

Last weekend I was in Colorado visiting my dad and my sister and her children. It was good to see my dad, who is getting up in years. He doesn't see or hear that well, and can't walk very far without pain. So it's a little hard to figure out the best kind of outing. We both decided that eating a steak would be part of what we would do together.

My sister and brother-in-law suggested I take him to the WWII Aircraft Museum in Colorado Springs. It was a beautiful day and the place was wheelchair accessible, so we headed to the museum before having our steak dinner. We took the two hour tour and saw all kinds of WWII planes and memorabilia. It was a little hard for me to tell if he was enjoying it. But when we saw a refurbished B-25, and as the tour guide was explaining the history of the aircraft, my dad raised his hand and said, "My mother (his mother) was a riveter in an aircraft plant in Kansas City, Kansas during the war. She worked on B-25s." It was a great connection. After that we went and had our steak dinner together. My sister called me this week and said that he had a great time with me at the museum. Glad to hear that. I hope he was encouraged. I know I was.

I think we can all agree that encouragement is a good thing. Our universal human experience is that on any particular day we either need some encouragement, or there is a person in our lives that could use encouragement from us. And I think we can all agree that suffering is a bad thing. A core belief of the human race is that when someone is suffering we should step up and alleviate their suffering and encourage them in some form.

Peter talks about suffering in these verses this morning. But it's important that we understand what kind of suffering Peter is talking about. He isn't describing the kind of suffering we go through because of our own foolishness. It's important that we don't confuse our suffering due to our stupid choices with suffering that happens because we have something good. In our passage Peter is describing a type of suffering that comes upon a Christian because he or she has taken a stand for righteousness.

We are more than halfway through 1st Peter. I hope this letter has been encouraging to you. I hope it's providing you comfort. That was certainly Peter's intention in writing this letter. Encouragement pours out of this letter to us when he describes our new identity as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own possession. I hope we are encouraged when we remember that we were once dead in our sins, like dead men walking, but Christ suffered and died for our sins.

Christ endured the ultimate in unjust suffering to accomplish his purposes for our benefit.

I hope we were encouraged when we were reminded that Christ died for our sins, and when we believed this good news of God's grace, and when we received it on faith, we received forgiveness, eternal life, and the gift of God's Holy Spirit to come in and dwell in our hearts. And even though sometimes we doubt and we get discouraged when things get hard, the truth is that God has changed us forever. We have been born again into a living hope. We have been given new life, new access to God, new power to live differently, and new hope for today and for all eternity. And for those who are suffering unjustly? He gives encouragement and comfort for the journey and actually chooses to use unjust suffering on earth to accomplish his perfect purposes.

We will see how enduring unjust suffering accomplishes God's purposes in four ways. The first way reminds us how near and dear unjust suffering is to God's heart. He is close to those who suffer. Although we may intuitively think that God is far away from us, he is actually very close and very engaged in our situation.

**Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?  
But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are  
blessed (1 Peter 3:13-14a).**

The idea is that we may endure unjust suffering from non-believing employers, neighbors, government people, religious fanatics, family members, even unbelieving spouses as we learned two weeks ago. He then identifies those who continue to suffer for doing right as "blessed ones." Literally right in the middle of the pressurized situation, the hurtful circumstance, the painful consequence, we have the favor of God. I'm reminded of Jesus' words that he spoke in the Sermon on the Mount: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Mt. 5:10-12).

Try to be encouraged to know that when we suffer we are in good company. Rejoice, not in the sense of "be happy" because you suffer, but open your heart to a deep joy that comes when we can see suffering through the perspective of a God who is powerful, loving and personally engaged with his children's situation. It's only through God's perspective on eternity that we can make sense of how we can be both "suffering ones" and "blessed

ones" at the same time. The math on suffering doesn't add up unless we look at suffering through God's perspective.

Next, we see that Peter reminds us to trust God. When we trust God we are accomplishing his purposes. But when we let fear take over control or when we let our flesh attack and retaliate we are likely not accomplishing his purposes.

**"Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord (verses 14b-15a).**

Instead of fearing their threats, he says, don't fear what most people fear. Don't be troubled, shaken up, disturbed; instead focus your attention on someone else. The words translated in English, "in your hearts revere" is better translated in the original language as "trust as holy." When we "trust as holy" Christ as Lord we accomplish God's purposes on earth. Peter is saying, "Set him apart above all human authorities." As the Lord's Prayer says, "Hallow His Name." Under the pressure of unjust suffering our calling is to hallow his name or honor him through our obedience to his commands.

Here are questions for all of us to ask ourselves this morning: Do I believe that I am entitled not to suffer? Can I accept that there can be some God-honoring purpose that can come through unjust suffering? Can I really experience a deep level of intimacy with Christ if I never go through some form of suffering in this life that requires me to trust God?

