

CHRISTMAS II – JANUARY 2, 2022 – 1 PETER 4:12-19

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. Thus far our text.

In Acts chapter 5, the disciples, headed by Peter, were emboldened by the Holy Spirit to preach the truth of the Gospel to those in power that didn't want to hear it. They preached about the complete sufficiency of Christ for salvation, and healed many with frail and diseased bodies by the Name of Jesus Christ. Peter was even given the short-term gift of having his presence or his shadow heal some, without saying or doing anything else. They were drawing people away from the Jewish leaders, and attracting quite a following, without even attempting to do so. Of course, the leaders didn't like this, and had Peter and some of the other apostles arrested – this was a public affront to the Jewish leaders' power and authority, and the system of sacrifices that they were profiting mightily from. But, the

disciples didn't stay in jail for long – the Holy Spirit rescued them, and caused the doors of the jail to be opened. What did the disciples do? They resumed the teaching they were compelled to deliver to the people, about the complete sufficiency of Christ, and that faith in His salvation causes the salvation of mankind. They were doing what they were supposed to do, and preaching the Gospel that they were given to teach from on high.

Upon questioning, accusation, and threats of violence, the disciples rejoiced that they were given the ability and the courage to suffer for the Name of Christ which they bore. Not that they wanted the beatings and the inquisition, but that if it were necessary to undergo this, they were more than willing to do so – the spread of the Gospel was more important than anything sinful men could do to them. They also knew that this was a mark that what they were doing was right and proper – Jesus had promised them, during the years in which He trained them one-on-one, that the world would reject them for the Gospel which they would preach to all nations.

The willingness to suffer persecution, even death, as we talked about last Sunday in the example of Stephen, the first martyr, has always been a mark of the Christian church. We aren't to seek out martyrdom or public rebuke, but we also shouldn't shy away from it. Sometimes it's necessary when we're preaching a foreign message to a world that's steeped and schooled in sin and shame and vice. Peter reassures the listeners to his letter being read to the new Christians, and to us today, that being rejected for preaching the unadulterated true doctrine is nothing to be ashamed of. Rather, we should chalk it up to those who are listening to us, and realize that Christ's message isn't going to be popular, it's not always going to bring about great crowds of followers, it's not going to be easily accepted by those who are deep in the guilt of sin. We don't want to hear that there's nothing we can do about our sinful nature, about our desire to sin every minute of every day, our every thought, word and deed that is opposed to the perfect will of God. Like Jonah preaching to the folks in Nineveh, it could be rather dangerous to one's health to preach a message that the masses don't want to hear, and who have been

misled all of their lives to believe is the truth when it is not. But, the Holy Spirit gives the power, the strength, the conviction, and puts us into situations where we can be effective and useful to God's ultimate purpose of drawing all nations to Himself, and saving them from their sins through His Means of Grace, His Word and His Sacraments. Let's delve into this unfamiliar subject for a bit, learn about suffering and persecution for the sake of Christ, why it's necessary, and what we can do to be better prepared for it to come.

We've been relatively coddled here in America these last 50-100 years; indeed, in the 20th and 21st centuries – the Christian life hasn't called for much sacrifice at all. In fact, we've been in a time where being a Christian, and receiving the gifts of God, and speaking to others about the hope that lies within us, has been by and large received positively; at least no major roadblocks have been placed in our way. Unlike in other countries, no one in governmental power has tried to stop us from gathering together with others for worship, or for reaching out to those around us within our sphere of influence.

Well, at least not until recently – the COVID-19 outbreak has given an excuse for unprecedented responses, including self-muzzling, self-censorship, and forsaking the gathering together of the church of God, all for the sake of the continued safety of the physical body and health. We can debate whether or not we did what was right at the time, but we can at least agree upon the fact that it's been a long time in the history of Western civilization where the church has been prevailed upon by the secular authorities to forsake corporate worship together – it's not a normal occurrence! For those of other times, countries, and situations, however, it's nothing new – and we're being introduced to it in this country maybe for the first time. Whether it's stated or not, the maxim has been promulgated that there are things that are more important than eternal life and the expression of Christian faith – the health of our bodies being one of them – and that the church is not an essential activity anymore. You can agree or disagree with the merit of this statement, but it's hard to argue that the decision has been made on the part of the governing authorities over us

