

SERMON – 1 PETER 4:12-19

Over my shortish life, I have read many books about leading people to Christ. None of them apart from the Bible, however, say that we would introduce new converts to a life of suffering. I suspect however, that comes in books about being a disciple of Christ. Christians in the west are suffering greatly in this current age. Why is that? The world that we currently live in is very anti-Christian to the point that in our recent law changes, if you pray for a person in certain contexts, you risk jail time. There have been recent cases of doctors being sacked for praying for their patients. Even in teaching RE, there were restrictions on how much of the Christian Gospel you could talk about. That was because the curriculum had to be approved by the government. It has got to the point that in our society today, Christians are considered the bad guys. This was very prevalent in the newspaper last Sunday when a visitor to a school in Melbourne whilst addressing a year 11 class, got all boys who were white, male and Christian to stand up...the female presenter then called them oppressors. Yes, that did happen.

In our passage from 1 Peter, suffering is talked about in various forms. But this is not the physical sickness type suffering, but suffering that comes from being a believer in Christ. And indeed, Christians suffer in the world today and not just physically. Please follow 1 Peter 4:12-19 from the bible that you have with you or on the screen. The first thing we are told in the passage is that suffering is a fiery ordeal in verse 12. However, it is a fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you. In the Bible, there is a concept mentioned called the Refiner's fire. The refiner's fire is a test that tests the purity of silver and gold.

The fiery ordeal that is testing us here is actually a test of faith, or a test of the purity of our faith. According to this passage, we shouldn't be surprised at this test of our faith and loyalty to God. Straight after being tested, the results will be released. For gold and silver, a successful result will be that the metal will survive and that the sample of gold or silver will prove real. For the genuine fair-dinkum born-again believer, which is the only type in the Bible, it means that they have survived this test to their faith and are encouraged to continue on in the Christian Faith – a faith that 1 Peter describes as very visible and very active throughout the book. However, with regards to these fiery ordeals, Peter tells us that we should not be surprised. For the fair-dinkum believer in Christ, these should be expected because trials or tests of faith will be part of the Christian life.

In our current time, Christians are seen as the bad guys in the world today because we hold dear to the truth of the Bible – God's word. Not only that, just after he heard the words, "My son, whom I love in who I am well pleased" from His father at his baptism, Jesus ended up in the desert experiencing his own trial with the devil's great temptation. Therefore, the trials that we have for being Christians, are not unexpected nor surprising because Jesus had them. A read through the gospels will tell you that Jesus was verbally persecuted by the majority, if not all, of his opponents. However, in spite of this, how are we to engage with our suffering as Christians? Listen to what verse 13 says, *"13 but rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."* We rejoice in suffering. This is very counter-cultural to what human nature would do. If we were following human nature, we would either cower from fear or fight back to break out of our suffering.

However, what we rejoice in is how much we participate in the sufferings of Christ. What does that mean? The concept of participating in the sufferings of another sounds like a strange concept but what it means is that because we are obedient to God, we suffer in the same way as Christ did because of his obedience to God. In this book of 1 Peter, we are called to be obedient to God because of what Christ has done for us. These events we commemorated about a month ago. However, whilst we are told that we will suffer because of our obedience to God, there is something great on the other side of our suffering and that is the revealing of Christ's glory when Jesus returns. When the revealing of Christ's glory happens, we will be overjoyed because we will be free of the suffering we have experienced on earth due to simply being a fair dinkum born again believer in Christ. The ultimate suffering that Jesus was involved in due to his obedience to the Father was his suffering on the cross for our sins. The time we end up overjoyed won't be arriving as yet but only when Jesus is ready. But there is still much rejoicing in suffering to be had and blessing to be experienced.

Why do I say that? Listen to what it says in verse 14, *"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."* Has someone ever made you suffer or had a go at you for being a Christian? It appears to be a common thing for the people that Peter is writing to. I've even copped some insults not just from outside of the church but also from within the church as well. It is very scary when that happens. It is also draining on your energy levels consistently being insulted especially if it is because of the name of Christ. These days, its very easy to get insulted for being a Christian because Christian thinking and practice is so against the practices of the world. But if we live out our faith, despite what the world thinks, we are blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. This is so much better than what the world has to offer.

