

Series: Moving Onward Towards Perfection
Sermon: World Church (1968 - ???)

I Peter 4:12-19 (NASB)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? 19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Sermon

The first time I was ever in a wedding was in March of 1977. 42 years ago this next month. I was the three and a half year old ring bearer in my aunt's wedding. Little white church out in the country. Mom made my little blue suit, as well as the bridesmaids cloths, and the wedding dress. Nicest suit I ever had at that point, being three of course. A day of joy and a day of celebration - so they say, I don't remember it - I was three. Mom and her sister, among others were bridesmaids. Her brother, my uncle, a few days away from 18 years old, a groomsmen. The family, all in one place, celebrating love and togetherness. My grandmother has a picture of my uncle, in his groomsmen tux, in a prominent spot in her house. (PIC 1) You see, that was his last picture. For a week after this wedding, he was in a tractor accident that took his life, three days after turning 18. And two weeks to the day after that wedding, we gathered again in that little white church out in the country, to pay our respects and to cry at the death of a loved one. And I wore a little blue suit, it was the nicest suit I owned. The same pastor who did my aunt's wedding did my uncle's funeral. The same guests at one gathering, were the same guests at the other gathering - albeit the mood had changed. March is finicky. In like a lamb, out like a lion. Unpredictable. It could be as nice as summer, or as cold and stormy as winter. The same is true with life events. A day could bring joy and sadness. Happiness and grief. The same with our faith. We were made to rejoice. And we were made to suffer, as it seems.

We don't get a free pass to suffering. It comes to the good and bad. Said a missionary once, "I have come to see that pain and pleasure come to us not as opposites but as Siamese twins, strangely joined and intertwined. Nearly all my memories of acute happiness, in fact, involve some element of pain or struggle." While we do not go out to find suffering, it is true that some of our greatest growths in who we are were born out of difficulty, out of despair, out of pain. Or to put it another way, you find the best wine in the deepest cellars. Or as Charles Spurgeon said, They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls."

It's in this spirit that Peter writes to those in Rome. Suffering is a part of life. Especially for the Christians who now live in Rome. Just so we remember the context: It was the summer of 64 AD. For nine straight days, a huge fire swept through Rome and destroyed almost everything. The emperor then was Nero. He was psychotic, to say the least. He was known for killing anyone if he had the slightest suspicion they were betraying him, including his wife, brother or closest general. He was also known for his desire to rebuild the city of Rome and doing so by whatever means possible. Problem was, Rome was already built. But he had a plan to get rid of the Rome that was already there. The fires began, and Roman troops were even stopping people from extinguishing

them, the general population started to resent their Emperor at an ultimate high. So Nero needed to shift the blame on someone else. Guess who? Christians. Christians were blamed as the scapegoat for burning Rome. This was ingenious on the part of Nero, because Christians were already looked down upon and slandered for cannibalism (Take and eat, this is my body, this is my blood), Incest (brothers and sisters giving each other the “holy kiss”), and many other false accusations. Nero then led the assault to kill the Christians. You may remember when we talked about how he crucified some of them. He also captured others, “using them as human torches to light his garden parties...allowing them to be sewn inside animal skins to be devoured by predatory animals...and by subjecting them to other heinous, unjust tortures.” These people knew about suffering. But they also knew about joy and love and peace and contentment. That was the rub! How can you find joy in times like this? It’s not a lesson for back then, but also for now! There are some grumpy people out there. How do you find joy and peace and contentment in times like now?

First Peter is a letter mainly about how to be like that. The command is found in verse 13: “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.” Keep on rejoicing. When you are thrown in the cellars of suffering, keep on rejoicing. When you dive in the sea of affliction, keep on rejoicing. In fact, keep on rejoicing not in spite of the affliction but even because of it. This is not a little piece of advice about the power of positive thinking. This is an utterly radical, abnormal, supernatural way to respond to suffering. It is not in our power. It is not for the sake of our honor. It is the way that we live in the realities of this world that has both pleasure and pain, good days and other days. We keep on rejoicing.

Today’s text, in fact, commands us to be like that and gives at least six reasons why we should keep on rejoicing in the face of suffering. I’ll go through these pretty fast.

First, suffering shouldn’t be a surprise. It’s going to happen. Ever since Genesis 3, Paradise is not an option for us. Pastor Mike, you need to be more positive. I am positive. I’m positive there’s going to be trials for everybody. Verse 12 (PIC 2): “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.” It isn’t strange. It isn’t absurd. We can find meaning and growth in these times. Life can be painful. Anyone who tells you different is selling something. It can be a time of purifying, reminding us of what is truly important in this life. And it proves and strengthens real faith.

