

The Surprising Glories of Suffering

1 Peter 4:12-5:4

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Today is our second to last Sunday in our current sermon series in the letter of First Peter, which we have subtitled, Everyday Exiles. Throughout the letter, and especially here toward the end, Peter talks a lot about the suffering of Christians. These passages, and many others throughout the New Testament, are what led us to include this in our list of Mission Convictions as a church:

Because Christ suffered in his mission to us, we embrace that God uses our suffering in mission to others.¹

We always want to be upfront about this, so that we won't be surprised by our sufferings. In fact, Peter is going to tell us today that we should actually be surprised by something else: not just *that* we suffer, but the *glories of our sufferings*. This reality actually serves as the title and main idea of the sermon.

So, open your Bibles with me to 1 Peter 4:12-5:4, which you can find on page 1016 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. While you're turning there, I'll repeat the main idea and give you the breakdown of the passage: As Jesus' disciples, don't be surprised by your sufferings, but be surprised by their glories. In 4:12-16 we will see suffering as blessing, then suffering as judgment in 4:17-19, and finally, suffering as ministry in 5:1-4.

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is 1 Peter 4:12-5:4. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed,

¹ Antioch Church, *Post-Sabbath Year Prayer Guide*, 20

but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

*“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”*

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 1 Peter 4:12-5:4

May the Word preached here today echo in our hearts and among the nations. And all God’s people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

Exposition

If someone from another country were to ask you, “What is the ‘American dream’?” how would you answer? Probably the best place to start would be with a quote from the Declaration of Independence, which famously says,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Of course, at the time that ironically only applied applied to white, male property-owners; but over time Congress extended those rights to slaves, women, and people without property. Then throughout American history the “pursuit of happiness” went on to be defined in many different ways: from a free, prosperous society with opportunity for all, to the acquisition of material things, to domestic welfare and security, to racial equality, to entitlement to homeownership, college, health insurance, retirement, and sexual orientation, and finally, to the latest definition of simply the

freedom to create a meaningful life for yourself and the people you love—however *you* define meaningful.² This is the American dream.

Regardless of what country you are originally from, or your views regarding the American dream, every single one of us to some extent is influenced by it. Where this gets tricky for Christians is that we no longer live primarily under the rule of a earthly kingdom. Secondly, yes; and we are even called to submit to such kingdoms and embrace their cultures to the extent that it doesn't cause us to depart from the commands of Christ. But ultimately

our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:20-21

This is why throughout the letter of First Peter Christians are described as “exiles” and “sojourners”. If we don't see ourselves as the foreigners, the everyday exiles that we are, then we will assume the American dream can be the defining pursuit of our lives too. And like those who live according to the American dream, we will assume that “suffering and hard times [are] an abnormal state of life that should be avoided at all costs; and if they can't be avoided, they should be dealt with urgently so that ‘normal’ life can resume as quickly as possible.”³

I. Suffering as Blessing - 4:12-16

And if that's the view we take in life, then imagine how hard it will be to receive Peter's words in verse 12:

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 1 Peter 4:12

This brings us to our first observation about the surprising glories of suffering: suffering as blessing. This is weird, right? It doesn't make sense in human terms. And Peter knows that if he doesn't explain *why* we suffer as Christians, then we'll not only be surprised, but confused; maybe even think that we've done something wrong or that God doesn't love us.⁴

² Kimberly Amadeo, “What is the American Dream Today?”, <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-the-american-dream-today-3306027>

³ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Loc 6733

⁴ Edmund Clowney, *The Message of First Peter*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, Loc 2747

So, why do Christians suffer instead of immediately being taken to heaven when they are united to Jesus? The answer lies in verse 13:

13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:13

What we see here is that suffering isn't a threat from heaven (picture God as a grumpy old fart ready to smite you every time you're having a little bit too much fun). No, suffering is something shared from heaven, like a gift. These sufferings belong to Christ, not us. They only come our way because we now *belong to Christ*. Let me give some examples:

- This is being maligned because you participate in that which is pleasing to Christ, not the world (like we talked about last week).
- This is being targeted by spiritual powers of evil who want to devour you because they hate Christ in you.⁵
- This is being physically persecuted, as is so common among the global church and will become more common here.

And since these sufferings belong to Christ, when we bear them we're just being signposts. Now, who drives all the way to Florida just to take a picture at the Disney World sign and then drive back home? Nobody! The sign just points to the reality.

So when you are given over to some form of suffering because you belong to Jesus Christ, surprisingly, it is a blessing, a privilege, a cause for rejoicing, even. Because in that moment you're not only a signpost pointing to the reality of Jesus' suffering on a cross, you're a signpost pointing to the reality that you belong to him.⁶ That when he is revealed to the world a second time in all his glory, you'll be revealed with him.⁷

But the blessing of suffering doesn't just lie in the future, but the present. We read in verse 14,

14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 1 Peter 4:14

⁵ 1 Peter 5:8

⁶ Clowney, Loc 2766

⁷ Colossians 3:4

It's likely that Peter is actually referring back to a messianic prophecy in the book of Isaiah that says, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him".⁸ And so when we suffer for the name of Christ, even just by being insulted, it shows that we bear the name of the Messiah, and his Spirit rests upon us.

