If You Share in the Suffering of Christ, You Are Blessed

Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

1 Peter 4:12-19

Pastor Bryan Clark

Probably around the first half of my life, I would say I was highly involved in sports, and I learned a lot about myself through that. One of the things I learned is if I have a choice, I'd much rather be on the field playing than in the stands watching. I also learned that for me, it wouldn't be enough just to wear the uniform on the sideline. I want to be in the game. That's especially true if it's an epic battle, where we're going to be bruised, we're going to be bloodied, we're going to be exhausted, we're all going to come together, ultimately, to share the victory! If that's what it's going to be on the field, I want in! If you've used sports as kind of a metaphor for life, I think that's kind of true for me in how I want to live my life. I don't want to be a spectator. I don't want to just wear the uniform and have a ticket to heaven. If there's going to be an epic battle, count me in!

I think if Peter were with us this morning, he would say, "Me too... me too!" As a matter of fact, Peter went so far as to say he would actually rejoice if he was found worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. What exactly did he mean by that? Well that's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Peter, Chapter 4. Chapter 4 is kind of a change in tone in Peter's letter. He's talked about how to live strategically in order to minimize unnecessary conflict, in order to maintain maximum freedom for the sake of the gospel. But it is possible that if we follow that strategy, we just become more effective, which just angers the critics more, which can actually lead to more intense opposition and even persecution. It does appear that's what is happening with these churches that Peter is writing to. There's a shift in chapter 4 to much more discussion about persecution, and we know from history that is what awaits both Peter and these churches. So we pick it up in chapter 4, verse 12:

> **Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.** (*1 Peter 4:12-13)

Do not be surprised...that word **surprised** is the same word we had earlier in chapter 4, verse 4. It carries the idea of not just *surprise*, but as if this is *strange*, as if this is *odd*—even some level of offense. So, if you think when you trusted Christ as Savior you boarded a cruise ship—nice little ride on the love boat—and now people are shooting at you, you're surprised; you're shocked. This is strange; this is odd; it's even kind of offensive to you. "I've paid a lot of money for my journey on the love boat! What's the deal with people shooting?" But what Peter is saying is when you trusted Christ, you didn't board the love boat; you boarded a battleship. We talked about that last week. So don't consider it strange. You shouldn't be **surprised at the fiery ordeal**. Now there are a couple of different views on **fiery ordeal**. Some think it's actually a literal statement. We do know that at some point in time, Nero began burning Christians at the stake. He would cover them with pitch; he would actually light them and use them as torches in his gardens. Whether or not that has begun at this point or not is debated, but some think that Peter is making a literal reference to that.

But it's also true that throughout the New Testament this fiery language is often used in regard to persecution. It's metaphoric language. Basically it's to capture the idea of *a refining fire* that is used to refine precious metals. In the refining process the fire brings the dross—the impurities—to the surface; they are cleaned away, and what remains is the pure gold. That's probably the more likely reference here. So it's the idea that trials, persecutions and struggles are a purifying process that brings the impurities out; they're scraped away and what remains is the pure gold. The idea of testing isn't so much a test to see if you are in or out; it's much more the idea of revealing or exposing. So the refining process doesn't make the gold; it reveals the gold. It brings the dross up; it's removed, and what is revealed or exposed is the pure gold. That's probably what Peter is talking about there.

As though some strange thing were happening to you—basically the idea is that this should not come as a **surprise**. This isn't **strange**. There are a couple of ways to think about this. One is that Peter, John and the other apostles heard this directly out of the mouth of Jesus Himself. As a matter of fact, Peter's buddy John, his fellow apostle, writes in his letter—1 John 3:13—"*Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.*" Very similar language and almost identical to the language of Jesus in the upper room, hours before He was arrested, when He said to these men, "The world hated Me. They're going to hate you. The world persecuted Me. They're going to persecute you." So Peter is saying, "This shouldn't be a surprise. This has been clear from the beginning. This is an epic spiritual battle, and what's at stake are the eternal souls of the people around us."

Another way to think about it, though, if we're going to go back to this athletic metaphor, is you just don't leave the bleachers—the stands—and walk through the gate and go onto the field and play. It's not like that. There is this long, hard, process of getting in shape, getting beat up, getting bruised, feeling the pain, learning, growing, getting to the point where you're finally ready to go in. It's kind of the idea that if we're going to be serious about being players in this epic battle, there's a necessary purifying process to burn away the impurities, the distractions, and ultimately to refine the gold that makes us more useful to the Master. That's kind of the idea there. Verse 13:

> ...**but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory** [which means the return of Christ] **you may rejoice with exultation.** [Rejoice with great joy.]

