More willing to suffer and serve than sin
1 Peter 4:1-11

Last week the previous section of this letter ended with a declaration of Christ's victory over sin and death: that He's gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with everything: angels and authorities and powers made subject to Him. And now Peter wants to apply Jesus' victory to how you and I live. Jesus is the supreme King, everything is under his feet, so this is what that's going to mean for you. And what subject does Peter immediately tackle? Suffering.

And you think: suffering? Again? Didn't we talk about that last week, and the week before? Yup, and guess what, Peter talks about it in the next passage as well. And you might think: I think I'm a bit suffering-ed out! Isn't this a bit gloomy? I mean, if Christ is triumphant shouldn't we talk about victory, and triumph? Well, Peter does, but he does so knowing, that difficulties and sufferings and trials are the real stuff of life – and you know that from experience. Think about it: maybe your parents drive you to succeed; or your teacher or supervisor treats you harshly; or you get a new boss at work, and things don't go well, and you feel the pressure. Or there are problems with family, or friends and people are getting hurt. How are you supposed to respond to stuff like that? What has Christ's death and resurrection and exaltation – his victory - got to say to those times when you feel defeated?

Well, that's what Peter does here. He takes Christ's suffering and victory and applies it to real life. And he does so in two ways, firstly, he says you've got to be more willing to suffer than to sin; and secondly, you've got to live with the end in sight.

More Willing to Suffer Than Sin
Look at v1: 'Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, *arm yourself* with the same way of thinking.' So what's the first thing Peter says we should do? Arm yourself with the same way of thinking as Christ. In other words, firstly, you've got to decide to **think like Jesus.**

You see, as you go through life, what you discover is that life is a succession of choices – of crossroads, of forks in the road. And you have to decide – you have to choose which way you're going to go. And that's not just true for big life decisions – but also those decisions that fundamentally shape your character, like: do you ridicule the person who ridicules you, or verbally attack the person who attacks you, or do you bless them? Do you speak up for Christ at school or the university or do you keep your head down? Do you do what's right, even if there's a price to pay for that, or do you compromise?

And Peter says: Arm yourself, make a decision ahead of time that you are going to think like Jesus. You see everyday, Jesus faced similar moral choices, and every day he chose the path of obedience to his Father, even if that meant suffering for it. So be resolved Peter says, make your decision, take your stand with Jesus, that you would rather do the right thing rather than sin, even if it comes at a cost.

And here's why you've got to decide ahead of time to think like that: because by default, particularly in today's culture, we tend to think that the goal of life is that I should be happy and my life should basically be trouble free, and that God

exists to make that happen. And if you think like that, then you'll tend to think that difficulties can't possibly be good, and God couldn't possibly want me to experience them. Well, Peter doesn't seem to see it like that. He says, come to Jesus and decide in your heart to pay the price for doing what's right.

And then he says, v1 again, 'For whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin'. Now, what do you think, is that true? Does suffering necessarily lead people to stop sinning? Let me give you a case study. Imagine a guy or girl, and he or she is at uni, or early on in their career – imagine someone like you. And things are just not working out. Things have been going from bad to worse at work or in their relationships, and then they have an especially bad day. How might they react to that? And… there's beer and wine in the fridge, and chocolate in the cupboard and they have unlimited internet access on phone and computer.

You see, the danger is that when life is hard, and things aren't working out the way you want, you can begin to think that that gives you the excuse to sin. I'm suffering so I get to please *myself* for a change. I've had a bad day, so I can look at porn, or get drunk, or binge on chocolate, or flirt with that person, or bad mouth that other person. And the hard truth is that when we suffer, when our worlds begin to disintegrate, it doesn't necessarily mean we cease from sinning, instead it can give us the excuse to sin even more.

So Peter's not saying that suffering has some universal redemptive properties. He's talking about an inner heart attitude. He's saying that when you decide to suffer for doing what's right, you're saying 'I'm done with sin. Obeying Jesus is what matters most to me. I would rather be mocked by my friends than deny Him. I would rather be sidelined at work, or forego promotion, than be involved in something lacking integrity. I would rather lose the argument than get my own back. Whatever the cost, I'm through with sin.'

Which all sounds great, and holy! Until you actually have to do it! So what can motivate you and give you the power to live like that? Well, Peter begins all this by saying, v1, 'Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh…' In other words, Jesus loved you so much that *he* suffered and died for your sins, to bring you to God, so let that love sink into your heart and change what you love most – him not yourself; his reputation, not yours, his will to be done, not your own. Verse 2, 'So as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.' You see, when you begin to understand Christ's love for you, then what you love most changes, and with it your decision making – because what was your duty becomes your delight.