Remember, going back to the Biblical time, that the Christian religion was illegal – people could be jailed or beaten to get them back into line, and abandon that which was seen as destructive to the uniform faith that had been passed down through the generations. Don't forget, though, that the early 1st century Judaism wasn't nearly the same faith as that of the Israelites wandering in the desert, or that which was given to them by Moses in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. They had abandoned faith in the Messiah, and thought that they were going to heaven based upon their adherence to the Law, and by keeping the sacrifices proscribed in the Bible. They forgot about the sinful nature, and only focused on the actual sins the people committed – that's why Jesus had to expand upon the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount – it's not just the letter of the Law, but the spirit of the Law, that counts, if one is trying to earn their way into heaven by adherence to the Law alone. The point of the Law is to lead to the Gospel; there is no salvation in the Law, but only in the Gospel. That key tenet must be remembered when talking about these things.

We can rejoice that we've been kept from outward persecution for the "crime" of preaching the Gospel; however, we cannot expect that this will continue. Jesus tells us throughout the Gospels, and hammers home in Matthew chapters 24 and 25, that things are going to get much worse before they get better. In fact, if we measure the correctness of our faith by how the world responds to us, we might be sorely mistaken. Paul in his letters says that the Gospel is "foolishness" to the Greeks and a "stumbling block" to the Gentiles – it's not going to be received well by many, because it flies in the face of what we in our sinful human nature think we already know. The evil one works against us in our Gospel endeavors, and often redoubles opposition to the truth for the purpose of driving away as many as possible from the truth into great shame and vice – that's his only warped goal, to keep as many as possible from true faith and heavenly glory with Jesus

There's an important warning, a perspective that we don't see in many other passages, given here in 1 Peter. We are to expect that persecution will come for those who believe in Jesus Christ, and

who seek to follow in His ways. However, this doesn't mean that we should seek it out! We can get ourselves into trouble if we develop a martyr complex – if we connivingly try to get ourselves into difficult circumstances for the sake of “building up merits” in heaven. Also, if we start bragging about how much opposition we face, as if we were somehow better at spreading the Good News of Christ if we are constantly being opposed, or mistreated, or worse. Peter reminds us that we shouldn't seek out persecution – it will find us! If we receive punishment for being a murderer, or a sinner, or any other manner of public offender, that's not what Peter and Paul and Jesus are talking about. Rather, we've gotten ourselves into trouble in these situations for the infraction against God's Law, rather than unjustly for holding to the truth of the Gospel.

What's being referred to here is ostracism, punishment, repression, even physical abuse, suffered because we will not recant from the truth that we have been taught, and that we are trying to pass on to others. This takes the form of holding to the truth of the Scriptures and the Confessions at the expense of the ire of those who don't want these doctrines to be taught and upheld in the church, for whatever reason. This sometimes takes the form of exposing and calling out the “pet” sins of society, those things that are opposed to the will and Word of God, but that folks don't want to turn away from, repent, and receive the forgiveness of God for. They'd rather either ignore them, or at least not have us bring them up

Let's turn to a present-day example, and one that we're going to be dealing with in a book study rather soon – the idea of Critical Race Theory – in a study by Paul Dare entitled Christians in a Woke World: A Call to Courage, Confession and Love – we'll be embarking upon this study rather soon. We're told in society that there is at least one category of sin that is unforgiveable, both in the eyes of polite society and even of God – that of being racists. Now, we're not talking here about those who actually hate, or think less of someone else because they are of a particular race – there are clear Scripture passages that speak of us all being equally valuable in the sight of God, and that all nations are

part of the promise of God in Christ Jesus. This is clearly not a God-pleasing attitude to have. But, what those who are of the CRT mindset are talking about is being guilty of racial crimes without yourself having committed them. You're guilty of being a racist merely because you're not a minority, but you're of the "dominant" people group.

