

What Persecution Brings

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It's good to see you this morning. I was blessed to be here yesterday for Amy and Brian's wedding, so if you think about it, pray for them as they begin their married life together. And one other announcement, and this is not Tom's fault because we didn't tell him to do this, but if you are leaving, please let sure you let us know so we can celebrate you in a couple of weeks at our send-off Sunday. So if you're graduating or if you are leaving town, please let us know for those things. Okay. We read the headlines of the state of the church around the world. There are times when these headlines are fearsome. We read of churches burned. We read of pastors imprisoned.

We read of police raids on gatherings of believers. We read of missionaries who are attacked. Places like Myanmar, Afghanistan, China, Nigeria, North Korea, and others, such things are happening.

All five of these countries are in the top 20 watch list for the most dangerous places in the world for Christians to live. How do we respond to this? Maybe we're filled with compassion and moved to prayer and to giving. Maybe we're filled with outrage and moved to advocate for human rights and for intervention.

And these are good responses. But what if it comes home? What if it were you? What if it were us? What if we woke up one morning and Trinity had been raided and burned? What if your pastors were put in prison for preaching the gospel? What if your small group was in fear of being raided by police?

[2 : 09] How would you respond? Hopefully we'd be prayerful. We might be outraged and seek redress and some sort of help from the government. But you know, we might also wonder, did we do something to deserve this? Have we done something wrong? Is God judging us? Or has God abandoned us?

These are some of the questions that the early church asked themselves as they saw persecution rise against the early church. As we've been studying in the book of 1 Peter, Peter writes this letter to a group of churches in Asia Minor that either have been or are now or will soon be suffering from various forms of persecution. As Peter writes a letter, it was not a matter of if but a matter of when they would face these kinds of trials.

How do we respond? What kinds of attitudes are we to have in the face of persecution? What does God want to bring to us in the midst of persecution? These are the questions that our passage looks at this morning. So if you want to turn to me, we're in 1 Peter chapter 4 starting in verse 12. That is page 950-something in your pew Bible, and that'll get you close enough to find it. 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 12 through 19. As we come to this, recognize that this is often seen as a beginning of the last section of the book. The last section that Pastor Nick preached on last week ends with a doxology, what seems like a wrapping up of a thought, and Peter now comes back with his pastoral heart to encourage the churches that he's writing to as he writes these things.

1 Peter chapter 4 verses starting in verse 12. Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

[4 : 55] But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, or an evildoer, or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed.

But let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God, and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

And if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? Therefore, let those who suffer according to Christ's will—sorry, according to God's will—entrust their soul to a faithful creator while doing good.

Will you pray with me? Lord Jesus, we look at this passage. We come to it this morning. Lord, we ask for your Holy Spirit, Lord, to open our minds to understand your word, to soften our hearts to receive your word.

God, we pray this morning that you would shape us, our hearts and our souls, Lord, so that we might be those who walk through suffering in ways that bring glory and honor to you.

[6 : 24] Lord, I pray for my words and for your help, that I might speak your words this morning, Lord, and that you would use them in all of our lives.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So how does God want us to see this kind of suffering? This kind of suffering that comes from persecution, suffering for Christ's sake.

Three things we're going to look at. Verses 12 and 13 tells us that persecution brings not surprise, but joy. Verses 14 through 16 tells us that persecution brings not shame, but blessing.

Verses 17 through 19 will tell us that persecution brings not fear of condemnation, but confident faith. So that's your outline. For those of you who are taking notes, that's what we'll be looking at in order.

We'll just walk through the passage, and we'll explain it and seek to apply it to our lives a bit as we go. So first, verses 12 and 13, persecution brings not surprise, but joy.

[7 : 32] There are two imperatives here. Paul is exhorting the congregation to think about two things and to do two things. The first one is, do not be surprised by the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you.

