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1 Peter 4:12-19

Sixteenth Message

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THE SONG OF THE WOUNDED

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

Today, the San Francisco Bay Area is celebrating the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev, *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1989. A lottery was held for Stanford University students and staff who want to participate in the festivities surrounding President Gorbachev's arrival on campus, since the audience must be limited. What a difference a generation makes! I grew up under the lingering shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War. Back then, the phrase "The Russians are coming" meant either nuclear holocaust or KGB agents. Now their leader, Mr. Gorbachev, is welcomed as an honored diplomat and statesman. He even used the word "friend" in his vocabulary describing the relationship between our nations. The one we thought would destroy us is now saying he wants to be our friend and wants to work with us toward a common goal.

In some ways this is how the prophets depicted the coming of Jesus Christ into history. Malachi 4:1-3 envisions the fire of his coming in these words,

"For behold the days is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evil doer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts.

In the same way, the apostle Peter wants Christians to be prepared for the second coming of Jesus. No one will need a winning lottery ticket, but everyone will have a personal encounter with the Lord and will respond in one of two ways: there will either be dark gloom, and his consuming fire will destroy, or there will be inexpressible joy, full of glory so great that it cannot be put into words. Peter desires that his readers prepare for that day, and ready their hearts accordingly to meet the King.

How does the heart prepare itself so that this coming fire is not a day of gloom but of joy? Peter says that is accomplished by putting the fire of God, through the Spirit, into our hearts now, so that it will purify and consume all that is evil in us. As it burns through the lamp of the Spirit, it purifies with his life so that on that day his glory will be revealed to all. Surprisingly, this process is enhanced through the unjust suffering of the believer.

In a previous section of his letter, Peter declared that the resurrection of Christ resulted in victory over his enemies. The apostle now responds to those who question the reason for suffering: If Jesus was victorious over evil, why should those who bear his name be abused, mocked and arrested as criminals? The apostle says that understanding God's intent will replace fear with rejoicing because our suffering is a sign that God's judgment has begun. Suffering purifies the heart, preparing it for the great joy we will experience at Jesus' return. First Peter 4:12-19 explains how to approach unjust suffering in our lives,

describes our attitude and the way we should suffer as Christians, and reveals the significance of our suffering. May the Lord make us attentive!

I. Attitudes to Approach Suffering (4:12-14)

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; 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. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

A. Not Surprise but Expectation

Christians are about to face a fiery ordeal, says the apostle. History shows that the cause of their troubles was the change of government policy toward them from encouragement to intolerance. Christians became the scapegoat for every mean thing in the culture, and Nero gave official sanction to persecution of the believers in A.D. 63. A year later, when Rome was destroyed in the great fire, Christians were unjustly blamed and killed by the hundreds for their alleged treachery. Thus, the "fiery ordeal" Peter refers to is a change in government policy.

I believe that a similar hostile attitude toward Christianity is growing in our nation. Last week I was commiserating with a friend, who is a respected doctor in the community, about the process of writing an AIDS curriculum for sex education in the school district. Although AIDS leads to death—there are no exceptions—our liberal community is reluctant to teach abstinence as the only foolproof method to prevent the disease. Whenever my friend suggested that choice, or any other absolutes, he was branded a "fundamentalist Christian" and ignored. Even as a doctor who is a recognized expert in this field, he must be careful about what he says since people who preach absolutes are accused of having a Christian bias. He was perturbed at this group's antagonism toward his stand and the way they are arranging the curriculum.

When we are maligned for Christ's sake, Peter says we should not be surprised, we should expect it. The word "strange" is used as a word play; it is the same Greek word as "surprise." I would translate this sentence, "Do not feel inwardly strange, as if some strange thing were happening to you when you face unjust suffering." Peter encourages us to expect it because a fiery ordeal is necessary to test our faith. "Test" is a word which refers to the process of purifying metals by fire. When metal is heated, the dross which comes to the surface is skimmed off. Similarly, when we first embraced Christ, our faith was a mixture of our trust in him, tainted by reliance on our own resources (i.e., talents, wealth, position, etc.). A fiery ordeal of suffering removes the impurity of trusting ourselves so that it is Christ alone and his life that floods through us.

