

1 Peter 4:1–6

Introduction

In the verses immediately preceding this passage, Peter instructs us as to what the Lordship of Christ really means, and what the key is to truly, in our hearts, sanctifying Christ as Lord (1 Pet. 3:13-16). In short, we must be diligently believing and apprehending by faith the infinite saving value of His suffering and death (“in the flesh”), and so also the infinite saving power of His resurrection life (his “life in the Spirit”) that He now lives. In our text this morning, Peter turns to exhort us in the light of these realities and in light of the Lordship of Christ.

I. 1 Peter 4:1a — Since therefore **Christ suffered in the flesh...**

With these words, we see Peter reaching back to what he said previously in chapter three:

- 1 Peter 3:18 — **Christ also suffered** once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God, **being put to death in the flesh...**

Now he picks up again, five verses later: “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh...” And yet in between—in the last four verses, all of Peter’s emphasis has been not on Christ’s existence in the flesh (in the realm of weakness, and frailty, and mortality, and death), but rather on His new life and existence that He has now in the Spirit (in the realm of immortality, and power, and glory). The more we grasp this life lived wholly in the realm of the supernatural and all-powerful Spirit of God, the more it will be a mystery to us that this Christ should ever have truly and really existed “in the flesh” – that He could ever have really suffered and endured actual death. It’s a good thing for us to embrace this as a mystery and to rejoice in this as a mystery. We may think this is an easy concept. But if Christ’s former life in the flesh isn’t a mystery to us, then have we truly understood the power and glory of the life that Christ now lives “in the Spirit” (not to mention His eternal, preincarnate glory)? Think of John’s vision of Christ in Revelation chapter one:

- Revelation 1:12–17a — Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Is it not a mystery to us, then, and even an offense to our human way of thinking, to hear what this “one like a son of man” says to John who lay at His feet like a dead man?

- Revelation 1:17b–18 — But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, **I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.**

How could this “living one” have ever died? Well, He had to have existed once Himself in an entirely different realm—in the realm of the flesh. We all at least have room in our thinking for a “theology of glory.” But once we’ve grasped this theology of glory, will there still be room in our thinking for the suffering and the death that’s the prerequisite to that glory? Do we embrace the mystery that this Christ who lives now wholly in the realm of immortality and power and glory, and is in heaven at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him (3:22)—that this Christ really and truly existed “in the flesh”—that this Christ even suffered and was even put to death “in the flesh”? It’s this mystery that Peter emphasizes now as he reaches back to verse 18, past all the theology of Christ’s resurrection glory, and picks up again with the theme of Christ “in the flesh.” Why does Peter want to do this? The answer is simple. Because all of us, here, are still living in the flesh—in the realm of weakness, and frailty, and mortality, and death. So, Peter writes:

II. 1 Peter 4:1b — Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same resolve...

The resolve that Christ had wasn’t simply to suffer, as though His goal was to go out and find suffering; but it *was* a resolve to always choose suffering rather than compromise. It was a resolve to choose mistreatment and persecution even to the point of death rather than to sin and reject His calling and His relationship with His Father (cf. Jobes). Sometimes we might forget that it was Christ’s true and real existence “in the flesh”—just like us—that required this “resolve” even for Him. On the one hand, our Lord didn’t have a sin nature like we do. On the other hand, our Lord did live in the realm of the flesh, with all its weaknesses, and limitations, and frailties. And so we know that the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness (and throughout His life) were real (Mat. 4:1-11). They were temptations to compromise and to sin in order to avoid suffering and the cross. Therefore, every time Christ refused the devil’s temptation He was choosing suffering rather than compromise. He was choosing persecution even to the point of death rather than to sin. Christ’s entire life was characterized by this choice and by this resolve so that He could say to His disciples in Luke twelve:

- Luke 12:50 — I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

And then, at the end of Jesus’ life “in the flesh,” we hear Him praying in the garden:

- Luke 22:42–44 — “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Christ wasn’t “auto-programmed” for suffering. How could we say that when we know that He lived and existed “in the flesh,” just like we do? And so the Bible says that it was through Jesus’ sufferings that He “learned obedience.”

