

The Cross Before the Crown

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, as I say, this morning we are beginning a series in the first letter of Peter. And to get us into the feel of this letter, I want to begin by sharing with you four real-life situations that Christians have found themselves in as they followed Jesus. And I wonder if they resonate perhaps with something that you or someone you know has experienced. When I was a student, I worked for a couple of years in a restaurant. And when I began, I said that I couldn't work on Sundays. This was fine for a couple of months. And then I looked at the Roto one week and I was down to work on a Sunday. Now at this time, they were struggling for staff. Sunday was the busiest shift.

And I didn't want to be unhelpful. So I said, this one time, I'll work on a Sunday. A couple of months in, I noticed they began putting me on more Sundays to work. So I went to speak to the manager about this. You can't work on Sundays, she asked. Or you just don't want to.

A friend of mine was a history teacher. And he had an interview for a job in a school. They asked him all the usual questions about his qualifications and experience, what he loved about history, what he loved about teaching. But the last question of the interview was different.

How would you seek to support the LGBT community in this school, they asked. Well, he said, I would want to support every student, whoever they were in doing well at school.

But that clearly wasn't the answer they were looking for, he said. And he didn't get the job. A mom that I knew had recently become a Christian and started coming to church. Her faith was so fresh.

[2 : 1 3] She loved the Lord Jesus. She loved coming to services. But her husband wasn't a Christian. And he didn't like the idea of the kids going to church. On a Sunday, he'd ask them whether they'd rather go to church with mom or stay at home and play video games. He'd organize things on a Sunday, family get-togethers and trips and activities so that his wife couldn't go to church. And eventually, he got a new job outside the city, a long way from a good church, and the family moved away. Finally, last example, a student moves to a new city to start university. And the way everyone seems to make friends is going out, getting wasted, hooking up, and talking about it the next day. The student, she tries to tag along, but without any of that. The crude jokes, the sexualized banter, it grates on her. And so after a time, she stops going out with those friends. And then the gossip starts. Funny looks in the corridor, silence when she enters the room. Rumors about what she does with her time.

Four different lives, four different situations, but each of them ways that Christians have suffered and do suffer for following Christ in our world here and now. And each left wondering, is this really worth it? There are times when we discover in the course of ordinary life on a Monday morning, on a Saturday evening, again, the cost of following Jesus and think, really? Should it really be this hard? Perhaps a memory comes back to us that we can't shake off of an old life without Christ when these problems just didn't exist? Now, perhaps I've described something that you've been through, or indeed are going through, or something perhaps that you know somebody who's been through something like that. Or perhaps this morning, this is news to you that it can be hard to live as a Christian.

But those very real and recent experiences help us to get into the right headspace and breathing the right air as we begin looking at 1 Peter. Because the reason this letter is in our Bibles, the reason it was written at all, is to teach us how to live for the Lord Jesus in a world that does not recognize Jesus as Lord. In fact, as we go through, we'll see how Peter actually speaks into those very situations that I described in the central part of his letter.

Because life has changed so much over the last 2,000 years since Peter wrote. But what it means to live as a Christian hasn't changed. Now, we're going to speed walk through this letter, so to speak, in just eight sermons. And so this morning, I just want to step back so that we can get familiar with the route, the main road, if you like, that runs from beginning to end through this letter. And so I've got one longer point with two shorter implications. The title of this point is also the title of the sermon, and indeed the series, The Cross Before the Crown. The Cross Before the Crown. Peter wrote this first letter to reassure to reassure Christians that to follow Christ means the pattern of our lives will always be suffering now and glory then. The cross before the crown. Not because being a Christian is a drag, or because we like suffering. No, not at all. But see, Peter actually has a lot to say about the far greater gain that we have in Christ, the joy that comes from knowing him. But he says to us, life as a Christian is always going to be suffering before glory. Why does he say that? Well, his answer is because it was suffering before glory, the cross before the crown, for Christ himself.

Look over, if you would, have a look down at chapter 1 and verses 10 to 11 with me. Wonderful verses that speak about how the prophets of the Old Testament craned their necks through the centuries to see, well, what did they want to see? Concerning the salvation of the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

[7 : 24] The sufferings and the glories. The prophets didn't know everything, but of this, they were certain that for the Messiah, it would be suffering before glory. That's the blueprint, if you like, that they gave us to look for the Christ, and so it was. Peter tells us he witnessed that. He saw it firsthand. Turn over, if you would, again to the end of the letter, chapter 5 and verse 1.

