

On Suffering

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- [0 : 0 0] We're looking at 1 Peter chapter 4. We're in the middle of a sermon series on this little letter which is very, very powerful that God speaks very clearly in.
- And if you like, turn to page 218 in your Bibles. It's in the second part of your Bibles. And you can follow along as I reflect on those words and talk a bit about what God is saying here.
- And as you're looking, I do want to welcome the newly baptized, these adults and babies, that we have seen this incredible sign given to them.
- It is a real privilege to be able to be part of this sacrament, as David called it, this picture of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.
- And it's wonderful to welcome family and friends of the baptized who are here with us today as well. And I want to let you know that this, if you don't know already, this event that you witnessed today is incredibly important.
- [1 : 0 2] It's more important than marriage even, a wedding. Because Jesus himself commanded that Christians should be baptized. And the reason he did it was because it reminds us of who God is, of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ.
- It reminds us of a covenant, a relationship he has set up with us, in which he has promised us several things which are absolutely life-changing.
- And the first thing he promises is that he will forgive our sins. That's why baptism is water with washing. It's like being washed from sin. And secondly, he promises to make us new people.
- And that's why we use water, because it signifies new life. It is a new people who belong to him and are at peace with him that Jesus makes us.
- And finally, he gives us eternal life. And there is a new birth. There is something very new about the person who has been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- [2 : 1 3] And those promises are true and they change our lives today only because Jesus died on a cross for our sins and because he rose again never to die again.
- Because of that powerful event, this baptism is so significant and affects our lives today. And the implications for those people being baptized is immense.
- The implications are also immense for you and I who are sitting here today because it means that life fundamentally is defined by a question.
- And it's a question that comes to us because of seeing this baptism. In a sense, the baptism asks us, what will you do about Jesus?
- This person that baptism is all about, what will you do about him? Baptism is about the good news of Jesus and what he has done. How will you respond?
- [3 : 1 4] And there are basically two responses. And this Bible passage tells us what those responses are. Either you will live for yourself or you will live for him.

Those are the two responses that are available to us. And that's what our passage is about. So I want you to look at verse 1. Interestingly, it starts with suffering when it talks about this new life, this different life.

He tells the Christians in verse 1, Now, the reason it starts with suffering is because Jesus suffered so that he could obey God.

You know that there was this great temptation for Jesus. The night before he is killed on a cross and will undergo horrific suffering, he prayed to God the Father. And he said in the Garden of Gethsemane, My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.

Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. And today, as we saw the baptism, we are most thankful that Jesus chose to suffer instead of living for himself.

[4 : 31] The result was that he died for our sins and he rose again in glory. And Peter says to us today, Arm yourself with that same thought. In other words, be willing to suffer so that you can avoid sin and obey God.

And that was a big thing to say to the people that Peter was writing to, because they are suffering. They are going through difficult things because of their faith. But Peter says that if you have this attitude, you have actually ceased from sin.

Now, he is not saying they suddenly became sinless, because he teaches them in this letter how to avoid sin and how to keep from falling back into sin. It was their temptation all the time. But what he is saying is that they are freed from sin.

They are not ruled by it anymore. In fact, they have actually died with Jesus to sin and they now live to God. We talked about that in our baptism, that we die with Christ and we rise with him.

And I think it was just wonderful that Vicki read that Bible verse from Mark 8. And in it, she said Jesus' words, You see, there is a suffering, there is a death that comes when we turn to this new life.

[6 : 04] It is the suffering of being freed from sin. There is this suffering that goes with dealing with temptation. Now, Cyprian, a very famous Christian from the 3rd century, long, long time ago, just a couple hundred years after Jesus rose from the dead, lived during a time of great persecution.

He lived in North Africa. And he had this teaching to Christians who were facing the persecution. He said, Those who are redeemed by Christ ought to prefer nothing to Christ, for he has preferred nothing to us.

Isn't that a powerful thing to teach? That we would prefer Christ above all others because he has preferred us. He forsake everything.

He suffered everything for our sake so that we might have peace with God, so that we might prefer nothing to Jesus Christ and know that joy that comes by being in relationship with God.

