

May 8, 2016

Sojourners *Strengthening Your Faith to Suffer*

1 Peter 3:18 – 22

On a crisp October day in 1555, two men, Hugh Lattimer and Nicholas Ridley, walked out the doors of Bocardo Prison in Oxford, England. The morning sunlight was like a thousand October mornings before. This day, however, was a day destined to stand out among the thousands. These two men, refusing to recant their personal faith in Jesus Christ, would die a terrible death that morning. They would be burned at the stake. We cannot imagine all that crossed their minds that day but we do know what Hugh Lattimer said as they walked to the stake. As they approached the stakes set in the middle of tinder-dry firewood, Lattimer turned to Ridley and said, 'Be of good cheer Ridley. Play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace as I trust shall never be put out!'

The context of this passage this morning, very simply, is undeserved suffering. Lattimer and Ridley didn't deserve to be burned at the stake. They had broken no laws or committed any kind of treason. In every respect they had lived commendable lives. But they had defied a queen and insisted that Christ was the head of the church, not the pope. They were just two of the many casualties of the persecution during the reign of Bloody Mary in the 16th century, and their suffering, like many others, was undeserved. And yet this world is full of suffering. Everyone experiences some kind of suffering in this life, whether from the natural effects of sin that has infected all of creation or because of our own stupid choices or from the evil intent of others. But this passage is not about that. The suffering Peter is talking about is the suffering Christians will experience for doing right.

Verse 13 really begins the thought that this passage sums up: *Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.* Peter is talking about the suffering we must endure as followers of Christ. This is mostly a foreign thought to most Christians in the West – that suffering is a necessary part of the Christian life. But for most of church history, in most of the world, being a Christian meant that you could expect to suffer for the sake of Christ. We are so insulated here in America that we don't realize that for most of the world, through most of history, being a Christian has not been safe. During the first 2 or three centuries, when the church was spreading like wildfire throughout the world, every Christian knew with certainty that sooner or later they might have to testify to their faith at the cost of their life. And yet they came to Christ. Imagine preaching the gospel, calling people to Christ, not offering the promise of a better life, but rather if they believed, they could most likely expect to have it worse – risking imprisonment, torture, slander, abuse and even death.

This is why Peter goes on to say, *Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.* It would be easy to be intimidated and troubled by suffering, if we thought that coming to Christ would automatically make everything easier and more comfortable for us here and now. But the perspective is an eternal one – not temporal. That is, it is our experiences in this life that get us ready for the next. Who or what indeed can ultimately harm us if we understand that? Don't be intimidated, don't be troubled by evil men who want to make life rough for you, by circumstances that dump you in deep waters over your head, *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.* In other words, make Him the center and circumference of your life and the great object of your affections. Let nothing take His place in anything. Do not fear men or adverse circumstances – but sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart – *always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*

And then live in such a way, that if you are accused of being a Christian, when all the evidence is in, the charge is supported. *'...having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.* The testimony of our lives then will shame and confound those who revile, or speak evil of us.

And then Peter gives us a great and triumphant reason for not considering this suffering as something abnormal or ultimately destructive, or something to fear or that should intimidate us. He says, *For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.* In other words, if God thinks it is a good thing that we suffer, who are we to argue? He is the one in control – He knows the end from the beginning – He is the one who said, *'Weeping lasts only for the night, but joy comes in the morning.'* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter to his twin sister, Sabine wrote: *It is good to learn early enough that suffering and God are not a contradiction but rather a unity,...and to find God in this way gives peace and rest and a strong and courageous heart.*¹

And now what follows is Peter's explanation why it is sometimes God's will for us to suffer for doing what is right. It is not an easy thing to hear that sometimes it is the will of God that we suffer, and we need encouragement and hope if God is going to will it so that we suffer for doing right. So verses 18 – 22, are the explanation and reason for the call to suffer as a Christian for doing right. This is supported by the opening verse of chapter 4 which is the bookend for this section: *'Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking...'* Peter is saying, 'Don't be surprised when suffering comes when you do what is right, if that is the will of God, Christ Himself suffered for doing what was right, so fortify your thinking with the kind of thinking your Master had.' Peter's aim was to strengthen the faith of his readers to withstand the onslaught of persecution that had come and was coming and he uses four things to do that. Peter talks about the suffering of Christ, the salvation of Noah, the symbol of baptism, and the supremacy of Christ as explanation and reason for the call to suffer as a Christian for doing right.