What does God offer? The blessing of God for sticking with being obedient to God especially given what he has done for us on the cross and rising to new life to give us hope. God has given us plenty and for that, we should be obedient and as a result, there will be persecution and suffering for living out the Christian faith. But there won't be suffering if you fit into the following categories. Listen to what verse 15 says: *"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler."* There is natural suffering for these categories – Jail which is consistent with worldly punishment and therefore, there is a need for suffering as punishment for your crime. However, there is something we can do in terms of suffering as a Christian. Listen to what verse 16 says, *"However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."* As Christians we do not need to be ashamed of being a Christian.

So, if we are not ashamed, how then are we to respond? We are to praise God that we have the identity of a Christian. This decrease in shame develops over time. Let me give you a story of how this developed in my life. When I first started work in the bank, I was a slightly shy type. People would ask me what I did on the weekend and the answer sounded like "went to church" with a mumble. Over time, the questioning went from went to church to why do you go to church? My answer was "I'm a Christian". As time went on, the answers I gave became clearer, louder and longer. I became less ashamed of being a Christian and

more confident to talk about what happened at church including the content of the sermon and over time, the more my shame dissipated, the more my intent was to honour God with how I replied to work colleague's questions. So therefore, despite the suffering we might undergo we should not be ashamed of being a Christian for many reasons that are made abundantly clear in Scripture and will be made supremely clear to us when we leave this earth.

But there is another reason that we should continue as believers in Christ despite the suffering that we cop as Christians even to the point of being called a goody-goody. That reason is judgement. It is interesting that according to verse 17 that the believers in Christ will be judged first. Listen to what the first half of verse 17 says, *"For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household"* We are told in other parts of the Bible that we are saved by faith and judged by our works. This means what saves us is trusting in what God has done to save us which is Jesus' death and resurrection. Our works are what we do in our lives to live as people who have been saved by faith. These include being obedient to the word of God. In other words, according to 1 Peter, our obedience to God equates to holiness which is in response to the living hope that we have because of the resurrection of Jesus.

How then does this equate to the biblical concept of judgement? This I believe is often misunderstood because often judgement has only a negative connotation that often leads to people to being uncertain about whether they will get into heaven. Judgement works this way. It is positive for those who choose to accept God's gift of salvation and then express it in obedience to the word of God. In this case it is connected with verse 12 of our passage as they have been refined and strengthen by the suffering that they have undertaken. In other words, they have passed the test that has been put before them. However, why does it start with God's household? My answer to this is that the members of God's household have received the gift of salvation from God and therefore, God has a chance to judge how they have used the gift God has given and whether they have used this through their obedience to God.

But what happens to those who don't obey God? There are some rhetorical statements in the rest of verse 17 and 18 that give us an answer. This is what they say, *"and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* There is a clue here for the people that Peter is writing to. Obey the gospel of God because the implied alternative does not appear to involve an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade nor is it one that has passed the fire test that is alluded to in verse 12. This will be what will happen to the ungodly and the sinner And yes it is hard for the righteous to be saved because they can't save themselves – only God can. So given all of this, what should believers do in the 21st Century? Listen to what verse 19 says, *"so then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."* Living out God's will involves opposition from the secular world in general as it is opposed to God. The right response is to commit ourselves to our faithful creator who will never let us go and will forever nourish us. Not only that, we need to be holy which is the same as continue to do God's will or live holy lives that are pleasing to God. Believe it or not, suffering will strengthen

our faith. Opposition to our faith actually deepens our expression of faith in God. This is important to note because that will help us to withstand the suffering we face as Christians. This goes to show that indeed, suffering does bring blessing and what is on the sign outside is the truth. Why? Because God calls us to be obedient to him and he makes it worth it in the end. After all, Jesus was obedient to God until the end. It cost him his life but it gave us salvation and a model for living a holy life. Brothers and sisters in Christ listening in person and watching online, let us remember how obedient Jesus was so that we can be as obedient knowing we have a great reward waiting for us at the end.