

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 main theme of 1 Peter is the encouragement of scattered believers who were suffering for the sake of Christ to find the meaning of it. He taught them that through suffering, their faith was being refined, to be like pure gold (1:7). Also, he helped them to see the meaning of people's rejection. As they came to Jesus, the living Stone, they were being built into a spiritual house as living stones (2:4-5). They could live with a clear identity as a chosen people and a royal priesthood in the midst of suffering (2:9). He encouraged them to suffer for doing good by submitting to authorities, working hard, and living godly lives as God's servants (2:11-13). He also pointed out that suffering for doing good is better than suffering for doing evil (3:17). In the course of suffering, it is important to remember Jesus' suffering for us, and to follow his example (2:21-25; 3:18-22).

Now in chapter 4, Peter focuses more deeply on the meaning of suffering. When we hear the word “suffer” we may shudder. We like to hear the word “glory,” but we don't want to hear about suffering. Yet actually, we all suffer in many ways. Suffering is so familiar to all of us. Every day we hear about affliction, pain, trouble, distress, injury, loss, sorrow, anguish, grief and so on. So Job said, **“...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward”** (Job 5:7). Suffering is part of humanity. There is a saying that until one knows the pain of hunger, he cannot understand humanity. However, the manner of suffering is not an issue; why we suffer is important. So Peter said we should not suffer for wrongdoing, but because we are Christians. We need to discern why we suffer. If we suffer with a right motive, glory will follow. In fact, glory comes through suffering. Let's consider for what each of us is suffering, and discover the blessing that comes upon those who suffer as Christians.

First, arm yourselves with the same attitude as Christ (1-6). In verse 1, Peter drew his conclusion from the previous passage, using the word **“Therefore.”** In 3:18-22, Peter pointed out that suffering was the way to exaltation and glory for Christ. This principle applies to his followers as well. So he exhorts us, **“...since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also**

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

with the same attitude....” Peter applied a military term because we are involved in spiritual warfare. On the night Jesus was arrested, he repeatedly urged Peter to watch and pray so that he might not fall into temptation (Mk 14:34,37-38). But Peter was self-confident and was dozing in the time of prayer. When Jesus was arrested, Peter fell into fear and denied Jesus three times (Mk 14:66-72). On the other hand, though Jesus is the Son of God, he armed himself with fervent prayer before the cross, suffered willingly for our sins, and won the victory. Through this experience Peter learned the importance of arming oneself with prayer. Whatever we do, we need to arm ourselves with prayer as Christ did. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:11-12).

Verse 1b says, “**...because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.**” What does this mean? As 3:18 says, “**...Christ suffered once for sins.**” Fundamentally, Christ solved our sin problem once and for all through his death on the cross. But that does not mean that believers will be free from sin in this life (Jas 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8). The sinful nature still works in us. But suffering for Christ in the flesh helps us deal seriously with our sin problem. Sinful desires that once seemed important become insignificant when we experience great pain. Suffering for Christ advances the progress of sanctification. Our faith can be strengthened, our desires change, and we can overcome temptation. In this sense, suffering brings a great benefit to us. Many people have changed their life direction from pursuing worldly things to doing the will of God through times of suffering.

In verse 2, Peter explains more clearly what it means to be 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.**” This means that our purpose of living was changed from gratifying evil human desires to doing the will of God. As verse 1 says, in the past many believers had lived like pagans, in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry (3). This lifestyle, described by Peter in the first century, is an accurate depiction of what still happens today. We spent enough time doing these things. Sometimes we may think, “I need to spend a little more time doing these things. I’m too young to stop.” But Peter says, “No! You spent enough time in the past doing these things.” When we believed in Jesus, God gave us new life. Our value system has changed. Now, we live a new lifestyle, not following evil desires, but doing the will of God. Instead of

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

indulging in Friday night parties, we share testimonies of God's grace and pray for the emerging generation. Instead of seeking partners based on lustful desires, we seek a godly partner who will share a holy pilgrimage with us. Instead of seeking benefits from others, we serve them sacrificially. Instead of following the national trend to become like Sodom and Gomorrah, we pray to raise up a royal priesthood and a holy nation for God's world salvation purpose. When we do these things, some people are surprised (4). Their sinful lifestyle is exposed and they become defensive and heap abuse on us. Though they carry out hurtful acts without cause, there does not seem to be any consequence for them. But verse 5 says, **"...they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."** Everyone will have to give an account for every word they have spoken, every deed they have done, every thought that has filled their hearts. The Bible clearly says, **"God will repay each person according to what they have done"** (Ro 2:6). And, **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad"** (2 Cor 5:10). God is serious about this final judgment of all people. At the same time, he loves people and in his great mercy gave us the gospel for our salvation. This gospel was preached to the people. Some of them accepted it, were persecuted at the hands of unbelievers, and died. Though they were judged by human standards in regard to the body, God made them alive with his Spirit to live forever (6).

