

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

1 Peter 4:1-19

Key Verse: 4:13

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

The word “suffer” appears 17 times in 1 Peter—more than any other book in the Bible. It is a major theme. Why does Peter talk so much about suffering? He learned from Jesus. Jesus repeatedly taught Peter and the other disciples that he must suffer, die and rise again and that they also must suffer and die to enter his glory. However, Peter rejected Jesus’ teaching at that time. Peter dreamed of great glory without suffering. But after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Peter realized that Jesus’ teaching was the truth. He saw that Christ was wounded and died for his sins and met the Risen Christ personally (1Pe 2:24). Then he could accept the life of self-denial and took up his own cross to follow Jesus. This changed attitude toward suffering marks genuine disciples of Christ.

Peter’s change gives us hope. We want to avoid suffering; this is our natural instinct. God did not intend for people to suffer when he created the world. Suffering became a reality when sin entered the world and corrupted God’s creation. Under the power of sin and death, everyone suffers. How do people cope? Many escape into virtual reality or substance abuse. Some become mean toward others. Perhaps the best kind of people accept sufferings and encourage others to do the same, in the hope of mutual comfort. Peter’s teaching transcends any human wisdom. Peter gives us a simple imperative. It can totally change our attitude toward suffering and empower us to be fruitful and victorious. Let’s listen to Peter’s words. We can divide this passage into three parts: 1) arm yourselves with Christ (1-6); 2) live for Christ (7-11); and 3) rejoice in Christ’s sufferings (12-19).

First, arm yourselves with Christ (1-6). As Peter foresaw that early Christians were going to face ever increasing persecution, he urged them to prepare. He said, “...since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the

same attitude.” This is the third time in this letter that Peter has emphasized “Christ suffered in his body” (2:24; 3:18). These words have deep meaning. Before coming to this world, Christ dwelt in heavenly glory and power as God. But he left it behind; he took on a human body just like ours. He was hungry, tired and thirsty (Mt 4:2; Jn 4:6; Jn 19:28). He experienced emotional distress, and spiritual anguish as “a man of sorrows” (Isa 53:3). His crucifixion was the ultimate suffering and sacrifice. He suffered in every way, in a human body, just as we do, and more than we do. When people are suffering, they often feel alone. They wonder if anyone understands them or cares about them. Christ does! Christ entered into this world in a human body and suffered just as we do. He really understands us and cares. Our sufferings are times to identify and connect with Jesus. Moreover, since Jesus suffered in his body, so can we. This is why we need to arm ourselves with his attitude.

The word “arm” in verse 1 is from the Greek word “ὀπλιστής” (hoplistēs). It refers to a soldier, particularly one who is heavily armed. Soldiers about to go into battle know they are entering a fight for their lives. So they prepare well, spending serious and dedicated time, as a matter of life and death. In the same way, we must prepare to engage in suffering. We must not remain under the illusion that we can avoid suffering. We must accept suffering and prepare for it. How? We can learn from Jesus. Jesus knew from the Scriptures that God’s will for him was to suffer, die and rise again. He really did not want to do it. So he cried out in prayer with many tears to surrender to God’s will. Then God strengthened him. He faced suffering and death with a sense of victory and peace. Likewise, we should listen to God’s word, understand his will for us, and pray to carry it. God will strengthen us. Let’s arm ourselves with the attitude of Christ.

Verses 1b-2 tell us, “...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.” Suffering in the body has tremendous spiritual value. We are “done with sin.” Sin loses its power over us and we gain freedom to live a holy life. Without this freedom, we live by our sinful desires. Many Christians are powerless to serve God because evil human desires enslave them and make them ineffective. Even worse, they may stumble and fall. Ravi Zacharias was a popular Christian apologist. But

he avoided real accountability and secretly indulged in immoral behavior. When this was exposed shortly after his death, it discouraged many sincere believers and tarnished his legacy. On the other hand, John Wesley practiced personal holiness and accountability. He was willing to suffer in his body to overcome various temptations and serve God. He was used greatly to plant the Methodist Church, which has blessed the world.

