

The title for today's message is; **What Christian suffering is—and isn't**

Peter said; **Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you,**

OK, Doc, give it to me straight. What a way to begin a sermon, but what is it, when you go to the doctor.

Do you want him to only hint that something might be wrong, or do you want him to honestly and clearly discuss the details of your problem, even if they might be painful for you to hear?

Most of us would prefer the direct approach. We don't want someone who will candy-coat the problem or give us false hope.

Neither do we want someone who will frighten us with all the details of everything that could possibly go wrong.

We simply want someone who will give it to us straight. Take Jesus, the Great Physician, He cared about what his followers would face after his glorious ascension into heaven.

He even prayed for them specifically beforehand. He said, "...I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.

All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. He said; Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name...

How comforting to know that Jesus prayed, and continues to pray for us! We are God's family, followers of Jesus

Were bearers of the name of the Triune God which was given to us in Holy Baptism and we certainly thank God for our human families as well.

Especially for the role they had in bringing us to faith. Today we also praise God that we are members of another family:

God is our Father, Christ is our older brother, and all of us are relatives of each other through faith in him. What a privilege to belong to such a family.

What an honor to bear such a name, the name of Christ himself! Thank God that we are members of His family by grace!

And to be a baptized Christian brings with it many lasting benefits, such as forgiveness, life, and salvation which He won for us on the cross.

But Jesus wanted us to know that here in this world His name would also temporarily bring us suffering. Yes Jesus gave it to us straight!

He said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name..."

He summed it all up by saying, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Peter learned this lesson well. He and the others saw firsthand what happened to Jesus: how He was arrested, convicted, mocked, beaten, and put to death.

He and the others knew that because of Jesus' name, they could expect the same kind of treatment from the world!

Yet, they also saw Jesus rise from the dead and ascended into heaven, so they stood up boldly and testified to the entire world.

They weren't afraid of those who could hurt the body. In fact they rejoiced in their suffering and trusted in God.

Know with this attitude, Peter was inspired by God to write the words we read today in our text.

First Peter was intended to travel among several different churches: some that would experience persecution in the future.

Some were just beginning to experience persecution, and some were already right in the middle of it.

Now today, one of these three categories can be applied to any given church anywhere in the world, yes including our own!

These words were written for us so that we could learn what suffering IS and what it IS NOT.

Look it's not unusual. So do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering today, as though something strange were happening to you.

Here in America, we have been blessed with religious freedom for so long that we forget we are the exception rather than the rule.

We forget that there are places where Christians are or have been viciously and violently persecuted for their beliefs.

Even where Christians are grudgingly tolerated, they don't always enjoy respect and approval among their neighbors.

Somewhere in the world right now, you can be sure someone is either being threatened or being put to death simply because they are a Christian.

For Christians, suffering is not unusual or surprising. It's expected! What should surprise us is that here and now we have been able to go for so long

This should be seen as a rare and unusual blessing from God! We should thank God for each and every day He gives us to practice our faith.

And to do so without having to put our own lives or the lives of our families in danger. It certainly is not invited or deserved.

Look, If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

We must understand there is a difference between suffering for doing wrong and suffering for doing right.

As Christians we don't delight in the suffering of anyone, even though some suffering is deserved.

When God made us, he designed us to be happy and healthy in our relationship with him and He gave us His laws to safeguard those blessings.

When we either intentionally or unintentionally break God's laws, we go against his original design for our lives.

We open ourselves up to the very real possibility of pain and suffering, and when this happens, it really isn't fair to ask, "Why is God letting this happen?

Why is he doing this to me?" In such cases we should know that we have no one to blame but ourselves.

An even greater tragedy is that some people will needlessly suffer for eternity because they persistently reject Jesus' free offer of forgiveness, life and salvation in his Gospel.

On the other hand, when Christians do suffer for their faith, it is never a punishment for something we have done wrong.

Persecution never means that God doesn't love us, or that he's forgotten

The trials we endure are never signs of God's displeasure toward us. Such suffering is simply a result of living in this cruel, sinful world—a world that has rejected God Himself.

This kind of suffering is not something to be ashamed of either. It's not something to worry or be careless about!

Jesus said not to worry about our life, what we will eat or drink, or about the body, what we will wear.

The Father knows we need these things, and He provides them for us. St. Paul also said, "Do not be anxious about anything..."

Easy words to say, but difficult to live by. I'm not sure of the statistics on this, but I would not be surprised.

If a great majority of the physical illnesses people face are in some way connected to unhealthy stress.

One danger of suffering painful trials is that we can allow ourselves to become filled with worries and fears about tomorrow.

As we see troubles brewing all around us, this can cause us to "freeze" or shut down. What if persecution does come? What if I'm not able to handle it?

Should we be busy preparing underground shelters, etc., for the day of persecution? Should I be writing my will? What if this? Or what if that?

There is, however, the opposite danger: that we relax to the point where we just stop caring all together.

In America, have we forgotten that God has blessed us with this time of relative freedom from persecution for a reason.

So that we can be especially fruitful in spreading the Gospel for Him? Have we

For this reason, Peter wants us to always be aware that there is someone out there who is constantly at work in the world, trying to destroy the family of God:

So my friends, be self-controlled and alert because the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone, anyone to devour.

Now according to Ecclesiastes chapter 3, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.”

According to Peter, suffering is an experience now shared by churches throughout the world.

Yet it is not presented as a terrible tragedy. Instead, we can see it as a time for joy: Because we share in Christ’s sufferings.

When Jesus “gave it to them straight” the disciples said, Now you are speaking clearly and we can see that you know all things.

This makes us believe that you came from God.” Through apostles like Peter, God also gives us the bad news straight: Yes we can expect to suffer.

This world can be a dangerous place and there are spiritual enemies that we must face. As Peter says, “it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.”

But there’s also good news, thank God that we are members of his family and by grace of God we bear the name of Jesus.

Amen.”

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.