

Persecuted but Not Forsaken

I Peter 3:13-18

Introduction

The central theme of I Peter is suffering and endurance in the face of persecution. At the time this letter was written (mid-60s AD), Nero was likely serving as the Roman Emperor (54-68 AD), and the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD) was an impending reality. For the next three centuries, Christians would be mercilessly persecuted under Rome, being made public spectacles in gruesome one-sided death matches as they faced off against fully trained and armed Roman Gladiators or wild animals such as lions, tigers, and bears. The stakes were high, and publicly expressing your faith in Jesus Christ could lead to dispossession of land and wealth, imprisonment, and in many cases, death and martyrdom. While the context of I Peter is on suffering brought about specifically through persecution, I would suggest that the principles and encouragements of this letter, can be applied to all forms of human suffering and affliction experienced by Christians in service to Christ. I titled this sermon, "Persecuted, Not Forsaken," being inspired by two familiar passages.

First, by David's words in Psalm 37:25, where he writes: "I have been young, and now am old, yet **I have not seen the righteous forsaken** or his children begging for bread."

Reflecting on the span and years of his life, David writes that he has never witnessed a righteous person, someone who lived faithfully and with integrity, forsaken or abandoned by God. The imagery of children begging for bread indicates that neither the righteous nor their descendants were ever left in a state of extreme poverty or deprivation. God cares for the needs of His people!

Second, by a similar sentiment echoed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:7-10: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; **persecuted, but not forsaken**; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."

Persecution, and in a broader sense, any human suffering that we face directly or indirectly in this life is to be expected, and from an eternal perspective, ultimately results in God's blessing. At first glance, this may sound like a conflict. After all, aren't suffering and blessing on opposite ends of the continuum? As Jeremy taught us last week at the men's breakfast, this is an example of a biblical paradox, a seemingly contradictory statement that is still true, and can be resolved through careful exposition of God's word. Something I hope I am successful in this morning.

Three Assumptions

Assumption #1 - We cannot escape trials and tribulations in life.

I heard a pastor recently say that "our theology is not a theology of avoidance, but rather of laying down and giving up our lives for Christ." We cannot, through human means alone, prevent all suffering, but to this end, as Peter has instructed, should not recklessly stir up trouble through sinful or godless behavior; but rather, rejoice and see suffering as a "gracious thing" when we are called to endure it when doing good and living righteously before God and men.

1 Peter 4:12-13: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But **rejoice** insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also **rejoice** and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

2 Timothy 3:12: “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Philippians 1:29: “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”

Assumption #2 – God is sovereign over all things good and bad.

As we learned recently in the theology class, reading about the incommunicable attributes of God. On the attribute of God’s sovereignty, the author writes, “God is totally, supremely, and preeminently over all his creation. There is not a person or thing that has escaped his control and foreknown plan.” Many have considered the age-old philosophical question, “why do bad things happen to good people,” and the corollary, why is their suffering in the world. The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that all things, both the good and the evil, the things that bring us joy and the crushing and most sorrowful events in life, are from God and under his sovereign rule and control. Turn to Ecclesiastes and let’s read this together:

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14: “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the **day of prosperity** be joyful, and in the **day of adversity** consider: **God has made the one as well as the other**, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.”

Ecclesiastes 9:1-2: “But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds **are in the hand of God**. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked...”

Job’s Example: One of the greatest examples of the righteous suffering is found in the life of Job. His journey through suffering, and ultimately prevailing in it, were both divinely orchestrated by the Lord.

