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How Easter People Are to Live in a Good Friday World: Rejoicing, Humbly, and Vigilant

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TEXT: 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 (ESV)

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. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

In 1927, the famous English poet and essayist T.S. Eliot became a Christian and was baptized and confirmed. Now, prior to his conversion, he belonged to London's Bloomsbury Group, which was a small, informal association of artists and intellectuals who lived and worked in the Bloomsbury area of Central London. But when Eliot's conversion hit the news, the Bloomsbury group responded with shock and even disgust towards him. The writer Virginia Woolf, who was the de facto leader of the group, penned the following letter to one of her peers.

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become a believer in God and immortality, and he goes to church. I was shocked. A corpse would seem

more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.

And this scenario has been a common thing that has occurred all around the world throughout Christian history. And it can be very hurtful, even though it's a mild form of persecution in comparison to other parts of the world where we know it's far worse, it still hurts. It's painful. Persecution is an ugly reality in our sinful world. What people don't understand, they often attack, and what they cannot embrace, they sometimes endeavor to destroy. Instead of engaging in careful evaluation of ideas, they attempt to intimidate by threats and violence and belittling. Christians have historically borne more than their share of persecution, although they have at times been persecutors themselves. Evangelical theologian J.I. Packer once wrote in a *Christianity Today* article a few years ago, "It needs to be said loud and clear In the Kingdom of God, there ain't no comfort zone and never will be."

So how is the Christian church, God's Easter people, to live and serve Jesus faithfully in a Good Friday world? How can they prepare for difficulties ahead before they come so they can react properly? Well, Peter offers believers in Christ three valuable pieces of instruction to work with. First, he says in our passage, instead of being surprised and defeated by suffering for the sake of the Gospel, rejoice, rejoice. He says, "This way, beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." He's saying here, here's the reality: you do live in a Good Friday world filled with people who don't understand the living hope you have in Christ, and they sometimes will lash out. Darkness does not appreciate the light. So, a fiery trial will come.

Notice, Peter says when it comes, not if it comes, when it comes. It shouldn't surprise you. And if you stand firm for Jesus and the Gospel and strive to live out the great commandment and fulfill the Great Commission, trouble is going to find you. After all, remember you followed Jesus who said if any person would come after me, let her pick up her cross and follow me. And he also told the disciples in the upper room the night before he was crucified that say if they persecuted me, they will persecute you. So we don't need to go looking for trouble. Trouble will come looking for us, Peter tells us. And when it does, we need to know how to look at it. To not be surprised as though we were expecting to be treated justly, to have things go smoothly. For Christians are not

exempt from suffering and trouble. But rejoice, Peter says, in taking a hit or suffering a blow for your faith and your service to Christ.

Now a person might wonder, rejoice. Why in the world would I rejoice in that? We rejoice because Peter says it's a privilege to share in Christ's sufferings. It's an honor to be identified as belonging to him. Consider it an affirmation of your faithfulness to Jesus who suffered and died and rose again for you. This kind of suffering also affirms the person of Jesus. When it happens to us, his word is true. He really did know what he was talking about when he talked of the future and said his followers would suffer and be persecuted for him just like him. How could he know that if he were not the son of God? And so, this also means then that sufferers for the Christian faith know the big picture that in the end, when Christ's glory is revealed, as he promised, their suffering will end and they will share in his glory. Sharing in his cross, you will share in his crown.

There's a Norwegian hymn based on Revelation 7 that offers a beautiful, heavenly vision of the future. It goes like this.

Who is this host arrayed in white, like thousand snow clad mountains bright,
that stands with palms and sings its psalms, before the throne of light? These are
the saints who kept God's word. They are the honored of the Lord. He is their
prince who drowned their sins. So, they are cleansed, restored. And they now
serve God both day and night. They sing their songs and endless light. Their
anthems ring when they all sing, with angels shining bright. On earth, their work
was not thought wise, but see them now in Heaven's eyes. Before God's throne of
precious stone they shout their victory cries. On earth they wept through bitter
years. Now God has wiped away their tears. Transformed their strife to heavenly
life, and freed them from their fears. For now, they have the best at last. They
keep their sweet, eternal feast at God's right hand. Our God commands. He is
both host and guest.

And keep this in mind. Peter goes on to say, if you're insulted for the name of Jesus because you're a Christ follower, you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. You're not alone in this. You have a helper – like Jesus, the spirit of the Lord rests upon you. And as you stand firm, glorifying God, not being ashamed of the Gospel before others, that Holy Spirit is working in your life, giving you the strength

and power necessary to live effectively for God's purposes and to even persevere in a Good Friday world that doesn't understand or want the gospel.

Now, where do you suppose Peter got this notion of the blessedness of suffering for Christ that he's passing along to his readers in this passage? Well, we know Peter speaks from firsthand experience, don't we? I mean, look at the Book of Acts. There, you'll read Peter's Pentecost and post-Pentecost exploits with the Holy Spirit working in him and through him during times of suffering. Peter also had these words of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in mind when he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in Heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Rejoice when trouble comes your way for the sake of the Gospel.

