

Christ has Won - So Suffer Well

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder, what is the best news you have heard in your life? Maybe it was getting into your course or getting into that dream job.

Maybe it was hearing that you have a baby on the way. Maybe it was hearing that your finger isn't fractured. Or, more seriously, maybe that your condition is treatable.

That the illness that you've suffered for months or perhaps years is coming to an end. Well, for millions of people in our recent past, I imagine if we had the chance to ask them, it would have been this, one single piece of news, the best news they heard in their lives.

News heard on every radio in Britain on the 8th of May, 1945. The war is at an end. The war is at an end.

It must have sounded too good to be true. Indeed, in the next few sentences, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, summed up how that news had come to be true.

[1 : 13] It said, What news?

It's incredibly moving to watch film, video footage of people hearing that news, laughing, crying. The war is at an end. That day is known as Victory in Europe Day, VE Day.

But, as good as that news was, it was only actually confirming what everybody already knew to be true. Because the war had already been won almost a year before that on D-Day.

Okay, think, saving Private Ryan. Looking back, it said that from that day onwards, the war was won.

That was the beginning of the end. Even though the battle raged on another year, from that day onwards, the victory was secure. So the war was won on D-Day.

[2 : 37] But the fighting wasn't over until VE Day. Now, why start there? Well, Peter is going to tell us this morning that spiritually, we live between D-Day and VE Day.

We've seen in this letter how Peter is writing to ordinary Christians suffering for Christ. And Peter is writing to teach them and us today not only how to live well, but how to suffer well as Christians.

And in our passage this morning, he does that by reminding us that even though we battle on, sometimes it feels single-handedly in a world in rebellion against God.

Struggling in our witness, opposed in our worship. Yet, he says, victory is inevitable because Christ has already won the war.

The good news has already been announced, and now we are simply living for the day that the fighting ends. And so, he says, whatever we suffer this side of glory, we know we cannot lose.

[3 : 51] We cannot lose. Isn't that not the best news you've ever heard? It's life-changing news.

We're going to see three ways that news changes our lives. And right in the middle, we are going to see how secure that victory really is.

So, firstly then, Peter teaches us to suffer well in our witness. Suffer well, he says, in the eyes of the world around you.

But he begins with a refreshing reminder. If you glance down at verse 13, see that who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? Now, if you've been with us in our morning series, you will know that Peter has a lot to say, doesn't he, about suffering.

The way that we should prepare for suffering as we follow Christ in the world. Don't be naive, he says. You will be thought of as backwards, as ignorant, as antisocial, if you choose not to love this world, but instead to love Christ.

But before we start building a bunker in the basement, he slips this in. Don't be naive, but don't be paranoid. Don't be paranoid.

[5 : 07] Who's going to harm you if you are eager to do good? Don't imagine, he says, that if you live well and do good in the world for Christ, that someone somewhere must have it in for you.

Brothers and sisters, it is an ugly thing when Christians can only think the worst of the world that we live in. So, at that point, normal people start to tune out.

Because the world isn't as bad as it could be, is it? When the government or our schools or our society can't do anything right, when we start telling one another how it's only going to get worse in the next 10 years, that damages our witness.

Because it's not necessarily so. You know, I think we can be bad for this. Remember, we don't need a persecution complex to take suffering seriously.

So, when we catch ourselves thinking the worst of our world, says Peter, remember God's common grace. Common grace.

[6 : 20] It's the doctrine that teaches us that people who don't share our faith can still recognize a good life when they see one. Common grace tells us, generally speaking, if we stay on the right side of the law and work hard and love our families, who's going to have a problem with that?

Because, as Jesus says, God is kind even to the ungrateful and the evil. And therefore, our world will never be as bad as it could be or should be, perhaps.

And friends, that wonderful truth changes our whole posture towards our world from a defensive posture to a generous one, from closed to open.

