

Hope PCA Sermon: March 24, 2024

“Suffering in the Flesh; Living in the Spirit” (1 Peter 4:1–6)

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Continuing in 1 Peter, we’re now up to chapter 4, and we’ll be learning again. Last week was a particularly difficult passage. This one has a couple questions as well, but we’ll deal with those, Lord willing, in proper sequence. If you would stand in honor of reading God’s Word, this morning we’ll hear from 1 Peter 4 verses 1-6. These are not just words written on pieces of paper or displayed on your computer screen or phone. These are the very living words of our living God.

¹ Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. ³ For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. ⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; ⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

Thus far, God’s holy, infallible, and inerrant Word. The grass withers, the flower fades, but his Word indeed endures forever. Please be seated, and let me pray for us as we come before the word this morning.

Oh God, our Father, as you spoke through your Spirit to the prophets, to the apostles who wrote down and preserved your Word for us, may you speak through that Word to us here this morning. May that Word go out and not return to you empty, but be successful and accomplish every purpose for which you’ve sent it. We trust that this is true, for it is a promise that you have made. It may be true for us here this morning. We pray in Christ’s name, amen.

I think, at least for me, among the most incredible and fascinating stories that we come across in the history of Christianity are the stories of the martyrs for the faith. Just to read about their incredible bravery, displayed in the face of torture and impending death. We heard about the deacon in Rome who saved the treasury of the church and brought the poor and the widowed to the Roman authorities. And they said, “Well, we thought you were going to bring us the treasure.” And he said, “Well, here they are.” Of course, he went to the flames for that, and the story goes that as he was on the flames, he said, “This side’s done, how about you turn me over?” That’s bravery. That’s bravery. A quiet, firm resolution to go to this death, the horrible death, with dignity. That, at least for me, I can somewhat understand. Bravery in the face of something terrible that’s coming.

But I have to be honest with you, over the years, the ones that just baffled me and have baffled me a little bit, and maybe even more than a little bit, are those who go with joy. And I mean true joy. These are people happily going to torture and to death. One of the stories that I remember, I don't remember where it first came from, but French Christians, Huguenots, who sang psalms as they were led publicly down what was meant to be the place where they would be executed. And it stirred up the crowds. What was meant to be a display of dishonor and shame became a witness to those who were watching it. And the officials who were punishing them were so frustrated by it that they began cutting out their tongues before leading them down the streets. Joy, singing, praising God as they're being carried off to die. Again, the bravery, the quiet dignity, I think I can understand. Whether I could do it or not is a different question. But it just seems a little bit harder to grasp going with happy, joyful, rejoicing.

How is that possible? Facing what these people faced, knowing the pain, the humiliation, the grim specter of their own death. And yet scripture itself encourages this kind of a joyful, happy (if I can put it that way) response. Think of James in chapter 1 verse 2. He says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." And then he goes on to list those various kinds of trials. Count it all joy. that you get to experience these things. Later in this very same letter (we'll get to it, Lord willing, in a few weeks) 1 Peter 4 verses 12 and 13, he says, "Don't be surprised by the fiery trial when it comes, but rejoice." Rejoice. Why? Because "you share in Christ's sufferings." And if you do so, you will also rejoice "when His glory is revealed." Count it all joy. Rejoice.

Great advice, but where from within us does this kind of response come? Where's the spring that flows out in this kind of joy? And it occurred to me as I was studying these verses this morning that I think Peter gives us kind of a deeply profound and also a very powerful reason to have that kind of joy, and it's in the very first verse. May not seem obvious at first, but his reason, I think, for that joy is that those who have suffered in the flesh have ceased from sin. And we'll get to that as we go through the passage. And I'll share why I think that realization should produce such abounding joy in us and could face anything. We'll take the verses in three parts, two verses each. The first two really give us a goal of what our remaining lives on earth should be as Christians. The middle two verses, 3 and 4, talk about what we leave behind as our former way of life, and there are consequences for doing so. And then verses 5 and 6 remind us of the reality of impending judgment for everybody, especially those who malign believers, but also we see the eternal goal there of the Christian life. So we'll take these in turn.

