

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.* 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.* ¹⁵ *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.* ¹⁶ *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.* ¹⁷ *For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?* ¹⁸ *And,*

*“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”*

¹⁹ *So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (1 Peter 4:12-19)*

You’re on the Path to Glory

“Are we there yet?” I know it’s a cliché, but when I was a kid, I used to torture my parents with that question when we went on vacation. My dad actually banned it from the car. In an attempt to satisfy our need to know, my mom would let us trace our progress on a road map. But I was too young to understand the realities of the map scale. Every time the road made a little turn, I assumed that meant we had passed the next bend shown on the map. But, of course, roads are full of curves and bends that are too small to show up on a road map. I had a very limited understanding of where we were going and what it would take to get there. But fortunately, my dad always knew where we were going. There’s a parallel in our spiritual journey here on earth. By nature, we have a very limited understanding of what it’s going to take to get us to the end of the road. Some days, the view looks about like what we expected. But there are other days when the road is going in a direction that just seems wrong. We wonder if we’ve gotten lost. But God always knows where we are and where we’re going. He knows where we have to turn and how fast we need to go. You and I are never going to have his knowledge of the route. But keep the goal in mind: **you’re on the path to glory.**

I.

For our purposes this morning, don’t think of your trip to glory as a car ride. Think of it as a long hike through the woods. You do have a trail marked out. You don’t have to find a new way to get to where we’re going. But that trail isn’t always level and smooth. **The path to glory leads through the mud of suffering.**

Peter says, **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”** Don’t be surprised. What’s happening to you is normal. Now, when we’re talking about suffering, that’s a shocking statement! But it’s true. And that “painful trial” is not easy. It hurts. But it has a purpose: to test our faith. Now, that doesn’t mean that God is testing to see if we have faith or even that he’s testing to see how strong our faith is. God knows the answer to both of those questions before he even begins. Rather, God is putting our faith to the test the way that a coach puts his players to the test when he has them do drills. He’s exercising our faith and strengthening it. With that understanding, it’s clear why we shouldn’t be surprised at those painful trials. God loves us and he wants us to have the strongest possible faith. So he puts us through our paces. Clearly, that hurts. But hurt should never catch us off guard. Hurt is part of life in a sinful world. It’s part of faith on this side of heaven. Do we expect that to be the case? Or are we shocked when good health turns to illness, when wealth evaporates, when people attack us for our faith? It’s too easy, especially in a free and prosperous society like ours, to forget that God promised us “painful trials.”

But the next statement Peter makes is even harder for us to grasp. He says, **“But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”** Rejoice that you suffer. How could we possibly be glad that we hurt? We don’t rejoice just because we hurt. We rejoice because we share in the hurts of Christ. And we do that because it means that we also share in the glory of Christ. Peter is saying if we have one, we will have the other. What sufferings did Jesus have in his life?

Don't start at the cross. His sufferings began long before that. They began when he was born in a stable and raised as a poor carpenter's son in a backwater fishing village. Jesus never had any money. His family was a bunch of nobodies, even in his hometown. His stepfather probably died before he was an adult. Even once he became a famous teacher, he was constantly criticized and attacked. The devil gave him no peace. All of that was before he was arrested and tortured and falsely accused and convicted and then nailed to a cross to die the most horrible death that the Romans knew how to dish out.

All of that is ours. Jesus suffered all that to pay for our sins. But that's not what Peter is talking about today. All of that is ours in the sense that we share it here. Poverty and illness, grief and mourning, attacks and persecution and finally even physical death all go along with being a disciple of Christ in a sinful world. Every time we suffer those things, it's a sign that we will also enjoy his glory because the suffering and the glory are welded together. And what is Jesus' glory? Resurrection. These bodies will live, even though they die. Transformation. When we rise, our bodies will be perfect – better than they have ever been. And our hearts will be free from sin. Joy. Jesus will wipe every tear from our eyes. And vindication. God will seat us next to Jesus as his adopted brothers and sisters, and we will praise him for all eternity.

All of that is ours. So what should our attitude be when suffering comes? Peter says, **“If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”** Every time you get kicked in the teeth in this sinful world, you are blessed. That's especially true when people do it because you confess your faith in Jesus. But it's also true whenever our faith is bowed down under the cares and burdens of life here. Those hurts are a blessing. They show that we are connected to Christ. But that's only true for those who have faith. The Holy Spirit rests on us and he will lead us to glory. And when we get there, we will be glad for everything we had to go through here.

