Jesus is going to make all things new. And when you're there just flooded in that glory and overwhelmed by that joy, you'll have the answer to your question, is it worth it?

Of course. Of course it's worth it. This is what our hearts are longing for. Is it not joy and glory?

This is the way to joy and glory. So may God enable us to walk in this way in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.