The calling of God may include unjust suffering. And this is not because God's plan has failed. This is not because God has been unfaithful, or weak, or forgetful of my situation. This is not because the world is out of control. I don't exactly enjoy revealing this kind of personal stuff, but I know that unjust suffering in my life has brought things to the surface like a boil. Unjust suffering has brought to the surface my pride, my self-righteousness, my judgment of others, my sense of entitlement, my anger and envy; all things that need to come to a head and be lanced like a boil and then drained out of me.

A great question for us to ask is, "If God is about removing ugly things in my life why would he allow unjust suffering?" Unless I am taken to places beyond what I can control, unless I am taken beyond things I can comfortably manage, taken beyond my level trust, how else can I grow in faith? How else can those ugly character things be drained out of me and then be refilled by the beauty of Christ unless I "trust as holy Christ as Lord? Why wouldn't Christ have us endure unjust suffering if it means that while going through it we trust him more and are made to look like him more?

That God would love me so much that he would push me to abandon my self righteous, my sense of entitlement, my own wisdom, and my own strength. That God would love me so much to use unjust suffering to pry my fingers off of the idols that won't satisfy. That God would love me so much that he would convict me of my sin of envy. We get it so wrong. This

calling to unjust suffering is a sacred calling. Peter is talking about a calling to live in grace. It's sacred because it's only God's grace that changes us on the inside.

So be encouraged. Be confident. While we endure unjust suffering we are assured that Christ still reigns as Lord. We can obey the command to trust as holy Christ the Lord because of all we know about his power, his goodness, and his personal attention to the details in our lives. Not only do we fulfill God's purposes because unjust suffering makes us favored ones and trusting ones, we also fulfill his purposes because unjust suffering gives us an opportunity to witness to others about our faith in Christ.

**Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (verses 15b-17).**

Peter is telling us that if we endure unjust suffering unbelievers will not only notice, they will be curious and want to see how it plays out in our lives. Peter tells us that they will ask. So make a defense to all who ask and in all situations. The language tells us that we won't know when they might ask, or when they are watching; just be alert to have an answer for anyone at anytime who asks. Instead of retreating in fear, Peter says do what they don't expect. When they see something different in you, tell them that they are right. Tell them it isn't you, it's what is inside you. Tell them you have been born again into a living hope.

Gentleness is a New Testament virtue and a fruit of the spirit. In this context it is best defined as to not demand one's own justice, or attack an opponent, but instead commit one's cause to God, even when those that cause us to suffer don't deserve our respect. Peter is saying do this out of respect for God. So it isn't just what we say that makes us good witnesses, it's also how we say it. I think most of us know from experience that the people we interact with aren't dumb, they are usually perceptive. People who will watch us will see right through our hypocrisy if our words don't match up to our actions and attitudes. I've heard it said, "a conscience is a soul reflecting on itself." The idea here is to make it a habit to examine your heart in these matters. Know what is a right or wrong response to unjust suffering. He is saying keep your heart tender. Don't let your heart become hardened because of unjust suffering. When you respond wrongly, confess and repent and ask for forgiveness for this reason.

It's an amazing thing that unbelievers watch how our lives play out when we suffer unjustly. Unbelievers watch how your life plays out to a neighbor who is making your life miserable through some unfairness. Unbelievers watch how your life plays out maybe to a co-worker who observes how you handle the temptation to bend or break the rules to get ahead because everyone else seems to be doing it. Or maybe it's your child watching how you give an account for your faith to a relative who slanders you

or who thinks you are a fool because you follow Christ. Maybe it's played out as you seek to become part of a group but you are not let in because they don't like what you stand for. Peter says bear up under unjust suffering. It's your witness about Christ to an unbelieving world. So be encouraged. For you who are enduring unjust suffering right now the grace of God marks your life. That God might use unjust suffering in your life to actually bring someone closer to Jesus is God's grace at work in you and in that person.

Suffering presses and folds God's grace into our hearts. In chapter two, Peter said that bearing up to unjust suffering is commendable to God. Bearing up makes God smile and accomplishes his purposes. For you who suffer unjustly this morning, I want to challenge you to smile because God is smiling on you because this is so close to his heart. Have you ever thought in that temporary season of suffering you endured that you could say, "This is grace because it's changing me and others"? With this encouragement so far, Peter encourages us one more way. Peter lays out before us the example of Jesus' life and the hope that comes from his gospel to encourage us.

**For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit (v. 18).**

Christ also endured unjust suffering. The one to whom we pray, depend on, who provides our hope, who shows us grace is also one of us, he lived where we live. He faced more of the harsh realities from a fallen world than we ever will. We are not seeking comfort today from someone who doesn't understand us. Christ the perfect one, lived out the gospel perfectly. And as a result he was rejected and suffered at the hands of evil men.

But Peter goes farther. Christ was more than an example to us; he is the substitute for us. Peter says literally, "the righteous one (singular) for the unrighteous many (plural)." He was the sacrificial lamb who stands alone in the place of all sinners and was sacrificed once and for all. Without the lamb there is no hope. His once and for all sacrifice is the hope of the world. He took my sin on his back, that he might bring me to God. So now by grace through faith I accept that his sacrifice is for me personally, and I have a personal relationship with God. God loves me. He accepts me. And he has adopted me as his child. I am now parented by him.

