

First Peter No. 23 “A Strange Pleasure”

1 Peter 4:12-19

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Text Comment

- v.12 “Beloved.” Because he is going to be talking about the suffering they are enduring, he begins by reminding them that they belong to a fellowship of love.

Because “trial” can now be taken in a general sense as simply an affliction, we should read the text as it literally reads: “the fiery ordeal, which comes upon you to test you.” This is the point he has already made in 1:6-7. The verb: “to be surprised” is the same one already used in 4:4. So there is this interesting comparison. The pagans are surprised that the Christians won’t join them in their sins; the Christians, however, should not be surprised that the world opposes them. John says the same thing in 1 John 3:13: “Do not be surprised if the world hates you.”

The idea of persecution as a testing of the soul is found in the Lord’s teaching also. Cf. Matthew 10:22: “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” And so also Paul “. . .if we are children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” [Romans 8:17]: You’ve got to think about why it is that this subject of suffering in the Christian life – and suffering that God has appointed for us and suffering as a test of our faith, as a means of us growing in the grace of God – appears as frequently as it does.

- v.13 Paul speaks in Philippians 3 of wanting to share in Christ’s sufferings, the most profound way of identifying ourselves with him and his plan for the salvation of the world.
- v.14 The blessing is not only in the future; it is already theirs. They are blessed, in one way, in that their persecution shows them to be the true followers of Christ and so people who can be sure that they will share in his triumph. But they are also blessed for the ministry of the Holy Spirit that the Lord Jesus promised to his people when they suffer for his sake. Matthew 10:19-20: “When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”
- v.15 Peter hurries on to say that, of course, it is only suffering *as* a Christian and *for* Christ that brings such blessing. There is a lot of suffering that is punishment for unrighteousness not righteousness. The term *meddler* may be Peter’s gentle reminder that there are good ways and foolish ways to bear witness to one’s faith and to condemn the pagan culture. Human nature being what it is, no doubt there were some Christians who brought down upon themselves the censure of the pagans with whom they lived by arguing for the gospel in a way that wasn’t wise or thoughtful or gentle or temperate. Theirs was the way of public criticism, of rude interruptions, of thoughtless interference with family relations and so on. We’ve see this so often in our own time – God hates fags, and so on, on a sign. Terrible and utterly fruitless as a testimony to the truth of the Word of God.

v.16 We will read on to the end of the paragraph, but we will consider those verses, 17-19, Lord willing, next time.

Now we do not know precisely what sort of troubles these Christians were enduring because of their faith in Christ. They were facing active opposition from the pagan culture. That much is clear. But what form that opposition took we cannot say. But we know from other evidence what sorts of persecution Christians suffered in those days. There was, of course, the public ridicule of their faith and their life, a faith and a life that seemed bizarre to folk in that time and place – as ours does increasingly in our ever more pagan culture. Peter has already mentioned this, in v. 4. One cannot live out the faith, one cannot even explain the Christian faith and life without unbelievers in large numbers turning up their noses or gathering that you mean that *their lives* must, therefore, be wicked and displeasing to God. Not the way to win friends and influence people, but inevitable for a Christian who has come to see the truth of human sin, divine holiness, the impossibility of human beings measuring up to God’s standards but who is, nevertheless, committed to obeying the commandments of God. People didn’t like this message when Christ brought it himself; they don’t like it still; and they resent those who bring it and represent it in the world. Jesus warned us on a number of occasions that this contempt for Christians and Christianity would be a fact of believing life. It was a continuation of the contempt that so many had felt *for him*.

But there were other forms of persecution: ostracism from families, the denial of opportunity in education and business, the loss of property, physical violence – Paul remember was stoned several times – and, of course, was arrested several times, beaten, and finally executed. Those fates befell ordinary Christians as well. That had not happened on a grand scale by this time, as it would eventually, but Peter himself was at this time only a few years removed from his own crucifixion in Rome. He had been arrested and was then executed for no other reason than his identification with the Christian movement. And there were ordeals of other kinds. Because Paul said that, on behalf of Christ, he had “suffered the loss of all things,” (Phil. 3:8) it has long been wondered whether he lost his wife as a result of his faith in Christ. Most men were married in those days and it would hardly be surprising – given that the Lord told Ananias to tell Paul how much he would have to suffer for his sake – that an ardent Jewish wife might well not have accepted Paul’s conversion.