God's kindness, his common grace keeps us living these open, generous lives, even when things go wrong, says Peter. Even when the world does turn on us, verse 14, even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

Do not fear their threats. Do not be frightened. But in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. So you see here is Peter, the heart surgeon, opening us up to see where does that defensive and closed attitude come from.

[7 : 45] He says opening up our hearts, where that comes from, is a place of fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. What does it show us when we are twitchy and defensive about the way our world operates?

It reveals our insecurity, he says. Here we might tell ourselves that we are concerned about the moral or ethical direction of our world, and we might be.

But if when the prospect of suffering for Christ gets under our skin, what comes out is anger, frustration with our world, well, Peter says that's not a sign of boldness, but a fear.

And the question to ask in those times, he says, is who is Lord? Who is really king? Instead of fearing those threats, he says, in your heart, revere Christ as Lord.

Or as the ESV puts it, in your heart, set apart Christ the Lord as holy. Christ rules your heart, your inner life, says Peter. You won't be frightened by frightening things, the thought of suffering for him, because Christ is Lord of all.

[9 : 03] And friends, this is where real security is found. The power to live the Christian life, freedom from fear. You know, why are we worried about what people will think of us if they know that we're a Christian?

Why are we afraid of the way that they might react if we speak to them about the hope we have in Christ? There's only one opinion of us that truly matters, and that is Christ, who is Lord.

We live for his eyes only, says Peter. And so while he is watching over us, we don't need to fear anything that is frightening. Which frees us up, Luke, if you look at verse 15.

A verse we all love, not to hide our faith, but to witness well in the world, though we suffer for it. Always be prepared, says Peter.

Always to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Always be prepared. We love that verse, don't we? But are we always prepared in our hearts to do that?

[10 : 16] This verse is a great encouragement to all of us to speak to others about Jesus. Whose responsibility is it to tell others about him?

Well, says Peter, everyone who hopes in him. Everyone, all the Christians that he's writing to in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, and by extension all Christians the world over. If he is your living hope, your only hope in life and in death, well, that hope is worth other people knowing about, isn't it? If you knew that there was only one lifeboat on a sinking ship, and it was big enough to fit everyone in it who needed to get in it, would you not tell everyone on that ship where their only hope was to be found?

Brothers and sisters, this world is a ship sinking into eternal darkness, and there is only one hope for humanity of being rescued, and that is Jesus Christ.

And so the question is, if you hope in him today, why would you not be prepared to tell people why? Well, Peter's already given us the answers, I think.

[11:37] One, we think the worst of people and assume that they're not going to want to hear us. Two, that we fear other people and are frightened of what they will think if we tell them.

There might be other things that challenge us, but these are the heart issues. Okay, I'm preaching to myself here to you. This is challenging. It's challenging. It's challenging. But if God is kind to the ungrateful, and Christ is our security even when it's tough, then Peter is saying neither of those are good reasons not to tell people about our hope in Christ.

In fact, Peter assumes that people will want to know why. Giving an answer implies getting a question, doesn't it? Perhaps we're thinking, well, if nobody ever asks me the question, then I don't have to give an answer.

But if no one is asking you why you're a Christian in Scotland in the year 2022, well, perhaps there are deeper questions that need to be asked.

Have we perhaps taken ourselves out of the world so that, in fact, nobody knows that we're Christians? Or have we perhaps in the world started to look like the world and less and less like Christ in the world?

[13:07] Friends, if we are ready to share the hope that we have, we will want to share the hope that we have. And if we remember how kind God is to his enemies, and if we know how safe and secure we are in Christ, we will want to share it warmly and gently and respectfully.

That's the bit of verse 15 we often miss out, isn't it? With gentleness and respect. Not self-righteously, not heavy-handedly. In short, not making people wish they'd never asked. Jesus might be offensive to some, but it's not our place to be insensitive, to deliberately hurt people. Do it gently with respect, says Peter. And brothers and sisters, Peter's encouragement to us is that if we live and speak for Christ gently and respectfully and well, most of the time, nobody's going to have a problem with that.

