

Flourishing under Pressure (1 Peter 4:12-19)

Sometimes as Christians we can face pressure from the world around to give up on our faith. In some places this can even mean death. So, how can we flourish as Christians when faced with such pressure? Peter gives us some great reasons.

Our Suffering and the Persecuted Church

In this country you are unlikely to die because you are a Christian.

In Southern Nigeria, being a Christian is now quite normal.

In some parts of Northern Nigeria to be a Christian is downright dangerous.

Rebecca - part 1

Rebecca lived in a village in North-Eastern Nigeria. She was part of a small Christian community in a mainly Muslim area. Her mainly Muslim neighbours were not a threat, but her village was raided by Fulani herdsmen who were radical Islamists. They targeted the Christians in the village and killed her husband. Then a few months later they came back and murdered her son.

Rebecca was left devastated, paralysed by grief and sorrow at the incomprehensible tragedy she had befallen.

To be a Christian in some parts of the world is to risk being killed for your faith. Why would you remain a Christian in such circumstances? Why be a Christian in cultures and societies, where Christians are shamed, ridiculed, insulted, arrested or even murdered for their faith?

1 Peter

1 Peter was written to small communities of Christians living in very un-Christian world. Christians were shamed, ridiculed and insulted. Occasionally Christians were even imprisoned or killed for their faith. Peter writes to encourage them not just to hold on to their faith under such pressure, but to flourish in it. Look at verse 19:

"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4:19)

It's worth asking whether for us as Christians living in a relatively tolerant and free society what Peter writes is relevant to us.

Pressure on our faith

I think it is, because although our livelihoods and lives are not under threat because we are Christians, there is a pressure within our society to give up on faith. People around us will quite often act surprised that we still believe such things in these days. Others may even be upset that we take the Bible seriously, when it disagrees with more modern popular views of morality around issues to do with sex, sexuality, the unborn child and end of life treatment. When people say to us, "You don't believe that do you?" we feel a subtle, but real pressure to be ashamed of our faith... a pressure which tragically leads many to give up on following Jesus altogether.

Suffering because of Covid-19

At the same time some of what Peter says about suffering because of persecution is relevant to our suffering more generally.

Over lockdown some of us have faced social isolation, which we have struggled with - you have experienced what some persecuted Christians experience because of their faith.

Because of Covid-19 some have faced financial insecurity and uncertainty. Some Christians find it hard to make a living in societies, where you have to be part of the mainstream culture and religion to engage effectively in the economy.

Over lockdown we have been reminded about the reality of death as daily we are told the number of people who have died from Covid-19 - for Christians like Rebecca in Nigeria death is a powerful reality.

The present crisis then brings us suffering that in some ways mirrors the suffering of persecuted Christians around the world. We need to hear what Peter has to say.

Three reasons not to give up on faith in the face of pressure:

And Peter gives us three reasons not to give up on our faith in the midst of suffering and particularly in the midst of persecution or pressure from those around to give up on faith.

1. Participation with Christ - vs. 12-13

Firstly, he reminds us that when we suffer we are participating with Christ. That is Jesus was there before us and when we suffer we are living in the same way as Jesus did. If we suffer for our faith in Christ at the hands of a world who hated him, then we know that we are truly aligned with Christ.

Indeed, the fact that Christ suffered means that we should not be surprised by suffering. If Jesus, the Son of God, was persecuted by evil men, then why not his followers. If God becoming human and living among us meant that he suffered pain and death, then we should see that as part of the normal experience of human life.

Our society, however, often perceives suffering as abnormal. Even in our present crisis we look for and expect a quick return to 'normality' where the restrictions and illness caused by Covid-19 has gone away. No doubt that will happen and I pray it will happen soon, but even when there is a vaccine for Covid-19, people will still die, some will still face isolation through ill-health or just lack of family or friends, others will still face financial ruin, because companies are going bust all the time. Suffering is normal, poverty is normal, death is normal in our world.

Yes, as Christians we know that is not the way it is meant to be. God created the world good and we look forward to a day when suffering will be in the past and death will be no more. In the light of God's eternity, suffering is abnormal, but for now in this present world it is normal - we shouldn't be surprised by it. Jesus's death on the cross shows us that.

Rebecca part 2

I spoke about Rebecca at the start of our sermon.

2 years after the tragic murder of her husband, then son, her pastor sent Rebecca to a trauma centre run by Open Doors, a Christian agency helping persecuted Christians.

Initially Rebecca attended the meetings only as a passive observer, with an expressionless face and dead eyes. She was frozen in sorrow.

The staff did not pressurise her they just allowed her to be there and move at her own slow pace.

One day they asked the women to draw a picture representing their sorrows. Rebecca drew a picture of a coffin and a crying face. After two days in silence Rebecca began to talk about her painting.

Then they were told to place their paintings at the foot of a cross.
Rebecca said:

"The moment I laid my picture at the cross a lightness of heart came over me - I rediscovered peace."

Slowly Rebecca came back to life. She began to sing worship songs and even dance!

Placing her picture at the foot of the cross had caused her to think in a very real way that Jesus, a man of sorrows who is acquainted with our grief, had also validated her suffering and loss.

- **Return to Joy!**

When we can align our suffering with Christ's suffering. When we know that Jesus was there before us, that to suffer is not a sign of abandonment by God, but alignment with his Son, then our suffering - especially because of persecution can become a source of joy! It becomes an assurance not just of our alignment with Christ in his suffering, but also in his resurrection and his victory over sin and death. It becomes a powerful sign of our future eternal joy that God has stored up for us, so that not just in the midst of suffering, but because of suffering we can find joy!

