REJOICE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST

1 Peter 3:8–4:19

Key Verse: 4:13

“But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

When you suffer in some way, what do you do? Everybody suffers, but how we respond to it varies widely. When babies suffer, they cry loudly. There are people who are obsessed with removing any suffering whatsoever from their lives. When they suffer, some are totally paralyzed and feel utterly defeated. Throughout this letter Peter has been talking about suffering as a Christian, and in today’s passage he comes to a profound conclusion about it. He says we should rejoice to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Why does Peter say that? What does he mean? How can we really do that? May God open our hearts to accept his word personally today.

In the previous passage Peter taught mainly about Christian submission. He addressed citizens in a society, and slaves, wives and husbands in individual households. In today’s passage he addresses Christians in community with one another who all face a hostile world around them. It’s hard to live among people who don’t like us and even mistreat us. People face such a situation for many reasons. For some, it’s their race; for others, it’s their economic, educational or social class; for still others, it could be their common interests that make them different from most. In the case of Peter’s audience, it was their faith in Christ. Theirs was not just a nominal faith or a closet Christianity, which for many people is acceptable. Theirs was a faith lived out in real life. Such a faith inherently makes distinctions between the real followers of Christ and those who aren’t. As the famous book *Pilgrim’s Progress* illustrates, once we make a clear decision to follow Jesus, we’ll have the whole world against us. But unlike the book, we don’t have to go it all alone; we can live in community with other Christians who mutually support each another. It may be large or small, but such a community becomes like a refuge and power station that nurtures us to live out our faith in the real world. So twice in today’s passage Peter addresses suffering Christians living in community (3:8–12; 4:7–11).

Let’s look at the first case. Read 3:8. This is a summary of Peter’s teaching on Christian submission, but it applies to all believers especially as we relate to each other. These are character traits that should be obvious in any Christian’s life, but especially as we share life together. Why? Because these are the character traits of our Lord Jesus. Jesus is always sympathetic, loving, compassionate and humble. If we’re close to him, we’ll share these traits with him as we live with fellow believers (Php2:1,2). These traits make Christian community so beautiful and a place we really want to be, a place where we can know Christ better and really grow in him. But it doesn’t happen naturally; we need to be reminded to put these qualities into practice in our relationships with one another: Be like-minded, sympathetic, loving, compassionate and humble.

Peter goes on to mention one character trait that is particularly hard to practice, whether we’re with believers or non-believers. Read verse 9. This is actually based on the teachings of our Lord Jesus himself. He said, “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Lk6:27). In our fallen world it’s often seen as acceptable to tear people down verbally or get back at them if we feel hurt. But Peter says here in verse 9 that we are “called” to live this different way. It means it’s essential, and as a Christian there’s no escaping it. But it’s really not easy. When we’re insulted it’s so hard to keep quiet. What should we do? To help us, Peter quotes from Psalm 34:12–16. Read verses 10–12. This was a psalm of David when he was living among hostile Gentiles. He learned how important our speech is. We have to keep our tongue from evil and our lips from deceitful speech. We have to do good, seek peace and pursue it. And we do this especially in how we speak with people. It can be such a struggle, especially when people don’t respond to us in the same way. Making peace among people is especially hard. To have it, we have to search for it and work for it. Why do we have to live this way? Read verse 12 again. This describes God in a vivid way—with eyes, ears and a face. God is very much alive and able to respond to who we are and how we live. He can be pleased with us, or, displeased. As we live with people we should remember that God is always watching. As Peter said earlier, if we want God to listen to our prayers, we need to be Christ-like in how we’re treating the real people in our lives (cf. 3:7).