Who is going to harm you for doing good? But if after all that, you still, you still get put on the sideline, you still get insulted, still get laughed at, well, says Peter, suffer well.

[14:27] Suffer well in your witness. 4 verse 17, it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Friends, still better to say something and suffer for it than not to say anything and sin. And that's hard.

That's hard, isn't it? Because our every instinct tells us to seek safety and avoid suffering. So how can we suffer well? Maybe that sounds like a contradiction to you, suffering well.

Well, next Peter tells us we can suffer well because Christ suffered first and won. He won. 4 verse 18, Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

If it's costly for us to tell people about Jesus' rescue, let's not forget how costly it was for him to rescue. He suffered for our sins.

[15:37] His body was nailed to a cross and he bled and suffocated and died to bring us to God. And his suffering wasn't only physical, his soul was crushed under the infinite weight of God's holy anger against our sins.

On the cross, Jesus went through hell so that we would never have to. He, the righteous one, was punished so that we who are unrighteous could come to God and be welcomed, not because we are right in ourselves, but because our wrongs are paid for.

And Peter's point is that if Christ's suffering achieved that, bringing us, unrighteous people, me and you, to God, then his suffering was not in vain but led to victory.

And that is what these verses 18 to 22 are here to tell us. And remember how the news that the war was over had to be backed up by the story to be believed?

Well, that's what Peter was doing. Notice, follow with me, he's telling the story of Christ. Verse 18, he suffered, he was put to death, but made alive in the spirit.

[17:02] Verse 19, he preached to the spirits in prison. We'll come back to that bit in a second. At the end of verse 21, look, he was raised from the dead.

And, verse 22, he went into heaven to sit at God's right hand with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him. In short, says Peter, Christ is one and that is how he has won.

How do we know he's won? Because he suffered and fought single-handedly until the evildoers lay prostrate before him. And that is where the imprisoned spirits come into it.

Now, maybe, as Murdo read, you thought, what on earth is going on there? I don't remember that happening in the Gospels. Now, there are different views about verse 19.

Martin Luther was not known for his humility. Sometimes, when people disagreed with him, he swore at them. But when he came to this verse, verse 19, he said, this is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament.

[18:14] I still do not know for sure what the apostle meant. So, it's good for us, isn't it, with verses like this? But there's not too much to go on, not to be too sure of ourselves, to be humble.

As Alistair Begg often says, the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things. So, don't lose sleep, please, over this one verse.

But put really simply, my own understanding would be that verse 19 is what we mean when we say in the Apostles' Creed, he descended into hell. Not that Christ suffered in hell, nor that he went and gave people in hell a second chance.

Rather, that when Jesus' body lay in the tomb, his spirit went and proclaimed to the evil spirits in hell that they were now doomed.

Paul says in Colossians chapter 2 that on the cross, Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame.

[19:21] Shame because they thought they had won when the Lord of glory died. But in fact, that was the moment when they lost forever. Putting Christ on the cross was a massive own goal for the powers of darkness because his death took away any grounds on which the devil could accuse us before God.

It took away our guilt. His death took away our sins. They are nailed to the cross. We bear them no more. So friends, Christ's victory over the powers of darkness was won when he went and died.

Peter says in his second letter, chapter 2, verse 4, that the powers of these evil spirits are held in chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment. And there, Christ went to tell them in person, the war is over and I have won.

Their fate was sealed by his death. And so probably Peter, what he's doing here is describing a cosmic victory tour that began in the grave before Christ was raised to life and went up to heaven and the tour finished with Christ seated on the throne of the universe with all powers submitted to him so that he is now Lord of all.

Now people would disagree with me on that. Perhaps you do too. And if you have questions, I'd love to talk about that afterwards. words. But whatever we think of verse 19, the way this works, what Peter wants us to take away from this section is that Christ's victory is total and everyone knows it.

