

In the Land of our Sojourn: A Joy to Suffer as a Christian

1 Peter 4:12-19

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on October 12, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ *If God were to grant you one wish – specifically one thing that he'll take away if you just ask – what would it be?* I think we'd all hope, if given the opportunity, we'd think of the big picture and ask him to take away all war or take away all hunger and poverty. Something on a global scale. But if we're honest, our first instinct would probably be to ask God to take away some pain that we're in, some sickness we have, some sort of disappointment, some kind of shame, some form of hardship, some type of suffering.
 - ▶ All of us are naturally pain-averse. We don't like suffering. We don't enjoy going through trials. **If we could have it our way – if God really did offer that blank check – we'd ask to never feel pain again.** To never hurt, to never suffer.

- ❖ I used to feel the same way. That is until I learned about this rare genetic condition where certain individuals are **born with the inability to feel physical pain.** There was this TLC episode years ago about these young children who were discovered to have this condition.
 - ▶ My first thought was to think, "That's awesome." It's like a mutant ability. You could be a superhero, an X-Men. But then the show went on to describe how this is actually an extremely dangerous condition, especially for kids. This one poor toddler was always biting her fingers raw. Her tongue was practically destroyed because she would simply chew it like gum. She could break her leg and keep playing as if nothing happen. She could be touching a hot stove and not even know it.
 - **Ironically, we think of it as a blessing to never hurt again, to never have to suffer, and yet to these parents, to these kids, it was a curse.** They would have welcomed pain as a blessing.

- ❖ And here we are wondering why God doesn't take away the pain in our lives. *If he's all-loving, if he's all-powerful, then what's stopping him? If he really loves me and if he really can do all things, then why doesn't he do something about the suffering I'm in?*
 - ▶ **What we forget in those moments is that God is not only all-loving and all-powerful, he's also all-wise.** And we're not. We often think, "My life would be so much better without all this pain and suffering." That's what *we* think. But God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways higher than ours (Isa. 55:9).
 - Just as it's actually a curse to never feel pain or suffering in the body – ***could it be that it's not a blessing but a curse to never feel pain or suffering in life?***

- ❖ That's the radical idea that Peter proposes in our passage. We've seen in our study of this letter that suffering – particularly unjust suffering as a result of one's Christian faith – is an overarching theme and an ever-present reality for Peter's readers, both ancient and modern.
 - ▶ As sojourners and exiles, as strangers and aliens to society, this comes with the territory. It comes with the call to Christ, the call to be a Christian. In chapter 2:21 we read, "*For to this [suffering for Christ] you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.*"

- ❖ **So suffering is the path we have to walk as disciples of Christ because it's the path he took. It's the path he paved for us.** This is why Peter can say in today's passage that suffering as a Christian should come as no surprise and should be a cause for rejoicing.
 - ▶ Look v12 again, "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. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings.*"
 - So there's a direct correlation being made between rejoicing and suffering as a Christian. So they're not antithetical. You can experience both simultaneously.
- ❖ Peter goes on to say in v14, "*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.*" **So he is making the argument that it's a blessing to suffer for Jesus. It's a joy.**
 - ▶ I know that sounds strange. It sounds foreign. But to foreigners – which is what a Christian is in this world – there is good reason. This morning I want to show you from our passage six reasons why you can you rejoice to suffer as a Christian.

Not Less Loved

- ❖ The first reason to rejoice is because you can be sure that **when you suffer as a Christian you don't have to question God's love for you.** I know that has crossed my mind. But Peter makes it clear that being on the road marked with suffering does not mean I'm less loved than when the sun is shining down on me and the world is all as it should be.
 - ▶ That's why he starts v12 the way he does. "*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you*". Beloved. You're beloved. That's exactly what we need to hear. Peter understand the human condition. **He knows our first reaction when we face trials – especially fiery trials – is to doubt. To doubt God's love.**
 - For some reason we think that if God really loves us then he would shield us from pain – he would work his will to protect us from suffering.
- ❖ But then v19 speaks of those who, "*suffer according to God's will*". That means when you suffer as a Christian, God's will *is* at work. It hasn't been thwarted. Now when you read the first and the last verses together, do you see the point being made? **The point is that God can will you to suffer and still call you beloved.**
 - ▶ Do you remember that time in Jesus' ministry when he heard that a good friend named Lazarus was terribly sick and on his deathbed? Turn with me to **John 11:1**. His sisters Martha and Mary send for Jesus and beg him to come quick knowing Jesus can heal their dying brother. Not only can he – surely he wants to!
 - Look at what it says in John 11:5, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*" No question there. He loves them, so surely he wants to relieve their suffering, right? Keep reading in v6, "*So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*"
- ❖ I love you. So I'm going to stay where I'm at two days longer. I'm not going to rush in and save the day. I'm going to let you die. To let you lose a loved one. It's my will for you to suffer, and yet I call you beloved.

