

The Normalcy of Suffering

1 Peter 4:12-19

Introduction

Last week, we saw that Peter exhorts Christians to take the gifts God has given to them and turn around and use them for the sake of the body of Christ. In this passage, Peter calls on Christians to suffer as Christians and to view this suffering as a sign of blessing. This is the culmination of Peter's exhortations regarding suffering and seems to be the main point of writing this letter to the Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor.

The Fiery Trial and the Judgment

While there are important principles to draw out from this passage, remember first the context that Peter is writing in. It is likely that Peter is writing right around the time that Nero begins his persecution of the Christians (AD 64). Peter warns his readers of the "fiery trial which is to try you" (v. 12). As we saw last week, Peter also knows that "the end of all things is at hand" (v. 7), referring particularly to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. God judges His own children first so that they are not condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). The persecution coming upon Christians is to be expected in anticipation of God's hammer falling on Jerusalem (vs. 16-17). God purifies His church through fire to spare them from the eternal fire.

Rejoicing and Identifying with Christ

Suffering should be no surprise to Christians (v. 12). Jesus and the apostles have made that clear (e.g., Matt. 5:11-12, Matt. 10:24-25, Mark 13:9-13, John 15:18-20, John 16:33, 2 Tim. 3:12, 1 John 3:13). The right response to suffering like Christ and for His name is to rejoice and to see it as a mark of blessing (v. 13-14). God's Spirit, a Spirit of glory, rests on you. This is what makes a Christian a target in the first place. The world identifies the Christian with Jesus and treats him the same way it treated Jesus. When you can see your participation with Christ in His sufferings, rejoice because you believe the promise that you will also participate in His glory. You have been identified with Christ.

Peter anticipates a misunderstanding of his teaching. Suffering alone is not commendable. Do not assume that if you are suffering, it necessarily means you are following Christ. We also suffer because of our sins. And so Peter warns Christians not to suffer for doing evil (v.15), even evil as seemingly harmless as nosing into other people's affairs.

But, if you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but rather glorify God. The word "Christian" only occurs three times in the New Testament (twice in Acts and then here). It is possible at the time of Peter's writing that the term was still in use as a derogatory term. When someone mocks you for being a Christian, it is easy to be ashamed of it. When someone identifies you as like Christ, as obeying His law, it is tempting to be embarrassed about it. Instead, rejoice, see it as a blessing, and glorify God.

Types of Suffering

There are it seems five main categories of suffering. The most ultimate is of course "the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God" (v. 17), being cast into the lake of fire. We also suffer the consequences of our own sin, which Peter warns against in v. 15. Third, there is

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also suffering on account sin in general, the fallen world we live in (tsunamis, cancer, thistles, painful childbirth, oppressive governments, rug burns, death). Fourth, as Christians, we suffer or make sacrifices because of our commitment to follow Christ (Christian education, having and raising children, being honest). Lastly, Christians suffer persecution: fiery trials and reproach for sake of the name of Christ.

This last category is the main one Peter addresses in this passage. For the most part, by God's grace, we do not experience much persecution in our country today. At least not yet. Do not think that the trials you have in front of you right now are worthless, though. You are still called to imitate Christ, to live as a Christian, in whatever it is God has placed in front of you. It may be that God has given you this test to prepare you for a fiery trial. Be faithful with what is right in front of you. This is God's assignment to you.

This means that you must not buy into the victim culture which dominates so much of our society. Don't play the victim, even when you are truly a victim. In the last verse of this passage, Peter says that if you suffer in God's will (in obedience to Him), commit your soul to God in doing good. God calls you in the midst of your suffering to put your trust in Him, get back up, and do good to the people God has placed around you. Participate in Christ, not in the victim culture.

Conclusion

Peter reminds his readers that suffering for the sake of Christ is expected. Do not be surprised when it happens, and don't think it is something strange. God is at work purifying His church and bringing His kingdom. The reminder is not there, though, to make you anxious about what's around the corner. The reminder is so that you are not taken off guard, so that you can be preparing for it faithfully. How do we prepare without becoming anxious?

The answer is to commit yourself to God as the faithful Creator now (v. 19). He made you. He gave you life. He sustains you. Every breath that you have is from Him. He is good, and He does not change. He is faithful. So like Jesus, commit yourself to Him (Luke 23:44-46, Ps. 31:3-5, 1 Pet. 2:21-24). Commit yourself to Him like Abraham and Joseph and Samson, like Stephen and Paul and Peter, like the Christians in the Coliseum, like Jan Hus and William Tyndale, like Corrie Ten Boom and Jim and Elisabeth Elliot. Commit yourself to Him like our brothers and sisters around the world today who rejoice to give their lives for the name of Jesus. You have a great cloud of witnesses surrounding you, cheering you on as you rejoice in the work, in the sufferings and the blessings, that God has set before you. First and foremost among them is your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who ran this race before you and calls you to run after Him. So run, rejoice, and commit yourselves to your faithful Creator in doing good.