

Imitators in Suffering

1 Peter 4:1-11

This year I am living in an apartment style building on campus at the University of Northwestern in St. Paul, and I have had what you might call a unique rooming situation. I say this for many different reasons, but one of them is that one of my roommates, like all of us at times, particularly likes to complain. Whether its friends or school or grocery shopping or cooking or cleaning or slow internet, it seems like there is usually something to complain about. And at the end of a bout of complaining, he will usually make a noise that is a cross between a sigh and a whimper and say, “Life is sooooooooooooo hard.”

As challenging as it is sometimes to endure all the complaining, I think my roommate is on to something. In a lot of ways, this passage is Peter’s way of saying that life is really hard. No matter which way you cut it, life “in the flesh,” or the life we all live in this age, includes much suffering. And, ironically, where most religions seek to alleviate suffering, Christianity involves a special type of suffering, which is exemplified in Christ. However, this isn’t where Peter leaves us. Life is really hard and it involves a lot of suffering, but the suffering of the Christian is full of hope and works toward a glorious end. In short, Peter in this passage gives us one simple instruction:

Embrace suffering as Christ did because you have the hope that Christ gives.

In order to say this, Peter gives us a primary instruction and then the two major ways that we live this instruction out. So, the overarching instruction is this:

1. Arm yourself with the knowledge that Christ had. (v.1-2)

This instruction sounds really good, but it isn’t exactly self-explanatory, is it. For us to understand it, we need to understand how the sentence, which has many parts, is set up.

(Ground) Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh The important question for us to ask here is “Why is this a solid ground.” Christ suffered in the flesh. So what? Great question. We will come back to it after we get through the whole sentence. On this solid ground Peter lays his central instruction

(Command) Arm yourselves in the same way of thinking. Next the reader might ask themselves, “For what reason would I do this?” so he provides an explanation for the instruction

(Explanation) For whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin Well, the reader says, that makes sense, but what is the purpose of all this? What am I trying to achieve?

(Purpose) so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

Let’s look at each of these pieces briefly. First, the ground. The author goes to special lengths in the original language to emphasize that our passage is founded on Christ, namely his suffering as described in the passage above. And why is this a good grounding? Well, because Christ is the

ultimate sufferer. Through Scripture, we see many characters taking the role of one who suffers even though they don't deserve it. The righteous sufferer. Some examples would be Noah, Joseph, Job, Ruth, David, Uriah, Bathsheba, Bathsheba's first son, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many others. But none of them suffered like Jesus. Rather than being mostly righteous or flawed but faithful, Jesus was perfectly faithful. And rather than suffering on behalf of some evil or some unrighteous people, Jesus suffered on behalf of all sin, as it says in verse 18 above. And look at how it turned out for him. His suffering did not, in the end, drive him down, it raised him up. His bold obedience in the face the most severe suffering imaginable placed him at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers having been subject to him.

So, Peter implies, none of you could possibly suffer as bad as Jesus, but even if you did, it would not be your loss but your gain, because Jesus showed that the opportunity to suffer righteously is blessing, not curse. If, that is, if you actually choose to suffer in the same way that Jesus did.

Now the command makes a lot of sense. We all know that suffering is a part of life on this earth. That is evident. The privilege of being a Christian is that we get to choose what we will suffer for and how we will endure that suffering. As Peter has said and will say again, we are to suffer for doing good. We are to live righteous lives, and in doing so we choose the suffering that those lives encounter. So that is what we suffer for, but how are we to do it? By what method are we to endure suffering? We are to do it by thinking how Christ thought. But what does this mean? I think that our purpose statement reveals the key to the mindset of Christ in his suffering.

(Purpose) so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

The point of arming ourselves with the mindset of Christ is that we might live for the will of God and not for ourselves. But what does this have to do with suffering? Look to the explanation above.

(Explanation) For whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin

When Peter says suffered in the flesh he is connecting back to the ground in Christ, who ultimately suffered in the flesh. So he is saying here whoever suffers in the same way that Christ suffered, has ceased from, or broken from sin. Now we are getting to the heart of this passage, and it is very good news; we don't have to sin anymore. Let me explain.

The passage from last week shows us that Christ placed the highest priority on obedience even in his suffering. He knew that God had a plan, and he knew that it included his own ultimate suffering. But the knowledge that Christ had was that nothing he could endure could possibly even come close to the ugly awfulness of sin. In the mind of Christ, no suffering could compare to the suffering of sin, so he came to earth and suffered the pain that is life on this earth and not in heaven. He emptied himself of the privileges of heaven, he stooped low and washed feet, he carried a cross then hung on it, he died. And he did all this for the sake of obedience. But Peter wants us to know that it was not just his own obedience he suffered for.