- ❖ **Friends, if you don't have the categories in your theology to reconcile God's love for his children and God's will for his children to suffer, then I have no idea how you stay a Christian.** There is just too much suffering in this world – too much suffering in the lives of faithful Christians – to not raise questions, to not feel this tension.
 - ▶ Now maybe Christians in developed, prosperous nations like ours can live in a bubble of relative safety and comfort, so that they've never really wrestled with this. Maybe you've never doubted God's love because you've never really suffered as a Christian. But I guarantee you, if you really are one, that bubble is going to pop.

- ❖ **Christians will suffer as Christians. It's God's will.** The Bible pulls no punches in warning Christians of the suffering to come. Jesus promised his disciples, "*In the world you will have tribulation.*" (Jn. 16:33)
 - ▶ James tells us to count it all joy *when*, not if, we face trials of many kinds (Jas. 1:2). Paul warns that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Not *may be* but *will be*. It's going to happen (if it hasn't already). This is why Peter can say that you should not be surprised or think something strange were happening to you (v12).

- ❖ So according to our passage, we have no need to question if God still loves his children when they undergo suffering for his name. But the question that many of us should probably ask ourselves is this: ***Why am I not experiencing any suffering as a Christian?*** Maybe we need to question – not God's love for us – but our love for God.
 - ▶ Am I not experiencing this kind of suffering because I haven't gone public with my faith? If I love God, then why would I hide that fact? Why would I keep it private?
 - God's love is constant. God's love is sure. Even in suffering. It's *my* love for him that's often in question. It's a greater love and concern for my name that affects my willingness to bear insults and persecution for his.

Not Cursed or Abandoned

- ❖ But when you do suffer as a Christian, you can be sure that you're not less loved. That's the first reason for rejoicing. The second is related. **You can rejoice to suffer as a Christian because it does not mean you've been cursed or abandoned.**
 - ▶ Along with feeling unloved by God, this is another common reaction when Christians suffer. We feel like our life is cursed or that God has deserted us. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Look at v14. "*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.*"

- ❖ **When the world casts insults on your head; God rests glory on it instead.** They might curse at you for being a Christian, but you're certainly not cursed. Peter says you're blessed.
 - ▶ He's simply recalling what he once heard his master say, "*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.*" (Mt. 5:11-12)

- ❖ Just compare that to v14. Notice how both mention verbal attacks/insults for the name of Christ and both speak of being blessed and having a reason to rejoice and be glad (v13). What I find fascinating in Peter's argument is that he understands the great reward that the Son of God spoke of to be God himself.
 - ▶ **Far from abandoning you in suffering, Peter believes God draws nearer.** Look at what he says in v14. You are blessed "*because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*" God is powerfully present when we go through suffering as Christians.

- ❖ When King Nebuchadnezzar had Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, thrown into the fiery furnace, he couldn't imagine that they would survive. That they would walk out without even the smell of fire on their clothes (Dan. 3:27).
 - ▶ But what really left him speechless, what he couldn't explain is how there happened to be four men in the furnace when he only threw in three. It says in **Daniel 3:24**, "*24Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." 25He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."*

- ❖ Like a Son of God. In the furnace. **Present with his people in their suffering.** To me, this is one of the most compelling aspects of the Christian faith. Other religions offer a god or gods that are also transcendent, also all-loving, all-powerful, and all-wise. Their god is also sovereign over your suffering. But no other god has shared in your suffering.
 - ▶ This is what makes Christianity stand out. **In Christianity, God draws near to his people in their suffering. So near that he even takes on their flesh, their pain, their burden.** The Son of God became man. Jesus Christ suffered for us. He voluntarily walked into a furnace called Calvary. He walked in alone. He accepted the curse. He allowed himself to be abandoned by God. Why?
 - **So that we would never have to experience suffering as a curse** – but now as a blessing. **So that we would never have to be in the furnace alone** – but rather assured always of his presence. That is a great reason to rejoice even in your suffering.