There is something, however, that hinders our preparation. It is the thought that we need more time to sin. Peter says, “No! You spent enough time in the past...” Through Jesus, God has given us a new life. Our value system has changed. We are no longer slaves to evil desires; now we can choose to do the will of God. We need to say “no” to sin and “yes” to Christ (Tit 2:11-12). To help us, Peter contrasts two ways of life, which cannot be blended. Those who have new life in Christ come to hate sinful indulgence. At the same time, those living in debauchery look with scorn and contempt upon Christians. Yet Christians have an advantage. They know what both ways of life are like. Peter’s audience had indulged in wild drinking parties, sexual perversion, idolatrous cults—drowning in a flood of dissipation. But now they knew a better way, a way that their scornful friends could not imagine. Fervent love of brothers and sisters in Christ had replaced lust, and alert awareness of the times had replaced drunken stupor. But above all, the joyful adoration of the risen Lord had replaced the folly of idolatry. They were truly happy to follow Jesus and live for him. In the same way, we should be convinced from our hearts that a holy life in Christ is the best, most joyful, most meaningful life that we can live in the body.

The consensus of the world is to indulge in reckless, wild living (4). The basis of this lifestyle is despair over the power of death. When worldly people see Christians enjoying holy lives, with real hope in Christ’s kingdom, it exposes their darkness. They do not respond rationally. Rather, they heap abuse on believers. We should be ready for this. Kayleigh McEnany, former White House Press Secretary, was publicly outspoken about her Christian beliefs. Media outlets and commentators mocked her. But Ms. McEnany was prepared for it. She has remained committed to her faith, citing it as a source of strength and guidance for her. To me, she is a good influence. But to the world, she is a crazy person. The world is upside down. The world affirms

deviant sexual behavior instead of Biblical standards of marriage, or even the natural law of creation. How can we live in such a world? Peter tells us to remember something that will strengthen us.

Look at verse 5: “But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.” Every human being will give an account to God, including all those who have already died (Jn 5:28-29). This accounting will be for the words they have spoken, the actions they have taken, and the motives of their hearts (Ro 2:6-8). Every sin and wrong attitude will be judged by a God who knows everything perfectly, even the secret thoughts of each heart. Before his holy law, each person is guilty. The punishment is hell. Hell is a place of eternal suffering. Jesus repeatedly called it a place where the fire never goes out and the worm never dies (Mk 9:43-48). This is why the preaching of the gospel of Christ is so serious (6). Christ alone saves people from eternal condemnation and gives eternal life. Jesus said, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16). As we remember this gospel truth, we can stand firm. We are not shaken by the trend of the world that calls good evil and evil good. Rather we can have compassion on those trapped in sin, pray for them, and preach to them.

Second, live for Christ (7-11). After telling us to arm ourselves, and to see the world in light of God’s judgment, Peter stirs us to live for Christ. Look at verse 7a: “The end of all things is near.” When Jesus comes again, he will establish his everlasting reign; there will be no more hindrance or opposition. Sin will disappear. Death will be swallowed up in victory (1Co 15:54). The devil will be thrown into hell forever (Rev 20:10). This world, with its frustration and pain, will give way to a glorious new heaven and new earth—where righteousness reigns (2Pe 3:13). Believers, fully bearing Christ’s image, receive glorious resurrection bodies and reign with Christ forever. This is our living hope (1:3). The words “...is near” mean it is imminent. We should spend time each day meditating on this truth. Early Korean Christians, suffering under severe persecution from the Japanese, secretly gathered in small groups and read Revelation out loud. In this way, they could see the glorious Risen Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. The promise of a new heaven and new earth was real to them. They overcame persecution and

were used by God to establish a great missionary-sending movement. In the same way, Christ's imminent return should be very real to us.

