

INI

1 Peter 4,12-19

2nd Sunday After Christmas — 3 January 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from Saint Peter's First Letter, which was read earlier:

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; ¹³ but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing;

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: I suspect most people do not complain when one is pleasantly surprised. After all, when everything is going smoothly, there generally is little cause for complaint.

But when we're confronted with an unpleasant surprise, then we might get a bit uncomfortable. We might begin to wonder what's happening. And if the unpleasant surprise has to do with spiritual matters, then we might even question God.

It seems that's what confronted Peter's readers in Asia Minor – that's today's Turkey. They were facing persecution. And they were surprised.

It seems they might have forgotten some basic truths taught not only By Jesus but also by Paul. In writing to Timothy, Paul said,

And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3,12)

In the Book of Acts, Luke records another of Paul's sayings:

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.
(Acts 14,22)

But in our letter for today, Peter makes it quite clear that even though there may be suffering, God stands by His people. This brings me to my sermon theme for today, "**God Comforts Us During Times of Suffering.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) The Goal Of Suffering;**
- 2) Remember Our Fellow-Sufferers;** and,
- 3) Assistance In Suffering**

1) The Goal Of Suffering. Peter begins by saying:

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; ¹³ but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing;

Peter uses the phrase, "fiery ordeal," to refer to Christian suffering, which we must endure for the sake of our Christian faith. For Peter, such "fiery ordeals" can include mockery and derision, enmity, discrimination, and even persecution, yes, even bloody persecution. By using the image of burning or fire, Peter tells us that such an ordeal is not going to be at all an easy one. This was certainly true even while the Apostles were writing to their fellow Christians in Asia Minor, because there events moved from verbal abuse to a bloody persecution that at times even meant being murdered for the faith.

We know how the holy martyrs suffered and even how they died. Some met their deaths being torn to pieces by wild animals in the bloody spectacles the Romans called “games.” Some were covered with tar and then used as human torches. Some were tied to iron chairs and had their limbs torn off. In these events the words of Jesus were fulfilled:

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15,18-19)

But for the children of God, from these words comes divine power from God Himself. Rather than deny the Savior, Christians are willing to endure the most dreadful of sufferings. Jesus says:

If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15,20)

And Peter writes:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose. (1 Peter 4,1)

The sufferings which Christians endure, and which the Lord permits, serve an important purpose:

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; ¹³ but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing

The purpose of suffering is to put faith to the test. God permits such ordeals to prove whether His children are true. This is a test to see if we are ready to suffer for His names' sake. As long as everything goes well, it is no great problem to be a Christian, so long as there is no opposition, so long as a person enjoys the benefits and honor of the

world. So long as there is no persecution, no discrimination, we see hypocrites and pretend-Christians also claiming to belong to Christ.

But there is more. Times of peace bring great dangers to Christians, because it is easy to become complacent and, in effect, one's faith grows tired, sleepy, and weak. Therefore through the fiery ordeal God puts faith to the test. When the fiery ordeal comes, the hypocrites and pretend-Christians quickly flee, and the hotter it gets, the quicker they flee. As Jesus put it in one of His parables: "and in time of temptation they fall away" (Luke 8,13).

The Lord purifies His Church through such fiery ordeals.

In Asia Minor many Christians fell away and joined the camp of the enemy and turned against their former co-religionists and began to persecute them! In the "fiery ordeal" it became clear who the true Christians were. This is the purpose: God tests to see whether the confession which is on the lips is one which also comes from the heart. The Lord tests to see whether those who confess the name of the Savior – the "Man of Sorrows," "The Lamb Who for the sins of the world was led to slaughter," – are willing to suffer disgrace for the Savior's sake.