Verses 1 and 2. Back in chapter 3 verse 18, Peter told us that "Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." We talked a little bit last week about how for centuries of Jewish ceremonial worship, God's holiness made him inaccessible to anybody but the high priest, and then only once per year, and only after very, very careful preparation, such that if a mistake was made or something was wrong, we're told that they tied ropes around his waist so that they could drag him out if he was put to death by God in his holy presence. That's incredible. God's holiness, so great that it has to be avoided. It has to be put behind the walls of a tabernacle or the walls of a temple, behind a thick curtain. But now in Jesus, we learn from the New Testament that all who come to Him,

go to God with Him, into that holy presence. The multitudes upon multitudes of unrighteous sinners, made righteous by faith in Christ Jesus, are led by Him into God's presence. Everything's changed, everything's reversed. Hebrews 10:19 celebrates that freedom to enter into the holy place behind the curtain and do so with confidence, drawing near to God in full assurance of our faith. And elsewhere Hebrews talks about Jesus being the forerunner who leads us into God's presence behind the curtain.

So now in verses 1 and 2, Peter gives us another benefit that is ours because Christ suffered for us. Building on what we learned last week. Jesus was "put to death for us in the flesh, made alive in the spirit" for us in verse 18, has gone to heaven for us, leading us to God, and now his suffering points Peter points to his suffering as the basis for having a same way of thinking as Jesus. Have the same way of thinking or attitude or mindset that Jesus himself had so that we can live the rest of our lives (he calls it "our time in the flesh no longer for human passions, but for the will of God." Christ also died so that our minds would be changed. The renewing of our minds, right? In Romans. And changed in such a way that the rest of our life here on earth is no longer for human passions, but for God's own will. Christ suffered so that we might be transformed So that even here on earth, awaiting His glorious return and the future of eternity, we might be different people than we used to be. Peter's already talked about this in this letter, so this isn't anything new. But again, the righteous, the righteous one, Jesus, suffered for the unrighteous. Us. all who repent of sin and turn in faith to Christ Jesus. He suffered for the unrighteous to lead us to righteousness, obedience to God, doing the will of God. This is part of the purpose for which Christ died. And so we're to have the same way of thinking, the same mindset, the same resolve as Jesus as he suffered for us and for our salvation.

An aspect of that way of thinking is Jesus' willingness to suffer. And again, this is not new in Peter, by this point in the letter. He's already told us that Jesus suffered as an example for us, our unjust suffering. He suffered unjustly, so we should not be surprised that we experience the same. But here the mindset is tied to this goal: doing the will of God. He's talking about a new disposition, a new attitude that pursues the things which are right. The same word is used in the book of Proverbs a couple times. In chapter 16 verse 22, it's the "good sense." The good sense that is "a fountain of life for him who has it." A mindset, a disposition, a way of thinking. In chapter 23 verse 19, it's a father's instruction to his son to hear and "be wise", to "direct [his] heart in the way." It's a resolve, a way of thinking, the way we direct our hearts, the resolve that we have to do God's will. Jesus displayed this attitude.

So again, he is our example. He displayed this way of thinking in his whole life, in his whole obedience to his father. It's not the same word, but it's the same idea that Paul brings to the Philippian church in chapter 2 verses 5 and following, where he instructs us to have the same mind as Christ. But he doesn't mean to think exactly his thoughts. He means have the same attitude, have the same mindset. And what did Jesus do? He became a servant and humbled himself by being obedient even to death on a cross. Have that same mindset of obedience, of service to God. Jesus says the same thing about himself in John 6 verse 38. It makes it clear: "I've come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me."

That's the mindset, that's the way of thinking that Peter is calling us to arm ourselves with. Deliberately take up this weapon of resolve to live for the will of God. It's the fruit of a heart that is grateful and thankful for the suffering that Christ underwent in the flesh for us and for our salvation. It's a mindset that includes our willingness to suffer in the flesh. Again, nothing new in Peter's letter following Christ's example.

