

Live through Suffering

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[0 : 00] If we just even thought about some very ordinary everyday examples, the reality is we do sometimes in more significant, sometimes in very minor ways, but we do choose to suffer.

And sometimes it would be kind of, we could title it, the cost of living. And I know economically the cost of living is something else. But the cost of living, there is a cost to the choices that we make in our lives.

And suffering is sometimes part of that for your career. Maybe some of you are suffering in order to progress your career. Suffering with the number of hours your work is suffering in your health. Suffering with kind of being dragged into the manager's office at various times, I don't know. You may be suffering at that level. You may be suffering on account of your health in order to keep fit, to be fit.

A lot of suffering involved. You'd be suffering if you pluck your eyebrows. You know, insignificant, but nonetheless, why women do? I have no idea. Why men do it, I have even less idea.

[1 : 01] But you know, you suffer willingly. You suffer for your family, don't you? You'd stay up all night for a sick child. You'd deprive yourself of sleep if you were a parent.

Husband or wife for your partner. You would spend days at the bedside of a dying parent. You would suffer for these things. Because they reveal to you what's important. And it's a bit like what we were saying last week about the economic, looking at spiritual economics at the cost of our salvation.

And again, Peter's continuing on this theme today as he talks about the reality that we will be suffering for being Christians.

Suffering for being Christians. And part of that is for us as we examine our own lives is a recognition of what value, what importance we place on being Christians, on putting Jesus Christ first in our lives.

[2 : 02] There's nothing more important for us than being Christian. There's nothing more significant. And there's nothing of greater value than being a Christian. And that ties in with the whole idea of suffering, as Peter displays and speaks about it here.

The cost of being a Christian in many different ways. And I just want to introduce that with a long introduction. I'll not say much about the past, but a long introduction today. In the light of this being communion as well, and our relationship and our covenant with the living God.

If we were Christians, we're in relationship with Jesus Christ, we're in a living, loving relationship with Him. You're in covenant with God. Our Old Testament professor in the college, 24, 23, 24 years ago when I was there, and I think probably still the same now, would describe a covenant as a bond in blood, sovereignly administered, that sounds very technical, doesn't it?

But it's just reminding us that it's a relationship, it's just like a covenant, a close, meaningful relationship we had that's sealed in the blood of Jesus Christ, that the way is open to us from what Jesus has done, and it's gifted to us by God.

It's not just an equal relationship like a marriage, although the illustration is used in Scripture. It's an unequal relationship, because God is God and we are not. He's the one who has redeemed us, and He's the one who makes the promises, and He is committed to us.

[3 : 27] What do we say to Him as Christians today? What are we doing in our response to Jesus Christ? Well, we say today, I accept your amazing gift of grace.

That's part of our deal. That is the beginning of the cost as we begin to unpack that and unfold that. 3 F's, we receive forgiveness and friendship and a future with the living God, because He lives, I can face tomorrow, because He lives, all fear is gone.

Because He lives, I know who holds the future. And we're in this relationship, this living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, that we enact in our lives this ongoing, precious, living relationship with the covenant God that we have accepted, a living, vibrant thing.

Not just an understanding of certain truths, but a living, vibrant, enacted relationship with God that we reflect in our sacrament that we share today.

I accept that amazing gift as a Christian. And we say to God also, I am your child. I'm your child. God is our Father. We saw that last night when we looked at the first petition of the Lord's Prayer. [4 : 51] God is our Father, but we're under His heavenly care and His authority. We take His name, just like children take the names of their parents.

We bear His Spirit, we're dealt by His Spirit, we enjoy His company. And we arouse the same enemies. As Christians as His child, we become, you know, when we look tonight at Acts, we're looking at chapter 24 and only one of two or three places in the Bible that the word Christian is used.

And it's been used because it was a derogatory term. We use Christian, I hope we don't use Christian in a derogatory term, but if you're called a Christian at the time of Acts, it was a real derogatory term.

And when we take the name of Christ as a Christian, we're taking His name as His child, then we do arouse the enemies of Christ and the enemies of the cross.