And verse 2 tells us this. If you look down at verse 2, it talks about this incredible change that takes place because of Jesus' sufferings for us.

[7 : 17] It says that you live for the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer by human passions, but by the will of God. That defines it for us.

That tells us about the two ways to live. Either you will live for your own desires and passions, or you will live for what God wants.

Now there's a striking list in verse 3, and it outlines the old life of these Christians before they knew Christ. They were living in towns in Turkey, and these were pretty wild places to live.

It says your old life involved licentiousness and passions and drunkenness and rebels and carousing and lawless idolatry. I won't unpack all of those. All you have to do is go to the supermarket, to the checkout stand, and take a look at the magazines that are there on the rack.

And there's news about this. But really there are three categories that he talks about. He talks about sexual immorality, he talks about binge drinking, and he talks about this wild worshipping of idols.

[8 : 23] Now the wrong response to reading this is to say, well that's not me, I've never gone that far, not that extreme, before I became a Christian, or now that I don't know Christ yet, I haven't done these things.

But that's the wrong response. The right response is to look at them and to say, that is a picture, an extreme picture of living for one's own sake, for living for own pleasures.

How am I living for myself and for my own desires? It's a list that actually highlights the self-centered life very starkly.

And that list that describes your life without Christ may be less spectacularly indulgent. But the thing you will have in common with it is that our natural default way of living is to be self-centered.

I think 1 John 2 helps us here and tells us what actually people naturally struggle with. It says that the world, love of the world, involves the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions.

[9 : 32] And I think that in Vancouver, there are many, many opportunities to live for these things. It's very easy to live for the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and for the pride of possessions.

And in fact, the litmus test for commitments in our culture is whether or not it continues to be pleasurable. Do I continue to enjoy it? And there are many idols that can give us pleasure.

Well, Peter is calling these people, the people of God, to resist that pull of that life and instead to stay strong in Jesus in their loyalty to him and the new life.

That's why, if you remember, in the baptism at the end of the service, we prayed that the baptized might never be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ and that they would always fight courageously against sin in their lives.

There is real suffering that comes because of the stand we take for Jesus Christ. And you know, that struggle is not only the resisting of temptation, but also it comes from people who don't want us to stop living the old way.

[10 : 50] Look at verse 4. And this shows it really clearly at the end. It says, they are surprised that you do not join them now in the same wild profligacy.

We don't use that word much. It's a life of excess. And they abuse you, it says. They abuse you. Literally, it says, they profane you. And what is happening is that not only are they surprised because there is this change, the life is different for these Christians, but they are actually a target because they are living a different life.

And I think it's something very familiar about this anything-goes culture that suddenly becomes intolerant when Christians don't join in or endorse their lifestyle.

You see, the life lived for Christ really does bless the world. There's no doubt about that. We see that in chapter 3. People are deeply blessed because of the way that we can live for Christ.

But also, at times, that life infuriates the world, especially when it actually means that the way they are living will not be joined in or endorsed.

[11 : 59] And it brings suffering with it. And so, at this point of the passage, what Peter does for us is he says there is a need for encouragement.

And he does it by telling us that the future of each of us is in God's hands. That's the great encouragement for Christians here who are suffering. And so, he says that those who persecute Christians will give account to Jesus who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

Verse 5 there. In other words, it says that God himself will defend his people. God himself will bring true justice to every case of unjust persecution.

People will be vindicated when the judgment of God comes. And then in verse 6, he continues talking about judgment. And he says, this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.

And what he's saying in that curious verse is that people who have died, Christians who have died, like anyone else, they are often maligned by those who are abusing them and said, look, they died, Christ didn't come, we had the upper hand, they didn't.

[13 : 18] But it says that those who have died in Christ, who have heard the gospel, they will live in the spirit like God because they heard the gospel.

In other words, they will find that it was worth trusting the promises of God. It was worth living for him, even when it was difficult, even when it involved sufferings.

And the people who Peter writes to would be deeply comforted by this verse to know that God himself would say, well done, good and faithful servant.

