

Last weekend Lynn and I were down in Arizona as part of our ministry to the SF Giants. When we got there we had some free time and decided to take a hike up what's called South Mountain. We'd never done this hike before so we really didn't know what we were in for besides what we could find out online. So off we went.

What we soon found out is we really weren't fully equipped for the journey. It was more of a test than either of us expected. We didn't wear the right shoes. We could have used more water. And the trails weren't as easy to follow as we thought they'd be. Having said that, it was a beautiful hike, we made it back to our car safely, and we're glad we did it.

For a few months now we've been learning from the first epistle of Peter. Peter wrote this letter from Rome towards the end of his life to a diverse group of Jews and Gentiles living in an area called Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. The Emperor at the time was Nero, and he was becoming increasingly fed up with Christians. This would soon turn into outright hostility and persecution. Peter himself would be martyred in Rome around 64 AD. But the people he was writing to were feeling the heat start to turn up. And what Peter is trying to do in this letter is prepare them for what's ahead. He knows it won't be an easy journey. Soon they'll be tested by a "fiery ordeal" and if they're not ready for it, they may not survive.

I think sometimes we have a hard time relating to this letter because we just don't experience the kind of persecution these believers in the first century faced. Not that we all don't experience trials and testing; most certainly we do. But here in America we rarely experience the kind of suffering and persecution Peter was talking about. But there are a couple of things to keep in mind.

First, many of our brothers and sisters in our world today do experience this kind of suffering and persecution—North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan are all places where severe persecution of Christ-followers is taking place right now. Each month around the world 322 Christians die for their faith, 214 churches are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians.

Another thing to remember is just because we don't experience this today in America doesn't mean it won't soon be upon us. I think we all know that although we still have freedom to worship and share our faith with others, our beliefs and our way of life as Christ-followers are more and more at odds with our culture. In

a recent poll by Lifeway Research, 60 percent of Americans say Christians in this country face increasing intolerance. Simply to believe in the exclusive claims of Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, or to adhere to biblical values in any number of areas is to invite accusations of bigotry and intolerance.

So, just like those who read Peter's letter in the 1st century, we need to be prepared.

In today's text Peter gives several encouragements to help us do that and to persevere to the very end of our journey. That's what this text and this sermon are for—to help us do that; to be prepared when the struggle comes. I'll start by reading the text and then we'll look at each of these encouragements.

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit (1 Peter 4:1-6).

Encouragement #1: Arm Yourselves with the Same Attitude Christ Had

Peter begins, "*...since Christ has suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude.*" The first encouragement is to arm ourselves with the same attitude Christ had. Up in chapter 3:18 we read this, "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.*" Suffering didn't just happen to him, he chose it. He even said, "*No one takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own accord*" (John 10:18).

Peter points specifically to his attitude or mindset. He's not talking about having a positive attitude toward suffering, but rather to be ready for it, as Jesus was. Viktor Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set

of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Peter says choosing your attitude will arm you, equip you. He uses a military term. Like a soldier who takes up a weapon to prepare for battle, arm yourself with the right way of thinking. Arm yourself with a mindset that says, if I must suffer for the sake of righteousness, I will. If you choose that way of thinking, you'll not be so taken off guard when it comes. You'll be prepared for what's coming.

We should ask ourselves, what are our expectations? What do we expect of God in our journey as a believer? When I first became a Christian, I knew my life wasn't my own; that I was bought with a price. But I hoped serving him didn't mean suffering. As a friend of mine said, "Lord, I'll serve you anywhere, but may I suggest Maui?" What do we expect? Jesus didn't send us into the world as vacationers on a self-guided tour of a playground, but as soldiers on a battlefield. We're not called to kick back, take in the scenery, and wait for our guide to bring us home. We're engaged in a fierce battle on foreign soil!

In 1984 Billy Graham wrote a book called *Approaching Hoofbeats*, a study of the book of Revelation. In it, pointing back to the days the apostle John lived, he says,

"It wasn't easy to be a Christian then. It isn't easy now. Late in the first century, during the time of John's exile, the persecution of the Christian church by the Roman Empire had begun in earnest. It was difficult to keep the faith then. It is now. There are grand and awful moments before a centurion's blazing fire. And there are little and awful moments almost daily when one longs to give in to the values of this world, to give up the high standards of our Lord, to give way to the various temptations that pressure every man, woman and young person who believes. Even Christians are tempted to surrender to the passions or the pleasures that pursue us all. We think of modern Christians living on under atheistic or totalitarian regimes as being the only ones who must daily decide their ultimate loyalties. It is not true. Every Christian in every nation--totalitarian, democratic or somewhere in between--decides daily to be loyal to Christ...or to give in to this age and its values."