First of all Peter gives us the suffering of Christ: *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.* The Bible tells us that Jesus suffered and died on the cross. And throughout the New Testament this thought is consistent: because the Author of our salvation suffered, we, His followers, will not escape it. Paul's great desire expressed in Philippians 3:10 was, *'...that I might know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.'* And in Hebrews 13:12-13 it says, *'Therefore Jesus also...suffered outside the gate. Hence let us go out to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.'* And the Lord Jesus said Himself in the gospels, *Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.* This is something that builds hope and strengthens faith to know that the most just man in history suffered for the most unjust sinner on the planet, and if we suffer unjustly, we are only following His example.

But even more, this passage says that His suffering was for sins. Christ died for sins, and sin is what separates me from God. What I need, what you need, at the deepest level, is a sacrifice for our sins – sins that would forever condemn us to eternal suffering. So suffering momentarily for the sake of righteousness is incredibly better than suffering forever the wrath of God because of my sins. The good news is that I don't have to die in my sins – but He suffered evil men and abuse and died and rose and triumphed over sin and death to bring us to God. That is why people come to Christ in spite of the threat of suffering, persecution and death. Some actually preach that suffering is a sign that we lack faith or God has forgotten us or we have sinned in some way. But what Peter is saying is that because our Lord led the way in suffering – we can expect no less – and suffering for the sake of righteousness is not a sign that God is against us but rather for us.

When Jesus was put to death on the cross, the gospels record that at that moment, the great veil in the temple was torn in two. Now the veil in the temple separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place where God met with man over the mercy seat on the ark. The first century Jewish historian Josephus records that the veil in the temple was about four inches thick, cross-woven together, and about 60 feet tall. In other words, this was an impenetrable barrier between God and man. The only way through was the yearly sacrifice for sins offered by the priest, and it had to be offered every year. Our sin had so separated us from God that He was unreachable. But in His death, Christ tore down that veil and the way was open once again for us into the very presence of God, once for all.

And Peter is pointing out that His unique death was so effective, that it destroyed forever all the barriers between God and man. And by His death He invites us into the very presence of God. And just as He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, so it is for all who follow Him into death.

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, V6,(Fortress Press, Minn., Minnesota, 2006), 284

This is incredibly hopeful for those who are suffering unjustly. And especially for those who face death at the hands of unjust men. I just heard the testimony of a young Nigerian Christian named Victoria, who was in the Sunday service in her church, along with her family and friends when it was interrupted by gunfire. She said they had been singing praises and praying for their country and the persecuted church, when shots rang out in the small building. Rebel soldiers had burst in the door, firing their automatic weapons indiscriminately. "Everybody was crying and shouting. I started feeling some pain...I did not realize that it was my blood that had spilled. I saw people on the floor, some were dead and some were crying. There was blood around their bodies. I remember shouting 'Jesus'. That was the only thing I had." Victoria lost her 10 year-old brother and her father in the attack, along with twelve other church members. "I saw my father who was bleeding from his chest. He had always been kind and told us to always read our Bible and be close to God. That was the last time I saw him. But he is not dead. Definitely one day we are going to meet again."

Peter knows that some of these believers to whom he is writing will face the ultimate injustice, and what you need at that point is hope. Hope that even though we are put to death in the flesh, we will not die. And then Peter turns to the salvation of Noah: [Christ] *being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.* Of all the passages in the Bible, this is without a doubt the most obscure. It is highly ironic that Peter, who claims in his second letter that Paul's writings are hard to understand, has left us with a passage that has defied certain interpretation for centuries. Martin Luther said: "A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means."² Who are the spirits in prison? And what does He mean when he says Christ proclaimed to them? And why does he use this to bolster his teaching about suffering?

