

Why does suffering as a Christian so often surprise us? Why are we taken back by it? Jesus told us it's going to happen. He told us that if the world hated him, it's also going to hate us. We are guaranteed to suffer as Christians. There's no way we can escape the hatred of the world. So why are we so often surprised by it? Why does it so often catch us off guard? It makes us impatient, makes us ask the question "why?" "Why is this happening to me? Why am I having to go through this?" But why does that happen, Christians? Why are we so often surprised by what Jesus said was going to happen? I think it's because of the way that we tend to think about suffering. And I can see at least four reasons why that's the case.

And the first one of these reasons is because we tend to think of suffering as a Christian the same way that we think of suffering in general: as something bad, as something to be avoided. And I get it. It's understandable for us to do that. Because when we think of something like pain or mental suffering, that's nothing that anybody wants to go through. And even being a Christian and suffering can be very difficult for us. It can be just as painful. Peter says in our Epistle reading that is like a "fiery trial," like suffering along with Christ. But just as we think of pain and physical suffering as something bad and to be avoided, we so often think of Christian suffering in the same way. Something that we don't want to go through. Something that we try to avoid if we can help it. Because even though Jesus tells us that it's going to happen, we don't really want to do it. And for that reason, we are surprised when it does happen. Why is this happening to me? So that would be the first reason then, that we think of it as something bad.

A second reason is because we tend to think of Christian suffering as something strange or abnormal, something that's extraordinary, something that happens beyond our control. Again, a lot like physical suffering, right? We tend to think of being in pain or being in some kind of suffering as abnormal. Normal for us is being comfortable. Normal for us is not suffering. And so whenever we start to suffer, we see that as something gone wrong, as something totally out of the ordinary. Which is why we want to get back to normal. We want to get back to the way things were. We want to go back to not suffering, so that we are comfortable once more. And that very often leads us to do whatever it takes to get back to being comfortable. As long as I can stop suffering, that's what I want to do. And even just the threat of it, even just the mere possibility of suffering is often enough to make us want to do that. We don't even like the idea of having to go through suffering, so we'll do whatever it takes to get out of it and to go back to what we consider to be normal. And we might even do something in the process that we don't want to do, but hey, whatever it takes, right? And for that reason, Christians, we're so often surprised when we do suffer, because we think it's not normal.

A third reason is because we tend to think of Christian suffering as something accidental, as something that just sort of happens in our lives. We're having a bad day, for example. Things just aren't quite going our way. And for that reason, we're taken by surprise when they do happen. Because we think of what's going on around us as being pure chance. It just sort of happens. So if we are suffering at the hands of the world, well, it's because the world's so crazy these days. We're not really sure why it's crazy. We're not really sure why things turned out this way. All we know is that it seems like everything has gone wrong. And we are taken back when it does happen. "Who could've predicted it?" we say. "Who could've imagined that we would be going through these things? And now I have to deal with this unforeseen event." And so it takes us by surprise in that way too, Christians, because we think that it's purely accidental.

And a fourth and a last reason is because we tend to think of Christian suffering as being something far off from us or something really big. We know what Jesus says. We know that he says that we're going to suffer because we are Christians. And we don't want to deny that. We don't want to say that he's wrong. But we make it into something big that might happen to us off in the future, but it's never anything that's happening right now. We might even imagine what it would be like to suffer in that way. Maybe we've imagined what it would be like if we were imprisoned because we were Christians. Maybe we imagine some big moment, some "Here I stand" moment like Martin Luther, where we're making a big confession against the world. And we say that we'll be ready for that moment. "I'll be ready in that moment, so I won't waver! So I won't give in! Because I know that I will stand firm for Christ!" But because we've romanticized it, made it something almost unreal, made it into something that almost never is going to happen to any of us, we won't be ready when it actually does come. Because we imagine it's going to be something big, and then when the little things come, the little things we actually suffer, we're not ready for them. We've made it so that we think that we're going to be ready for the big thing, but we stumble and fall at all the little inconveniences that come along with being a Christian. And so in that way, Christians, we aren't prepared for suffering. We aren't prepared for what is to come. And for that reason, we're taken by surprise.

Christians, these four things together all show us why we're so often surprised when suffering does come. But what does Peter have to say to these things in our Epistle reading for today? He says, first of all, suffering is not a bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing. Because he says in verse 14: "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." Christian suffering is a blessing, Peter says, not a curse. It is something good and not evil. Why? Because it shows us that we are, in fact, Christians. It shows us that we have the Spirit within us. Because if we did not suffer as Christians, then we would be part of the world, and we would not be part of God. Jesus wasn't joking when he said that the world hates him, and that it hates those who belong to him. Because the world loves those who are like the world, and it hates those who are not like the world. So we can rejoice, Christians, in our suffering, because it shows us that we are not in the world, that we are not part of the world. But rather, we belong to God. So suffering, Peter says, is good for that reason.

Second of all, Peter tells us that suffering is not strange. It is not abnormal. It is part of what it means to be a Christian. As he says in verse 12: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." We shouldn't be surprised, because this is something we should expect to happen. Suffering is normal for a Christian. Being comfortable is a good thing, absolutely. We should see it as a gift from God. But being comfortable is the exception. Being comfortable is what is abnormal. Suffering for the sake of Christ is the norm. Because being a Christian means that we will be like Christ. So we shouldn't try to do whatever it takes to get back to normal, so to speak. We shouldn't try to do anything that it takes to make sure that we are comfortable in this world. Rather, what we should do is trust in God, knowing that he will lead us through these things and care for us in the midst of our suffering.

Third, Peter tells us that suffering is not accidental. In fact, as he says in verse 19: "Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will." Pay attention to that: "according to God's will." God

intends for suffering to be part of being a Christian. God sends suffering into our lives. Why? Because in this way he leads us away from the world. Because if we were still in the world, if we were comfortable with the world, we would be condemned along with it. And the judgment which is coming upon the unbelieving world, Christians, will be far worse than anything that we suffer now for the sake of Christ! But the suffering which God sends us, the suffering which comes from his hand, prepares us for the glory to come. It prepares us for the glories of heaven. And just as Christ suffered and entered into glory, so we, too, who suffer with him will be glorified with him in the age to come.

And lastly, suffering, Peter says, is something that we should be prepared for at all times. We shouldn't think of it as just something big in uncertain future that may or may not happen. We shouldn't think of it as just the big moments in life. It is part of our daily lives as Christians. Because there's not many Christians who will become martyrs, but all Christians will be spoken evil of by the world. There is not many Christians who will make those history-changing confessions, those "here I stand" moments, but every Christian will be treated differently by the world because they belong to Christ. Not many Christians will be imprisoned for the sake of the Gospel, but every Christian will be hated for the sake of Christ. Suffering as a Christian is not just the big things in life. It is whatever we have to go through for the sake of Jesus, big or little. And so we should not be surprised when these things happen.

So Christians, prepare yourselves. Prepare yourself by being patient in the face of trouble. Prepare yourself by trusting in God who will take care of you in all things. Prepare yourself by turning to him in prayer, calling on his name. Because God will not fail to care for you in the midst of suffering. And no matter what this coming year may bring, no matter what 2022 has in store for us--whether it comes from the government or society or our community or even our families--whatever it may be, you can be ready for it. It won't be a surprise, because Jesus has told us that it's not going to be easy. But we have him through all of it. And knowing that, we can glorify his name through what we suffer on his behalf. Turn to him, Christians. Trust in him. Because whatever God sends us from his hand is meant for our good.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to take us out of the world. We pray that you would strengthen us in the midst of all our tribulations, knowing that you intend them for our good and that you are preparing us for glory through them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.