- Hebrews 5:7-8 — **In the days of his flesh**, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, **he learned obedience through what he suffered**.

Jesus was never disobedient, but it was necessary for Him to grow in His resolve and in his obedience to the Father through each test and through each temptation and throughout the entire course of His life until the final “crisis” of the cross. And so Paul says in Philippians 2:8 that:

- Philippians 2:8 — ...he humbled himself by *becoming obedient to the point of death*, even death on a cross.

We see how our salvation depends on the real obedience of Christ – on His conscious, daily resolve to choose suffering rather than sin. Maybe now we can understand Peter’s application to us:

III. 1 Peter 4:1c-2 — Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same resolve, **for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God**.

What Peter is emphasizing is the fact that all of us here are still living every day in the realm of the flesh—in an existence characterized only by weakness, and frailty, and mortality, and death. And it’s this fact that makes it necessary for us to arm ourselves with the same resolve that Christ had when He Himself was also living in the flesh, just like us. We remember that just because Jesus wasn’t prone to sin like we are doesn’t mean that the temptations He endured were less real than ours. He was no more immune to the pain of suffering than we are. And so once again, we have in the sufferings of Christ in the flesh a model and a wonderful encouragement for us. We’re not called to go out looking for suffering (cf. 1 Pet. 3:13-17), but we are called to have the resolve—or mindset—that we will always choose suffering rather than compromise – that we will always choose suffering, even if it should be to the point of death, rather than sin. Peter says that the one who has (already) suffered in the flesh has finished with sin. In other words, the person who’s already suffered for righteousness’ sake has clearly demonstrated the genuineness of his resolve to choose that suffering rather than sin. But we can say, too, that the one who hasn’t yet suffered, but who has still armed himself with Christ’s resolve—this person, too, has finished with sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. What does the true willingness to suffer (denying the flesh) have to do with the pursuit of human passions? What does the pursuit of human lusts and desires have to do with the resolve to choose pain and suffering, if necessary, in the pursuit of God’s will? Therefore, the person who has armed himself with this resolve must be the one who is living a life wholly weaned from human lusts and passions, and a life wholly set apart to the will of God.

This isn’t to say that we can attain sinless perfection in this life. But neither is this a special, super-spiritual, elite class of Christians. Peter’s simply describing again the holy life that we’re all called to live—a life characterized by the resolve that Christ displayed all throughout his life in the flesh—the resolve that led Him in the end to the cross. It’s a life lived no longer for human passions, but truly and only for the will of God—which is the life we see so beautifully and so perfectly embodied for us in the one who said:

- John 4:34; 5:30 (cf. 6:38) — My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work... I can do nothing on my own... I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me...

And then we remember again what Jesus prayed in the garden:

- Luke 22:42 — Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, *not* my will, but *yours*, be done.

There are many who can have no attraction at all to a life like this. But for all of us who've been born again, there is an attraction to this life of holiness, even though it requires the resolve to suffer rather than to sin. And the attraction for us, now, is the fact that this is the life our Savior lived—the one into whose image and likeness we are being transformed. But if there's always a growing attraction for us to this life that Jesus lived, how can there not also be a growing revulsion to the life that chooses human passions rather than the will of God? Peter goes on to write:

