



A few weeks ago I read an article in my newsfeed on my phone. The heading of the article stated that in 2016 a Christian was killed for their faith every six minutes. This means nearly 90,000 Christians were killed for their faith in 2016, equivalent to one every six minutes. The research was completed by the Italy-based Center for Studies on New Religions. The annual study is set to release next month with full details.

You might find it interesting to know that the number of Christ-followers who were martyred in 2016 is less than those who lost their lives in 2015. In 2015 105,000 Christ-followers were martyred. The group commented that "It still makes Christians the most persecuted religious group in the world." Most of the persecution took place in Africa in tribal conflicts. Many people who give their lives to Christ refuse to take up a weapon and fight with their tribe and therefore lose their lives.

The annual study also indicated that between 500 and 600 million Christians were prevented from freely practicing their faith. Right now Christians are being harassed in 110 countries around the world. While we freely gather here, there are other Christ-followers who are forced to worship in private locations. But these followers of Jesus are worshipping Him; they aren't allowing the persecution to stop them. They are worshipping God right now for His goodness in their lives.

Although you may not share a similar experience to other Christ-followers around the world, have you noticed how suffering is a tool that God uses to shape your faith? Have you found that some of the most difficult times are when your faith flourished the most? Even if you're not yet a Christ-follower, have you found that times of suffering grow your character most?

Grab your Bible and turn to the book of 1 Peter. This morning we continue our study in this book. Peter writes this letter to a group of believers in Asia Minor who are being persecuted for their faith. In the introduction of the letter he calls them "exiles." They have been rejected by the world for their faith in Christ. Our text this morning is almost like the cliffnotes for the rest of the book. Verses 3-12 are going to be the foundation that Peter builds on in the rest of the book. The subjects, concepts and topics we look at this morning are going to be further developed in the upcoming chapters in our series.

## **Praise God: He Established Our Hope in Christ**

The first thing Peter does is encourage these believers to praise God because He established our hope in Christ.

**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).**

This section of Scripture is referred to as a "doxology." The word doxology means to praise God, or a time to worship God. The first part of verse 3 is going to be an overarching statement that will guide the whole passage. It is a call to worship God as the Father of Jesus Christ. Peter provides three reasons to praise God: the first is because of His mercy, the second is that the resurrection of Christ gives you a living hope, and the third is that you are shielded by God's power. Let's look at each of these reasons.

### **God's mercy**

You can praise because in God's mercy you have been given new birth. If you've placed your faith in Christ, you've experienced this new birth. You didn't accomplish this new birth on your own, just like you didn't accomplish your physical birth on your own. Your new birth is based on God's mercy. Mercy means to not get what you deserve. The truth is that you deserved death for your sins and rebellion against God, but in His mercy Christ died in your place, giving you new birth. You can praise God because of His mercy in your life.

### **A living hope**

Look at the second half of verse 3 for the next reason to praise God. It's because Christ died in your stead that you can have a living hope. A living hope is one that has life and therefore it gives life! What is the opposite of living? It's dead, right? Do you know that some people have a dead hope? They have hope but really it's dead; it's wishful thinking. It's half-hearted hope in things that may never come to fruition. And you know they never come to fruition, which is why it's a dead hope. But hope in Christ brings life.

This living hope leads you into a new inheritance, an inheritance that can never spoil, fade or be taken away. Historical studies reveal that families were not giving an inheritance to a person who placed their trust in Christ. So these new believers who Peter is writing to would have no inheritance to speak of; their hope had to be in Christ!

Studies and personal testimonies show that more people are wasting their inheritance. Can you think of someone you know who received an inheritance and wasted every cent of it? This week I read an article from a man who was given \$250K on his 18th birthday. In just over four years he had wasted almost every cent of the inheritance. In his story he shares about buying unnecessary items, running up huge bar tabs and partying. Things had gotten so bad for him that he had to take a loan just to finish his last year of college. His inheritance disappeared.

You might be wondering; "Neal, what is this inheritance Peter is writing about?" It's a great question. The inheritance is salvation! When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome he shared this same great news. *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory"* (Rom. 8:17). As children of the King we share His inheritance in glory! I love what the Bible scholar Warren Wiersbe writes in his book on 1 Peter: "Note the description of this inheritance, for it is totally unlike any earthly inheritance. For one thing, it is incorruptible, which means that nothing can ruin it. Because it is undefiled, it cannot be stained or cheapened in any way. It will never grow old because it is eternal; it cannot wear out, nor can it disappoint us in any way." Peter is saying that today is a great day to praise God for the living hope you have in Christ and the inheritance He has given you!

