

Blessed are the Persecuted

1 Peter 4:12-19

² 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. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory^[b] and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgement 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? ¹⁸ And

*"If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"^[c]*

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

We all live with a vision of the good life. A vision of what will truly make us happy. In fact, your vision of the good life is what functionally drives you to make the decisions you do, to live in the places you live, to go to the schools you go to, to hang out with the people you hang out with. In fact, your life is driven by vision.

Some people say you are what you think. Others you are what you eat.

But "you are what you love because you live toward what you want." Little Prince "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the immensity of the sea. "

The problem with much of our Christianity is this – we intellectually believe truths about Christianity. We believe God exists, Jesus died for my sins...we do stuff in church, we serve, we read our Bibles – but our hearts long for a different vision other than Jesus. We have a different vision of the good life.

And it's easy to know why because all around us society is telling us a different vision of the good life. I drove past a billboard the other day – advertising an insurance company with the title – the good life next to an attractive couple in love, just moved into their spacious new apartment overlooking the sea without a care in the world.

I went to France for a couple of weeks and stayed with friends who work as civil servants – he for the French national railway. In Paris – city of love, amazing food and wine, culture. And you know he's a well-paid engineer, managing a large team, beautiful family, kids in the best schools, gets 46 days annual leave – they live in a 3 storey house in a nice suburb – and if you are a civil servant – you cannot be fired, so workers can just decide not to work for a day – as long as you're actually in the office you get paid and there's nothing your boss can do about it, retire at 55 with a good pension, free transport, ridiculously cheap skiing and family holiday destinations paid for by the company. How many ppl think that's the good life? May be add in some recognition and respect – some status. And yet, he wants to move away from Paris because they're not happy with their life.

And many of us are more attracted by that than by the life that Jesus offers. If we're honest.

And 1 Peter for a group of Christians in Turkey who under social pressure for their faith... Peter's been giving them radical counter-cultural vision of the good life which no one in HK will ever tell you. And it's about belonging to a different kind of people, who are not self-focused but Christ and other-focused. Who see suffering differently and who have a different source of hope and honour than the world around.

Peter is saying: if you are a Christian, who has lived the best life ever?

Do you notice I didn't say the most comfortable life ever? I didn't say the most wealthy life ever. I didn't say the popular life ever.

I said the best life ever. It's Jesus. At least that's the Sunday school answer. But when you are captivated by another vision – your life proclaims something different.

Because who is the only person who has ever got 100% Strikes down the bowling alley of life was Jesus. The only person who has lived with complete integrity, with love, who was strong and courageous but tender and compassionate – who has been popular and it never got to his head, and despised but it never got to his heart..

He is the Son of Man – the true representative of the ultimate human...the Son of God...the true reflection of God himself. Creator of all, perfectly happy in community with his Father and the Spirit for eternity – living the good life we could only ever dream of....but then choosing to come down into the mess and mire and suffering of our world...he got his hands dirty, and he got his back beaten and his face bloody – to bring us back to himself. To take our sinfulness on the cross – by his wounds we are healed Peter tells us. And when all seemed hopeless, all seemed lost – he rose again, defeating death – rising victorious – seated at God's right hand in glory and he will come again to defeat his enemies and to bring joy and a restored world to all who have trusted in him.

And Peter is going to say to 1st century believers under pressure – if you see even a glimpse of who this Jesus is...here's how it's going to reshape your life. New expectations, new honour, new perspective.

1. New Expectations

But Peter says "Beloved" – isn't it amazing when you're talking about suffering that you don't usually think of being God's 'dearly loved ones'. We normally think we're despised ones.

V12 ***Don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.***

He says don't be surprised *when* fiery trial come upon you to test you. Notice he says 'when' not 'if'. But he's acknowledging that for Jesus, the early church and for us – there are different seasons. It may be a good season for you. Jesus and the early church had sweet seasons of popularity. It may a season of mild trials. The odd comment here, some nasty looks, friends turning away but nothing too bad. OR it could be a season of intense trials – persecution like some places in China and India and around the world. And Peter wants to say – if you're in a good season – and it feels a little depressing to be talking about suffering – now is precisely the right time to get your expectations and thinking straight about

suffering. Because at some point you will experience mild or intense trials if you're trying to follow Jesus. And they are hard enough when you go through them but they're even worse if you aren't expecting them.