Christ's obedience did not just keep him from the awfulness of sin, it delivered humanity from it, so that now, if we recognize that sin is terrible and destructive and the worst imaginable thing, we can spend the rest of the time we have in this life then all of eternity living not for human desires, but the

will of God. We will suffer, but because of what Christ has done, the prize for our suffering is freedom from sin increasingly in this life and perfectly into eternity. Yes, life is so hard, but the gospel of Jesus Christ, our suffering Savior is sooooooo good. For the Christian, the worldly suffering of this life produces increased freedom from that which we know is true suffering, the power of sin.

In the rest of the passage, Peter lays out the two kinds of suffering that are unique to the Christian life and teaches us how to embrace as Christ did: the suffering of rejecting sin, and the suffering of obedience in a disobedient world.

2. Embrace the suffering of resisting the works of the past by looking past physical death. (v.3-6)

Those who know Christ know the challenge of resisting sin. It surrounds us daily and, though we know how truly horrible it is, there is still something inside us that is drawn to it. Such suffering is only experienced by Christians, because everyone else just chooses the sin and asks us why we are so uptight. To this Peter says v.3-6.

This whole statement from Peter is meant to point out the irony of the situation. First, when he says, “the time that is past suffices for doing what the gentiles want to do, he means about the same thing as a mother who tells her back-talking child “I’ve had about enough of your sass.” Of course, this does not mean that there has been just the perfect amount of sass. It means that there has been way to much sass. So Peter is saying that the time for indulging human passions for unrestricted sexual pleasure and unlimited consumption of mind-numbing drink and unguided worship of false gods is gone. Christ has made a new and better way and those purely earthly, sinful activities have no place.

But ironically, it surprises those who are still stuck in their sin that we would abstain from these things. It is shocking to most people that I, a healthy 20 year old male going to college, would choose to not go party on my Friday nights. It is astonishing to the world that many of men and women in this room have only ever been with their spouse. Young men who don’t look at pornography are like unicorns in the world today. People who abstain from sin are utterly confusing to the world we live in. So how does the world respond? It judges. It calls the church stuffy and oppressive. It accuses us of wrong doing because we have violated their warped sensibilities in choosing to resist their flood of debauchery. They look at Christians who are sick or poor or even dead and say, “What good has this morality done them?” So, our suffering is multiplied. Not only do we struggle through the tension of putting to death what is earthly in us, we are ridiculed and attacked for it. Such was the situation in Peter’s day, and so it is in ours.

However, there is great irony here which he points out. The unbelievers around us put themselves in a place of judgement, but it is they who will be judged. In fact all of us will be judged, and not by the standard of warped sensibilities but by the judge of chapter 1:17 who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds and judges the living and the dead. This judge, according to Contrary to what this world may think, death is not the end of the line. As verse 6 informs us, physical death is only a flesh-level judgement, just like the sufferings of this world are flesh-level sufferings, and it has no bearing on whether or not one is alive in the spirit. In the insignificant physical judgement of death, a believer may appear to be condemned, but in the weighty final judgement of the Lord, they will be found living and well. And this is the ultimate irony of this section. The unbeliever thinks that he is experiencing true life and mocks the believer for living in fear

of some God and eventually dying, but it is the believer who knows true life and has no fear of the physical death that drives the unbeliever into more death-earning sin.

This passage holds so much hope for us. It may look as though Christianity is under attack and Christians are no better off than the rest of the world, but things are not as they appear. The flesh-level sufferings that we experience that end in flesh-level death do not damage the spirit-level life that Christ has bought for us. The Lord brought the gospel into our hearts so that in the midst of ridicule and suffering and death, though we are judged in the flesh the way people are, we might live in the spirit the way God does. So do not be discouraged by the flesh-level judgement you are encountered with. Chapter 1:18-19 assure us that those who are covered with the precious blood of Christ are ransomed from the futility of sin, so persist in obedience with the mindset of Christ and look to the final judgement. This is how we endure the hardship of resisting sin in this unbelieving world.