So what is Peter talking about here? He's talking about what it means to be counted worthy, to suffer for the cause of Christ, to **share in the sufferings of Christ**. There's an interesting story in Acts 5. Let me just read you a little bit of that. Basically in Acts chapter 5, the apostles are preaching the gospel; people are responding; the church is exploding; it's threatening to the religious leaders, so they want the apostles arrested. They're arrested; they're threatened. They enter into this discussion. Gamaliel, one of them, comes forth and says, "Hey, here's the deal: if this Jesus story is true, you can't stop it. If it's not true, it will die out, so maybe just let them go." The religious leaders think that's good advice, so they flog the apostles—which would have been an incredibly painful experience—and turn them loose, basically threatening them, "You need to be quiet, or else." That's where we pick it up in Acts 5:

> **And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered**

> **worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.** (*Acts 5:40-42)

So Peter has a lot of credibility as he writes these words. This isn't a theologian in a seminary, passing down ivory-tower advice. This is Peter, who has been in the trenches. He has suffered persecution, imprisonment, pain and suffering for the cause of Christ. He doesn't become angry and embittered. He's not surprised by this. He actually considers it a privilege to have been considered worthy to suffer for the name of Christ, **to share in the sufferings of Christ**.

It's also worth remembering this is the same Peter that denied Christ on the night He was arrested. Without a doubt, that has to be the absolute worst moment in the life of Peter. He was absolutely miserable and even after he was convinced that Jesus rose from the dead, he was also convinced that he was certainly off the team—John 21, he's back to fishing. Jesus has to show up and issue Peter a recall. Peter experienced the terrible pain of this denial and now he's got his game face on; he's in a completely different frame of mind, and if there's going to be action, he wants to be in the middle of it. And, if he is found worthy by Jesus to share in the sufferings and to be persecuted for the cause of Christ, he actually rejoices! It's the idea that he wants to be in the middle of the action and give everything he has for the cause of Christ. Basically what Peter then says is, until the return of Christ—that glorious moment—it's going to be an all-out celebration. He wants to be part of it, knowing he was on the field, in the action, giving everything he had to accomplish the mission.

So, again, taking this back to kind of an athletic or sports metaphor, imagine the team makes it to the championship and all that's involved to get there. It's an epic battle. Players come away bruised, beaten up, exhausted, but at the final gun they emerge victorious. There's now going to be some sort of a parade, some sort of a celebration. What Peter is saying is, "In that moment, I don't want to just be a fan. I don't want to just have worn the uniform and stood on the sideline while the team won the battle." In order to enter into the fullness of the celebration, he's saying, "I want to be in the mix. I want to be bruised; I want to be bleeding; I want to be exhausted. I want to know that I gave everything I had to be part of the victory when we celebrate this magnificent victory at the return of Christ. Verse 14:

> **If you are reviled** [the word means verbally abused] **for the name of Christ, you are blessed** [it's a word that means happy - you're happy], **because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.**

Basically what Peter is saying in verse 14 is if you're abused, persecuted for the name of Christ, you are to be happy, you're to rejoice, not because you like to be abused and mistreated—that would be strange—but because there is this epic battle going on that involves Christ, **the Spirit of glory**, and God the Father. In the very beginning of Peter—chapter 1, verse 2—we were told that this mission involves God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit —all members of the Trinity— engaged in this epic battle. That's basically what Peter's coming back to here. That stands **for the name of Christ**, upon Him is the **Spirit of glory** and God the Father, so all three members of the Trinity are engaged in this epic battle, ultimately for the victory and the glory of God.

One of the challenges we probably have as Americans is just trying to sort out this concept of *persecution*. The text isn't just talking about suffering in any general sense; it's specifically talking about persecution for the cause of Christ. We as Americans have really experienced very little of that. You know, we're not just talking about somebody who says something hurtful on social media, or that somebody at work ignores us, or somebody at school makes fun of us. We're talking

about real persecution. Many of these people receiving this letter would ultimately be persecuted—imprisoned; many would die for the cause of Christ. Peter, shortly after writing 1and 2 Peter, would be crucified upside down for the cause of Christ.

It's also sobering to realize that through the last 2000 years, most Christians have suffered some level of persecution. Many of our brothers and sisters today suffer extreme persecution for the cause of Christ—many of them put to death. Generally speaking, it's been very different for us as Christians in America but I think there also has to be this understanding that we have fundamentally changed as a nation. I've been saying this now for years. We're not talking about one or two election cycles, and everything will be like it was. It won't be. We have fundamentally changed at our core. Whether or not we can find our way back is up for debate. But the reality is there are a lot of hints that the winds of change are upon us, and it's naive to think that there won't be a day where Christians in America will be persecuted.