Trials are here to *test you* or chapter 1 said to refine you. God is doing the ultimate detox in your life. And he's not detoxing you from too much meat or alcohol or chemicals. He's detoxing you from your biggest problem. Which is you. I have caused more problems to myself in my life than anyone else has. Even if I could get that good life I'm dreaming of – my own selfishness and greed and impatience would ruin it.

And he says to these Christians who are being laughed at and excluded for their faith. Don't be surprised. This is normal. Expect it. This is all part of God's great detox plan for you to bring you to the best life – to delight in him.

But this is totally counter to our ways of thinking. We live with a transactional mentality – networking with Jesus. Jesus you help me get my vision of the good life- make things work smoothly, and I'll put more in the offering, pray more and share my faith. Deal.

How many people do I know who became Christians and afterwards – life just got harder not easier. And for these 1st century believers I imagine they've been praying for their colleagues and friends and finally they pluck up courage to share their personal testimony of faith with them – expecting them to fall on their knees and say – what must I do to be saved? And they say – “Why do you believe that?” “You've turned into one of those religious nuts.” “I guess I'm just one of your projects to save the world.” – and they defriend you on Facebook.

And you go “That wasn't supposed to happen.” “God, I thought you would answer my prayers.” Are you really there? Are you really good? Why me?

And Peter goes – if that happens to you. Nothing's going wrong. This is going to plan. V19 says you suffer according to God's will. So if anyone ever tells you it's never God's will for Christians to suffer – just point them to v19 and ask them to explain it to you. Don't be surprised but instead:

Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings

He goes rejoice. And you're going Peter – I'm not sure what planet you're on.

That word share is the verb of the Greek word *koinonia* which means fellowship. Which is a nice Christian word – we usually use to mean having coffee and cake together after the service. But That's not what the Bible means by fellowship.

It means sharing your life – having life in common. In Acts 2 – the church devoted themselves to fellowship and they shared all their possessions and had everything in common.

Like in a marriage – when I got married, Fiona's life and my life became intrinsically connected. We share life together.. If she's going through a hard time, unless our relationship is totally dysfunctional – I share her sufferings too...in a different way...but you suffer. And if he or she is going through a great time – then her joy becomes my joy. She gets a bonus – I'm overjoyed too.

But if we are united with Jesus...we share his life..his sufferings become our sufferings. And his triumph becomes our triumph. Jesus says in John 16 "In this world you will have trouble. – that's a promise we don't name and claim. We should expect suffering. "But take heart I have overcome the world."

I have come to see that pain and pleasure come to us not as opposites but as Siamese twins, strangely joined and intertwined. Nearly all my memories of acute happiness, in fact, involve some element of pain or struggle. (*Christianity Today*)

I have never heard anyone say, "The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort." Nobody says that. It isn't true. What's true is what Samuel Rutherford said "The Great King keeps his finest wine in the cellars of affliction" – not in the courtyard where the sun shines.

This is not no pain, no gain idea – this is saying when you get stabbed in the back because you won't play dirty in the office politics – I will find joy in Jesus because I know how this ends. I've read the last page of the book. And Jesus wins. And I'm with him.

And while I'm waiting – it's tough – it's a battle. But I'm going to press into my relationship with Jesus. Because trials – mild or intense are not an interruption to our joy and our good life – they're the very pathway that God is taking us on to detox us from ourselves to the best life he has planned for us. Where Christ is both the journey and the destination. If you live for your vision of comfort- it's as fleeting as a French civil servant's happiness – one inconvenience and it's gone. If you live for Christ, everything can be taken from you but no-one can take away your joy. New expectations.

2) New honour

V14 "If you're insulted for the name of Christ, you're blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. But don't suffer as a murderer, thief, evildoer, meddler. If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."

If I was to ask you – name 10 situations where you feel you've been blessed by God – how many of you would name being made fun of for being a Christian as one of them? Because our vision of the good life doesn't include insults.? Except it does in Jesus vision too – *"Blessed are you when people insult you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven."* Matthew 5.