Here is your inheritance. You will live in the spirit as God does. And then in verse 7, he finishes talking about judgment by saying, the end of all things is at hand.

In other words, he's saying, the time is close. All of the things that God has put together for saving the world is in place. The stage is set for Jesus to come. He could come at any time.

[14 : 17] He could come right now and you wouldn't have to listen to the rest of the sermon. And that might be a good thing. But it's also saying it could be generations from now. And in the in-between time, we live in the light of that great fact.

That is our great motivation. And because of that, this new life, this life that involves living to Jesus Christ, preferring him to all others, will have three priorities.

And I want to talk briefly about those three priorities. The first is in verse 7. It says that we will pray. Keep sane and sober for your prayers.

And you know, the word sane in the gospel is about, means a person in their right mind. Somebody who has been delivered from the power of a demon. It's about being clear-minded and having the mind of Christ.

Knowing what God wants. Seeing things from his perspective. It's about being people who have that truth of God in the front of their mind. And then the word sober is about being watchful and alert to God.

[15 : 23] It's really the opposite of being under the influence of the cares and concerns of this world and the values of it and by worries of the future.

And so, there's a real sense here of being aware of God and how you relate to him. And that's why he immediately talks about prayer. It's about cutting through the hazy focus of many priorities we each have in our lives and being completely clear about the one great purpose which baptism talks about.

And that is that we were made to be in fellowship with God. That those people who were being baptized, we signed them with the sign of the cross to mark them as Christ's own forever.

We were designed for fellowship with God. It's why Jesus came to die for the forgiveness of sins. And so, when you pray privately or when you pray in small groups in this church, you are living out that purpose.

In a real sense, God's grace that has brought us into fellowship with him is being expressed in the fellowship we have with him in our prayers.

[16 : 33] And we are deeply blessed by those prayers as well. They are not just an activity that we do. I have spoken to a number of people in recent months and I think this has been happening throughout our church who have experienced the power of God deeply affect them in their lives.

We have prayer every other Sunday during communion in the chapels on each side of the church. People come to pray for thanksgivings, for people who are in trouble, for themselves, for healing, for release from oppression of different kinds.

And a number of people have experienced the release and the freedom that the gospel gives. They have experienced change and direction in their lives that is very real and powerful.

And this is a humbling and wonderful thing. To know one's need of God, to come to him saying that without God we have nothing, but with him we have everything.

To say, I will prefer all things to Christ in our prayers. Now the second great priority is love. And this is the greatest priority.

[17 : 39] Look at verse 8. It says, Above all, hold unfailing your love for one another since love covers a multitude of sins.

And you know, in the original that word for love is a special kind of love. It literally talks about a stretching love, a love that extends you. And that's why Paul, earlier in another letter, prayed that we would know how wide and deep and high the love of Jesus Christ is and to increase our love for one another.

That love that stretches is an inconvenient love. And here's where it cuts across the grain of our culture because it's the kind of love that would actually be committed to people you don't normally like.

People in church that irritate you or you try to avoid. If you want to get a sense of what this love is, imagine the person who you are most uncomfortable with here in the church or elsewhere.

And we want to read people's minds here. And imagine, as you think of that person, that you would want for them what you would want for yourself. And that begins to get at the great stretching love of this verse.

[18 : 59] It is, again, about giving away God's grace. If he has loved us through our sin, how much more ought we to love those around us?

And Peter says that this love covers a multitude of sin. He's not saying it condones, love condones sin or it hushes it up. He is referring to the Old Testament where it says, hatred stirs up strife but love covers all sin.

In other words, hatred deliberately exposes sin to humiliate and hurt or gain revenge. But stretching love is the opposite. It promotes peace between the people in the church.

And it looks for the best in people. We are prone to take offense quickly. This love assumes first that offense was not intended. And when there is intended sin, this love discourages needless talk about that sin.

And in fact, it actually goes to the person and deals with them directly. And this is necessary because all of us in the church struggle with sin.