Job 1:8: “And the LORD said to Satan, ‘**Have you considered my servant Job**, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’”

- **Loss of wealth:** Job lost his possessions to invading forces, all of his business holdings (sheep, cattle, camels, donkeys, etc.) and the servants tending his flocks and was left financially ruined.
- **Loss of family:** Job lost his sons and daughters, killed tragically when a great wind struck their house and it collapsed upon them.
- **Physical affliction:** Job experienced immense suffering from what the Bible described as “loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.”
- **Loss of friends and social standing:** he was falsely accused of suffering because of his sin, when in fact, he was singled out by God because of his righteousness, and his afflictions were a test of his faith and perseverance orchestrated by God himself. Even Job’s wife joined the chorus of his accusers, saying: “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die.” To which Job replied, “shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”

As we see from the text, not all persecution is a direct act of human oppressors. Satan conspired against Job and used a human army, a natural disaster, and physical afflictions to torment Job, confident that when crushed, Job would curse God. Job was brought down into a deep pit of

despair, but when the time of testing had come to an end, God vindicated him, restoring his wealth and reputation, blessing him with seven sons and three daughters, and adding 140 years to the days of his life.

Job 42:10-11: “And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him.”

Assumption #3 – God is for us.

Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

God uses all situations, whether easy to endure, or extremely difficult, painful, or challenging, for the ultimate benefit and welfare of his people, to those who have a loving and faithful relationship with him.

Romans 8:31-32: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

God is on the side of his children and always will be. His protection is absolute. No one... nothing... can ultimately prevail against us.

Verse 35, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”

Verse 37: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and **not to harm you**” (NIV)... “plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.” (ESV)

- Given as a message of hope to Israel during their captivity with the assurance that God would bring them back to the Promised Land in 70 years and restore them and renew his relationship with them.

Now to the main points of the sermon which I’ve labeled:

- (1) God’s Protection and Blessing
- (2) A Christian’s Response to Suffering
- (3) Christ, Our Example

1) God’s Protection and Blessing (verses 13-14a)

- b) The Promise: Who is there to harm you?
 - i) Peter’s asks a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is no one!
- c) The Condition: If you are zealous for what is good...

- i) **Psalm 34:7-8:** “The angel of the LORD encamps around those **who fear him**, and delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man **who takes refuge in him!**”
- ii) It’s important to note that our righteousness or our ability to endure suffering for righteousness sake does not mean that we live perfectly, without fear, without anguish, without doubt, or without sin. If this were the case, we would all be disqualified. Romans makes it clear that, “None is righteous, no, not one.” The prophet Isaiah wrote, “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” And Ecclesiastes 7:20 says this, that “surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” So then, how are we to be able to be zealous for what is good. The Bible makes clear that it is only by God’s grace that we can do good. We are justified through faith in Jesus Christ alone and our righteousness is a gift from God, imputed to anyone who accepts Him as their Savior. For Christians, it is possible by God’s help, through the transformative power of his Holy Spirit, and our partnership throughout the lifelong process of sanctification, to do good; and to receive grace and forgiveness when failing to do so.
- iii) Throughout this letter, Peter encourages believers to do good and to live righteously, and that in doing so, we will remain under the umbrella of God’s sovereign protection. Does this mean that by doing good, nothing bad will ever happen to us, or that by doing good, we can escape suffering? No, not necessarily, as Peter immediately follows up by saying “**IF** you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed.”
- iv) By doing good, we are assured as followers of Christ that any suffering we are called on to endure will be redemptive and ultimately result in God’s blessing. Whether we are able to recognize the blessing immediately or even in our lifetime is irrelevant. God’s eternal blessing on those who suffer for righteousness sake is assured.
- d) In C.S. Lewis’ classic Narnia series, I’ve always remembered the scene where Mr. and Mrs. Beaver try to prepare Susan for her first encounter with Aslan, King of Narnia, and the fictional representation of Jesus Christ in the seven-book series.

Mr. Beaver tells Susan “He is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great lion. Susan asks “Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” Mrs. Beaver responds, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” “Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy. “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “Course he isn’t safe. **But he’s good.** He’s the King, I tell you.”