But here's the first question in the text. What does Peter mean when he says that "*whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin*"? It's a very interesting and somewhat provocative statement. And part of the reason is we know as Christians from bitter experience that we still sin. That's why we take this opportunity week after week to confess our sins to God. We still do the things that we don't want to do. We still don't do the things that we want to do. We share the same struggle that Paul expresses in Romans 7. The "want to" is there (if I can put it that way) but also the "do not want to". I want to do what is right, I do not want to do what is wrong. But the ability is lacking. Or as it's said elsewhere by Jesus to his disciples, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." So Peter must mean something else other than we no longer sin anymore, or we're completely free of sinful behavior.

We can get at the answer by looking a little bit more closely at what he is saying. Peter's talking about suffering in the flesh. He uses the phrase "*in the flesh*" in verse 2 to talk about our remaining lives, the rest of our time in the flesh. He's using it differently than how the Apostle Paul uses the term flesh or being in the flesh. Paul means our sinful nature. Peter here is just talking about life in this world, the life that we live in the flesh. So suffering in the flesh must be suffering in this earthly life. And what are we suffering for? Well, at this point in the letter we know: we're suffering for our faith. Suffering for Peter in this letter is suffering for being a Christian. Suffering unjustly for being a Christian. So suffering in the flesh, here in verse one, is this unjust treatment that we receive in this life as Christians. As Christ suffered in the flesh during His earthly life and ministry, particularly the climax of that ministry on the cross, so we suffer in our earthly lives.

And here's where I think Peter's really going. Therefore, if we're suffering for being Christians, this suffering is evidence that we are Christians. We don't normally think that way. We want blessing, we want abundance, we want prosperity. We don't often think that suffering for being a Christian is evidence for being a Christian. The two go together. It's almost a tautology, right? Of course, if you're a Christian and you suffer for being a Christian, you're a Christian. But it's meant to give us comfort. And if we're Christians, then here's what we know from the rest of Scripture. Sin is put to death in us. In Dr. Job's commentary on this passage, suffering unjustly for our faith because we are Christians demonstrates our break with sin. Non-Christians aren't willing to suffer for doing good. It makes no sense. For us it's a willingness because we do it for Christ and in imitation of Him. We've been set free from sin's guilt. We've been set free from the pollution of sin by God's grace to us by faith in Christ Jesus. And as Jesus again himself says, those whom the Son sets free are free indeed. In that sense, we've ceased from sin. Not ceased from sinning (the verb) — we've ceased from sin. We still struggle, but the beauty of the gospel message is that the penalty has already been paid in full on the cross. By faith we're justified, made right with God. Our sins no longer counted as ours, but as His. Christ Jesus, His perfect obedience credited to our account as if

it were our own righteousness. So again, suffering for our faith, even up to the point of martyrdom, is evidence that we really are Christians.

And that's how I think for these martyrs of the past, and maybe for us as well. This can be a powerful motivation for true joy. I'm suffering for being a Christian? Yes. It doesn't make sense, and yet it does make sense. I'm suffering for being a Christian? Great, I am a Christian. My faith must be genuine. So I think it's in this sense that the martyrs could face torture and death with true joy, not some crazed emotional fantasy of religious fervor, but the fruit of a very deep conviction and assurance of their faith.

And these precious truths that we find in verses 1 and 2 lead naturally to what Peter tells us in verses 3 and 4. The time is past, or the time that is past, suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do. Their sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, parties, loss, disobedience, a flood of debauchery, That former way of living, that former way of chasing after human passage, that's past, that's done, that's over. That former way of life, we pursued what Gentiles want to do. Peter uses Gentiles as a synonym for non-believers. Their resolve, their mindset, their way of thinking is to pursue their own passions, to indulge themselves, They don't pursue the will of God. They're selfish, self-interested, self-indulgent, and they're passionately so. They seek to satisfy the desires of their own senses, a deep sensuality born of a terrible lack of self-control that leads to a flood of debauchery. And Peter gives us examples, "*sensuality*" in general, "*passions*" that they pursue, "*drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, lawless idolatry*".