### Shielded by God

The inheritance you have in Christ can never be wasted like an earthly inheritance. You don't have to worry about protecting it, either. It is being kept in heaven right now for you. The word "shielded" in verse 5 has a greater meaning. In the original language it means to be guarded by a military force or kept under protection. It makes sense for Peter to write that your salvation, which is the inheritance, is being protected by the power of God right now. Your salvation is waiting for you. Yes, if you've placed your trust in Christ, you already have salvation. But the fullness of your salvation will be revealed at the return of the Savior.

I've had conversations with people who think they have lost their salvation or they could lose their salvation. If you have placed your hope in Christ as your personal Savior, if you have accepted the mercy of God and been given new birth, then your salvation is waiting for you. You don't have to worry about it. Your salvation is protected by the power of God! The strongest force in the universe is keeping your salvation protected for you until

the return of Christ. This is the third reason why Peter tells these persecuted believers they can praise God right now!

### Praise God: He Gives Us Joy in Our Trials

But Peter is not done giving reasons to praise God, there is more to come for this persecuted group of believers scattered in Asia Minor.

**In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls (verses 6-9).**

Peter moves dramatically from ecstasy to agony. He moves from praising God because of the hope we have in Christ, to praising God because He will give us hope in our trials. This is a drastic shift in the direction he was going.

The question is not **if** a Christ-follower will experience trials but **when** you will experience trials. If you're like me, when I placed my trust in Christ I was told it would better my life. I was presented with the Gospel about accepting Christ to help me with my problems, not give me more problems! Trials in our lives are bound to happen whether we believe in Christ or not. What is the role of trials in your life? Let me share three roles that trials play in each of our lives.

### Trials grow us

The first role trials play in our life is to grow us. Peter said that trials prove the genuineness of your faith. Think about a trial that came in your life that served to grow you. Maybe it was serving in a new ministry. Maybe it was talking with your family about your faith in Christ. Maybe it was breaking off a relationship that you knew didn't honor God. As you approached this trial you put in extra effort. You had to think more, pray more, or look at the problem from a different angle. Now, on the other side of this trial, you can see how it shaped you into the person you are today.

The Bible tells us a great story in the book of Genesis about a trial that shaped the life of a young man. Let me tell you the short version of the story: Joseph was the favorite son of his father. He was sold into slavery by his brothers. He was falsely accused by his master's wife. He was imprisoned and felt like God has forgotten him. After 13 years he was promoted to second in command over Egypt. He forgave his brothers and saved his family. Listen to what he said, *"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother*

*Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you!"* (Gen. 45:4-5). God used this trial in Joseph's life to grow him and save others! Joseph was able to praise God because he saw how this trial led to further maturity in his life.

### **Trials are varied**

Peter says, "All kinds of trials." Each of us has a different story because God has given you a unique path to walk in life. Some people seem to have a trouble-free life, while others seem to struggle at every turn. Think of some examples of this: some couples have a great marriage while other couples struggle to find harmony. Some people have a wonderful boss while others writhe under poor leadership. Some people have financial peace while others barely make it. One trial that might be hard for me could be simple for you to endure. Trials are all varied.

If you are going through a trial right now—and many of you are—you might not want to praise God. You might actually prefer to curse God or at minimum give Him the silent treatment. I've been there. I've experienced painful situations in my life (which I don't have time to go into right now), and had no desire or ability to praise God. I've stood in this room singing with my lips while my heart has been stone cold because of what happened. That might be you today. I'm so glad you're here. What I've learned is that trial will pass. The pain won't be forgotten. But God won't forget you in the trial. There will be a day you can praise Him because the trial you're experiencing today is growing you.

### **Trials are controlled by God**

When you experience trials you can rest assured they are controlled by God. This brings comfort in pain. Our trials will not last forever. When God permits His children to go through the furnace He keeps His eye on the timer and the thermostat. There are times in each of our lives where we feel like God has turned up the heat too high and accidentally set the timer for too long. It can feel like the pain is unbearable.

Peter illustrated this with the example of the goldsmith. Fire does not destroy gold; it only removes combustible materials. The fire refines the gold and makes it pure. The goldsmith doesn't want to waste the ore just as God doesn't want to waste your life experiences. The genuineness of your faith shines when it's in the fire. As Jesus prepared for His crucifixion, He told His disciples they would have troubles in this world. *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). Jesus also promised that He would always be with you during every situation you encounter. *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matt. 28:20b).

This week I kept a list of the trials that I heard about from people in my life. Let me share some of what others shared with me: someone having heart surgery, a co-worker committed suicide, someone lost money at their company, a person diagnosed with cancer, a friend who lost a job, sick family member, dealing with racism at work, overcoming their past, infertility, struggles with kids and divorce. These are some tough trials and this is only from one week! This is where we, as a body of believers, need to come alongside each other and support each other in the various trials we experience.