Surprise is often a natural response to suffering, but it indicates that we do not understand the curriculum in the process of sanctification. Hebrews 2:10 and 5:8-9 demonstrate that even Jesus was perfected through suffering. As the Son of Man, he needed to experience suffering in order to mature his faith. If Christ, who had no sin, needed to suffer, how much more do we need it? John Stott wrote that these verses speak of a process in which Jesus was “made perfect” through his suffering. He was not imperfect as far as sin is concerned, but he needed the experience to mature him: “If suffering was the means by which the sinless Christ became mature, so much more do we need it in our sinfulness.” Therefore, do not be surprised by suffering, but expect it.

B. Not Sorrow But Rejoicing (4:13-14)

Secondly, Peter says that our attitude must not be one of sorrow but of rejoicing:

...but to the degree you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.

The phrase “to rejoice with exultation” is used in the scriptures to describe the increase of our appetite for joy when God has delayed an act of salvation. When it finally comes, our joy is so full that it cannot be expressed (see Matt 5:12; Luke 1:47; 10:21; John 8:56; Acts 2:26; 16:34; 1 Pet 1:6, 8; 4:13; Rev 19:7). Suffering with Christ will clearly increase our capacity for joy on the great day of his return. It enlarges the heart in the same way as when one receives a gift.

This brings to mind the story of Elijah and the widow in 1 Kings 17. While Elijah resides in her home, the widow is devastated by the death of her only child. She says to Elijah, “What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance, and to put my son to death!” Elijah takes the lifeless boy upstairs to his room, prostrates himself on the child, and prays three times. Through the prophet’s prayer the child is revived and presented to his mother. Imagine how her joy was enlarged through the suffering she experienced!

We are to view the resurrection of Jesus from the same perspective. Every loved one who has been lost will be presented by Jesus, the new Elijah, and handed back to the family at the banquet feast that God has prepared for believers at the end of this life. For those of you who have lost children, think of the joy you will have when you welcome them back through Jesus Christ. If a beloved husband or wife has preceded you in death, the Lord will be pleased to present this one to you. If you are childless in this world, the day will come when you are seated at a banquet table with more spiritual children than you could have produced in your physical womb. For those of you who have not married, or have a disobedient mate, you will come face-to-face with the Spouse who loved you all along. That is the great joy to which we look forward, and our capacity to experience that joy will be increased by suffering.

Peter then tells believers to rejoice because it is an indicator that we have privileged status. He says,

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

When Christians suffer, at times their first thought is that God is angry with them. Why me? they ask. The truth is, God is not mad at us; on the contrary, our suffering is evidence that he loves us dearly. It is a sign that the Spirit is finding a permanent home in us, the

temple of the living God. From that platform his ministry will be multiplied.

At Pentecost, the visible sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit was tongues of fire over the believers’ heads. The significance of this is that the unique experience Isaiah had. Isaiah 6 is now possible or every Christian after Pentecost. Caught up into heaven, Isaiah saw the holy God on his throne, his holiness so pure and great that Isaiah responded, “Woe is me, I am an unclean man.” An angel touched his mouth with a burning hot coal and declared, “Your sins are forgiven.” Cleansed by the power of God’s Spirit, Isaiah was made a prophet to speak the oracles that changed the entire course of world history. In the book of Acts the gift of the Spirit produces the same effect for all Christians. The flame will purify and burn so brightly that it will affect our speech. By its power, all Christians become prophets, and the words of salvation we speak will bring healing throughout the world. We can rejoice because it is through the process of unjust suffering God that will perfect us.

Suffering has great purpose and value in our lives, therefore we must expect it and learn to rejoice through it. If we understand that it is not meant to destroy us, but to purify us, we can have inexpressible joy at its advent.