In Acts 5 – the apostles including Peter have just been told to stop talking about Jesus to others and they refuse – and they're beaten by the authorities for it – and do you know what their response is: *"They left the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name."*

What is going on here? In our culture – face counts for a lot. We are bound by other people's opinions of us, which is why we don't want to show our weaknesses, why we stay so private so often – because we're afraid of losing honour and respect in other ppl's eyes. That's why if someone insults you – we either end up feeling shame – we lose face...or we end up getting angry - fighting back, being defensive – no you're stupid for not believing.

And Jesus and Peter are saying when you are willing to stand up for your Christian faith and what you get back is not honour – but dishonour. Rejection not respect. It's painful. It hurts. But you see you still have face and blessing. May be not in your friend or family's eyes. But in God's eyes...because your honour and blessing are now found in Jesus not in craving to

be liked by others. And you find a new freedom that you don't actually need to live in fear of losing face – because you've already lost it and found God's favour. And if you suffer for your king...as a hero who suffers for their country – your honour increases. The Spirit of glory rests of you – just as Jesus went through the same things and God's Spirit came upon him through from his baptism and his life..to his death and then raised him from death and into glory...so suffering for Christ is a sign that God's presence will be with you, giving you the power to live for him, and making Jesus more precious to you and making your story to look just a little more like his story.

Joseph Tson, a Romanian pastor who stood up to Ceausescu's repressions of Christianity, wrote,

This union with Christ is the most beautiful subject in the Christian life. It means that I am not a lone fighter here: I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering: I only had the honor to share His sufferings.

It's not that we delight in the suffering itself but in what God does through the suffering. But Peter says If you're going to be insulted and suffer – suffer for the right reasons not the wrong reasons. Don't suffer for being an idiot. Telling everyone about Jesus but you're mean, hurtful, you're a gossip. You'll suffer for it – but it won't grow your love for Jesus – it'll just grow your martyr complex. If you preach Jesus – do it with gentleness and respect Peter says in chapter 3.

But if I'm honest I'm not sure that I've really suffered that much as a Christian. I've had comments – but most people are like – okay well, you've got your religion just don't push it on to me. And so the question comes – should I be suffering more?

And I have this secret jealousy of those who do suffer for the name of Christ – I don't think it's because I have a martyr complex – but because I know what suffering does for your faith. I know people who have suffered for Christ and their love for Jesus is so strong. But I wonder if sometimes I haven't faced even mild trials for Christ because I sought honour from the wrong places.

In reaction to all the weirdo Christians, don't we sometimes want to be the cool or relevant Christian, not seem too legalistic or uptight, up-to-date, because we somehow think people will be more attracted to Jesus if they see we can be trendy too. But I wonder if sometimes we've taken that too far and used that to justify our own comfort not finding honour in Jesus.

Just a week ago – I went down to our letterbox downstairs to take out our letters and bumped into a guy in my building who I say 'hi' to whenever I bump into him – about once every 2 months. And BTW, if you never say 'hi' to people in the lifts in your building or where you work – you may be missing out on God really using you with the people around you. Because you never know how God will use those conversations. I said ' how are you doing?' And he replied "I've had the worst 2 months of my life'. And we stood by my letterbox for the next 40 minutes. And Fiona had to call me to find out where I was. And he talked about his serious health issues, nearly dying, his insecurities. And I said I'll pray for you – and he said. Thanks I'm not that bad. And I shared a little of my story and said – my faith helped me. But at the back of my mind – I really felt God saying – you need to challenge this guy to really consider faith in Jesus at this time. And I chickened out. Because I justified it by saying – well I don't want to lose the relationship...because maybe I'll be able to develop this. And I said enough to feel like – well I told him I was a Christian but I was too

ashamed to challenge him to follow Christ because I feared that he'd think I was a religious nut and never want to speak to me again.

But this was his moment of greatest vulnerability and darkness when would be a better time. You see – I'm not saying the first time we meet people we should throw the gospel at people – no we love others, build relationships, listen well. But I wonder when we get into those 50/50 moments of shall I share something or shall I stay quiet...how often most of us resort to the 50% of -now's not the right time. Because we're ashamed. And we want honour and respect and a relationship with the people around us and we don't want to do anything to rock the boat. And yet in so doing, we may be failing to love them dearly and point them to the best life possible. We'd have no problems if we thought the new Iphone was better than their Xiaomi – saying – listen – you should get the new Iphone. Because that's socially acceptable. But we don't want to say – you should get to know Jesus because that could cost us social capital.

