

HAPPINESS ON THE HIT LIST

1 PETER 4:12-19

Peter made a very bold statement during the Last Supper just prior to the Lord's death. Jesus had predicted that one of the disciples would betray Him. Peter was incredulous. He said, "I'll stand by you, Lord. Even if everyone else abandons you, you can count on me to stay by your side.

And Jesus said to him, "Peter, before the rooster crows you will deny that you know me three times."

Peter would have wanted nothing more than to prove the Lord a liar. "Me? Deny you, Lord? Never! I'll stand by you even if I have to die!" And he was never more sincere in his life.

But you know the story. After supper they retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus, in obvious turmoil, asked Peter and the other disciples to stay awake with Him and pray.

Please note: This was the only time in the Lord's life that He asked for something from them. He wanted their companionship. He wanted human comfort. Instead, "somebody's yawn tipped the first domino, and in no time everyone's prayers had degenerated into dreams" (Tada, *When God Weeps*, p.52).

When the disciples were rudely awakened by the mob that had come to arrest Jesus, Peter tried to overcompensate for his failure to stay awake by drawing his sword and cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus rebuked him and told him to put the sword away.

Shortly thereafter, at Jesus' trial, Peter showed up incognito. He tried to blend. But he was recognized and confronted, three times, and each time he denied ever knowing Jesus. Once he was so vehement that he cursed.

And when that rooster crowed Jesus turned and looked at Peter, and Luke's Gospel says that when Peter saw Jesus looking at him, he went outside the gate and wept bitterly.

Even in an age when people cannot agree on what is right and wrong, there is still consensus that deserting someone who is in mortal danger is morally reprehensible. It is the quintessential act of cowardice. It is the epitome of selfishness.

Such behavior in the armed services carries a stiff penalty, and it is not difficult to understand why. Such behavior in an intimate relationship can severely strain or even sever that relationship, and it is not difficult to understand why. There are few things more hurtful than leaving a loved one stranded at a time when he or she is counting on you to be there.

That's why Peter wept bitterly. Oh the guilt. The shame. And, frankly, these were the feelings that lingered in Peter's consciousness even after Jesus had risen from the dead. To be sure, he was thrilled that Jesus was alive, but there was still an elephant in the room whenever he was in Jesus' presence. He couldn't help but replay scenes from that night on the screen of his mind, which no doubt produced thoughts of self-loathing. "I blew it! I let Him down! At the moment of His greatest need, I abandoned Him. Oh, what a flake I am! What must He think of me?"

Early one morning, a few days after Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were fishing and they looked up and saw Jesus on the beach, cooking breakfast for them. After they had eaten, knowing the awkwardness that Peter felt, Jesus took him aside, not to chide or rebuke him, but to bring him out of his guilty past and lead him firmly into a state of

forgiveness. Jesus fully restored him, even reinstating him to a position of privilege and responsibility.

It is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. But it's not the end of the story. Because after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit became his new operating system, Peter was confronted again by an angry mob of Jesus-haters. They commanded him to stop speaking about Jesus and healing people in Jesus' name. He said, "Sorry. We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

The Jewish leaders got so angry they wanted to kill him (5:33), but they settled on flogging him. And after Peter had been beaten we are told that he rejoiced *"because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ"* (Acts 5:41-42).

Thirty five years later Peter wrote a letter to people who had responded to that good news, people who had been scattered all over the world because they, too, were being persecuted for their identification with Jesus Christ. And he says to them in chapter 4, **verses 12-13**. ¹² *"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"* (NIV).

This is the seventh time Peter has addressed the subject of suffering in this letter, which tells you that not only is it a major theme, it was a major concern on the hearts of his hearers. Please note that when Peter talks about suffering, here, he has a particular kind of suffering in mind. He is not referring to suffering from disease, sickness, old age, accidents, catastrophes, random violence, or other kinds of things that are the result of living in a fallen world. He is making a reference solely and specifically to suffering for being a Christian, suffering for being identified with Christ.

