

Disciplined Living

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of June 2002.

The preacher is Carol Elpherson. Her sermon is entitled Disciplined Living and is based on 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 1 to 11.

We thank you for your word. Pray that you will enable me to preach it clearly.

Pray that you will give each one of us hearts to hear and respond. In Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. The year was 1994.

4. The place Rwanda. A woman huddled into a worship service one Sunday morning on crutches. Her face and body were wrapped in bandages.

[1 : 07] Her neck was held in place by a plaster collar. At a point in the service, people were asked to come out and share their testimonies.

Slowly, Rosalie stood up and made her way forward. She spoke of being captured, together with her whole family, by the Hutu extremists.

Each member of her family had been killed. Rosalie was badly cut all over her body, including her neck and temple, and left on the edge of the road to die.

For three days, she lay there, bleeding and in great pain. She was thirsty and cold. The heavy rain poured down continuously.

Finally, Rosalie was found by some Tutsis and given first aid and taken to hospital. As she talked, Rosalie gave praise to the Lord for every detail of her rescue.

[2 : 24] Then she said something that made everyone there take an inward breath. Rosalie said that she knew all of the people who did this to her.

They were her immediate neighbours. She said she asked them to give her time to pray for them before beginning to torture her.

She said she continued to pray for them until she lost consciousness. She forgave them before, during and after their abuse to her.

She had no desire for revenge. No call for justice to be brought. Simply that the Lord will save them.

This is one of the many stories of people who suffered from the terrible genocide in Rwanda found in a book called Faith Under Fire. I just wanted to share that with you as we're today looking again at 1 Peter, the first letter of Peter, about suffering for the Christian faith.

[3 : 40] This morning we're continuing in our series. And as we begin to look at the fourth chapter, I'd like to recap a little on what's been gone before.

Firstly, the letter is addressed to people who are scattered throughout North West Asia Minor, an area of the dispersion. They were mostly Gentiles, and were suffering because of their conversion to faith in Christ.

Peter describes them in the opening verses of the letter as exiles. Peter writes to these exiles to encourage and instruct them in living their new way of life.

Peter paints a clear picture of who they are, their new identity.

Having accepted Christ, they are not a people who have been left alone as if they were in a small, unpowered vessel out at sea. No.

[5 : 02] Peter says, as believers, they are God's people, a people chosen and destined by God himself. They have a firm and living hope of new birth through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and have a wonderful inheritance kept for them, unfaded and undefiled, waiting for them.

Having this firm hope, they are called to live a life that is holy because God is holy.

Peter, throughout the letter, speaks to particular groups, slaves and married people, and using Christ as their model, advises them how to live. Then he widens his scope to include all of God's people, continuing to use Christ as the example.

He exhorts them to stand firm during times of suffering. This morning's passage begins, chapter 4, verse 1, with the words, Since therefore.

You may like to have it open. It's on page 985. Since therefore is a reference back to his argument in chapter 3, and verse 18, which we looked at last week.

[6 : 27] And then Peter went off on a bit of a transgression, a bit of a diversion from those verses 19 to 22. But now at the beginning of chapter 4, he returns to his main line of thought, suffering unjustly for doing good.

He says, Since Christ suffered too, they need to be prepared to do the same themselves. They are to arm themselves mentally, to be alert, on guard, ready for whatever may come.

Forewarned is forearmed, as my mother used to often give me advice and say. On the old New York police show, Hill Street Blues, I can remember the captain would always finish the day's assignments, and he's sending his troops out to police, the streets of New York, and he would say, Hey, be careful out there.

He was reminding them, to be prepared, to be alert. So Peter is telling the people to be ready to suffer with the same attitude of Christ, who, as we've seen in chapter 2, when he was abused, he did not return abuse.

When he suffered, he did not threaten. I can imagine that suffering helps to straighten out one's priorities in life.

[7 : 55] Sinful desires and practices that were once important would seem insignificant, when your life is at stake. I think this is what Peter's meaning when he says here, for whoever has suffered in the flesh is finished with sin.

Therefore, Peter is saying that since the example of Christ shows that one must go through suffering, whilst living in the flesh, at death that person will be finished with sin, and so, armed with this insight, they're called to live accordingly, that is, to live by the will of God, as we've seen in verse 2.

Have you noticed how people talk a lot about making lifestyle changes these days? It's usually in reference to career paths, housing, recreation.

They're often taking stock, pausing to think about where they are and where they're heading, and say in the next 5, 10, 20 years' time.

Well, here, Peter's calling for the ultimate, lifestyle change, a radical choice in how to live the rest of their earthly lives. He's calling them to stop living according to human desires, and to commit to living according to God's will.

