

Suffering as a Christian

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of July 2002. The preacher is Paul Dudley. His sermon is entitled Suffering as a Christian and is based on 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 12 to 19.

I love sport. It's a good thing. I enjoy playing it. I enjoy watching it. But I love people who are committed to their sport. You see it in the AFL. Such commitment. Putting their bodies on the line. I don't know if you watched the Tour de France. But they are incredible.

21 days of gruelling riding. Day after day. Six hours in the saddle and then the next day get back onto the bike again. These are incredible athletes. Such commitment.

Yet yesterday I heard the commitment of all commitments in the sporting world. I didn't quite catch her name. But she's the javelin thrower for Australia. She's been having a few problems in her shoulder.

So she's going to go under this surgery to fix the problem. The surgery is she's going to remove two of her ribs. Such commitment. Imagine going under the knife to remove a couple of your ribs so that you can prolong your career as an athlete for a little bit longer.

[1 : 43] Perhaps just to throw that little bit further. Perhaps to get an Australian record. Such commitment. It's incredible. I was just blown away by it. Some would say that it's actually full harley-ness. But here is someone who is so committed to her sport.

Can I just say there is someone in our midst here today who I think rivals such commitment. Not in the sporting field but in commitment to God.

Jacob Kwashi came from Nigeria at the beginning of last year. Jacob came to Australia as a Nigerian pastor here to study at Ridley Bible College.

He came here to learn more about how he can serve God back in Nigeria. It's a two year course.

He came over here without his wife and his eight year old son, Amos.

He left them there for a whole year so that he could study here. At the beginning of this year, Amos came to Australia. It's great to see you here, Amos. It really is very good.

[2 : 55] Much to Jacob's delight, she is here now for this year. But at the end of this year, they go back to northern Nigeria. Back to serve God in this place.

Let me describe northern Nigeria and what they're going back to. They're going back to a democracy of a government. A government that is ruled by Muslims.

A government that serves the name of Islam. As a result, churches can no longer buy any church land.

They cannot set up any new churches in northern Nigeria. Not only that, all the schooling that happens in northern Nigeria, there needs to be a component teaching Islam.

As a result, 125 Christian schools have closed down because they refuse to teach Islam. If that's not bad enough, they go back to a country that if they go out and witness, they go out and tell others about Christ, they suffer for it.

[4 : 12] For if the Muslim leaders see Christians witnessing, they tell their younger children and youth to go out and stone them. Such persecution in northern Nigeria.

This is what Jacob, Rhoda and Amos go to face at the end of this year. To make matters worse, it's not like it's a group of people that come from another country that have invaded their country.

It's their own brothers and sisters who are bringing about this persecution. Why would Jacob do it? Why go?

If that's what it means to be a Christian, to have that level of commitment, why be a Christian? I think these are good questions. And today's Bible passage seeks to answer some of these questions about why Jacob is going to northern Nigeria.

Before we look at this passage, I'm going to pray that God will help us. If this is God's word, then we need to ask God to help us understand the passage and also apply it to our lives.

[5 : 28] So let us pray to our God. Father, we pray this morning that as we come to your word and look at it, that you'll give us understanding and great insight into it.

Help us to apply it to our lives that we may live lives that bring glory and honour to you. We pray this in your son's name. Amen. For those who haven't been with us, we've been working through the book of 1 Peter.

It's been a great little book. We saw at the beginning that Peter is writing to a group of churches that is now modern day Turkey. Back then, it was a part of the Roman Empire, a part of its Asia Minor area.

They were all fairly new churches, all fairly new Christians. As a result, they turned their back on the lifestyle that they were living, a lifestyle of idolatry and debauchery.

They had a radical change in lifestyle that left them behind. And now they were following Christ.

They were Christians. But as a result, they were coming under great persecution, not only from the government, but from the people around them, from their brothers and sisters, from their countrymen.

[6 : 46] It was hard to be a Christian back then. Very, very hard. And so Peter has written this letter to encourage them not to give up, to remind them of why they should continue on being a Christian.

For the last little bit, from chapter 2, we've seen how they are to live. They are to live good lives.

Lives that are in accordance with God's will. And we've seen that the way that Peter has described that for different people groups, for the different situations that they're in.

And today we start a new section in the book. It's one of the last sections of the book before we get to the end. And in a way, he's bringing together all the themes that have happened in the first part of the book.

We can see that it is a new section. If you open up your Bibles, it would be helpful to have your Bibles open in front of you as I work through this. On page 986, page 986, verse 12 starts, Beloved. It's a way of talking about the people that Peter loves. But it's also used as a bit of a marker, an indication that he is bringing together the threads of his argument that he's had thus far.

[7 : 59] Also to indicate that he's about to give some new information before wrapping up. So he begins, and in verses 12 and 13, he gives us the proper, gives Christians the proper response to suffering.