When we truly believe Jesus' coming again, we should be alert (7). This means we are not influenced by an unbelieving worldview and lifestyle. Scoffers say, "Where is this coming he promised? Everything goes on as it has before..." (2Pe 3:4). And they indulge in sin. However, the sober minded see things differently. They are not distracted by social media or celebrity culture. They realize that people are perishing in their sins and Christ is coming soon. In the face of this awful truth, they pray. Through prayer God sustains them and gives them wisdom to serve him. Our friends in Tajikistan confront a dead spiritual atmosphere under the strict oppression of Islam. They are under constant surveillance and risk immediate deportation if they preach the gospel to native people. In that impossible situation, they have learned to pray fervently to God each day. Prayer has become their lifeline through which God gives them strength and wisdom to keep their identity; they even share Christ at opportune times. God has blessed their witness remarkably.

Those who pray can enjoy God's love in their hearts and have the strength to love others. This is vital. Verse 8 says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Love means being aware of each other's struggles and caring for each other deeply. "Deeply" comes from the Greek word "ektene" which describes the taut muscles of an athlete who strains to win a race. Our love for others should be sacrificial and wholehearted. This love is not blind—it sees the sins and weaknesses of others. But it accepts people with the same unconditional welcome which Jesus showed to us. It is forgiving love. Forgiveness is like a giant eraser that removes all the blemishes and stains of sin and leaves a person pure and holy. This kind of love leads to mutual sanctification.

Offering hospitality is a practical expression of love. It is to provide a warm and welcoming environment to guests or strangers, showing kindness and generosity. This can involve inviting people into one's home, sharing meals, and making them feel comfortable and valued. Warm hospitality creates a sense of community and connection.

In verses 10-11 Peter urges us to use our spiritual gifts to serve others as a further expression of God's love and grace. No one can say that they have nothing to offer. God has given gifts to everyone. On our recent trip to Astana, we met a shepherd who could not speak English well. And we don't speak Russian or Kazakh. Nevertheless, this shepherd found countless ways to serve us with practical care: by driving, giving food and water, guiding us through the city, providing face masks, etc. His service was so warm and genuine that we formed a real love relationship in a short time.

Loving one another should be a mark of the Christian community. Jesus said that the world will know that we are Jesus' disciples when we love one another (Jn 13:34-35). This glorifies Christ. It reveals supernatural work that only he can do. People in the world want this kind of community. The Beatles' song "All you need is love," released in 1967, reflected this. The word "love" is mentioned 66 times. They repeat again and again that "All you need is love." But they never tell us how to have love. Despite their emphasis on love, they could not remain together as a band. Within three years they broke up. While many people merely talk about love, Christians can truly practice the love of Christ. This kind of love wins the world over. In our UBF community, many married couples have remained together for 30, 40, or 50 years. We have friendships in Christ that have lasted for decades. Living in our UBF community gives us great encouragement and strength to overcome the world. It is what the Beatles only dreamed about. We are the most blessed people. I believe God will use us greatly in the years to come. Let's keep living for Christ, praying for one another, and loving one another deeply.

Third, rejoice in Christ's sufferings (12-19). As we live holy, noble lives and form a loving community, we may expect admiration and respect. However, the world's response is often hatred and persecution. This comes suddenly through "fiery ordeals." Peter instructs the early Christians how to respond in verses 12-13. He said in verse 12, "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." His first word is "do not be surprised." This is challenging for us. Fiery ordeals may come suddenly and unexpectedly, interrupting our normal routines of life. The term "fiery ordeal" refers to intense suffering and conveys the idea of refining fire (1Pe 1:6-7). Fiery

ordeals come unexpectedly and interrupt our idyllic lives. These trials may come from obvious enemies of Christ, or enemies in disguise within the church, or through the death of loved ones, economic misfortune, or physical ailment — as was the case with Job. The natural response is surprise. We ask, “What is happening? Why is this happening?” It is easy to become fearful, and bitter over injustice, and to doubt God’s love and good purpose. We may automatically think that something strange is happening to us. One day we seemed to be doing very well—but suddenly our lives were totally disrupted. For example, in one day Job lost all of his wealth in flocks and herds, and all ten of his children died. He could have had a total meltdown. But as soon as he heard the news he got up, tore his robe, shaved his head and fell to the ground in worship. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised”(Job 1:21). The author comments that Job did not sin by charging the LORD with wrongdoing. Times of trial are God’s testing to bring to the surface what is in our hearts, and to help refine our faith. When fiery ordeals come upon us, our first thought should be about God, and not just about God, but to recognize his sovereign rule over our lives and the situation and to thank and praise him for the good things he has done for us. This is the first step in a right response to God in times of trial.