IV. 1 Peter 4:3 — For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

Peter is writing from the perspective of the Christian. He talks about the “Gentiles,” which assumes that he and his readers—and all of us—are not Gentiles, but rather God’s holy covenant people. And so it’s from that vantage point – it’s from this perspective of God’s holy, covenant people – that Peter’s describing what “the Gentiles” want to do. The Gentiles wouldn’t have described themselves as “Gentiles,” and neither would they have wanted to say that they were “living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry”—at least not all of them. That last phrase (“lawless idolatry”) is a phrase the Gentiles would hardly have known the meaning of because “idolatry” wasn’t even a word they used. But for Peter, those who aren’t true worshipers of the only true God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ are all, by definition, idolaters and therefore they’re all, at some level, living in lawless idolatry. And always associated with this idolatry—with this worship of the creature—is the pursuit of human passions (lit., “the lusts of men”) rather than the will of God. So what Peter’s doing here is just describing these human passions that are common to all Gentiles (and that were common to all of us before Christ) in their grossest, basest, and most flagrant forms. We can’t read this verse and think that just so long as we avoid these excesses of idolatry, or these extremes of human passions, then we must be living for the will of God. Instead, Peter’s point is just to paint the starkest possible contrast between the life that we now live wholly for the will of God and the life that we used to live wholly for human passions. (See Achtemeier, p.p. 282-285; footnotes 113 & 122) Paul paints the same picture for us in 2 Corinthians chapter 6:

- 2 Corinthians 6:14–16 — What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

We all need to share in these “either/or,” “black and white” perspectives. There’s a sense in which we all need to learn to see things not in “grays” but in “absolutes.” We need to have a real

sense of the vastness of the gulf between living for the lusts of men (as all the Gentiles do) and living truly for the will of God. In this way, our unaffected revulsion to the one (the life lived for human passions), and our genuine attraction to the other (the life lived for the will of God) will be stronger and deeper, and so we'll truly be fortified in our "resolve" to always choose suffering rather than sin.

Can we agree wholeheartedly with Peter when he says to us—"The time that is past suffices [is more than enough!] for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry." When we hear what the Gentiles want to do described in terms like these, are we even more powerfully drawn and attracted to that life that's lived wholly for the will of God, after the pattern of Christ our Savior? But now Peter goes on to explain further why this deep attraction and this strong resolve is so necessary.

V. 1 Peter 4:4— With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you...

Notice how Peter continues to use this extreme, "excessive" language. His underlying assumption is this: How can lives that are lived for the will of God not stand out in contrast to the Gentiles with their idolatry and their pursuit of human passions? Certainly, for the Christians in Asia Minor, it was impossible not to. In the world of Asia Minor, customs and practices associated with idolatry were part of almost every aspect of living — in the home and family, in the workplace, in government, and even in the recreational and social parts of life. And so the result of all this was that it forced Christians to withdraw from many of the normal, expected, everyday activities of life (not just those cultural activities that involved actual immorality and drunkenness). But what happens when Christians withdraw like this—when they live their lives no longer for human passions but wholly and truly for the will of God? How are they going to be perceived? They'll be seen as aloof, and strange, and maybe even secretive and suspicious—in the words of one writer in Peter's day, as even "haters of humanity" (Tacitus; quoted in Schreiner; cf. Achtemeier; Davids).

We might not be living in the culture of ancient Asia Minor, but are things really so different in our day? Just because we always do the things that even the world admits to be good doesn't mean we won't be perceived as strange, and even as extremists. So long as the world is surprised that we don't live like them—so long as the world finds it strange that we should be so "withdrawn" and set apart—there will always be the prospect of being mistreated for righteousness' sake – of being persecuted precisely because we're living the rest of our time in the flesh no longer for human passions but always and only for the will of God.

"With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery," Peter says, "and they malign you..." And now we see Peter's true concern – that somehow this specter of being maligned, and slandered—or even of just being perceived as social misfits—might cause us to question whether it's really worth it to choose this discomfort and pain rather than to sin. To be living still "in the flesh" means that we still grow weary, that we're weak and frail, that the temptations to sin are real. And for Peter, it's this simple reality that makes it necessary for us to arm ourselves with the same resolve that Christ had when He

Himself was also living in the flesh — just like us. It's to this end, that we might be strengthened to arm ourselves with this resolve, that Peter goes on to write in verse 5:

