

Well, good afternoon, friends. Now, being at this conference, I think of a couple of years ago, I was at a conference where the average age was somewhere around 25 to 30. And I'm not sure anyone at that conference knew, but that day my father was in hospital. And it was too late for me to go and be with him. I was too far away. But just before one of the sessions, I found out that his heart had stopped and I didn't know if they'd be able to get it going again. And my father was a believer. He is still a believer. I wasn't worried about his fate, but hearing my father's heart had stopped, death loomed. Pain was large for me.

And at that conference every single song was about sins forgiven, guilt dealt with, oh wonderful, beautiful gospel truths. But none of them were really hitting directly with where I was at right then. That day, with my father in that state, I needed to hear what the gospel has to say about suffering, pain, death. But because the demographic of the conference was young, death and suffering weren't dealt with. They weren't the felt needs of the majority. And in my experience, that's a common blind spot. It means that Christians are going out into life without the gospel ballast to deal with the storms of life. See as Christians, yes, we do deal with guilt and sin, but sometime or other we also have to face opposition. We face friends, family dying. We just come across the awfulness of a fallen world of abuse, robbery, rape. We face getting old, ill, hurting, dying, and we need to hear what the gospel has to say to all that when we're in pain.

And in case you're wondering, am I advocating less joy and praise and more doom and gloom? More focus on death? More focus on suffering and pain? No, I'm not at all. We don't need that. But we do need realism that we do live in a broken, fallen world. And we need a gospel perspective on that. And we need to know amid all our struggles how secure and how superb is glory.

Would you come with me to 1 Peter Chapter 4? First Peter, Chapter 4 from verse 12. This is the text we're really going to bathe in. 1 Peter, chapter 4 from verse 12, where Peter writes:

“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.”

Now, I love that (I'm using the ESV here) I love that the ESV is so literal here, “the fiery trial”. The fiery nature of it is sometimes undone in some translations, but it is the fiery trial. And that's important, because have you noticed where Peter's writing from in Chapter 5, verse 13? He's in Babylon. No, not literally, it's Peter's way of saying the church is in exile, as in the hostile world, just as Israel was in Babylon. But OK, he's in Babylon talking about a fiery trial.

What's on that scripture search mind of his? It's got to make us think of Daniel 3. Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace in Babylon, and you remember Nebuchadnezzar throws in the three saints, and he looks into the blaze and he sees a fourth figure, as the old King James Version puts it, “looking like the son of God”. As they are tested, this fourth figure, like the son of God, is with them in the blaze.

And Peter says, “Do not be surprised, beloved, at the fiery trial when it comes upon you”, but verse 13, it's hard to imagine as possible, “rejoice”. “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings.” The son of God came to be with those saints in the fire in Babylon. But now Peter says he's already there with his saints in the fiery trial, he's already gone before us to the place of suffering, and he invites his saints to

join him in the fire. To have fellowship with him there in the place of trial. And that is why Peter can say, rejoice in your sufferings.

And it's not because he's a loopy religious masochist. But because he knows Christ is the firstborn, he is our forerunner and where he goes, we go. He is the head, and as in a birth, the body must follow where the head goes, through suffering to glory. And if we do not go through suffering, we cannot be like him.

How could we be like Christ if we do not go through any suffering, when his life and death were so marked by suffering? How could we be like him? To follow him, the Man of Sorrows, must be to go through suffering. The thing is everyone suffers. Everyone gets sick, gets ill, they age, the body breaks down. That's true for everyone. But for the Christian, it's all changed, because for us, it's not pointless. Born again into Christ's new humanity we've been taken out of that terrible, but simple downward slide into death. For, if this, is the horror for the unbeliever, it's all downhill for the unbeliever. When you're young and healthy, that's the best it's ever gonna be. And then, old age and sickness and death, and then they hope against hope. But for us, believers united to Christ, we've been taken out of that downward slide. We've been brought into Christ's life, so we share his direction of travel now, not Adam's direction of travel.

And so, Peter says, "Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" dear brother, dear sister.

And Peter is no hypocrite who just trots this out on paper. In Acts 5, Peter and the apostles were flogged before the Sanhedrin, and they left, we are told, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name, for the name, the dear name of Jesus. Now, it wasn't that the flogging didn't hurt. It was that their desire to be like Jesus was stronger. And so, there was joy to be found in sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Now I want to push on that a little bit. Let's have a look at the first time the sufferings of Christ are mentioned in Scripture. Can you think where that is? It's Genesis 3:15. Genesis 3:15, the Lord says to the serpent,

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

Now that of course, is a promise telling us about *the* offspring, *the* seed, *the* Son, Christ, Christ, the promised one. But here's the interesting thing, Paul picks up Genesis 3:15 and he says it can also apply to Christians. So, in Romans 16:20 he writes to the Roman church saying, "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under *your* feet". You see what Paul's done? He's saying believers are taken into Christ, the promised seed. And so what is true of him becomes true of us, in him. We've brought into the one who is bruised and bruising. "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." It speaks then of the special bruising Christ's people must go through being united to the bruised one. See where once we were at peace with the God of this world, where once, we loved how he blinded us, we loved how he covered us with darkness. It hid our shame. We liked it. But our eyes have been opened, and we've come out from under his dark dominion, and our old master is angry with us. And so are his offspring, still following the Prince of the power of the air.