Peter's audience was suffering because of their connection to Jesus. And Peter wrote to them, in part, because they had questions as a result. Why would anyone suffer for doing good? Where is God in all of this? And when is it going to let up?"

Christians who suffer through no fault of their own frequently have questions because it seems surprising. Not only because they've done nothing to deserve it, but because the One on whose behalf they are being persecuted, is capable of making it stop. And they wonder why He doesn't.

So Peter reminds them that they *shouldn't* be surprised by their suffering. It might seem "strange," verse 12, but when you stop and think about it, it makes perfect sense. On the same night that he denied Jesus, Peter heard Him say, ¹⁸ *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."* ¹⁹ *"If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."* ²⁰ *"Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also"* (John 15:18-20).

Why do Christians suffer? Why is there hostility and angst toward Christians that results in them being picked on and persecuted? It's very simple. It's because they don't belong to the world, they belong to Jesus. And when people of the world lash out at them they are actually lashing out at Jesus.

Do you want to know what *really* seems strange? It's that *Jesus* would suffer. He was

perfectly good and loving and kind and compassionate. He was perfectly holy and righteous. He never did anything wrong. He never had a selfish thought or an impure motive. He was always looking out for others, always doing good.

Why was He persecuted? Why was He maligned and assaulted and eventually killed? For all the reasons I just mentioned. Because He was righteous in an unrighteous world. He was Light in a world full of darkness and as the Light He exposed the motives and the attitudes and the behavior of those who lived in the darkness. His holiness magnified their sinfulness, and it made them squirm, it made them feel ashamed, it made them feel guilty.

And people don't like to feel those things. They will go to great lengths to keep from feeling those things, even if it means trying to extinguish the light. It's one of the oldest reactions in the world.

Cain killed his brother Abel, we are told, because Abel's actions were righteous and his were evil. Abel didn't do anything wrong, and he didn't do anything to Cain, but his actions exposed and magnified Cain's unrighteousness, and Cain couldn't stand it. Somehow he had to alleviate his discomfort—he had to feel better about himself—and so he eliminated the righteousness.

That's why Jesus suffered, and that's why Jesus said those who follow Him would suffer, too. For the same reasons. We not only represent Him, we resemble Him. Because of His Spirit who lives in us we act like Him, respond like Him, think like Him, talk like Him. And that makes us vulnerable to opposition and abuse for the same reason that Christ Himself experienced those things.

So how does that make you feel? Peter says, it ought to make you happy. He says, don't think it strange, but *“rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ.”* We can rejoice when we suffer because it is radical identification with Him.

What does that mean?

We are told in Acts 9 that a man named Saul of Tarsus was obsessed with terrorizing and even killing followers of Jesus, because he thought that Jesus was a fraud, and that this movement called “the Way” was blasphemous. So he appointed himself marshal, formed a posse, and went throughout Palestine hunting down Christians so he could drag them to Jerusalem, throw them in jail, try them for treason, and punish them severely.

We are told in **Acts 9:3-4**. *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”*

verse 5, *“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.*

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.

When Jesus introduced Himself to Saul He did *not* say, “Why are you persecuting my followers?” Or, “Why are you persecuting my church?” He said, “Why are you persecuting Me?”

That's what I mean by radical identification. Jesus is so identified with His church that He not only knows and cares what is happening to us, He *participates* in what is happening to us. When we are being persecuted, *He* is being persecuted. When we suffer, *He* suffers.

That's how it is when you belong to someone.

When we lived in Nairobi many years ago there were two men, living on either side of us, who were two of the meanest individuals I've ever met. Both of them were from Pakistan, both of them could be very loud, and both had very violent tempers.

For some reason these two men hated each other, and occasionally they would create a scene in front of our house which inevitably attracted twenty or so neighborhood boys who were eager to see a fight. They would scream and swear at each other. Sometimes they would throw things at each other. One time I even saw one of them chase the other inside his compound, after which he put a padlock on the outside of the gate so the other man could not get out.