Right? This imagery brings to mind very, you know, for anyone who's read the Old Testament, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, the three men who were thrown literally into a fiery furnace because they would not bow down and worship a different God, but that they would maintain their fidelity to their worship of God alone.

But it says here, Peter says, this fiery trial has come to test you, to reveal the character of your faith. What kind of suffering is it? It's important to see here as we think about this fiery trial. It is not just hardship of living in a fallen world. It's not just the trials of living around other people who make your life difficult or living with natural disasters or diseases.

Those are a different kind of suffering. There are passages that tell us to rejoice in those too. Places like James 1 and Romans 5. But here in particular, Peter is talking about suffering for persecution.

[8 : 56] Suffering that is for Christ's sake. We'll see that more in verses 14 and 16. This is suffering that is being identified as loyalty to Christ that is provoking or causing the trial that we are going through.

And it might be physical harm. It might be verbal or relational. You may be maligned or reviled or spoken against or insulted.

You may be excluded. You may be discriminated against. All of these things are ways that we suffer persecution. That is the negative effects of others upon us because we are followers of Christ and publicly identifying with Him.

And Peter says, don't be surprised. For those of us who live in the Western world, this is not an easy thing because we've grown up in a world that for hundreds of years has been undergirded by a welcoming or by a general embracing of a Christian worldview.

And so there's been a lot of places where being a Christian has been in sync with our culture, been in sync with the worldview of our neighbors around us, regardless of what faith they profess.

[10 : 14] But that presumption is not a one that Christians should hold broadly.

We see this in the rest of the world where Christians suffer deeply because their Christian faith is out of line so much with the worldview of the culture that they live in.

And we find ourselves in a culture that is increasingly at odds with a Christian worldview as well.

And we have to remember that Christ Himself predicted this.

In John 15, 20, He says, A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. And we see that this was true from the very beginning of the church.

The passage that Tony read earlier from Acts 5. Remarkable, isn't it? The early church suffering, being beaten, being accused, being arrested, being threatened, and yet they counted it worthy.

[11 : 20] They rejoiced because they were counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus. We are tempted when facing persecution to be surprised, I think.

We are tempted to fall into self-pity. Oh my gosh, I can't believe this is happening to me. This is so terrible. Or self-justification.

Well, I'm right and they're wrong. And we become proud and arrogant. Sometimes we go on the attack. Well, those people are doing wrong for attacking me. Why can't they be tolerant to me the way I'm trying to be tolerant with them?

But Peter says, Don't be surprised and fall into these heart attitudes. But instead, his second imperative, Rejoice.

And he gives a reason. Look in verse 13. He gives a reason. Rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

[12 : 22] You see, the key, according to Peter, for our ability to rejoice even in the face of persecution is that our joy now is a part of our joy later.

That our suffering now is a part of the glory that will come later. This is the pattern of Jesus, that his cross comes before the crown. Jesus, who, according to Hebrews 12, says, For the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Peter says, Don't be surprised because Christ suffered as well, and your union with him, because of your faith in him, you are joined with him. And as you are joined with him in your suffering, you are also joined with him in his joy.

And this joy is now that you can have in the midst of suffering. And this is joy that you can have knowing that there will be a future that will be only joy and no more suffering in his glory.

Peter is suggesting that our fellowship with Christ, our union with Christ, is deepened through persecution. And we enjoy a depth of fellowship with Christ that we never could have had in the same way if we had not suffered.

[13 : 48] Because only when we suffer do we know this Christ-like joy in the midst of persecution that allows us to see the glory of the joy that is to come.

So Peter says, Persecution brings not surprise to Christians, but joy because of Christ.

And then he goes on in verses 14 to 16. He says, Persecution brings not shame, but blessing. We might wonder, Why shame?

Why is he talking about being ashamed in this context? Well, Peter is writing to a church that's living in a largely non-Christian culture. People would walk out their doors and they would see the Roman pantheon lived out in all sorts of big and small ways in their everyday life.