She will say a little bit more about that. But as we are in that, this covenant with God, we recognise it as a unique relationship, no ordinary family relationship.

[6 : 00] At some level, God in His condescension uses lots of pictures for us to understand. And He uses family and He uses siblings and He uses all kind of different pictures about a relationship to try and help us understand.

But at many levels, it doesn't bear comparison with anything, because it's not simply an ordinary relationship. We recognise your God, God is God, I am not, I am not God, and your ways are not my ways.

So there's a uniqueness and there's a difference and there's a special relationship that we have in covenant with the living God. You are God and we recognise that today in our worship and in our lives.

He is the one who is absolute life. He is the source of life and He is the one in whom we live, we move and we have our beings. And Him is purity and holiness and mystery and revelation and hidden truth and revealed truth.

This great sovereign God that we can't begin to fit into our tiny little brain boxes and minds is just so great that sometimes we walk away from Him but He is nonetheless this astonishing living God who is in covenant with us, the God who loves to stoop down and hear us pray.

[7 : 19] Loves the thought of saying, clumb is made together on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday lunch time to come together to plead, to enter into His presence and to plead to Him for the kind of things we need and also to worship Him.

Loves to hear us. Stoop down, we still God. Still God, we mustn't make idols of Him. We mustn't make a God in our own image. A God that's easy and manageable and cheap and nasty and throw away.

We mustn't ever get to the stage where we're looking down on God from a position of great superiority in our lives because of who He is as He reveals Himself and as we see in the creation but more significantly in Jesus Himself.

You're God. He is God. We are not. I am not. And that's part of the relationship, isn't it? That's part of the understanding is that I am not.

In a living relationship with Jesus Christ, we don't come to Him as an equal. We come to Him as a child, as a created child before the Creator, a redeemed child before the Redeemer.

[8 : 32] He is declared as righteous. He's declared as absolutely innocent because of what Jesus has done. But the Bible makes clear we're still in a battle and we are still sinning and we are still broken and we are being transformed.

We are becoming more like Him. That's part of our ongoing responsibility as Christians. We're always battling because I am not God and He is God.

And we're not yet perfected even though we're redeemed and will never be more righteous in His sight. In our own lives and in our own hearts, the battle to get rid of remaining sin in our lives is

indeed that, it's a battle.

We often recoil from the light, His light. We don't want to face that light. We don't like the process of sanctifying, we're sanctified when we believe, but we are also being sanctified as we move on and sometimes we don't like that.

We hate the concept of not necessarily being the best judge of our own needs. But I know. I know exactly what I need. And God, I know you should give me now because we have that relationship sometimes in our own hearts.

[9 : 56] We know better and we forget that He remains the one who is healing us, who has redeemed and is redeeming us and who is bringing us to Himself.

You're God. I'm not. That's significant in our relationship. That's as significant as we sit together at the table as we remember that. That's beautiful Savior.

He's God. We are not. And as Isaiah 55.8 says, your ways are not my ways. In many ways that takes us to the heart of Jesus Christ Himself and to the cross.

Who would have gotten that way? Who would have decided that was a way of salvation? We would have got together in committee and made a thousand different suggestions about how to save humanity.

Nailing God to the cross would not have been one of them. Your ways are not my ways. They're higher. They are different. And that is not only in relation to His character and His nature and His salvation, in His relationship with us.

[11 : 03] Do we see that? We so quickly fire up against God when His ways are not what we would expect them to be.

And particularly as we begin to hone in on this passage where we suffer, we say, God, come on, where are you? What's this all about?

Why is it happening? Don't you care? Don't you care? I'm going through what I'm going through. You're supposed to love me, you're supposed to be on His redeeming me.

I thought becoming a Christian would make life good and simple for me. And yet we find that's not the case for so many of us. And His word makes clear that that will not, while we remain having breath in our bodies, that will not be the case for us.

But He says, I will wipe away every tear I will. And the darkness that the darkness is for you is not darkness to me. There is no darkness to me.