Certainly things we know from Roman history, readily apparent though in our own time as well. In fact, we've come up with our own term for it in recent times. We call it "expressive individualism". Not merely indulging in our own sinful desires, but putting them boldly on display for everybody to see, and not just for the world to see, but for the world to celebrate and encourage us to continue in. "Go, yeah, go. You be you. You do you." What a nonsense piece of advice. Sexual sin has been celebrated and promoted at least since the sexual revolution. Drunkenness and drinking parties are popularized. Constantly see videos online. I don't know where they come from, but they're just so prevalent. Different games that people will play at parties. Drinking games. Get this ping pong in this cup. Do this, do that. We engage in these things, we celebrate them. Drinking games tied to various events, two that I just read about recently. Again, widely shared, widely popularized. "Hey everybody, let's take a shot every time the cameras show Taylor Swift at the Super Bowl." Why? Because we think it's going to happen a lot, and we can take a lot of shots, and we can get drunk out of our gourds. Or, take a shot every time the president says "MAGA" during his State of the Union address. It's the same stupid idea. This is hell-bent, self-indulgent, lawless idolatry, a worship of the self and the supposed freedom to be and to act and to identify as any kind of person I want to be.

And not only that. You have to worship me with me. "I'll worship you with you, but you have to worship me with me." There's no more live and let live when it comes to religion in the public square. You must worship with me. And that's the same attitude the Christians faced in the Greco-Roman Empire. And that Christians have faced at various times and various places throughout the history of the church: "Come and worship our gods." To us this is

lawless idolatry. We can't worship other gods. There's one God. We confessed that this morning: one God and three persons. We can't do what they do. We can't worship their gods.

And what we see time and time again throughout history is what Peter talks about. That they'll malign us for not doing what they do. He says they're surprised, they're astonished. The word there is tied to the Greek word for "stranger" or "exile". They look at us as strangers: "You guys are weird. Who are you, Christians, not to do what we do? You're like foreigners to us." And yet we're called to abstain from the passions of the flesh, as Peter said in chapter 2 verses 11 and 12: because they war against our soul. He tells us to keep our conduct among these Gentile non-believers honorable, so that when they speak against us as evildoers, they will nevertheless glorify God and His second coming. In chapter 3 in verse 16, he told us that the slander of believers by others will one day put them to shame.

And this leads us to verses 5 and 6, where Peter reminds us as He has before, that God will vindicate His people. A day is coming when those who speak against Christians as evildoers, who slander us, who malign us, will have to give an account to God, who is ready, as Peter says in verse 5, "*to judge the living and the dead.*" When Christ comes again, and He is coming, the world, the entire world, will be judged. Are those alive? at His Second Coming, and all those who have died but will be raised to face that judgment and to give an account. (We'll see this vision in John, John's revelation to us in Revelation, Lord willing, Tuesday night, what that judgment looks like. We've seen the effect of it graphically, but we'll see that, what's called the great white throne judgment, hopefully in our study Tuesday night.) What Peter's telling us is that those who mistreat God's people will have to give an account of what they've done to God himself and the consequences will not be pleasant. The suffering that we endure here for a little while on earth in our time in the flesh is nothing compared to the wrath of God that sinners will endure for all of eternity. God's judgment is just. And they will deserve that judgment and they will know that they deserve that judgment. But rather than just sit back and revel in this, and we should give praise to God for His justice, but here and now in the flesh, pray that these people storm the gates of heaven, that these people would repent of their sins and turn to faith in Christ Jesus and cease from their sin before it's too late. Because of this terrible, pending judgment, we're to be ready with an answer for our hope in Christ, ready to share the gospel with those around us.

