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1 Peter 4:12-19

DON'T BE SURPRISED... BUT REJOICE!

Her name was Mildred. At the age of 88 she suffered a shock from which she never recovered. One day, Joe, her 90-year-old husband, told her, "You need to take me to the doctor right away. I'm very sick." 48 hours after being admitted to the hospital, Joe was dead. In fact, Joe had been dying of cancer for some time. But he had never told Mildred about the diagnosis. Though Joe likely was trying to shelter his wife from the bad news until it was absolutely necessary, she couldn't help but feel a deep sense of betrayal.

When she was eighteen and engaged to be married, Joe had swept her away from her former fiancé in a whirlwind courtship and then marriage. Together they determined not to have children. They did not want that domestic life. They wanted to entertain friends and host parties at their lavish home. As a young man in my twenties I found myself pondering as I got to know

Mildred, “Why are you so surprised that a 90-year-old man passed away? Could he not just as easily have passed away in his sleep? Did you think the two of you would go on like this forever?” I drove her to the cemetery where she showed me Joe’s headstone. On it was engraved two words, “Together forever.” Perhaps that was my answer.

Whenever we suffer in whatever form -sorrow, accident, burden, insult, pain -is there not always an element of surprise to it? We’re often so surprised when bad things happen. I never imagined that my life would come to this -a bed in a nursing home. I never imagined that one of my kids would get entangled in some thing. Never in my house. How did it come to this, that I’m married to an abusive husband, that I’m emaciated with disease, that I’m filing for bankruptcy, that I’m caring 24/7 for an incapacitated spouse, that I’m raising my grandchildren? I never thought my life would turn out like this.

But we need to ask, why are we so surprised? We see these things happening around us all the time. Did we think none of it would ever touch us? Did we think we alone would slide through unscathed?

The Scripture reading from 1 Peter 4 today tells us not to be surprised. This is addressed to believers. We Christians need not be surprised when we suffer. No, the surprising thing about suffering is that Scripture says suffering gives us reason to rejoice. Let's examine why suffering is not a surprise, but a reason to rejoice.

First, suffering is not a surprise to us because we pray, "Thy will be done." When we pray, "Thy will be done," we are saying, "God, make sure I don't get what I want and only You get what you want." Not getting what I want is painful -being hampered by sickness when what I want is to be free to come and go, being stymied by my manager when what I want is to have my ideas considered, grieving over my wayward child when what I want is for them to be safe and secure. And what I want makes perfect sense to me and only seems good and fair. But this is what Jesus was talking about when He said, *Whoever would come after me must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

A cross is for dying on. My will must die and be replaced by God's will. Because I am permeated with sin, my will is inherently sinful. Even when I think my will is good, God's will is always better, always holier, always more sublime. Perhaps at times, the degree of

suffering I feel when my will is stymied, might give me a peek at the degree of sinful defiance that naturally lives in my heart -as if somehow I have a right to feel hurt or angry or mistreated. I seldom realize that if my will is left unhindered and unchecked, ultimately it will lead me to hell.

Suffering when my will is broken is no surprise, but it's reason to rejoice because God's will is always to bless and to save us.

This leads us to the second reason suffering is no surprise to us. As God intends to bless and save us, He will be working to make us more like Christ. To be clear, only Christ's sufferings and death have paid for our sins. Only Christ's sufferings and death atoned for our guilt and earned our way to heaven. Think of it, when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done," He truly meant it in a way you and I were never capable of. Shivering in the night air with sweat-drenched clothes He held out his wrists to be bound and was led away to be crucified.

Christ has redeemed you and made you His own with His blood. By your baptism, God has placed His name on you and adopted you to be His child. As you belong

to Jesus and are associated with Jesus through faith, God intends to make you more and more like Jesus. You suffer now as Jesus suffered while He was here on earth. But you will also enjoy later the eternal, unfading glory in heaven that Jesus earned for you by His sufferings and death.

Listen again to 1 Peter 4: Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God refreshes you.

Think of all the Christ-like qualities that become ours only through suffering: meekness, compassion, humility, gentleness, perseverance, obedience and stronger faith. The Spirit give us these qualities as He refreshes us with the good news of the Christ-earned glory that awaits us -in the same way that Jesus awaited His glorious exaltation.

Therefore don't be surprised at suffering, but rejoice in it because suffering identifies you as someone

belonging to Christ and it shapes you more and more into His image.

Thirdly, suffering should not surprise us, because God is making us ready for heaven. 1 Peter 4 says, *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.* In other words, if I get ticketed for speeding I am merely suffering the consequences of my own actions. If, on the other hand, suffering hits me that I did not ask for - whether by persecution from the world or by God's design for my life - God is using it to ready me for heaven.

1 Peter 4 tells us, *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.* In what sense does judgment begin with the family of God? In the sense that God uses suffering to help purge sin from our lives, to help kill our Old Adam and also to give our New Man a chance to thrive. That peptic ulcer might keep you from gluttony. The ever-aching weakness for something may guard you from complacency in prayer. The Bible says, *God disciplines those he loves.* Suffering is God's useful way to prepare us for holiness in heaven.

1 Peter 4 goes on, *If it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* In other words, whereas believers suffer now and will enjoy glory later, unbelievers tend to enjoy their good things now, but they will suffer later at the last judgment. This teaches us -even though suffering is not fun or pleasant -do not despise it. Oddly enough, we can embrace suffering as something dear, even wholesome, to our lives. We can even rejoice in it. For suffering is a sure sign of God's love, it is a marker that He has designated us for heaven.

Therefore 1 Peter 4 concludes this thought: *So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.* The answer to your suffering is not to cave to impatient sin, but to trust that God's will is good, that He has in mind to bless and save you.

Suffering is no surprise as you follow Christ because He has promised that you would suffer. He had a cross. You will have a cross. But every time you suffer, you can tell yourself, Jesus is keeping His promise. Jesus

said I would suffer. I am suffering. Jesus is keeping His promise. But you can also tell yourself this... if Jesus is keeps a promise that He takes no pleasure in keeping (namely, that I will suffer), don't you think Jesus will for sure keep the promises He loves to keep (namely to help and save me)? That is reason to rejoice.