In suffering, the Church of Christ experiences the mighty power of the Lord and wages its struggle with spiritual weapons. Christians take "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6) and encourage and strengthen one another, and, in the midst of sufferings, experience the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit. Finally, being so strengthened, they can withstand anything that a scornful and sneering world can throw at them; they are even willing to give up this earthly existence in order not to lose the heavenly one, as did the early, holy martyrs. They are comforted when they sing:

The world against me rageth,
Its fury I disdain;
Though bitter war it wageth,

Its work is all in vain.
My heart from care is free.
No trouble troubles me.
Misfortune now is play,
And night is bright as day. (*Awake, My Heart, With Gladness*, v. 6)

They sing with Luther:

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won:
The kingdom ours remaineth. (*A Mighty Fortress*, v. 4)

They cry in complete confidence:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him Who loved us. (Romans 8,35.37)

And it is certain that there are those who were weak in the faith who, on account of tribulation, were strengthened in the Lord and in His might. Through such a test the Church is strengthened and cleansed. “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” We are His work, His creation. The Holy Spirit has cleansed and renewed our hearts so that we can repudiate the devil and all his works and all his ways, so that we can “set our minds on the things above, and not on the things that are on earth” (Colossians 3,2).

When the hurricanes of temptation and doubt blow over the congregation of God, when the storms of suffering rattle the doors of the hearts of the faithful, then know for certain that the Holy Spirit, the mighty Third Person of the Trinity, will be with the believers. Then we

can praise and glorify God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – that the devil with all his fierce wrath cannot prevail in destroying the Church of Christ. Indeed, we know that many who persecute us and the Church were once nominally followers of Christ; therefore:

By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evil-doer, or a troublesome meddler; ¹⁶ but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.

Yes, it is the so-called “disgrace of Christ,” disgrace and persecution for Jesus’ sake; therefore we also called to

2) Remember Our Fellow-Sufferers. Jesus says:

If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15,20)

Thus, suffering is not unusual, it is not something which other Christians do not experience, each person shares in Jesus’ experience. A few verses further on, Peter writes:

But of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (1 Peter 5,8-9)

What does this mean? It means that whenever we have to endure sorrow and distress for the sake of faith in Jesus and confessing Him, we find ourselves in the company of all true Christians; and what happens to us also happened to Jesus. Instead of suffering being a sign of God’s displeasure against us, we are assured and know that this is a sign that we are God’s children and that God is for us! We endure suffering not only with all other Christian fellow-sufferers, but with Christ Himself! “to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing”!

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps. (1 Peter 2,21)

In suffering we travel on the same path as that traveled by our Savior, Who first went down that path for us. The Lord will not let us remain in suffering, but will lead us through suffering to eternal blessedness. After the cup of suffering He will place in front of us the cup of joy. Remember the holy apostles, who after they had been beaten,

... went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' name. (Acts 5,42)

Paul writes to the Romans “we exult in our tribulations” (Romans 5,3). As the holy martyrs faced their imminent deaths, they praised God and sang songs of thanksgiving. Here we see most clearly that we still have

3) Assistance In Suffering. It is in this manner that the Apostle Peter speaks of God: “the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (v 14). If we had to rely only on ourselves and on the weakness of our flesh, then it would be impossible to endure the smallest pain without denying our Lord. Here we paraphrase the words of Luther: With our own power we can do nothing and would soon be lost.

When the Lord tells us that “the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” then we know that it no longer depends on our feeble and weak efforts. Then, when the Holy Spirit joins us together with His might, we confess with Paul, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4,13).

Here the Holy Spirit is described as “the Spirit of Glory,” and in the midst of sufferings, He reminds Christians of the glory that lies ahead. This is what the first martyr Stephen reminds us of:

But being full of the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7,55-6)

In Stephen’s most dire moment, the Holy Spirit gave Stephen a vision of heavenly comfort. Therefore, come what may, whether we suffer but a little or greatly for the Lord’s sake: “Let them mock and let them rage | In the end God’s salvation will put them to shame.”

Conclusion: Through the Apostle Peter, God has shown us that the goal of suffering is to strengthen our faith, that we stand with fellow-believers in the midst of suffering, and that He assists us in the midst of suffering. For Jesus’ sake, God will take all the bitterness out of suffering. “The Spirit ... of God rests upon you” – and ensures that in the midst of suffering we have the comfort and strength of His presence so that the burden will not be too great. Indeed, as Paul writes to the Corinthians:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able; but with the temptation will provide a way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10,13)
Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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