Second, pray, love and serve as God's stewards (7-11). In this letter, Peter repeatedly emphasizes the building up of a Christian community. God did not intend for us to live isolated lives as Christians. He brings people, one by one, according to his calling and guidance, to form Christian communities. Sometimes we think we chose to join our Christian community. But in fact, God chose us and brought us together for his purpose. It is a great blessing to live in Christian community. We need to cherish this community and edify each other for God's glory. In verses 7-11 Peter gives specific instructions about how we can build up our Christian community.

Verse 7 tells us why we have to pray: **"The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray."** When Peter said, **"The end of all things is near,"** he sensed the imminence of Jesus' Second Coming. Many early Christians felt that Jesus would come soon. Not only them, but Christians down through the centuries shared the same mindset. Yet Jesus still has not come. How then should we understand this?

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

Biblically, time can be divided into three periods: from creation to Jesus' coming into the world; from Jesus' incarnation to his ascension; and from Jesus' ascension to his second coming. This final period is known as "the end times." We don't know how long this time period will last. Jesus may come today; or he may come a thousand years from now. But we know that Jesus' second coming draws nearer day by day. We see the frequency of signs increasing as time goes by. When we are aware of this we can be alert and sober-minded. Then we can pray. But without this awareness, we easily become complacent, fail to pray, and go astray. We should be alert so that we may pray. Through prayer, we can discern what to do or not do. Through prayer, we can gain strength and wisdom to serve God and his people. Through prayer, we can overcome hardships and temptation. Through prayer, we can have a more intimate love connection with God. Apostle Paul also emphasized the importance of prayer: **"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people"** (Eph 6:18).

In verse 8, Peter again emphasizes the importance of loving one another: **"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."** The most important characteristic of the Christian community is God's love. Love, the greatest Christian virtue, binds us together in perfect unity (Col 3:14). The phrase **"love covers over a multitude of sins,"** does not mean to condone sin, but to practice Jesus' forgiving love that heals and transforms. The Christian community consists of all kinds of forgiven sinners. Naturally, conflicts arise. Sometimes we are offended; other times we offend others. So we spend a lot of time trying to overcome conflict. We are tempted to remove those who are unlovable from our community, or to move to a better Christian community. But if we do these things, more problems will arise. More troublemakers will enter our fellowship. When conflicts arise, it is time to practice Jesus' forgiving love. Love forgives again and again. It is interesting to remember that one time Peter asked Jesus, **"How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"** Jesus answered, **"Not seven times, but seventy-seven times"** (Mt 18:21-22). Jesus went on to tell the parable of the unmerciful servant. He taught the importance of remembering God's unlimited grace of forgiveness and practicing his unconditional, forgiving love toward fellow Christians. If we have an unforgiving heart that holds grudges, we damage ourselves even more than others. But when we

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

practice Jesus' forgiving love, we can grow in his love and be a blessing to others.

To love is not only to forgive, but to serve practically as well. In verses 9-11 Peter explains how to do this. Verse 9 says, **“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”** Hospitality is an important part of Christian love (Ro 12:13; Heb 13:2). It is to welcome others with an open heart, ready to share whatever we have with them to refresh and encourage them in their life of faith. In offering hospitality, we should be willing and joyful. If we do so with a sense of loss for our time and material, or out of a sense of duty, we may begin to grumble. Then it burdens others more than encouraging them. Offering hospitality is good, but it must come from a right heart. This requires us to have stewardship. Our time and resources are a generous gift from God to be used freely for the glory of God and for the benefit of others. The same is true of our spiritual gifts. Peter tells us what attitude to have in using our spiritual gifts. He said in verse 10, **“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”** Everyone has received at least one spiritual gift from God to use faithfully as stewards of God’s grace. God’s gifts are not given to make us proud, or to envy others and feel inferior. They are to be used to serve others and build up the church. Peter mentions two kinds of gifts: speaking and serving. Speaking is not just preaching; it includes Bible teaching, evangelism, testimony sharing, and praise. All these should be done with a deep sense of God’s presence as the one speaking to us, and for his purpose and glory (11a). Serving includes helping or encouraging others in many ways for their benefit in the church. This should not be done as a human favor. This can make one proud and offend those being served. As a result, instead of building up the church, barriers arise. Those who serve others should be very humble. They should realize that all things come from God and serve in the strength God provides for his glory. Then both the server and the served are mutually encouraged. Peter explains the purpose of using our gifts in verse 11b: **“...so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.”** Everything comes from God: our lives, time, money, children, and all we have. They are not ours, but God’s. We are just stewards who have a privilege of participating in God’s work during our time on earth. Knowing this, Peter concluded with a doxology: **“To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen”** (11c).