Right? Something that we as Americans find it hard, even in a place like New England where there are churches on every corner. Half of them are now condos, but there are still churches. And we see all of those things.

[14 : 56] Right? We see how much that's been a part of our culture. But Peter is writing to a place where Christians were small and despised, not highlighted, not seen.

Peter's saying, You may feel like your faith is being diminished and dismissed in your culture. You may feel marginalized and discriminated against. You may feel the threat of violence and physical harm.

And these things are real. The privilege that I had of meeting believers in China who lived in a much more of this kind of a culture and to see them, it was easy at times for them to become so discouraged and overwhelmed.

Is this really worth it? Should we really do that? They become ashamed of the gospel because it feels so out of step with the world around them. You believe that there's something wrong with you because of your faith.

The day may be coming when we're close to that here in the West as well. You might feel it in small ways and in large ways.

[16 : 10] You might feel it when you're not up on the latest TV shows and movies because you've chosen to fill your mind with things that are profitable. Maybe you're suffering as a parent because your child can't sign up for community sports because they have all their games on Sunday morning and you've made a prior commitment to be a part of attending church and being a part of the church community.

Maybe you're a student and you know that the views that you're expressing in your term paper that flow from your Christian convictions and worldview, you know that you're going to get docked points for not the argument, but for the content of what you say.

You know that you will suffer a lower grade because of that. It's easy in these contexts to feel ashamed, but Peter says don't.

Don't be ashamed. He goes on and he warns us, but make sure that we're not suffering those things for the wrong reasons. You see, this is what verse 15 says, right?

But my summary is like, suffer for Christ, not for being stupid. What he really means is, don't suffer for doing wrong, right? Don't be rude, ungodly, hateful.

[17 : 48] Don't be a murderer, a thief. I love this word meddler. It means getting your nose into other people's businesses in the wrong way, in an unhelpful or ungodly way.

You don't have to fix the whole world. You don't have to make everyone do what's right in the world. Even if you know it because of Christ, you don't have to make everyone— that's not your job.

So let's not fall into those things and find ourselves on the back end of persecution and backlash for being ungodly people.

Because look, we can do it. Christians, out of zeal for certain truths, can do terrible things. We can even justify violence against others on the basis of upholding Christian values.

We can cheat or steal because we claim self-righteous ownership of things. We can compel others to conform to Christian ethics in a world that we can invite them to do it, but to compel them to do it?

[18 : 56] Peter says, let us not be suffering for the wrong reasons, but if we suffer in the name of Christ, if we suffer for being a Christian, if we suffer because we identify with Jesus and his gospel of grace, we will always feel like we don't totally belong.

We will always feel that we will be misunderstood. And increasingly in our world, we will be assigned false motives. Friends, let us not be unwise about our moment today.

There are places where a Christian worldview is increasingly out of step with our culture. In ethics, as we think about the beginning of life and the end of life, as we think about things like abortion and euthanasia, Christians will uphold a pro-life stance.

Not in a political sense, but in a sense of God loves and cares about life in a way that will be out of step. We know this, but in areas of sexuality and gender, our understanding of what humans are and how they're created by God, how they're affected in their created goodness, in their fallen brokenness, and in their potential for redemption and glory.

We are out of step with a world that will tell us different things about how we can be self-determinative in these things. Religious tolerance is something that increasingly has boundaries.

[20 : 29] We have religious tolerance for tolerant people, but we have religious intolerance for people who hold to beliefs that are exclusive. And friends, we believe in exclusive gospel, not because we choose to be hateful to others, but because Christ alone has done the only thing that can save us.

And even the most gentle and gracious and kind orthodoxy will be condemned and we will be called hated, hateful and bigoted and cruel and oppressive for our following of Christ.

And we should expect that there will be times when we will be excluded, disrespected, marginalized, and discriminated against because we follow Christ. We need to avoid a culture war mentality.

