



The Letters of James and Peter

Week 7 – 1 Peter 4:12 – 2 Peter 1:21

Day 1 - 1 Peter 4:12-19

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. ¹⁵But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief-maker. ¹⁶Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. ¹⁷For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And

*'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?'*

¹⁹Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.

Understanding the Passage:

When was the last time you suffered for doing good? It's frustrating, isn't it? You try to do the right thing; you try to give Jesus a good name; you try to be ethical and kind, but it blows up in your face. Instead of being the "good guy", now you're in a "fiery ordeal."

Peter is writing to a network of house churches where Christians make up less than 1% of the population. They are the do-gooders on the block, they're the ones taking the narrow way when everyone else is taking the easy way, but people look at them as strange and abnormal because they fight against the tide of the culture, as obsessed as ours is with achievement and possessions and image. "So what gives?", the people ask Peter. "We're trying to be like Jesus, but we're outnumbered 100 to 1. It feels like we're fighting a losing battle. Why?"

Peter gives a few bits of wisdom to those who suffer for doing good and it's getting old:

1. *This is what you signed up for.* Jesus himself suffered for doing good. Doing good always comes at a price; not even love is free. The world is too unfamiliar with the ways of love for it not to push back against it. But Jesus kept doing good no matter the price, so if you want to call yourself a Christian, don't be surprised if you get push back just like Jesus did.

2. *What the world calls foolish, Jesus will honor at his return.* It's unclear what this will look like, but Peter makes it plain that those who keep the faith and continue doing good in the face of adversity will receive some kind of reward at Jesus' return.

3. *Don't suffer for suffering's sake.* We should never glorify suffering. We should never go out of our way to suffer. Suffering is never a good thing; it's a redeemable thing. Peter doesn't want people suffering because they're facing the consequences of their sinful decisions to say that they're suffering "for the Lord." No, it's when you suffer "as a Christian," when you suffer as part of your witness to the love of Christ, that you should consider yourself glad, because you are participating in Christ's suffering.

4. *Your suffering as a Christian is not for nothing.* God is still working for good in the world, usually at the hands and feet of God's people, and we have this hope that God's work will one day be complete. When we suffer for doing the work of God, we don't suffer as those without hope, but as people who know that one day it will all be worth it, even if we don't get a chance to see the finished product, when God's mission is complete and we can sit down and enjoy a job well done.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- When is the last time you faced resistance for doing the right thing?
- What are some projects of love that you are involved in but won't see finished?
- Where could you stand to suffer a little more as a Christian for doing good?

Day 2 - 1 Peter 5:1-11

¹Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ²to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. ⁵In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

⁶Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Understanding the Passage:

When elders are ordained in The United Methodist Church, it is customary for verses 2-4 of this passage to be read aloud in unison by *the non-ordained people* in the congregation. It is a humbling experience. Those who are not elders, those people sitting in the pews on Sunday morning, will speak these words over a new flock of shepherds and remind them of their job description, how they should be servants-leaders and not tyrant-lords, that this is something they get to do and not something they have to do, and it is not for profit or gain that they enter this career but for obedience and service.

Few of us will ever become ordained elders, but all of us will step into some kind of leadership position. Sometimes you want to be the leader and you intentionally take that step; other times, and maybe this is most of the time, you are pushed into that role because no one else cares enough to do the work, but you care, and you're willing to pull others into the work with you. Peter was in that second category of leader-by-surprise. He didn't set out to be Jesus' rock, but Jesus saw the gift within him and called it out of him, and when there was no else to lead the Jesus movement because no one else cared enough to step up, he stepped up. He rose to the occasion because no one else would. Leaders aren't born of genetics; they're born of necessity.

The two leadership qualities that stick out the most in this passage are humility and obedience. If you're going to be a leader, says Peter, you must be humble as Jesus was humble. Humility must become the very shape of your leadership. Why? Because the people in your care will come to look like you, and if you look like one of the narcissistic divas that the world likes to follow, then your people will become that, too. But if you take the form of a servant, your people will become servants.

And your leadership must be obedient to a higher authority, to the God who called you into this mess in the first place. You do not work for yourself. You work for a calling, and God will hold you accountable to how you pursued that calling. Plus, says Peter, think of all the other leaders working for God's Kingdom. Don't let them down. They're counting on you. If just one of you fails to be obedient, then God's mission in the world is a little weaker.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What gift is God calling out of you?
- What leadership role are you saying no to right now but maybe you need to reconsider?
- How could your leadership look more like a servant?

Day 3 - 1 Peter 5:12-14

¹² Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you, and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. ¹³ Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. ¹⁴ Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Understanding the Passage:

Try this today: whip out your phone and scroll through old text messages and voicemails that were sent to you by people who love you. Maybe you'll listen to a voicemail from a parent or grandparent, or someone you haven't talked to in a while, maybe even someone who has passed away. Maybe it's a text from an old friend or your spouse, buried in a long conversation that spans the years. What you'll have is a record of the voices of the past telling you exactly what you need to hear in the present. I love you. Hang in there. Have a good day. I miss you. See you soon. You're awesome.