[9 : 24] The German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, calls this single-minded obedience, at a time leading up to, and during the Second World War, when many Protestant churches in Germany, were supporting the National Socialists, or Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer and a minority refused to follow, and publicly declared their opposition.

At the time that the war broke out, Bonhoeffer was on speaking engagement in America, and he could have remained there, in safety. But, he felt his call was to be with his fellow countrymen, so he returned to Germany, and joined later the underground movement, working towards Hitler's defeat.

He was subsequently arrested, and imprisoned. Sadly, he was hanged, just days before the Americans liberated the prison. Though life in Flossenburg prison was brutal, his fellow prisoners recall Bonhoeffer's peaceful demeanour, sense of calm, kindness to all, and his simple faith in God.

In the worst of circumstances, Bonhoeffer chose to do God's will, and in doing so, found an inner contentment. Whilst in prison, he wrote a collection of poems, giving insight into the place and trust, and spiritual freedom, which he found, such that he had never experienced before.

Making a specific choice to do God's will is crucial, not only for those who are suffering, but for all God's people.

[11 : 22] And decision time must come time and time again, because the two ways to live cannot coexist. Believers can't live with one foot, in both camps, living sometimes God's way, sometimes the way of the world.

Decision making is part of the ongoing life of faith. We see this in Jesus' own life. He was faced with temptations in the desert, again at Gethsemane, and finally on the cross.

Each time he needed to reject the way of the world, and seek to live according to God's will. The drift away from living according to God's will, the drift back to living according to human desire, is often subtle, but sure.

In really hot weather, I enjoy nothing more than swimming in the surf at Anglesey. But there's often a slight undertow.

It's not easily detected. But slowly, over time, if I don't consciously look to my point of reference, usually one of the flags, I find that I'm getting off course, that the current has taken me over to one side, or further out than I'm really comfortable with being.

[12 : 48] And so I need to correct my course, get back to swimming between the flags, get back to the safety zone. The people Peter is writing to have already taken the initial step in faith.

Now they're suffering because of it. Peter is calling upon them in the midst of their suffering and hardship to reaffirm that decision, to take stock of their lifestyle in light of the decision for Christ and to make sure it's aligned.

Peter goes on to remind them in verse 3 they've already spent enough of their time living by human desires, the way of the Gentiles. We get the impression that they're still fairly recent converts because their former friends are still surprised that they no longer want to join them.

and so they slander them. Rejection and abuse hurts, especially when it comes from former friends and colleagues.

Peter goes on to list the vices that they're now abstaining from. Three have sexual overtones and two concern indulgence with alcohol.

[14 : 09] The final one, idolatry, may be the context in which all the others take place. Sexual prostitution and excessive drinking were a feature not only of pagan temple worship but also of civic festivals, community celebrations and social activities.

And this was not a problem to these believers uniquely. There are many documents of the early church that have said the similar thing.

That they're often, Christians were often accused of anti-social behaviour and of being politically disloyal because they stayed away from social situations where immoral or idolatrous behaviour might occur.

Alienation is painful. But now, Peter shines a light into their distress. Just as a cameraman shifts his focus from, say, a close-up shot of a single person where the impression is that that person is all alone and then scans it out so that you see that that person is not alone, in fact, but is perhaps one of a crowd of a thousand.

So, too, Peter is giving us the bigger picture. In verse 5, he points out that for pagans who are judging and blaspheming the Christians at the moment, a time is coming when the tables will be turned.

[15 : 37] At the moment, the spotlight is on them. But there's a time to come when things will be different. By broadening the lens, Peter is pointing out to the proper perspective that God is the righteous judge and therefore Christians are to stand firm.

They are to resist the temptation to fall back into their old lifestyle, resist the temptation to replace worshipping God for an idol, resist the temptation to backslide, fall in with their old crowd to take the pathway of the least resistance and conform to peer pressure.

Instead, they are to trust in God. At the moment, the pagans are judging and misjudging them for their faith.

But in time to come, the pagans will be judged by someone far more powerful. Then they will be judged by someone who judges the living and the dead. And in this judgment, there's an echo here back to chapter 3, verse 15, where Christians are told to always be ready to make a defense for anyone who demands it.

Now, Peter reminds them a time is coming when the shoe will be on the other foot. The pagans will need to give an account before God who stands even now ready to judge.

[17 : 07] This is the thrust of the whole letter to lift their thoughts to God's perspective, to look to the time to come, to look to the eschatological framework, as they say in theology, to fix their eyes on the here and now and to see God's grand design.

Not to fix their eyes on the here and now, I mean, but to look at God's great grand design. In verses 6, it's not easy to know exactly what Peter means about the proclamation of the gospel to the dead.