We need to not see that there's an enemy that we have to win the culture war in our world, but we are to hold the truth of God with humility and grace and belief and practice.

We are to love our enemies and we are to fight to live as citizens of a kingdom that is unshakable and cannot be broken in the midst of a world that is increasingly going to be difficult to live in.

[21 : 56] So Peter says, let us not be ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because he says, you are blessed. You are blessed by God in the midst of this persecution.

This is what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.

On my account, rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. God looks at you as one walking in Christ and suffering for Christ and says, you are blessed.

And how do we know that? Because he pronounces your favor, his favor on you publicly because you have, this is what the end of verse 16 says, because you have the spirit of glory and of God resting upon you.

You see, friends, we might feel ashamed like we're doing something wrong when we suffer persecution, but God looks at us and says, as you suffer persecution and as you stand firm in humility and steadfastness, you are proving that the spirit of God is on you and you are displaying the spirit of the gospel and of Christ in the world.

[23 : 25] And he looks at you and he says, this suffering is revealing to the world what I have already done, which is I have pronounced upon you a blessing by giving you the spirit by virtue of your faith in Christ.

This is what verse 16 says. Karen Jobes, this commentator, we keep quoting because her commentator is really excellent on 1 Peter, notes that the suffering here is not productive. Sometimes we want to say our suffering and our persecution, they're only worth it when we can see what good it produces. But here, Peter's not saying the suffering here doesn't produce the blessing. The suffering simply reveals it. The suffering is a testing fire that shows what is really there. Friends, this is what Helen Rosevear found.

If you don't know Helen Rosevear's story, you should. She was a missionary in the 20th century. She went to Central Africa, to the Congo, to serve as a medical missionary.

[24 : 33] She suffered deeply as a missionary. In the midst of civil war and the Simba rebellion, she was imprisoned, she was beaten, she was raped, she suffered immeasurably.

And in the midst of her faithful service and seeking God in the midst of her terrible, terrible circumstances, as she reflects back on that season in life, she writes this.

One word became unbelievably clear, and that word was privilege. privilege. He didn't take away pain or cruelty or humiliation.

No, it was all there. But now it was altogether different. It was with him, for him, in him.

he was actually offering me the inestimable privilege of sharing in some little way the edge of the fellowship of his suffering.

[25 : 47] Friends, this is what it means to have the glory of God revealed in a believer who stands firm, who is not ashamed in the midst of, but who knows that they are blessed because the Spirit of God resides in them because they can see this.

Suffering is an opportunity for fellowship with Christ. So persecution brings not surprise, but joy. Brings not shame, but blessing.

And finally, verses 17 through 19, persecution brings not fear of condemnation, but confident faith. So I don't know if you felt it when we read through it, but verses 17 through 19 strike me as you read through the logic of this as a bit of a non sequitur.

What is he doing here? He's talking about suffering for Christ. He's encouraging the believers. This all makes sense. And then verse 17, he says, for it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.

And if it is to begin with us, what will be the outcome of those who do not obey? And why does he turn to this? Why does he turn to judgment?

[26 : 59] And I think that to get this right, I think Peter may be using judgment in a slightly different way than we usually think of it. Usually we think of judgment as condemnation. We think of judgment as bringing punishment.

And so it often is in the New Testament. It means that judgment is, and for believers, it can be judgment that comes to refine people so that they might be purified of their sin.

There's a final judgment on the whole world where there will be a final reckoning and accounting for our standing before God and where God will vindicate the righteous and where he will condemn and punish evildoers.

But it doesn't seem like this is the sense of judgment here. because there's no sense of Peter saying, hey, you guys are falling short in holiness and you need to grow in this.

And there's no sense that Peter's saying, hey, there's a final judgment that's going to come, so hold on for that because in verse 17 it says, for the time is now that this judgment is happening.

[28 : 07] So what is Peter talking about? Peter's talking about the persecution that the church is suffering now, not as a condemnation on the church, but as a test.

