

+ 1 Peter 4:12-19 + The Cross-Bearer Finds Comfort in the Crucified +
+ 17th Sunday after Pentecost + 27 September 2009 +

Who of us likes to suffer? Who of us likes to struggle? Who of us likes to endure pain or temptation or worry or doubt? Who of us joyfully cries out to the Lord with arms wide open, "Lord, hit me with everything you've got"? Who of us likes to bear a cross in all its self-denying reality? I'm sure none of us would put struggle or pain or hardship or cross-bearing high on our list of favorite things we like to do, but today the apostle Peter comes along in his first letter and urges us, ***"Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ.... If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed.... If you suffer as a Christian...praise God..."*** Basically, Peter is telling us, "Bear the cross gladly."

Can he really be serious? Doesn't Peter know that crosses are heavy? Didn't he pay attention when his Lord carried that awful load on bloody shoulders through the streets of Jerusalem? Doesn't Peter know that crosses sometimes feel like they're too much to bear? Doesn't he realize that a cross is filled with sharp splinters that cut and poke and jab and hurt?

Oh, Peter knew. He knew all too well how hard it is to bear the cross. You see, there was a time when he asked the same questions and wondered the same things we ask today. In fact, he went so far as to rebel against the cross. We heard it moments ago. "No, Lord! You can't suffer. You can't be rejected and arrested and killed. No, Lord! You can't go to the cross." With stunning speed, Jesus squelched the rebellion welling up inside this disciple who didn't want the cross for his Savior or himself. ***"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*** What made Jesus' rebuke sting all the more was the fact that just moments before Peter had boldly confessed, ***"You are the Christ"***. Even the boldest confessors have difficulty bearing the cross, let alone bear it gladly.

Oh, yes. Peter knew about the cross, and he reacted just as you and I would have if we were in his sandals. Who of us would not have objected to the anguish and pain and suffering and cross and death that awaited Christ, our beloved Savior? Who of us doesn't have difficulty bearing the cross of denying self and following Christ? Perhaps that's why it's so hard to hear Peter's words today. His words cut us to the heart for those times when we've failed to willingly bear the cross or have been more eager to dump it.

Peter doesn't want us to be surprised when ***"painful trials"*** come into our lives when we suffer as followers of Christ. To be clear, Peter isn't talking about those times when we face the painful consequences of a sinful action. Every sinful act has a consequence, whether it's the loss of trust in a cheating spouse, the empty discontent of greed, the health problems of a glutton, the loneliness of a liar, or the legal problems of violence. Peter writes, ***"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a troublesome meddler."*** Sinners suffer the consequences of their sinful words and actions.

For Christians, however, suffering and the cross for Christ's sake are to be an expected part of life. Peter tells us, ***"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."*** Being a Christian is counter-culture, but not just in society. Being a Christian really goes against the grain of who you and I really are by nature. You and I struggle with those temptations to lust, to never be content, to overindulge, to lie, to gossip, to react violently or harshly or critically. You and I struggle with those temptations and we suffer. We suffer when the sinful nature wants what is forbidden and we suffer when we fall into sin. We even suffer when we triumph over temptation as pride and self-righteousness rear their ugly heads.

Our sinful natures tempt us to think, "None of that struggle and suffering would be necessary if I didn't follow Christ. Who needs to bear such a heavy cross? Who needs to deal with the pain and the struggle in the mud and muck of this life beneath a cross that simply crushes me? Even if I do bear it, why bear that cross gladly or willingly or even joyfully?" The seductive voice of temptation lulls you and me into thinking that the cross isn't worth bearing, that we could be "free" without the cross.

...But where does a life free of the cross lead? It seems so much more attractive, so much cleaner and easier, but a life free of the cross is a life free of Christ. It is a life that leads to eternal judgment locked up in the prison of hell separated from God's love forever. Peter warns, ***"For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, 'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'"*** How frightening to be free of Christ and left to our own righteousness before the holy God! Is it really worth throwing off the cross of following Christ, who bore the cross for me?

...But Jesus did bear the cross for me. When you realize that, then you start to understand how you find comfort in the Crucified. Remember what Jesus taught his disciples after they confessed him as God's Anointed—the Christ? He prepared them for what they did not understand. ***“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”*** Jesus was going to the cross for them.

Jesus had not yet turned his face towards Jerusalem, but the time of suffering and the cross was coming soon. That didn't make sense to Peter or the others, but Jesus had to do it. Now don't get me wrong. Jesus didn't enjoy the suffering. He didn't gleefully bear the beatings and go to his death. There's a difference between enjoying the cross and bearing it gladly. That's what Jesus did when he willingly put himself beneath the cross and on the cross for you. He knew how hard it is for you to bear the daily cross of temptation, so he bore it for you gladly taking on Satan and all his hellish demons. He knew how hard it is for you to bear his name in a society, in a culture, in a workplace or a school where the name of Christ is neither revered nor respected, so he gladly bore rejection and suffering for you.

It wasn't pretty. It wasn't glorious. Even his grand entrance into Jerusalem was rather pathetic as the King of kings rode in on a donkey. It was a struggle from the moment of his conception in the womb of an unwed virgin to the fickle roller coaster of public popularity to death by a form of execution that gave us the word “excruciating”. Even his tomb was borrowed! Still Christ willingly and gladly endured it all for you. Christ Jesus knew how hard it is for you to suffer in his name in a world that hates him, so he endured the cross and suffering and death to give you what the world cannot give—righteousness before the holy God, eternal life, and forgiveness for those times when you stumble beneath the cross of following him.

When Christ came to Peter after his resurrection, he brought Peter the comfort of forgiveness. Peter's willingness to rebel against the cross led him to publicly deny Jesus, but Jesus went to the cross for Peter's too so he could absolve or cleanse Peter of all that guilt. Peter saw the cross differently. Knowing that Jesus went to the cross to absolve me, and knowing that Jesus remained committed to me, even though he knew far too well that I would fail him, I see the cross differently too.

Beneath the cross is not a pleasant place to be and Peter isn't urging us to enjoy it either. Instead he encourages us to bear the cross gladly, to rejoice in suffering for the name of Christ, to praise God when we suffer for Christ privately or publicly, because we find comfort there in Christ. ***“But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”***

As odd as it sounds, bearing the cross as a follower of Christ is a blessed privilege. You're not alone. As a follower of Christ, denying self and taking up your cross, you join the procession of cross-bearers across the centuries. As a cross-bearer of Christ, you participate in his sufferings as Jesus had promised in John 15, ***“No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”*** Our same Savior also promised in Matthew 5, ***“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*** Peter had received that comfort from the Crucified, so he encourages us, ***“If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name...Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”***

We see the cross differently and bear it gladly with real perseverance, real joy, and real praise. As cross-bearers, though, we don't revel in suffering, but cling to our faithful God who has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. We are consoled by the fact that only in Christ Crucified do we have real righteousness before God, not because of our own struggles, but because of his for us. Beneath the cross we are comforted knowing God will not despise us as we struggle there, but will strengthen us through his Word and Sacrament for the journey ahead, a journey that will end in eternal glory. At that time, all of us who bear the cross will lay them at the feet of our victorious Lord. We will be overjoyed when his glory is revealed and eternal rest from the struggle will be ours. ***“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”*** Amen.