

# Grateful, In Spite of Suffering

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, everyone. Why don't we bow our heads and pray together before we think about God's Word. Our gracious Father, as we've come together to think about gratitude today, we pray, Lord, that even those of us who feel like we're going through a season of darkness may be able to find something that we can say thank you for.

And Lord, we thank you for you are an amazing God who promises amazing things to your people. Lord, we want to really believe in those promises.

And so we pray, Lord, today you would help our unbelief. Lord, that even in times of adversity, we might find space to give thanks for all that you've done and all that you will do in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. So, in 1 Peter chapter 1, we read in verses 6 and 7 these words.

In this, that is, in the events that form the basis of our salvation, the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, in all this, says Paul, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

[ 1 : 35 ] These have come so that your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour.

One of the hardest things that I had to face in my own ministry in local church is that though there were lots of people coming to Christ, there were lots of people who had been sitting in church for years who came to Christ in our church.

My general sense was, I would rather people left our church than remained in it unconverted. And sadly, all the people I wanted to leave never went.

Here's the thing. What I had to face was, there are some people who started well and then gave up. didn't just give up coming to our church, but gave up their faith altogether.

I spent a lot of time in prayer and thinking, trying to work out, well, why is this? Why is it that some people give up? And then I realised, this is no new phenomenon.

[ 3 : 05 ] In John's Gospel, in chapter 6, in verse 66, we're told that many of the disciples, who, unlike us, saw Jesus, unlike us, heard him minister, saw him do healings, did all that, some of those disciples gave up.

And in verse 66, we're told why. They said, because this teaching is too hard. of course, when it comes to a very serious question, like why do people give up their faith, the answer is there in Scripture for us.

You remember that story of the different soils, the one we call the parable of the sower. And you can read about that in various places. I'm reading from Mark chapter 4 here.

Jesus says there are basically four reasons why people give up. Some people never get started. They're like a path, says Jesus, and when the seed is sown on it, it just bounces off.

Faith never has opportunity to take root in their hearts. Then he says, others, like seeds sown in rocky places, hear the word and receive it with joy.

[ 4 : 31 ] But since they have no root, they last only for a short time. I think I've seen that phenomenon in my ministry.

Seen people who really came to the Lord with zeal and enthusiasm. I've never forgotten a man. His name was Gordon. I won't tell you his surname, but he was one of my prodigies in the faith.

It was dangerous for clergy to have prodigies. This man came to Christ. He was a very senior scientist in a local company that made radioactive chemicals to help us get better from things. He was full of joy. He waved his arms around in morning prayer. He was full of joy. But then a temptation came his way.

I've never forgotten this. I saw his wife in church one evening and she was weeping in a pew and she, I asked her what it was about and she couldn't tell me so I went round to the home afterwards. [ 5 : 41 ] Daughter was there with her and said to her, what's up, Claire? She said, I think my husband's having an affair. I won't give you the graphic details of why she thought that was.

So I was sitting there trying to find something consoling to say. I mean, that's a tough call. Some of you know that. When the phone went, she was in the kitchen making some, she shouted to me, can you pick up the phone?

I picked up the phone. It was her husband. He said, who's that? I said, it's Mike. Is that you, Gord? He said, yeah, I'm in New York. Wow. He said, yeah, would you mind telling my wife I'm never coming home again?

I said, look, I think that's your job. So I shouted to Claire, Claire, you can't put my hand over the mic. I said, I don't think you're going to like this conversation.

He repeated what he'd said to me and was true to his word. He was out there with his secretary. There are people who receive the word with joy and then fall foul.

[ 6 : 55 ] And then there are those, says Jesus, who get caught up in the cares and pleasures of this world. Isn't that a temptation for our generation? Let me ask you a question.

How much time do you spend thinking about stuff in comparison with how much you think about God? How many of you spend more time worrying about money and thinking if you had a bit more what you would spend it on than you do thinking about the power of God to transform your life? I'm not going to ask you to shout out your answer, but you might like to think about that. People give up on the Christian faith.