- ❖ Please don't get Peter wrong. He's not saying furnaces are fun. He's not encouraging a blind optimism that just ignores pain. **It's tragic that many Christians feel ashamed to lament, to openly grieve their suffering, especially in the company of other Christians.** We're given this impression that a real Christian is happy all the time. Always a smile on your face.
 - ▶ No, you can grieve. You should grieve. **But because of what Jesus has accomplished, you don't have to grieve as those who have no hope** (1 Thess. 4:13). You have this unique opportunity – and ability! – in Christ to be sorrowful yet always rejoicing (2 Cor. 6:10).

A Process of Refinement

- ❖ It's also going to help to have a better sense of why God wills for you to suffer. This leads to our third point. So far we've only discussed the wrong conclusions to make when God has you suffer. It's not because he doesn't love you or because he's cursed you or abandoned you. Now let's talk about the right conclusions to draw. **A reason you can rejoice to suffer as a Christian is because you realize that it's not a process of punishment but refinement.**
 - ▶ This is why Peter is quick to qualify in v15 that there is a form of suffering that even Christians experience that should not be a cause of rejoicing but cause for repenting. Let me read it again, "*But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.*"

- ❖ So remember this. **There's a difference between suffering as a consequence of your sin versus suffering as a consequence of your faith.** Now I think it's unlikely that Peter believes his readers are at high risk of committing murder or theft, but perhaps they were being accused of such things.
 - ▶ I think he's mostly speaking rhetorically. But when he mentions meddling, Peter is thinking of a less serious behavior that was probably more common to his Christian readers. Some translations say *mischief-maker* (RSV) or *busy-body* (KJV).

- ❖ I think Peter's making a distinction between Christian suffering that's inevitable so long as you are being true to your faith and public with it – from suffering that's a consequence of meddling in the lives of others. Something Christians can often be guilty of doing.
 - ▶ **In our zeal to help others, to see others saved in Christ, we can be guilty of meddling, of being busybodies.** Unnecessary frustrating and annoying those we truly care about by speaking or acting without tact. Peter told us earlier in chapter 3:15 that we are to always have an answer for anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that you have – yet we are to do it with "*gentleness and respect*".
 - So before you wear your suffering as a badge of honor, you have to ask yourself, "*Are they insulting me because of what I say or what I stand for? Or is it because of how I'm saying it or the posture in which I'm standing?*" It's an important distinction. Like I said, one is a cause of rejoicing. The other a cause of repenting.

- ❖ But assuming the former, assuming the suffering is not punishment, then you can see it as a process of refinement. I get this from what I see back in v12. Look back at the phrase "*fiery trial*". It translates from the Greek word *purosis*. Listen to that: *purosis*. It sounds like the word purify, doesn't it?
 - ▶ Peter is applying a furnace metaphor. He sees suffering as doing the same thing that fire does when you refine precious metals like silver. **The silversmith is not trying to punish the silver ore.** The flames are not intended to consume the silver. What burns away is simply the dross – all the impurities imbedded inside – **so when you finally take it out of the furnace you have refined, pure silver.**

- ❖ There was once a man who visited a silversmith's workshop and was fascinated as he watched this expert craftsman refine a piece of silver by repeatedly thrusting it into a blazing hot furnace. He asked, "So how long does this process take? How do you know how long to leave the silver in the fire?"
 - ▶ The silversmith didn't have any timers laying around his workshop. No clocks really. He was old school and his methods were passed down to him from his father and his father's father. So he told the man, "I just keep looking at the silver, and if I can see my reflection in it, then I know its pure enough."
- ❖ That, my friends, is what God is doing to us. He keeps thrusting us into the furnace, into the fire. Back and forth. How long? ***How much suffering must I endure? "Until you look like me," God says, "until I can see my reflection in you."***
 - ▶ God puts his children into the furnace – not because he hates us – but because he loves us and hates the sin and impurities in our lives. He wants to conform us into the image and likeness of his Son and he will spare us no pain to accomplish his will.

A Means of Assurance

- ❖ There is another purpose for the fiery trials that God puts us through. Peter goes on to say in v12 that the trials come upon you to "*test*" (*peirasmos*) you. That's the same word we saw back in chapter 1:6 when Peter talked about being grieved by various "trials" (*peirasmos*). He says these trials/tests are intended to prove "*the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire.*" (1:7)
 - ▶ So the furnace of suffering is intended to refine you, to purify you – until you reflect Jesus in your life – but the fires are also meant to test you, to prove you, to determine what's real from what's false. This is our fourth point. **Another reason to rejoice to suffer as a Christian is because it's a means of assurance.**
 - I see this idea reenforced in vv17-18. "¹⁷*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? ¹⁸And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? "*"
- ❖ **Peter says here that God's judgment begins with the church.** It's common to think that since we're Christians that means we're exempt from judgment. That we get a pass. No, Scripture says we still have to face judgment. In fact, we have to go first.
 - ▶ We see a perfect example in that popular passage in Matthew 25 where the sheep (believers) are judged first and then the goats. But it's clear that the judgment for God's sheep is not to be seen as a negative thing. It's not a punitive judgment. **It actually leads to great blessing and joy because it proves them to be genuine sheep.** The verdict is in and they're the real thing.
 - This is how Peter sees Christian suffering. It's a form of judgment – a judgment that proves your genuineness. Just like a refiner's fire, suffering for Jesus proves what's true by burning away what's false.