That's the kind of mindset Peter encourages us to have. This leads to the second encouragement Peter gives.

Encouragement #2: Choose Suffering Rather than Sinning

He says, *"Arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin."* There's been a lot of debate about what this means. Some think it means that somehow suffering purifies us from sin. Certainly, suffering can have that affect on us. When we suffer we learn what's really important; what really matters. Sin doesn't have the allure it once had. But that's not always true. Sometime suffering makes a person resentful and bitter and even drives them away from God rather than closer to him. Pharaoh suffered under the plagues of Egypt, but that just intensified his resistance against God.

Instead, here's what I believe Peter means: He's not talking about sinless perfection, but if you trust God enough to suffer for doing what is right, then you've made a decisive break with sin. Those who embrace suffering for Christ show that their bondage to sin has been broken. Get the thought and the purpose in your head that Christ is worth suffering for; live out that conviction when the choice comes between suffering and sin; and suffering sin will be defeated. If you come to the point where you suffer for righteousness' sake, you've ceased from sin—not perfection, but a clean break with the past of sin.

It's kind of like this: suppose you hire a personal trainer to get in shape. You agree to meet him at the gym every morning at 6:00 am and to only consume 1500 calories a day. You know it will be hard because you're out of shape; normally you sleep until 7:00 am and eat 3000 calories a day. But you're committed to this. It won't be easy. Your new trainer vows to hold you accountable and put you through the grinder every day. But you make the choice to do it. And in making that choice you're showing you've made a clean break with your former ways of sleeping in until 7:00 am and enjoying a bowl of ice cream every night.

That's kind of what Peter means. That clean break with sin is described in verse 2: *"As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God."* When you suffer for what's right, it shows you've renounced sinful human desires and embraced the will of God as a higher value.

From time to time, we all come to a place where we must choose between God's will and our will; between suffering or sinning. Remember Jesus in Gethsemane? He chose God's will over his will; suffering over sinning. It wasn't easy, even for him. The writer of Hebrews says, *"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered"* (Heb. 5:7-8).

Jesus lives a sinless life, but it was far from easy. Somehow suffering was the boot camp for learning obedience; for not living for evil human desires, but for the will of God.

Encouragement #3: Any Amount of Past Sinning is Enough

This brings us to the third encouragement. Peter says in verse 3: *"For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry."* This is a remarkable statement: You've spent enough time on sin. It's enough. Any amount of past sinning is enough. If you sinned a little before you came to Christ, it's enough. If you sinned a lot and for many years before your conversion, it's enough. You can never sin so little that you can say, "I need some more time to sin." I've even heard this

from people, especially younger people, "I know I need to get right with God. I need to stop partying and sleeping around. But just a little more time. I'll have plenty of time later to do what's right. But I just need a little more time to sin." No! God's word says, the time you've spent sinning is enough. Make the break; choose the will of God. And suffer for it if you must.

Justin Martyr was a Christian thinker in the 2nd century. He describes this attitude in a letter he wrote defending the Christian faith:

"We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone. We who formerly used magical arts dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God. We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and share with everyone who is in need. We who hated and destroyed one another on account of our different customs and would not even live with men of a different race, now since the coming of Christ, live on excellent terms with them; and pray for our enemies and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ; to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God, Ruler of all."

What's he saying? He's saying as followers of Jesus they knew they'd spent enough time living in sin. And they suffered as a result. Justin Martyr was beheaded because he wouldn't deny his faith.

The suffering Peter has in mind here is mentioned in verse 4: *"They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you."* I love how *The Message* puts this: "You've already put in your time in that God-ignorant way of life, partying night after night, a drunken and profligate life. Now it's time to be done with it for good. Of course, your old friends don't understand why you don't join in with the old gang anymore."

Pagans of the 1st century viewed Christians as killjoys who lived gloomy lives devoid of pleasure. Christians abstained from popular forms of Roman entertainment: the theatre with its risqué performances, the chariot races, the gladiatorial fights with their blood and gore. They refused to burn incense to the emperor, which was viewed as a gesture of civic gratitude intended to ensure the well-being of the empire. So Christians were accused of being haters of humanity and traitors of the Roman way of life. Taking aim at Christians, the 3rd century Roman critic Felix wrote: "You don't go to our shows; you take no part in our processions; you aren't present at our public banquets; you shrink in horror from our sacred games."

