

PREPARATION FOR SUFFERING

1 Peter 1:1-2

Introduction:

Illust – In ancient Rome, crowds by the tens of thousands would gather in the Colosseum to watch as Christians were torn apart by wild animals. Paul Rader, commenting on his visit to this famous landmark, said, "I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom they gladly died, and asked myself, 'Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?'" Rader continued, "I prayed most fervently in that Roman arena for the spirit of a martyr, and for the working of the Holy Spirit in my heart, as He worked in Paul's heart when He brought him on his handcuffed way to Rome." Those early Christians "lived on the threshold of heaven, within a heartbeat of home, no possessions to hold them back."

We do not live in a world like that. Yet, there are many who do. According to statistics, in the 20th century, more Christians faced death as martyrs for their faith than in the previous 19 centuries combined. And while we do not face that kind of persecution or opposition where we live, yet we are seeing our rights and freedoms being taken away, and it leaves us wondering when it is going to become a punishable offense to believe in the words of Scripture. The day may well be coming, and it may not be far away, when we will be faced with difficult choices that could mean life or death.

I cannot help but ask myself the question, "Am I prepared to suffer, if need be, for the sake of Jesus Christ, my Lord?" I believe that the apostle Peter has written a letter for just such a time. Turn with me to the 1st Epistle of Peter. *Read 1:1-2.*

Introduction to the Book

Author – Peter. We will come back to look more at the man Peter in a few minutes.

Recipients – see v. 1 – not written to a specific church, but the writer intended this letter to be shared with many churches. The area described covers most of the area known today as the country of Turkey. It would have included the seven churches of the book of Revelation.

Key verses – 1:13 – "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

4:7 – "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers."

4:12 – "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."

5:8 – "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

Themes – there are a number of important themes in this short letter

- suffering and glory
- separation and holiness
- Experiencing God's grace in the face of suffering.

The overall theme has to do with preparation for suffering – being prepared to suffer at the hands of evildoers for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Peter lived in the kind of world I described at the beginning of this message. Christians were imprisoned, beaten, fed to lions as entertainment for blood-thirsty crowds. They were stripped of all rights, even to exist as citizens.

Peter was concerned for these people – concerned that they not lose heart in the face of such suffering and abuse. Because of this, he wrote this letter of encouragement to them. I believe there is plenty that we can learn from this letter as well. So, we are going to begin a journey through this letter that will take us several weeks. Following that I would like to go into Peter's second letter, which serves as a warning about false teaching creeping into the church.

But, before we get into Peter's epistle, I want to spend some time this morning looking at the man, Peter. As we look at Peter in the gospels and the book of Acts we see an interesting contrast between what I am calling the "old" Peter and the "new" Peter.

The “Old” Peter

Remember Peter? Jumped out of a boat to walk on the water to Jesus, then found himself sinking... Opened his mouth before thinking – wanting to build tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah on the mountain of transfiguration... Grabbed a knife and cut off a man’s ear, trying to defend the Lord against the temple officers who had come to arrest him.

That was Peter... Impetuous, hot-headed, unthinking, often rash and impulsive... But to really understand Peter, you need to know something about Peter’s world.

Peter knew what it was to suffer even as he was growing up – not because he was a Christian, but because he was a Jew - occupation of their land by the Romans; there was very little freedom; they were constantly under the control and direction of a foreign government, with rules enforced by soldiers who cared little for their value or dignity.

Peter, like most everyone else among his people, was looking for the day when their Messiah would come and set them free from their oppression. His brother, Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, who had heard John speak of sin and the need for repentance. He had also heard John announce that the Messiah was soon to appear.

One day, Andrew brought Peter to meet Jesus. When he did, the Saviour did something He did for no other disciple--He changed Peter’s name – John 1:42. Cephas (Peter) – the Rock. He gave Peter a name to signify strength.

But for a long time, Peter was anything but strong. As we have already suggested, he was bombastic, impetuous, but not strong. In fact, anytime the idea of suffering raised its head, Peter ran from it. In our study of Mark, we saw Peter’s aversion to the suggestion that Jesus would suffer and ultimately die.

Turn to Matt. 26:31-35 – Peter spoke very bravely, but he found himself unable to live up to his words. Look down to vv. 69-75. Here we have Peter’s denial. When faced with suffering for Jesus’ sake, he folded under the pressure. He became a coward.

Suffering just didn’t quite fit with the “old” Peter’s theology.

The “New” Peter

In the book of Acts we see the new Peter. Acts 2 – the day of Pentecost – Peter boldly preached the gospel message, standing up to the mockers and to the Jewish leaders.