And Peter reminds us he is not just the Spirit of God, but the Spirit of glory, a reference to the glory cloud that led the people of God through the desert and settled on the temple as a sign of God's presence with his people. But now, more than a cloud that surrounds you when you suffer, he is a Spirit who indwells you and reminds you that you are his.⁹

The time in my life where I experienced this the most tangibly was while I was serving as a missionary in East Africa. It took place one day when a mob of people nearly stoned me and my teammates to death. Rather than feeling afraid or ashamed in that moment, I felt full of joy and boldness. I had never felt so alive and so privileged to belong to Christ.

And yet, this doesn't mean we should go looking for suffering or claim everything in life as Christian suffering. I'm also the guy who got kicked out of Walmart in high school for putting gospel tracts down in 12-packs of beer. That wasn't Christian suffering—it was dumb and I deserved to get kicked out. Yes, we could all stand to be more bold in commending Christ as Lord.¹⁰ And Jesus warns us, "Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you".¹¹ But even still, we don't force it.

That's why Peter continues in verse 15,

15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 1 Peter 4:15-16

We can understand not being a murderer or thief or evildoer, but what does Peter mean by being a meddler? Well, consider this. When you're in a foreign country, it's wise to not interfere with the political affairs of that country. Otherwise, you might be identified

⁸ Isaiah 11:1-2

⁹ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 186-187; Jobes, Loc 6774

¹⁰ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission*, 137

¹¹ Luke 6:26; Jobes, Loc 6731

as a conspirator or spy or mischief-maker and get kicked out, which would bring shame on your name and that of your country. You learn this principle very quickly as a missionary, because, most importantly, you are representing the name of Christ.

Likewise, when you don't view yourself as an everyday exile who is far from home, you can easily find yourself consumed by affairs that shouldn't be of primary concern to you. And the suffering that arises from it comes not from Christ, but from meddling.¹² Instead, with our eyes set on the great privilege of knowing Christ, we lift him highest in our lives; and when suffering inevitably comes, we don't have to be ashamed, because it comes as Christian suffering, not as Christian meddling. It comes that we might bear—not just the Spirit of glory and of God—but the very name of Jesus Christ.¹³

II. Suffering as Judgment - 4:17-19

Now, suffering as blessing may not be that surprising to you, especially if you've been a Christian for a while. But what about our next observation: suffering as judgment? Doesn't sound very glorious, huh? Let's see what this means. Peter continues in verse 17:

17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And

“If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” 1 Peter 4:17-18

This is actually just a continuation of Peter's thought. Remember back in verse 12 when he refers to suffering as a “fiery trial”? What's being referred to there is a refining fire, the process of purifying a precious metal, like gold or silver. This intensely hot fire doesn't destroy the metal or change it into something altogether different—it only makes it purer.¹⁴ So, the sufferings that God allows to come into the lives of his children are a refining fire; and this refining fire—according to verse 17—is actually a fire of God's judgment.¹⁵

Now you might say, 'I don't know, pastor, that doesn't sound quite right. You just said that suffering isn't a threat from heaven. This seems like a contradiction.' Well, the word used for judgment here doesn't necessarily mean condemnation, but it refers to a kind

¹² Grudem, 187; Jobes, Loc 6798

¹³ Grudem, 188

¹⁴ Wikipedia, “Refining (Metallurgy),” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refining_\(metallurgy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refining_(metallurgy))

¹⁵ Grudem, 185-186

of judgment that can lead to either approval or condemnation.¹⁶ “For it is the time for judgment,” Peter says, or if you return to verse 7, “The end of all things is at hand”. Now that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven with all authority and is preparing for his return as a conquering King, it’s the end of the world as we know it. Therefore God’s end-times judgment is already starting to be poured out. Where? At the household of God—it begins with *us*.¹⁷

Peter’s reference and concepts here are likely taken from multiple parts of the Old Testament, but the one we’ll focus on to help us understand comes from the prophet Ezekiel. It presents a picture of the Lord calling executioners to bring judgment on the horrible sins of the people of Jerusalem. First, they are to put a mark on the forehead of those who grieve over such sinfulness; then the rest they are to execute. The final ominous phrase God utters before judgment begins is this:

And begin at my sanctuary. Ezekiel 9:6

So the judgment of the end times begins with us; though not to destroy us, but to *purify* us.¹⁸ This is why I talk so often about Christianity not as this long and happy life in peace, but a willingness to die a million tiny deaths day after day after day¹⁹; or as Paul put it after being stoned nearly to death in Lystra, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”²⁰ When you are willing to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow as Jesus’ disciple,²¹ it all works according to plan—you are purified and prepared. Prepared to do what? To survive the day when God’s judgment is also poured out on those who do not obey the gospel of God.

Don’t you want to be ready for that day? And don’t you want to help others prepare for that day?

