

Never be Surprised by Problems • 1 Peter 4:12-19

Why me, God? Why me? “Why am I sick when others seem so healthy?” “Why am I getting this unwanted divorce?” “Why was I rejected by the college I wanted to attend?” “Why can’t I get pregnant?” “Why did I get pregnant and what am I going to do now?” “Why do other people treat me so rotten?” “Why is life so hard?”

Sometimes as Christians we are shocked by the difficulties we have to suffer. We had this notion of the way life was supposed be and it hasn’t turned out like that at all. So, we are disappointed with God. In fact, some of us are downright angry with God. It’s like we did our part and he didn’t do his part.

Here is what St. Peter says about this in 1 Peter 4:12-19:

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 rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 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; and 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 sinners?”

So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Peter is not saying here that life isn’t better for Christians. Life really is better for Christians! We

have a rock solid relationship with God that will take us through every circumstance and situation. We are the recipients of God’s goodness, his protection and his strength. God is there for us no matter what happens. We have a supernatural resource for now and a guarantee of ultimate victory in heaven that other people simply do not have.

But there is nothing unusual about suffering. Suffering is part of life in a world that is infected with sin and evil. Everyone and everything is contaminated by sin. And where there is sin there is suffering . . . and Christians are not exempt. We are reminded of that in 1 Peter 4:12 where we read, “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*”

There is a difference between “expect suffering” and “do not be surprised” by suffering. We should never live our lives looking for or waiting for bad things to happen. To the contrary, we ought to live each day with deep gratitude for the generosity of God. And, we ought to live our lives in such a way that we are keenly aware of the goodness of God and thoroughly enjoy every blessing God gives to us. But, when hit with trials, pain, problems and

tragedies—don’t be surprised! Understand that they are part of life. Accidents happen. Illness happens. Pain happens. Evil happens. Death happens. Don’t think of any of this as strange or unusual.

It’s not that God has targeted us for pain. It’s that God has not exempted us from this uni-

versal human experience. Every parent knows that we cannot provide lifelong exemption from problems for our children. It can be dangerous to do that because there are no exceptions and there are no problem-free lives. Smart parents warn their children about the dangers and prepare them to handle the realities they will face. And God does the same for us. God prepares us for the difficul-

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As Christians, our number one goal in life is to follow Jesus. Jesus' life was not always easy. While he had good friends and good times he also suffered a lot. When we suffer we are experiencing some of what Jesus suffered.

Compare this to a family-owned business. It is not unusual for a son or daughter to enter a successful family business. The parents may have lived in poverty, worked 20-hour days and enormously sacrificed to get the company to where it is today. They know their children will never fully understand but they allow them to start at the bottom of the business and experience some hard times. They may even invite them to go out and try to make it on their own, living in substandard housing and earning minimum wage. Life may be difficult for awhile but eventually they are promoted to the executive offices of the family-owned business.

One day the son or daughter says, "Mom, Dad, I can't really say I understand what you went through to get where you are today. I wasn't there. But I'm glad I experienced some of what you experienced. I love and appreciate you all the more. I'm a far better person and better business executive because I went through at least some of what you went through. I didn't like it at the time, but I'm glad now."

Or, as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:13, ". . . rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

It is an amazing, mostly indescribable, joy to experience solidarity with Jesus in his suffering for us. When we suffer we do not find joy in the pain but we do rejoice in participation with Jesus.

When the pain and problems of life come as a result of being a Christian there is a special blessing. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 4:14, "*If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*"

When Scandinavians first immigrated to Minnesota they faced insults and discrimination. It was the same with Italians in New York and the Irish in Boston. It's not hard to imagine conversations between first-generation immigrants and their children. When sons and daughters came home from school with stories of ugly names and cruel jokes

their parents had responses that seemed impossible to understand: "You be proud that you are Irish!" "You are Italian; be glad for it!" "It's good to be Swedish!" "It's an honor to be Norwegian!"

The Bible here teaches us that it is a blessing to be insulted for being a Christian. Not because of the insult but because of being a Christian! Those who are Christians have on them the Spirit of God. God's powerful presence in our lives might be misunderstood and the cause of insult from those who don't believe, but it is a high compliment and source of honor for those who bear the name of Jesus Christ.

When we do suffer as Christians we need to make sure it is because we are Christians and not because we are criminals. When I was a college freshman there was a Christian on my dorm floor who could be especially obnoxious. When patience ran out some of the other freshmen would gang up on him. And every time this happened, you could hear him shouting, "They're persecuting me for my witness!" It wasn't because of his Christian witness; it was because he was a jerk!

1 Peter 4:15 says, "*If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.*" This is a really interesting list: murderer, thief, criminal, meddler. Why would meddler be included? Because apparently that is one more way to be a jerk! While the criminal code doesn't include meddler as a misdemeanor or felony it can be very damaging behavior. "Meddler" is a synonym for "busybody". This is someone who is always sticking his or her nose into other people's business . . . not to help but to hurt. Anyone who is insulted, persecuted or suffers for such behavior has it coming.

Peter's point here is that when Christians suffer it should be because we are good and we are innocent not because we are bad and we are guilty.

Christians who are good and innocent should consider it an honor to suffer for Jesus. While we are not told to be proud of suffering while innocent that is implied in the words "*do not be ashamed.*" So, 1 Peter 4:16 says, "*However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*"

A few weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Charleen and I were in Australia. We visited downtown Brisbane where a large political demonstration going on. Those involved in

the demonstration carried signs and were giving speeches through bullhorns. Literature was handed out. It was all critical of America and American foreign policies. I had two choices: be ashamed of bearing the name “American” or be proud of bearing the name “American.” I chose to be proud of it. I’m glad and grateful to be from the United States.

