

The Glory of Suffering

1 Peter 4:12-19

November 5, 2017

Introduction

This morning my message is about the topic of suffering. As I was looking back on the last few times I preached, I realized that my most recent sermon here was on the topic of death and grief, and the one before that was about God's wrath and judgement. And now I'm going to preach on suffering. With that kind of pattern, I really hate to think what I'm going to end up preaching on next!

But in all seriousness, the topic of suffering is an important one, and clearly relevant to our lives. More specifically, this morning we are going to be looking at suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ. That's appropriate, because today is the international day of prayer for the persecuted church. This is a sobering reality in our world today. There are many nations in which Christians suffer, sometimes in ways we can scarcely imagine, because of their faith in Jesus Christ. It recently came out in the news that Nepal has just criminalized evangelism and conversion. That clearly puts a lot of pressure on Christians and missionaries working there. Even here in our own country we are affected. Of course, we are also remarkably blessed not to face the kinds of things our brothers and sisters around the world face, but even in America it is not always popular to be a Christian. We are increasingly liable to be accused (among other things) of being ignorant and hate-filled. How do we respond to this sobering reality?

The Text

This passage in 1 Peter 4:12-19 offers us some help here. Now, in one sense, this is an easy passage to understand. But in another sense, this is a very difficult text. It is challenging precisely because it is easy to understand. It clearly tells us things which are difficult for us to hear and even harder to apply.

We can sum up what this passage teaches in two basic points. The first is this: *Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life*. Peter writes "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Suffering is a normal part of Christian life: that's a hard pill to swallow.

The second point is even harder: not only is suffering a normal part of the Christian life, *Christians are called to rejoice in their suffering for the sake of Christ*. Notice all the different ways Peter says this: "Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ." "That you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed." "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." How are we supposed to do that? Last time I checked, suffering was no joy-ride. This too is a challenging teaching.

There's a third point implied by this which is also contained in this passage, and this is that suffering for the name of Jesus is connected to glory. Peter writes "Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his *glory* is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of *glory* and of God rests on you." This connection between suffering and glory is what led to the title of this message: *The Glory of Suffering*. Perhaps when you saw that title, you found it just a little bit surprising or even jarring. I hope you did! We don't normally associate those two things. After all, suffering in itself is *not* glorious at all. God is ultimately against suffering. It was not part his original plan for the world, and eventually, all suffering will be eradicated when God creates the New Heavens and the New Earth, puts an end to death and pain, and wipes the tears from every eye. And yet, in the meantime, we find suffering and glory connected to each other. Suffering for the sake of Christ takes us on a path to glory--ultimately, God's glory. I

would sum up the basic point this way: *God is glorified when his people suffer in obedience to Jesus Christ.*

Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life, Christians should rejoice in suffering for Jesus' sake, and God is glorified when his people suffer in obedience to him. This is a lot to get our heads around! How can we gain a better grasp of these challenging ideas? I suggest that there are a few people from our church's history who can help us here.

Martin Luther

The first is Martin Luther. It's appropriate to be talking about Luther right now, since we just celebrated the 500th anniversary of Protestant Reformation, the beginning of which is often marked by Luther's act of nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg church door. Of course, there's a lot we could say about Luther and the Reformation, but I'd like to focus on particular teaching Luther brought: the distinction between what he called a *theology of glory* and a *theology of the cross*. Now, we need to be clear about what Luther meant by *theology of glory*. When we first hear that, we probably assume that it's a good thing; perhaps a theology of the glory of God. But what Luther actually meant by this was a theology of *human* glory. This could be summed up as an approach to God and life which is really all about us: humans work their way up to God, and there is a focus on human strength, wisdom, and an prosperity--in short, things which humans take pride and pleasure in. He observed that the church at that time seemed to be caught up in a theology of human glory--they gloried in human political power and righteousness by works.

In contrast, Luther stressed a *theology of the cross*: the teaching that we do not work our way to God, but rather that God came to us through Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. God showed his glory not through things the world celebrates, but rather through sacrificial love. Accordingly, Luther taught that the church should only glory in the cross of Jesus Christ. A few verses are helpful here to sum up Luther's theology of the cross: "May I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

This *theology of the cross* versus a *theology of human glory* was something Luther not only taught, but lived. When he persisted in challenging some of the prevailing doctrines of the medieval church, he was taking a great personal risk. He never was imprisoned or put to death for his beliefs, but there were many authorities who wanted to do that to him. He was willing to face that risk in obedience to his savior, whatever the cost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

There's another, more recent Christian from our history who can perhaps help us see this Biblical teaching about suffering for Christ more clearly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who lived in Germany and ministered during the rise of the Nazi regime. He wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* in which he discussed the difference between what he called *cheap grace* and *costly grace*. These are similar (though not identical) to Luther's teaching about a theology of the cross versus a theology of [human] glory. *Cheap grace* can be summed up as an approach to God and life which assumes an easy forgiveness demands nothing from us and that the Christian life mostly involves just "going with the flow." Many churches in Germany during Bonhoeffer's time were doing just that: they gave in to the pressure from Hitler's government and just looked the other way when they saw the evils it committed. In contrast to this, Bonhoeffer taught a doctrine of *costly grace*: God's grace, he said, is absolutely free, but it is not cheap. It was given at the infinitely great cost of Jesus' life on the cross. We were purchased at this price, and therefore we owe total allegiance to Christ.