Second reason: Sometimes suffering shows evidence of our union with Christ. Keep on rejoicing because your suffering as a Christian is an evidence of your union with Christ. Verse 13 again (PIC 3): “But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.” In other words your sufferings are not merely your own. They are also Christ’s. This is cause for rejoicing because it means you are united to Christ. This union with Christ is a beautiful subject in the Christian life. It means that I am not a lone fighter here. Don’t go out looking for suffering, but you can fall on him when we do face hard times.

A third reason, although I want to be careful with this one: Suffering could be a means to attaining a greater joy in glory. Also verse 13 (PIC 4): “<[As you share the sufferings of Christ]> keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of his glory, you may rejoice with exultation.” Notice: keep on rejoicing now, so that you may rejoice then. Our joy now through suffering is the means of attaining our joy then, a thousand-fold in glory. Makes sense; first, there is suffering, then there is glory. You don’t get a body in shape without running or lifting or working out. You don’t get smart on your own but only after years of toil. Anything worth having has pain to go through to get it. You don’t get the baby without the pushing. Sometimes we suffer to get to a place of joy and happiness.

A fourth reason: Keep on rejoicing in suffering because then the Spirit of glory and of God rest upon you. Verse 14 (PIC 5): “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” This means that in the hour of greatest trial there is a great consolation. In great suffering

on earth there is great support from heaven. You may think now that you will not be able to bear it. But if you are Christ's, you will be able to bear it, because he will come to you and rest upon you. If you say, "What is this?" — the Spirit of glory and of God resting on me in suffering — the answer is simply this: you will find out when you need it. The Spirit will reveal enough of glory and enough of God to satisfy your soul, and carry you through. I have not tested this out personally, and I hope never have to: but continue to rejoice in the deepest pain and suffering, and sooner or later you will experience the Spirit of glory and of God resting upon you in suffering. But I tell myself these lessons now, in the hope that I will never have to use them, but if I do need them, there are there.

Fifth reason to keep rejoicing: To glorify God. Keep on rejoicing in suffering because this glorifies God. Verse 16 (PIC 6) : "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God." Glorifying God means showing by your actions and attitudes that God is glorious to you — that he is valuable, precious, desirable, satisfying. And the greatest way to show that someone satisfies your heart is to keep on rejoicing in them when all other supports for your satisfaction are falling away. When you keep rejoicing in God in the midst of suffering, it shows that God, and not other things, is the great source of your joy. If we ditch God at the moment of trial, what does that say of our faith? If we turn our backs on God in our trials, we also turn our backs on the one who can help carry us through them. But I see it all the time. Some think that God is the insurance from calamity. But more often He is the first responder. Our rejoicing in dark times glorifies God.

Last one for today: God's Faithfulness to Care for Your Soul. Keep on rejoicing because your Creator is faithful to care for your soul. Verse 19: (PIC 7) "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." The degrees of suffering and the forms of affliction will differ for every one of us. But one thing we will all have in common till Jesus comes: we will all die. Do we entrust your soul to a faithful Creator? He created your soul for his glory. He is faithful to that glory and to all who love it and live for it. Now is the time to show where your treasure is — in heaven or on earth. Now is the time to shine with the glory of God. When my uncle passed away, one of the blessings out of that pain was that the three sisters have a tight relationship. They have a bond that will not break. How does that verse go? "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." From Romans. Paul's letter to the Romans, to the same group of people that Peter was writing to. God doesn't cause the suffering, but good things can spring from tragedy.

I don't have much Methodist history to share for today. In 1968, when the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Church joined to become the United Methodist Church, it was around 11 million members. We're around 12 million today. In the United States, the UMC ranks as the largest mainline Protestant denomination, the largest Protestant church after the Southern Baptist Convention, and the third largest Christian denomination. Our worldwide membership is roughly 7 million in the US, 4.4 million in Africa, Asia and Europe. But like all generations, this one isn't without its challenges and fights. Every four years, we have General Conference - where we hash out, as the General Church, who we are and where we stand. Three years ago, we had this legislative body in Portland, Oregon. And our inner fight over inclusion and Gay marriage had caused such a rift that a special session of General Conference was called. With our worldwide representation, it seems difficult to get everyone on the same page as to cultural differences and practices. Since our formation as a church, we haven't had a special session (except the one to form the church in the first place). It starts today in St. Louis. (PIC 8) You may hear in the news outlets that the United Methodist Church did this. Or decided that. There is information in the back about how to follow along with what is going on with General Conference. And while we are a strong church, we are suffering in this area.

But what do I know about suffering? I will continue to rejoice. No matter what the future holds. Whether this conference bodes well or bodes ill, I will wear the best suit that I have, and continue to celebrate love and togetherness, Because I know who holds the future. Church, keep rejoicing. And the family of God said,

Amen!