II. The Way to Suffer (4:15-16)

A. Not in Shame as a Law-Breaker

By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;

The Spirit has written God’s law on our hearts, and we are able to keep the law by his power. Peter exhorts us, therefore, to suffer not as law-breakers (e.g., cheating on our taxes, laziness at work, drunkenness, etc.), but as Christians. In the classical literature, “troublesome meddler” was defined as a spy or an informer, and later as a revolutionary. In this context, I believe Christians are warned against the temptation to act with excessive zeal, like revolutionaries, in attacking non-Christian habits. As we see society going downhill morally, it is tempting to group together as Christians and attack the world, thereby meddling in their lives. When we do this, we in fact break the law and become troublesome meddlers rather than good citizens in Christ. Unfortunately, Christians of the second and third centuries lost their witness by being strident and combative toward non-Christians.

Peter counters this attitude by exhorting the brethren to suffer as Christians, turning people towards God with their gentle spirit rather than away from him.

B. But in triumph as a Christian (4:16)

My timid personality has often been a hindrance when I have been presented with opportunities to speak boldly for the name of Christ. Six months ago, for example, some neighbors came around with a petition against a building that was to be erected near our residential area. After I signed without reading it in detail, they informed me that a group of Christians wanted to use the building on Sundays for worship. I said nothing as they left, but felt miserable knowing that I had missed the opportunity to suffer as a Christian by speaking out for my brothers. I thank God that the petition failed and the building was indeed constructed.

When we suffer, says Peter, we must not be ashamed, but instead we should glorify God. Our text begins with the name of Christ being reviled, but it concludes with the name of Christ being glorified

in verse 16. This verse is best exemplified to me by the witness of the Romanian leader, Traian Dorz, who was imprisoned sixteen years for his faith. In his cell, he did not respond in silent shame, but wrote over ten thousand hymns to Christ, glorifying the name of God. One of them reads:

IN TEARS OF THE NIGHT

Oh we trusted in the LORD, that's the reason
Why neither the strong wind that was blowing,
Nor the waves which were striking,
Could destroy us.

Trust in the LORD in all your ways,
You who belong to Him,
Because to all who trust in Him,
In Him they have victory.

Oh we trusted in the LORD, that's the reason
While it looked like we were being struck down,
We were looking confidently
To our bright salvation.

Oh we trusted in the LORD, that's the reason
Why in tears of the night,
We prepared our songs of praise
For the morning victory.

Oh we trusted in the LORD, that's the reason
Why in silence we beheld,
And stood unflinching
In the face of our terrible enemy.

Oh we trusted in the LORD, that's the reason
Why we sing so today,
And so eternally will we praise
His glorious victory in heaven as well.

If we are suffering for the sake of righteousness, we must not only rejoice inwardly, but we must also take the opportunity to boldly proclaim the name of Christ in public.

III. The Significance of Our Suffering: Judgment Has Begun (4:17-19)

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? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

A. It Begins in God's Temple for Purification

What is the significance of our suffering? Peter reveals that it is a sign that God's judgment has begun in history. That judgment does not begin with the nations and then filter down to his people; rather, it begins in God's temple, the new Jerusalem, for purification, and then it works outwardly to the nations.

Concerning Christ's first coming, Malachi wrote:

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger [John the Baptist], and he will clear the way before Me. And the LORD, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's

fire and like fullers' soap. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they many present to the LORD offerings in righteousness. (Mal 3:1-3)

God proclaims the good news to the Gentiles that they too are brought into his kingdom of priests and are the new sons of Levi. The Spirit's fire will reside in our hearts and purify us so that when we come to the temple through the blood of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, we offer sacrifices of righteousness. Thus, judgment begins with us in order to purify us. It not only begins with us, says the apostle, but it is with great difficulty that it sanctifies us.

