

Blessed in Suffering

2020-06-21 Pastor Sharon Tidd

“It is never easy to be a Christian. The Christian life brings its own loneliness, its own unpopularity, its own problems, its own sacrifices and its own persecutions.”

(William Barclay)

Has this been your experience since choosing to follow Jesus? It certainly was the experience of the believers to whom Peter wrote his letter; believers scattered across Asia Minor because of the persecution and suffering they experienced. Moving forward in Peter’s letter, we focus today on a passage that celebrates suffering for the faith: 1 Peter 4:12-19. I encourage you to prayerfully read it now.

Peter writes out of a desire to put suffering in its proper place and perspective for those early believers. It was a lesson sorely needed then, and one that remains relevant to us today. Five key messages about suffering flow from this passage:

1. Suffering is inevitable (verse 12). If we are living for Jesus, and seeking to model His values in this world, we will suffer simply because we are different. Darkness does not like light! Light pricks and penetrates the conscience of those who prefer darkness, creating discomfort. So, if we are bringing light

into this world, we will be faced with hatred and suspicion and slanderous accusations; responses aimed at shifting the attention to us. It is inevitable. We should expect it. When we suffer for our faith and values, we shouldn't wonder why.

2. In our suffering we share in Christ's work (verse 13). Christ suffered so that we could be saved. He gave up the splendours of heaven to walk on this earth, learning first-hand the joys and sorrows of human existence. He endured hardship from infancy through adulthood. He wasn't rich. He didn't dwell in a castle. He walked countless miles on dusty roads to bring God's message of love and shalom to the people. He touched the sick, bringing healing. He entered the world of the demon-possessed, bringing freedom. Each act of kindness and mercy came at a cost. His safety and well-being always came second to the needs of those around Him. And in the end, He submitted to false accusations, fake trials, the desertion of His closest friends and followers, torturous beatings and floggings, and a horrific criminal's death. All that suffering was willingly accepted for our sake. And because of His obedience to the will of the Father, accepting this as the only way to bring salvation, He was resurrected to life again and returned to His rightful place in heaven. Now, His suffering is our suffering. People will continue to misunderstand the love and

hope that we seek to bring. People, not yet ready to accept that love, will twist the good that we seek to do in Christ's Name. Like our Master, we will suffer. And in our suffering we will experience a deeper kinship with Him. As Barclay says, "When a man has to suffer for his Christianity he is walking the way his Master walked and sharing the Cross his Master carried."

3. Suffering is the path to Glory (verse 13). The good news is that our suffering is but for a time. Glory awaits those who remain faithful through suffering. Just as Jesus was returned to His rightful place in Glory, so our suffering will be rewarded with glory. The pages of the New Testament are filled with this assurance: If we suffer with Him, we will also be glorified with Him (Romans 8:17; Philippians 2:10,20; 2 Timothy 2:12; 1 John 3:2 to name a few). Glory isn't just about life eternal lived in the presence of God; wonderful as that hope is. Glory is about being fully re-made in God's image; original creation completely restored; all that was stolen by Satan and sin renewed and revived. Glory means God's "It is very good!" will finally be reclaimed for us because of the work of Jesus Christ. Glory means no more pain, no more sorrow, no more suffering. In being glorified we will receive, from God, a new body that will never perish or fade away; a spiritual body that reflects the goodness of God, the *imago dei*, fully ... without compromise, without faltering, without failings.

Keeping this truth ... this assurance of Glory ... at the forefront of our minds when we suffer for our faith makes all the difference. Hope can remain steadfast, because Glory does await us! And suffering is the pathway to that Glory. Joy overflowing, that sweeps away any lingering hurts and sorrows experienced during suffering, will be ours on the day that we are Promoted to Glory!

4. Suffering is proof of the sincerity of our faith (verses 14-17). I love verse 14 and the truth that it declares. “If you are insulted because of the Name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” Do you hear that? Does it warm your heart? We don’t like suffering, but to recognize that it is the proof that God’s Spirit rests on us ... that makes it worthwhile. People will attack us only when they see the beauty and glory of God in us; that light that threatens their beloved darkness. It’s only through the Spirit’s power within us that we can live in such a way that they will feel threatened by us. In and of ourselves we cannot bring that level of penetrating light into this dark world. But through the Spirit, who dwells within, we can. If we’re suffering for our faith, it’s because we are living in His power and walking in His Light, and choosing faithfully to “do good” in His Name. As verses 15 and 16 assert, our suffering is not to be as a result of wrong-doing. That kind of

suffering brings no blessing. No. It is as we suffer because we are a Christian ... a Christ-follower ... one who lives as Jesus lived and loves as Jesus loved, that we will know the blessing of God. His “Well done!” will ring in our ears and warm our hearts. His encouragement to carry on will penetrate our souls. When you suffer for His sake, Peter says, “praise God that you bear that name (*Christian*)”, and that you bear it well! Peter speaks of present-day suffering as a “time of judgement to begin with the family of God” (verse 17). We who have received the Good News and who know the wonder of God’s salvation are offered the opportunity of suffering to prove the steadfastness of our faith. Earlier in 1 Peter 1:6-7 Peter assured those early-day believers that their suffering would be used by God to refine and purify their faith so that it would be proven genuine. God continues to use suffering for this good purpose in the lives of believers today. The goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:9). So we are to welcome, as a “blessing” (1 Peter 4:14), anything – suffering included -- that God allows and uses to solidify our faith in Him. As I reflected on this I was reminded of Stephen’s experience of suffering and death by stoning. Luke records that experience of persecution, affirming that in the midst of his suffering Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and “*looked up to heaven and the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*”

'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" (Acts 7:55-56) Stephen's faith was made steadfast through suffering. He received glorious blessing as he suffered death for Jesus' sake. Our faith will be made steadfast too, if we willingly accept suffering as a refining fire; as a blessing!

Most of us, being honest, would say we'd rather skip the suffering part of the Christian journey! It's human nature to choose the easy path! But in skipping suffering, we will limit the refining, glorifying work that God seeks to do in us as we await Glory. Knowing this, Peter closes this section by suggesting, instead, that we choose to willingly suffer "according to God's will" (verse 19) and in that suffering, commit ourselves fully to our faithful Creator. He loves us. His plans for us are always to prosper us and not to harm us (Jeremiah 29:11). What He allows, by way of suffering for our faith, is for our good ... and for the good of those who persecute us too! In this world, we can avoid much suffering by not shining Christ's light, by not living the values of God's Kingdom, by not choosing to "do good" in response to evil, by conforming to this world and rejecting God's call to be different/sanctified/holy. It seems that was what some of those early believers were considering. Peter suggests that a better choice is to trust God, who can be trusted implicitly, and keep on doing good (verse 19). As our Creator,

He knows us well. He knows what we can handle and His Spirit is available to us to empower us to stand firm and do even more than we believe possible. The world needs our light. The world needs the glimpses of His Kingdom that we can offer. The world needs our good deeds. The world needs our love. The world needs us to stand tall and not cower in fear of suffering or persecution. Glory is promised to us as we remain faithful through suffering. And, though it can be difficult to see it in the midst of our struggles, our faithfulness will help to bring others to glory too! That was Christ's way, and it is to be our way too as we follow Him!