[12 : 03] And He says, trust me. I'm with you. He says, I'm with you. Trust me. He says, I've suffered. Trust me because I'll stand beside you.

I'll take you through it. I'll redeem you in the midst of it. I'll take that suffering and I'll turn it on its head and you'll one day see and know that that's the case.

My ways are not your ways. Trust me. You know, if you know where you're going, in ordinary terms, if you know where you're going, you don't need to trust anyone else to take you there, do you?

You know the way. You know the way. And now everyone knows the way because everyone's got sat and have. If you've got a car, of course, it's not much good if you're on a bike.

But you know, it's when we don't know the way, even when we might know where we're trying to get to, but we don't know how to get there, we need to put our trust in someone.

[12 : 59] And in many ways, God's saying that to us. You know where you're going with me. You know where I'm preparing a great place, but sometimes I'm going to take you there a way you didn't expect.

The plan is mine and I will. And he says, trust me. If everything is going to plan, if you're Lord of your own life, if I'm Lord of mine, we don't need God, do we?

And spiritually wants us to trust in him. And that brings us to the passage that we've read. And he says in the passage that we will suffer for being Christians.

We will suffer. Dear friends, don't be surprised at the painful trial you're suffering. If you're insulted because of the name of Christ, you're blessed.

If you suffer as a Christian, verse 16, do not be ashamed, but praise God, you bear the name. It's simply part of the genetic reality of our lives as Christians that we will suffer.

[14 : 06] This particular people that he was writing to were suffering persecution, very overt persecution. And he's writing into that situation, tangibly, practically in reality, speaking to them and their need.

And yet he speaks to all of us in our need and in our realities. He says, you will suffer for being a Christian. And there's a couple of reasons he gives for suffering.

Here he gives. The first is simply because you belong. If you suffer simply for being a Christian, he says in verse 16, just for being a Christian, just because you belong, just because you bear that ridiculous name, Christian, which was a derogatory term, as I've said, if you belong.

Now he goes on to explain now, if you're doing wrong, if you're suffering for being a murderer, a thief, or a criminal, or a meddler, then that's just life, isn't it?

We all accept that. If we do wrong things, then we pay the price for that, usually, in our lives. If we don't pay the price in this life, then we do when we meet with our sovereign judge.

[15:19] But he's speaking of something different here. He says, this is different. He says, just for being a Christian, we've taken the name of Christ, we've become Christians.

Do we feel that that's our reality? Do we suffer? We suffer because we've awoken, for many different reasons, but at least we've suffered because we've awoken spiritual opposition.

Spiritual opposition is as if a lie goes on in the spirit world when we become Christians. And there is a recognition that we are Christ's, Christ has redeemed us and bought us.

And that is something that creates a tension in the world in which we live as a spiritual genesis, but it creates a tension in the world very often misunderstands what we are and who we are as Christians.

Those who don't believe often hate the God who is revealed in Scripture that we love and that we've come to serve. We know because we were in the same place ourselves.

[16:30] The lack of autonomy, the seeming helplessness that Christ's message brings to people saying, you need salvation, you can't earn your way.

People spend their lives seeking to justify themselves before God. And this message that says simply come and accept my salvation is a real hurt to our pride and it's a real hurt to our own ability to live with our own wisdom and our own strength and our own intellect.

And he says, don't come to me. And that gauges opposition in the world. The motives behind our morality will be one that causes opposition.

People will mock as we saw previously in the previous chapters and deride us for not going with them into the same flood of dissipation in that great phrase from previously.

The exclusivity of our claims has fine for you, but you can't possibly reckon that that is truth, what is truth, and people reject and are opposed to and will oppose us and cause us often to suffer because of these things.

[17:40] We might not feel persecuted. We might not necessarily feel persecuted for our faith.

There are many Christians today throughout the world who will be. Neil spoke about them very briefly there this morning in some instances.

But listen friends, you don't need to go further than Nidra to see people who are genuinely suffering for making that choice of becoming Christians. People in the church in Nidra, in Mesas church in Nidra, who are from Nidra and who become Christians undergo very radical, real and physical persecution for their faith.