If you're turning to love Christ, friends, family, they think you're weird, fanatical, a threat. A war has begun. And we feel it in our bones. Sin, which once was so purely sweet to us, has lost its sweetness. It chafes, and we long to be rid of what once we loved. Right? That's the Christian experience of the sin that remains, the world, the flesh, the devil. Yes, of course Christians are going to suffer. But look at the weight of how it is, Paul writes, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." Fellow believers, we are brought into Christ, bruised and bruising. Yes, we will get bruised as we follow Christ. But what bruising we will do!

That is the perspective all of Scripture wants to give us. It's never triumphalistic wading happily through life in pure triumph for no pain. Never triumphalistic but, definitely triumphant. Don't be naive. Definitely be jubilant. Satan nibbles at our feet. We crush his head.

We're heading to glory, but even as we are bruised now know it is you're being faithful in pain if you're going through it now, even as we're bruised now with our great first-born brother, we do some bruising on Satan and his kingdom. Just think, when you suffer patiently like Christ as you are content when all the world is so unsatisfied, when you walk away from the glittering rubbish of the world, you showed all the world does not satisfy, then you show how Satan has been stripped of his power. Every time you rejoice in Christ, resist sin, proclaim him, show his love, you do something completely unnatural. You show your freedom from the serpent's chains, and you stomp on the old Dragon's head. We begin the crushing of him now.

Now, before we get to see just how secure and superb is glory we need to see a little bit more how we can rejoice, as Peter says, in the sufferings we'll face. Some of you, I know, in here right now are suffering. I know some of those issues. Some of you are going through great pain and trial and temptation, even now. And what Peter is writing is not something that should frustrate you as you think, "How possibly could I rejoice when I'm going through this right now?" Oh, Peter suffered! And he's not writing a frustrating command, but here is hope. Let's read:

"If you're insulted for the name of Christ, verse 14, "you are blessed. Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

Just think on that one, if you're insulted for Christ, it proves your standing with Christ. And you know where that takes you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evil doer or a meddler. Yep, a good word there. You can't simply dress up suffering because you sin or because you've been an idiot. You know, I've got a hangover, I've got a speeding ticket, oh, I'm suffering for Christ. No, no! Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name, for it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God. And if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good. Now that phrase, "It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God" the point is this, our wonderful Father, he is all about removing what is foul and evil from his world. Death, sin, wickedness, he began the process at the cross, and one day the fire of his wrath will envelope the entire world, and he will cleanse it completely. For now, the fire of his judgment burns mostly among his people. Who he has baptized with the Spirit and fire. He does his winnowing work among his people.

Now, for those who love sin and who don't love Christ, that fire of God's judgment is purely and utterly terrible. But for us who love Christ, it is entirely different. Our sinful identity and status was put to death at the cross. Sin is no longer our identity and so when we are picked through the fire, it's not us who are consumed, but, Peter put it in Chapter one, verse seven, we are, as it were, like gold refined when we go through the fire. The dross is consumed, the gold is refined. Not us. But our sin is burned up. That's not comfortable. But while that's not comfortable, isn't that what we want? To be free of our sin? You know, when you think on Christ, you remember, of course he is better than those shrivelling ways of my sin. Of course he is. And when I remember his pure and loving ways, they are life and freedom. And when I remember that, I think, Lord cleanse me, because I want to be like you, not shrivelled by sin.

You know, personally my own experience is that suffering has always taught me far more than comfort. Far more than ease. And I rarely understand why I am going through what I'm going through during a point of struggle. Very rarely does it make any sense. But, I am glad as I look back at those times of trial. And I'm grateful to the Lord for them. Because it's left me less attached to old addictions. It's left me more contented, more joyful, more free. See, sorrows throw me onto the Lord. Fear, tribulation, they make me cling to him. Whereas times of comfort I can feel self-sufficient and not feel I need to cling to him. So, they push me on him. And then when I lose things, losses, they can also do something good to me. They reveal the insufficiency of everything around me. So that I can appreciate the all sufficiency of Christ more. It's a bit like, you enjoy the stars better when it's darker. And when things are dark in your life you really do enjoy heavenly glories more. It's not that they're any better, but you'll appreciate them. You somehow can see them better. So, Hebrews 12 put it famously, "My son, do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord disciplines those he loves". If we are the brothers and sisters of the one who has made perfect through suffering then our Father will use suffering to perfect us, to make us like Jesus.