It would be inconsistent, I think, with scripture to understand it as Christ being proclaimed to the dead once someone's already dead. Some have thought that perhaps it's a reference back to the proclamation to the spirits in prison back in chapter 3, but the words are a bit different.

Some commentators understand these words mean that the gospel was proclaimed to those who died before Christ's coming, that is, to wherever it's understood as the place of the dead. But I think it's best to understand as Christ was the subject of the gospel that was preached whilst the people were still living and though now dead, they will be judged according to their acceptance or rejection of Christ when alive.

Therefore, verse 6 makes two important points. The first emphasises the universality of judgment. God judges all, believers and unbelievers, both the living and the dead.

[18 : 50] And secondly, this verse gives hope to the Christians who may be being mopped by pagans, who see the death of believers as proof that their claims of having eternal life a fault.

But Peter is reminding his readers that in fact God will vindicate believers by bringing them to salvation. At last, the hope is that they too will be heirs of life in the spirit.

In view of the certainty of final judgment, Peter says the end of all things are near in verse 7. we don't know when Christ will return.

It will be at any time. It could be very soon. Nor do we know when our own time here in this earthly body will be up.

death is just last week my daughter Catherine attended the funeral of a friend from university, 21-year-old girl who had her whole life ahead of her but was killed tragically in a road accident.

[19 : 57] Sometimes death comes slowly expectantly. Other times it comes tragically quickly.

So we're to live our lives as though the end were close at hand as Peter says because the reality is that it could well be. In preparation for this Peter calls us to be serious to be sober-minded have clear thinking about faith issues not to be fuzzy-headed or muddled in our thinking.

He's calling the people here for that. He's calling for mental alertness that looks at things in the light of the coming time and this attitude will lead to prayer a disciplined prayer that calls upon and submits to God as the sovereign ruler of the whole universe no matter what evil is around us at the time.

Jesus advised his disciples to watch and pray. Prayer is seeking a clearer vision of God a clear communication with him.

just as Christians are called to fellowship with God in prayer they're also called to a proper relationship with each other in verse 8.

[21 : 28] Peter emphasizes that by saying above all the priority is for love in these relationships. The emphasis on love in Christian relationships is found throughout the New Testament.

unity of believers and care for each other is central to our faith. Peter quotes the saying that was probably in popular use in his day to highlight the need for this love.

He says for love covers a multitude of sins. It's a generalization of Proverbs 10 and it's also quoted in James. It doesn't mean that sins are excluded by love.

After all Peter's just been speaking about judgment for sin but love is a sign and fruit that the believers have moved from the old sphere where sin held rein to the new sphere of life which is ruled by faith and love.

In a community that needed to preserve its sense of solidarity with each other under the face of persecution love that will forgive and overlook the faults of others was vital.

[22 : 44] Offering hospitality is a practical way of showing this love. It was an important aspect of the early church and was one of the requirements listed of bishops in 1 Timothy 3 and it's also necessary for those who wish to be given help as widows.

Extending hospitality is listed in the final judgment in the separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew. hospitality was very important for travelling Christians in those days because the church was encouraged and communication was spread by travelling preachers and teachers and apostles.

It was also important to offer hospitality to those Christians who were fleeing persecution. at the time most Christians had limited means and so it was a costly service of love and was to be done ungrudgingly.

and then verse 10 Peter moves on to spiritual gifts. What's your understanding of spiritual giftedness?

I don't know I don't know if you've thought a lot about it. It may be something you may like to bring up in some of these spiritual checkups that we're having throughout the year.

[24 : 04] In verse 10 Peter gives us his understanding of gifts and responsibilities in the church. He says that we're to be good stewards of the various gifts of God's grace to serve one another with whatever gift each of us have been given.

All Christians have been given gifts. How they are used is a matter of stewardship. Good stewards use their gifts for the benefit of others and in using their gifts this giftedness grows.

Gifting is not their false display or self glorification not by any means and nor is it to bring honour to oneself but it's for the service of others in the church.

The apostle Paul sees gifting in a similar way. He says in Ephesians that the gifting are for building up the body of Christ. As Jesus taught in Luke each person is responsible to see that their own gift gifting is used and is growing.

Gifts vary from one person to another but they all come from God's manifold or various gifts, grace. In verse 11 Peter gives two examples of these gifts speaking and serving.

[25 : 30] They can only be done through God's grace. And when God's word is spoken there is a call to present scripture faithfully, truthfully and clearly and needs a thorough and proper preparation as well as a call to hear and to respond.

In service we do so in the strength that God supplies through his grace. finally, since all things come from God so that he may be glorified, Peter ends this passage with praise to God.

To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. Amen.