

As we continue in 1 Peter, we're going to explore a passage that teaches the surprising and strange thing about suffering.

Life can have fun surprises. When I was in middle school, my brother and I arrived at my grandmother's house for Christmas to find a puppy running through her house. We asked, "Whose dog is this?" She replied, "It's yours!" My brother and I were surprised to discover our first family pet.

But surprises can also be heartbreaking and painful. I've had the heartache of surprise of discovering a friend living a secret life, the strangeness of colleagues who have walked away from the faith that they once proclaimed, the painful surprise of discovering marriages ending, of sudden job loss, of conflicts so intense that it ended a years-long relationship in a moment.

Life is filled with both good surprises and heartbreaking surprises and strange occurrences. We laugh and take photos, but there are also seasons of suffering that can leave us wondering what happened. How do we find the way forward?

In this passage, Peter teaches us the surprising and strange thing about suffering. It is something counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, but also perhaps the one thing that will keep you going when you can't go forward.

### **Surprised and Strange**

**Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you (1 Peter 4:12).**

Peter begins by addressing his audience, "Dear friends." The original language could also be translated, "beloved." Before Peter says what he wants to say about suffering, he reminds his audience that they are loved by God. Whatever may happen, they are starting from a place of value, as loved by their heavenly Father.

They experienced "a fiery ordeal." Some sort of suffering was happening among them. They were seeking to live as God called them to live, yet they faced hardship as a result. But this suffering had a purpose: to test this early Christian audience. "Your devotion to something is measured by how willing you are to suffer for it." (William Barclay)

In the face of suffering that comes to test faith, Peter makes two curious statements. First, don't be surprised by the suffering. That is interesting because we often are surprised by suffering. We're surprised because bad things aren't supposed to happen. Second, don't think it strange that you suffer. But again, we often

find it strange to suffer. We equate suffering as a sign that we've done something wrong. Bad things aren't supposed to happen to good people, right?

If we're not to be surprised by suffering or find it a strange experience, how should we respond to suffering? This is where Peter makes his bold exhortation that is so counter-cultural, so counter-intuitive that we can't help but pause and consider it.

### **The Surprising and Strange Thing About Suffering**

**But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed (v. 13).**

Instead of being surprised by suffering or finding suffering a strange occurrence, Peter exhorts his audience—and us—to rejoice instead. What an odd exhortation! Who does this? Who faces heartache, pain, turmoil and rejoices? Peter says this is the call for the Christian. Don't be surprised or think it strange **that** you suffer, but do something surprising and strange **in** your suffering: learn to rejoice. But in what can you rejoice? It's easy to say, "rejoice," but what is the reason why you can rejoice in suffering?

In your suffering, you are participating in the sufferings of Christ. Your suffering somehow joins you with the Savior whose suffering led to glory. Your suffering isn't meaningless, but unites you more deeply with Christ.

Your participation with Jesus in suffering means that you can be overjoyed when He returns. "Overjoyed" is the Greek word for "rejoice" modified. In other words, you can rejoice in your suffering now because you will rejoice exceedingly in God's future. Your rejoicing now is a joy "mingled with grief and sorrow" (John Calvin), but your rejoicing later will be in triumph.

So, don't be surprised or find it strange if you suffer for living as God calls you to live. Rather, do something surprising and strange: rejoice in your suffering because when you suffer, you are participating in the sufferings of Jesus.

But there is more. Peter explains what happens when you suffer as you live as God calls you to live.

### **What Happens When You Suffer**

**If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal,**

**or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name (verses 14–16).**

If you are insulted, you are blessed. The paradox is that the recipient of injustice is also the recipient of favor. You can experience blessing in the midst of pain. What is the blessing that you receive?

The blessing is this: in your suffering, the Spirit of glory rests upon you. This is an allusion to Isaiah 11:2, a Messianic prophecy. Peter is making the point that the same Spirit of glory that rested upon the Messiah also rests on those who suffer. This an astounding claim, namely, that your darkest days are imbued with the light of glory because God is with you. We see this in Acts 6. Stephen, one of the early followers of Jesus, is martyred. In verse 15, as Stephen is killed, his face is that of angels. In other words, it has a sense of glory. In his suffering, the Spirit of glory rested upon him.

Here is another surprising and strange thing about suffering: God is with you. He does not run from your suffering, He is not ashamed to be seen with your pain. That's why there is something divine when we spend time with the lonely, hold the hand of the sick, speak up for those who have no voice. When you stand with them, you are bringing the reminder that God has not left them. And if God is with you, there is no hindrance to your joy in this life.

