

1 Peter 4:12-5:14
The Blessedness of Christian Suffering

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On this Sunday, the first Sunday of the month, we come together at the Lord's Table.

Participating in the Eucharist is a physical act – you can see a loaf of bread and the cup and the plates that contain bread and cup for you, you can touch the bread and cup, smell the flour and grapes, and taste the dough and smooth sweetness of the juice. The Eucharist is a physical act that has deep spiritual meaning, a gift of God's grace to us. This is what makes communion a sacrament in the Christian church: it is a physical reminder of the gifts of God's grace to us.

Not only does communion combine physical and spiritual; but gathering here at the Lord's Table brings together past, present, and future. We remember past events which give us a present identity as God's people and a future hope of the full and complete renewal of all creation. We anticipate the future where God will dwell with us and His Kingdom will be on earth as it is in heaven.

The past events are, of course, the past events of the life and death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. When we retell the story of Jesus' last supper, we tell once again the story of God, we tell the story of creation and covenant; and we celebrate the promise of new creation and new covenant in Jesus Christ. We tell the story of life and death, of love and betrayal, of suffering and healing, of forgiveness and a Kingdom.

The story of Jesus is a story that can be hard to hear, it can make us want to turn our heads and stop listening or turn our backs and walk away. When we listen to some of Jesus' puzzling teachings, we may easily become offended; when we read his parables, we may conclude it's no

longer relevant or applicable; when we remember the story of his death by crucifixion, we may wonder why worshipping and following a crucified Saviour brings life and healing and peace.

Yet it is precisely the bread and cup which remind us of the crucified Messiah; which remind us of Jesus' broken body and shed blood; the bread and cup bring us face to face with the suffering of Jesus. The Lord's Table is the place where suffering, the presence of Jesus, blessing and hope all mysteriously come together. These are the themes we find in Peter's first letter. Pastor Greg and I have been working our way through Peter's first letter and I will offer some concluding remarks about the last part of his letter this morning.

The experience of every Christian believer, says Peter, is one of suffering. He writes: *Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* To suffer was the way of Jesus and is the way of the Christian disciple. Though no one wants to suffer, the tone of Peter's letter is far from being pessimistic and depressing. Rather, Peter holds suffering and blessing in a mysterious and strange tension. The suffering Peter speaks about is the kind of suffering a Christian experiences because one is a Christian: it is to suffer because we choose humility instead of pride, we choose generosity towards those who have offended us, we choose chastity instead of unfaithfulness, we choose to love those who have betrayed us.

Yet Peter connects suffering with blessedness. To suffer because one is a follower of Christ is at the same time to be blessed. Peter writes two verses later "*if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you*". It is a blessing

to suffer for being a Christian because it identifies one as belonging to God, it identifies one as an obedient follower of Jesus Christ and on whom the Spirit of God rests. Because of our suffering, we know we are in God's care: this is our blessing – that God is near us, that God is taking care of us, that we belong to God.

The link that Peter makes between suffering and being blessed seems about as strange and paradoxical as Paul's statement in Romans to rejoice in suffering. Let me be clear: the blessing that Peter speaks of is not in the experience of suffering. Our being blessed is not found in our suffering, in our anguish, in our hurt and pain. The blessings that Peter speaks of is because the presence of the Spirit of glory and of God is with us. In other words, our being blessed is found in God's presence with us, which is evidence of our genuine faith. After all, it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we experience strength to live righteously, following the footsteps of Jesus. A Christian's willingness to suffer rather than compromise indicates inner transformation of the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Peter's argument is that God has not abandoned the Christian who suffers, rather God is powerfully present in the experience of the sufferer. This is our blessing.

At the Lord's Table, we see that most clearly in Jesus' experience of suffering, of blessedness, of presence, of hope.

The culmination of Peter's teaching on suffering and blessing is found in verse 19: *Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.*

Peter makes two points:

1. Suffering for being a Christian is to be expected.
2. When you suffer, you should continue to live righteously, which is to trust God despite your circumstances.