That man's name was Mohammed, and he looked just like Saddam Hussein, only about twenty five years younger. Mohammed had a blue car—a Peugeot—of which he was very proud, and of which he was *very* protective. Unfortunately the place where he liked to park his car was the place where the neighborhood boys played soccer. It was at the end of a cul-de-sac, right in front of our house. So whenever he drove into the neighborhood and parked there, he would tell the boys to scram, and threaten them if they didn't.

One day, I was working in my office in the house and I heard his car alarm go off. I didn't think much about it, since it happened often, until James came running in the house yelling, "Dad quick, Mohammed's beating Lucas!"

What do you think I did?

Well, I did what any of you fathers would have done. I calmly sat James down on the chair and said, "Son, this is a matter for Lucas and Mohammed to work out. Sure, Lucas is only seven years old and yes, Mohammed is a mean and violent man, but I'm sure he's reasonable. Whatever Lucas has done to receive this beating he must have deserved it. Now you go on out and play and let me get back to my work."

I don't think so.

When I heard those words I was out the door and into the street in less than four seconds, where Lucas promptly latched onto my leg. A split second later I was two inches away from Mohammed's nose, realizing what a tremendous advantage it was to be tall.

Now, I need to tell you that we did not throw any punches or do anything that would be considered violent, much to the disappointment of the twenty or so boys who were surrounding us. We just came to an understanding. Simply stated: "Mohammed, whenever you see this boy, don't ever forget he belongs to me."

How do you think that incident affected Lucas? I should tell you that Lucas, being the tough, street-smart boy that he had become by that time, was not the least bit traumatized by Mohammed's assault, as I would have been at his age. But I do remember him saying to me, "Wow dad! That was cool!" I did notice that from then on, whenever he and I walked down that street together, he held his head a bit higher around those twenty or so boys who lived on that street. And he was never afraid of Mohammed again.

Here's the point of the story. Knowing that we belong to Jesus ought to make us feel similarly proud of our association with Him, content and secure in our intimate relationship with Him. Knowing that He is not merely a spectator when we suffer, but that we are participating together in those sufferings, ought to cause us to rejoice.

Because, as we sang earlier, *"I know who goes before me, I know who stands behind. The God of angel armies is always by my side. The One who reigns forever, he is a friend of mine. The God of angel armies is always by my side."*

If we suffer for His sake, we can, like Peter, rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer disgrace for His name.

But there is another reason to rejoice. We can rejoice when we suffer for Jesus in this

present world because we will be compensated for them in the world to come. One day, Jesus will make things right, and richly reward those who have endured. And what is that reward? **Verse 13b.** “...so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

The compensation we will receive for our present sufferings is an inexpressible and glorious joy that will never diminish and never end. The word translated *overjoyed* refers to a steady, persistent joy that is building to a climax. It is churning, it is effervescing, and when the glory of Jesus is revealed it will erupt like a volcano and spill out of us for all eternity.

And Peter says that the anticipation of this overflowing joy that will be ours when Jesus comes ought to make us joyful right now. It's the joy that comes from hope.

But we can rejoice in something else when we suffer for Jesus' sake. **Verse 14.** 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.*

Stephen was a man described in Acts 6 as full of faith and the Holy Spirit. On one occasion he fearlessly declared the good news about Jesus to a less than receptive crowd. As he spoke, and they were confronted with the truth, they became angry. And as that message challenged their skewed belief system and their perverted sense of self-righteousness, their anger turned into full-blown rage.

But as Stephen spoke we are told that there was something very conspicuous about his countenance. The text says that his accusers looked at him and concluded that his face was like the face of an angel.

Do you know what the face of an angel looks like? I don't, and I doubt if they did before they saw Stephen that day. But it's clear that there was something unmistakably supernatural about it. It was glowing. It didn't have the marks of fear and worry that you might expect in such circumstances.