All this leads Peter to a conclusion in verse 19 that one theologian believes summarizes the entire teaching of his letter²²:

¹⁶ Grudem, 188

¹⁷ Jobes, Loc 6703

¹⁸ Grudem, 189-191

¹⁹ Bradley Bell, “The Spring of Tears: Joy and Sorrow in Christian Experience,”

<https://brokenmissiology.com/2016/06/06/the-spring-of-tears-joy-and-sorrow-in-christian-experience/>

²⁰ Acts 14:22

²¹ Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27

²² Grudem, 191

19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. 1 Peter 4:19

Simply put, Jesus hung from the cross of God's worst judgment, and yet with his last breath he cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (or in other words, "I [entrust] my spirit!"). If Jesus could do that, then surely that Father must be *trustworthy*. And if he is that trustworthy, then surely you and I can entrust to him the questions that go unanswered in our sufferings.²³ For those who are in Christ, suffering as judgment can actually be suffering as blessing.

III. Suffering as Ministry - 5:1-4

Finally, we come to a third observation that might be even more surprising than the first two: suffering as ministry. What do I mean by this? Let's allow Peter to explain, beginning in verse 1 of chapter 5:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 1 Peter 5:1

I know this probably seems like a whole new direction in the letter, but here's why I think this goes in the same sermon. Remember a few minutes ago when we were talking about Ezekiel 9, where God's judgment was to begin first at his own house? Here's what the very next words say:

So [judgment] began with the elders who were before the house. Ezekiel 9:6

It seems like Peter is just following the logic of Ezekiel: if judgment begins with God's people, then among them, it begins among *the leaders* of God's people.²⁴ So Peter turns his application to elders, or pastors. What's his message to them?

First, they *especially* are partakers in the sufferings of Christ. Although in our context today pastoral ministry is often viewed as the way to power in the church, it's actually supposed to be the way to the cross. Not only does being a pastor make you a greater target for persecution from the world and from the enemy, but you also must embrace becoming like a worried mother over a flock of children, and unintentionally making

²³ Grudem, 192

²⁴ Grudem, 189-191

relationships weird, and serving as a punching bag for public and private criticism.²⁵ ‘Bros—this is what we signed up for,’ Peter says.

Second, Peter tells pastors that, as examples of sufferers who entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good, they are to do the following:

² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 1 Peter 5:2-3

All of this carries the sense of a tender shepherd, who knows his work takes place in dangerous times, but doesn’t become bitter about it, or seek to turn it into personal platform.²⁶ He’s working to fight off wolves, while also fighting not to become one himself. And in so doing, he’s not so much an “overseer,” which is a word in English that brings to mind the grouchy office manager or the foreman with his arms crossed. Maybe a better translation for this work would be “guardian”.²⁷ Because the pastor himself knows what it means to be shepherded and guarded,²⁸ for

when the chief Shepherd appears, [he] will receive the unfading crown of glory. 1 Peter 5:4

Yeah, the task of ministry is noble in large part because it’s doggone painful; but the more pastors are privileged to taste Christ’s sufferings, the more they also taste his glory.²⁹

It was common in the Greco-Roman world of Peter’s day to award victorious athletes with a crown of leaves. The crown that pastors are to receive refers to a type of red flower whose color never fades.³⁰ It’s a fitting gift for being visible examples of their suffering Savior, Jesus Christ, for embracing judgment as a blessing that refines them. Not so they can say they earned it. Not even so they can keep it forever. Instead, as one writer puts it,

²⁵ Jobes, Loc 7047; Clowney, Loc 2862

²⁶ Jobes, Loc 7612

²⁷ Clowney, Loc 2952

²⁸ Clowney, Loc 2905

²⁹ Jobes, Loc 7047; Clowney, Loc 2862

³⁰ Jobes, Loc 7047

*Faithful elders who receive their crowns of blessing from the Lord will then cast their crowns before the throne of him who bore the crown of thorns for them.*³¹

Now that is a surprising glory of suffering. And what they faithfully bear within the church is a microcosm of what all believers are to bear outside the church, in their homes and among their neighbors.

Conclusion

I think it's fitting for us to bring all of this to a conclusion today by returning to a story in Peter's journey that no doubt defined a meaningful life for him. This story is recorded in John 21. As we've just seen, Peter exhorts elders to shepherd the people of God under the guarding rule of Jesus the Chief Shepherd. But there was a time in his life that he had failed miserably to do the same thing himself...

[See John 21:1-17]

And Peter, who has exhorted us today in his letter to not be surprised by our sufferings, but to be surprised by their glories, he listened as Jesus continued to tenderly restore him there on the beach, and was likely surprised when he heard these words:

¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." John 21:18-19

My friends, would you hear the tender voice of Jesus spoken to you today? He does not tease you with the idea that following him is simply another part of the American dream. No, he is honest with you from the very beginning, that for you he laid down every right to his own life, and liberty, and pursuit of happiness. And in conquering death by rising from the grave, he now has every right to not only restore you, but to cause you to share in his sufferings. No tricks. No surprises. Let him define a meaningful life for you, and no doubt you will be carried into situations and places where you do not want to go. But let whoever has ears to hear today receive his surprising and glorious invitation: "Follow me."

³¹ Clowney, Loc 3018

On the night he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and said to his disciples, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **Today we are announcing that Jesus Christ is the faithful Creator to whom we may entrust our souls.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

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