How should a Christian respond? Well, Peter goes on and says in verse 12 and 13, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings so that you may be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. Peter starts by saying, Do not be surprised at the sufferings and the persecutions you are undergoing.

Do not be surprised at it. Now, back then, there would have been some surprise, I imagine, at the sufferings that are suffering. You imagine becoming a Christian, serving the great God of the universe, a God who loves them, a God who sent his only son into the world to die for them. Surely this God would care for them, protect them, keep them from suffering. Surely there must have been some surprise to actually face such opposition.

[9 : 24] Particularly in light of the fact, look at the way that in verse 12, Peter describes the suffering that they are undergoing. It is described as a fiery ordeal. The idea, the picture that Peter is trying to create here is that of a fiery furnace, a furnace used to purify metal.

A person who works with different silver and gold would take the metal and place it in the furnace and it would burn the impurities off.

The impurities would be taken away by the thief. Here is the idea that their sufferings, that they are undergoing at the moment, is the idea that God is burning off the impurities.

That in some way the sufferings are coming from God's hand. Look in the next bit, it says, it talks about, placed among you to test you. Surely there would be some surprise back then.

It's strange that God should allow this to happen. Well, in verse 13, rather of being a surprise or something strange, Peter describes the proper response to suffering.

[10 : 41] Verse 13, but rejoice. Rejoice in your suffering. This is not a perverse, sadistic enjoyment of suffering.

They're not there to sit there and go, oh, this is fantastic. I'm loving this at the moment. Isn't this great? No.

Peter's talking about an inner joy. A joy that comes from knowing that the sufferings that they are facing are sufferings that have been faced by one before. Faced by Jesus.

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's suffering. Back in chapter 2, Peter describes the fact that they are indeed, that Christ indeed did suffer.

He suffered on a cross. A terrible penalty. God's son dying. He died as a ransom. He died to pay a penalty.

[11 : 45] See, the world was in great need of salvation. It needed someone to come and pay the penalty for sin. God is a holy and just God and this is what he desires, for people to be holy.

So Christ dies and takes our sin upon himself on the tree, on the cross. He pays the penalty. And so those who trust in Jesus, those who trust in him, are united to him.

Therefore, as they are united to him in his sufferings, as they suffer now like Christ suffered on the cross, they are also united to his glory that is to come. Look there in the second part of verse 13.

So you may also be glad and shout for joy when glory is revealed. The great promise of the Bible is that Jesus will return. He will return in glory. He will make things right.

He will put the world the way that it should be. That great and glorious day is a day to look forward to. Peter's reminding Christians that they are to have an inner joy because they know that their sufferings reminds them that they are actually united to Christ.

[13 : 04] They are followers of Christ and that they have a great and glorious future. If Christ suffered, is it any surprise that they should be suffering?

Christ, God's son. They are to rejoice in this. Well, verse 14 through to 16 then gives an example of how they are to live.

As an example to clarify what he's been speaking about, to explain further about their attitude towards suffering. Let me read verse 14. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the spirit of glory, which is the spirit of God, is resting on you.

If you are reviled, if you come under verbal abuse, if people slander you and show contempt to you, then you are blessed.

There is great blessing for being a Christian. It's interesting to note here this idea for the name of Christ, this idea of being a Christian, is one of the first times we see it in the New Testament.

[14 : 15] This label that Christians are given, the label of Christians. If they suffer for being a Christian, then they are blessed. The idea of blessing here is the idea of being favoured, the idea of being a favourable one, one who is to be admired, something that is great, that has happened to you.

Well, Peter gives a reason why they are blessed. It's because that God's spirit is with you. This is one of the great promises of the Bible, that as Christians, we are given God's spirit.

We are united to him. We share a part of that great reality now. As Christ has been resurrected from the dead, as he is seated in heaven, so we too can share in that because of God's spirit now.

This is a great blessing, a great promise of the Bible, a promise that we can enjoy being a part of God's kingdom now. It's also to strengthen them, to remind them that they do have God's spirit, God's spirit who enables them to continue on.

So Peter reminds them, if you are reviled, if you are given a hard time for the sake of being a Christian, then think that they are to be reminded of the fact that this means that they have Christ's spirit with them.

[15 : 52] A great news indeed. Well, verses 15 and 16 go on to explain that not all suffering brings this blessing. Not all suffering means that you are suffering for Christ's name.

Look there in verse 15, let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. The idea of a mischief maker here is someone who meddles in the affairs of others, who gets involved and causes trouble and heartache, someone who abuses that friendship.

If you suffer for doing those things, this list here, which is seen throughout the New Testament, if you are involved in these things, then this is not the right suffering. This is not what is going to cause great blessing.

We are to suffer for Christ's name, not for doing wrong. Verse 16 goes on to further explain this. On the other hand, you are to suffer as Christians, yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.