Why would that be the case? Many reasons, simply because we belong. We belong to Jesus Christ. And there is also that whole aspect of the spiritual enemy that we have in Satan.

We see it in the life of Job as the curtain is pulled back on the mystery of what happens in people's lives. Under the sovereign eye of God, Job suffers hugely in darkness, loss of dignity, in losing his income, losing his family, losing his health, losing all these things in his life.

And there are no easy answers for that. There is no kind of A to Z of simple response to suffering. But we know he was kept and he was restored and he was suffering simply for being a believer.

[19:11] Putting his trust in God, curse God and die was what Satan hoped would be the response of Job to his sufferings.

So we will suffer simply because we belong. And that's a challenge. I wonder if it's a challenge for us today. We sit at the Lord's table as we take his name.

But we also suffer because we're being refined. Verse 12 says, Dear friends, don't be surprised at the painful trial you're suffering as though something strange were happening to you.

Now that word trials the same word as testing. It's the same word that would be used, the process of purifying silver and gold in the old days. And that would be a taking of the silver and gold and putting it into a fire, really hot fire so that the impurities would be burned off.

The process of purifying precious metal. And there's a certain level. It can't go on too much. Otherwise the precious metals are damaged and destroyed.

[20 : 20] And it's, I shouldn't think it's fabled. That's not fair to say it's fabled. But in the old days the process was checked and people would ask, when do we know when the pure silver and the gold is pure when it's right to come out of the fire?

And it would be when the refiner would say, the refiner can, when I can see my face reflected in the precious metal. And there's an illustration there for us in our own sufferings that remember, here God, I am not, your ways are higher than my ways.

And who would want that refining in many ways? But we see that he is a, we are precious to him and he is refining our lives through what we are experiencing to bring us closer to himself and to remove from us the impurities that keep us from him.

He transforms our suffering and he takes our pain and he brings life to it. He gives the picture in John 16, Jesus gives that picture of comparing it to the suffering with childbirth, the pain of childbirth and then the joy of new life, the transforming of that pain into something significant and important. And so he takes the refining, the suffering that we go through and he's refining our lives through it because he's a purpose in it, because he wants us to learn patience and learn grace and learn trust and learn sacrificial love and deal with its deep seated, deep rooted self-centeredness that so knots our spiritual stomachs in so much of our lives.

[22 : 02] Remember last night we saw that great, wonderful picture, first petition of the Lord's Prayer, which is a wonderful antidote to self-absorption and to the eye-centered prayers that we so often make, it's all about me.

And he says, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name and it just changes our focus, even changes our prayers so that our prayers are focused on the Lord God, the Lord God, Jesus Christ. So we see that he is taking the suffering that we go through and he's refining us, he's perfecting us, he's changing us into his own image, he is recognizing that we also are sharing in what his own Son shared.

Jesus Christ, how is it? He did nothing wrong. He did nothing wrong. He's the perfect guy. He did nothing wrong. In his life he never hurt anyone unnecessarily.

He was never selfish, he was never abusive, never did anything because he was the perfect Son of God yet he spent a lifetime of suffering culminating in his rejection and his death under God becoming a redeemer.

[23 : 23] So the challenge for us, just as we close this morning, the challenge for us is to what to do with suffering? Rejoice.

It's pretty hard going is it not? To rejoice. Only as we understand and recognize that God is sovereign and God is good and God is transforming and we are associating with Jesus Christ as we suffer as being a Christian, for being a Christian.

Not for wrong things we do but just for being a Christian. He uses four different words, he's rejoice, be overjoyed, be blessed, praise throughout this passage. Praise God if you bear the name of Jesus Christ, don't be ashamed.

Praise Him because you bear His name. It's part of belonging. It's part of being His family, it's part of being redeemed. It's hugely difficult. I know that.

None of us want to be in that place where we feel ostracized from the society in which we live and the ideas and the thinking of the society but we belong to Jesus and we recognize His ways and His truth in our lives and it's a privilege to bear His name.