There he writes, to the elders among you, I appeal, as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings, who also will share in the glory to be revealed. I saw it, says Peter. I saw suffering now, glory then. I saw his hands nailed to a cross, and I saw those same nail-pierced hands living, working again three days later. I saw his eyes, he said, as he went to his death, and I saw those same eyes turn to me on a beach a week later. I saw him die, and I saw him raised to life again. I saw suffering, and then glory. And because I saw it in Christ, he says, I know that's how it's going to be for me and you as we follow him. And so in this letter, Peter cannot stop pointing us to Jesus. As you suffer now for Christ, he says, don't you dare take your eyes off him.

He is the suffering and glorified Christ the prophets longed for. He is the precious stone rejected once by the builders, but now raised in glory by God to be the cornerstone. He is the guiltless lamb who bore our sins in his body on the cross, now raised up to life to be our great shepherd and king. As you suffer for being a Christian, he says, do not take your eyes off your Christ.

He calls Jesus our living hope, not a vague idea that one day we might be in a better place, but a living, breathing person whose words, whose body and blood cry out to us, that though we suffer now as he did, we will be raised in glory as he is.

And so we read in chapter 4 and verses 12 to 13, as we read earlier, dear friends, do not be surprised. Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that's come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice. Rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. Whose sufferings, whose glory?

[10 : 29] Or his and ours? Or more to the point, his and so ours. As it was for him, so it will be for us, the cross before the crown. That's the glorious thread that holds this whole letter together.

And so, therefore, is the teaching that Peter wants us, on accord Christians today, to get into our bloodstream as we study this letter. Now maybe, as I've spoken, you have thought, exactly. Yeah, that is exactly what is happening to me.

Or yeah, now that makes sense of that difficult time that I went through before. But perhaps with some of us on this sunny morning in Aberdeen, suffering now seems like a strange way to describe day-to-day life.

And perhaps the question in your head is, am I really meant to suffer? Do I have to suffer for Christ? You know, I know it happens to other people in other parts of the world.

I know it's happened in certain times or places in history. But I just get up and I read my Bible. I do a day's work. I say a prayer and I go to bed.

[11 : 48] Where is this suffering? Well, let me say firstly, that in a sense, for a lot of us, there's truth in that. If we got every Christian together from around the world and throughout history in a room, lots of us would be in a tiny minority in the corner that has generally not had to think too hard about the cost of following Christ in a world that doesn't love him.

Put it this way, we don't eat in fear on a Sunday. We don't have to buy our Bible books. Let's just fill our up in a Bible practice.

We can invite whoever we want to eat on a Sunday. Praise for us for that. The freedom that we have. Let's not wish that away.

Let's not take that for granted. Let's pray that this freedom would long continue that we live in. Sometimes we feel, maybe if we feel we should be suffering for Christ, we're quick to cry persecution.

Persecution. Well, let me say just now, that's not a word to be used lightly. As for us, there is no state agenda. There's no social plot.

[13 : 07] Is there to silence the church or to seek and destroy Christians? As our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world do suffer this very day, in Iran, in Afghanistan, in China.

One day that might be us. But to call this here and now persecution, well, it cheapens their suffering, doesn't it? Let's not forget them.

Pray for them, won't you, as we study this letter. They are being persecuted. We are not. But that's okay, because that's not what Peter's readers were going through either at the time.

So let me say, firstly, we don't need a persecution complex to suffer for Christ. But having said that, if your Christian living doesn't ever confuse anyone, or invite odd comments, or rub up painfully against the views and values of the people around you, then Peter would warn us, that's not normal.

Don't get too comfortable, he says. Because even though we here and now are not being persecuted, we do live in a society and with a government that a lot of the time doesn't know what to do with us.

[14 : 31] Professionals, teachers, medics, engineers, students, taxpayers, service users, ordinary people, who have given their full allegiance to a man who lived 2,000 years ago and died a horrible death, who they say then rose from the dead and now rules over everything in the world, specifically to build, of all things, his church.

Think for a minute about how strange that sounds to somebody today. Everyone was just working with another's mom there.

He was a friend of mine, who was also the time to train in the ministry. And their colleagues at the hospital, when they found out, would go from one to the other in shock and disbelief, saying, Did you know both your husbands are training to become ministers?

They couldn't get their heads around it. One of them said, I didn't know people still did that. Brothers and sisters, if that's the world we live in, how long do you think that you can live comfortably to Christ?

How long before you find yourself in a situation in which to choose to honor Jesus will cost you something? Whether it's a loss of respect at work, or friends who just can't understand growing distance, or passing up opportunities that would compromise your devotion to Christ, where obeying Jesus will be being misunderstood, or thought badly of, or left out.