[21:15] Even his sworn enemies. D-Day has happened. The war has been won. Good Friday from that day onwards, the story was only ever going to end with Christ on the throne.

And between that day and what we might call the sea day, victory in the cosmos day, well if we hope in Christ's victory, then we have nothing to fear from this world and its suffering.

And so, brothers and sisters, that is what enables us to suffer well. Suffer well. Because the suffering is only for a little while, but then guaranteed glory with Christ forever.

You know, imagine sometimes Peter's readers had a lot of sympathy with Noah and the days when he lived. In Noah's time, we read, the Lord saw how great the wickedness of humans had become on the earth, that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

It was a hard time to love God. So, picture this, says Peter, picture the world flooded, all life swept away, God waited patiently, he was slow to anger, says Peter.

[22:39] But when the day came, his victory was total over evil. people, but on the waters of his judgment floated one small boat. In that boat were eight people who trusted the Lord and were saved.

And so, says Peter, that is you today, verse 21. If your trust is in Christ, kept safe, kept afloat, even when God's patient anger finally comes and the world is judged, if you're trusting in Christ, you will be safe and secure forever because he is one over the evil of this world and because he has taken our sin away as far as the east is from the west through his death on the cross.

Baptism is a sign of that security, says Peter. We don't have time to get into it. But just if you have been baptized, reflect on that. What a gift. It's a sign that Christ suffered first for ye and one.

And that's why we can suffer it firstly in our witness, but thirdly also in our worship. Suffer it well in worship. If you have a glance down there, chapter 4, verse 1, therefore, off the back of this, since

Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude.

In short, suffer as Christ suffered because he suffered and won. You know, don't we, Christ is not only our role model, but he is also our role model in suffering.

[24 : 20] So the difference in this section is the direction that our suffering is pointed. Earlier, Peter said, suffer well before the watching world. Now he says, suffer well in the eyes of God.

He's turned from witness to worship. See that verse 2? If we're willing to suffer for Christ, we do not live the rest of our earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

It's a reminder to us, isn't it, that we don't stop worshipping God when we go out through those doors at the end of our service. I hope we know that. Our lives are to be living sacrifices, says Paul, worshipping God as long as we live.

But living as a living sacrifice in this world is not easy. Other ways, easier ways of life are always available to us, aren't they?

It would be so easy to stop being a living sacrifice and simply live. We think this is a 21st century thing, maybe, but if you glance down at verse 3, Peter says, you've spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do, living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry.

[25 : 38] He's saying that's how they used to spend their Friday night, the bars and clubs and brothels and one-night stands. And Peter's suggesting that there's a part of them that probably still wants tea.

It's important to say this, isn't it? Christians are not immune from alcohol and sex-based sins. In fact, our middle classness is a really good cover-up for those sins because they're things that we just don't talk about.

We'll add to that quiet, inner voice of temptation the persuasive, loud voices of our world and our living sacrifices in danger.

First of all, they're surprised that you do not join them in reckless wild living and they heap abuse on you. Have you ever not gone out with your colleagues on the work night out or sat to one side while they went explicitly to get plastered and never heard the end of it?

Or have you perhaps not had a romantic fling to talk about with friends? You've stepped out of the crude banter and become the butt of the joke instead.

[26 : 55] Being a living sacrifice for God is dangerous because it is so, so different from the lifestyle that is lived all around us.

And the pressure is real, isn't it? Because the pain would go away instantly if we just joined in and weren't so different. But don't do that, says Peter.

Don't do that. Don't forget that when we suffer, we are playing for the winning team. For Christ, you've suffered first and won. You people are surprised when we say no to things that don't honor God.

We don't reinforce their egos by nodding along with their stories or support their lifestyle by joining in with it. People get defensive, don't they? Perhaps they feel judged.

Let me say, we shouldn't go out of our way to make people feel judged or be judgmental. people.

But as we live our lives for God, our difference reminds us and other people that there is a different set of eyes on them.