So, if that's available to you, don't waste your suffering. You can suffer for things that matter or things that are worthless. Peter lists several things for which people can suffer. We would probably all agree that those are actions not worth spending your life on and not worth the suffering that they bring. Instead, if you're going to face difficulty in this world, let it be because you are living as God has designed for you to live, not because you are living outside of His design.

Suffer because you bear His name. Peter has used this idea of "the name" several times (v.14: "the name of Christ", v.16a: "Christian", v.16b: "this name"). The name of God in this context is His nature and character. To bear His name means to be associated with Jesus, with who He is, living like He lives. If you're going to suffer, says Peter, suffer because you are living like Jesus.

To give greater emphasis for living like Jesus, Peter points to the future and the outcome of both the Christian and non-Christian.

### **The Judgment to Come**

**For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And,**

**"If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (verses 17–18).**

Peter declares that now is the time of judgment, of putting the world right. Everyone will have to give an account for what they did with what God gave to them. And it will start with the people of God. But there is a contrast between those who are Christians (who bear "the name") and those are not Christians. Both people suffer, but the Christian who suffers, as difficult as it is, will find their salvation in God. Their suffering will only last a short time. For the one who is not a Christian, their future will be marked by suffering and eternal separation from God. The Christian has their eternal hope in the victory of Jesus. They can rejoice now in part and they will rejoice exceedingly later in full because of what Jesus has done.

Suffering was a constant in the life of Jesus. His disciples left Him. The religious leaders criticized Him. The crowds demanded of Him. He had nowhere to live, and was rejected by His neighbors. He was put on trial in secret, and He was killed by a government official that considered Him innocent. And Jesus endured the world's most horrific punishment.

But Jesus had a certain outlook in His suffering. Hebrews 12:2 says that what led Jesus to the Cross was joy. It was joy that led Jesus to endure the most immense suffering we could imagine. In other words, Jesus found a way to rejoice in His suffering. And His suffering accomplished the plan of His heavenly Father. The suffering **from** the world was the means that led to the offer of salvation **for** the world.

Here is the surprising and strange thing about suffering: if you suffer, you can rejoice. You can rejoice because in your suffering, you are participating in the sufferings of Christ. You can rejoice because in your suffering, the Spirit of glory rests on you. God is with you.

### **How to Build the Habit of Rejoicing**

**So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (v. 19).**

But rejoicing in suffering is often not our habit. How can we develop this surprising and strange way to live? Verse 19 shows us the way. First, commit yourself to your faithful Creator. The word, "commit," in the original Greek was a word used to deposit money with a friend for safekeeping until you could return to collect it. You acted in such a way because you believed that your friend was faithful. It is the same word used by Jesus on the cross when He says to His Father at the end of His suffering, "into Your hands I commit my spirit" (Psalm 31:5).

Jesus believed that His heavenly Father would not fail Him, even though His present circumstances could have tempted Him to believe otherwise. If Jesus, in the darkest moment of suffering, believed that our heavenly Father was worthy of His trust, we can believe too. Your trust in God will never be wasted. As John

Calvin wrote, God “faithfully keeps and defends whatever is under his protection or power.” (John Calvin)

The first thing to do in developing the habit of rejoicing in suffering is to deposit your trust with your heavenly Father. Second, Peter writes to “do good.” This doesn’t mean adding a ToDo item to your already-too-full list. Rather to “do good” means that you live in faith when faith is the hardest thing to live. It means that if you live by faith in following Jesus and you face hardship as a result, then wake up the next day and follow Him again. To “do good” means that you persevere—that you don’t stop doing what you should be doing.

Years ago, I joined a ministry team. What I thought would be a peer relationship working together to accomplish the work, my efforts seemed to be rejected and I felt sidelined. I recall clearly coming back from a trip and a verse coming to mind that I’ve heard numerous times: ***“Let us not become weary in doing good,***

***for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up”*** (Gal. 6:9). As exhausted as I was in my attempts to be included relationally with the team, as much as I wanted to give up, the call is to take the next step because God has a future planned for you if you do.

You have a God who cares deeply for you. So, take courage and take the next step. Develop by the habit of rejoicing in suffering by depositing your trust with your heavenly Father. Do good; live as God as calls you in when living that way is the hardest thing to do. And when hardship comes, be encouraged that “the Cross is the way to the crown.” (William Barclay)

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

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