VI. 1 Peter 4:5 — ...but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

One of the most basic doctrines of Christianity is the reality of the final judgment where all who have ever lived will stand before God and give an account to Him. But this may also be one of the doctrines we most *neglect* in our thinking—to our hurt and detriment. If we believe in the reality of final judgment as God has revealed it to us in His word, then won't we be strengthened to arm ourselves with this "same resolve" that Christ had? The point here is not a spiteful or vengeful spirit. Peter's just reminding us that to live the rest of our time in the flesh for the will of God—to be fully resolved to choose suffering rather than sin—*will* prove to be worth it in the end. The truth of the matter, we know, is that all those who live for human passions, and who malign those who don't, will one day be called to account before the one who is "ready," even now, to judge the living and the dead.

Peter says "*ready*" because from his perspective, the judgment isn't far off. Because we're living already in the last days, Peter sees—and he wants us to see—that the end of all things is now "at hand" (cf. 4:7). It's no longer something remote, and far off, and shadowy, but something immanent, and real, and vivid that's already set before our eyes. And why is this? It's because God has now—in these last days—designated the Man through whom He will judge the world in righteousness, having furnished proof to all by raising Him from the dead (Acts 10:42; 17:31). This Man through whom God will judge the world is Jesus, who lives no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit, who is ruling at God's right hand, and who is, indeed, "ready" to return as judge of Judge of the living and the dead. Therefore, let us arm ourselves during the rest of our time in the flesh with the same resolve that Christ Himself had when He was in the flesh – just like us. If this is the "negative" side of Peter's comfort and encouragement, then verse six is the "positive" side.

VII. 1 Peter 4:6 — For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged **in the flesh** according to men, they might live **in the Spirit** according to God.

Does this language sound familiar to you now? In chapter three verse 18, Peter wrote:

➤ 1 Peter 3:18 — For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God, being **put to death in the flesh** but **made alive in the Spirit**.

Peter's focus so far this morning has been on the first half of this equation. His focus has been on Christ's suffering and our call to arm ourselves with the same resolve. But now we see a wonderful thing. What about all the Christians in Asia Minor who chose suffering rather than compromise and have already died? What about all the Christians throughout the last 2000 years who lived not for human passions but for the will of God, and have now already experienced the ultimate consequence of living in the flesh—who've already died, just the same as everyone dies? What about the world's conclusion that this means our lot is the same as everyone else's and therefore, "what did we gain from all our 'resolve' to choose suffering rather than sin?"

Peter answers: “This is why the gospel was preached even to those who are [now] dead, that **though judged in the flesh according to men, they might live in the Spirit according to God.**” Or, we could say, “that though judged in the flesh from a merely human perspective, they might live in the Spirit according to the final verdict and decision of God.” Human appearances, as compelling as they may seem to those who are still “in the flesh,” are not what is ultimate. And so Peter reminds us that there are *two* sides to the coming judgment. There’s condemnation, yes, but there’s also justification (vindication) and life. There’s condemnation for those who lived in lawless idolatry; but for us who are living the rest of our time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God, what will there be? God will cause us—even *us*—to share in the everlasting, resurrection power and glory of the life that Christ Himself is now living. We will not just be raised to life again; we will be raised with Christ to a life that’s no longer “in [the realm of] the flesh” at all, but to a life wholly and completely “in [the realm of] the Spirit. This isn’t to say that we won’t be raised bodily. Indeed, to be raised means nothing at all if it doesn’t mean that we’re raised bodily. But this is to say that we will be raised with Christ to an existence that’s no longer characterized by weakness, and frailty, and mortality, and death, but rather to an existence that’s characterized only and fully by the life-giving power of God. This is *why* the Gospel was preached not only to those who are now dead, but also to us—that even though we, too, may one day be judged in the flesh by all outward human appearances, we will, on the final day of judgment, be raised up to share in the resurrection power and glory of the life that Christ Himself now lives.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, “since... Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same resolve, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions [‘the lusts of men’] but for the will of God.”