Looking at little hints in the culture, for example, just recently, when there was that mass shooting in that church in Texas—a horrible event—one of the things that happened was something that I don't remember happening before. There were people asking for prayer for the victims and the family members of victims in the shootings, and there were other voices in the culture that mocked that these people were praying. They were worshipping when they were slaughtered, and there was this voice of mockery that, "Obviously that doesn't work; it isn't true, and maybe they need to rethink their options." Now that's a high level of hostility—to enter into that level of mockery to people who were praying and worshipping at the time of the slaughter. Yet what was interesting was there's been very little reaction to those voices in our culture. Things are changing. The possibility that those who are children today may suffer a level of persecution that we have never known before in our country for the cause of Christ is very real and very possible, and suddenly the words of Peter start to make more sense to us. He says in verse 15:

> **Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or as a troublesome meddler;**

So there does seem to be some hint in Peter's letter that some of these believers are kind of drifting back to their pagan ways. He's addressed that several times already. But it's also possible that these people, as a result of the unfair, abusive treatment, have a tendency to justify bad behavior, that in our case—because of what's going on—it's okay to steal and to do these things, kind of justifying because of the circumstances. What Peter is saying is *not* to do that—that the conflict, the judgment, should not be because they are doing evil things, but rather for the cause of Christ. The interesting one is the idea of **a troublesome meddler.** Most scholars think Peter just made up this word, so there's a lot of discussion: "What exactly does he mean?" Some people like the translation *agitator*. It carries the idea that earlier in Peter's letter he really talked about learning to be skillful in a hostile culture—that we learn how to respond as citizens and as slaves and husbands and wives so as not to create unnecessary conflict. **A troublesome meddler** would be someone who is crusading for the cause of Christ and just creating unnecessary conflict, making it worse for everyone. Now we know these people. They are where we work; they're in our schools; they're on social media; they think to stand for Christ is to somehow create all this unnecessary conflict, crusading for the things of God. But at the end of the day, all they're doing is making it much more difficult to have meaningful conversations with people that need to know Jesus.

One of the things that is always helpful to remember is: I don't expect unbelievers to act like believers. I don't expect unbelievers to share my values and beliefs. It is not productive to

continually be pointing out everything that everyone is doing wrong, keeping things constantly in a state of conflict. Ultimately we have to be more skillful than that, and bring the conversation around to what it means to have an encounter with the resurrected Christ—to experience new life in Christ. That's the only thing that's going to generate real and lasting change. So basically the **troublesome meddler** is someone who is just unnecessarily creating conflict, and everybody pays the price for that.

But if anyone suffers as a Christian...now we would probably read right past that, but it's worth noting that there are only three times in the New Testament where the word **Christian** is ever used—twice in the book of Acts and once here. It originally was kind of a derogatory term, a Christ-follower, "And who would be so naive and so stupid as to actually believe that?" So they were called Christians, and that's what Peter's talking about—a kind of a slander.

> **But if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in His name.** (Vs. 16)

We have a lot of this in the culture. Christians are considered to be simple-minded, somewhat naive, lacking in intellect, kind of easily persuadable and Christians, generally speaking, are just kind of dumb, and the sophisticated among us see it differently. Paul says in Romans 1, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation."* What Peter is saying is, "If they slander you, if they call you a name, wear it like a badge. 'Yes, it's true! I am a Christ-follower! I do believe in the message of the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation,' and **not to be ashamed** or embarrassed by that, but to take our stand and **glorify God in His name."**

> **For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER?** (Vs.17-18)

It's a very interesting couple of verses. In essence we look around the world and we say, "You know, why is it that often there seems to be so much struggle for the Christian and why does it seem like the godless just kind of go floating along and seem to get away with it?" You hear people talk about that all the time. What Peter is saying is right now God's attention is on His children. **It is time for judgment.** This word for **judgment** is not condemnation; it's more like *discipline*. It's a judgment of the good and the bad. But it's also this purifying, refining process. We learned earlier that we are *living stones.* We're *the house of God*. We're *the people of God* and right now God's primary attention is not on the wicked. It's on His children and He is purifying and growing and changing and strengthening His children as stewards of the gospel in order to accomplish this eternal mission. What Peter is saying is that's true right now, but if this is what God is willing to do for His own children, then imagine what He's going to do to those who have rejected the gospel?

Hebrews 12 has really the same message—that God pays attention to His children and He disciplines His children because He loves them and He wants to grow them and change them and prepare them and refine them for this epic battle and mission that will matter forever. When my girls were little, if we would go to the store, the mall, or wherever, it was not my responsibility to discipline every child in the store. It was my responsibility to discipline three girls. Why? Because I'm their dad; they belong to me, and it was my responsibility to discipline them and grow them as their dad. Would it be true that the other children in the room got away with lots of things that my kids did not get away with? Absolutely true! Were there times when they thought that wasn't fair?