And then Peter goes on in verse 6 to say that, for this reason, this is why, he says, "*the gospel has been preached, even to those who are dead.*" Like last week in this idea of proclaiming to spirits in prison, a lot of theories about this. I'm not going to go through them all this morning. I think the context makes it fairly clear. Peter is saying that everyone is judged, the living and the dead. Again, the dead raised to face judgment. So this is not about Jesus going and preaching to the dead. This is not that at all. The dead are raised to face judgment. Rather, this is about people to whom the gospel of salvation has been preached, but are now dead. These are believers, even in Peter's time, who believed and passed away. These are people who are going to be among the dead, who are raised at the last day, who believed in Jesus but died before the second coming. This is who I believe Peter is referring to. They will not miss out. Despite being dead, they will not miss out on being resurrected at the last day. They will not miss out on Christ's second coming. Peter here could be dealing with the same question Paul deals with the Thessalonian church regarding the resurrection. What about those who

are dead? The resurrection must have already happened or people would be dying. Peter's saying, "Don't worry. Don't worry about the dead. They will live again." That's the promise of the gospel.

He also may be addressing maligning words, the mocking of those who ridicule Christians for believing what we believe, practicing what we practice, in regard to our faith in Jesus, but also how we live, how we live out that faith. Mocking us because, "Hey, you Christians die like everybody else. So what good is your faith? What good is your religion if you end up dead just like everybody else?" It's almost a preacher in Ecclesiastes type of attitude: "Your whole life is vain and pointless. You believe you'll live forever, but you die just like everyone. This coming of Jesus that you keep talking about hasn't happened." Peter does address this in his second letter chapter 3 verse 4: "Where is this coming?" say those who mock. I think Peter is reassuring believers: don't let their maligning words, don't let their mocking, get to you. We know the promise of resurrection. We know what Jesus said to Martha outside Lazarus's tomb: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will never die. He who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live."

This is the gospel truth. The Gospel was preached to those who are now dead, so that when they face judgment they will be vindicated, just as we who are alive at His coming will be vindicated. They and we are to be judged like all people in the flesh, our present lives here on earth, the way people are, by human standards. But though we're judged this way and maligned in this judgment, we nevertheless, says Peter, *"live in the Spirit the way God does."* It's another way of putting what he said earlier: doing God's will, to live for God's will. Because this can only be done in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the one who raises us to new life in Christ, as we heard this morning in Sunday School, Colossians and Ephesians. The one who calls us to repentance and faith, the one who teaches us the wisdom of God's Word, the one who works in us to desire to do God's will and to do God's will, to will and to do according to His good pleasure. This is consistent with what Paul tells us in Corinthians 15: "The first Adam became a living being. but the last Adam became a life-giving spirit." The last Adam, this is Christ who takes us to God, whose work enables us to live in obedience to God.

So Peter's instruction here is quite sound, I think. Let us arm ourselves with this new way of thinking in Christ Jesus, to be willing to suffer, even with the joy of our salvation, but also to be eager to obey God. And the first obedience, we talked way back in Peter chapter one about, and believe. If being hearing and receiving and submitting to the gospel call to repent and believe. That's the first step in obedience. Admit your sin. I'm just repeating something I said last week. Admit your sin. Be honest about yourself. Be honest about your selfish, self-indulgent passions. Be honest about your lack of self-control. Admit that it deserves God's punishment, and then seek His forgiveness. Because He freely offers it. And it's freely received from Him, as a gift from Him, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And then if that's you, live as children of God, no longer chasing after human passion, but divine passion, a passionate, loving obedience to a loving Heavenly Father.

Let me pray for us. Lord God, indeed help us to put off that old self. Create in us desires to do your will, but also by your Spirit grant us the ability to do that will. Without you, without

Christ, without the power of the Holy Spirit, we are lost, without your grace, without your mercy. We're dependent upon you, but you grant us the strength and the ability and even the will to do what you would have us do. May that be true for us and may it bear fruit in our lives. We thank you. We praise you. In Jesus' name, amen.

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