

## 1 Peter 4:13-16

Mention 'suffering' and most of us would run a mile in the opposite direction! It's the last thing on our mind! In fact, the chances are, it probably doesn't figure in our thinking at all, it doesn't loom large in our projected plans for the future; it's not the kind of thing we lie in bed at night and dream of. I imagine if we conducted a straw poll among our listeners today, it's not the kind of experience too many of us relish. And yet, when you read Peter's incisive comments in chapter 4, you quickly realise that suffering and persecution are not alien to the people of God. We discovered in yesterday's study that sooner or later trials will come into our lives and, whether we like it or not, the Lord will use all of these harrowing and distressing experiences to mould us and to shape us into the image of Jesus. When we emerge into the bright light at the end of the long dark tunnel, I believe our faces shine with a warm heavenly glow. I can't explain it, I don't understand it, but I know from reading between the lines of the inspired writings of both Peter and Paul that an intrinsic part of the suffering process ensures that, at the end of the saga, we reflect considerably more of the likeness and beauty of Jesus than we have ever done before! To me, that makes it all incredibly worthwhile! Allied to that ultimately enriching and life-enhancing experience is a tremendous truth which should fortify even the most jelly legged and fainthearted among us. For, according to Peter in verse 13, our suffering for Christ finds its significance in Christ's suffering for us. That's why he wrote: 'Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.' In other words, the underlying principle is this: we share now in suffering *for* him as we shall one day share in glory *with* him. Sure, there may be tears in the here and now but, in the there and then, there will be unmitigated joy. Pain and pressure today will give way to endless pleasure throughout the eternal ages. You can have suffering without glory, many unconverted people suffer in the course of their

lives, but, they have no lasting glory; if that's what you can have, let me tell you one thing you cannot have, you can never have glory without suffering! That's what Peter says right here in verse 13, that's what James says in 1:12 of his epistle, that's what Paul says a bit further back in Romans 8:18. I must say, I am quite intrigued with the phrase 'the sufferings of Christ.' This whole issue means so much to Peter for he saw so much of what Jesus experienced; in 5:1 he reminds us that he was a witness of the sufferings of Christ and so, even with the passing of time, the events of Gethsemane and Calvary are still comparatively fresh in his memory. He not only testifies to the events of that hugely significant few days but he also writes about their meaning. He summed it up quite succinctly in 3:18 when he said that Christ, the righteous one, suffered for us, the unrighteous, to bring us to God. The fact that bad things often happen to good people is an enigma which is honestly handled in the word of God. Having said that, it can only be adequately understood when we submit to the sovereignty of God in every situation and, that surely implies, the key to the mystery of the suffering of the Lord's people is rooted in the incomprehensible mystery of the suffering of Jesus. As someone has said: 'In the wonder of God's design, it was his purpose that Christ should suffer for us, and by his suffering, save us.' He goes on to say, 'Knowing his suffering for us, we may rejoice when God wills that we should suffer for him.' It is true that we cannot add to his atoning sufferings, for as Peter himself says in 2:24, he bore our sins in his own body on the tree. Yet, there is a very real sense that when we suffer as Christians we are actually sharing in the sufferings of Christ. As Edmund Clowney says in his excellent commentary: 'Made righteous by him, we suffer as the righteous with him.' If we take Paul's words in Philippians 3:10 on board, this adds a whole new dimension to the meaning of fellowship, it's an intensely relational exercise, it's a positive sharing with Christ by following in his footsteps. You see, it is as we suffer for Christ that we are inextricably linked to Christ! That fact alone should be enough to