Acts 3-4 – the healing of the lame man and the conflict that ensued. Peter boldly stood up to the authorities, proclaiming that there was no other way to be saved than through Jesus Christ. They were thrown into jail for their stand, yet refused to back down. This is Peter who played the coward just a few weeks earlier. See Acts 4:29.

In Acts 5 we see again Peter with the other disciples continuing to preach the gospel, even though they were persecuted and imprisoned for it. See 5:27-32, 40-42.

Acts 12 records that Herod had put James to death, arrested Peter, and was soon to execute him. There we also see the account of Peter’s divine deliverance. One commentator says: “Of interest and amusement is the condition in which the angel of the Lord found Peter when he came to rescue him; Peter was sleeping (Acts 12:6)! The “old Peter” would have been trying to saw through the cell bars or pick the locks of his chains, even tunnel his way out of that prison. Instead, the “new Peter” was sound asleep. This Peter is not the same man we knew in the Gospels.”

What an incredible transformation in the life of this man. What is it that changed Peter?

Peter’s Transformation

At the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, Peter was a broken man. He had denied his Lord and Master. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Peter’s denials, and his reaction. Luke – “Jesus turned and looked at Peter...” He broke down and wept bitterly, when he realized that he had failed his Lord. I can only imagine the bitterness with which Peter went through the next few days, as he watched his Lord crucified, knowing he had been unwilling to stand with him.

Yet a couple of months later, Peter is boldly preaching, standing up to the authorities with courage and confidence. What changed...?

I believe there are a couple of things. First, and most obvious is the coming of the Holy Spirit, to fill and empower the disciples for ministry. But even before that, in Acts 1, we see Peter confidently taking leadership among the disciples...

I want you to turn to John 21:15-19 (we read these verses earlier). After Jesus rose from the dead, the angels had a message for the disciples that is recorded by both Matthew and Mark. But Mark adds two words that I believe are significant. In Mark 16:7 we read, "But go, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." (*Discuss the significance of this...*)

Now, in John 21, they are in Galilee. They have gone fishing, and Jesus meets them on the shore, with breakfast prepared for them. In vv. 15-19 we have a conversation between Jesus and Peter. It was not particularly private, the other disciples probably heard it all.

In order to really understand this, you need to be aware of the Greek words used for love – agape and phileo. *Read it again using them.*

- "Do you love me?... are you committed to me?" Peter couldn't answer that positively. I imagine that Peter had trouble even looking Jesus in the eye as he responded. He was broken, ashamed, and humiliated at his behaviour the night of Jesus' arrest.
- The third time – "Do you phileo (have affection for) me?" Peter was grieved, not because he was being a nag, but because he had lowered the standard. He brought his question down to Peter's level.
- "Lord, you know everything..." The Lord looks at the heart. Peter realized that. Jesus could see everything inside him, and yet was reaching out to him.

Read vv. 17b-19 – "Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.' ..." And in that moment Peter was restored to fellowship with his Lord. **Follow Me** – the same command Peter heard back at the beginning, when Jesus called him from his nets and his fishing boat.

In that moment Peter was restored, commissioned as a shepherd of God's flock, and strengthened for a life of service and ministry. Now, when we come to his epistle, Peter is an old man, and he is still faithfully shepherding the flock of God, calling them to stand firm in suffering.

Conclusion

So, what is the lesson in all of this for us? I believe that Peter's life serves as an example for us. Peter lived in a time of great suffering and anguish for believers. Many in our world today are facing the same kind of treatment because of their faith. Even in our country, we are facing increased pressure and opposition by the enemy. We are called to endurance.

But, if we are to be faithful in the face of suffering, there are two important things that we need to experience and understand. First, we need to recognize that suffering is part of the Christian life. Paul said in 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.*"

Secondly, if we are to endure and persevere in suffering, we need to be in right relationship with our Lord. Peter, because of his failure, needed restoration to fellowship with Jesus Christ. You may find yourself like Peter this morning – heartbroken by failure. Have we not all found ourselves there at one time. Yet Jesus comes to us to lovingly restore us to a life of fellowship and commissions us to a life of service.

One other thought – Jesus is our example when it comes to suffering. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2:21 – "*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.*" The suffering of Jesus Christ is precious to us because we know we have been saved by His suffering.

Each month our church celebrates the Lord's Supper. Every few weeks we remember His suffering, His death, and His resurrection and ascension. We do this in obedience to our Lord's command. Some may wonder why our Lord would have His church continually focus on His suffering. I suggest it is to put our suffering into proper perspective.

May God grant us the perspective He gave to Peter. It is my prayer that we may be able to say with Peter, "*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*" (1 Peter 1:6-7)