Interestingly, in the 2021 census, the questions on religious affiliation revealed for the first time that the fastest, fastest growing religion in this country is no religion.

people who said they didn't believe in anything anymore. Today, we're thinking about gratitude.

[ 8 : 14 ] I've told you many times, gratitude is good for you. If you wake up in the morning and try and think of something grateful to say, it will start your day on the right footing.

It's good for you spiritually. It's good for you psychologically. I read in the Daily Mail, so it must be true. I read in the Daily Mail that 55% of people wake up after a night's sleep and their first words are, oh dear.

Oh dear. You start the day saying that, the rest of your day is based on a negative statement. Oh dear.

No, find something to say thank you for. Told you that I say thank you to God every day that I've been able to take a breath and then I remind myself that the breath I just took means one less breath here on earth while I'm here on earth and there's an urgency to God's work.

And a lot of you would think that our subject today is extremely eccentric to the point of laughable. How can anybody stand here this morning and encourage you to give thanks when your life is going through turmoil and disorder?

[ 9 : 45 ] It would take a bumptious old guy with a flashy tie to do that. But it's what I believe God wants me to say to you today.

How can we rejoice? Well, Peter interestingly tells us three things that we can think about and what you need to know is that Peter was writing sometime between AD 62 and 64.

At this time the church was going through a major persecution under the Roman Emperor Nero. It was a persecution that started around about AD 62 and went on almost interrupted for the next 70 years under different Roman emperors.

You know, we all make choices don't we? We Christians make choices and we don't always make good choices. But I thought to myself if in a time of terrible persecution where Christians would ask to be crucified upside down simply because they didn't want to be crucified in the way that their Lord had been crucified.

If that was your choice to make either you can say I'm no longer a Christian and bow your knee to the Emperor or you can be crucified upside down.

[ 11 : 24 ] What would you choose? I mean, anybody sensible would say, you know, hail Emperor. But they didn't. And many of them were hung upside down on the Appian Way, that road that leads out of Rome where they died for their faith.

death. So what Peter's talking about here is, in particular, he's talking about persecution. He's saying, though at the moment you're going through this persecution, it will be momentary.

I mean, 70 years doesn't feel that momentary to me. But he said, here are three things that you can think about in the light of your troubles, really important things.

The first thing is, says Peter, keep your eyes on the prize. Come back to that. Secondly, he says, faith works and will see you home.

And thirdly, he says, whatever's going on, hold on. Hold on to Jesus and it will come right. Keep your eyes on the prize, says one Peter.

[12:37] Let me just remind you of what he says. He says this. First of all, he reminds them of what the prize is, so to speak. 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.

Kept in heaven for you. You know, I read those words again. I suppose I've read them many years over since I became a Christian. Almost 60 years ago now.

And I thought to myself, do I think about that enough? 20th century psychology told us that if we want to understand who we are, what we need to do is to look into our past.

It's, you know, it's not rocket science in one way. We all know that to some extent we are the product of what went on in our childhood, what went on and what went on in our adult years.

But I wonder if it meant that we forget that there's a future. And if you're a Christ follower, there is a future for you that is so amazing you never could, you just can't imagine it.

[13:57] It's your inheritance. The Bible says although we are God's children through creation, our sin broke that link with God and in consequence when we come to Jesus we are adopted children.

Do you all ever think about that? Do you all ever imagine what it's going to be like when you die? I mean, a lot of you, I mean a lot of people who come to church, I know, think that death is a brick wall.

No, says Peter. You have the most amazing inheritance waiting for you. When Gran died, she left us a load of stuff from the days when a great-grandfather was a naval chaplain in Shanghai.

I have no idea what kind of chaplain he was, but I can tell you he had an eye for antiques. And he collected a boatload of them which was burgled about three times, but there was some stuff left.

And we have it. And my goodness, it's fading now. Every ten years I have to send the pictures that we have to an art renovator to have them cleaned and looked after.

[15:13] It's an inheritance that fades. Peter says, no, your inheritance, friends, if you trust Christ, will never fade.