They are to suffer as Christians, not because of anything that they have done wrong, but because they bear Christ's name.

[17:19] Back then, this was a disgraceful thing, to be called a Christian. It was a thing that the world rejected. It was a position of dishonour, not honour.

Therefore, we have these words. Do not consider it a disgrace. Peter is pointing out that it is not disgraceful. Do not be ashamed to be a Christian.

Do not be ashamed, but instead glorify God. But glorify God because you bear this name. In fact, by the very fact of standing up as a Christian and taking on his name and suffering, you are indeed glorifying God.

God, this is the way they are to suffer. As people who glorify God, people who are not ashamed, people who do not avoid the pain of being a Christian.

God, this is a Christian. I grew up on a farm and on the farm I had a horse and the horse's name was Caruso and he was a very flighty little horse.

[18:31] He would shy away from anything. We would be going along and a little branch would move and this horse would spin on a little dime and head off in the wrong direction, leaving me on the ground.

At any moment he could do this. Any moment. It was hopeless. Anything could scare this little horse. A bit of wind, anything, a bit of paper on the ground or even if you're trying to jump over a log, there could be something scary on the other side and so it'll turn to go the other direction, leaving you to go over the log by yourself.

Caruso was very skittish. It always tried to avoid pain. He would shy away at the drop of a hat. Peter is reminding the Christians they are not to be like that.

They are not to shy away from pain. In verses 17 and 18, Peter then gives a further reason why Christians should not be ashamed of God.

That they should not shy away from suffering, but they should continue on glorifying God. Let's have a look at the beginning of verse 17. For the time has come for the judgment to begin with the household of God.

[19:52] Now I don't know whether you've tried to drop this in a conversation recently. Talk about the judgment that is to come. It's not really a popular conversation.

A point of something to talk about. So have you thought about the end of the world just recently? It's an interesting thought isn't it? Let's have a little discussion about this shall we over dinner? It's not the type of thing that you bring up as conversation.

You can be sort of a little embarrassed about it. Well Peter is not embarrassed to talk about the judgment to come. The fact that it will come. That there is a time when God has set a day when ultimate judgment will begin.

It will happen. But Peter makes a very interesting and surprising point here. He notes that judgment has already begun. That in fact sufferings and persecutions are a means of God bringing about his judgment now.

But notice it's for the household of God. To understand, to unpack this idea of the household of God we need to go back into the Old Testament. And in there in the Old Testament we see that the household of God was God's temple.

[21:05] Or back when they were walking through the wilderness, God's tabernacle. The place where God dwells. This was God's household. And there are a couple of pictures in the Old Testament where God talks about the fact that he will bring about judgment and that it will start with his temple.

In Ezekiel chapter 9 verse 6 it talks about how that God calls some executioners. These are angels to come and bring judgment on Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, God's holy city, has rejected God. They have committed horrible sins. And so one of the executioners is called to go around and put a mark on the heads of the people who sigh and moan over the sins that have been committed.

Those who trust in God. Then the rest of the executioners are told to go through. And they are to begin with the household of God. The elders, the ones who are in charge of the temple.

That is where they are to start and to bring judgment. This is a picture that Ezekiel has in one of his dreams of what is to happen. In Malachi in the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi predicts that God will indeed come and cleanse his temple.

[22 : 30] It describes there in Malachi how it will be like a fire, a purifying fire. Does that remind you of anything that we have heard thus far? Right at the beginning in verse 12, it talked about suffering and persecutions as being a fiery ordeal.

Something that would test people. Here we see it is the beginning of God's judgment for God's people. It's the idea that when we come across great hardships as Christians, God is working his purposes.

He's purifying his church. Those who aren't willing to follow God, he purifies and they leave the church. Here we see God.

Here we see Peter talking about the fact that judgment begins now with the household of God, with God's people. We see that we are now God's temple because we have God's Holy Spirit.

We saw that back in chapter 1. This is the great privilege of Christians. God dwells in us and judgment therefore begins with us.

[23 : 43] We see in this verse. But Peter sets up this at the beginning of verse 17 to describe also not that judgment begins with us, but that judgment was spread out from his people throughout the world.

We see there in verse 17, the rest of verse 17. For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God. But if it begins with us, what will happen? What will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

For those who do not trust in the message, the good news that God has sent Jesus into this world? Those who do not trust in that message, they reject that message, they also reject God.

What will the judgment be like for them? If judgment starts with God's household first, those who do not trust in God, what will the judgment be like for them? Peter puts it up to make it very clear for people to see.

In verse 18, he goes on to even explain it further. Peter, if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinners? If salvation is hard for those who are righteous, if it is a great cost and a great difficulty that God has brought those who are righteous, how much more so those who disobey God who are sinners?

[25 : 02] Peter holds them up very clearly for the people in the churches then to see. Peter is very keen that they understand that they should not fall away.