stimulate the chords of joy and praise to resonate from our hearts. It really is a wonderful privilege for us to be found in this special role of suffering for him that we should be thrilled that he counts us worthy to do it. We rejoice, not because we are going through a tough time, but because of what he is doing in our lives at this time of sifting. I realise it's hard to visualise such a response when you're not in the thick of it right now, it's also extremely difficult to come to terms with this kind of mindset, but there is nothing strange or sinister about it, it's what kept Jesus going! We read he stayed the course, he endured the cross, because of 'the joy that was set before him.' That's what enables us to hang in there, that's what helps us to hang on a little while longer, it's the prospect of what awaits us at the end of the journey. Suffering, in that context, is definitely not seen as an ominous threat nor is it a dark cloud hovering over our lives, it is more a promise that we can stand upon! And when we cling to that promise, when we claim it and personalise it and make it our very own, then we have so much to look forward to, the future is bright, the garden is rosy, the sun is shining, the prospect is exhilarating because 'his glory is revealed'. That's what Peter suggests at the end of verse 13. You see, suffering and glory are twin truths that are woven into the fabric of Peter's first epistle. Your next door neighbour, the man living across the street, he believes that the absence of suffering means glory, but the Christian's outlook is radically different, the believer sees it from a totally different perspective, he has an altogether different slant on it. What we need to understand is this: God is not going to replace suffering with glory; rather he will transform suffering into glory. Jesus, in John 16:20-22, used the illustration of a woman giving birth. The same baby that caused the woman enormous pain also gave the new mother a feeling of indescribable and unsurpassed joy! You see, the pain was transformed into sheer joy by the birth of the little one. The unthinkable agony is eclipsed when it turns into a cause for celebration! The same idea is reflected by the psalmist David when he writes: 'weeping may

endure for a night but joy comes in the morning.’ It’s what Warren Wiersbe calls ‘postponed pleasure’. It’s the old story, isn’t it, we pay a price today in order to have some enjoyments in the future. That is true of the athlete as he finely hones his skills so that on the big day he will be able to perform to his optimum; it’s no less true of the young person starting out in the world of music, there will be seemingly endless hours of theory and practice to absorb but it will be worth it when they take their final bow at the end of a highly acclaimed concert performance! So, I think you will appreciate, this principle is found in most areas of personal development and it is no different for the Christian in his pursuit of Christ likeness. One day our suffering will be transformed into glory and, what a day, what a glorious day that will be! By the same token, suffering prepares us for glory for it helps us to see life in perspective. In our times of severe trial when we feel we are being kicked around like a football, we see that the most important thing for us is to put Christ first in our lives and to live for the glory of God. That means, by the time we reach home we will be a purified people and we will be overjoyed when, with our own eyes, we see the King in all his impeccable beauty.

Here’s a mouth-watering promise in verse 14 where Peter has a special word for all those who are being barracked because of their faith in Jesus: ‘If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.’ Now, human nature being what it is, that’s not always how we see it when we’re on the receiving end of a mouthful of verbal abuse. At that point, we don’t feel blessed, far from it! More often than not, we feel the ‘cringe’ factor coming on, we sometimes wish the ground would open and swallow us up, we are prone to paranoia when we sense we are being singled out for special attention, we feel cornered and maybe even exposed and vulnerable as well, we feel threatened and so our rapid reaction instincts set in and we end up with a siege mentality; we don’t like being got at, it’s as simple as

that! But, that is where Peter urges us to look at the hassles and hurts of this life from a totally different perspective. The old adage is as true in the third millennium as it was in the first: 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me!' It doesn't matter what they say to us, it doesn't matter what they shout at us, it doesn't matter what vulgar or blasphemous comments they make in our hearing, it doesn't matter how they vilify us, they can insult us all they like and they can do it from now till the cows come home, the inescapable fact remains, they are only hurting themselves in the long run; and, so far as we are concerned, we feel the pain of it but, with the enabling of God's grace, we are able to handle it, we are able to take it on the chin and, in so doing, we are wonderfully blessed. In the cold light of day, the reality is, we can't expect any better treatment, this is what they did to the Lord Jesus when he was here on planet earth, and he warned us on more than one occasion, it would happen to us as well. Such verbal tongue lashings are par for the course! It's no big deal, they are the ones who are losing out, they are the ones who are missing out, we are the ones who are destined for the throne and for glory! When we are on the receiving end of somebody venting their spleen, somebody bent on taking it out on us because we love the Lord Jesus, then, says Peter, it is at such times that the Holy Spirit draws near to us, he administers strength, he dispenses grace, and he provides an abiding presence of God's glory. I was captivated by the comments of one Bible teacher when he wrote: 'Suffering for Christ leads to glory and tastes of glory; it also gives glory to God.' You see, when we as believers suffer because we are Christians, our Father in heaven is glorified. Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna about the middle of the second century. He was arrested for his faith and threatened with death if he did not recant. 'Eighty and six years have I served Jesus,' the saintly bishop replied, 'and he never did me any harm. How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?' 'I have respect for your age,' said the Roman officer. 'Simply say, "Away with the atheists!" and you will be set free.' By 'the atheists'