We need to hear these messages. We need to hear that someone, somewhere is thinking about us, praying for us, longing for us, remembering us. We need to feel a connection that breaks the rules of space and time, even death. It's that connection with people we love and who love us that gives us hope when times get hard.

Peter is doing exactly that. Hang in there, he says, because your brother and sister Christians in Rome (the early Christians referred to Rome as a modern-day Babylon) are praying for you. They haven't

forgotten you. They send you greetings precisely because they haven't forgotten you and they miss you. Even people you've never met are holding you in prayer. Let that sink in.

We worship a God who wanted to be so connected with us that he broke the rules of space and time, even death, to be with us. God longs for us that much. Peter is asking his congregations in Asia Minor to feel that kind of deep love as embodied in the transcontinental relationships between Christians. It's a challenge for us, too, that we live out God's eternity-crossing love with the people in our lives. Because one day, somebody might need a message of encouragement, and when they go looking for it in their texts or voicemails, or in the folds of memory, they might come across you. Perhaps you are exactly the one God is sending. Let that sink in.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Who do you go to when you need encouragement?
- Who can you think of who might need encouragement from you?
- Are there people from your past you like to remember when times get tough? Name them. What would you say to you today?

Day 4 - 2 Peter 1:1-15

¹Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ:

² May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

³His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature. ⁵For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. ¹¹For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

¹² Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. ¹³I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, ¹⁴since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. ¹⁵And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

Understanding the Passage:

There is a sentence that is often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, but really comes from Bara Dada, a Hindu philosopher in the 1920's. He is said to have responded, after reading the New Testament given to him, "Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians, you are not like him." Ouch. Frankly, such a judgmental spirit isn't so Christ-like either, but I guess Dada never professed to strive to be like Jesus. We, on the other hand, have "received a faith that is ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:2) Surely something ought to be different in the way we live.

So, Peter has some specific suggestions: First, this transformation begins with God. God has given us everything we need to live just such a life. Then he tells us that God has done this through Christ, who now lives in us through faith. Because of Christ, we can partake of “the divine nature” through Jesus. So, this transformation moves from God, through Christ, alive in us through faith. Then that faith makes the rest of the journey – from our hearts (goodness) to our minds (knowledge) to our will (self-control) to a sustained will (endurance) to relationships with one another (mutual affection) to love that looks outward (love). Our job is to facilitate that journey all the way to every part of our lives. For some of us, it may move in a different order. For some it begins in our minds. For others it begins in a community that shows us how to love one another. For some it begins with a disciplined rule of life. But eventually, it can take us over completely. We call that “sanctification,” a fancy church word. Jesus called it “perfection” or “maturity.” (Matt 5:48) But remember, it begins with God, who has given us everything we need to get there.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Where did faith first take root in you? Heart? Head? Community Relationship? Way of life?
- What is different about you because of your faith? Do you think you are more like Christ?

Day 5 - 2 Peter 1:16-21

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, ²¹because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Understanding the Passage:

Imagine you’ve been picked for jury duty and there you are, sitting in the jury box, as the prosecution brings witnesses to the stand. One by one they testify. It’s not looking good for the defense. “He did it!” says one of witnesses, pointing to the man in a grey suit in the defendant’s chair. “I was there. I swear he did it!”

But then the defense attorney stands up and cross-examines the witness. “You say you were there, but did you actually see my client do it?” says the attorney. “Well, with my own eyes... I mean... no, I guess I didn’t,” says the much-deflated witness. “I didn’t actually see the act itself. But everyone I talked to later says he did it!”

Now you, sitting on the jury, have a choice to make: will you believe someone who is not an eyewitness but who is getting their information secondhand? Or would you defer to an actual eyewitness, who says the guy in the grey suit is innocent?

Peter is an eyewitness, and that’s what gives him the authority to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. In this passage, he cites the Transfiguration of Jesus as proof of his eyewitness status (see Matthew 17:1-8). Peter was there with James and John, they saw Jesus in brilliant light having a conversation with Moses and Elijah, and they heard a voice from heaven calling Jesus “my Son, my Beloved.”

Now, Peter's readers, both today and those in Peter's day, have a choice to make: they can choose to believe Peter or not. But if we choose to believe Peter as an eyewitness, we are also choosing to give him a higher authority than other preachers who are receiving their information about God on a second-hand basis. Peter will spend the rest of this letter shouting down these so-called "prophets" who say there is no second coming of Christ, even though they, unlike Peter, weren't eyewitnesses of Christ himself.

The authority of the gospel rests on eyewitness accounts of those who have seen God at work in Jesus Christ. Without those testimonies of real-life experiences of Jesus, there is no Christianity. But those experiences didn't stop with the first apostles. Even today God is at work in Jesus. Even today people have experiences of Jesus showing up in their lives. Those experiences make us apostles, people who testify to what we have seen and heard.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Do you believe Peter when he says he heard the voice from heaven? Why or why not?
- If you could preach a sermon on an experience you've had with Jesus, what would it be?