The Bible advises us to respond the same way on being Christians. When others are shouting and demonstrating and writing literature that denigrates Christianity we have a choice. I choose to be proud to be a Christian even if it means suffering. I thank and praise God that I bear the name of his Son.

Fifth on Peter’s list of reasons to rejoice because we are Christians is that we have different standards. Or, as he puts it in 1 Peter 4:17-18:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and 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?”

Should Christians be held to a higher standard than non-Christians? Absolutely! Whether we are talking about honesty on income tax returns, not living together before marriage, insisting on the sanctity of human life, being generous to the poor, giving justice to the oppressed or just being nice to other people—Christians are to be held to and judged by a higher standard than those who are not followers of Jesus.

We never live by the standard that “everyone else is doing it” or “it’s not against the law.” We belong to the family of God. We have salvation through Jesus Christ. Of course we live by a higher standard. And, this is a source of rejoicing. High standards are not a source of restriction and sadness; higher standards are a source of delight and righteousness.

Let’s summarize what we are being taught here. First, Peter is saying there is nothing unusual about suffering. It is a universal human experience from which Christians are not exempt. Also, when you suffer, rejoice because you are a Christian.

The call of the Bible is to commit our situation to God and do what is right whether we suffer or not.

All of this may explain the realities and the reasons, but we still need to know what to do when pain and suffering come our way. The answer is to commit ourselves to God and do good according to 1 Peter 4:19 which says, “*So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*”

Don’t miss a subtle but very important point in 1 Peter 4:19. We may suffer “*according to God’s will.*” Some Christians think that if they do God’s will they won’t suffer, that they are guaranteed health, wealth and a problem-free life. To the contrary, there are times when doing God’s will directly leads to suffering. Doing what is good and right is not always easy or trouble-free. The call of the Bible is to commit our situation to God and do what is right whether we suffer or not.

The best-selling Christian devotional book in all of history is *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers. Ironically, Oswald Chambers didn’t write the book. Let me tell you about him. From 1911 to 1915 he was a lecturer at the Bible Training College in Clapham, England. From 1915 to 1917 he gave devotional talks as a YMCA chaplain assigned to New Zealand and Australian troops who were protecting the Suez Canal in Egypt. Oswald Chambers died at the age of 43 in 1917 without ever having written or published anything. However, his wife was trained as a stenographer for the royal courts of Great Britain and she had written down all of his lectures and devotionals. She compiled them and published them as a book of daily readings in 1927.

The reading from that devotional book for last week is based upon 1 Peter 4. Here is what Oswald Chambers said:

Rise to the occasion. Do what the trial demands of you. It does not matter how much it hurts, as long as it gives God the opportunity to manifest the life of Jesus in your body.

May God not find complaints in us anymore, but spiritual vitality, a readiness to face anything he brings our way. The only

proper goal of life is that we manifest the Son of God. And when this occurs, all of our dictating of our demands to God disappears. Our Lord never dictated demands to his Father, and neither are we to make demands on God. We are here to submit to his will, so that he may work through us what he wants.

Let me tell you the true story of David and Nancy Guthrie. This is not from the pages of a Christian devotional book or a quote from the Bible. Their story comes from TIME magazine.

The Guthries are Christians. They live successful upper-middle-class lives in Nashville, Tennessee. What they did not know is that Nancy carries a recessive gene for Zellweger Syndrome that causes severe disability and an early death for children. The odds of having that recessive gene are 1 in 160. However, her husband also has the same gene. The chances of both of them having the same gene are 1 in 100,000. They didn't know that either of them had this gene when their healthy son Matt was born. They didn't find out until a few years later when Nancy gave birth to baby Hope in 1999.

Hope was born with the syndrome that brings clubfeet, severe brain damage, blindness, deafness and the inability to take food orally. When she was born the doctor met with them in Nancy's hospital room and said. "There's no cure and there's no treatment." When the doctor left David crawled into his wife's hospital bed with her and they wept and prayed: "God, our hearts are broken, but we still want to trust you."

David and Nancy did their best to take care of Hope for seven months. Then, one night David went into Hope's nursery and touched his baby daughter. She was cold. The time had come. He got his wife and she came and changed Hope's diaper for the last time. They had a memorial service and buried their baby.

Recognizing the genetic issues, David had a vasectomy. In spite of odds of 1 in 2,000, Nancy became pregnant again. A year and a half after Hope's memorial service David told the people of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville that Nancy was pregnant and their little boy would be born with the same syndrome Hope had. Hundreds of fellow Christians audibly gasped. In another year

the family grave would be reopened and another baby would be buried.

Nancy put her heart's thoughts on paper:

"In the darkest days, we've experienced a supernatural strength and peace. We often cannot see the hidden purposes of God. But we can determine to be faithful and keep walking toward Him in the darkness."

St. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:12-13, 19:

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.

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Our Faithful Creator, we don't pretend to understand all of your purposes. We don't understand all of the explanations, either. But what we do know is that you love us and that you care for us. Even in the midst of our greatest darkness you will be there for us.

I pray especially for those who are suffering right now and for those for whom the suffering is yet to come that the truth of your word may be translated into the joy of knowing you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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