This is what we saw in verse 12 and I think he's coming back to this idea. A test in God's hand that is a trial that as we stand firm through it, we see and what God sees is who are truly his people. So judgment here is not the condemnation, but it's rendering a verdict, whether good or bad. And then he explains that the verdict could be good or bad.

Right? For judgment, that is this testing, starts with the house of God. God comes and through this fiery trial that's happening now of persecution, the true church is being revealed.

Those who are falsely claiming Christ or those who are saying they want to follow Christ, but only when it is easy and when it doesn't include suffering, those people are winnowed out of the church.

[29 : 14] Yes, that's a true thing. And so the church, the true church will be revealed in its glory.

Peter says, well, if that's what's happening with those who know Christ, what about those who don't?

When he says those who do not obey the gospel of God, this is a different language for saying for those who have not put their faith in Christ. It's going to happen and those who are in Christ are going to be preserved, then the message for those who are not in Christ is a fearsome one.

And the persecution that the church is feeling now is of a piece of that final judgment that will come and that final verdict that will come upon all people.

This is why he quotes Psalm 11, 31, if the righteous are scarcely saved, that is, if the righteous are saved through a great trial, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?

That is, those who don't know God and don't care about God. The great sorting of humanity is prefigured in persecution. Who will endure and stand to the end and who will not?

[30 : 23] If those who claim Christ may waver and fall, what about others? Without Christ, when we face God's trial and his judgment, there is condemnation for sin.

God's wrath is poured out. There will be an eternal punishment for those who are outside of Christ because a holy God cannot suffer to overlook sin.

And only in Christ, only in Christ, has those sins been dealt with and taken away. with the gospel, there is hope to persevere.

Without the gospel, there is only condemnation and fear and death for all people at all times who do not know Christ. This is why Peter ends with this exhortation in verse 19.

Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good. He's saying, friends, I know that there's a fiery trial.

[31 : 34] You're either in it or it's about to come. Don't be surprised. Don't be ashamed. Don't be afraid. But entrust yourself like a little child who runs to his daddy's arms and who's enveloped by the grace of the gospel and protected from all the harm and all the trial and all the hardship, all the condemnation, all the attack on them from the outside.

So we run to Christ and trust ourselves to our creator who knows us and what he's made us for. We run to this one and find in him refuge and strength.

And as we entrust ourselves, not trusting in our own ability to manage or to navigate or to take care of ourselves, but to give ourselves over to him and to his purposes in our lives, this is how we endure suffering.

This, it's with these attitudes that we are able to face the fiery trials of living as aliens and strangers in a world that does not know us.

Friends, we do this because we know Christ. We are able to do this because Christ is our treasure. and in Christ we find joy and blessing and hope.

[33 : 15] We find a place of refuge where we can hide ourselves, where we can be what Peter exhorts us to be. And friends, if we're here this morning and we don't know Christ yet, or we're not sure how we stand with Christ, if we are wondering whether Christ is worth it, if the cost may be too high, if the suffering may be too hard, this word has a warning for us as well.

There is no hope outside of Christ and the hard things and the trials that are facing, that you may be facing now are nothing compared to the final judgment when you will stand before God.

And Peter would implore you, turn to Christ, put your hope in him, put your trust in him today. And then you will be able to endure these fiery trials.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you this morning. We thank you this morning for this word, Lord, that Lord, is meant to encourage us to give us strength in our inner being.

Lord, we know that when you called us to yourself, you called us out of this world and that as long as we live on this earth as your people, we will feel like aliens and strangers, like exiles whose

home is somewhere else.

[35 : 01] Lord, we pray you would give us endurance and patience and steadfastness to embrace this life. And Lord, when we do suffer persecution, when we do suffer for Christ's sake, Lord, we pray that you might bring us the joy, the confidence, the blessing.

Lord, that our faith may be tested and found to be true. Lord, the faith that you have given us and so we might stand firm.

Thank you, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.