

REJOICE EVEN WHEN....
1 Peter 4:12-19

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
December 12, 2021

The third Sunday of Advent is Joy.

“Pastor, I don’t have any Christmas joy. How could I? If you only knew what I was going through.”

Peter’s message to suffering people in chapter 4 of his first epistle is to keep on rejoicing! Peter is telling followers of Christ to keep Christmas Joy in the midst of chaos.

“Sadness should be shared” was the title of Carol Weston’s usually witty and humorous “Backtalk” column in *McCalls* magazine (February 1986). But the column was not humorous in this particular issue. Carol explains that upon her father’s death she found herself paralyzed in life. At a standstill. She was dreaming about her father’s gourmet cooking and seeing his face in every man she looked at.

For comfort she would call her mother day after day. She always found her mother a rock of composure and strength, and that – that was the problem. “I cried on my mother’s shoulder, but she never soaked mine in return,” explained Carol.

Yet one day, as her mother cleaned out her husband’s tobacco drawer, the smells of Dad – cedar box, leather pouch and apple tobacco – bought her to the long-awaited tears. This time she called her daughter, and the healing began. Carol concludes, “Because my mother shared her sadness with me, it is easy for me to share her joy!

Like Carol Weston discovered that “trouble should be shared,” you and I will discover in a letter from the Apostle Peter that we are called upon as Christians to share in the troubles of Christ. And as we experience the troubles of being in Christ, we should keep on rejoicing. Rejoice, Peter says, even when troubles come.

This is the powerful message of Peter in his first letter to the Christians of Asia Minor, what we would call Turkey today. Turn in your copy of the Scriptures to 1 Peter 4:12-19, and let us hear how his message still applies to us today.

Up until now, Peter has written in his letter warning his readers about being trapped by various temptations, such as hatred, deceit, hypocrisy and speaking evil of one another. He has urged them that most important is that they have a strong love among themselves. The possibility of suffering or trials has been, first of all, conditional (chapter 1, verse 6), and then potential (chapter 3, verse 14).

But here, in verse 12 of chapter 4, Peter intensifies his focus on the suffering Christians must face. The suffering is now actual. The setting is just before Nero's horrible outburst of persecution on the people called Christians. Nero was the Roman emperor who, around AD 64, began to persecute Christians to the point of burning them alive to light his garden and making sport, as animals tore into human flesh. And as the tension was mounting and their persecutions became more open and more harsh, Peter brings his message: "Rejoice even when trouble comes."

Nero, himself, had set the city on fire. Tacitus (a Roman historian alive at the time) gives us Nero's scheme. **To avert suspicion about himself, he put forward as guilty, and afflicted with the most exquisite punishments, those who were hated for their abominations and called "Christians" by the populace.** *Christus*, from whom the name was derived, was punished by the procurator, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius. The noxious form of religion, checked for a time, broke out again not only in Judea, its original home, but also in the city of Rome, where all the abominations meet and find devotees. Therefore, first of all, those who confessed to being Christians were arrested and then, as a result of their information, a large number were implicated – not so much on the charge of incendiaryism, as for the hatred of human race. They died by methods of mockery. Some were covered with skins of wild beasts and then torn by dogs. Some were crucified. Some were burned as torches, to light the night. But after the extreme cruelty, commiseration was stirred for them, although guilty of deserving the worse penalties, because men felt that their destruction was not on account of public welfare but to gratify the cruelty of Nero. (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3) Tacitus clearly implies that the Christians were innocent, and Nero simply used them as scapegoats.

It is in the midst of a growing persecution that Peter begins to write his epistle.

First of all, Peter says:

I. Rejoice even when trouble comes because of the positive results you receive (vs. 12-14).

Notice verses 12-14. The people in these churches were surprised that being in Christ would result in some hardships for them. Especially the Gentiles, the non-Jewish members, were surprised because they were not used to being mistreated on account of their faith. They thought it strange that in accepting a gospel so full of blessing they also faced new trials of a fiery sort. Earlier in the first chapter of his letter, Peter first introduced the idea of the "fiery test." He explained that just as the refiner purified his gold with fire, God allowed troubles to purge Christians in Asia Minor. But Peter's emphasis is not on the glow of the fire but, rather, on the pure results.

Still today, across America, we have the message of the preachers of health and wealth and prosperity. One would suppose if he or she were to follow their theology that once one proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior that there will never again be any difficulties, hardships, losses or sufferings among those who call Christ Lord. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth found in Scripture.

