

Entrusting Yourself to God

I Peter 4: 12-19

**First Presbyterian Church
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Every year, we take time to give thanks for those who made the gospel clear. We revere our Reformation heroes such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and, of course, John Knox. We are proud of them now. But in their day, Knox, Calvin and Luther were all considered extremists. Their views threatened the usual order of life in Europe. They were corrupting the young and disturbing the old. They faced criticism by the elites. They dared open conflict with rulers. They got rejected by town councils and sometimes by their own congregations. Knox himself was exiled for years from his beloved Scotland. They got accused of being too political. Because the faith they uncovered created social upheaval and sometimes civil war. These heroes of our faith knew doubt, deprivation, and times of despair. They suffered for Christ.

And how grateful we are for their courage! We take for granted now what was then revolutionary.

- That the Scriptures should be translated into the language of the people.
- That worship services should occur in the language of the people attending.
- That ordinary people could be empowered to understand what Scripture teaches when they read the words plainly.
- That what needs to be known about God can be known by regular people who rely on the Holy Spirit to guide them.
- That the Scriptures teach that we can be reunited with God by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. Our works don't save us, Jesus does.
- That the church doesn't have the final word, the Bible does. We can know God through Jesus personally and experientially as we meet him in Scripture.

In other words, the Reformers told a better story. They had better news than the prevailing guilt, fear and obligation the medieval church had been laying down on people. They had a better view of how God views people—not as pawns of the powerful, but each one, high or low, precious to God. Worth the blood of his Son. When the gospel got loose in Europe 500 years ago, people flourished. But first there was resistance. First there was conflict.

That’s exactly what Peter would have predicted. He told his readers, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you, as though something strange were happening to you.” The gospel is the greatest news in the cosmos. But the gospel makes a direct assault on any idea that I am autonomous. It pricks holes in my bubble of belief I am in charge of my life. It denies my stubborn hope that I belong to myself alone. No, says the gospel. The Father created you. The Son died for you. The Spirit claims you. You cannot solve your life on your own. You cannot solve your death in your lifetime. You cannot solve your guilt by your own deeds of atonement. You cannot solve your loneliness alone. You cannot solve the mystery of your purpose from inside yourself. But Christ Jesus has solved all of that. He gives you living water to drink. He shines a light the darkness cannot overcome. He is the companion who will not leave you. He supplies the hope everlasting. Only bow the knee. Turn. Believe the gospel. Yield the throne of your life to Jesus. That’s the way to flourishing.

Yet most people, and many times you and I, hear that word, look Jesus in the face and say, “No. Not yet. I still think I can make a go of it as my own god.” Or worse, we say, “How dare you? How dare you question my autonomy? You hater!” Beloved, we have the best news, but it offends our own sense of self. It offends those who do not want God to be real. They get mad at the wonderful truth we have. Don’t be surprised at that. It was ever so.

Christians have often been called extremists. A few decades ago, my historically Christian beliefs were once challenged as outdated and irrelevant. Now they are scorned as downright dangerous. I know they are the path to life. And so I will experience a rub, a friction between myself and the world. We lose preference. We lose friends. We lose status. That’s just the way it has always been.

For Peter’s audience, the friction had become outright persecution. He wrote to encourage them. And to give them a way to survive and even thrive in the midst of it. So he told them, “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad.” When you feel the prickly rub of the world

against you on one side, press into the warmth of Christ on the other side. Your suffering gives you a sense of participating, just a bit, in the sufferings of Jesus for the world. As you share Christ's sufferings, you can rejoice and be glad. "Share" is a bit of a weak translation of the original word. We need to hear a sense of real participation. Of communion and connection with Jesus in his suffering for us. This requires imagination and faith that such a mystical joining could occur.

We have to pause here and ask, "So does this joyful connection to Christ's sufferings happen only when we encounter persecution for our faith? Or can other kinds of suffering give us an entrance into deep fellowship with Jesus?" I think the answer is a strong Yes. Just living means the wear and tear that comes from gravity, aging, hunger, illness, work, frustrations and fatigue. Jesus entered into that normal experience of the day to day suffering of life. So we have connection points. More acute suffering takes us further into identifying with him. Being beaten or killed for the name of Jesus is the most dramatic of these. You can't help but make the connection since it is the very name of Jesus that causes our suffering. So, many forms of suffering can be the entry points into a fellowship with Jesus that yields a sweet joy. If we are willing to use imagination, will and faith to make the connection.



