Christian Suffering – A Curse or A Blessing?

Text: 1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11 Pastor Keith Besel

4:14 – “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

Introduction
※ Christ is Risen!  He is risen indeed!  Alleluia!

※ [Hold up two tea bags.]  I have two tea bags here; two different kinds of tea.  Since they’re out of their boxes, I don’t know which one is which.  All I know is that one is Lemon Jasmine and the other is Mandarin Orange.
   ➔ The only way to find out which is which is to steep them in hot water.  Then their true flavors will be revealed.
※ Eleanor Whitney once said that “Christians are like teabags; you never know what kind they are until they are in hot water”.
   ➔ Since Peter, in our Epistle lesson today, is talking with us about the “fiery trials” (v.12) that every Christian should expect to endure in life, it seems appropriate to ask the question, “Which kind of Christian are you?”
   ➔ When you end up in “hot water”; in other words, when someone finds out that you’re a Christian or when someone tries to force or pressure you into doing or saying or thinking something that is not in line with what Jesus says we Christians should be about, what is that “hot water” going to reveal about you?
   ➔ Will it reveal a bold, faithful, loving, respectful and firm faith in Jesus Christ or will it reveal a weak, afraid, embarrassed, apologetic or even silent faith?
※ Or is that even a relevant question for us as American Christians in 2017?  Because let’s face it – for us in our country today it seems a little strange to think that we might truly be persecuted because of our faith – or does it?
   ➔ Here in the United States we are not likely to be burned at the stake or thrown to the lions or beheaded because we are Christians.  It’s not like we live in Egypt today, where just two days ago (on Friday) 28 Christians were killed and 23 more were injured on their way to a Christian monastery when their bus was ambushed by terrorists.
   ➔ That is the normal way of life for far too many Christians around the world right now in places like Sudan, Syria, Laos, China, North Korea and even some parts of India and Pakistan to name a few.  We are blessed that we do not have that degree of persecution here in America.

I. We shouldn’t be surprised by persecution
※ And yet Peter begins our text today, “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” (v. 12).
   ➔ The fact is that the persecution of Christians, in one form or another, has been the normal way of life throughout most of the history of the Church.  Peter is writing from Rome just a few years from the end of his life.  At this point persecutions are common but they are still relatively small compared to what is headed their way.  In just a few years the Roman Empire will crank up the heat against Christians in a very big way.
Peter sees it coming and he gives this warning to his fellow believers, especially his fellow pastors so that they can be prepared.

He’s heard Jesus teach about it and he’s seen it already himself – the devil, the world and the sinful flesh has and will always hate those who believe and trust in Jesus.

And it’s not only in the middle east or northern Africa. For example, death threats have been a standard part of ministry-life for “Xavier Gonzalez,” a church planter working in one of Colombia’s most dangerous regions: a poor, rural area currently ruled by paramilitaries. Xavier used to have a successful career in broadcasting. But since 2009, he has heeded God’s call to establish and pastor a church in one of Colombia’s poorest cities.

- Xavier has been threatened by guerrillas, paramilitary members and even street gangs. His wife was robbed at gunpoint. A leftist guerrilla once told him why they hate Christians and why they give him such grief. The man told Xavier, “My boss hates Christians because Christians make people not want to join our ranks.”

- Xavier said, “We preach about love and forgiving others and they don’t want to forgive. They don’t want this to be preached…[but still] we treat them well. We give them food, we give them soda and serve them in any way we can”. “Every threat,” he said, “we take as a challenge because we want to win these people for the Lord. That is all we want”.

We may not realize it in the U.S. but it is unusual still today for people to live in a place like we do where, at least for now, we have a Constitutional Government that is supposed to protect our right to believe and worship freely and publicly.

Yet how often are political candidates mocked in the press if they believe in creation or that abortion is murder or that homosexual activity and same-sex marriage is sinful?

You know, there’s a reason that so many of us are not confident or comfortable sharing our faith in public or speaking up when we hear people promote something that is the opposite of what Scripture says – because we know that if we do, then we’re going to feel the “hot water” of a negative or angry or accusing reaction. That’s the beginning of persecution.

And sadly, persecution even comes from those who are supposed to be our brothers and sisters in Christ. Earlier this week, right here in Ft. Lupton I had a member of another Christian Church – a weekly attender as I understand it - that made fun of our Church here because we understand the Bible to say that women should not be Christian pastors. More than once I’ve received comments like this, “Oh you’re the Church where no one is allowed to do anything”, which of course is a total twisting of the truth.

