



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 1 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

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Message Title: If You Share in the Sufferings of Christ, You Are Blessed Pt. 1

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Probably around the first half of my life, I would say I was highly involved in sports, and I learned a lot about myself through that. One of the things I learned is if I have a choice, I'd much rather be on the field playing than in the stands watching. I also learned that for me, it wouldn't be enough just to wear the uniform on the sideline. I want to be in the game. That's especially true if it's an epic battle, where we're going to be bruised, we're going to be bloodied, we're going to be exhausted, we're all going to come together, ultimately, to share the victory! If that's what it's going to be on the field, I want in! If you've used sports as kind of a metaphor for life, I think that's kind of true for me in how I want to live my life. I don't want to be a spectator. I don't want to just wear the uniform and have a ticket to Heaven. If there's going to be an epic battle, count me in!

I think if Peter were with us, he would say, "Me too!" As a matter of fact, Peter went so far as to say he would actually rejoice if he was found worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. What exactly did he mean by that? Well that's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Peter, Chapter 4. Chapter 4 is kind of a change in tone in Peter's letter. He's talked about how to live strategically in order to minimize unnecessary conflict, in order to maintain maximum freedom for the sake of the Gospel. But it is possible that if we follow that strategy, we just become more effective, which just angers the critics more, which can actually lead to more intense opposition and even persecution. It does appear that's what is happening with these churches that Peter is writing to. There's a shift in Chapter 4 to much more discussion about persecution, and we know from history that is what awaits both Peter and these churches. So, we pick it up in Chapter 4, verse 12:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. (*1 Peter 4:12-13)

Do not be surprised...that word surprised is the same word we had earlier in Chapter 4, verse 4. It carries the idea of not just surprise, but as if this is strange, as if this is odd—even some level of offense. So, if you think when you trusted Christ as Savior you boarded a cruise ship—nice little ride on The Love Boat—and now people are shooting at you, you're surprised; you're shocked. This is strange; this is odd; it's even kind of offensive to you. "I've paid a lot of money for my journey on The Love Boat! What's the deal with people shooting?" But what Peter is saying is when you trusted Christ, you didn't board The Love Boat; you boarded a battleship. We talked about that last week. So, don't consider it strange. You shouldn't be surprised at the

fiery ordeal. Now there are a couple of different views on fiery ordeal. Some think it's actually a literal statement. We do know that at some point in time, Nero began burning Christians at the stake. He would cover them with pitch; he would actually light them and use them as torches in his gardens. Whether or not that has begun at this point or not is debated, but some think that Peter is making a literal reference to that.

But it's also true that throughout the New Testament this fiery language is often used in regard to persecution. It's metaphoric language. Basically, it's to capture the idea of a refining fire that is used to refine precious metals. In the refining process the fire brings the dross—the impurities—to the surface; they are cleaned away, and what remains is the pure gold. That's probably the more likely reference here. So, it's the idea that trials, persecutions and struggles are a purifying process that brings the impurities out; they're scraped away and what remains is the pure gold. The idea of testing isn't so much a test to see if you are in or out; it's much more the idea of revealing or exposing. So, the refining process doesn't make the gold; it reveals the gold. It brings the dross up; it's removed, and what is revealed or exposed is the pure gold. That's probably what Peter is talking about there.

As though some strange thing were happening to you—basically the idea is that this should not come as a surprise. This isn't strange. There are a couple of ways to think about this. One is that Peter, John and the other apostles heard this directly out of the mouth of Jesus Himself. As a matter of fact, Peter's buddy John, his fellow apostle, writes in his letter—1 John Chapter 3, vs. 13—"Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you." Very similar language and almost identical to the language of Jesus in the upper room, hours before He was arrested, when He said to these men, "The world hated Me. They're going to hate you. The world persecuted Me. They're going to persecute you." So, Peter is saying, "This shouldn't be a surprise. This has been clear from the beginning. This is an epic spiritual battle, and what's at stake are the eternal souls of the people around us."

Another way to think about it, though, if we're going to go back to this athletic metaphor, is you just don't leave the bleachers—the stands—and walk through the gate and go onto the field and play. It's not like that. There is this long, hard, process of getting in shape, getting beat up, getting bruised, feeling the pain, learning, growing, getting to the point where you're finally ready to go in. It's kind of the idea that if we're going to be serious about being players in this epic battle, there's a necessary purifying process to burn away the impurities, the distractions, and ultimately to refine the gold that makes us more useful to the Master. That's kind of the idea there.

Verse 13:

...but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory [which means the return of Christ] you may rejoice with exultation. [Rejoice with great joy.]