And, of course, it has been the same ever since. Robert Yarbrough, who is professor of New Testament at our Covenant Theological Seminary, translated from the original German some years ago a fascinating biography of Adolf Schlatter, one of the premier theologians in Germany in the first half of the 20th century, a staunch evangelical in a triumphantly theologically liberal university world. Over and again, obstacles were put in Schlatter’s way of obtaining positions in the German University simply because he was a Bible-believing scholar. That he was a scholar no one could doubt. That his scholarship was first rate, no would could deny. But that he was a Bible-believing man, no one could deny either. When Schlatter sought for the first time a professorship at the University of Bern, the professors there instituted for the first time a requirement that applicants pass a battery of extraordinarily difficult exams with very high marks. Schlatter passed with high marks. No candidate for the rank of professor was ever asked to sit those exams again. In one instance, a high official in the culture ministry who had power over professorial appointments in German universities, told him outright that he would never consent to make him a professor. “And I will also tell you why,” he said. “If I make you a professor, the Pietists in this land would call it an answer to their prayers. And I refuse to give them this pleasure.” [Neuer/Yarbrough, 75] The official was dead within the year and Schlatter got his appointment! This same sort of thing has

happened time and time again in recent years on the American academy. Lots of Christian scholars keep their heads down in their university precisely because they know only too well that if they were to advertise their faith in Christ and their loyalty to the Bible they would lose their jobs or, at least, be sent to Coventry by their colleagues.

There have always been such relatively minor impediments placed in the way of Christians. And there have been, of course, throughout this history, many cases of much more vicious persecution leading to martyrdom and, if possible, to still worse suffering – to have one’s children taken away, to be sold into slavery – such things as still happen today in parts of our world. We hear of the violent deaths of Christians in Muslim countries nowadays on a somewhat regular basis. Several years Pakistani Muslim terrorists murdered nine Christians, eight from the same family, in the northeastern town of Noshehra. The father of the family was a man of prayer and even Muslims would go to him to have him pray for their sick. This offended some extremist Muslim groups. The youngest slain was a grandson one month old. The victims were butchered with a sharp knife and most of them had their throats cut. Somebody who is willing to do that to a baby is obviously a man who is eaten up with hatred. To be sure, we’re not the only ones who suffer in this way. In India it is probably more dangerous to be a Muslim than a Christian. But there is no community of faith so widely persecuted in our world today, nor one persecuted so directly for their faith, for what they believe and how they live, as are Christians.

So, let’s not imagine that Peter was speaking blithely here, as if he didn’t really understand what suffering is or how vicious and terrifying persecution can be. He had seen it himself – seen men executed for their Christian faith. Peter, James, and John were the inner circle of the Lord’s disciples. We imagine that the three men were close. They had shared a great deal, including some absolutely transcendent experiences, such as the Lord’s transfiguration. But James had been dead now for years; having been executed by Herod Agrippa I. Peter undoubtedly knew Stephen, in all likelihood was present at this stoning. Peter had himself been jailed and threatened with death more than once. He would have known some if not most of the Christians that Paul had thrown into prison before his conversion. But, what is more, Peter here, as he has already in this letter (2:21), linked the suffering of Christians for their faith to the sufferings of Christ himself. And Peter knew about *that* suffering. He had seen, and from the perspective of his later understanding, he now knew how horrible it had been for a sinless man to be considered by other men not only not the Messiah, but not even a good and righteous man. He knew what pain and humiliation it was for the Lord to have the world deny and reject everything that he was and heap scorn on all that he lived his life for. And then he had seen such sorrow and pain. Peter was in the Garden the night before the crucifixion when the Lord Christ, as it were, sweated great drops of blood. The last thing in the world it was possible for Peter to think was that such suffering as Christians suffered, such suffering as was a kind of partnership in the Lord’s own suffering, was a small thing. *When he speaks of their “fiery trial” he means what he says.* He knew how terrible it was, how devastating, how heart-breaking, how sad!