There are lots of interpretations of this passage, and variants on the interpretations, but I'll boil it down to the three main interpretations held by mainstream theologians. And I'll give you these without a lot of commentary just so you have an idea of what is being said. All of three of these views have their strengths and weaknesses and there is not a clear consensus on which view is the right one. But the real emphasis is not on who the spirits in prison are and what Christ proclaimed to them, but rather on how understanding this illustration works to strengthen our faith through suffering, because that is Peter's main point. Peter is reminding his readers that undeserved suffering, or suffering for doing what is right, is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. And he is trying to give his readers strong encouragement to stay the course in the face of unjust suffering.

One interpretation is that after His death and before His resurrection, Jesus descended into hell and preached or proclaimed to the spirits of those people who had perished in the flood at the time of Noah. Some say that He was offering them a second chance at salvation, but that doesn't hold water with what is revealed in the rest of the Bible about salvation. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us: *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,*³ Others say it was rather a triumphal proclamation of the victory He won at Calvary to those who died in the flood. But you have to wonder why He only chose to speak to this one group since it's a sure bet that there were lots more disobedient spirits in that place than just the ones that died in the flood. After all, there are a few thousand years of sinful human history between the flood and the cross.

Another interpretation is that after His death and before His resurrection, Jesus descended into hell and proclaimed His victory, authority and dominion over the fallen angels of Noah's day, who, as the letter of Jude tells us: *did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, He has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.* This view is probably held by the majority of theologians, but again it is difficult to understand why Jesus would choose only this group to preach to. The third interpretation is that Christ, through the Spirit, preached to the people who were alive in Noah's day, when they were alive. That is, in just the same way that Peter, in the first chapter, teaches the Spirit of Christ was within the prophets, predicting His eventual coming and His suffering, the Spirit of Christ was proclaiming through Noah, the coming judgment of God. In fact, in his second letter, Peter refers to Noah as a preacher of righteousness.

² Luther, Martin. *Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*. Kregel, p. 168.

³ Hebrews 9:27, ESV

But whichever explanation you choose, you have to remember the context. And the context is undeserved suffering. And it would be entirely consistent for Peter to use Noah as one of his examples here. After all, Noah was preaching for 120 years, 'Repent, the judgment of God is coming down on you!' And nobody is listening. No one is obeying. In fact, they are probably mocking him and his family. Why else would Peter mention this? And yet God is being patient. Peter makes a pointed reference to the patience of God during this time. And in his second letter he reminds his readers that '*God is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but for all to come to repentance*'. These people were not only doing wicked things and ignoring God, but they were mocking Noah, the preacher of righteousness. In other words, Noah was suffering for doing what was right, and Peter is drawing a parallel here.

I think Peter is making several points here. One of the things Peter is saying is that it is better to experience undeserved suffering for 120 years and be saved, than to suffer an eternity for sin. He is also assuring us of the victory of Jesus over everything, and whether you are a follower of Him 2000 years ago, or you follow Him today, He was speaking then and He's speaking now. He was speaking in Noah's day and He's speaking now. And everyone who comes to Him has this promise: '*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*'. And finally, whichever interpretation you choose, I think we are to understand that those who follow this suffering Christ and suffer for His sake in this life, will most assuredly be brought safely through the waters of death. You see, Christ is the ark that will bring us through the death waters. It is only when we enter the ark that we are saved. It is only those who are in Christ who are delivered from death. This is strong encouragement for those who are suffering. Christ the Just, died for me, the unjust, and did it once for all. The most righteous man ever, took my place, absorbing the wrath of God, paying the penalty that I deserved; utterly and completely innocent, and paid my debt in full, in order to bring me to God. How can that not fail to fill my soul with joy and assurance when I am faced with the comparatively unjust actions of others?