[16 : 16] Peter would not have a say on that day, This can't be happening to me. God cannot want me to suffer in this way.

Dear friends, he says, Do not be surprised. As though something strange were happening to me. Perhaps this morning you know that only too well.

But if you're not suffering for Christ now, well let this letter prepare you for the day when it comes. Friends, following Jesus in this world is not going to get any easier.

Not only because our society is drifting further from the truth, but because for every believer in every age, living as a Christian means suffering now.

Glory then. That might not sound like a very encouraging message this morning. It isn't encouraging to hear that from Peter of all people.

[17 : 18] We read earlier in our service, didn't we, what people did when Jesus first called him. It would be the cross before the crown. The Lord Jesus is trying to decide what I'm talking to.

I don't know who you think you are, Jesus said, but you can't go around saying things like that. It's a shock and confusion when Jesus required, get behind me, Satan.

Well, 13 years of the Lord is the same. And this same man, Peter, well, he knows better now. He's been beaten.

He's been to prison. He's been warned and threatened not to stop going on about Jesus. Now he knows, doesn't he? It had to be for Jesus, so it had to be for him, so it has to be for every believer suffering now.

Glory then. 30 years of suffering for Christ later, and Peter can now write this letter and say, friends, it's worth it. This Jesus, follow him.

[18 : 27] Whatever it costs, it's worth it. And so for those times where we come up against a choice between sin and suffering, and we're tempted to say to Jesus, well, Lord Jesus, it doesn't have to be suffering, does it?

Well, Peter says to us, as Jesus once said to him, yes, brother, yes, sister, yes, it does. Because he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that you might die to sin and live to righteousness.

And so in his letter, Peter is going to teach us how to bear gladly with the suffering that comes from living faithfully in Christ, the world that doesn't love them.

And he's going to do that in two main ways, two briefings, and the case of that tree. And so what does it mean for who we are? Famously, in voting verso to this letter, Peter calls Christians black and exiles.

Black and exiles, now this is a strange thing there. Black means chosen, exile means black and out. Now how do voters think to be true?

[19 : 51] Well, Peter is saying to you, Christian, you are a walking contradiction. If you are following Christ, you are both chosen and left out. Chosen by God, left out of the world.

And to be one is to be both. Now I can't go into everything there is to say at this point. We're going to come back to these verses next week in more detail.

But for now, it's important for us to see that this identity is ours not by accident, but because of God's good and gracious work for us and in us.

See chapter 1 and verse 2. How have we come to be elect exiles, chosen by God, yet strangers in the world? Peter says, you have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with His blood.

See, he says, we have this identity because of the saving work of the triune God. Father, Spirit, Son, chosen by the Father, set apart by the Spirit for obedience to the Son and to be sprinkled by His blood.

[21 : 10] And so Peter's saying from the outset, whatever you go through as a Christian, know that it comes from God's good, sovereign, gracious, loving hand because He has made you His.

Notice the position that the Father has given us before Himself, chosen. Chosen. What good news this must have been for these suffering saints.

how easy it would have been for them to feel forgotten by God as they had abuse heaped on them, treated as a social cancer.

Forgotten? Notice, says Peter, precious, chosen. If you turn over to chapter 2 in verse 9, the end of the first section of this letter.

Brothers and sisters, who are you to God this morning? You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.

[22 : 26] Friends, says Peter, when you suffer for Christ, you are not forsaken, you are forever His. He chose you before the beginning of the world to belong to Him, to be His treasure in a dark, dark world.

What position does that put us in then before the world? Well, the opposite. Left out, exiles. The Spirit sees that, look, in there in verse 2, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

Sanctified just means set apart. So what has the Spirit done? Well, He has set us apart from the world. So these Christians in the various regions that they lived in, in the towns and villages where they were born and raised, well, now they no longer feel at home.

They feel like strangers in their own country because the Holy Spirit had set them apart to belong to God. the things that brought everyone together, worshipping the emperor or drinking parties or ritual sex, they were not part of life with God.

And so now they live on the sidelines, social outcasts. Have a look, if you would, at chapter 4 and verse 3. Peter says, you've spent enough time in the past doing what the pagans choose to do, living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, detestable idolatry.

[23 : 57] They're surprised that you don't join them in their reckless wild living. And they heap abuse on you. See, the suffering that Peter's describing is not organized state religion.

It's friends, neighbors, family members, community leaders, we might say. They're not insulting, accusing, and bullying their Christian neighbors because they have stepped back.

They're being divisive. They're troublemakers. They are not caring for the community. But remember, Christians, why that is, says Peter, not because the people in your village or town decided it would be that way, but because the Holy Spirit decided.

