

If you're a women's college basketball fan, last year was great. Now maybe it wasn't so much for fans of OU or OSU. The women's basketball team from Baylor played an entire 40 game schedule including against OU and OSU. They had grueling practices, hard road trips, and tough games. A 40 game schedule provides plenty of suffering. But they didn't lose one of those 40 games. Undefeated champions. The joy of winning the championship and not losing a game was better than the suffering they endured to get there.

Do you think the Baylor Lady Bears ever wanted the suffering of a long practice to stop? I'm sure there were times they would have given anything for the suffering to stop. In your life of suffering, do you ever want it to stop? Are there times when you can hardly think of anything else than doing whatever it takes to make suffering stop? Maybe you join with the world in trying to get rid of suffering. Suffering is bad and anything bad should stop.

Is that the kind of life Christians should expect? If you're living today expecting a life pain or suffering free, I hate to break bad news. I don't think you are though. You're realistic. You know there are things that hurt. You know we don't try to suffer, but we don't shy away from it either. Peter as he wrote his first letter would agree. In fact he would say there's a way Christians should live in a world of suffering. That's what we explore today as we see that...

Christians live suffering and joyful
Looking forward to Christ's glory
Clinging to Christ's promises

We're still surprised when we suffer. When I talk about suffering today I mean Christians who suffer because they're Christians. This isn't the suffering you get when you cut your finger or the suffering that comes when the power goes off and you've got no air conditioning for a few hours. This suffering, sometimes physical sometimes emotional, comes because you're a Christian. We're shocked when people laugh at us going to church. We're surprised that people still make comments online about how stupid Christianity is. We actually can't believe it when governments turn on Christians and do them harm. "These kinds of things shouldn't happen, especially to Christians," we think.

Peter was writing to individual Christians in Asia Minor who were living scattered among unbelievers. Just the fact that they were scattered was indication they were suffering. Minor scuffles arose. Christians had to put up with the occasional weird look or evil eye. But Peter indicates things are about to change and not for the better. **"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something stranger were happening to you."** Their suffering so far was light compared to what would come. It would be so bad and they would suffer so much that they'd be shocked.

How bad would it get? They lived under the Roman Empire. Emperor after emperor treated Christians worse than dirt. Nero set Christians on fire so at night their burning bodies lit up the skyline. Antonius Pius allowed Christians to be burned at the stake for not cursing Christ. Marcus Aurelius ordered public executions. Decius had Christians torn and eaten by wild animals. Diocletian ordered all Christian churches destroyed, all Christian property confiscated, and death to any Christian caught in public. That's only the first 300 years after Jesus. Century after century has seen Christians persecuted. Peter was right, it was about to get so bad that they would think it strange that these things were happening.

Now clearly if persecutions this bad are happening today they aren't happening in this country to us. But you suffer and you're probably persecuted for your faith in Jesus and for being a Christian. Will it surprise you if some of the extreme persecutions started happening to you? Trials being held just for being Christian. Punishments enforced only on Christians. Confiscation of property, denial of rights, demanding certain things be taught that don't agree with Christianity. These things could happen. It would surprise us, but the bigger question should be how do we deal with it? There's the potential for sin in our response. Looking for revenge and a way to get back at those who attack us as Christians is sinful. Running around complaining about how unfair life is because of the suffering is sinful. Fighting back with words or more violent ways is sinful.

Instead, when someone insults you because you believe in Jesus Christ remember you're blessed. When someone tries to injure you because you confess faith in Christ, be joyful. When you're persecuted for being a Christian Peter tells you that's a good thing. **"But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."** Key point, Christ suffered too. Christ came to suffer. Christ came to die. If there's no cross then you aren't saved. But there was a cross and Christ willingly suffered and died on it for you and me. The more you suffer the closer you participate in Christ's suffering. The hatred that struck him strikes you. It earns you nothing but it reminds you that he took all the suffering and all the sins for you. Christ Jesus is the only reason you can have joy in the face of sufferings.

Proper perspective in suffering is living with heaven firmly in view. Hope for heaven changes our attitude and life. Suffering reminds us Christ suffered and was victorious. He rose from death and went to heaven. We're connected to Christ Jesus in his suffering and death and we're connected to his resurrection. That's a guarantee. We rejoice in suffering when we look forward to the greatest joy to come. On the Last Day we'll see the exact opposite of Christ's suffering and ours. We'll see Christ's glory revealed. Christ's glory is our glory. We fix our eyes on that, we look forward to Christ's glory, and we will have joy in the face of suffering.

Expectant mothers have some idea of what they have to face in the future. Even with pain relieving drugs, giving birth to a baby is not easy. I've heard there's a level of pain and suffering involved. Who would go through something like that if suffering was all there was? Of course suffering isn't all there is. There's something to look forward to and something to cling to. Mothers cling to the promise that after the suffering there will be a little baby. Christians who go through suffering have something to cling to as well. Christians cling to the promises of Christ.

When I visit people in the hospital or at their homes who are suffering I realize I come sounding a little crazy. I tell them they can rejoice in suffering. I tell them that sufferings are used by God to draw us closer to him. Their suffering is allowing them to grow in faith. But I know they're probably thinking, "Easy for you to say. You're not suffering. I understand what God says but it still hurts." Realizing what God says is true doesn't make suffering any easier. Complaining is easier. Telling everyone how much you didn't deserve this is easier. Talking about fairness and how difficult life is that's easier. Then when we face these temptations we sometimes sin. We suffer as we fight that battle. We then suffer as we face the guilt.

Remember the promises of Christ. **"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."** You've got promises from God. You suffer according to God's will. It's not out of control suffering like you might think. God's still in control. He's not letting it come down on you harder than he is giving you his grace to build you up. The promise of the cross is that you're victorious over all suffering. There's someplace better beyond the suffering. Your sin, your death have nothing on you. Our faithful Creator made us and wants to save us. The crushing weight of suffering can be brutal, but our faithful Creator God made promises to us and we live by them. We know the promises of Christ bring us victory. We live a life of joy in that victory from Christ even in the face of suffering.

The essential truth to keep in mind is that the same God to whom you're committed and for whom you're being persecuted will also enable you to stand firm in faith until the heavenly reward. The fiercer the ordeal, the more reason for rejoicing because we're closer to Christ's suffering and we're closer to his promises. Suffering as a Christian you have the opportunity to give glory to his name. When you continue to live as a Christian when living as a Christian isn't easy, that brings glory to God's name. We trust in the promises of a faithful God who has never let us down.

The world will always be trying to eliminate suffering. Dear Christians don't follow. Know that suffering for the name of Christ is suffering that brings you into a closer and deeper relationship with Jesus. It allows you to concentrate on looking forward to Christ's glory which is yours. A life of suffering makes you want to cling to Christ's promises. And through it all you can be joyful. Because Christians live suffering and joyful in Christ.