

March 9th 2014: 1 Peter Series #12 1 Peter 4:12-19
"The Suffering That's Part Of The Package".

There is no doubt that suffering is part and parcel of our world and it can strike any person in any place at any time. Sickness targets the very poor and the very rich and all in between. It hits both the good and the bad for suffering is so random and yet in our sin sick world it is so often the poor and the oppressed and the helpless that suffer most.

Yet it is not that general suffering that Peter is talking about here in 1 Peter 4:11 when he says to his readers ***"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering..... as though something strange were happening to you."***

For he is writing to first century Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman State and all manner of other individuals, simply because they professed allegiance to Jesus, and it is that kind of suffering that he is talking about here.

I was talking to Shan the other day and she was telling me about a person she knows there who felt led to establish a bookstall selling Christian books. He was arrested and when he went to trial he was imprisoned for a further two years. His wife is struggling at home because of this and recently her daughter was hit by a car and she is battling with times when she feels so low. But he is preaching the Gospel in prison and she is holding to her faith and through the tears there is still that joy in the Lord.

That's the suffering Peter is referring to, for Peter's readers were going through that type of thing and a lot worse. And even as Peter writes these words he feels for their pain. The NIV has Peter addressing them as dear friends, but in the Greek Peter uses just one word which translates as 'beloved'.

Peter is saying to them, 'you are my beloved, but I need to tell you not to be surprised at the fiery ordeal you are suffering simply because you are believers.'

His words suggest that at least some of them were surprised that God was allowing such things to happen to them. They had chosen to stop rebelling against God and to accept the Gospel message with the expectation that life could only get better for them. But now they were experiencing cultural

isolation, personal hostility, and government oppression. Not what they expected as the blessings of God. Not quite the Christian life they had signed up for.

And unfortunately there are Christians today who have been taught that God will keep them from all types of suffering, but that is not what Jesus promised. Indeed He stated more than once that "Suffering is Part of the Package" as far as living for Christ on this earth is concerned.

Matthew 5:11-12

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

John 15:18-19

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."

Paul and the other NT writers often confirm such thoughts, with Paul informing us that as Christians we are soldiers constantly on the battlefield for our Saviour and His kingdom. That's there is a spiritual armour we must take care to put on because (Eph 6:12)

¹² "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

So rather than be surprised when you suffer says Peter, you should rejoice. For even as Christ suffered to give you eternal life so in your ongoing battle against the forces of evil, your suffering is not pointless. The stand you are making for Jesus is part of the great Kingdom of God battle that will one day be seen as triumphant. So we read in v13

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

Now it is not hard to see how Peter's tough words applied to those first century Christians who were being persecuted as Believers. And it is also easy to apply this teaching to people like the ones I referred to earlier who are being made to suffer emotionally and physically because they live in lands where Christianity is unacceptable.

But how do we apply this passage of Scripture to our situation where physical persecution for being a Christian is virtually unknown?

The answer to that relates to the spiritual battle that we are constantly involved in against the powers of evil. The devil and his demons are ever seeking to destroy the witness to the kingdom of God that we are responsible for. I believe he at times attacks us through sickness, through circumstances of life, and through the words and acts of those around us. If we are seeking to stand up for Jesus and to stand up for what we believe is just and good, then we should expect to be attacked.

We shouldn't be surprised if we begin to notice that life is more difficult since we have been known as a Christian in our workplace, school, or family.

When we make a stand for doing things in a way that is right and true and refuse to be manipulated by those who are more interested in themselves than in others, we shouldn't be surprised when the reaction against us is heated and even irrational. There is a bigger battle being fought in the heavenly places than we can ever see, but in some small way our perseverance under attack is adding to the final victory.

I read the story of this professional baseball player who was a Christian and who chose to oppose the continuing threat of a strike by the Player's Association. You see he was concerned about the impression of greed and wrong priorities that the players were giving to society and its youth, and his judgment about those issues were entirely formed on the basis of his Christian faith. But the other players were against him and disrespected him because of this, and we can only imagine how he was treated that season by the other players and managers. How he suffered.

And when we talk to someone about Jesus and we get laughed at, or patronized, or shouted at, or insulted, we shouldn't be surprised, for so they treated Jesus. We note that with all the persecution that those Christians

were suffering from, the one thing that Peter highlighted was being insulted because of bearing the name of Christ openly. Verse 14

"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

I think of William Wilberforce who fought in the English parliament for the freedom of slaves because as a Christian he knew it was wrong, and also proclaimed Christ whenever he could, and the attacks on him and his character were extremely vindictive.

So we shouldn't be surprised if, when we seek to live out our Christian faith, suffering comes. And neither should we seek to avoid it.

Unfortunately that is a temptation that is always there for us. More for us Western Christians than for anyone else. To turn a blind eye to someone's behavior because we know that we will suffer if we speak out. So many horrible deeds have happened within the organization of the church because good people were silent.

To stay amongst the silent majority when the Lord calls us to stand and declare His truth.

To avoid certain works for Jesus because it's inconvenient as far as our lifestyle is concerned, or because the personal cost is too high.

And surely the trap we fall into most is not talking to someone about Jesus because we fear being laughed at, insulted, humiliated.

Peter calls us to expect such suffering and to welcome it with joy, for it proves that you are indeed serving your Master in His army. That the final battle belongs to the Lord. And, in the words of Peter found at the very end of this chapter, commit yourself to your faithful Creator and continue to do good, for He will look after you.