Like Luther, this was a theology which Bonhoeffer not only taught but embraced in his life. He was part of a movement called the Confessing Church, which, when faced with

pressure from the Nazi government, said “We refuse to cooperate with evil. We will obey Jesus whatever the cost.” And Bonhoeffer did have to pay the cost: he was imprisoned by the Nazis for his activities, and was finally killed by firing squad. Bonhoeffer vividly demonstrated a theology of the cross and of costly grace in his life and death.

The Prosperity Gospel

We can make all of this still more relevant to us now. Currently, there is a popular movement called the Prosperity Gospel. In short, this is the teaching that God wants us to be happy, to have plenty of money, and to be free from health problems. The belief is that if we don’t have these things, we are doing the Christian life all wrong. It’s a view of Christian faith which is very centered on wellbeing in this world rather than taking an eternal perspective. The title of a book by a well-known prosperity preacher sums it up well: “Your best life now.” Clearly, this goes against what we have been saying about how suffering is actually a normal part of the Christian life, to rejoice in suffering for the sake of Christ, and the theologies the cross and costly grace.

Unfortunately, this is a popular teaching not only here in the U.S., but also around the world. Recently, Pastor Emeritus Fred Martin traveled to an African country with a ministry which brings training to local pastors. He wrote about something he learned there: “The Prosperity Gospel has a huge hold on Christian churches in [this African country] and throughout Africa. As one pastor explained to me, “The people want to get blessings, blessings, and more blessings. They don’t want to hear about how we should take up our cross and follow Jesus.”

However, there are many Christians around the world who are having a very different experience and who truly are living out a costly discipleship. Let’s take a few minutes to watch this video which tells the story of one Christian in Africa:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY_I3HzM4w0

Application

That’s a powerful story, isn’t it? It raises the question which we will be thinking about for the rest of the sermon this morning: what are you willing to suffer in obedience to Jesus Christ? Are you willing to obey him whatever the cost?

As we think about how apply that question in our lives, I first want to consider what our passage this morning tells us about *how not to suffer*. 1 Peter 4:15 says “If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.” In other words, it hurts our witness if our suffering is not actually for the cause of Christ or a result of doing what is right, but is rather something we have brought upon ourselves. Of course, none of us are perfect. But there is an important call for self-examination implied in this. If we are ever in a situation in which we feel that people are reacting against us because of our faith, we need to make sure that it is not for some other reason; in particular, for something wrong we have actually done and should apologize for.

Similarly, there are a few attitudes we need to guard against when we encounter suffering. One is pride--thinking that suffering earns us favor with God or makes us superior to others. To do this is to slip back into a theology of human glory. We need to be very clear that although suffering for the sake of Jesus glorifies and pleases God, it doesn’t earn us salvation or put God in our debt. We are saved by grace through faith alone, and only as a result are we called to live out total faithfulness to God, even in the face of suffering. We also need to reject a victim mentality in which we think we are more persecuted than we actually are, demand our rights, and feel sorry for ourselves. We are called instead to a humble willingness to obey Jesus whatever the cost, whether we gain recognition or not. As Peter tells us in verse 16, it is an honor and a privilege to bear the the name of Jesus.

More positively, verse 19 gives us a practical and encouraging instruction for how to face suffering: “Those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful

creator and continue to do good.” This call to persevere implies a wonderful promise: that even in the midst of suffering, God is faithful. When we choose to obey Jesus whatever the cost, we are entrusting ourselves to the faithfulness of God rather than the fairness of people. When we are willing to follow Jesus even if it leads to suffering, our lives are built on the unshakable foundation of God’s faithfulness, which is infinitely more secure than the pursuit of human approval.

I’d like to get even more specific in our application of our question. Like I said before, here in America we are quite unlikely to face full-blown persecution, and yet the pressures we face are real. If you follow Jesus, it is likely that at some point you will face criticism or ridicule from friends, family, and coworkers. Are you willing to follow Jesus even if it costs you that? (And, are you willing to keep loving those around you as a representative of Jesus even when they treat you this way?)