In verses 13–18 Peter goes on to discuss how we should live among non-believers. Read verse 13. Life among people can be scary sometimes, but we always should be eager to do good. It’s really the best way of living. It’s not guaranteed to have a good outcome, but generally, if we’re eager to do good, people won’t harm us. It’s when we do bad things that we tend to get harmed. Still, Peter’s audience seem to be scared of the people where they were living. Read verse 14. Suffering for doing good is a special blessing Peter talks about in this letter again and again (2:19,20; 3:14,17; 4:15,16). Here he especially emphasizes that in doing good we should fight against our fears. We human beings are all both good and evil. In our evil nature we don’t like those who do good. We see this in the Bible again and again. Joseph in Genesis was hated by his brothers for doing good. David was hated by King Saul. Our Lord Jesus was hated by the religious leaders. Apostle Paul was hated by both Jews and Gentiles. Why do people hate those who do good? Because it exposes their own evilness. It makes them uncomfortable with how they themselves are living. They threaten them and try to intimidate them to stop doing good. Peter tells us not to become afraid. He quotes from Isaiah 8:12, where God warns a king not to give in to fear of his enemies.

Who should we fear? Read verse 15. Instead of fearing people, we need to live in deep reverence for Christ. In Greek the word “revere” is literally to set apart as holy. Isaiah 8:13 says, “The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.” By quoting this passage Peter is teaching us to live with the greatest respect for Christ. The only way to really do that is to spend time in daily devotions. God’s word reminds us that Christ our Lord is living and holding us accountable for how we live each and every day. It also reminds us of his promises to us as we follow him. And through prayer we ask him to help us live for him, honor him and use our lives for his glory. We need to choose each day to live with Christ as our Lord, instead of trying to live as the lord of our own lives. The more aware we are that Christ is Lord, the less likely we are to be afraid of people.

We don’t have to always be talking about our faith to others, but we shouldn’t be afraid to speak up about it, either. When should we tell others about our faith? Read verse 15 again. It says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you.” People will ask? Yes, they’ll ask when they notice something different about our lives. Peter is again talking about lifestyle evangelism. When we’re always eager to do good, people will notice something different about us and some close to us may even start asking us questions about why we live like that. It’s called a teachable moment. It’s much more effective when the person actually asks, is actually interested in knowing.

The problem, Peter suggests, is that in some cases we won’t be prepared for such a moment. Why? Our minds can be distracted by other things. Or we can in that moment be at a spiritual low—tired, or depressed, or upset about something, or struggling with temptation. Peter is urging us not to miss the chance to share our faith with others. How can we always be prepared? Again it speaks to our devotional life. Through a devotional life each day we can be filled with the Spirit and draw spiritual strength. Our Lord Jesus said, “…for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Lk12:12; cf. Mt10:20; Mk13:11; Jn3:34; 14:26; 16:13).

But Peter does tell us what to talk about when people ask us about our faith. He says to focus on “the reason for the hope that you have.” It means that good living comes from the living hope we have in Jesus. Our Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and gave us new birth into a living hope—our eternal inheritance kept in heaven for us (1:3,4). When they ask us, we need to share with people that we believe Jesus was raised from the dead and gave us this incredible promise and hope. It may seem crazy, but it’s the only living hope and the only one worth living for. It’s a hope anyone can have in Jesus, if only they turn to him in faith.

And Peter tells us not just what to say, but how to say it. He says, “But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.” It’s always been easy for Christians to come off sounding to non-Christians like we’re bossy, self-righteous and condescending. It’s so important to have Christ’s gentleness when speaking with others, and to have genuine respect for people as human beings created in the image of God. It’s also so important to keep a clear conscience. It means basically not to be living a hypocritical, double life. It means to be depending on the blood of Jesus, because only his shed blood cleanses us from all our sin and enables us to serve God (1Jn1:7,9; Heb9:14). What happens when we talk to people in this way? Peter says, “…so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (16b). When we are gentle and respectful, even malicious people can be melted and led to repentance.

Peter comes back to his main theme. Read verse 17. He emphasizes here “if it is God’s will.” We don’t have to go out seeking suffering or provoking people to treat us badly. We just need to do good and focus on our Lord Jesus. We may suffer or we may not. But if we do suffer, we should realize that it’s better to suffer this way than to suffer for doing evil. And Peter also comes back to our main example, our Lord Jesus. Read verse 18. As Christ suffered to bring unrighteous people back to God, we should be willing to do so, too. We may feel like we’re being put to death in the body, but the Spirit will make us truly alive.