Do you know what? If you can listen to one bit, I think it's this. Naturally, we are so quick to take suffering to mean that God is against us. You've been there? Life falls apart and you think it's because God doesn't love me or he's forgotten me. He's somehow weakened in his care for us. Friend, that is not so. And we should therefore not be too easily dismayed by our troubles. In a failing world, friends will fail you. We will hurt. We will feel our frailty and our emptiness and our corruption. But none of that is any indication that our Father has forgotten us or failed us. Nor that we might no longer be useful.

You see, here's the difference. In other religions, God will give ease to the good and health to the worthy. It is not like that in Christianity, because in Christianity goodness is Christ himself and conformity to him. And so God is not simply going to reward believers with ease in this life, because that would make ease rather than Christ the great prize. What is the great prize he wants to give us? Not ease, but Christ!

Suffering, friends, is therefore a covenant mark, a proof that God is our Father and cares enough about us to do everything necessary to mold and clip us into the likeness of his happily, holy Son. Now that might seem like bad news for the believer. After all, who wants to hurt? But, those who never have to push through waves of difficulty in their life they never grow in strength and maturity like those who do. Those who never experienced the discipline of trouble tend always to be more frail and feeble in their faith.

The great 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon said, and he was a great sufferer himself, he said, you need to know, not only suffered personally a great deal, but he also had a wildly, outwardly successful

ministry. So, hear him when he says this, he says, "Uninterrupted success and unfading joy in it would be more than our weak heads could bear. Our wine must be mixed with water, lest it turn our brains. And my witness is those who are honored of the Lord in public have usually to endure a secret chastening or carry a peculiar cross, lest by any means they exalt themselves, and fall into the snare of the devil." Yes, friends God uses everything, even suffering for our ultimate blessing. Our almighty Father uses everything. He uses suffering. He did it at the cross. Through that darkest day, that deepest pit of suffering he definitively overturned and defeated the very root of darkness. Through his death he defeated death, and through our comparatively light sufferings he's able to defeat our selfish independence and our foolish wandering and make us more like himself.

And for those who have glimpsed the unfettered beauty of Jesus, for those who've seen something of his glory; that thought puts metal in our joy. Because having seen what it looks like to be free of sin's power we want to be more like him. And we are even prepared to hurt to become more like him. And with that, Paul, sorry, Peter has given us something the world simply cannot understand. How to rejoice even in suffering.

Can I be as clear as I can be now? Peter talks about suffering and then glory. But he does not, he does not mean suffering and only then, afterwards, comes joy. That's not what he means. No! Solid, grounded joy in Christ is what will get you through the suffering. For Christ and his people joy precedes and follows and undermines, and encases all suffering. Suffering for Christians is set about on all sides by joy. And that's how we deal with it. See, Christ had joy before he had all pain. Before the world existed, it was joy that strengthened his resolve to suffer. Hebrews 12, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross." And that is what Christ shares with us, a preceding joy that enables us to endure suffering.

It is the happy secret of the saints who have borne most cheerfully and bravely for Christ. The more we find our pleasure in him, the more willing we'll be to suffer for him. As the happy old Puritan Richard Sibbs said, "We will not suffer with Christ if we will not first feast with him. We will not suffer with Christ if we will not joy in him." Does that make sense? You'll go through suffering. When you love him and find your joy in him so much that you're prepared to go through the suffering. Because you want him more than you want comfort. So friends, find your joy in Christ. Ensure that he is glorious, beautiful more than sufficient for you, and you will rejoice in your sufferings. You will know that secret.

It means, friends, the church cannot be silent about suffering and how our Father uses us. If we're silent about it, believers will be unprepared. But neither can we simply say it's suffering now, glory later. No, believers need to hear it's about following Christ. It's about living his slipstream. Sharing his suffering to then share his glory.

So, if you would comfort believers in their trials, tell them about Jesus. Fill their eyes with the glory of Christ, so they love him. Only then are they going to rejoice in their sufferings. Because only then will they want that much to be like him.

And the other thing about being Christ centered here is this. Christ is not just the one who is powerful to bring us beyond our sufferings. He's also the one who has gone through suffering. Dear suffering friends, Christ understands. He has compassion right now. His beating heart on the throne of heaven is filled with compassion for his beloved ones who are struggling. He groaned with pity over the leper. He was moved, his very bowl stirred, his gut churned when he saw the harassed and the helpless, he groaned with pity over them. And just so is he now in heaven he sympathizes with our weaknesses. In Hebrews 2

tells us Christ was made like his weak and tempted brothers in order that he may help those who are being tempted.