"Difficulty does not imply uncertainty of the outcome, but the difficulty of the road that leads to it." This word is used of the difficulty it took to force a demon to leave a young boy (Luke 9:39), and the difficulty in sailing against a fierce wind (Acts 27:8). It is difficult for the Father to save people even when they cooperate, because saving them cost him his only Son. After the resurrection and the giving of the gift of the Spirit, God still must design history to act like labor pains for the believer. It is only through the process of that pain that the reality of the cross will filter into our hearts, purifying us so that we might grasp the magnitude of Christ's love. Oswald Chambers wrote, "The finest men and women suffer, and the devil uses their sufferings to slander God. God is after one thing—bringing many sons to glory, and He does not care what it costs us, any more than He cared what it cost Him."

B. It Ends With the World Unto Destruction

If it is with difficulty that we believers are saved, what happens to the wicked who reject Jesus? Peter refuses to describe the horror of hell; he leaves his thoughts unspoken. Scripture talks of hell metaphorically, but not in great detail. It is rather contrasted to the grace of God. Psalm 1:4-6, for example, says of the wicked,

Not so, the wicked.

For they are like chaff which the wind drives away
Therefore the wicked will not rise in the day of judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

Likewise, the author of Hebrews will not describe the experience of hell, but says,

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb 10:26-31)

C. It Evokes Trust and Righteousness

We must put suffering in perspective, and realize that what God is doing is purifying and enlarging our hearts to receive the joy. When we do, we affirm Peter's words in verse 19:

Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

If we understand the significance of suffering, we will respond in trust rather than anger toward God for our situation. This passage is the only place in the New Testament where the title “Creator” is used with reference to God. It emphasizes that the believer’s hope is in God’s ability to bring about the creation of the new heavens and earth through this process of labor pains called unjust suffering (2 Pet 3:15). Therefore, we must trust him as the Creator, knowing that he uses suffering in our lives to make us new creations.

Secondly, self-righteousness and anger toward the world will be replaced with fear and love for the lost. Thoughts of hell will evoke compassion for the ungodly, motivating us to do good. We must not hate those who malign us for Christ’s sake, because suffering opens avenues to manifest his love to a watching world. We must not condemn them, but rather our passion must be to die to ourselves for their benefit, just as Christ died for us.

Instead of regarding unjust suffering as if God were angry with us, we should take suffering as the very sign that we are his legitimate children and the objects of his love. The fearful price that Christ paid for our salvation ought to evoke a tremendous sense of awe and fear in us. Suffering is the sign that a new creation has already begun. It is not a threat, but a pledge that we belong to the Lord, and thus we have a promise of the future hope.

Tomorrow, when the selected few will see Mikhail Gorbachev, remember that One is coming—he is right at the door of history—and he will be seen by all. It is my prayer that our hearts will be ready to make that a day of great joy.

I will conclude by reading a couple of stanzas of a prayer I wrote after my experience with the brethren in Romania. The depth and purity of their faith is a testimony to Christ’s refining work in their lives through the process of suffering. Comparing their position to the richness of my life, and all the privileges I have had, I tallied the resources and then counted what it cost me:

And what have you asked for all this?
A son, a daughter,
Cold families.
Tears? Yes.
And what have you asked for all this?
A son, a daughter,
Cold families.
Tears? Yes.

But you already did for me what you did for Job.
Double plus one from your grace,
And ten times the family and home,
And I didn’t face his accusers.

And what do you ask in return—
Is there any contribution I can make?
I am so weak—so flawed,
So stained with selfishness.

You ask me to teach, a joy not a burden;
Shepherd the 70, but the 12 are better than I;
Train the 12, but what is that?
To be melted together in their love.

I am not like the saints of past,
Calvin, MacDonald, Whitefield,
And that amazing Edwards.
They labored at great cost,
And with less produced much more.

For such grace and so little task,
I feel I will stand alone in heaven.
In heaven, yes, by your blood,
But alone—so far behind

Those you gave no privilege
no gifts,
no money,
no friends,
no glory.

Like those simple ones in Babylon
Who stood unflinching under your cross,
Their bodies buried under the flames of ridicule,
Crying “*Yahweh Echad!*” [the Lord is one]
To you be the glory.

I love you, Adonai,
Brian

Don’t waste my life, O Lord!

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