But that fact makes only the more remarkable what Peter says. “Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.” Those like us who are familiar with the teaching of the Bible are perhaps too used to hearing such words. But perhaps some of you newer to this book were struck by Peter’s words. He is telling his Christian readers to rejoice that they are suffering for Christ’s sake; that it is a blessing so to suffer – that is, such pain and anguish is more a good thing than a bad thing; even a blessing; that it is actually a reason to praise God.

Now you folk who have been Christians for a long time stop and ponder. You are, of course, aware that this is by no means the only place where such a thing is said. Jesus said the same thing on several occasions, most memorably in his Sermon on the Mount. “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.” James says a similar thing: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” These are thoughts very similar to Peter’s here.

But, think now. What an astonishing thing to say! We on our mettle to clear our minds and think about Peter’s words. After all, how easy *have you found it* to rejoice in your trials and how often have you seen other Christians doing so; *really doing so*? Such a command as Peter gives us here is like *Paul urging us to boast in our weaknesses* because Christ’s strength is made known in our weakness. Tell me, how many Christians do you hear boasting of their weaknesses compared to the Christians who boast – or at least obviously hope you will notice – their strengths?

Now, I say again, to ward off a possible misunderstanding, that Peter is not in any way diminishing the reality and the severity and the weight of the suffering that Christians must endure for the sake of their loyalty to Jesus Christ. The Bible is a book of deep feeling and spends a great deal of its space acknowledging the anguish that life metes out to even the most godly and devout man or woman. The Bible *never* trivializes human pain! It never tells us just to get over it, to buck up. And the Bible is candid about how much pain there will be!

So, no one should read Peter to mean that Sudanese Christians should surrender their children to Islamic militia with a smile; that they shouldn’t be devastated at the thought of their children undergoing forced conversions to Islam, to be sold into slavery, and suffer even worse fates. That this may be a participation in the suffering of Christ hardly makes it any less suffering, any less tragic, any less horrific. Peter’s idea is much more profound and theologically complex. It is not wearing a smile to a funeral. He is not speaking of “joy” as an emotional state of exhilaration. He is speaking of “rejoicing” as an act of theological conviction, as a certainty in life upon which one may stand and find strength and solace in the midst of darkness and even despair. Peter uses “rejoice” precisely for its shock value, for the power of the very idea that anyone should have cause to rejoice when life comes crashing down upon one’s head.

It is in this way that the same thing is said of the Lord, who, we read in Hebrews 12:3, endured the cross “for the joy that was set before him.” That certainly doesn’t mean that he was laughing and smiling as he hung on the cross. We know he was not! We know of both the agonies of his soul and the wracking pain of his body both at the cross and, even before, in anticipation of it. When the great hymn *My Song is Love Unknown* was added to the second edition of *Trinity Hymnal* several lines of Samuel Crossman’s poetry were altered. One of the lines read:

A murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay,
Yet *cheerful* he to suff’ring goes that he his foes from thence might free.

In *Trinity Hymnal* it reads:

A murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay.
Yet *willing* he to suff’ring goes, that he his foes from thence might free.

Obviously, the editors thought that you would think that we were singing that the Lord tripped his way to the cross with a smile on his face. So, they changed “cheerful” to “willing.” But this pedantry killed the power of the poetry, the same power we have here when Peter says to *rejoice* in our sufferings. The crucifixion was terrible suffering, but Jesus went to it with joy *with a capital “J”* because he knew what was to issue from this terrible suffering on his part.

In the same way we read of Moses in Hebrews 11:26: how he “regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking forward to his reward.” We might have just as well read there that Moses *rejoiced* in the disgrace for the sake of Christ. He could have evaded the suffering, but at what cost? He could have lived a comfortable life in the Egyptian court, but then what would he have missed, what a great work, a world changing work, would he have failed to do. Tell me now that Moses thinks he should have stayed at court and lived a more comfortable life! We know that those days of his flight from Egypt and his exile to Midian, following forty years at the center of the Egyptian court, were not happy days in the ordinary sense of the term. But, they were days of joy in this deeper, firmer, mightier sense, for they were days when Moses’ faith was being proved, when he was laying hold of the world to come, when God was proving himself a present Helper and Protector, and when he was bearing witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Christian life is a great adventure and great adventures always include dangers and difficulties.