It will be there forever. And some of you are sitting there this morning saying, well, hang on, you have no idea what's happened to me in my life. And that's true up to a point, I know some of you well enough to know, that it's been hard.

Some of you are saying, well, what about my questions? Will I go to heaven if I have questions?

Yes, you will go to heaven as long as you continue to trust Christ. In fact, in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, what the great apostle teaches is this.

He says, though at this time we see in a mirror darkly one day, the day we enter the courts of heaven, the day there's a party as we arrive, Paul says, I will then know fully as I am fully known.

Whatever lingering questions you have, dear friend, there will be a day when they will be answered. Imagine that. You're like, well, my questions are unanswerable. No, they're not.

[16:36] And when you meet Jesus face to face, he will reassure you. Paul says, keep your eyes on the prize.

I think to myself, and it's been a real, what would you say, it's been blowtorched in the media recently. You remember this man, Abdul Ezzedi, a man who travelled all the way from Newcastle to London with a very caustic substance in his rucksack, which he then threw in the face of a woman he knew and her two children, having picked up her three-year-old child and thrown it to the ground like a prize wrestler.

This is a man who'd handed asylum appeal heard twice. Let me be very clear, I am not making a negative point about asylum seekers here.

I think we should be offering refuge and sanctuary to people who if they were sent home would face the most terrible outcomes. This is not my point. My point is, this man had been through two asylum tribunals and had been told that he had to leave.

On the third one, he told the tribunal judge that he converted to Christianity. See, I think that the world can expect that if we claim to have converted to Christianity, there should be some evidence

of that.

[18:22] Do you think that? There should be some evidence. There should be something that shows forth in your life. Let me ask you a question.

Suppose a terrible persecution broke out against the church in Clevedon in 2024. Would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Let me ask that again. Very somber feel in the church right now. If a great persecution broke out against the church in Clevedon, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Friends, we've got to keep our eyes on the prize. It may be that delving into your past will give you some insight as to why you are the way you are today, though too often that becomes an excuse for terrible behaviour.

But listen, you're not just people with a past if you trust Christ. You're people with a future. And if you can't think of anything else to say thank you to God for, at least you can say thank you to God for that.

[19:48] Thank you that I'm a saved person, not through my own effort, but through the grace of God so that none of us can boast. You are saved.

Saved for eternity. Saved into an existence you cannot begin to imagine. Friends, keep your eyes on the prize.

The second thing is faith works. This is a wonderful passage, isn't it, in 1 Peter where he says this, to these Christians who are spread out across what they call the diaspora, that is, the regions around Israel.

He says this, 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.

Why? Verse 9, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Someone say amen. Some of you need to get over it, don't you?

[21:00] Listen to me. This is fundamental, friends. Faith works.

And you should be thankful for that. Because of what Paul has said, which I just quoted from Ephesians 2, is by grace you're saved. That's God's mechanism for saving you.

His love for you, though you don't deserve it. And the mechanism by which you are saved is by faith. Peter, who wrote this epistle, of course, did see Jesus.

Hung out with him while he did his miracles. Made a few mistakes. Remember, he lopped off the ear of the high priest's servant. He denied Jesus three times, and Jesus says to him, on you I will base my church.

People like him, people like us. It is by grace, through faith, that we're saved. In 1 Peter, chapter 5, and verse 1, Peter says this, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's suffering, and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed.

[22:19] Peter saw it all. Peter's now writing to people who've not seen it, but have heard the gospel. Faith works.

You ask a lot of people, I remember this when I did Evangelism Explosion course, which is a course of door-to-door visitation, where you explain the gospel to people in their own home.

How terrifying is that? And one of the things that they taught us there was that you have this diagnostic question, and it's this, if you were to die tonight, and God were to ask you, why would I let you into heaven, what would you say?

A lot of these people were people who were in church Sunday by Sunday, you know what they said? I've tried my best, tried to live a good life, right?