That's an illustration of the Spirit of glory and of God resting on someone.

However, his demeanor only made his accusers angrier. They started pelting him with stones. And while they were doing it Stephen calmly looked up into heaven and lo and behold, he saw Him! Jesus! *Standing* at the right hand of God.

This is the only reference in the Bible to Jesus standing instead of sitting at God's right hand. Was He standing to salute Stephen? Was He standing with outstretched arms so He could welcome him into His presence with an embrace?

Whatever the reason, one thing is certain. Stephen was consumed with what he saw. As you read the account it almost seems as though Stephen wasn't paying any attention to the insults, or feeling the impact of the stones that were pummeling his body—stones that eventually took his life. Because there he was, eyes fixed on Jesus. Transfixed by His glory. And the spirit of glory and of God was resting on Him.

But it's not just Stephen. This kind of thing has happened with followers of Jesus who have suffered all throughout history.

Peter appointed a man named Ignatius to be bishop of the church in Asia Minor, where he served in that capacity for forty years. While the Roman emperor Trajan was visiting the region, he arrested Ignatius because he confessed Jesus, rather than Caesar, as Lord. The emperor sent him in chains to Rome, where he was hustled to the arena and thrown to two fierce lions who immediately devoured him.

At no time did he try to escape his miserable death. On the contrary, while bound for Rome under armed guard, he wrote a letter to the church in the imperial capitol insisting that

no one interfere. He said, "...nearness to the sword is nearness to God; to be among the wild beasts is to be in the arms of God; only let it be in the name of Jesus Christ. I endure all things that I may suffer together with Him."

I'm not sure I have ever been truly persecuted or have truly suffered because of my faith in Christ. I've been called "judgmental" and "narrow-minded" for some of my convictions, but I'm not sure that counts as persecution. I've never been attacked, I've never gone to jail, and I've never been threatened with death. But I've often wondered how I would respond if any of those things happened to me. Could I respond like Jesus, or Peter, or Stephen, or Ignatius? Perhaps you have wondered the same thing about yourself.

I think a lot depends on how much we understand who we are in Christ, and how deeply that understanding has permeated our self-awareness. Do I really believe that I am not my own but I've been bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus? That I am thoroughly *defined* by Christ—not only by what He has done for me but the fact that He now lives in me? Do I really believe that I have been crucified with Christ, and that I no longer live but Christ lives in me, that the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved and gave Himself for me (Gal. 2:20)?

I am convinced that the more I know Christ, and the more I realize who I am in Christ, the more likely I will respond like Christ if and when I was persecuted for Him. Indeed, I am convinced I would rejoice when I suffered for Jesus' sake because I have the privilege of sharing in His sufferings, and anticipating His rich rewards.

Happiness on the Hit List

1 Peter 4:12-14

Main Idea: We can rejoice when we suffer for Jesus' sake because we are sharing in His sufferings and He will richly reward us.

Introduction: Peter comes full circle

Suffering for Jesus is to be expected (v.12)

A specific kind of suffering

Shouldn't be surprised

Jesus was good all the time, and yet...

Goodness magnifies sinfulness, and makes people squirm

Reasons to rejoice (vv.13-14)

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ (v.13a)

Radical identification with Christ

How He suffers when we suffer

Anticipating *overflowing* joy (v.13b)

Soaking with his glory (v.14)

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

1 Peter 4:12-14

Read the Passage and review the main idea of the text.

We live in a culture in which if we are ridiculed or persecuted for being a Christian we can take legal measures to stop it (i.e. get restraining order, hire a lawyer, go to court). Is this appropriate? How would this affect a person's joy for sharing in Christ's suffering?

If joy in the midst of suffering comes from anticipating the "inexpressible and glorious joy" that will be ours when Jesus is revealed, how can we live each day in anticipation of that joy?

Has there been a time when you have suffered for Jesus' sake? How did God use that suffering in your life? Are there lasting results?