Peter says that if we suffer for being Christians, we should praise God because we bear the name of Christ. How can we rejoice in our sufferings? How can we consider ourselves blessed when we're persecuted? As my mom likes to say, “Pain hurts.” Peter is not saying that suffering is easy. He's not saying that we don't look forward to the end of it. He's not saying that pain somehow earns us eternal life. Suffering does hurt. But we can still rejoice in it, even if we're aren't happy about it. We can remember the promise of Christ. We can focus on the glory that is coming. We can remember that we are blessed to share in what Jesus won for us and that it is a privilege to carry his name in this world. And we can remember that for every moment of pain here, we will have an eternity of joy there. And God will strengthen us through that promise.

II.

That's the path we're on, the path to glory. But it can be a very confusing path. In my family, we like to go to state parks and hike the trails. Usually, those trails are well marked and well maintained. But sometimes, they get confusing. Sometimes, the trails loop and cross other trails and when all you can see is woods, it's hard to know if you're going in the right direction. Sometimes when the trails cross, the one you want to follow is less obvious than the one you're crossing. I've had to stop and figure out which way was the right way to go. The path of glory works the same way. It meanders and crosses other paths and other trails. **The path to glory leads past easier paths to hell.**

What do those easier paths look like? Perhaps the most common one is the one that says that you don't have to take this stuff quite so seriously. Many times I've told you that your faith is the most important thing in your life. I've often said that means that your faith should come first. You should want to hear the word of God and you should put that ahead of other things that may seem more enjoyable. You should insist on living your faith, even if it means that friends and family are going to be angry with you and may even drop you like a hot rock. That's a tough path to follow and every time I say it, I wonder how many of you are thinking, “Get a life, pastor! It's OK for monks like you to put your faith first, but out here in the real world, things are different!” Are you one of those people? You're right, things are different out there in the real world. But that doesn't change what God says. When you let those real world concerns justify turning your back on what God says, you're taking the easy path. You've wandered off the road to glory.

Another common path is the path of “spirituality.” Many people today are anti-religion but not anti-spiritual. But what is spirituality? Usually, it's finding God in yourself. And that just doesn't work. It makes you God. It's worshipping yourself. Now, I would be the first to admit that our churches are made up of sinners and so we often do and say things that don't reflect well on Christ. That's just sin. But you cannot have faith in Christ without the Church. God designed us to walk together. The path of individualized “spirituality”

in which you decide how you're going to worship God and what you're going to believe and you don't need no pastor or church telling you what to think is a different path than the path to glory.

A third common path is the path of works. "I'm a good person. God will take me to heaven because I deserve to be forgiven. I've tried hard and done my best." But God says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. He tells us to be perfect, just as he is perfect. And anything less than perfect deserves death and hell. The path of works is easier than the path of faith because it allows me to feel good about myself. It allows me to be a member of the cult of self-esteem and to dismiss pastors who dare to call their members "sinners." But it is a path that leads to hell.

The path to glory crosses many other paths. They all look easier or more pleasant or more natural. But they all lead to hell. The truth is, we all feel attracted to one or another easier path. We feel that because our hearts are sinful. The Old Man inside us wants to give up on this difficult road of suffering and persecution. It wants to be one with the people around us and enjoy their fellowship. It doesn't want to think about all this God stuff or drag ourselves to church to hear that we're sinners one more time. But that attitude is pure rebellion against God. That attitude earns us hell. That's what we deserve because we have that sinner inside us. But that's why God gave us Christ. Jesus was the only person who ever had a perfect faith. He was the only human being who ever joyfully and continuously walked the path of suffering and mud and humiliation without ever retreating or resenting it. Because he was also God, his perfect faith counts for us. His perfect life replaces our failures to stay on God's path. He died because we want to follow so many other paths, to think that we're good people and to feel good about ourselves. He died and he paid for all the sin that still hides in our hearts. And then he rose and announced that we are free.

The only path to heaven runs through Christ. When the Holy Spirit came to us in baptism and in the word and he gave us faith, he put us that path. Now, as long as we live here, staying on that path will be hard. That's the point Peter is making in the last couple of verses in our text. He says that judgment will begin with God's own people and we will barely be saved because there are so many things in this world trying to kill our faith. But we will be saved. We will reach eternal life because Jesus is still with us. And all that suffering on the road is part and parcel of walking the path to life. So what does Peter tell us? **"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."** You're in God's hands. Do good. Live the hard and faithful life, not because you think that you can earn heaven, but because you trust the faithful promises of God that you are forgiven, that you will make it through this life to eternal life, that you will get home. Once you reach the end of this journey and see the glory that Christ has won for you, there will be no doubt in your mind. You will be glad. It will all be worth it. Amen.