

When Strange Things Happen to You

I Peter 4:12-19

David H. Roper

We come now to the third and final division of this letter. As I have mentioned, Peter's style is to return again and again to the great themes which carry through this book - salvation, submission, and suffering -- and in each of the three divisions of the book, to underscore or emphasize one of these three themes. In the first section, which runs from 1:1 to 2:1, he emphasizes salvation; from 2:2 to 4:11, submission; and from 4:12 to the end of the book, suffering. It is the section dealing with suffering that we now begin. This subject has come up before, but in this final section Peter again calls it to our attention and underscores some new truths we need to understand:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that a/so at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Taken as a whole, this section tells us that suffering is an inevitable part of Christian living. It is inescapable. The Scriptures underline this fact repeatedly. Yet, despite the counsel Scripture gives about the inevitability of suffering, we still tend to think of it as something strange that happens to us. It is not. The strange thing is peace and prosperity; the normal thing is suffering.

We all have a vision in our mind of a place where there is uninterrupted peace and prosperity, where everything goes according to schedule. It may be a cabin up in the Sierra, or a condominium on Lake Tahoe. Somewhere there must be a place where we can let down our hair and relax, where no one will hassle us, and the phone brings only good news, and there are no problems. But unfortunately, life is not like that. It is filled with pressures and problems.

Murphy's Law states that whatever possibly can go wrong certainly will and at the most inopportune time! We have all experienced the truth of that law. Why is it that on the busiest day of the week, your little boy spills India ink all over the rug? And why is it that, when a wife has had a particularly difficult day at home, and the children have been unusually unruly, that is the day her husband comes home from work, grumpy and out of sorts and difficult to communicate with? Or why is it that when a husband has had an extremely hard day at the office that is the day that his son runs his motorcycle over the sprinkler head and breaks it off, and he comes home to find water spouting ten feet in the air? And on and on it goes.

I have a friend who decided some months ago that he was going to stop paying for repairs around the house. He wanted to be a good steward, so he decided to start repairing things himself. First he repaired the shower, which had been dripping for some time. That evening when his wife took a shower, the water came right out of the faucet instead of the shower head. Undaunted, he turned to repair the oven. He discovered a little wire hanging down which obviously was useless, so he clipped it off. He did not realize that it was the thermostat. The next time his wife cooked a roast, she incinerated the whole thing!

You may attribute that to human stupidity, perhaps correctly, but at the same time you must admit that there is

something perverse going on in the world. No matter how hard you try to rectify things. Something always goes wrong. And yet we all have the hopeful outlook that someday we will turn a corner and things will be all right. We have a strange duality in our thinking: our experience tells us that everything will go wrong, but we are always hopeful.

There was a wonderful old character in history named Diogenes. He was a Greek who lived in the fifth century B.C., a member of the school of Cynics. The story goes that he lived much of his life in a tub, or huge jar. One day Alexander the Great came to see him, and asked if there was anything he could do for him. Diogenes said, "Yeah; get out of my light!" He was a complete cynic -- dour, soured with all of life, But when he died he gave his disciples instructions to bury him face down because, he said, "Someday the world is going to be turned right-side-up." That is the way most of us live -- with that kind of hopeful thinking. But it is not very realistic, because life teaches us that there are adverse circumstances everywhere. Very often these are trivial. But in any event, the strange thing is to find that things are going well. Our normal experience is disaster.

And when you become a Christian, things do not get better; they get worse. If you are thinking about becoming a Christian, I want to disabuse your mind of one thing. If you have been told that things will get better if you become a Christian, you have been given some misinformation. Things will get much more difficult. Very often, in talking to non-Christians, we give the impression that when you become a Christian, life becomes one eternal gravy train -- everything goes your way, you no longer have any problems or pressures. It is simply not true! We do have a Resource for living, but life actually gets more complicated.

The reason is twofold. First, we Christians live in a fallen world -- just as everybody else does. Our children become ill, our cars break down, our yards produce crabgrass and feed lawn moths the same as those of non-Christians. We live in a fallen world where things are not right, and they will not be right until Jesus comes back. We are part of a system that is decaying, and so we are affected by adversity as much as those who do not know Christ.