3. Embrace the suffering of persisting in love by looking past this age. (v.7-11)

In verse 7, Peter draws some stark contrasts from the last 3 verses. Where the time for living in sin as the unbelievers do is well past and over with, the end of all things is just up ahead. Where the unbeliever prioritizes their own fleeting passions with a life marked by licentiousness and intoxication, the believer is to prioritize prayer by living with self-control and maintaining a sober mind. With this contrast Peter introduces an almost entirely opposite variety of suffering. The suffering of the last section was at the hand of unbelievers on account of resisting sinful action, but the suffering of this section is at the hand of each believer's residual worldliness and is suffered on

account of persisting in love. Though the life if the believer is beautiful and the reward for loving earnestly as Christ has loved us is great, it is suffering, because it necessarily involves the slow, painful death of our sinfulness. Jackie Hill-Perry points asks this: if Christ, our example in suffering, died the most agonizing drawn out death available in his day, why would we expect the death of our sinful desires to be quick and easy? We would not! Peter is gently but clearly telling us that a life of obedience is a crucifixion, not a walk in the park.

Before we get into verses 8-11, which discuss the key ingredients to a life of obedience, there are a few things to notice in verse 7. First, the motivation. Be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. This is the very same motivation Peter used to encourage husbands to be understanding of their wives: relationship with the Lord. Without self-control and sober minds, we cannot commune with the Lord in prayer, and we will not want to. We have a lifeline to the Father in prayer and we forsake it when we choose to live uncontrolled, intoxicated lives. I think self-control is talked about in churches much more than sober-mindedness, so I want to discuss it a little bit.

Sober-mindedness has already showed up in Peter, and it will again, so let's think about it. In the original language, our word here literally means sober, but often times it is used to describe a spiritual state. Be spiritually sober. I think the point of the imagery is that this condition has to do with what we put into our hearts in the same way that physical sobriety has to do with what has recently been put into the body. Is the intake of our heart clouding our view of reality? Does it make it seem like maybe obedience isn't that important because the end it far off? Or does it keep us sharp and on the edge of our seats?

The most important tip Peter gives us for maintaining spiritual sobriety is found in 1:13. Therefore, preparing your

minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. What keeps us sharp and clear-eyed? Feasting on the hope of the Christian life, which is the grace that Jesus will give you when he comes back again, which is eternity in sweet communion with him without the interruptions of sin and suffering. Jesus is coming back, and he is going to drown us in a flood of grace so massive and overwhelming that it will make the flood of debauchery from verse 4 look like a little tiny trickle. So feast on the beautiful, vision sharpening, balance steadying, thought clearing glimpses of God found in Scripture. In every story and parable and command and rebuke and law and prophecy there is a nugget of hope in the return of Jesus Christ that will stir you up and push you forward through whatever gauntlet of Christian suffering that lies ahead. Friends, the end of all things is at hand. It's right in front of our faces; it will be here at any moment. And right on the other side is an eternity of basking in the presence of a beautiful, perfect, risen Lord who suffered that we might share in his perfection. So be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your relationship with him. This suffering is temporary. That joy is eternal and we are right on it's doorstep.

When you are in that sober-minded, self-controlled state, living a life of disobedience will be as unthinkable to you as it was for Christ, so Peter gives us some guidelines for obedience. First and foremost, keep loving one another earnestly, because love covers a multitude of sin. Earnest love doesn't cover sin like whiteout, pretending the sin isn't there. It covers the sin like an umbrella covers a wet person. It keeps them out of the way of more sin and helps them grow in holiness. It gives them a chance to get dry without pretending that they aren't wet. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. Easy to say, but so hard to do, especially when the

act of hospitality is inconvenient. But remember, any inconvenience is better than disobedience. Next, Peter says, God's grace is diverse and far-reaching, so everyone use the gracious gifts he has given to serve. Don't flex your strengths like a body builder, use them to carry other's to the Lord as Christ has carried us to him. If God has gifted you at speaking, don't speak your own words, airing your opinions and boasting with your knowledge, speak the words of God. Quiet your heart and listen to Him, that he might use you to speak to others. In whatever way you serve, don't deceive yourself into thinking that you are offering something to God that he did not have. Serve with the gift of strength that he has granted to you and that you may pass on to others. All of these things will be challenging. Loving the unlovable can hurt, but look ahead to what will come. Happily giving of yourself is wearisome, but it is not the end. Verse 11 reminds us of our why. In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. When we refuse to sin, even to the point of death, we declare to the world that death is powerless to defeat our Savior. When we give our time and our money and our homes and our lives without even counting the cost to love and serve and bless those who have not earned it, we join the eternal anthem of heaven that shouts, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain." Friends, our beloved Savior is almost here, usher him in with lives of radical obedience that proclaim, "Life is hard, but Jesus is so so good."

Communion Text: Luke 22:14-23