Glad to Take Heat

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[0:00] In our reading this morning, what encourages you and what discourages you as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus, especially in the suffering of life? And suffering comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. In our series of gratitude, it may be surprising to you that in the reading this morning, as it was to me, we find this theme of suffering in the middle of gratitude. Where does that all go together? I was almost tempted to actually dodge the reading and choose something a little bit easier to grapple with. But you know me, never one to take an easy option. So here we go. First Peter is a letter to the early followers of the emerging church.

That is in the context in which it was written. The church was scattered throughout the Roman Empire and the Roman Empire and the wider world wasn't too adept or happy about this Christian movement that was moving so rapidly and growing. And we know that the early church was suffering from acute persecution. And therefore, this scripture within context comes as no surprise to us because imprisonment and death was a reality very much to the early followers. And to some, it was just too much. Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. Many who became followers were ostracized by their families. They were chucked out of their home. They lost their job. They lost their living. They lost their status. They lost their security. They lost their inheritance. Don't worry, we'll give you an update on the finance next week. Is that okay? That's how you've responded to that wonderful video. Being a follower of
Christ isn't perhaps the most comfortable experience that we know and appreciate. Because let's face it, in our Western culture, we're pretty comfortable, aren't we really, when it comes to persecution.
Yeah, you know, it's being a follower of Christ isn't, none of us this morning have risked the rest for coming here this morning. None of us have had our homes raided because we've met. None of us have had our businesses closed down, our bank accounts frozen by the authorities or been placed under house arrest.
You know, this was the early church. Yet this scripture is just as stark for some of our brothers and sisters today as a reality that are meeting in different parts of this world.
[2:50] This scripture is alive for them. Don't get me wrong and please don't hear me because I'm not minimizing the suffering that many people experience here and those of you who are listening.

Because suffering can be a significant part of our discipleship journey. And I have known those who have struggled in their faith during suffering in its various forms. And perhaps we get to a point where life gets tough and we wonder how can we continue to take the heat of life in our Christian journey.
verse 14. If you're insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed. You are blessed. Whoa. Let's imbibe that one.
For the spirit of glory and God's rests on you. I don't know whether that's been your experience. That you've been actually blessed by the insults that you have received or the putbacks for being a Christian. You know, many disciples and apprentices of Jesus live and work in settings today where they are often a minority in the workplace and in their faith. Many of you will know what that's like. Many of us recall the news stories. A person who was disciplined in the workplace for wearing a cross. There was a person who was arrested on the street for preaching because one person disagreed with them.
[4:22] Not for the rest of the people passing by, but one person. And then there was the nurse, wasn't there? The nurse who actually somebody asked her client or a patient asked them to pray for her to pray with them, which she did. And then the family complained and she was disciplined. You know?

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And then there is the everyday when we have experienced in ourselves or in the home, in the workplace, that critical spirit. And we all know that, don't we? People who want to put us down. People who want to actually draw or suck the joy out of us by some form of criticism that they come to us and causes us what they think is suffering. It's not. Take it on board. Because maybe like you've, as I've had, people, oh, call yourself a Christian? How can you behave like that? You know? Maybe we've all experienced that. Paul knows from his own experience that following Jesus isn't without suffering.
Yet, however, if you suffer as a Christian, verse 16, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. Praise God that you bear the name of Jesus, that you are called into a situation actually to bear his name in a setting. You know, is there a place where you are unable to mention the name of Jesus to mention the name of Jesus or talk about him openly? In that case, is that the very place where the gospel of Jesus needs you to be lived out?
Rather than retreating? What areas of everyday life of relationships have we retreated from because we may offend others' views and their sensitivities?
[6:18] I think sometimes we've become a little bit oversensitive as to society tells us we can't do this and we can't do that. You know, there's many ways that we can show Jesus in our lives through kindness, through gratitude, through encouraging and building one another up.

You know? It doesn't have to just be about, I'm just going to throw you this tract and tell you about Jesus. Although that is a good time as well. Listen to the Spirit. If he tells you to do that, do it. You know? What areas of life or relationships have we retreated? I mean, I won't make a comment, or I think I must have, but for those in government who are seeking now to tell the Church of England what it should do in relation to biblical truth and doctrine. You know? Where does that fit? Who's going to stand? And it's about time to stand.
Paul is encouraging in the early church that not everyone is happy to bring the good news of salvation, hope, restoration, forgiveness, grace and love that Jesus promises into the settings into which we are called, into which we find ourselves. But we are carriers of the Gospel. That's why we go out from here.
We are carriers of the Gospel into the everyday to make it known. And as the ones who are in our everyday lives able to do that, as Paul wrote in Philippians, but I focus on this one thing. I forget the past. I forget the past. And I think that's really important because I think many of us have been deterred or slapped down, or maybe we were criticized for sharing our faith. And so we do exactly that.
We focus on the one thing that was in the past rather than moving forward. And Paul says, forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead. I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus Christ, is calling us.
[8:25] I can think of lots of times, and I'm sure you can as well, where you've been criticized in a setting. It might have even been in your family setting. Somebody really close to you, where there's been that put down and you think, oh, I better not go there. I'm a bit sensitive.