Remember our context—the people in Peter's original audience were rejected by their world. But they are accepted by God. The gospel says, don't fear those who reject you. The condition of your soul doesn't depend on whether or not people in this world accept or reject you. Our true identity and acceptance is now established forever in Christ. We don't need to try to find it somewhere else. The gospel has set us free from the judgments of this world. The condition of my soul is based on one thing: The work of Christ.

The last part of verse 18 says, "*Christ was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit.*" Peter is referring here to Christ's actual resurrection. This is so encouraging because it says that suffering and death ended for Christ. He suffered for a relatively short duration when we compare it to the span of all eternity. It tells us that any unjust suffering we experience will be short in the scope of eternity as well.

Peter goes on to say that after Jesus died a mysterious thing happened. There is strong debate among scholars on what the specific details were that actually happened. But standing back and looking at the big picture, there is one thing we can see for sure. Jesus made a victorious proclamation. This is encouragement for anyone who suffers unjustly in the present.

**After being made alive he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (verses 19-21).**

Commentators make a good case that Peter is telling us that at some point after Jesus' death—probably after his resurrection and before his ascension into heaven—he went someplace and gave a victory proclamation to spirit beings who were imprisoned. Commentators also made a good case that these imprisoned spirits were literally fallen angels or evil spirits who had spread evil in the days of Noah. In the days of Noah as recorded in Genesis 6, we know there was great evil and spiritual darkness over all the earth, and all but Noah's immediate family was disobedient to God. It was so bad that God's patience eventually reached its limit and God pronounced judgment with a flood.

Digging a little deeper, Genesis 6 describes evil angelic beings or demons, called sons of god, who likely entered and possessed men on earth and then these demon-possessed men impregnated women in Noah's day and further corrupted the human race. The offspring of these evil relationships were evil themselves and described to look like a giant human race God's people knew about called the Nephilim. So after Genesis 6, and after the flood, where did these demons, these fallen angels end up? Peter tells us that they were imprisoned by God in some holding cells where they wait for their future final judgment as recorded in Revelation 20. And Peter tells us that before his ascension, Jesus went there and proclaimed his victory.

But he no doubt told them that Noah had been called to endure suffering and ridicule. That Noah was faithful even though there was no rain day after day, year after year, decade after decade, and even though he looked foolish to everyone in the world for his obedience, he continued to trust God as holy and built the ark. And this ark was his witness of his obedience and the ark itself was a call to repentance to a sinful world. Jesus no doubt

told these imprisoned spirits that Noah and his family survived judgment by water and were vindicated because they were saved from the waters of judgment by an ark.

What saves us? The belief in the power of the resurrection that raised Jesus saves us and brings us into the community of faith, and all of that is symbolized through water baptism. On Easter Sunday we will have a baptism celebration for all of us to watch, where some in our church family will stand before their church family and express their faith in Christ by being water-baptized—water on the outside to symbolize the internal cleansing that comes through their new faith in Jesus Christ that saves them. Peter ends with this final thought: he tells us that it is Jesus Christ,

**who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—  
with angels, authorities and powers in submission to  
him (v. 22).**

So be encouraged. We don't need to doubt or be afraid because we have the hope that God will finish his work. Be encouraged. There will be a day when the mockery will end. There will be a day when there is no more suffering and sadness. There will be a day when we will live with him forever. And he will not sit down or quit until that work is complete in every one of his children. He reigns on our behalf.

It's passages like this that shape us. Three years ago Mark and I went to Cameroon to teach at a Pastor's Conference. We went there to teach, but it always happens that I get taught so much more at things like this. A month before we arrived we were notified that our conference was relocated from a place in Northern Cameroon to the capitol city of Yaounde in the middle of the country. This was done because a terrorist group called Boko Haram was terrorizing Southern Nigeria and threatening to enter into northern Cameroon. This group had been responsible

for the burning of rural villages and kidnapping and even killing some local Christian pastors and missionaries and kidnapping young girls. So it made sense to move the pastor's conference to the safer capitol city.

As I heard the stories from my Cameroonian brothers and sisters in Christ who attended our conference, most had come from long distances, risking their lives in open country traveling from these places where these kidnappings and murders were taking place. I met rural pastors from Nigeria filled with joy as they served in their churches. They knew God's favor through suffering. They knew what it meant to trust. They knew their responses were the best witness to unbelievers there was. And they knew the power of the gospel that had saved them, and was saving them, and will save them for eternity. They knew they worshipped an unstoppable God who is the Only King Forever.

Be encouraged: If you find yourself enduring unjust suffering, count yourself to be in privileged company with saints like these. Be encouraged or encourage a friend: Your life has great purpose on earth that may include suffering as a witness for Christ. Be encouraged: The more you trust Jesus through the suffering the more God is glorified on earth. Be encouraged: You who are persecuted are counted as favored by God. And be encouraged: One day there will be no more suffering. ***"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true"*** (Rev. 21:4-5).

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*