And then Peter takes off on the symbol of baptism: *while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Now a lot of people read this verse and suppose that it is baptism that saves – in spite of the fact that the Bible clearly says we are saved by faith alone. Some denominations actually preach that unless you are baptized, you are not really saved. And I think Peter had either heard such teaching, or knew this might be problematic, so he qualifies what he is talking about – *not as a removal of dirt from the body*. In other words, you can't remove sin by dunking someone under the water. But baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just like Paul said in Romans 10:13 – '*Everyone who calls on, [or everyone who appeals to] the Lord will be saved.*' I like how John Piper puts it: ***It is a way of saying to God, 'I am trusting You to apply the death of Jesus to me for my sins and to bring me through death and judgment to everlasting life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.'***⁴

You see, Peter can't be talking about being saved by baptism. Baptism implies going under the water. And he's just given us an example of people going under the water, and they were **not** the ones that were saved. The ones that were saved were those who got in the ark. Everybody else died. So if Peter is trying to make the argument that the act of baptism saves you, he's using a really bad illustration. No, the point is that only those who got in the ark were saved from the waters of judgment. But Peter did see a parallel between the waters of judgment and baptism, and that is the point he is making. And it is the same point Paul makes in Romans 6: *We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*. You see Peter was pointing us to the death of the old nature and the resurrection to new life when we come to faith. In other words, we are buried with Christ in the waters of baptism symbolically, having escaped final condemnation and eternal suffering. And that means the suffering we are experiencing cannot be the condemnation of God, which is why James tells us to consider it all joy. There is only eternal joy, not eternal suffering waiting for us at the end.

Finally Peter shows us the supremacy of Christ: *who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him*. The call to follow Jesus is a call to follow in His footsteps of undeserved suffering. Precisely because it is only by following in His footsteps that we will join Him in glory. His path led from the cross to the grave to glory, and that is the path we must follow. How does that help us to walk through suffering? How does that fill us with hope that things will turn out for good? How does that help when we are mocked and criticized, persecuted and killed?

4 John Piper in a sermon, Strengthened to Suffer, September 25, 1994

Many people have the thought that if I do everything right, if I'm reading my Bible and praying and going to church then things will go well for me. They quote Jeremiah 29:11 as a mantra: *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.* This verse is often the exact opposite of what many people assume about God's will. They rip it out of context and fail to see that this was a word to God's people who were suffering in exile, and they suffered there for 70 years. Entire generations passed before they saw the fulfillment of this word. But God is reminding His people that even as they suffer, He has not forgotten them. Remember, it was God's will that Stephen would be stoned to death, John would be exiled, Paul would be beaten, imprisoned, stoned and shipwrecked, and that Jesus would be put to death on the cross. Why would we assume that it is God's will for us to have a great job, happy life and a big bank account?

Peter knew his readers were suffering and would suffer undeserved ridicule, imprisonment, and death, and what they needed was strong encouragement that they were on the right road and that God had not somehow lost control of things. The fact that Christ walked this same road and is now ruling over all things ought to give us wings when we encounter undeserved suffering because this means that nothing can touch us unless He grants permission. He's in charge. When it says all angels and authorities and powers are His subjects, it means that they can only do what He commands and what He allows. And He will only command or allow things in your life to the degree that they turn out for your good and for His glory.

Our merciful God and gracious Savior,

Your ways are not our ways, and Your thoughts are not our thoughts. Your thoughts are unsearchable and often baffling to our finite minds. We would not willingly choose to suffer, unless You had not first suffered for us, showing us the way to life. Help us to say as Paul did, 'that I might know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death'. Waken us as never before to the preciousness of Your mercy bought by the blood of Christ. Fix our hopes so fully on the joy of heaven, that we become the freest of all people on earth. May our everlasting memories of Your grace make us glad of all You suffered and all You forgave, and all You call us to, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.