he meant the Christians who would not acknowledge that Caesar was 'lord'. The old man thought for a moment, he lifted his index finger and pointed to the baying crowd of Roman pagans surrounding him, and he said: 'Away with the atheists!' The inevitable was not postponed, the sentence was immediate, Polycarp was burned at the stake, in his martyrdom he brought glory to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's one thing to find yourself enmeshed in some trial through no fault of your own, as in verse 14, if you are caught in the crossfire you can't do much about that except duck and keep your head down; it's quite a different matter when you bring it all on yourself and that's the can of worms which Peter opens in verse 15! Peter has been around long enough to realise that some folks have only themselves to blame for what happens to them, and so we read: 'If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.' How true it is, if you want to play around with fire, you'll end up getting badly burned, and when that happens, there's no ground gained in blaming someone else! The plain fact is, it was self inflicted. If you want to sow to the wind you will reap the whirlwind, you find that allusion back in Hosea 8:7. Sometimes we deserve the treatment we're getting, we have walked into it with our eyes wide open, and you know as well as I do, it catches up with us sooner or later, there is always a payback day; we deserve the punishment or the loneliness, the brokenness and pain. Stuart Briscoe sums it up well when he writes: 'Christians are rather superb at doing stupid things and then spiritualising them and getting great glory out of them.' Well, it seems to me, Peter sticks a pin in this balloon immediately! The fact of the matter is: if we engage in some illegal activity, there will be legal consequences; if we engage in immorality there will be moral consequences; and if we engage in improper activities we may well produce societal displeasure. Peter's inclusion of those who murder, those who steal, and those who engage in criminal acts, they are not the issue; we have no problem understanding his comments with regard to them. We can

summarise it like this: let's be sure we are suffering because we are Christians and not because we are criminals! It's when Peter takes it a step further and includes the person who meddles that most of us feel the ouch in our minds! This is a fascinating word in the Greek which actually conveys the idea of someone watching over other people's affairs, or, to put it in modern speak, it's when someone sticks their nose into your personal affairs! It's the busybody interfering mentality. I suppose, if we stick our noses in somebody's affairs we have to be prepared to take the consequences, the chances are, we will end up with a bloody nose! And, quite frankly, we deserve it! When that happens, there's no point in trying to spiritualise it, there's no point in adopting the persecution complex mindset and presenting yourself to all and sundry as a victim of pagan fury! If that's what happens to you, don't blame other people, and certainly, don't blame God; the truth is, you have only yourself to blame and no matter what high moral ground you take, you can't wriggle your way out of it! I believe Chuck Swindoll hits the nail on the head when he concludes that 'suffering the consequence of being a busybody brings no one applause or affirmation, only a whirlwind of anguish.' The final verse that we are putting the spotlight on in today's study is verse 16 where Peter says: 'however, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.' The gist of what Peter has been saying so far is: number one, there is nothing strange about fiery trials, they are inevitable, they are par for the course; number two, there is nothing sentimental about the sufferings of Christ, they were atoning, they were real; number three, there is nothing surprising about being insulted, we have to expect them, if we are not on the receiving end we should maybe wonder why; number four, there is nothing spiritual about suffering for wrongdoing, if you stick your finger in the fire you'll get burned, it's the law of cause and effect; and here in verse 16, there is nothing shameful about being a Christian! In fact, in the best sense of the word, we have something to be proud of, we are sons and daughters of the King of

all the ages, we are children of the living God, we are members of the global family of God. We can walk tall down the main street of any town, we can hold our heads high because we are numbered among the aristocracy of heaven. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ and that is nothing to be ashamed of, that is nothing to apologise for, that is nothing to be embarrassed about. It is interesting to note that the word 'Christian' only occurs three times in the Bible. I think most of us appreciate that the term Christian has been totally devalued in our twenty-first century pluralistic society, it's basically a reference to anyone who isn't a member of one of the other major world faiths. When you go back and trace its roots in the book of Acts, you will find that the people of Antioch were notorious for giving people nicknames, so it was their bright idea to call the people who followed Jesus, Christians! You find that historical reference in Acts 11:26. Ashamed, why should we be? Sure, we are sorry for many of the things we do, we feel a sense of shame because of the actions of others, but when it comes down to following the Lord Jesus Christ, we have nothing to be ashamed of for he is worthy to be praised!