But there is an added ingredient. It is what Peter calls "suffering for the name of Christ." Merely for the name! You will notice that he refers to it twice in this passage. Verse 14: "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed . . ." and verse 16: "...but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God." Therefore we should not think it strange when we suffer. We will suffer because we are part of a fallen humanity, and simply because we are identified with the name of Christ.

Now, why should Christians suffer because they are identified with the name? After all, Christians ought to be more responsible on the job, they ought to be better students, they ought to be better neighbors, why should they suffer? Why should they be derided and persecuted merely because they are identified with the name? Well, there is a clue in this passage. In verse 13 Peter tells us it is because we share the sufferings of Christ. The verb translated "share" comes from the same root as the word, "*koinonia*", we "share in common" the sufferings of Christ -- we share the same sufferings he suffered - -and we suffer because he suffered.

Why did Jesus suffer? That is almost inexplicable to us. Why should a man like Jesus suffer? - the best man whoever lived. As a matter of fact, he was the only truly good man whoever lived - the man who went about doing good, and doing it well. He was not self-righteous or self-conscious or priggish about his righteousness. He was good in every way, and yet he was killed for it. Why? Well, merely because he was, and is, good, and the world hates goodness. This is because the world lies in the lap of the evil one, as Scripture tells us. We sing, "This is my Father's world" -- and it is, in an ultimate sense. He is the Creator and Sustainer of it, and the One who ultimately will reclaim it. But this is not my Father's world now; this is Satan's world. It is a world that is in opposition to good. Satan hates good, and he will persecute it wherever he finds it. And men persecuted Jesus merely because he was good.

Possibly you are thinking, "But I know many people who are good, yet who are not persecuted." We tend to think that way because we do not understand the nature of goodness. A man came to Jesus once and said, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except

God alone." Many have taken this to mean that Jesus was disclaiming deity that he was saying, "You say I'm good? But I'm not good; only God is good." But that is not what he was saying. He was testing this man's understanding of goodness. He was saying, "Do you understand what it means to be good? The only good Person in the universe is God, and it is only when we depend upon God that any of us can be good." That was true of Jesus in his humanity. He was God. But as a man, only to the extent that he depended upon God was he able to express the character of God. The same is true of us today. Any time you venture into the world, resting upon the life of God - doing things in his name and giving him the credit for it you are going to be misunderstood and persecuted and hated. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' " Jesus suffered; we will too. Therefore, merely because we are identified with the name of Christ we will be hated. That is the promise.

Peter is speaking prophetically here. Within a matter of years, a series of great persecutions began to break across the Roman empire nine or ten of them! - and hundred of thousands of Christians died merely because they named the name of Christ. A very interesting bit of correspondence between the emperor Trajan, and Pliny, the governor of a province in Asia Minor, has been preserved. Pliny writes to Trajan and asks whether he should persecute Christians. He describes something of their worship and behavior, says that they gather on the first day of the week and pray together and sing hymns to Messiah as God, and do other things which are virtually innocuous. And yet, Pliny says, they are creating a great disturbance. "Should we, then, persecute them for the name?" Trajan's answer came back: "Yes; merely for the name." And from then until the time of Constantine a series of great persecutions swept across the church -- merely for the name. Peter says that we can expect to be persecuted simply because we are identified with Jesus Christ. Therefore we should not be surprised. It should not strike us as strange.

Peter goes on to tell us what our behavior should be when we are persecuted, verse 13:

. . . but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

The first command is to keep on rejoicing. This is the constant exhortation of Scripture. James says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Paul says in Romans 5, "And . . . we exult in our tribulations; knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint The constant imperative of Scripture throughout is "Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!"