We all know that our trials will only last a little while, but our hope in Christ is eternal. If you are going through tough times right now, listen to what Edmund Clowney has to say about trials: "Trials should not surprise us, or cause us to doubt God's faithfulness. Rather, we should actually be glad for them. God sends trials to strengthen our trust in Him so that our faith will not fail." If you are experiencing a great trial this morning, please don't doubt the faithfulness of God.

Praise is the best response to your trials. Even though we don't see Him, we love Him and can praise Him. Peter knew this firsthand. Peter had seen Jesus but sees Him no longer. And we don't see Jesus but our love for Him gets us through the trial. I have a good friend in Southern California who texted me this week and said, "Things aren't going well. The last couple months have been hard. Work has been very tough and I've been contemplating leaving ministry. Our car died and I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm trusting God in this process. I've been asking Him to keep my perspective steady and my peace high."

You might not rejoice in the circumstances but you can rejoice while you are facing these circumstances. Charles Spurgeon once said: "Little faith will take your soul to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your soul."

### **Praise God: Our Hope is Fulfilled in Christ**

Peter is aiming all of this towards the hope that is fulfilled for those who have placed their trust in Christ. He's going to expound on this further as we conclude this section of Scripture.

**Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things (verses 10-12).**

There's much we could say about this, but what I want you to see is we have the great privilege to see and experience things the

prophets and angels longed for. Prophets searched to understand more about Christ and His suffering and His resurrection. Angels looked down to get a peek, like the wedding attendees trying to steal a glance at the bride before her appearance. What they all longed to see has been preached to us by men and women, filled with the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

The glory we have comes from what Jesus has done for us. It comes through the penalty He paid for each of us on the cross. This is where grace comes in. God had grace on us. The best definition of grace that I've ever heard is "getting what we don't deserve."

Peter wants believers to understand the grace of God. Through what Christ has done for us, we get what we don't deserve. If you're not a believer yet I'm so glad you're here. Our church is all about grace. We want to be a group of people who show grace to others because of the grace we've been shown. We understand that life transformation doesn't happen overnight. We want to give you time to learn about the love of God, His salvation, His grace and benefits of following Him.

What Peter writes here is meant to be a strong word of encouragement. His aim is to encourage the persecuted church. His words also comfort us today. They comfort us individually and corporately. The best response to all of this is: Praise God! We have a living hope in Christ!

Sometimes it's incredibly difficult to praise God. Listen to Peter's reason why we can praise God. If you've placed your trust in Christ, you are born again! You have an inheritance waiting for you that will never spoil, perish, or disappear. The power of God will shield you today and you can find joy in all the trials you face. Christ-followers across the globe are suffering and some of you are suffering today but we can come together and praise God for His faithfulness.

Close your Bible, put down your phone, and listen to this story that I heard. Four years ago I attended the Global Leadership Summit and heard Wes Stafford share about the suffering of the church. From 1975-1987 Ethiopia was under communist rule. Every church was forced to close their doors and vacate. Pastors

and evangelists were publicly beaten for their faith. The church was forced to quickly and quietly move underground. During this time, Wes met a man named Tadessa who refused to keep quiet about Jesus. He was forbidden to preach God's word but he would use funeral services as a chance to share the love of Christ. The Communist Party hated this so he was beaten and imprisoned and finally sentenced to death for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Tadessa was lead to the market square to face execution by electrocution, there was no electric chair. Wires had been pulled from the existing structures to make a rudimentary torture device. He placed his hands on bare wires and the executioners threw the switch. There were sparks and every fuse in the city blew, but Tadessa was still alive! They took him back to the prison and told the electricians to make it right because they planned to execute him the next day. In the morning he came out and placed his hands in the crude wire system that waited to extract his life. The switch was thrown a second time and the same thing happened! The Communist Party was so upset, they released him.

That afternoon is when Wes Stafford met Tadessa. He was released from that town and told to leave and never return. The Communist Party was very strict and told him to keep quiet about Jesus. Wes shared about his conversation with Tadessa. As they concluded, Tadessa needed to leave. As he walked away, Wes shouted to him, "Where are you going?" His response was, "I have a funeral to officiate." When the Communist Party was overthrown and church doors reopened in Ethiopia, the church had grown five-fold in seventeen years of suffering!

Suffering can be one of the greatest shaping tools for our lives and suffering can be one of the greatest growth motivators for the local church. But we need to do this together. Remember, Peter wasn't writing to a person but to a group of people. We need each other as we encounter trials.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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