[20 : 07] We suffer in fighting it. And we see a multitude of sins in each other. But we contain that sin when in deep love we deal with it directly with that person and don't allow the sin to spread and become public.

It's interesting that Peter gives one example of love and it has to do with hospitality. There's a reason for it. Hospitality was necessary in the church if you look in verse 9. And he says that you need to do it.

And the reason he did was because hospitality was, as it is now, very inconvenient. It was disruptive and irritating and costly. I think the saying was actually begun back then that says that visitors to your home and fish are very similar.

They both go bad after three days. And that is what they experienced. That's why he says offer hospitality ungrudgingly without murmuring, he says, because love will silence murmuring.

And of course murmuring and sharing talk of sin is kind of a delicious thing to do. but incredibly destructive to the life of the church. But when Christians practice stretching love, we actually pour love on each other's failings.

[21 : 27] This will strengthen the church and it will be an advertisement to the world that this is the result of the gospel in our lives. Well, the passage ends with a third priority after the great priority of love and prayer.

It says that you will serve in this new life where Jesus is the one preferred above all others. And I think that this is the most difficult of the three priorities for us because our default thinking in our culture is that we are consumers above everything else.

So we think about the church in terms of how will it meet my needs. How good is the Sunday school? How good is the preaching or the teaching? How great is the fellowship and the music?

How caring is the pastoral care? But Peter says that we ought to come to the church with the purpose of serving. And our overriding concern is not what can I get but how can I give?

And that's why if you look at verse 10 it says as each has received a gift and it's assuming that God's pouring his grace on us giving us gifts all the time employ it or literally minister it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.

[22 : 46] And that's a wonderful line good stewards of grace because a steward at that time was somebody who was given the money of the owner of the property and his one job he didn't own that money or that land his one job was to administer it well to give it away well.

Peter's saying give away the grace that you have received and do it well. And in the original the each is emphatic and so Peter's underlining the fact that each person is a minister in the church.

Each one has gifts that God has given him for the purpose of serving. No one is left out and so each is a steward. And he gives two examples in verse 11 which are interesting he says whoever speaks and by speaking he means evangelism you know what Joan Pauls was doing with Vicki it means teaching or preaching or leading Bible studies any kind of speaking ministry he says well do that speaking as one who utters oracles of God so you're not doing something original or it's not your own cleverness but you're dependent upon God himself God is speaking through you as you are faithful to his gospel and secondly he gives the example of ministering by rendering service you see that in verse 11 and that service can mean pastoral care in a variety of ways it means giving money it means doing administrative work support work looking for needs in the church and meeting them because of a desire to serve and here again you do it only with the strength which God supplies in verse 11 in other words you are simply giving away grace that has been given to you and the purpose for it all says in order that in everything

God may be glorified so I want to end my sermon by showing you by actually revealing in this passage how contrasting Peter makes the two ways to live they are starkly different and you can't get more different in the way that he portrays them so that instead of sexual relationships that are about living for one's own pleasure he calls people in the new way of life to love in very inconvenient ways to do it in a way that actually gives up oneself that is self-giving and instead of drunkenness he calls people to have a clarity about God to understand his closeness and the way that he leads you in this life to follow in a straight way the way that he has for you and instead of idolatry there is this desire as we've seen to serve others so that God will be glorified through Jesus Christ it is about preferring Jesus to all other things so much so that you will give of yourselves to people for the sake of his glory now clearly those are two very different lives they are lives oriented so differently that they cannot be blended you can't take the best of both and say well I'll sort of straddle them because one is a life that will extend into eternity and the other one is a life that will not last and it will not mean anything when Jesus comes again one life is counterfeit it strives after satisfying human passion but the true life lives by the will of God it gives away the grace of God that's entrusted to us for his glory and we do this now as we pray and as we love inconveniently and as we are ministers to each other the powerful thing is that in all of this

God is glorified in Jesus Christ because his grace makes it all happen and here's where true blessing comes to us because glory and dominion belong to Jesus Christ forever and ever as it says at the end and so to live for his glory is really the only way to live because our deepest and our truest desires are only found in him amen