Peter tells us why. It is not a matter of grinning and bearing it. There is something we need to know. And in this passage there are two facts which will enable us to rejoice when we are persecuted for the name. The first is that we will share Christ's glory, verse 13: "...so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation." Peter's point is this: If we share Jesus' suffering, we will share his glory. And when Jesus comes back -- as C.S. Lewis says, "God without disguise" -- we will be like him. We will share his glory. Christ's glory is his character; it is what he is. Peter says we will share that character. We will be changed from glory to glory by the Spirit of God. From one attribute to the next we will be transformed into the image of Christ.

It is suffering that does that for us, because suffering drives us to depend upon God. It really does not make us stronger; it makes us feel our weakness more keenly. Then we draw upon God's power and his strength, and he begins to change us, from attribute to attribute, to be like Jesus Christ. It is always opposition that causes us to grow. We sometimes think that suffering is what impedes us, works against us. But suffering does not work against us; it works for us. It accomplishes the very thing we want in our lives - the character of Christ.

Some of you have husbands who are not Christians, and you may think, "If only my husband behaved the right way, if only he loved God, I could be the greatest wife in the world. I would submit, and love him, and make him happy - I'd love to throw myself into that job - if only my husband were what God wanted him to be." Or you young people think, "If only my parents were Christians, then I would be an exemplary child." We feel that the

thing which keeps us from being what we want to be is the adverse circumstance which faces us. But Peter says, "No, that does not work against you; it works for you. It is the very thing which is accomplishing what you want, and what God wants.

You see, suffering is what is producing the glory, and someday the glory will be unveiled. Have you ever been to a ceremony in which a painting or a sculpture was unveiled? The artist had labored long hours under cover, where no one saw him working on his masterpiece. Finally the day came when the masterpiece was finished, complete, and it was unveiled. Peter says the time is coming when God will be revealed -- unveiled; and we will be revealed -- unveiled. We will be everything our hearts ever desired. We will be like Christ.

In the meantime the process is still going on. We are not finished yet. When people look at us and see the imperfections -- and when we look at ourselves -- we ought to say, "I'm not finished yet. But just wait. There is coming an unveiling! God is at work in my life, and he is going to produce in me the character of Christ." And so Peter says, "Rejoice!" That is what God is doing. This adversity, this persecution, is not working against you, it is working for you. As Paul says in Romans 8, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

There is a second reason why we can rejoice, verse 14: "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." This reference to "the Spirit . . . of God" is an allusion to Isaiah 11 which, in its context, refers to Messiah. We share the same Spirit as Messiah, who grew up as a seemingly insignificant plant in Israel, and yet had immeasurable power, because the Spirit of God rested upon him -- the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." "And," Peter says, "that is true of you. You are blessed, because you have the Spirit of God resting upon you. His presence is evident. And he is everything you need to face persecution."

Peter inserts a word here which is not found in Isaiah 11: "the Spirit of the glory", literally. Here he is referring to the Shekinah, the cloud which rested over the tabernacle, and in the temple, and was the symbol of God's presence in the life of Israel. In Sinai the cloud overshadowed them from the heat of the day, gave them light by night, warmed them, and protected them, and was their source of direction. It was everything they needed -- a symbol of the presence of God in their life. Peter says, "Rejoice, because God is working out in your life a purpose that is perfect, and, secondly, while he is at work, you have residing over you the Shekinah, the presence of God, One whom you can trust for wisdom and direction."

Peter was the only one of the apostles, so far as we know, who was married, and both he and his wife were martyred, but at different times. One of the early church fathers gives an account of the martyrdom of Peter's wife. He says, "The blessed Peter, seeing his own wife led away to execution, was delighted [Yes, that is what he said! But don't take it the wrong way.] on account of her calling and return to her country. And so he cried out to her, in a consoling and encouraging voice, addressing her by name, 'O thou, remember the Lord.'" Could you do that if your husband or wife or children were being led off to martyrdom? Well, that is the sort of peace and sustaining power the Spirit of God gives us because of his presence in our life. He is adequate for any demand. And that is Peter's word: "Rejoice! Rejoice! Because God is using this persecution to accomplish some good thing in your life, and enroute, you have the presence and the power of God himself in your life."