So, what is Peter talking about here? He's talking about what it means to be counted worthy, to suffer for the cause of Christ, to share in the sufferings of Christ. There's an interesting story in

Acts 5. Let me just read you a little bit of that. Basically, in Acts, Chapter 5, the apostles are preaching the Gospel; people are responding; the church is exploding; it's threatening to the religious leaders, so they want the apostles arrested. They're arrested; they're threatened. They enter into this discussion. Gamaliel, one of them, comes forth and says, "Hey, here's the deal: if this Jesus story is true, you can't stop it. If it's not true, it will die out, so maybe just let them go." The religious leaders think that's good advice, so they flog the apostles—which would have been an incredibly painful experience—and turn them loose, basically threatening them, "You need to be quiet, or else." That's where we pick it up in Acts 5:

And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So, they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (*Acts 5:40-42)

So, Peter has a lot of credibility as he writes these words. This isn't a theologian in a seminary, passing down ivory-tower advice. This is Peter, who has been in the trenches. He has suffered persecution, imprisonment, pain and suffering for the cause of Christ. He doesn't become angry and embittered. He's not surprised by this. He actually considers it a privilege to have been considered worthy to suffer for the name of Christ, to share in the sufferings of Christ.

It's also worth remembering this is the same Peter that denied Christ on the night He was arrested. Without a doubt, that has to be the absolute worst moment in the life of Peter. He was absolutely miserable and even after he was convinced that Jesus rose from the dead, he was also convinced that he was certainly off the team—John 21, he's back to fishing. Jesus has to show up and issue Peter a recall. Peter experienced the terrible pain of this denial and now he's got his game face on; he's in a completely different frame of mind, and if there's going to be action, he wants to be in the middle of it. And, if he is found worthy by Jesus to share in the sufferings and to be persecuted for the cause of Christ, he actually rejoices! It's the idea that he wants to be in the middle of the action and give everything he has for the cause of Christ. Basically, what Peter then says is, until the return of Christ—that glorious moment—it's going to be an all-out celebration. He wants to be part of it, knowing he was on the field, in the action, giving everything, he had to accomplish the mission.

So, again, taking this back to kind of an athletic or sports metaphor, imagine the team makes it to the championship and all that's involved to get there. It's an epic battle. Players come away bruised, beaten up, exhausted, but at the final gun they emerge victorious. There's now going to be some sort of a parade, some sort of a celebration. What Peter is saying is, "In that moment, I don't want to just be a fan. I don't want to just have worn the uniform and stood on the sideline while the team won the battle." In order to enter into the fullness of the celebration, he's saying, "I want to be in the mix. I want to be bruised; I want to be bleeding; I want to be exhausted. I want to know that I gave everything I had to be part of the victory when we celebrate this magnificent victory at the return of Christ." Verse 14:

If you are reviled [the word means verbally abused] for the name of Christ, you are blessed [it's a word that means happy - you're happy], because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Basically what Peter is saying in verse 14 is if you're abused, persecuted for the name of Christ, you are to be happy, you're to rejoice, not because you like to be abused and mistreated—that would be strange—but because there is this epic battle going on that involves Christ, the Spirit of glory, and God the Father. In the very beginning of Peter—Chapter 1, verse 2—we were told that this mission involves God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit—all members of the Trinity—engaged in this epic battle. That's basically what Peter's coming back to here. That stands for the name of Christ, upon Him is the Spirit of glory and God the Father, so all three members of the Trinity are engaged in this epic battle, ultimately for the victory and the glory of God.

One of the challenges we probably have as Americans is just trying to sort out this concept of persecution. The text isn't just talking about suffering in any general sense; it's specifically talking about persecution for the cause of Christ. We as Americans have really experienced very little of that. You know, we're not just talking about somebody who says something hurtful on social media, or that somebody at work ignores us, or somebody at school makes fun of us. We're talking about real persecution. Many of these people receiving this letter would ultimately be persecuted—imprisoned; many would die for the cause of Christ. Peter, shortly after writing 1 and 2 Peter, would be crucified upside down for the cause of Christ.

It's also sobering to realize that through the last 2000 years, most Christians have suffered some level of persecution. Many of our brothers and sisters today suffer extreme persecution for the cause of Christ—many of them put to death. Generally speaking, that has not been true - it's been very different - for us as Christians in America, but I think there also has to be this understanding that we have fundamentally changed as a nation. I've been saying this now for years. We're not talking about one or two election cycles, and everything will be like it was. It won't be. We have fundamentally changed at our core. Whether or not we can find our way back is up for debate. But the reality is there are a lot of hints that the winds of change are upon us, and it's naive to think that there won't be a day where Christians in America will be persecuted.

Arnie: Bryan, I would agree that our culture has changed tremendously. We see that in the past 10 years there's been quite a big distancing from the Christian faith. Now inside of that, you'll have groups like Barna and Pew and they all say that yes, that may be true, that there's this growing of vast groups of people moving away from Christ, but the core of Christianity is actually getting stronger, and that the people that are in this core have stronger beliefs than they even had 10 years ago. So, it's kind of a confusing double trend. So, on one side, the people inside it are stronger, but on the outside, culturally people are moving away. And would you see that as a good trend or bad trend? How would you read that?

