

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 4, 2008

1 Peter 4:12-17; 1 Peter 5:6-11 (New International Version)

1 Peter 4:12-17

Suffering for Being a Christian

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

1 Peter 5:6-11

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

⁸Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

¹⁰And 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. ¹¹To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

We regularly point to the positive evidence on which our faith in the Savior is built. Scripture tells us of many witnesses that Jesus rose. Easter is a fact of history. We know God has redeemed us. I wonder if sometimes we treat it only as history. It happened in the past; it's over and done. We sing the hymn "Jesus Lives! The Victory's Won"—2000 years ago. That's finished just like the Easter decorations are packed away by this Seventh Sunday of the Easter season. We must ever remember that the effects of Easter continue in our lives. Jesus and His victory are part of today and every day.

It doesn't always seem that way. We feel down and out, alone and neglected, not part of the main stream in life. Nothing goes right for us. Yet as we listen to the words of Peter in these verses we see that we can and do

LIVE VICTORIOUSLY

I. As you rejoice in suffering v12-17

II. As you stand firm in faith v6-11

A challenge to living victoriously is the presence of suffering in our lives, but Peter in this epistle of joy calls on us to rejoice in those times. He was not denying the existence of problems. Life brings serious trouble to us all. Peter mentioned the painful trial of his readers. Our days are full of troubles. Lots of it happens in a sinful world. Peter was writing specifically about the suffering we encounter because of our Christian confession. His readers in Asia Minor had been experiencing some persecution. It would get worse. The government at first viewed Christianity as a type of Judaism, which had legal standing in the Roman Empire. When it became clear that the Christian and Jewish

faiths were different, then Christ's followers were viewed as dangerous. Emperor Nero activated persecution against believers after Rome burned. Peter likely even died in it. Nero's successors on the throne would increase the opposition.

Such action continued in later history and happens in places still. There are more forms of persecution. Some are active, as people speak angrily against you or fire you or pass you over for a promotion because of your ethics. Other times the opposition is more subtle. All of us like to be admired and popular. Instead we may find ourselves laughed at, ignored, or called names. That hurts, too.

Peter made the point that experiencing persecution is a privilege. Let's be sure that we're talking about suffering for being a Christian. "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler." If you commit a crime and receive a penalty, don't claim you are suffering for Christ. That final term "meddler" is a rare word with uncertain meaning. Fitting with the rest of the verse leads some to translate it as "agitator," a person encouraging rebellion.

If we truly undergo suffering for Jesus, "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ." Much of the world hated and mistreated Jesus. If you are connected closely enough with Him, you will receive the same kind of treatment. It is a privilege to do so, and that's why we can rejoice. Of course, our suffering does not pay for sin. His alone did that.

The blessing comes when we are connected with Jesus. Peter referred to the time when Christ's glory will be revealed. Believers will be in heaven because Jesus lived and died for us. He won it for us and presents it to us as a free gift. He will not let you down. We will not be ashamed, the text noted. The Savior delivers on His promises.

Is it really possible to rejoice in suffering? Early Christians did take Peter's words to heart. The story is told that many executed cruelly under a later emperor named Diocletian met death with calmness and even with joy, causing amazement to a young Roman soldier named Adrianus. When he asked how such joy was possible in the face of a horrid death, one believer told him, "We are looking for the blessed treasures of heaven, which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither is man's heart able to consider the things which God has prepared for those who love him." That confession made such an impression on the soldier that he became a Christian and later met a martyr's death.

We don't have to wait for heaven to receive His promised benefits. He helps us now, giving strength to endure those times of suffering. He limits what happens to us. He keeps some of it away. Things certainly could be worse. Peter noted that if even the family of God meets difficulties, what is in store for unbelievers? In personal experience we are among those whom God has spared from much trouble. That's a blessing of the freedoms we have in our land. We can gather to hear and study God's Word openly.

Since suffering comes to believers, expect it but you don't need to seek it. There is no reason to be obnoxious about your faith, to cause people to hate you. But don't try to hide or compromise your faith either. Live and share your faith. When persecution comes, meet it head on, thankful that God will bring you through. Live victoriously.

II.

The way to do so is also shown here. Live victoriously as you stand firm in faith, enduring it humbly. The second portion of verses in this text began with the instruction, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." We might question if there is a need for that reminder. If we're being mistreated, isn't that being low enough? Sometimes we resent having to suffer mistreatment. We grumble and complain about how unfair it is and how we deserve better. Isn't that pride showing itself? To be humble is to lower yourself. You can endure and stand firm even during what seems unfair as you trust in God's strength.

A key strategy is turning your needs over to God. The verse is well-known: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Times of persecution can certainly cause anxiety as you are concerned about the duration of it, what effects it will have and if it will spread to your loved ones. The items we tend to worry about exceed the matter of persecution. We get anxious about health issues, finding or keeping a job, our families, the economy, crime, war, the environment. Whatever your concerns, the solution is the same: give them to God. Let Him handle them. He is willing and able to do so. Peter said to bring them all to Him. Nothing exceeds His ability or is beneath His concern.

Taking your needs to God in prayer is effective "because he cares for you." Do you have any doubts about that? Look to the cross. There Jesus sacrificed Himself. He gave His life for you. You can't do any more than that. Jesus loves you. So He answers your prayers in the best way. Yes, we may suffer "a little while" as Peter termed it, but it won't last forever. There will be no suffering in heaven.

The text also calls on us to be on guard. "Self-controlled" was the word used. It describes a spiritual soberness. Have a balance in your disposition, thoughts and actions. Do not be carried away by emotions or ideas.

Be alert, Peter continued. That means be awake, aware of the pitfalls and temptations that wait in your path. Know the enemy. "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Recognize what he can do. Satan was originally an angel, a superhuman being. You are no match for him alone. He will devour you. You will lose every time. Yet Peter instructs us to resist him. We can do so because God gives us His power, which will defeat temptation.

Thus we can be confident as we go forward in life. The text noted that our brothers face the same experiences. We are not alone. We can support and strengthen one another.

Greater help is available. "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." God is with you. He called you to faith and wants you in His heaven. So He will do all it takes to get you there. He shields your faith. His power comes through the Word. That's the Spirit's tool in planting faith; it's also what He used to maintain faith. The Word will not fail. Remember how Jesus used God's Word when He faced Satan's temptations those forty days and nights in the wilderness. He quoted Scripture and beat the devil at every turn. It will do the same for you.

The Word helps in several ways. It tells us what Jesus did for us, prompting us to love and trust in Him. We want to follow His ways. The Bible contains inspiring examples of faithful believers who stood firm, despite the difficulties they faced. When it tells us of those who fell, it provides warnings about what to be on guard against. The commandments identify God's will so we know the difference between right and wrong. God's Word builds our faith. The term "steadfast" refers to a foundation. We have a firm and solid basis for our faith in Jesus. When we build on Him we will be strong and firm in our faith. We will not deny our Savior. That's what our confirmands vowed last Sunday here before God's altar. The Lord will enable them and all of us to remain faithful.

We are so sure of it that we close with praise. "To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen." God has the ability to keep us strong and He will use it. We thank Him and close with a hearty "Amen." The victory is ours.

Challenges to our faith will be many. The key to standing firm is our connection with Jesus. On our own we would fall flat on our face. In Him, we win. So stay in the Word. Hear it together in worship and Bible study. Use it at home with your family and in your private devotional life. As your faith grows, you will withstand temptation and live victoriously. You will be able to rejoice if you suffer for Jesus and you will stand firm in faith. God will be glorified in your life and eternally. Christ's victory is not ancient history. It is your present and your future. Know it, enjoy it, and live victoriously.