Now, to be sure, there is a sense in which, and there are times when, under the sway of the Holy Spirit and in a period of triumphant faith, Christian people really will rejoice and be glad – with the most intense emotion – in the midst of persecution *and precisely because of persecution*. Think of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem, and the apostles among them, who were flogged by the authorities for preaching Christ and salvation through his name, and who left the Sanhedrin, we read in Acts 5:41 “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name.” There, I don’t think the joy is joy *with a capital “J”*; it is rather the joy of theological conviction; I don’t think they were high-fiving one another that their lives had been brought to this glorious pass, that they were actually serving the growing, the exploding kingdom of God by the beatings and the imprisonment that they were undergoing.

Or think of Charles Simeon, the young, gangly, awkward, and intensely shy young minister, who had been thrust by a believing bishop upon an unbelieving and unwelcoming congregation in Cambridge, England. The people hated and mocked their new minister for the message he preached, locked their rented pews and forced the few people who came to services to stand around the edges of the church while Simeon from his pulpit looked out over empty space. College students thought it great fun to disrupt his services by making noise throughout; young toughs accosted him in the street. And he was not the sort of young man yet who could handle this without tremendous emotional pain.

“When I was an object of much contempt and derision in the university,” Simeon wrote, ‘I strolled forth one day, buffeted and afflicted with my little Testament in my hand. I prayed earnestly to my God that he would comfort me with some cordial from His Word, and that on opening the book I might find some text which would sustain me... The first text which caught my eye was this: “They found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name; him they compelled to bear his cross.” You know Simon is the same name as Simeon. What a word of instruction was here – what a blessed hint for my encouragement! To have the Cross laid upon me, that I might bear it after Jesus –

what a privilege! It was enough, now I could leap and sing for joy as one whom Jesus was honouring with a participation in his sufferings... I henceforth bound persecution as a wreath of glory round my brow.” [In Hopkins, 81]

But Peter is not talking primarily about that kind of triumphant emotion in persecution. He is talking about a joy that believers can have even in the midst of the most miserable and heartbreaking suffering and loss that is visited upon them on account of their following Jesus Christ. That is the remarkable thing about what Peter says. It is a mysterious thing. Remember, Peter has already referred to it in chapter 1 of this same letter as “an inexpressible joy” and has said that they rejoice with such a joy *even if they have been grieved by various trials*. How is it possible to grieve and rejoice at the same time? Only a Christian knows! It is a profound and mysterious thing, this joy; but it is also an absolutely real, indestructible, and transforming of our outlook on life because it is founded upon the most glorious and transcendent realities. Thousands upon thousands and tens of thousands of Christians through the ages would tell you today what Peter wrote then – that this joy in the midst of terrible pain is absolutely real. So, the great hymn:

If I find him, if I follow, what his guerdon [reward] here?
Many a sorrow, many a labor, many a tear.

If I still hold closely to him, what hath he at last?
Sorrow vanquished, labor ended, Jordan passed.

Finding, following, keeping, struggling, is he sure to bless?
Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, answer “Yes!”

What Peter is saying here, what his argument is, is that the Christian faith is *true!* You cannot rejoice in trials such as befall you because you are a Christian, *unless it be true:* 1) that God is in direct control of this world and that these sufferings also are under his control and so are his purpose for your life and the life of others; perfect wisdom has appointed this trial for you; God has a plan and that plan must be good because it is God’s plan; 2) that he loves his people with an unchangeable love; he hasn’t stopped loving you because you’re suffering, but has appointed the trial *because* he loves you; 3) that in Christ there is forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the heaven; 4) that this life is followed for the one who believes in Jesus Christ with a life so much better, happier, and more glorious than we are able to conceive; our trials are for a moment; our joy is forever; and 5) that God the Father will not fail to reward with his smile and with his blessing those who suffer for the sake of his Son, who love his Son and will not betray him even when their faithfulness to him costs them dearly. You cannot say that death is better by far as Paul does when he was threatened with death by the Roman government for his Christian faith, unless it is true that for a Christian is better to die and be with the Lord in heaven than it is to continue to live in this world! But if it is true, then the conclusion is inevitable: affliction, persecution, even death are matters concerning which Christians can rejoice in this deeper sense.