Ok, but then look at verse 3: 'The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do'. So how would you summarise what Peter's telling us there? You've spent enough time in the past living like everyone else. Don't waste any more of your life like that. So, secondly, **Don't waste your life.**

Don't waste your life he says, on sensuality and passions and drunkenness and parties and orgies. And maybe at that point you think - 'phew! I don't do any of those'. But whether you do or not, he then gets everyone of us between the eyes,

v3 again, '… and lawless idolatry'. Can someone define idolatry for us? Idolatry is making anything other than God your god. It's making anything other than Jesus Christ the most important thing in your life. And those things don't even have to be bad things. It can be a good thing, like your grades, or career, or your physical fitness, or marriage, but it becomes a God-thing in your life – your happiness or security or sense of worth depend on this - and when that happens, it's a bad thing. And Peter says 'don't waste any more time living like that.'

But of course, if you do live differently than those around you that may raise eyebrows: Verse 4 'with respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them'. And that's especially if the way you behave changes and you stop doing the things you used to do. But Peter says that just because others bad-mouth you is no reason for wasting your life like they do. Because, v5, 'they will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.' It's as if the court-room is set up, and the judge of all the earth is sat at the bench, and He's ready to try the cases. And one day, all of us will stand before him.

So, Peter says, because Christ has suffered, be more willing to suffer than sin: think like He thinks and don't waste your life.

Live With the End in Sight

Now the truth is that there are multiple reasons why we make the decisions we make in our day-to-day lives. Like: I'm not going to do that because I might get caught. Or, I am going to do that because I love her. Or I won't do that because what will others think of men. Or, I will do that because think what others will think of me!

Well, in verse 7 Peter gives us another motivator for right living: 'The end of all things is at hand, therefore…'

So, Christ suffered, but now he reigns in glory and one day all of this is going to come to an end, and we are nearer that day today than ever before, therefore… let that affect how you live. And he's right, isn't he. What you believe will happen in the future fundamentally affects how you live today. If you know that tomorrow you're going on a skiing holiday, then you're going to get your clothes ready and pack your bags tonight. But much more profoundly, if you think the future holds nothing for you, you'll live accordingly. But… if you know that one day Christ will return and institute his never ending reign, it will give you the confidence to live rightly.

And Peter picks out four areas where knowing that will change how you live:

1. Prayer

Verse 7: 'the end of all things is at hand, therefore be self controlled and sober-minded *for the sake of your prayers*.' Now, Su used to work as a doctor in the accident and emergency department. And on a Saturday night there were broadly two types of drunks who would pitch up. There was the one who had drunk enough to be intoxicated and was in this excitable state and had fallen over and needed stitching up. But then there were the ones who were blind

drunk to the point of total inebriation; who were stupefied, and comatose. And the tragedy is you can see both types in the church, it's just not alcohol they're drunk on. You can have people who run off after the latest crazy thing to hit the Christian scene, and they're intoxicated by it. And there are others who are so intoxicated by the world, that they're just about numb to the things of God.

But Peter says, if we allow the truth of Christ's return to sink in, it will sober us up. But not so we are sober and dour and dull and joy-less – because there are Christians like that as well, sadly. And it's not being sober minded so you become a religious legalist, with more laws than the Swiss. It's about being sober-minded and clear headed in a way that will impact your prayer life for good. So you can see things and think about things the way God does, and then pray according to his will – the type of prayers Jesus says he will not fail to answer. So you can pray for the Holy Spirit to be active and at work in your life and those you love.

You see, knowing that the end of all things is at hand, doesn't result in fatalism – '*kai sera sera*, what will be will be, God will work it out, so there's no point in praying.' No Peter says it's the opposite. When you know that Christ reigns, and that all the power is his, it gives you the foundation from which you can pray with confidence, and expectancy, knowing that God wants to intervene in people's lives and has the power to do so.

But the second thing the end of all things will influence is how you treat others, and in particular those who hurt you.

2. Earnest Love

Verse 8, 'Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.' You see, who is Peter saying should be the object of our love? One another. Your brothers and sisters in the church. That obviously doesn't exclude those outside, but here his emphasis is on the church. And he says love one another *earnestly*. Be serious about this. Why?