Absolutely true! But at the end of the day, my responsibility was toward my children. That's exactly what Peter is saying. Right now God's focus is on His children—growing them, refining them, training them, strengthening them, purifying them, to be part of this epic battle for the eternal souls of the men and women around us.

But then he turns his attention and says, "*But* once Jesus returns and the children of God are safely in His presence, then He will turn His attention to those who have rejected the gospel." The quote there is from The Proverbs. The idea of how difficult it was to save us is this story of how it cost God His own Son—and it's been this continual discipline, refining, fiery process in order to prepare us for the return of Christ. So if that was what was necessary for His own children, what exactly lies ahead for those who have rejected the gospel? It's actually a very ominous couple of verses—that what lies ahead is beyond the description of the text.

One of the ways to think about it is: for us as Christians, this world is as close to hell as we're ever going to get, as we're destined for an eternity in the presence of God. But for those who reject the gospel, this world is as close to heaven as they're going to get, destined for an eternal destiny of torment, separated from the presence of God. So it all kind of begins to put things back into perspective. Verse 19:

> **Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.**

So we've had this before in Peter. People often ask the question, "What is God's will for me?" Well we had it earlier: "It is God's will that I submit and do good in order to silence the critics." We had that in chapter 2. Now the text says it may be God's will for me to suffer persecution for the name of Christ. He says, for **those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls**—that's a banking term, *deposit their souls*—**to a faithful Creator**, a real unusual phrase. It's the only place it occurs in the Bible. You know, the unbelieving world would say, "Well, what right does God have to judge?" The biblical answer would be, "Because He is the Creator, and the Creator has every right to judge His creation." That's kind of why that language is used...***in doing* what is right**. So basically Peter is saying, "If I have been found worthy to suffer persecution for the cause of Christ, then I will rejoice that God has found me worthy. I entrust my soul—I deposit it into the hands of God—and I respond by doing what is right for the sake of the gospel." It's a very sobering thing to realize that many of these first readers, soon after this, would suffer severe persecution. Many of them would be put to death; many of them burned at the stake, used as human torches in Nero's gardens. Peter himself, shortly after 1and 2 Peter, would himself be executed and crucified upside down for the cause of Christ. But what Peter was saying is to realize that this is a battle, and what is at stake are the eternal souls of men and women. This is not a cruise on the love boat; this is a trip on a battleship. What Peter is saying is that there is this epic battle where you're going to get bruised, you're going to get bloodied, you're going to get beat up, you're going to be exhausted, you're going to have to give all you have in order to ultimately share in the victory that will be ours when Jesus returns.

If it becomes necessary that we suffer true persecution for the cause of Christ, if there's going to be this epic battle for the eternal souls of the men and women, boys and girls around us, if we're going to get bruised and bloodied and beat up and exhausted in order to share in the victory, if that's what's necessary, I say to you, without hesitation, "Count me in!" What about you?

Our Father, we're sobered by these words. It would be great to just cruise into the sunset on the love boat, but this isn't heaven. It's not supposed to be, and right now we are engaged in an epic battle for the eternal souls of the men and women, the boys and girls around us. Lord, there are those who are going to be spectators; there are those who are going to wear the uniform, but they'll stand on the sideline, content to hold a ticket to heaven. But, Lord, there are many in this room that say, "If that's the cost, put me in!" God, give us the courage and the strength to take our stand, to not be ashamed of the gospel, to be faithful to our call, and if it is Your will that we suffer for the sake of the mission, Lord, may we rejoice that we've been found worthy to be part of that which will last forever. It's in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. Would you rather be a spectator or player? What does that mean to you? How do you see this in relation to your Christian life?

2. The American culture has allowed us to live with one foot in the Kingdom of God and one foot in the things of this world. Is that good or bad? How might that be changing?

Bible Study

1. Read I Peter 4:12-19. Read Matthew 26:69-75 and Acts 5:17-42. How does Peter's story provide helpful background for what he writes in his letter?

2. How should we view the "fiery ordeals" among us? This is not general suffering but specifically related to suffering because we identify ourselves as Christians. How might this be experienced in our culture today?

3. What is the point of suffering for the believer today according to Peter? Compare Hebrews 12:4-11 and Acts 14:22.

4. How might we suffer today as a result of being a "troublesome meddler?" How is that different from what Peter is wanting from us as believers?

5. What is God's will for us as His children according to this passage? What does that mean for you? What gives Him the right to judge according to 4:19?

Application

1. At the end of your life would you rather be defined by being a spectator, bench sitter or player on the field? Why?

2. Thinking about what Peter has said in chapter 4, what does it mean to "arm ourselves?" If you are going to be a serious Christ-follower living on mission what should you expect? How does it help to just face the fact that a commitment to Christ will cost you and you're done trying to live with one foot in both worlds? What does that look like in practical terms for you?

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