For Peter to tell these Christians what he told them, about rejoicing in their sufferings, was his most powerful way of reminding them that a Christian’s outlook on life must be fundamentally different from that of unbelievers precisely because of the mighty things he or she knows to be true! It would be entirely wrong, deceitful, and unkind to summon people to rejoice in the terrible woes which many of them had suffered and would suffer unless what Peter gives them to believe about those woes and their meaning is true. Unless it really is true that when Christians suffer for their faith they

are sharing, participating in the sufferings that their Savior suffered for them and for their salvation. Unless it really is the case that the opposition that fell upon him is now falling upon them. Unless it really is true that such suffering is the proof that they are in Christ and have his salvation as a present and future possession; that God is with them now and they shall be with God forever. Unless it is true that a genuine faith – that is, a faith that stands up even under intense pressure – will take a man or woman to heaven in due time, to a world where every tear shall be wiped away, and there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain. Unless it is true that for the unbeliever, suffering in this world is simply prelude to more suffering in the world to come.

If those things are not true it is cruel beyond reason to urge people to suffer if they might somehow avoid it. There is enough suffering in the world as it is. But those things *are* true, absolutely, indefectibly true. And no one in the world knew that more certainly than did the big fisherman. He had seen Jesus in the flesh, the miracles he performed. He had seen him transfigured, with the divine glory upon him that night on the mountain long before. He had seen Jesus die; he saw him alive again on the third day. He had seen him ascend to heaven and just before had heard him say both that he was coming again to take his people to heaven and that he would be with his people always until returned. And he could himself remember the sound of the Savior's voice in the Upper Room, that fateful night before the crucifixion, when he spoke of going to his Father's house to prepare places for his people, and how he had said "If it were not true, I would have told you."

No, brothers and sisters, Peter knew things to be true that absolutely must change the way we look at suffering, especially suffering for our faith, that absolutely require – not just make possible but require – that we should rejoice when we participate in the sufferings of Christ. For there is nothing in all the world that is more wonderful than to know that I share, that you share and will forever share in the salvation of Jesus Christ, and nothing better demonstrates that than a faith that suffers, a faith that stands up to pain for Jesus' sake. Pass that test, by the grace of God, and enter into the joy of the Lord!

Hugh MacKail was one of the martyrs of the covenant in 17th century Scotland. He was not only executed for his unwillingness to be unfaithful to his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, but was tortured first in hopes that he would reveal secrets about his fellow covenanters. They used "The Boot," an iron case that enclosed the leg and knee. Then an iron wedge was driven between the iron casing and the knee. Eleven times the wedge was hammered home, but no betrayal came from his lips, until the leg was smashed and ruined. He was hung a few days later and he died, as those men and women did – full of grace and truth – in the strength their faith in Christ gave them. The Lord kept his promise and the Holy Spirit gave MacKail many grand things to say from the gallows. And he lies now in that corner of Greyfriars church yard that was reserved for criminals, awaiting the resurrection at the coming of Jesus Christ with a number of the other covenanter martyrs who were laid by his side.

Hugh MacKail had a cousin, Matthew, who was a doctor and like his suffering cousin a devout Christian. He spent Hugh's final night on earth with him in the prison. Matthew actually jumped up to grab his cousin's jerking legs when he was hung so that death might come easier and sooner. After Hugh was dead, Matthew asked for and received his martyr cousin's black haircloth coat from the hangman. He wore that coat until years later it literally fell to pieces. I want every one of us in this room to have a coat to leave behind for some godly, tender-hearted, heaven-seeking cousin or friend or son or daughter to wear – to wear to help them remember that there is no greater privilege in life, no greater honor than to participate in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Anyone who

remembers *that* will go far in this life!