In verses 19–22 Peter goes on a tangent to tell us about the Risen Christ’s preaching to imprisoned spirits from Noah’s time. In Asia Minor, though the people were not Jewish or Christian, the story of Noah and the flood was very famous, because Mount Ararat was there. Peter mentions here how this story may help suffering Christians trying to witness there. It mainly tells us that Christ was totally victorious over all evil, and that we should encourage people to accept him and be baptized so that they can be saved from God’s judgment.

Then Peter comes back to his main theme of Christian suffering. Read 4:1,2. When we keep focused on Christ, who suffered in his body on the cross, it transforms our hearts, especially in the way we think about sin. Most people are looking for loopholes so that they can cheat, so that they can sin and still be okay with God. But as we think about how Christ suffered in his body to do away with our sin, it changes our attitude toward sinning. It moves us to want to live for the will of God the way our Lord Jesus did. If we’re still struggling with sinful desire, we need to think more about our Lord Jesus and his suffering on the cross.

Read verses 3,4. Living in a non-believing society Christians face intense social pressures to conform. People who have no hope basically live for pleasure. They use their precious free time and money to really party it up. Peter urges us not to go back to such a life, even if it means being made fun of. He urges us not to waste our precious lives in reckless, wild living. It’s so much better to live for the will of God; it makes life so much more meaningful and so much more useful in the world. Instead of envying such people, we should be aware of how God sees them. Read verse 5. We don’t have to judge people; we just need to be aware that God is their ultimate Judge. In verse 6 Peter says that even those who are now dead, meaning Christians who died, heard the gospel of Jesus so that, though they were judged by human standards, they could be made alive by the Spirit.

In thinking about social pressure, Peter comes back to the Christian community as our place of refuge and strength. Read verses 7–11. Our community should be a place where we can be made spiritually alert, of sober mind, and prayerful, a place where we can learn to love one another deeply and constantly, where we can offer willing hospitality, where we can use our gifts not to show off but to faithfully serve one another, whether in word or deed, and bring all glory not to ourselves but to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then Peter comes back yet again to his main theme of suffering. Read verse 12. He’s referring to the intense persecution these Christians were going through. They had to flee Rome, leaving all their property and loved ones behind, and go to these strange, risky places in Asia Minor. It made them feel strange, but Peter said they shouldn’t feel that way. How should they feel about their situation? Read verse 13. Peter says, “Rejoice!” Rejoice to suffer? Yes! Why? Because this is the most blessed experience, to participate in the sufferings of Christ. The more we suffer like him, the more we rejoice! Wow! What are his sufferings? They are the sufferings to save sinners. They are the sufferings of self-sacrifice, humiliation, pain and loneliness. Yes they’re hard, but because they are the same sufferings as those of Christ, we know that they are the best blessing possible. When Peter and John were punished for their faith in Jesus, they left the Sanhedrin “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Ac5:41). How could we, as sinners, ever be worthy to suffer like our Lord Jesus? We can experience such suffering only by his grace. What a different way of thinking about suffering!

Sometimes we see ministry as burdensome. We can get tired, discouraged and even ashamed. But we should be known as joyful people. Our fellowship, even if we’re suffering, should be full of joy because of Jesus. Read verses 14–16. Such suffering in our lives is a sign that we are one of God’s precious people. It’s how God distinguishes in Christian community between those who really belong to Christ and those who don’t (17,18). Read verse 19. Suffering should never be an excuse to quit or run away, but to re-commit ourselves to God, our faithful Creator, and continue to do good.

Read 4:13 again. May God help us rejoice to participate in the sufferings of Christ. May he fill us with the hope of when his glory will be revealed. And may he help us build a genuine Christ-like community where we can strengthen one another to suffer for Christ in the real world and lead others to him.