I better not. You know, no. Hold the line. And we still can move forward. Jesus says, be filled with the Holy Spirit. Be filled with the peace, power and presence and purpose of the Holy Spirit that he gives us so that we have the confidence and resilience. Now there's an interesting word for today. Resilience. To continue to stand in witness for him, acknowledging that there will be a cost and there is a cost for standing for him in our discipleship. And not everybody is going to love us as we love the name of Jesus. But it comes with the package. That's what it comes with.
In Hebrews, it says, let us draw near to God with sincere heart and with full assurance that faith brings. And when troubles strike, and they will, could even happen as you walk out today. Where have you been today? Oh, I've been to church this morning. Oh, you don't do that, do you? I thought people had given up on that. Then is the time to stand and to share the good news.
The thing is, in those moments, God runs towards us and meets us where we are. I don't know whether that's been your experience, where you've suddenly found yourself in a position where, you know, somebody really criticizes you for your faith, or even a fellow Christian, even. You know, if somebody comes and says to you in church, I want to tell you something in love, run for a nuclear fallout bunker.
Because it'll be anything but in love. You know, when you find that place, when you find that place, as Paul says, ask the Holy Spirit to come, because God runs towards you, supports you, encourages you to finish the race well. Whatever that part of the race is.

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[10:53] I've often heard people say of a certain age, and now I'm moving towards that certain age myself, that I've done enough in the church. It's all for younger people now. I've done my bit.

The gospel never tells us we've done our bit. We run the race. We run the race, and the race has never ended. We bring our gifts and skills that each of us bring at different stages, and different parts of our life, to the fellowship to make Jesus known.
And that may include suffering. On the 4th of October 2022, Jim Redmond died.
You may not have heard of Jim Redmond. Jim was watching, everybody was watching on television, on television, most people, in the Olympics. And there was this crazy man, who they tried to stop running onto the track. The runner in the Olympics was his son, the Olympic athlete, Derek Redmond. If you were watching, it was in Barcelona, October, it was in the Summer Olympics of 1992. I remember watching it. And I stood along with the rest of the world in awe and in tears, as his son, who was ready and had trained to run this race, to do his best, broke down because of an injury on the track. I can't even imagine what that must have been like. You run the race. You train. You get ready to go. This is the peak. This is the ultimate.
This is the goal. And he breaks down. And we watched, we clapped, and we wept, as the father ran to the son. He held him, he supported him, and he encouraged him, because he wanted to get to that line in his suffering.
[13:11] And that's what God calls us to do. I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus Christ, is calling you.

Let's end the race well, shall we? Knowing whatever we face, that God comes and meets us at that point to encourage us to finish the race well.
Never give up on our sharing or suffering until we reach that glorious line and receive the well done that awaits for all who truly turn to him. Maybe our scripture wasn't that difficult this morning to understand for us. Shall we pray together?
Holy Spirit, would you come and help us to reflect on our own situation with you right now? Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, and our gratitude to you, Lord, for your presence with us in whatever situation that we are experiencing or will experience this week, in sharing our faith with others, knowing that you meet us where we are.
And Lord, thank you for that encouragement that you give us, Lord, that you support us all the day long of this troublous life. Until the shadows lengthen, the evening comes, the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done.
[15:00] Then, of your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

So, Lord, be with us this day in wherever and whatever situation we find ourselves in. We pray especially for our brothers and sisters around this world today who are meeting and sharing the gospel in settings that put them and their families at risk of death, imprisonment, persecution.
Fill them with fresh courage and resilience. In the power of your spirit, we pray. And Lord, give us gratitude and abundance and freedom that we have that freedom within our own setting and country to share our faith openly.
Inspire us afresh, Lord, to encourage each other, build each other up in the gospel and to make Jesus known, not through just what we say but how we behave.
Lord, we pray for those who support others at this time. We pray for the work of Open Doors. We pray for those who lobby governments and regimes, for those who are there to assist our Christian brothers and sisters to know that they are not alone, that they are not forgotten.
[16:36] Lord, may they know your presence, power, and strength in extra measure in their standing and witnessing for you. Lord, would you be with us this week in our community, in our homes.

Lord, we pray for a fresh courage and boldness to witness where we work and to those that we live alongside. Embolden and encourage us by the power of your spirit and strengthen us when words and comments come our way and unpopularity looms large for the gospel message.
Lord, may we stand in your strength and your confidence that we are not alone. Lord, bring healing to those who have stood for your faith and have been knocked back by the pain of comments, rejection, and criticism.
Lord, bring healing, fresh hope, new words. Bring them to us, Lord, to be a place where your word and teaching can revive and restore them.

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Lord, we pray for those who we know whose anniversary may fall about this time, who have run the race well. We pray for those who have run the race too and are coming to the end of this earthly life. [18:13] Holy Spirit, may they end well, knowing that their race in all its trials and tribulations have been in the knowledge that you are here, that you never leave us or forsake us, that your everlasting arms are holding us and welcoming us home.

Holy Spirit, come amongst us in our sacrificial giving, our sharing, our discipleship. Keep us growing more and more into the likeness of Jesus, Lord.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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