That’s persecution. That’s suffering shame because of our faith. So is this a curse that we must endure? Are we being punished by God? Some would say, “Yes”.

II. God has a purpose for persecution

But Peter in our text today says, “No. God has a purpose in allowing these kinds of persecutions to come our way”. He says in 4:12 that these trials come upon us “to test you”. In Isaiah 48:10 God says to His people, “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction”.

This image of how metal is refined; that it is purified by enduring great heat, is a common image in God’s Word. It’s the image that Peter wants us to see when he warns and teaches us that we must not be surprised – in fact we should expect that we will face “heat” in this life when we are Christians that hold fast to the words of Scripture as the true and inerrant Word of God.
For God uses these challenges to our faith to strengthen us; to purify us for the even more difficult times that are ahead.

So what kind of Christian are you; what kind am I in the face of persecution? 4:13 tells us how to react when we find ourselves in “hot water”, “But rejoice,” Peter says, “insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed”.

Jesus suffered and was killed for the truth. But in the end, His is the victory forevermore. When you face a challenge for Christ, Peter says you share in Christ’s death and suffering – but know for certain dear Christian, that you also share in His victory in eternity.

Still Peter is realistic, it’s not going to be easy. As he says in 5:8, “Be sober-minded (i.e. don’t get smug); be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”.

The devil uses these persecutions, you see, to try and make us think that God doesn’t really love us when He allows us to suffer for doing what is right. That’s the devil’s great deception. What God intends as a blessing, the devil tries to make us see as a curse.

But remember as a lion, all the devil is able to do with committed Christians is “roar”. He’s a toothless lion that cannot harm us as long as we remain firmly connected to Christ. For at the cross and through the empty tomb Jesus has kicked out all the devil’s teeth.

In 4:14 Peter says, “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you”. So yes, as strange as it may seem, it is actually a blessing to endure suffering, teasing, shame and distress when and because we confess the true name and word of Christ.

III. What’s strange is to think all suffering is good

But now real quick – I need to address a common misunderstanding about suffering in general. You see, Peter is NOT talking here about ANY and ALL suffering being a blessing from God.

Being “persecuted” is NOT the same kind of suffering as when a person suffers with cancer or heart problems or arthritis or diabetes. This is NOT talking about the difficulty you face after a string of accidents or a job loss or one after another strings of illness.

That kind of suffering does not please God at all. Though He certainly can, and often does, still strengthen us and help us through those kinds of situations as Paul says, “for those who love God, all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28). But they are NOT persecutions. They are simply the struggles that come to us all because we live in a sin-contaminated and fallen world.

What Peter’s talking about in our text is very specific and unique suffering and difficulty that we face because of our faith in Jesus. In His day people were flogged and thrown in prison and even put to death because they would not deny Jesus.

This is the suffering that is in itself an actual “blessing” because, like Jesus, we are then suffering as Peter says in 4:19, “according to God’s will”; we are suffering because we are obeying His Word and confessing Jesus Christ as our Lord – even in the face of opposition or danger.

IV. Christ is with us in all persecution
So what’s the bottom line that Peter is trying to get at with us here this morning? It’s the later part of verse 19. Peter says, “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

In other words, a Christian who is suffering because of his/her faith will be truly blessed by God in his/her suffering because he/she will know that we are not able to preserve or help or strengthen ourselves. Christ is the one that keeps us safe from true and lasting harm. Christ is the only One that saves our souls.

If we deny Him, then we are lost. But if we confess Him and trust in Him even in the face of great shame or danger or even death we are still saved and we are truly blessed with His gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus suffered in our place so that we always have that promise. Christ rose from death so that any and all difficulties; any and all attacks; any and all persecutions might be faced by us without fear but instead in faith.

Think of it this way. Our sufferings here on earth, though they may seem to be huge and may seem to last a long time are still only like a blink of an eye in comparison to the glories of eternal life in heaven before Jesus’ throne!

So today as we move from Easter into Pentecost, we are reminded that the Christian is always under pressure from the world. That was the same for Peter and it will always be the case until Jesus returns.

But in the midst of Christian suffering we have this truth from 5:10, “…the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you”.

That means you are never ever alone – especially in times of persecution. So, when the “hot water” comes, dear Christian – let Jesus shine; let Jesus lift you up; let Jesus guide you; and let Jesus display in and through you the blessings of His grace and the depth of His everlasting love!

Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.*