In verses 15 and 16 there are two warnings. Notice that in verse 13 he says, ". . . to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing In verse 15 he says, "By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer. or a troublesome meddler It only works when you are suffering for the name of Christ, not because of some evil thing you have done. If you do evil and suffer for it that is what you deserve. That does not accomplish God's work. Be sure, Peter says, that you are not suffering because you are obnoxious, or an evildoer.

And we can be obnoxious! Some of the most obnoxious people I know are Christians -- myself included. We are capable of murdering people -- with our tongue if not with a knife -- or of being guilty of thievery, or evil-doing, or meddling. Perhaps meddling in people's business is a uniquely "Christian" vice. My wife, Carolyn, passed on to me an epitaph she discovered somewhere in C.S. Lewis' writings:

*Erected by her sorrowing brothers
In memory of Martha Clay.
Here lies one who lived for others.
Now she has peace
And so have they.*

So Peter says, "Do not be a meddler, do not be a murderer, do not be guilty of any such vice.

And, in verse 16 he says, "If you suffer as a Christian, do not feel ashamed." Because that is what we tend to do - to be ashamed of the Name. I am sure Peter wrote this with a great deal of understanding and compassion because, remember, it was Peter who was ashamed of the name. He was twitted by a little girl, and he refused to identify himself with Christ. So he must have understood. And we all have had times when we were beginning to undergo some pressure because someone identified us with Christ, and we have weaseled out of it one way or another. I have done it; I know. Peter says, "Do not be ashamed." As Paul said to Timothy, "Don't be ashamed. All who were in Asia have deserted me." Timothy, a young, inexperienced man, was left behind in Asia with the heavy responsibility of leading a church there in which everyone was defecting from the apostle Paul's leadership. Paul said, "Don't be ashamed. I'm not ashamed. Onesiphorus is not ashamed. Don't you be ashamed."

And that is Peter's word, too. "Do not be ashamed." Because the very name we are inclined to be ashamed of is the name from which we derive our power. In chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Acts, it is recorded that Peter and John performed a miracle on a man. They did so in the name of Jesus: "In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." Later, when they were brought to trial for that act, Peter said it was by the name of Jesus that they did this, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved." That is the name that saves you, so do not be afraid. And do not be ashamed of the name; it is the name which delivers.

Peter goes on in verses 17 and 18 to give us a perspective on evil which undergirds everything he has said. Notice that the paragraph beginning with verse 17 opens with the word, "For". This is an explanation: "Do these things because certain things are true."

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?

Verse 18 is a quotation from the book of Proverbs. Peter inserts it here to authenticate what he is saying. Do you realize what Peter is actually saying in this paragraph? He says that the persecution of the church -- the hands of evil men which are being laid on the members of the church -- are the hands of God. The activities of evil men are the judgments of God. Now, that gives us an entirely different perspective on evil in the world. Evil is not running rampant. Evil men may think that they have ultimate control, but they do not. Satan does not have ultimate control; God does. And God uses the worst things that Satan can do to purify the church of God.

In the book of Job, when the sons of God (the good and bad angels) appeared before God, Satan requested the right to afflict Job. God gave him that right, with certain limitations, and he exercised that right. Then he came back and asked for an extension of the limits, so he could touch Job's body. God said to him, "Satan, you move me against my servant Job." God took the responsibility. So you see, the fingers which are pressing you, the people who are persecuting you, the evil men who afflict you for the name of Jesus, are really the fingers of God. He is allowing them to do that. They desire to destroy you. Satan wants to use them to destroy you. But God uses the worst the world can do, in order to build and perfect us! This ought to give us an entirely different way of looking at evil in the world. God is judging his people through the evil of men.