Well, look what he writes. 'Since love covers a multitude of sins'. Now, I hate to break this to you, but the hard truth is that if you stay around Christians and churches long enough, you're going to get hurt. You make yourself vulnerable with people, you open your life up to people, and sooner or later someone will let you down, or betray you, or criticise you – because like you they are broken people. But in that moment you will feel like walking away and quitting, or getting your own back. But Peter says knowing that Jesus is reigning and is going to bring everything to an end and make everything new, respond with love, because love covers that sin.

And when Peter writes that, he's quoting Proverbs 10:12: 'Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.' And sadly you can have churches that are deeply divided by little niggling dissensions and criticisms and personal attacks. And often that can be because someone was sinned against, so they sin back. Or they don't like something that's happening and they make their personal taste an ultimate thing. Or they want to be in a position of power and control and they're

not getting it. And in each case they let hatred and anger fester and it's like a big stick, stirring up strife.

But both Proverbs, and Peter say that there is an alternative, and it's earnest love and it's like pouring oil on troubled waters. And I know from experience that that is hard to do. If it was easy or came naturally, Peter wouldn't need to motivate us to do it. But we each have a choice – do you keep stirring the strife, or do you cover with love and refuse to treat them the way they treat you?

In Galatians 5:13-15 Paul says: 'Through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.' You see, when you start to pick holes in others, it soon comes back to you. Your devouring others, ends up devouring you. I once read an illustration that has stuck with me since. Someone once said that unforgiveness is like drinking rat poison and hoping the rat will die. You hold this thing against someone, they've sinned against you, and you hold onto this bitterness, or you go to war against them, as if it will harm them, but the person it's killing is you. But when you choose to love and cover instead, your soul doesn't shrivel in bitterness, it grows.

But then the third thing the end of all things should motivate is …

3. Your hospitality

Verse 9: 'Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.' Now why does Peter link the end of all things with hospitality. Well, when you know that everything you have belongs to Jesus and that you will give an account to Him for how you use it, it becomes a motivator for using it to bless others. And do that without grumbling, knowing that you've been blessed to be a blessing. Now, you might think, well I've got nothing, how can I be hospitable. Well, there was once a master's student here and he was so blessed by the hospitality of a number of families in the church that he prayed something like, 'God when I have a house and money, I want to be hospitable like them.' And then he thought, well, is there nothing I can do now? And he had an idea. He bought a box of biscuits and invited people round to his office once a week for biscuit time – and that biscuit tin became a little hub of hospitality on campus that other students looked forward to all week! So all you need is the will to do something, and a biscuit tin.

Finally, the fourth thing Peter says knowing this is going to influence is your service.

4. Service

Verse 10: 'As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace…. In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ'.

Now Peter heard Jesus tell a parable, first hand, about some servants whose master gave them all so many talents, before he went away. And some of them used those talents and saw them multiplied, but one buried his talent in the ground. But all of them had to give an account to their master of how they had

used their gifts. And Peter's saying the same: 'look, everyone one of you has been given somekind of gift, or gifts, by God, and your Master's coming back, so don't bury it, *use* it - to serve others.' So… what's your gift? What's the area of service God has called you to or is calling you to? And are you using the gifts God has given you to serve *others*?

Because, you can use your gifts to serve yourself. To make yourself look good – even when it looks like you're serving others. But when you know the end of all things is at hand, it humbles you, because you know you're going to give an account even for your motives with which you've done things. And knowing that, you'll serve for God's glory, not your own.

Recently I received a resumé/CV from someone applying for Andy's job. And it was a little boastful. And I replied telling him we wouldn't be considering him further. To which he replied something like, 'I wish you would, because if you read my CV you would find it deeply impressive'! Which is not the way to impress me – or his Master. You see, none of us are impressive – we're *unworthy* servants, Jesus says, not *impressive* servants. He's the one who's impressive not us. You and I are sinners saved by grace and grace alone, in whose flesh there dwells no good thing, and our perpetual cry should be God have mercy on me a sinner. And unsurprisingly, God is not very interested in our reputation or our glory, but he is passionate about his own – because there is no one more glorious, or gracious than him. So however you serve – do so for his glory.

But how can you do that? Verse 11; 'whoever serves, as one who serves *by the strength that God supplies* – in order that in everything God may be glorified.' When you serve depending on God's strength, not your own skills, or track record, or impressive CV, then it's God who gets the glory. Not you.

So, Christ has suffered for you, and the end of all things is at hand, so decide that you will suffer and serve rather than sin and do it all for his glory.