This past summer I met a lovely writer named Vaneetha Risner. She has lived for years with the chronic pain of a debilitating illness. At our conference, she couldn't stand for too long, or walk too far. But she radiated joy. Her story includes the death of a son and many other kinds of suffering. She has the street cred to write with authenticity about what joy can be found in

suffering through communion with Christ. She writes:

Jesus fully understands me, but I can understand only the mere edges of him. Yet as I identify with his suffering and yield more fully to him in my sorrow, I possess more of him.

Whatever you are dealing with, you can find your suffering in Christ's. He knows what it's like to hunger and thirst, to endure sleepless nights and exhausting days, to experience agonizing pain, and to pour himself out for others who are hostile in return. His cousin was murdered, his family misunderstood him, his hometown rejected him, and he watched as a sword

pierced his mother's soul. People used Jesus, flattered him, criticized him, lied about him, betrayed him, abandoned him, mocked him, humiliated him, whipped him, and watched him die an excruciating death.

So where can you identify with him in your suffering? If you have ever been betrayed by a friend, someone you loved and trusted, you can know a little of Christ's fellowship in suffering. Or if you have ever begged God to remove your anguish, and God denied your desperate request, you can know a little of Christ's fellowship in suffering. Or if you have experienced tormenting, all-consuming physical pain with no relief, you can know a little of Christ's fellowship in suffering.

There is no suffering we can experience that our Lord cannot relate to. And as we experience a portion of what he did and yield to him in it, we find a precious intimacy with him.¹

I love how Vaneetha flips our perspective upside down. My pain screams out, "If only Jesus understood a little of what I am undergoing, that would be a comfort." But actually, my suffering is just a ripple in the ocean of the pain Jesus underwent for us. My worst discomfort, sorrow, rejection, and pain let me experience a little, just a little, of what Jesus underwent. But when I seek to know him in that pain, to understand *him* and empathize with *him* a bit more, it brings me closer. It makes the suffering yield to joy. For I am taken up into something, into someone, much bigger than myself. Little me gets to identify with Jesus in his painful suffering for the world. I get let in on the great mission of love that drove him forward even through such pain. This flipped over perspective on suffering changes everything.

So how do we do this? Peter concludes with wonderful practical advice. "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to faithful Creator while doing good." Peter watched Jesus die from a distance. He saw his Lord suffer horribly. And maybe he heard the words himself or maybe his friends told him later what Jesus said as he died. Christ made words from Psalm 31 his own, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He died in faith. Jesus entrusted his soul to a faithful Creator, even at the terrible last.

This image has links to the picture of banking! The word there means literally to deposit. Like the way you deposit money for safe keeping in a bank. Or place jewels in a safe deposit box that goes into a vault. You commit something to the care of one who is faithful. You deposit something precious to a fiduciary. To someone who takes responsibility for guarding what you've given.

In our suffering, we deposit our souls, our very lives to the care of the faithful Father. No matter what is happening to our circumstances, we deposit our hope in the care of God's promised future. No matter what happens to our bodies, we release our fears into his faithful promises of eternal life. And, then we keep on doing good. This is crucial. Suffering does not end our mission, but becomes part of fulfilling our mission. Pain does not halt our seeking to bless and do good and serve God.

The British used to say during the bombing Blitz of WW2, "Keep calm, and carry on." That sounds a lot like this passage. Entrust your soul to God. Keep doing good. That's how we respond to suffering. And, if we can, we press into the connection. What am I feeling? What am I undergoing? Where did this occur in Jesus' life among us? How, then, can I make a connection? How can I identify a little more with all he did for us? How can I discover that there is room for my wounds inside Christ's wounds?

As we studied this passage last week, one of our elders made some profound connections. Now in his 80's, this faithful saint deals with several health problems, including chronic pain in the joints. He said, "I've discovered that my pain is not just about me. My pain effects those around me. Those who love me respond to the way I deal with my pain. So I can't just quit. I can't just complain. How I go through this effects their faith, their hope, and even their well being. How I suffer matters to the people I love."

We're going to go through suffering. It may be bodily pain. It may be mental illness. It may be financial setbacks. It may be losing friends because we stand for Christ and the truth of his Word. It may be discrimination at work because of the gospel to which we hold. Whatever the source, we are not to be surprised. This is to be expected. Life is hard, and the way of the Christian harder still. But every suffering can be a link to Christ Jesus. We can know the fellowship of his sufferings. In our pain, we can feel tender towards the pain Jesus bore for us. We can feel our hearts soften toward him. We can know intimate relating to Jesus as we find room in his wounds for our wounds. We share scars. And so we will be moved to entrust our souls to him. To deposit our lives into his care. Even as we don't quit, but press on. We love God and engage life seeking to do good. That's truly our Reformation heritage.

¹ Vaneetha Risner, "Someone Knows Your Pain: How Suffering Ties Us to Christ," DesiringGod.com, October, 2022.