He set you apart. And so, friends, if sometimes you don't feel like you belong in this world, something is not wrong.

Something is right. Something is right because that's what the Spirit has done in setting you apart for God. This world is not my home.

[25 : 08] For now, I am an exile, and so, as I live, I am going to feel left out because the Father has chosen and the Spirit has set me apart to be obedient to Jesus and sprinkled with his blood.

Which brings us back around, doesn't it, to where we started. To Peter, obedience to Jesus means obeying his call to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him.

All because we have been chosen by God, set apart by the Spirit, and sprinkled by his blood. By his wounds you've been healed, he'll say. All because of God's sovereign, good, and gracious work in us and for us.

And so, unsurprisingly, then, Peter takes those three big ideas, if you like, as the headings for the three sections of this letter. Chosen from verse 1, chapter 1, to 2, verse 10.

Set apart 2, 11, to 4, 11. And obedience to Jesus, 4, 12, to the end. So, we'll keep coming back, unpacking these ideas, seeing them again and again in the coming weeks.

[26 : 19] Because as a follower of Jesus, Peter wants you to rest secure in your identity as an elect exile. Because if you're a Christian, that is who you are.

Which finally gives us a way to live. So, as we close, two ways Peter wants us to learn to live. Ultimately, he says, we live for God's glory in our suffering.

Notice Peter doesn't begin his letter with an apology, sorry to hear you're having a hard time. So, he begins his letter with praise. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that note of praise sets the tone for the whole way of life he wants these Christians to have. He goes on to remind us the joy we have in Jesus chapter 1 verse 8.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

[27 : 25] So, as we set our eyes on Jesus in our suffering, he says, as we grow closer in our walk with him through our suffering, that we grow in love for him and joy in him.

And if that's true of us here and now, well, just imagine our joy when he comes again in glory. Rejoice now, he says, inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

And so, we glorify God in our suffering when we find our joy in Jesus. There's something Peter's going to really draw out of this is that that's not only something that happens on our own in the prayer closet, but no, as a Christian community, as a church.

Chapter 2, verse 9, tells us who we are, but then also what we're for. You are God's special possession that you, plural, church, bon accord, may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

So, walking from suffering to glory, says Peter, isn't a solo pilgrimage. We're not stoics, trudging this path alone. We're bon accord, walking this path together, living stones, he says, built into a spiritual house for spiritual worship to God through Jesus.

[28 : 53] So, we live and suffer for God's glory together. And we do that, finally, that others might glorify him. Live such good lives, he says, among the pagans, that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day when he visits us.

It's amazing, isn't it? Peter's hope for those who today make life hard for us is that tomorrow they return and join us in living for God's glory.

glory. Where does the strength come from to love our enemies like that? Well, only from God himself. So, we live for God's glory through our suffering.

And very lastly, in that, Peter wants us to hope in Jesus' return. Set your hope, he says, on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

Our world all around us tells us, doesn't it, to live for today. You have to get the best out of life while you can. But Peter wants us to live for tomorrow.

[30 : 06] Because it's going to be glorious, he says. Because Jesus is coming in glory, and if your hope is in him, then you will share in his glory on that day.

It's that hope that keeps our eyes on Jesus when things are going wrong now. The sure and certain and living hope that the suffering won't be forever.

Because with Jesus, suffering is followed always, always with glory. So keep your eyes on the horizon, says Peter. Don't stop living for the day of his coming in glory.

Because the cross is for a short time, but the crown is forever. And so I pray as we walk through this letter together, that we will grow into these wonderful truths of God's word more and more as we grow closer to the Lord Jesus, the Lord who suffered, and the Lord of glory.

Let's pray together now. God, our Father, how we thank you that you have loved us before ever you created the world, that you have chosen us to belong to you, that you gave your Son to suffer for our sins, and that he came so willingly to do so.

[31 : 40] Lord, we praise you that the Lord of glory is also a suffering Lord. Father, there's something we cannot get our heads around, how the Lord of glory hung on a cross, how his crown was a crown of thorns, so that we might wear a crown of glory in eternity.

And so we pray, Father, that as we suffer now, you would set our eyes on him. Help us, we pray, today to deny ourselves, to take up the cross and to follow.

Lord, for those among us who perhaps have not yet begun to do so, we pray that you would give new birth to this living hope, that you would grant by your spirit that each of us would follow Jesus Christ.

Lord, for those of us who are on that path, we pray that by your spirit you would fill us with joy, that even as we suffer with Christ, we would hope in his coming again, and that we would rejoice in him, that he suffered for our salvation.

salvation. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.