Bryan: Hmmm. Well, obviously you're the research expert. As a pastor, the sorting out of the Cultural Christians from the true followers of Christ, to me is a good and necessary thing. I think

a lot of the things that people really dislike about Christians has to do with the people that call themselves Christians, but their lives don't necessarily reflect that. So, if there's a separating of the two groups, I would see that as a good trend.

Cara: It's a great testimony that instead of becoming angry, bitter, and vengeful about persecution, Peter actually considers that a privilege. I'm sure this is sort of sorting out the prosperity message versus, you know, that the cruise ship - battleship. People might say that was Peter. He was one of the disciples. He walked with Christ. He experienced all these things with Him. I am not as strong as Peter. I don't think, I don't know if - I think this is a great concern of mine - what if I'm never able to, when faced with what, I mean, he was crucified upside-down, Bryan.

Bryan: Yeah. So, we remember Peter's a man. Yeah. And he had his failures and struggles, but he was also committed to Christ and Jesus radically changed his life. And you've had martyrs all through history that were amazing. They're just ordinary people that believed and God did amazing things through them. So, it's not a try harder religion, it's a Christ in you transformation. So, I have no doubt when the time comes that the true followers will find their strength and power in Christ and will rise to the occasion. That's been true for 2000 years. It's true right now in lots of places in the world and I think it will be true of the true followers of Christ today.

Arnie: Bryan, when you said it comes to faith, you said you'd much rather be on the field playing than in the stands watching. And I know both you and I have had some health issues and we've been kind of forced to sit on the bench. So, you have this strong desire to get back in the game but talk about your struggle with that. Sometimes you actually get benched though. How do you handle all of that?

Bryan: Yeah. So, I guess it's how you define terms. I don't want to be a spectator and I don't want to be sitting on the bench watching, right? I'm a "put me in coach" kind of guy and if I'm beat up and bruised and bleeding at the end of the game, it's like I'm fine with that. I gave it my all. So when I'm benched, part of that, you know - think about things we've been talking about in First Peter - for whatever reason, if God allows that, he's going to use that in some way to reveal something either to grow me or to the people around me. So, it's not like I'm being benched and not part of the game. It's just a different strategic role. And I have to trust God with that because honestly, I can't do anything about it.

You know, my dad was an incredibly talented musician who ended up confined to a bed, couldn't use his hands, his arms. It's like, how does that make sense? You have to trust God that he's up to something and he's going to use that. But honestly, I'd rather be on the field getting beat up than standing on the sidelines watching.

Cara: That's when I'm feeling very stir-crazy and I realize that's where I'm supposed to be. You know, getting in the Word. I'm just filling up all my battle supplies and putting it all together. But you gave great advice to me not too long ago of when I'm feeling stir crazy, to get into someone else's battle with them. I think that was very helpful advice for me, is that I can get into someone else's fire and help them out in that.

Bryan: That's great.

Cara: Yeah. Arnie, I'm glad God isn't asking me to go too far out of my comfort zone, but you've been all over the world. So, can you tell us what Back to the Bible's doing across the pond?

Arnie: Well, you know, the world is vastly changing and it's not as friendly to Christ followers as it once used to be. Places we've had all over the world where I could travel pretty openly, now it's starting to close up. I mean even big places like India and things like that. And one place in particular I think about. I have heroes of the faith - and there's times when I wish I could take you and Bryan and our listeners overseas, and you can meet some of these people - like Lokneth who recently retired from Nepal. He spent years in jail and what he did in jail was write music, Christian music, Christian tunes. He's kind of a folk artist in Nepal, just the gentlest, most wonderful person, Christ follower on fire for Jesus, but had been persecuted so much. And it's almost hard to imagine what these people live with on a daily basis. And are they like Debbie Downers? No. They are the most positive, on fire people, and maybe it's because like Bryan, they're in the game, they're getting bloody, they're getting beat up and maybe that's much more inspiring, than when you live in a land of comfort and the goal is just to be comfortable. So, you're fighting two battles. In the U.S., we're trying to get you out of being so comfortable and making a stand for Jesus and become a disciple maker. There, our battle is arming and equipping the disciple makers that are on fire for Jesus and ready to pay the price. They just don't have resources that we have. And listeners, that's where we ask you at times to join us in this battle.

Bryan: I think a lot of people would be surprised to know there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than the previous 19 centuries combined.

Arnie: Yeah, combined.

Bryan: It's the best kept secret out there.

Cara: When you see the numbers. Yeah, there's more people now than ever.

Bryan: It's staggering.

Cara: The most persecuted group.