In verse 13 Peter tells us positively what to do: “But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” “Rejoice” is imperative; it is a command. We want to express joy when we feel it. If we suddenly begin to suffer, we will not feel like rejoicing. But we must rejoice nevertheless. This is God’s wisdom for us. The phrase “inasmuch as” is important. It means we need to be discerning about the reason for our suffering. To the degree that we are sharing the sufferings of Christ, we should rejoice in our sufferings. As we begin to rejoice, our spiritual eyes open. We begin to see the meaning of our suffering, and how God is at work. As his glory is revealed, our joy increases all the more, and we will be overjoyed.

Though we are commanded to rejoice, it is really for our good. There are clear benefits to us. Firstly, as we begin to rejoice, we enter into deeper fellowship with Christ himself. In verse 13, “participate” is from *koinōnia* in

Greek, which means “communion, fellowship, close relationship.” As we grow closer to Jesus, we mature in our character. We can also experience the resurrection power and mysterious joy of Christ. This is why the apostles “left the Sanhedrin rejoicing” (Ac 5:41), after being flogged. When Stephen was being stoned for his public witness to Christ, he did not express his pain. Rather, he saw Christ at the right hand of the Father in eternal glory and victory. He prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Ac 7:59-60). How could he? It was because Christ was with him as his joy and victory, and welcomed him into eternal glory.

Secondly, as we rejoice in suffering, it sharpens our identity. In verse 14 Peter said: “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” Persecution is clear evidence that the Spirit of God is upon us. We are his precious children. In Matthew 5:10 and 12, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” During ordinary times, membership in Christ’s kingdom and recognition as God’s children may seem rather vague. At the same time, a \$100 bill is tangible. The blessing of fiery ordeals is that they awaken our eternal perspective; we can realize that we are the most blessed children of God with a glorious eternal inheritance. This gives us a great joy that the world cannot give.

Thirdly, through suffering and persecution, God uses us to advance the kingdom of Christ and bless others. This is further cause for rejoicing. Paul says in Colossians 1:24a: “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you...” Paul was consciously aware that his sufferings were used by Christ to sanctify the believers. This gave eternal value to his suffering. People of the world make a great effort to attain the things they want, such as money, power and fame. Yet these things will all disappear. Those who suffer for others’ spiritual welfare are the truly wise investors. In return for temporal sufferings in this world, they receive eternal glory in heaven. This is why Jim Elliot, who was martyred while preaching the gospel to the people of Ecuador said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Let’s thank God with great joy for his calling to serve in his world mission. To be sure,

suffering for Christ is real. But in the midst of suffering, we have real reasons to rejoice. Moreover, we will be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

To help us further value suffering for Christ, Peter contrasts it with suffering for sin. Suffering for sin is punishment. Ironically, worldly people heap shame and abuse on Christians who live holy lives. This worldly consensus can be very strong. Yet Peter urges us not to be ashamed of the name of Christ, but to praise God. In verses 17-18 Peter refers to the sufferings that Christians endure as a refining fire of God's purification. Indeed, it is painful to receive God's discipline. But the result is growing in holiness. On the other hand, for ungodly people, all kinds of trials and sufferings are harbingers of a more terrible judgment to come. In conclusion, Peter says, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (19).

Today we have heard Peter's words, "But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ..." May the Lord help each of us to rejoice in Christ. May he open our spiritual eyes to see his glorious purpose and our blessed state as children of God. May he help us invest our lives in the advance of his kingdom and rejoice all the more until he comes.