And in the same way, now you know it is the weak and struggling who minister best to the weak and struggling. God could have used angels or superman to minister to his people but their very strength would mock our weakness and therefore mock the gospel. And so God normally ministers to his people, he ministers through those who've been humbled and ministers through those who've suffered, normally. Because suffering enables us to share the compassion of the Man of Sorrows. If you haven't suffered, it's harder to show compassion and sympathy for someone who's struggling. Not impossible, but it's harder.

See when people are going through trials you can't just vomit out a set of technically correct theological answers. You're struggling, "Look to Jesus". Your mum's got cancer, "Cheer up, glory is coming." I know you. You need to have compassion, as Christ does. You can say some true things in a heartless way. Yes, Christ does offer a glory that outweighs. Yes, he is the resurrection of the life, but first he weeps at his friend's graveside. Even as he is the resurrection of the life, he weeps. So, friends, if you would lift up the suffering and encourage the saints, do it gently. Do it gently.

Like him who's moved to pity when you stumble, let the hurting, the struggling, know he cares. You can. And then when they come to church, they come to a supportive family of brothers and sisters. Not a fake smile club blind to the reality of struggle. Our Savior has compassion on us and has power to finally remove all suffering.

But suffering is not where we should finish this morning. Often terrible, but short term, ultimately. Small perspective. We must move on from looking at rejoicing our sufferings to this exceeding joy, this exultation, verse 13, when his glory is revealed, because to endure trials friends, you need to know glory is certain, secure for the saints. He is in glory now, and one day all the world will see it. And as surely as Christ is in glory, his own must join him. Because the head cannot have glory without the body. The bridegroom will not keep his status and riches to himself, he must share it with his bride. Glory is certain.

Now the accuser loves to have people doubt this. He loves to whisper, "Foul sinner, what can you have to do with glory? Slink away because of your failures. Glory is not for you. You're suffering because he's abandoned you." You must answer back, "Satan, what, what kind of Christ do you think I have? A faithless Christ. An abandoning Christ? No, I have one who says, "No one will snatch them out of my hand." Martin Luther said, "when the devil throws up our sins to us and says that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak like this and say I admit, I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means, for I know one who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the son of God, and where he is, there I shall be also."

You know, I was looking at the English reformer John Bradford recently. Bradford was the one who coined the phrase "There but for the grace of God goes I". He said it when he saw criminals being led to their execution because he knew his sin and he deserved death. Bradford, he had some daily meditations that he wrote applying the gospel to daily life. So, he he'd have, here's a meditation for when you wake up in the morning, when you get out of bed and when you put on your clothes, when you eat your lunch. All these little gospel meditations for different times of day. And here's what he said for the last one of the day, he said, "When last thing you climb into your bed, just as you are not afraid

to enter into your bed, be not afraid to die. More certain than waking from our sleep, we shall awake and rise from death in that happy morning." And a very short distance from here Bradford proved his confidence when he was 45 years old. He was sentenced to be burned to death at Smithfield as part of Bloody Queen Mary's campaign against the evangelicals. Tied to the stake he turned to his fellow martyr, John Leaf and said, "Be of good comfort brother, for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night." Be of good comfort, my brothers and sisters, in all you're going through glory is secure. Our Savior is certain. Glory is, superb. And to get the full helping of what Peter is saying, notice he doesn't say heaven, he says glory. Because glory captures something more than heaven. For the center of heaven, the very center, is the glory of the lamb, who is its radiant lamp.

The center of our gospel and our hope is well, what Paul calls the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. That day when his shining glory is finally and fully revealed on that day, friends, it will be like the sun rising on a winter morning driving away all darkness, his warmth making everything blossom. And on that day, there will be no more night. For the glory of God will give light universally. Darkness defeated. On that day we will be like him at last. Free at last from all pain or sin. We'll be like the light of the world. "Those who are wise, says Daniel, 12, will shine like the brightness of the heavens. And those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and ever. We will be with him in glory and like him in glory.

Friends, rejoice in your sufferings and share this hope. And in all the trials that you face, fix your eyes on him. Our forerunner who, for the joy set before him endured the cross. And is seated now, beckoning, at the right hand of the throne of God.

Let's pray. Almighty Father, we want to be like your beloved Son, to be with him. Open our eyes, we pray. Make him more glorious to us, so precious that we want him more than comfort. Strengthen and help us to comfort his dear ones in all that they face. And so may the world see a church that is full of a supernatural rejoicing. And so may they glorify your name. And in His name we pray.