- ❖ **Do you see why I call it a means of assurance? If you're suffering right now as a Christian, that means you're part of the household of God.** You're one of his sheep.
 - ▶ If you're being ridiculed for being a Christian – if you've been told that your beliefs are just too conservative, too backwards, too ignorant – if you've been mocked and called a prude or a goody-goody – *rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you* (Mt. 5:12).

- ❖ **You're suffering for Christ gives evidence that you're truly in Christ.** It's a great means of assurance. But Peter's real point in vv17-18 is this: If God has to put his children through a furnace of suffering – those who embrace his gospel – then what will be the outcome of those who reject the gospel? If Christians are "*scarcely saved*", what will become of nonChristians?
 - ▶ I think the term "*scarcely saved*" is better translated "*saved with difficulty*". Peter is talking about how hard it is to be a Christian. The difficulty is referring to the suffering that believers must endure in order to be saved. The Christian life is not a cakewalk. We have to persevere in faith through the furnace.

- ❖ Now think about it: **If the Christian life is this difficult, with this much suffering (though it's for their good), then just imagine the kind of suffering in store for those who reject Christ.** Their suffering won't be refining. It'll be consuming. It'll be unspeakable punishment.
 - ▶ Peter is addressing this as a wake up call to unbelievers and call for believers to pass on the warning to others through an urgent appeal to flee to Jesus for rescue.

An Opportunity to Glorify God

- ❖ Suffering for Christ proves that you're in Christ. It's a means of assurance. For that you can rejoice. But there's a fifth and final reason. **Another reason why you can rejoice to suffer as a Christians is because it provides you an opportunity to glorify God.** See v16, "*Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.*"

- ❖ The first disciples in the early church did not call themselves "Christians". They didn't coin that term. It was first used in the Antioch church and it was really a label used by outsiders to identify this growing movement (cf. Acts 11:26; 26:28). These people are followers of Jesus Christ. They're Christ-ians.
 - ▶ Peter's readers bear this name. They were identified as Christ-ians and were suffering for it. **I've mentioned before how first-century Christians were the victims of ugly smear campaigns and nasty rumors.** People said Christians were cannibals because they were known to hold these feasts where they spoke of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their Master. Who supposedly came in the form of a baby. So they were cannibalistic baby-eaters.
 - Peter says if anyone suffers these insults, these attacks, as a Christians, *let him not be ashamed*. That's not easy.

- ❖ **Peter is addressing the shame that many Christians instinctively feel when we realize we believe something that offends our neighbors** – when we discover that the prevailing culture views us or views our beliefs as foolish.
 - ▶ Peter is trying to combat that instinct and help his readers see that this kind of suffering is nothing to be ashamed about. Don't worry about what it's doing to your reputation. Ignore what's happening to your namesake.
 - **All the slander, all the mockery, all the ridicule, all the suffering for bearing the name of Christian is an opportunity to glorify God's name** – to build up his reputation, to praise his namesake.

- ❖ Glorifying God means showing by your actions and reactions to insults and suffering that God is glorious to you – that he is your greatest treasure, the most precious, most valuable, most all-satisfying thing in your life.
 - ▶ And the greatest and clearest way to show the world that someone completely satisfies your heart is to keep on rejoicing in that person – even when every other joy and satisfaction in life fails, when everything and everyone else is stripped away.

- ❖ If you can continue to rejoice in God, even in the midst of suffering, it demonstrates to the world that God – and not other things – is most satisfying and most worthy to be praised. **That's how can you glorify God with your suffering – when you endure it in such a way as to make God look great.**

- ❖ Friends, if God were to grant you one wish, to remove one thing, I wonder what you'd say. **And I hope and pray that instead of asking him to take away your suffering for Christ – that you'll ask him to take away any shame that you might have in suffering for Christ.** To take away your love for your name and to grant you a greater love to glorify his own in your life and through your suffering.