This is the way we can view Watergate, this terrible episode in our country's history -- perpetrated by evil men. I am not taking sides politically. But it is obvious that evil men have been at work. I heard one congressman say recently that something diabolical has been occurring, and he is right. It is obvious that Satan has been using men to accomplish his purposes. But who ultimately is responsible? God. God is purging his people, judging his own. And for those who refuse to respond, life becomes a hell on earth. But those who see that God is at work to purify

and perfect us in all the events of history are changed from glory to glory. God is using every event in order to accomplish his purpose in our life. So in verse 19 Peter says,

Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God [It is the will of God that we suffer, that we are persecuted and misunderstood, that we are ostracized and ridiculed.] **entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.**

Do what is right, keep on trusting, put yourself in his hands. He is a wise and faithful Creator, the sovereign Lord of the world; he knows what he is doing. All of this is for our sake. He is purifying the church. That is where God always begins - with his own. When he wanted to settle the issue of sin, he began with his own Son. He did not choose someone else. And when God wants to set things right in the world, he begins with his own people -- the church. The household of God is the ground and the pillar of truth; it is the foundation and support structure for all of life. As Ray Stedman has described us, we Christians, all around the world, are "the secret government of earth". And when God wants to correct the world, he starts with us. So we can see in persecution the hand of a faithful Creator who knows what he is doing, and therefore we can entrust ourselves to him.

Peter's letter was an encyclical that went through all the various communities of Asia Minor and was read by many people. One person who read this letter was a man named Polycarp, a disciple of the apostles who lived in Smyrna. He died a short time after Peter himself died, in one of the first waves of persecution that swept through Asia Minor. Polycarp was an elderly man - -eighty-six when he died. For a number of years he had been hounded and pursued because, at this time, the Roman empire was out to get the ringleaders of the church. Eventually, he could hide no more and he was discovered. Eusebius, an early church historian, describes the events surrounding his martyrdom:

Entering upon him at a late hour of the day, they found him indeed resting in an upper room, whence, although he might easily have escaped to another house, he would not, saying, "The Lord's will be done." And, having understood that they were come, he descended and addressed the people with a very cheerful countenance.

He goes on to describe how Polycarp prepared a table and fed the representatives of the Roman government who had come to arrest him, and then asked permission to go into another part of the house to pray for a time. Eusebius says,

He prayed with such volume that those who had heard him were amazed, and many of them repented that so venerable and pious a man should be put to death. Then he was taken into the stadium. And as he was going through the arches into the stadium, he heard a voice inwardly that said, "Be strong, Polycarp, and contend manfully," and this strengthened him. When he was led forward, a great tumult arose among those who heard Polycarp was taken. At length, as he advanced, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp, and he answered that he was. He persuaded him to renounce Christ, saying, "Have regard for your age," and adding similar expressions such as was usual for them to say. He said, "Swear by the genius of Caesar. Repent. Say, 'Away with those that are impious!'" But Polycarp, with a countenance grave and serious, and contemplating the whole multitude that were collected in the stadium, beckoned with his hand to them, and with a sigh he said, "Away with the impious!" [A sense of humor to the end! I The governor, however, continued to urge him, and said, "Swear, and I will dismiss you. Revile Christ." Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He never did me wrong. How can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?" And they burned him at the stake.

Perhaps you and I will not go through persecution like that, although in many parts of the world today our brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing that sort of persecution. We may well be ridiculed, misunderstood, and ostracized, though, and increasingly so in days to come. In the catacombs of Rome there is a graffiti on the wall which shows a young man on his knees worshipping a figure drawn above him. The figure is that of a person crucified on a cross. The figure looks normal, except that it has the head of an ass. Underneath is written, "Anaxaminus worships his God." So ridicule was as much a part of persecution in those days as actual physical affliction. And this is the sort of thing you and I are more likely to experience. We will be misunderstood,

ostracized, excluded from some of the groups we would like to join.

Peter's word to us is, "Let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."

Father, we recognize that many of your family are not experiencing the freedom we have today. We rejoice in the freedom we do have, and we pray for our brothers and sisters, asking that they might be strengthened to stand in the name. We would ask the same for ourselves - that when we are tempted to flee or to shrink, or to say nothing, you would strengthen us with your might, strengthen us in your name, give us confidence to be bold and to identify ourselves with the One who has not disappointed us. We thank you that it is your indwelling Spirit which does this for us, and we rejoice in the prospect of seeing you at work in our lives. We thank you in Jesus' name,
Amen

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