

Rejoicing in Suffering

Introduction

Have you been through, or are you presently going through, a period of great difficulty and trial in your Christian life?

The apostle Peter wrote his first epistle to believers in Asia Minor in order to encourage them in the great sufferings they were experiencing at the hands of their once fellow-Pagans. Christian servants were being treated harshly by their pagan masters, Christian wives were being mistreated by their unbelieving husbands, and Christians in general were being vilified by their idol-worshipping neighbours, who could not understand why they no longer joined with them in their drunken and debauched pagan festivities.

Reasons to Persevere

Peter encourages these suffering Christians by giving them **three reasons to persevere**.

Firstly, because **their faith**, which was more precious than gold, **was being tested and refined**: 1 Peter 1:7, “that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ”. And James says, “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations (trials); knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience” (James 1:2-3). This has always been the purpose of trials in the believer’s experience; Job could say, “he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). **The testing of faith is essential to the growth in grace of a Christian, and it brings glory to Christ.**

Secondly, because they were **following in their Master’s footsteps**: 1 Peter 2:21, “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps”, and, in chapter 4:13, he says that in their fiery trials they were “(partaking) of Christ’s sufferings”. Jesus was “despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3); and, as Jesus warned His disciples, “The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). **When Christians suffer for righteousness’ sake they are following the example of their Master.**

Thirdly, because **these sufferings were not unique to them**. In 1 Peter 5:9 he tells them to resist the devil “stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world”. Paul and Barnabas exhorted early Christian converts that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Paul warned Timothy that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). And Jesus told His disciples, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). **Suffering for Christ is the common experience of His disciples.**

A Reason to Persevere with Exceeding Joy

But at the end of 1 Peter 4:13, Peter gives suffering Christians a reason to persevere **with exceeding joy**. Peter tells them that they should persevere in their present sufferings, with joy, so “that, **when his (Christ’s) glory shall be revealed** (at His second coming), ye may be glad also **with exceeding joy**.” This is the Christian’s great hope; it looks beyond this world of suffering to something **glorious** in the future: something **worth waiting for**: something **worth suffering for**. Paul calls it, in Titus 2:13, “the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (New King James Version).

So, let’s look at some of the things that Christians can look forward to, **with exceeding joy**, when Christ returns and ushers in His eternal kingdom of glory.

- 1) **Meeting those Christian loved ones who have gone before us**, with whom we shared our joys and our sorrows in this life: the Christian father and mother, the Christian spouse, Christian sons and daughters, Christian friends and fellow church members. Meeting those holy men of old of whom we have read in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Meeting those past worthies whose writings have been a source of great blessing to us on our Christian journey.
- 2) **Meeting the holy angels**. Those glorious beings who kept their first estate and spend their days doing God’s will. They have been our helpers through our wilderness journey. The book of Hebrews describes them as “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). And if, as some believe, we all have our own guardian angel (Matthew 18:10; Acts 12:15?), I would very much like to seek mine out and apologise for all the trouble I caused him (actually, in my case, I’m sure it takes a whole host of angels to guard me!).
- 3) **A new body**: one no longer racked by pain and debilitated by chronic illness. A body no longer weakened by old age and a long history of sickness and infirmity. A body “fashioned like unto (Christ’s) glorious body” (Philippians 3:21), a body “raised in glory” and “power” (1 Corinthians 15:43), a body well fitted to life in the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13). “For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:52-53). “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21:4).
- 4) Then there is that **unholy trinity which we will be glad to be rid of for ever**: the world, the flesh and the devil. No more indwelling sin to trouble us; no more devil to tempt us; no more ungodly world to allure us with its passing, sinful pleasures. As Isaac Watts says, “Sin, my worst enemy before, shall vex my eyes and ears no more; my inward foes shall all be slain, nor Satan break my peace again” (from the hymn “Sweet is the work, my God, my King”, no. 43 in Christian Hymns).

- 5) Another thing to look forward to is **Eden restored**. “Paradise Lost” will become “Paradise Regained” (John Milton). Nature will be no longer “red in tooth and claw” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson) as a result of Adam’s sin. The original Garden of Eden, with its myriads of plants and friendly, herbivorous creatures, will be restored in all its pristine beauty (Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17,25), and, in the new earth, there will be no possibility of its beauty ever being spoiled again. The whole earth will be the temple of God where He, in His shekinah glory, will dwell for ever with His people (Revelation 21:3,22). A “pure river of water of life” will flow through it, and “the tree of life”, with its “twelve manner of fruits” will grow there (Revelation 22:1-2), and believers will have the right to partake of them both for ever (Revelation 21:14,17)). “The meek... shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5), and our inheritance will never be taken from us: “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:4-5).

- 6) But **the very best thing** that Christians have to look forward to when Christ returns, is the fact that **we will see our blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ, Himself**. The hymn-writer, Anne Cousin, with words inspired by the writings of Samuel Rutherford, expresses it wonderfully: “The King there, in His beauty, without a veil is seen; it were a well-spent journey, though seven deaths lay between; the Lamb with His fair army doth on Mount Zion stand, and glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel’s land... The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom’s face; I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace; not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand: **the Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel’s land**” (from the hymn “The sands of time are sinking”, no. 816 in Christian Hymns). To see **Him**, no longer the suffering servant, but the King of glory; to “**see his face**” (Revelation 22:4), no longer “marred more than any man” (Isaiah 52:14); to see **His “countenance (shining) as the sun shineth in his strength”** (Revelation 1:16); to see “**the head that once was crowned with thorns... crowned with glory now**” (Thomas Kelly, hymn no. 253 in Christian Hymns); to **see Him**, no longer with the eye of faith, but **with our very own eyes**, in our new, glorified bodies, and to hear His voice saying to us, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34), “enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21): surely **this** will be cause enough for us to **rejoice with exceeding joy** for ever and ever, and will more than compensate for all our present suffering.

Conclusion

What an “eternal weight of glory” awaits us as Christians, in comparison with which our present sufferings are described as “our light affliction, which is but for a moment” (2 Corinthians 4:17). Matthew 5:11-12 says, “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be **exceeding glad**: for **great** is your reward in heaven”.

So... “**look up**”! faithful, suffering Christian; “**for your redemption draweth nigh**” (Luke 21:28).

May the Lord enable each one of us, His dear children, to look forward **with exceeding joy** to the indescribably glorious future which is ours in Jesus Christ, when it will be **our chief joy** to see **Him** who is Himself **our “exceeding joy”** (Psalm 43:4). Amen.