As we look in the New Testament, we find that John the Baptist, of whom Jesus said there was no greater man born of woman, found himself in Herod's stinking dungeon. There, an evil woman named Herodias had him beheaded in revenge because he had condemned her immoral conduct. There is no record in Scripture that an angel visited John's cell to explain the meaning of his persecution. This great, godly man, who was the designated forerunner to Jesus, went through the same confusing experiences as we. It is comforting to know that John responded in a very human way. He sent a secret message to Jesus from his prison cell asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect somebody else?" Have you ever felt like asking that question? When God doesn't respond, when the suffering begins to pile up – "I don't know, Lord. Are you for real? I wasn't prepared to suffer like this."

Oh, we go quickly over to Stephen in the Book of Acts who was stoned to death for proclaiming the name of Christ. And the disciple James, to whom Acts 12 devotes only one verse: King Herod Agrippa "had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword." Tradition tell us that ten of the twelve disciples were eventually executed (excluding Judas who committed suicide and John, who was exiled). We also believe that Paul, who was persecuted, stoned, and flogged, was later beheaded in a Roman prison.

I'm not sure, but somewhere we have gotten the notion that the Christian life is a piece of cake. Where is the evidence for the "name it, claim it" theology that promises God will skip along in front of us with His great cosmic broom, sweeping aside each trial and every trouble and uncertainty? Not so. Jesus told his disciples that they should anticipate suffering. He said, "I have told you these things so that you may have peace. In this world you have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Paul wrote, "In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. For when we came to Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within" (2 Corinthians 7:4-5). Peter, again, in our passage, leaves no doubt about the difficulties in this Christian life when he wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you may participate in the sufferings of Christ, that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed."

(James Dobson) There is in Scripture a consistent, unequivocal expectation that we have been given by the biblical writers. And yet, we seem determined to rewrite the text. It makes us sitting ducks for satanic mischief. Why do so many believers feel that God owes them smooth sailing, or at least a full explanation for the hardships they encounter? Have we forgotten that God, Himself, is holy, majestic, sovereign? That he is accountable to no one? That He's not an errand boy who chases the assignments we dole out? He's not a genie who pops out of the bottle to satisfy our whims. He is not our servant – we are his. And that our very existence is to glorify and honor Him. Even so, sometimes He performs mighty miracles on our behalf, and sometimes He chooses to explain His action in our lives, and sometimes His presence is real, as if we had encountered Him face to face. But at other times, when nothing makes sense, when what we are going through is "not fair", when we feel all alone in God's waiting room, He simply says, "Trust me."

Notice verse 13. One of the positive results of our difficulties is "but in so much that we are sharing Christ's sufferings, keep on rejoicing so that, also, at the uncovering of His glory you may rejoice triumphantly."

Paul also expressed the same idea when he wrote in his letter to the church in Rome, “...and joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together.” As Christians of the New Testament were representatives of Christ, they suffered as Christ suffered while on earth. Yet, even as Christ will rejoice as triumphant victor, they will share in his triumph. But all of the positive results are not withheld until the last days.

Another positive result that you receive despite the troubles that come about by your being in Christ is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Notice, verse 14 says it best: “Seeing that you are reproached on account of the name of Christ, you are happy, because the spirit of glory, yes, the spirit of God is dwelling upon you.” Peter used the same word “reproached” that is used to describe the cold, bitter mocking that Christ received while he was jeered by the soldiers at Calvary. Even in their trouble, no, especially in their trouble, these early Christians could be happy because of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The same is true for you and for me that was true for the Christians under Nero’s terrible rule. Trouble is unavoidable if we are to become followers of the Chief one who was troubled – Christ. “If they hated me, they will hate you” – words from the lips of Jesus (John 15:18). The equation remains unbroken: as you share His troubles, you will share His glory; and as you receive the insults he received, you will have the same spirit remaining with you as it remained with him. The forms of trouble change, but the positive results do not.

Not only can you rejoice because of the positive results, but you can also

II. Rejoice even when trouble comes because your suffering is not the result of your sin (vs. 15-18).

Notice verses 15-18. In verses 15-18 Peter clarified his use of the word suffering. “Don’t misunderstand,” Peter seems to have said. “Just because you suffer does not mean that you suffer the Christ-type suffering that I’m talking about.” Notice how specific Peter became, even to the point of listing a sample of suffering brought about by evil – murder, theft, evil doing – and amongst this list of horrendous acts he includes troublesome meddling. Peter made sure that the Christians of Asia Minor did not misuse his message as a license to do evil and then console themselves for their suffering.