That may not be an instant process. Grief and trauma are real emotions. They take time to work through. Rebecca took years. We must allow ourselves and others to work through their experience of suffering and not expect instant fixes. Yet, as we look to the cross and the resurrection we will be helped through grief pain and trauma to a joy that only God can give.

Peter says do not be surprised by suffering, but rejoice in it - as you participate with Christ. That is one way we flourish in the midst of suffering and pressure to give up on our faith.

2. Presence of the Spirit - vs. 14

Secondly, we can know the presence of the Spirit, when we are under pressure because of our faith.

In verse 14, Peter talks about when we are insulted, because of our faith. This is a powerful pressure from others to make us feel ashamed of our faith.

To be insulted can be painful because we can feel ostracised, unaccepted, cut off from the rest of society.

But, Peter says when that happens we are blessed, because although we may feel isolated as a result, God is there with us by his Spirit.

In the same way you may feel isolated because of Covid-19, but God is there with you by his Spirit.

Father Abdullah

Father Abdullah - a monk in the Syrian Eastern Orthodox church

Sent on a mission to save artefacts from possible destruction by ISIS, he was kidnapped along with others. He was kept in complete darkness and had his head covered by a hood, imprisoned underground. The only way they knew who was still alive was when they prayed together.

They were told to renounce their Christian faith and pray to Allah or face death. Each day another member of the group was executed in order to intimidate those who were still alive.

Eventually when only four were left alive they were rescued by Syrian special forces.

How did Father Abdullah endure this isolation in darkness.

He prayed again and again:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.
Have mercy on me," but in Aramaic.

The word for 'have mercy' in Aramaic means more like 'womb me' - in other words, surround me, hold me, protect me, be my identity.

In the face of great pressure and total isolation, Abdullah held firm to his faith by knowing that God was with him - the Spirit rested on Him.

When life is going well, we can find strength through fellowship, our constant activity and with our struggles. Yet, when isolation comes because of persecution, illness or lockdown - we need God 'to womb us'. We are forced to depend on his presence in new and powerful ways. When we learn to do that we are blessed.

How can we persevere in our faith when we sometimes feel isolated because of it? Know that God's presence is with you - especially in such situations. Give thanks for that blessing.

1. Passing the Test - vs. 16-19

The final reason to keep going despite the pressure on us to give up is to see it as passing the test to be truly part of God's people and so secure from much worse judgement and confident in the eternal joy he wants to give us.

In verse 16, Peter says, do not be ashamed if you suffer as a Christian.

The reason he gives in verse 17 for not being ashamed is rather obscure. What does it mean that God's judgement will begin with the house of God?

Aren't we no longer under condemnation? How then can we face God's judgement?

And if it is God's judgement why does it come through the persecution of pagans?

These are not easy questions to answer and commentators point to different Old Testament passages to try and explain them. Perhaps Zechariah 13 is the most helpful:

"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!" declares the LORD Almighty. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'" (Zechariah 13:7-9)

This links back with previous parts of our passage in 1 Peter. The shepherd who is struck down by God is Jesus - indeed, Jesus quotes this verse just before the crucifixion to warn his disciples that they will be scattered.

If God's judgement began with Christ, the chief cornerstone, then it is natural to see the rest of the house of God being the first to experience God's judgement. Also 1 Peter 4:12 speaks of the fiery ordeal to test us and in this verse it says that the third who are truly God's will be tested by fire. Perhaps then we are to see persecution from non-Christian's as God's judgement in the sense that it is God's test for the genuineness of our faith.

But, Peter's main point is an argument from lesser to greater. Whatever pressure or suffering we may face as Christians at the hands of unbelievers, just imagine how much greater will be their judgement when God comes in judgement at the end of time.

Peter consoles his readers that it is therefore better to stand by one's faith now, even though it results in suffering than to deny Christ for present relief only to suffer much worse in the coming judgement as one who has denied and rejected Christ. We persevere in our faith, so that we might pass this test.

Perpetua and Felicity

Perpetua was a 21 years old Roman Aristocrat living in the area that is now Tunisia. She lived 200 years after Jesus walked the earth. When her faith was discovered she was thrown into prison along with her newborn child. She was joined by a pregnant slave girl called Felicity. They faced a test: deny Jesus and be set free or face the amphitheatre and the wild beasts.

They refused to deny Jesus and like Daniel sent to the lion's den they were sent to the arena. One eyewitness said:

"The day of their victory dawned, and they proceeded from the prison to the amphitheatre, as if they were on their way to heaven, with gay and gracious looks; trembling, if at all, not with fear but with joy."

Unlike Daniel, they were not saved from the wild beasts. Yet, they passed the test, they participated in Christ's suffering and the presence of the Spirit enabled them to endure their suffering with joy.

They now have their reward. With Christ they share in the eternal victory won through his death and resurrection.

Flourish don't fail

We may face pressure as Christians to give up on faith. We probably won't face the same pressure as Peter's readers or the extreme pressure of Christians living in North Eastern Nigeria, or Abdullah imprisoned by ISIS or Perpetua and Felicity sent to the wild beasts.

Yet, we still face the same test. Will we fail and give up on Christ or will we rejoice at participating in his suffering, know the presence of the Spirit and pass the test.

Will we in the midst of pressure and suffering do as Peter says:

"...commit ourselves to our faithful Creator
and continue to do good?"