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

Third, rejoice in suffering as Christians (12-19). Thus far in this letter, Peter has encouraged scattered believers who were persecuted because they were Christians. Now he comes to his main exhortation regarding suffering. In verses 12-14, he teaches that suffering is inevitable and that it has great meaning. Verse 12 says, **“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.”** Persecution for the faith is often irrational. It happens simply because the world hated Jesus without reason, and it hates us as well, for we do not belong to the world (Jn 15:18-19). Since Jesus told us that it would happen, we should not be surprised. If we are surprised, as if it should not have happened, we are vulnerable to doubting God’s love and power. We should expect persecution and be ready for it and rise to the challenge when it comes. Peter says it has come to test us. The word “test” means “trial” (1:6), which is translated from “*pir-as-mos*” in Greek. It is not like a pass-fail test to determine who is qualified to be a Christian. Rather, it is the process of refinement that purifies our faith. When persecution comes, we need to realize that God is using it for our good. It is the opportunity to experience God’s love and power and grow to be like Jesus. So we can say, “Welcome, persecution! Welcome suffering! I am glad to see you.” Even more positively, Peter encouraged us to rejoice as we share in the sufferings of Christ. Let’s read verse 13: **“But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”** In the past, suffering crushed us and made us miserable. Just to survive suffering was a great achievement; we could not imagine rejoicing in it. But now, when we suffer as Christians, we can rejoice because we are participating in the sufferings of Christ. When the apostles preached the gospel boldly in the temple courts, they were arrested by the religious police and flogged and released. When they left the Sanhedrin, they were rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (Ac 5:41). There is a mysterious joy that comes when we suffer for Jesus’ name’s sake (Mt 5:11-12). When we suffer with Christ, we can share in his glory. Our Lord Jesus gained glory through suffering. We also gain glory as we suffer with him. Glory comes through suffering. This is a Biblical principle. If we are insulted because of the name of Christ, we are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us (14). We think it is hard to bear insults and sufferings; and much more difficult to endure martyrdom. But the Spirit of God enables us to bear all kinds of hardships, even martyrdom. When Stephen was being stoned to death by insane religious leaders, he was full of the Holy Spirit. He saw the glory of God in Jesus, standing at the right hand

REJOICE AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

of God. He had the strength to forgive his persecutors and pray for them (Ac 7:55-60). Not only Stephen, but numerous Christians have borne all kinds of suffering. It was because the Spirit of God rested on them. We don't need to worry about how we will respond when suffering for Christ. When we suffer for Christ, the Spirit of glory and of God will rest on us.

While Peter strongly encourages us to suffer with Christ, he advises us not to suffer for wrongdoing as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler (15). Meddlers are those who get involved in other people's affairs out of curiosity, and with the intent to gossip about them. They are not busy, but busybodies. Because they irritate others, they suffer. This is not the kind of suffering we should be involved in. When we are sure that we are suffering for Christ, we should not be ashamed, but praise God that we bear the name of Christ (16). For the Christian, all kinds of painful trials are the judgment that enhances our sanctification (17). But for the ungodly, suffering does not have any meaning. It is just deserved punishment (18). Peter concluded in verse 19, **“So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”** God is our loving and faithful Creator. He never fails to take care of his people. He uses all things to work for the good of his people. Everything is in God's hand. So when we suffer, we can entrust our soul to God knowing that as we continue to do good he will turn all our sufferings to glory. When we know the meaning of suffering, we are not afraid of it. Rather, we can welcome it, embrace it, and rejoice in it. In this way we can overcome the world (Jn 16:33).