The second bit of instruction from Peter is found in chapter 5:6-7. He says, "Humble yourselves, therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you. Casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you." Notice: under his hand. Not over. Not with. But humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God. Now, to humble oneself is to admit that God is God. And I'm not. I'm simply a sinner in need of God's grace. I'm not as independent or as smart as I'm prone to think I am. The truth is, I'm dependent upon God to help and sustain me. I trust that he knows what I need. To humble oneself under God's mighty hand is to entrust your life to his care and to obey Him, believing that he is faithful and mighty and worthy of one's trust in obedience in all things. And again, Peter had to have got this, gotten this truth from Jesus, who said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," which means the humble, "for theirs is the kingdom." Again, Peter learned the truth of this statement not only in his three years of following Jesus, but in the years that followed after He received the Holy Spirit. He experienced Kingdom power in his life as He turned his days over to God's care and the Spirit's leading.

And He testifies to the positive result of humbling oneself under the mighty hand of God. He says, so that at the proper time he may exalt you. To exalt means to lift up, to revive. The proper time is God's time in the here and now, and ultimately at the end of time. I'm reminded of what the apostle Peter wrote about Jesus to some Christians in Greece.

Have this in mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was born in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in Heaven and on Earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God, the Father.

So, believers who follow this humble Jesus share in his exaltation.

In the end, he says, humbling yourselves under the mighty hand of God, involves then casting all your cares upon God because he cares for you. Peter's talking about the importance of prayer here, isn't he? "Oh, what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." And we know he cares for us because he's shown us his care at the cross. So, we can trust him with everything and lay every anxiety that we may have at his feet in our prayer time. Rejoice. Humble yourself.

And finally, in the final piece of instruction, Peter teaches Easter people to be vigilant and watchful for their ultimate enemy. As Christians, you and I live in a war zone. Something is at work behind all of this suffering you might be experiencing or someday. Well actually not something, but someone. Peter points out that your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. He's talking about the reality of the devil. See, as someone once wrote, I don't know if it was C.S Lewis or not, every square inch of the cosmos is claimed by God and counterclaimed by the devil. Jesus took this whole concept of the devil seriously as he opposed him. So why wouldn't we, as his followers, do the same?

C.S Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, teaches about the devil and his cohorts. There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils, he says. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. The devil is equally pleased by both errors and hails a materialist or a magician with the same delight. So, he's not to be ignored or taken lightly for his intent, Peter says, is to devour you. What a picture: to gulp you up with one big bite like a lion; to make you his own captive to his darkness and like a lion,

he prowls around. And his tool, his temptation. Sometimes he uses suffering circumstances to tempt you to question and doubt God's love and power in your life in hopes of devouring your soul and making you his own. That is what is happening to the folks Peter's writing to they're suffering. But sometimes Satan will use pleasurable seductions as well to get you to live for yourself and be comfortable and useless. Just living for self, doing life his way instead of God's way. He seductively says All of this is for you. You deserve this. It's harmless, come and follow. And he soothingly lulls people to rest in doing life his way. He's a deadly liar. For there is no life there. It's true that he's been defeated at the cross and grave by Jesus, but he is still present and prowling around until the end. And dangerous.

So, resist him. Peter says. Don't give in. Be firm in your faith. You cling to the gospel, to the fact that God has loved you through His son, Jesus Christ, and that you belong to Him. Peter had to have this memory in mind when Jesus warned him in the Garden of Gethsemane to watch and pray so that you do not enter into temptation, for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And he talked about how Satan would sift Peter. And Peter learned the hard way that there is a spiritual battle, a devil at work who wants to devour believers in Christ and resist God's gracious will be done in this world. So, Easter people had their eyes wide open and are on guard. They're vigilant, watching and praying for God's help to overcome from Satan's wiles. And Peter also reminds believers that this kind of suffering and spiritual attack isn't unusual. It happens to every faithful believer in Christ throughout the world. It's not God's punishment or his turning his back on you, as sometimes people are tempted to believe. Rejoice, be humble under God, be vigilant.

And then Peter finishes his teaching with this promise to Easter people about the glorious future with God. He says, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all Grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him, be dominion forever and ever. Amen." God will be faithful to take care of you. And in the end he will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. And not only in the end, but even sometimes you'll experience that now.

So, there we have it. When suffering for your faith comes your way, rejoice, humble yourselves. Watch, pray, and resist. And. And that's how Easter people live as faithful

servants of Christ in a Good Friday world: looking forward to the day when he calls us to himself.

Since today is our final lesson from Peter about how believers are to live in a Good Friday world. I thought it would be appropriate to end this sermon series with a covenant Prayer, which was written by John Wesley, that great pastor of the past for Easter people to use as their own. Pray with me. Lord, I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will. Rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing. Put me to suffering. Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you. Let me be full. Let me be empty. Let me have all things. Let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, o glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine. And I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on Earth. Let it be ratified in Heaven. Amen.