When I became a Christian my friends wondered why I was all of a sudden such a killjoy. As Peter says, they were surprised, shocked even. And, as a result, I was maligned. "You think you're better than us? We know what you're really like!" That's what

Peter says will happen—they'll malign you, slander you, heap abuse on you, make you look the fool. Better to embrace that like Jesus did, if it's God's will, than choose sin. Why? Because you've spent enough time sinning.

Encouragement #4: Your Adversaries Will be Brought to Justice

But Peter also wants us to know we don't have to give an account to them. In fact, they're the ones who'll be called on the carpet, before God himself. Look what he says in verse 5: *"But they [those who heap abuse on you] will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."*

A huge temptation when we suffer for doing right is to call the other person to account, or maybe we want to fight back. But when you suffer for righteousness' sake, God's will isn't that you do the calling to account, but that you hand them over to him who judges justly. Peter assures us they **will** give account someday. Nothing will be swept under the rug. Nothing will be forgotten. And the judge will be God. He'll judge both the living and the dead. Death is no escape for the sinner. Hebrews 9:27 says, *"People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."* The evil deeds may be long forgotten by men. Death may have come after a long and comfortable life of sin. But then comes judgment before God who remembers all.

So when you suffer wrongly and you feel that someone "gets away with murder," leave it in God's hands. He'll judge justly the living and the dead.

Encouragement #5: Those Who Die in the Lord are Alive in Spirit

This leads to the final encouragement. Peter writes, *"For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit."*

Some people interpret this to be the gospel of the second chance. In other words, when people die they'll get another chance to hear and believe the gospel and so be saved from judgment. But for a whole bunch of reasons that's clearly not what Peter is saying. Instead, he's referring to people who heard and believed the gospel **and then** died, not who heard the gospel **after** they died. The encouragement is even though they were judged by human standards in the body, which means they suffered and perhaps were martyred, they now live with God in the spirit.

You see, one of the ways that the adversaries were likely maligning the Christians was by saying: "Ha! You say that you have such good news. You say your God saves you and gives you joy. Well, all we've got to say is: you're missing out on a lot of fun, and then you'll die just like everybody else. So if we all die, we say, Eat, drink, and be merry!"

Peter's encouragement to help us embrace suffering like Jesus is simply: The gospel wasn't preached to your dead Christian friends in vain. The reason the gospel was preached to those who've died is so that even though it looks like they've been judged like everybody else, they haven't. They're alive in the spirit. They're with the Lord. And the sufferings they experienced here aren't worthy to be compared to the glory that's been revealed to them.

We need to be prepared to persevere through the whole journey. How do we do that? Peter offers five encouragements:

- Encouragement #1 Arm yourselves with the same attitude Christ had
- Encouragement #2 Choose suffering rather than sinning
- Encouragement #3 Any amount of past sinning is enough
- Encouragement #4 Your adversaries will be brought to justice
- Encouragement #5 Those who die in the Lord are alive in spirit

Let me take a moment to apply this to three groups who may be here this morning. First, if you're a "not yet" believer, Peter makes it very clear judgment is coming. We don't like to talk about that, but it's true, and deep down I think we all know it. But God has provided one way for you to escape condemnation, and that's through Jesus Christ. Our sin separated us from a holy God, but God himself sent his only Son to die for our sin. After three days he rose from the dead and offers us not only forgiveness but eternal life. Put your trust in him.

Second, if you're a new believer, you're just getting started on this journey. I want to talk to you about expectations. Don't underestimate the degree of difficulty. You'll need to persevere through hard times, confusing times, lonely times. You'll be tempted to give up and turn back. But I say to you what Peter said: enough is enough. You've spent enough time on sin. Don't go back to it. Any amount of past sinning is enough. Whether you sinned a little before you came to Christ, or a lot, it's enough. Stay the course. It will be hard but it will be worth it. Yes, you may be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but you'll live according to God in regard to the spirit.

Third, if you're a seasoned believer, don't forget you're still not done with your journey. You haven't crossed the finish line. So press on! As you get older, don't succumb to complacency or sentimental nostalgia. The best thing you can do is pour yourself into someone who's just getting started. In his second letter, Peter writes, *"Therefore, I will always remind you about these things... And it is only right that I should keep on reminding you as long as I live. For our Lord Jesus Christ has shown me that I must soon leave this earthly life, I will work hard to make sure you always remember these things after I am gone."*

Peter knew his time on earth was just about up, but seeing the finish line gave him all the more reason to press on and finish what he started.

We all need to be prepared to persevere through the whole journey!

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