But Peter is saying – don't be ashamed of the name of Jesus. In fact, it's the name of greatest honour. We name drop famous people we've met all the time because that gives us honour in others eyes. But how often do we name drop Jesus? Do you feel the honour of being a Christian in your office, in HK? And willing to face the shame of others for that name. "Hebrews it says Jesus for joy set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame and sat down at the right hand of the Father. How do you despise the power of shame?

You tell it – Shame – you have no hold on me because I have a greater honour. I have a greater joy, a greater vision of the good life – than what you're offering me. Jesus, rejected, abandoned, shut out - He said shame you can take my dignity in other's eyes, but you can't take my dignity in my Father's eyes. You can abandon me and leave me alone but my Father will never abandon me. His honour was in his Father.

But honestly, sometimes I'd rather have the honour of being seen as a nice guy, a talented guy, a successful guy by others – than the honour of belonging to Jesus.

And it's scares me to think of losing it. But like Paul does I want to know Christ – and the fellowship of his sufferings – so I see the honour of what it means to belong to you. Because if we don't see who Jesus is – if your heart is captured by a different vision of the good life – then you will always be terrified of suffering anything for Jesus. And you'll live safe yet joyless and burdened, always fearful of losing your comfort or your social credibility. And we'll miss the joy, the freedom and the honour of being united to Jesus. New expectations. New honour.

3. New Perspective

V17-19 “For it's time for judgement to begin with 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?”

When we hear the word 'judgement' we hear punishment. That's not what Peter is saying. He's thinking sorting process. In America, Christianity has been socially acceptable for a while, but as it is increasingly being marginalised, statistics are showing people who were nominally Christian – are now walking away from their supposed faith because it's getting less socially acceptable to be a Christian. That's why Peter says experiencing opposition for the faith sorts out those who are Christ's and those who were there just for the ride. Don't look for present relief from the suffering by denying Christ and trying to get an easier life Peter is saying...because if you want to avoid the pain of short-term detox – you'll end up

with worse suffering later on when you stand before God in judgement – just as you will in your health if you keep pumping the chemicals in your body.

If you are not a Christian, the Bible doesn't say – Jesus doesn't mind if you basically live for your own version of the good life as long as you were a nice guy. You'll get into heaven. Christianity is not about making you more moral or nice. In the new creation where the ultimate good life with no suffering is found – the greatest joy is not just getting a bigger Ferrari than you had here – it's where Jesus is the centre of everything. – the greatest joy. And if you don't want to share Jesus at the centre of your life now – then you won't want Jesus at the centre of life in heaven either. And since Jesus is the source of all the good things in life – to live an eternity in hell – is to live a life where you are continually at the centre of your life without any of the blessings that God provides in this life. Because you didn't want him. That's so much worse than suffering a little dishonour now. So come to Jesus, turn from making your vision of life the centre of your world and surrender to him today.

If you are a believer, and the thought of losing any face for the sake of Christ scares you. That's okay. But the reason we are so attracted to our culture's vision of the good life is because every day we hear its message preached to us. Advertisers don't spend billions of dollars for nothing – they want you to believe that you can get life through their products and comfort. And the only way you will every live with Jesus as your vision of glory is if you are preaching and meditating on him and his word every single day – preaching it to yourself – in Community Groups reminding each other. So often when we get together – all we talk about is ourselves and our issues. Which gives no power against shame and nothing more beautiful to live for than what the advertisers tell us. In our busy lives – let me plead with us to talk more about Jesus – and pray more to know him...so that when we face those 50/50 choices of whether to stand for him...we're so soaked in his goodness and grace that we can entrust all our circumstances to him. Just as Jesus did to his Father...because he's our faithful Creator – working out his plan for his glory and our good.

And if he has lived the best life – choosing to die on a cross in agony to bring you that life – then if it brings you through mild trials or major ones – you know that your future is already secure because the one you are united with has already gone ahead of you.

If you've ever gone through a trial and you've felt like no-one else understood – and then you sit down with someone you deeply respect and they say to you – I know what that's like – I've been through that and I've come out the other side – how much hope, how much joy – how much confidence does that give us...that not only has Jesus been through it and out the other side – but he is making us more like him, our hero in the process. And he becomes our great vision of the good life.