Peter encourages that in experiences of suffering for being a Christian – when we suffer because we proclaim faith in God with our words and our deeds – instead of concluding that God has abandoned and rejected us; we are instead supposed to turn even closer to God. We are to trust more deeply in God and continue to live righteously. This seems opposite of our natural tendency and desire. When we are suffering, we want to turn away from that which causes us to suffer. When we are hurting, we want to curl up and put up the walls and guards to protect us from more hurt. When we are in pain, we seek to control so we can fix whatever is creating that pain. No, says Peter, when you suffer for being a Christian your disposition should be to trust God, to turn even closer to God, to pray, to do good, to live righteously. In times of trouble and difficulty, we are faced with hard questions about our relationship with God; we question and doubt God's intent and character. We wonder about the goodness and holiness and love of God when we are hurting. So it is often even harder to entrust our lives to God when we are suffering, especially because our suffering is unjust and is a direct result of living obediently for him.

To trust means to hand over something of value to the care of another; to hand over one's most valuable possession. To entrust ourselves to God means to commit oneself fully to God; to give ourselves completely into God's care, our faithful creator.

As we gather at the Lord's Table, we are reminded that Jesus has taught us, has shown us what it means to trust God unto death. Trusting God is hard; it is even harder when we suffer. So how is trust expressed and developed when we suffer? Trust grows as we continue to do what is good even though it seems so unreasonable and counter-intuitive to do good; to continue to do the very things that are causing us to suffer in the first place. Peter explains earlier in his letter, in chapters 2 and 3 that to do good means to do those things which culture sees as good within the boundaries of our primary obedience to Christ. Doing good despite circumstances is how we live out entrusting ourselves to God.

Peter concludes his fourth chapter by reminding us that suffering for being a Christian is to be expected. Suffering is a sign of our blessedness for it is a mark of our belonging to God and a sure sign of God's presence within us. Our response to suffering is twofold: trust God and continue to live righteously, to do good.

In Peter's letter, he makes a transition from talking about suffering and blessing, about the presence of Jesus and belonging to God to talking about leadership. The fifth chapter is about the type of shepherd leadership that is needed in the church, especially during times of church suffering or persecution. Here Peter uses the pastoral motif of a shepherd caring for the sheep. The shepherd is one who willingly leads the church, even though the shepherd may indeed be the one to receive greater persecution or challenge. Just as Peter encouraged the church and disciples that their present suffering is an example of blessedness; so now too does Peter encourage the shepherd that the present suffering for Christ and the glory of eternal life go together.

Peter describes how the elders are to shepherd the flock as an overseer using three qualifications. The Greek word here for overseer means to exercise oversight, to care for, to visit. The Greek word episkopeo comes from the Greek word epi which means 'on or fitting' and the Greek word skopeo which means to look intently. So the meaning of overseer suggests properly focusing on, looking at with real caring interest and apt concern; a looking on that requires a natural action of taking care of something. The shepherd is one who looks intently with a focus for what needs to be taken care of. That is what exercising oversight means.

The first qualification of the shepherd is to oversee the flock not as if forced, but willingly, according to God.

Second, the shepherd oversees the flock by not being greedy for money but eager to be of service. The Greek word for eagerly also means readily, with a ready mind, cheerfully, thoroughly willing. The shepherd should serve not with a primary desire to get but with an eagerness to give.

Third, the shepherd oversees the flock not as domineering, but being role models or examples for the flock. This echoes the teaching of Jesus Christ himself in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This is a call to humble leadership. Humility expresses itself in a willingness to serve others even beyond one's self-interest.

Finally, notice how Peter closes his letter with a message of hope: *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.* In the circumstances of suffering, in the promise of blessedness, in the instruction to shepherd, notice how Peter speaks about what God will do: he himself will put things right, will strengthen, empower, secure. God is the one who will make all things right, in his time, in his way, by his love and grace and mercy. So let us entrust ourselves to God's good care.