There are a couple of problems with this worldview, reasons why it doesn't belong in the Christian church. First, it says that there are some sins which are not forgivable, which flies in the face of so many Scripture passages that I can't name them all here. 1 John 1:8-9 comes to mind, which we confess at the beginning of the worship service – He forgives the sins which we confess to Him, and cleanses us of all unrighteousness. Second, this worldview tries to separate the people of God into factions, warring with each other, putting enmity between them, for the sole purpose of trying to establish dominance and submission. The truth is that we are all submissive to the will of God in Christ Jesus, and ultimately made dominant over the sinful nature, when He takes us to heaven to be with Him. He doesn't want us to war with each other; He wants us to be at peace. Those who work to sow enmity are certainly not God-pleasing; rather, as we learn in the Beatitudes – blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God

We've gotten to the point that anyone who doesn't believe in the tenets of Critical Race Theory is shunned in polite society – we aren't allowed to have viewpoints that oppose this critical "sacred cow" of modern society. It's a stepping stone along the way of telling the church which doctrines she is allowed to embrace, rather than the church informing the secular society which is right and which is wrong – being a leader, rather than a cowering follower. Soft condemnation is a short step to much harsher condemnation, to prohibition, to punishment for holding to a belief that isn't "accepted" or "tolerated". This can range from denial of freedoms to actual prohibition at the tip of the sword. Think I'm exaggerating? Look at some of our allies in the Western world, where "hate speech" has been given a wide definition, and even enforcement power, by the state. It's easy for critical doctrines of the

church to be labeled “hate speech”, when the PC police are given free reign. I’m not saying that we’re at the point of having to retreat to our “bugout” shelter, at least not yet. What I am saying is that we are given the discernment to read the times in which we live, and prepare for that which is to come. Things will be difficult; however, the Holy Spirit will give us the power, the courage, the strength, and the conviction to endure NO MATTER WHAT!

The first century Christians lived every day wondering what the wider society, the church and the state, was going to do to them next for the faith which they believed and taught. Suffice it to say, Christianity wasn’t popular in polite society! They faced beatings, imprisonments, ostracism, and even worse, even the sword, like in the case of the martyrs. Don’t forget, eleven of the apostles were killed for the faith which they taught, with the exception of St. John, who was abandoned and banished to the island of Patmos, to live out his years away from influencing the people. St. Peter was famously crucified (albeit upside down, at his request, because he didn’t want to be killed in the same way as our Savior). Paul was executed in Rome, even though along the way to his gruesome end, he was given the chance to preach to many that he normally wouldn’t have had access. He took advantage of being shipwrecked to show his captors that God protected all of them, and many of those charged with delivering him to Rome were converted to the faith by the witness that they saw portrayed before them. All of the others have their stories, each one more difficult than the next. But, the thing that they all had in common was that they were willing, even eager, to experience persecution for the sake of the Name of the Christ which they bore in their preaching, teaching, and lives.

We, too, may be called upon to be martyred for the faith. We might be driven from our careers because we won’t do something that is directly opposed to the doctrines we are given in the Scriptures. Some suggest that the day may come when Christians can’t serve as physicians if we won’t consent to being willing to perform abortions on demand, or participate in gender-change surgeries. Those within the church may be barred from many of the professions that require government licensure for similar

reasons. We should expect that such things will come, because the world, and the prince of this world, the devil, oppose the Word of God vehemently. We are told that before the Last Day comes, things will appear impossibly difficult; we may be tempted to disobey the Word of God in order to save our own skin.

Of course, we are told that we must be careful that we are being put in a position to obey God rather than men. Sometimes when we're in the midst of trial and trouble, we can exaggerate the importance of what's happening to us, and see the situation in front of us as a direct assault upon Christ and His Word when it is not. But, we are told that the Holy Spirit will give us counsel and guidance and the knowledge to know when we're clearly being called upon to witness to the faith, and when we should demur for the sake of spreading the Gospel.

Thanks be to God for warning us about what's coming, giving us the strength of faith to be equal to the task at hand, and for being with us to lead us and guide us all our lives through. Even though persecution will come, the Holy Spirit will provide us with the words and the savvy to find a way to proclaim the truth in these difficult situations. We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where God will finish His already-accomplished victory over the evil one, and bring us to Himself in heaven. Until that day, we trust that He will not give us more than He gives us the strength to handle. He will enable us to rejoice amidst persecution, see His truth in the time of trial, and continue to spread His Word to our friends, our family, our neighbors, even though the world around us wants us to do anything but. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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