I mean, I'm not so beastly that I would say to them, that is nonsense. I mean, I'm not unhappy that they've been trying to live a good life, but let me tell you, that will not see them into heaven.

[23:31] It's the grace of God, received in faith, that will see you into heaven. Why, says Paul, so none of you can boast? Faith works.

One thing I've learned is this, and if you gave me the choice of suffering with Jesus, or suffering without him in this life, I would choose to suffer with him all the time.

so Peter's message is, it's for us to hold on, to hold on to Jesus in the most dire circumstances. Why? Because the promises of God are true, and he will see you home. keep your eyes on the prize.

Remember, it's faith that works, and hold on to Jesus. Let me end with a rather surprising insight, not my insight, the insight of researchers.

[ 24 : 42 ] You would think, would you not, and I imagine some of you have been sitting here this morning thinking, that in a time of persecution, the church recedes. Exactly the opposite is true.

Where the church is persecuted, it grows. In North Korea right now, if you were caught with a Bible in that evil land, you would be executed.

Yet, open doors tell me that the church in North Korea, an underground church, you got found out to be a Christian there, you'd just be shot in the street. The underground church is growing.

You look in China, where for years, the Christian faith was illegal. It's legal now, but you can only go to a church which is licensed by the government, which is a way of keeping an eye on people in their population.

Despite all that, it is estimated by open doors there are 50 million Christians in China and it's growing. Persecution broke out against the church in Cleveland, friends.

[ 26 : 04 ] Would there be enough evidence to convict you? Peter says, these sufferings are yours, terrible though they are, very high risk.

I mean, I said earlier, we make choices. I mean, you could argue that to choose to be a Christian in a land of persecution was a stupid choice. Not those Christians, friends.

They stood up, they prayed up, and they prevailed and received the promise of God. We're aimlessly bombarded, aren't we?

Bombarded with statistics telling us that the church is failing spectacularly in the worst. There are some churches, thank God for all of you, that are growing. I think this church, in terms of church growth, is in the top 1% of churches in this diocese.

Talking about the Church of England, of course, I'm not talking about some of the independent churches, but 1%. I mean, that makes me feel good for Clive and Russ and for what's going on here.

[ 27 : 21 ] It makes me feel bad for the diocese. Friends, we're those Christians of old. You need to stand up.

You need to pray up. And we need to make our difference. There are so few churches that are growing, and the reason for that is maybe not surprising to you.

But what Linda Woodhead, the social scientist, has come up with is this, that in 1965, the decline of the church was accelerated. Do you remember in that cocktail permissiveness of the availability across the board of the pill?

Somehow our culture went mad. It's going mad today. No wonder G.K. Chesterton said when people stop believing in God, they'll believe in anything.

You can go and pay thousands of dollars to go to some remote island and then sit with a bunch of weirdos with singing bowls in front of them and see if you can find your true self.

[ 28 : 33 ] It's all about me. Come on friends, the one thing I can promise you is that nobody in this town is going to come to Christ with a half-committed discipleship.

I never met any general of any army who said, I really like it when I march with a bunch of half-committed soldiers. Can we step it up?

Can we pray up and believe the promises of God? It's hard to say thank you sometimes, but it's good for you, even in the dark times of life.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you very much indeed for your promises. Lord, maybe we don't think about it enough, but we thank you that there will be a day when your promises will come true in our lives.

And Lord, that those who trusted you, those who held on to you, are minded of most of the saints of the church, most of all who had horrendous lives and terrible things happened to them, but they held on, Lord.

[ 29 : 49 ] And we ask that you'd help us, whatever our life circumstances, to hold on to you.

Lord, help us not to give up, but to embrace that big New Testament persistence. And Father, you know we can't do this in our own strength.

We need the help of your Holy Spirit, so come Holy Spirit and help us to stay faithful, to stay close to you.

In the knowledge that whatever happens to us, we shall prevail. And we pray these things in the name of Jesus, who gave his life that we might be free.

And Lord, in his name we pray, and the people who agreed, affirm together, Amen. Amen.