Let’s look at a slightly different scenario: suppose that at some point it seems like it’s necessary to do something unethical or dishonest to get ahead or even to keep up in life. Maybe it’s cheating on your taxes, or perhaps it’s cheating on a test. Everyone else is doing it, you think. It seems like you are disadvantaging yourself by not doing likewise. Are you willing to obey Jesus whatever the cost? Or, consider how some activities (especially certain sexual choices) which the Bible teaches to be sinful are not only accepted by our culture but are positively celebrated. Again, it seems that everybody is doing it. It is appealing and tempting. Are you willing to follow Jesus whatever the cost?

I have a final application: pray! We need to pray for ourselves; that God would give us the ability to remain faithful to him no matter what, and that we would be prepared to suffer for him, should that need arise. Suffering for Jesus’ sake is not something we can do under our own strength, but it is something which God empowers us to do by his Spirit living in us.

We should not only pray for ourselves, but for our brothers and sisters around the world who are facing persecution everyday. I believe that there are two main kinds of requests we should pray on their behalf. We should pray for relief from their suffering and an end to their persecution. But we should also pray for that they will remain faithful to God and glorify him in the midst of their suffering.

Here are two organizations which provide detailed guidance for praying for the persecuted church: Voice of the Martyrs (www.persecution.com) and Open Doors USA (www.opendoorusa.org).

Conclusion

This is hard stuff, isn’t it? God never said that the Christian life would be easy. But he did say it would be worth it. Let’s remind ourselves why:

First, suffering for doing what is right glorifies God. When we rejoice even in the midst of undeserved trials or difficulties, it proves that we love God and worship him not merely for the things he gives us in this world, but because he is worth loving and worshiping for who he is. This shows to the world that although we may endure painful things, we have a God for whom such things are infinitely worth enduring. Not only does this put God’s goodness on display; it also reminds us that we have an unshakable foundation for our lives. We don’t live for the fleeting pleasures and unstable approval of the world, but rather out the strength of God’s unwavering faithfulness, goodness, and love.

That brings us to the second reason why suffering for the sake of Christ is worth it: as Christians, we are meant to live out of an eternal perspective. There are a few verses which sum this up well: “Our light and momentary sufferings are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17). “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Brothers and sisters, if you are a follower of Jesus, be prepared to pay the price. Suffering is a normal part of Christian life in our fallen world. Yet it is a blessing. It reminds us who we are and whose we are. It reminds us where we have come from and where we are

going. God is glorified when his people suffer in obedience to Jesus Christ. He has promised that as we take part in the earthly sufferings of Jesus, so we will take part in his glory. He did not promise that it would be easy. But he did promise that it would be worth it.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji on November 5, 2017 by Micah Carpenter

Handout from Sermon “The Glory of Suffering” (1 Peter 4:12-19, November 5, 2017)

Two views of Suffering: Martin Luther	
<u>Theology of [human] Glory</u>	<u>Theology of the Cross</u>
Humans work their way up to God through good works, religion, etc.	God comes to us through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.
A focus on human strength, wisdom, comfort, and prosperity.	God shows his glory through the cross, not what the world celebrates.
Example: the Medieval church gloried in human political power and righteousness by works.	Example: Luther taught that the church should only glory in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Two views of Suffering: Dietrich Bonhoeffer	
Theology of [human] Glory	Theology of the Cross
<u>Cheap Grace</u>	<u>Costly Grace</u>
God’s grace is an easy forgiveness which demands nothing from us.	God’s grace is freely given to us but at the great cost of Jesus’ life.
The Christian life is easy: “Just go with flow.”	The Christian life gives us true joy but calls us out of our comfort zone into total obedience to Jesus.
Example: Many Churches in 1930’s Germany took the easy road and cooperated with Hitler’s government.	Example: Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church said “We will obey Jesus whatever the cost.”

Two views of Suffering: You and Me

Theology of [human] Glory, Cheap Grace	Theology of the Cross, Costly Grace
God wants you to have an easy life.	God wants you to be like Jesus.
The normal Christian life is comfortable, easy, and prosperous.	The normal Christian life is about union with our crucified and risen savior.
Suffering is devastating to faith.	Suffering is an expression of faith. It is a chance to know Jesus more.
Example: The prosperity gospel message. "Your best life now."	Example: World Christians willingly suffering in the name of Jesus, with an eternal perspective.

Two views of Suffering: How *Not* to Suffer

Theology of [human] Glory, Cheap Grace	Theology of the Cross, Costly Grace
Suffering because of wrongdoing	Suffering in obedience to Christ or imitation of Christ
Pride: thinking that suffering earns favor with God or makes us superior to others.	A humble willingness to obey Jesus whatever the cost, whether we gain recognition or not.
A victim mentality: thinking we are more persecuted than we are, self-pity, demanding our rights.	Being a son/daughter of God and suffering for it is a blessing and honor.

Resources to help pray for the persecuted church

Voice of the Martyrs
Open Doors USA

www.persecution.com
www.opendoorusa.org