In verse 16 Peter made the distinction clear. He explained that the suffering that was accompanied by positive results is directly related to one’s claim to be a follower of Christ – a Christian. Even this name, in the first century Asia Minor, had developed into somewhat of a sarcastic smirk.

Moreover, Peter delivered an intense message in verse 18: “And if the righteous man is scarcely saved, what will become of the impious man and (the) sinner.” The idea comes from Proverbs 11:31. It is important to realize that “scarcely saved” does not mean that there is doubt about our future. Rather, Peter once again emphasizes the troubles through which we will go through in this life. But note the cause for rejoicing – our troubles are not the result of our own bad deeds, as with the ones doing evil. And their future is all the more filled with trouble.

A United Press International story appeared in the Hartford City *News-Times*. It explains that a bank robber in Oakland, California, escaped with two million dollars. But he is suing the bank! It seems that a bag of money was loaded with a bomb that releases tear gas and a brightly colored dye. Daniel Canelairo, the robber, suffered some burns from the explosion, and his attorney is quoted as saying, "Daniel is a very mild fellow, but he feels quite strongly that a bank should not be putting these kinds of bombs in their cash drawers." (*Star-Telegram*, Sunday, November 8, 1987). His suffering was a direct result of his committing one of the very evils that Peter lists – theft.

Therefore, it is still true today. You must ask yourselves this question: Is my suffering brought about by living a life-style characterized by those graces which flow from a Christ-like life? The very nature of this world is that it must lash out against goodness. Remember Christ on the cross? If the answer is a sincere "yes," then rejoice even when trouble comes because your suffering is not the result of your sin.

Peter gives us another reason to rejoice in the midst of difficulty.

III. Rejoice even when trouble comes because of you opportunities to help others (v. 19).

Notice verse 19. Because there were no banks in ancient times, a person had to make a decision when he went on a trip. He had to choose an individual to entrust with his money and valuables. And to break such a trust was a serious offense. Peter explained that those who suffered as Christians were to likewise deposit their most precious valuable – their own soul – over to their faithful creator, God. Jesus was the very example when He said while on the cross, "Father, I now commit my spirit into your care" (Luke 23:46).

What is it that Peter taught would be the very partner of this commitment to God? Helping others! Being helpful was not the way to give one's soul over to God, but clearly it would accompany true commitment. Peter said to the ones suffering, not to those to whom no trouble comes, "Commit yourself in well doing."

We often find ourselves intending to help our neighbor clean out his garage just as soon as ours is clean. But the problem is that ours is never clean. Don't wait until your troubles cease to help others. Rather, keep your happy spirit in the midst of trouble because of your opportunities to help others.

And helping others means now. There is a beautiful literary piece called "The Station" by Robert J. Hastings.

Tucked away in our subconscious is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves on a long trip that spans the continent. We are traveling by train. Out the windows we drink in the passing scene of cars on nearby highways, of children waving at a crossing, of cattle grazing on a distant hillside, of smoke pouring from a power plant, of row upon row of corn and wheat, of flatlands and valleys, of mountains and rolling hillsides, of city skylines and village halls.

But uppermost in our minds is the final destination. Bands will be playing and flags waving. Once we get there our dreams will come true, and the pieces of our lives will fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. How restlessly we pace the aisles, damning the minutes for loitering – waiting, waiting, waiting for the station.

“When we reach the station, that will be it!” we cry.

“When I’m 18.”

“When I buy a new 450SL Mercedes-Benz!”

“When I put the last kid through college.”

“When I have paid off the mortgage!”

“When I get a promotion.”

“When I reach the age of retirement, I shall live happily ever after.”

Sooner or later we must realize there is no station, no one place to arrive at once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream. It constantly outdistances us.

“Relish the moment” is a good motto, especially when coupled with Psalm 118:24: “This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” It isn’t the burdens of today that drive men mad. It is the regrets over yesterday and the fear of tomorrow. Regret and fear are twin thieves who rob us of today.

So stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot more often, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more, cry less. Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough. (Ann Landers, Waco Tribune-Herald, June 13, 1991)

Rejoice even when trouble comes, because of your ability to help others.

Christmas is just around the corner. Christ is coming to our chaos. Find joy in unexpected place and unexpected people. Maybe even in a poor carpenter’s baby, born in a tiny town – Bethlehem. Born to unexpected people in a peculiar place. But Jesus is Joy among us, even – no especially – in our suffering, for He came to suffer with us and for us. He knows your sorrow, and He wants you to have His Joy.

Have Joy, Christmas Joy, even when trouble comes.