[24 : 43] It's a great privilege, it's the glory of seeing that the miserable things and the things that we find so a struggle and the darkness that we're in isn't just pointless and isn't just meaningless and I would like you just to think about that at the Lord's table.

You've got a few moments in quietness, a great time, five minutes just in quietness as the bread and the wine's passed down. You can just meditate on that, meditate about a response to trials and difficulties for being a Christian and the opposition that sometimes we face and the testings that we go through and why we're going through them and asking God to teach us through them and to enable us to rejoice that they're not random and not meaningless and not hopeless and not a cause of despair.

That He will be close to us through it. They were counted worthy of being ridiculed for being a Christian. Don't be ashamed of that, I know.

I know my own instant, my own response is so often to be ashamed of being a Christian, being embarrassed, being a Christian where people think you're crazy and you're mad and you're nuts. Just being a Christian for believing in Jesus, you don't believe in Jesus, you don't believe in heaven and hell, you don't believe in what He's done.

[26 : 11] Yes, you're mental, you're mad. Just rejoice in that, rejoice in that. Be committed to Jesus Christ, the last verse, so then those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator.

You know, our natural response when we struggle when we're going through darkness is to walk away, that is. We say, this isn't how it should be, this isn't what I expected it to be, so we walk away and we distance ourselves from God and from His people and from His worship.

And yet He says, these are the times when you need to hold on, tie us to Him. That's when you need to be committed, don't loose your grip on Him. Recognize that if He is dealing with sin in our lives through suffering, how serious He takes sin, how much He's transforming us, and what will it be like for those who are not Christians, if it's like this for us as Christians?

See, if it's hard, He says, the righteous to be seen, what will it become of the ungodly sinner who stand before Him on that day, not covered in the righteousness of Jesus? What will it be like if we almost want to give up because of the suffering that we face in this life because of sin in the world and because of the spiritual opposition?

What will it be like if you aren't covered in the blood of Jesus Christ symbolically, spiritually? We grasp that. The importance of being committed that nothing else matters more than that.

[27 : 45] Be committed and keep doing good. That's what He says at the end of the verse. Those who suffer according to God's will commit themselves to their faith, continue to do good, keep on keeping on.

In the Christian life, I have no magic formula. There will be days when we feel on the mountaintop, we'll be filled with the Holy Spirit, we'll be blessed.

It will give us the ability just to remember who we are, but most of the time we'll be asked just to keep on keeping on, just to keep going.

And the power of the Holy Spirit, keep doing good. Even if people don't appreciate what you do in the church, your fellow Christians, keep doing good, keep coming along to these prayer meetings, even though there's five or six, keep doing these things, be committed and serve God and have that perspective in your life and we have that perspective in our lives.

Jesus Christ speaks so clearly into this world that we live in. It absolutely speaks into the kind of troubles and difficulties we face as Christians in a redeeming, realistic and empowering way.

[29 : 06] And without Jesus Christ, it's a terrible world to live in. Let's bow our heads and pray, Lord God, we ask that you would help us to see Jesus Christ and the importance of Jesus.

Lord, as we sit in silence for a few moments around the table, maybe think about what is really important to us, what we would regard worthy of suffering for, we will have many of the same things, our own selves, our families, our jobs in some ways if we have them.

Lord, we ask that we would also recognise and see what is important to us at a much bigger level and are we willing to pay the price for standing close to Jesus Christ?

Or are we on the edge of non-commitment, take us over that edge we pray and to trust? Help us not to cling on to things that we can't hold on to beyond a few years we have here as if they are infinite and of great value ultimately.

But enable us to trust in this crucified and risen Saviour who we worship on the first day of the week and who we remember today at the Lord's Supper, the one who died for our sins.

[30 : 39] And as of trusting in you and the great gift of grace, the forgiveness, the fresh start and the accompaniment through the battles and sufferings that we face and the knowledge that they are being transformed, they are being used that one day He promises to wipe away every tear.

We rejoice in that and we pray for your blessing as we think about it together. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.