[28 : 04] A set of eyes that are uncomfortable to live with unless we love the one that they belong to. For verse 5, they will have to give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

notice, not an account to us, an account to him. We are not their judge, but there is a judge, and it is the Lord.

So, in those times of sore temptation, remember that safe, safe refuge that Christ is for his suffering saints, his world-weary people.

Remember that his gospel gives life even if our suffering should end in death, he says. That's the point of verse 6. Perhaps these guys knew Christians who had died from neglect, gone missing, been killed because they lived for God and didn't follow the easy lifestyle of this world.

They were judged by human standards while they were alive, says Peter. They were ridiculed and thrown out and bullied and killed, but the news of Christ's victory means that they now still live in the spirit the way God does.

[29 : 20] Their lives are still safe and secure with Christ even in death because they suffered with him and for him here and now. When we started this series in Fresh Peter, I downloaded an app called the Open Doors Prayer App.

Highly, highly recommend it to you. It's such a help for praying for suffering Christians around the world. Let me read to you three headlines from this week.

Pakistan, pastors gunned down in front of church. Bangladesh, man follows Jesus, loses family.

Myanmar, fleeing genocide, believer beaten in refugee camp.

life. You imagine reading this letter in one of those countries this morning. Suffer well as living sacrifices, says Peter, because Christ is one and therefore you cannot lose.

You cannot lose. friends, for us here in Scotland, it might be a social death, a social media death, maybe, but Christ is worth suffering and dying for in every possible sense, because whatever we suffer, we cannot lose.

[30 : 49] As Paul puts it, to live is Christ, to die is gain. For Christians, living and dying is a win-win situation. So suffer well in worship.

And keep suffering well in worship until he returns. And finally, and much, much more briefly, as we finish, we can't suffer well on our own.

Brothers and sisters, we need each other more than we know. So suffer well together. Suffer well together. Above all, love each other deeply, says Peter, because love covers a multitude of sins.

Peter's told us this before, hasn't he? In chapter 1, verse 22, now that you have a sincere love for each other, love one another deeply. As if he's trying to tell us something.

Folks, the Christian life was never meant to be lived alone. Eugene Peterson famously described following Christ as a long obedience in the same direction.

[31 : 52] A long obedience in the same direction. Christian life is not a long obedience we do with our heads down and our teeth gritted and our skin thickened.

Keeping going in one long direction through the world on our own is practically impossible. It's not how we're built. The road is so tough and so church.

You need each other, says Peter. On a chord, you need each other. None of you are lone wolf Christians. We are a pack, a family.

And so as we reach the end of all things, love one another deeply. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. It's fascinating, isn't it? That's the only specific instruction Peter gives.

Be in and out of each other's homes. We need that intimacy, that real life, up close, living to keep these bonds of love strong. But all the time, in every way, verse 10, each of you should use whatever gift you've received to serve others.

[33 : 00] Serve each other. Use your gifts. Use them faithfully. Give yourselves to one another out of love for Christ and suffer well together, friends, as you follow him.

Because if Christ is one, then as those who trust in him, we have won to him be the glory and power forever and ever.

Amen. Let's pray together. God, our Father, how we thank you for Jesus, that he came and lived and died and rose again and is seated in glory, and that therefore, we have a hope that lasts beyond death and through all the things that we might suffer in this life.

Father, we pray that when we lose sight of that hope, that you would fix our eyes again on Jesus.

Lord, help us never to lose sight of him. Lord, we pray for strength this coming week to suffer well in our witness for you.

Lord, help us to live freely and generously towards others. Lord, we pray for the strength to worship well, to suffer well in our worship for you.

[34 : 25] Lord, strengthen us, we pray against temptation. Christ Jesus, please be our refuge when we are worn down by this world. Father, we pray for the strength to suffer well together.

Lord, please keep us bound together in love as your church. Please keep us going together, we pray. Keep us serving. Keep us loving one another deeply out of the love that we have for Christ. We pray in his name. Amen. Amen.