- e) **Joseph’s Example:** Just ask Joseph how safe he felt after being thrown into a pit by his ten jealous brothers. In time, he would come to understand that the misery he endured during years of unjust treatment and adversity were purposely designed by God for some greater good and divine purpose. Before his death, he comforted his brothers and allayed their fears with these words: “As for you, you meant evil (harm) against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” –Genesis 50:20:
- f) **Stephen’s Example:** When we get to heaven, we can ask Stephen, the first Christian martyr recorded in the Book of Acts, whether following Jesus was safe. Stephen is described by Luke as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit... and full of grace and power, doing great signs and wonders among the people.” Luke writes that Stephen’s adversaries in the synagogue “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” They stirred up opposition against him, seized him, brought him before the religious council, and set up false witnesses to accuse him of blasphemous assaults on Moses and God. In response to his impassioned testimony, Luke tells us

that the crowd became “enraged” and “ground their teeth at him” before stoning him to death, but Stephen stood firm in his faith to the end and was blessed in suffering for righteousness sake. We’re told that being full of the Holy Spirit in the moments before his death that “he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” Stephen’s death was followed by what Luke described as “a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” and a scattering of the disciples who “went about preaching the word.” Stephen’s death was the catalyst for the spread of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem and resulted in great revival. But there was a cost to following Jesus, and for those in The Way, it was anything but safe. But God’s steadfast love and goodness is constant and endures despite suffering.

- g) Other examples: During the Exodus, God protected the Israelites from being captured by parting the Red Sea, allowing them to cross safely to the other side, then closing it down to drown Pharaoh’s army. He gave Esther favor with the king to prevent the annihilation of the Jewish people. He protected Daniel in the lion’s den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. He delivered David countless times from the hand of Saul. He sent an angel to Peter during his imprisonment to release the chains and set him free. He repeatedly rescued Paul through miraculous interventions and divine guidance. God may not be safe, but he is good and zealously protects his children.

2) A Christian’s Response to Suffering (verses 14b-15a)

Three encouragements from Peter...

a) Have no fear of them, nor be troubled...

Isaiah 41:8-10: “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; **fear not**, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

I read this week that the Bible includes some form of the phrase “fear not” 365 times, one for each day of the year. Fear is a natural human response to trouble and distress and the admonition to not be afraid is meant as a reminder and an encouragement, and not a rebuke.

Jesus, knowing the distress that his death and departure would cause his disciples, left them with the promise of the Holy Spirit, and this blessing from John 14:27, saying: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. **Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.**”

b) Honor Christ as Holy (sanctify the Lord – Hallow His name)

In Psalm 22, David erupts in anguish with prophetic Messianic utterance, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” foretelling the words Jesus would cry out from the cross as he suffered unimaginable physical and spiritual torment. David continues with, “Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” Anyone who has experienced human suffering can identify with David at this moment. The anguish and distress of the moment can seem overwhelming, our faith can wobble on the brink of unbelief, our raw emotions may characterize our weakened state of mind, and we may feel utterly alone, abandoned, and without hope.

In verse 3, David flips the script and shifts his focus upward to God in remembrance of God's past faithfulness. "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame."

c) Testify of the hope that is in you....

Psalm 22:22-27: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him. The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.

3) Christ, Our Example (verse 15b-18)

Isaiah 53:7 prophesied of the coming Messiah Jesus, that "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." Peter added in chapter 2:23, that "when he (Jesus) was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

Peter concludes this section of the text reminding the reader that our conduct in suffering is important.

- In defending the Gospel, to do so with kindness and respect. If you struggle doing so, then try following Jesus' example of maintaining silence. Or as Abraham Lincoln advised: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt."
- Maintain a clear conscience, so by virtue of our good behavior in Christ, our accusers and oppressors will be put to shame.
- If God so wills, it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Closing thoughts...

Those who suffer for righteousness sake will be blessed...

Matthew 5:10-12: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..."

Jesus is praying for us that our faith will not fail...

1 Peter 3:12: "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer."

Luke 22:31 "Simon, Simon, behold, **Satan demanded to have you**, that he might sift you like wheat, **but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail**. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."