The easy option when we face persecution and suffering is to turn away from Christianity. For Jacob, Amos and Rhoda, it would be easy to give up on Christianity.

But this passage makes it clear that there is a judgment day that has already begun and that will surely happen. And they have to be reminded by this not to give up.

Sure, to alleviate the suffering now may be bad, may be a good thing, but worse will be for those who do that. Well, in verse 19, we come to the end.

Peter summarizes this little unit, brings it to a conclusion. Let me read it for you. Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful creator while continuing to do good.

[26 : 13] Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will. Note here that the suffering is something that will inevitably follow those who trust in God.

It is not an easy decision to be a Christian. Those who follow him, inevitably, you will come up against a world that will reject you.

A world that thinks that you have made a bad decision. It is not an easy decision to be a Christian. It is not an easy decision to be a Christian. Note also the idea of entrusting yourself there to God.

Entrust yourself. Entrust themselves to a faithful creator. The Greek word that we have here for the idea of entrust is the idea of committing something of great value to a trusted friend for safe keeping.

It is like you have got a big pile of gold. And you think, I have got to look after this. What am I going to do with it? I need a close friend. Someone I can give this gold to.

[27 : 17] They can look after. They have got a safe or something like that that they can put it in. And I know they won't steal it and take it for themselves. And so they commit the gold to their friend. A trusted friend for their safe keeping.

This is the word that is picked up here. It is the word that Jesus used when he is on the cross. He cries out. He says, Father, I commit myself to you.

This is our reaction. This is the proper response to suffering. To entrust themselves to a faithful creator. Notice, he is a trusted friend.

He is a faithful creator. The one who has created the universe. The one who has brought about salvation. We can entrust our lives to him because of who he is.

Well, they were to commit themselves to God and continue to doing good. They were to continue to seek out how to live according to God's will.

[28 : 24] They were to live to please God. Well, what does this passage mean for us? Let's start with Jacob and Rhoda and Amos.

For you, Jacob and Amos, and for those who are suffering like you, can I encourage you to stand firm, not to give up. Don't be surprised about the suffering that is to come.

God uses it to test and prove and refine you. It is a cause of great joy. It's a way of sharing in Christ's suffering. A way of glorifying God.

But remember, it is useless if it is deserved for non-Christian reasons. Remember, the beginning of the final judgment begins with suffering.

Remember, for those who torment you, for them, a far worse judgment is coming. What about for us here who may not be going to face or are not facing such suffering?

[29 : 36] Perhaps our suffering is only minor discomfort. Don't be deceived. We live in a world that screams out to you. It lures you.

The desires, the pleasure of the world to join it. It screams out to you that Christianity is folly. That it is stupid. Don't be deceived.

The voice of the world is crying out. Many, many Christians have fallen away. A good friend of mine, Scott, went on beach mission with me.

He was a fine speaker, talking to many non-Christians about Jesus. He was great. He was passionate. He even headed up a Christian heavy metal radio station.

Whether you can have one, I'm not quite sure. But he did. A heavy metal Christian radio station. But when he started working, he started realising that there was great pleasure out there to be had.

[30 : 44] The world was a very desirable thing. Soon he started getting involved in the swearing of the staff. It didn't really matter. Soon he stopped coming to church.

He fell completely away and is now no longer a Christian. Don't be deceived about the world.

Say no. Continue to entrust yourself to God's will. Heed today's passage. What about for those who don't suffer at all? Those who feel like they're not suffering.

I mean we live in a society that is very easy to live in in many ways. What if you feel like you're not suffering? Should you go out seeking suffering? Go out and look for those opportunities to be beaten up?

Is that what the passage is telling you? No, I don't think so. But the passage is telling us to have a good look at our lives. How are you living your lives?

[31 : 44] Are you avoiding contact completely with the world? I mean that's an easy way of not suffering. But that's not what we're called to do. Are you prepared to stand up to what is right and wrong?

Are you prepared to invite your friends and family to the annual dinner coming up? Are you prepared to make a stand for Christ? What about for those here today who do not know what it is to be a Christian?

The passage makes it very clear that the final judgment hasn't come. But it is coming. God holds off his final judgment so that those who do not know him can come to know him.

Take the opportunity while you have it. Turn to God and trust your lives to him. Live lives that bring honour and glory to him.

My three year old loves birthdays. Her birthday is in March. But for her her birthday is always next week.

[32 : 55] It's coming. It's just around the corner. It's going to be here any moment. It's my birthday next week you know daddy. Well just a little bit further on. I guess for her it must seem like an eternity for her fourth birthday.

It must seem like such a long time away. But she knows it's coming. Peter is reminding his readers. The day is coming when all things will be put right.

Be assured of it. Be assured of it. Trust God and live according to his will. Lord. Say goodbye. Go toell