

Good Grief

In the name of him who accomplished all that the Father sent him to do, and who now reigns over all at the Father's right hand, dear friends in Christ: I expect that most of us readily recognize the phrase "Good grief" as comic strip character Charlie Brown's go to exclamation to express frustration – which he experiences a lot since he's the boy who can never do anything right. And that's what makes his character amusing. We find humor in his never-failing ability to fail. So the phrase "Good grief" actually fits. His grief is good for us. It's what the Germans call "Schadenfreude": that joy we take in the misfortune of others – usually sinfully, I might add. It's not such a big deal when it's Charlie Brown, because he's not real. It is a moral problem when grief comes to real people and we think it's good.

By itself, though, "Good grief" is an oxymoron: two words that don't belong together. *Grief* is a word that means sorrow, pain, misery, that sort of thing. Grief is what we hope to avoid. There's nothing good about it – not usually anyway. But in today's Epistle lesson, the Apostle Peter tells us about a kind of grief that is indeed good. And if and when it comes to us, instead of becoming depressed or loudly bemoaning our unhappy circumstances, we should find it cause to rejoice and be glad.

He's referring to the grief we experience on account of our faith in Jesus Christ. This grief is a natural consequence of trusting in Jesus and trying to live as a faithful member of his kingdom. Why? Because if you are a Christian and trying to live like one, then you are the enemy of the devil, the world at large, and yes, even your own sinful nature. And these three enemies will do everything in their power to destroy you, to cause you to suffer, to bring you pain and misery—anything that might get you to doubt or to give up your faith in Jesus, or get you to compromise the higher moral principles to which you have been called as a Christian.

This is why Peter says, "Don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." There's nothing strange about it. You should count on it. Look what happened to Jesus. He never lied, never hurt anyone, never failed to act in love for the good of others; he went about teaching the truth of God and healing people. And yet he was opposed, hated, slandered, falsely accused, condemned, and ultimately executed—and not by criminals or what we would consider the worst elements of society, but by those who were generally regarded as good and godly people. And Jesus told his disciples, "The servant is not above the master. If the world hates me, it will hate you too."

This is a truth that so many in the Church have forgotten. In my reading and in listening to Christian radio, I hear all kinds of teaching about how God wants to bless and enrich the faithful, and help them to achieve their goals and dreams, whatever they may be. The pitch is "Become a Christian and everything will come up roses for you all the time. You'll be richer, healthier, happier, and more successful than ever been before. So, c'mon: give Jesus a try and see if it doesn't work for you." It sounds good, but there's nothing biblical about it. And those who fall for it will be sadly disappointed.

The call of Christ is to take up your cross and follow him. And a big part of that cross is the opposition of the enemy. Faithfulness to Jesus and to his Gospel will bring grief upon you. But it's good grief, because Jesus also said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and

persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

This is the sentiment that Peter is echoing. When you find yourself in the midst of a fiery trial, he says, “Rejoice insofar as you share in Christ’s sufferings.” And that “insofar” means “to the same degree”. That is, the more intense your suffering the more you should rejoice. It was something Peter knew about personally. And it was a hard lesson to learn. Recall that at the trial of Jesus, Peter feared what he might have to suffer, so he denied even knowing Jesus. But later, after Christ’s resurrection and ascension, Peter was arrested and severely beaten for preaching about Jesus. Afterward we’re told that he and the other apostles who endured the same punishment, “Rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name [of Jesus].”

Peter is telling us to adopt the same attitude. Suffering for the faith is good grief, and we should receive it as such. There are several reasons for this. One is that it is a means by which faith in Christ is tested, proved, and strengthened. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus talked about the seed that fell on stony ground. It sprang up rapidly; but shriveled in the sun and died. He said these are those who hear the Gospel and receive it gladly; but who fall away when persecution comes. It’s a surface level, fair weather sort of faith. It’s not the real thing. So, how do you know what kind of faith you have? Is yours genuine? Or is it like Peter’s at the trial of Jesus which failed when put to the test? Your willingness to confess Christ in the face of persecution or when there’s a cost for doing so proves that it’s the real deal. It means that the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. And thanks be to God for confirming it.

Another reason for rejoicing in suffering for being a Christian is that it makes us more fruitful for God’s kingdom. When speaking of himself as the vine and we the branches, Jesus said, “the unfruitful branches the vinedresser cuts off and throws away; but the branches that are fruitful he prunes so that they produce even more.” This pruning is painful. But the hardship makes us more disciplined. It drives us deeper into the Scriptures by which faith is built up and matured. And stronger more mature faith produces more and greater acts of service and love. And that’s something to be glad about.

A third reason for rejoicing in suffering as a Christian is because of the powerful witness it makes to unbelievers. Paul writes about how we are to love our enemies and do good to those who are persecuting us. When we forgive them for the evil they do to us, when we help those who have hurt us, when we return kindness for their malice, he says we heap burning coals upon their heads. He means that it burns their consciences. They feel the guilt of their sin. And that in turn may lead to repentance and to the question, “How can you be this way? What is it in you that makes you behave like this?” The answer, of course, is the love and forgiveness of Christ. And what an opening to share the reason for the hope that lies within you.

Yet another reason for rejoicing in suffering for the name of Jesus is what it means for your future when Christ appears in his glory. Jesus was serious about the great rewards that will be bestowed on those who endured the fiery trials of persecution. And Peter indicates that the rejoicing we do now when suffering for the faith will blossom into the fullness of joy in eternity. So yes, for all these reasons, we ought to rejoice in the good grief God permits to come upon us.

But Peter continues, “Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or and evildoer or as a meddler”. He doesn’t want there to be any confusion here. There’s a difference between suffering for the faith and suffering on account of sin. Don’t imagine that if the IRS fines you for

cheating on your taxes, or if you lose your license for driving while intoxicated, or if your life comes unraveled because you cheated on your spouse that you are suffering for the name of Jesus. Jesus doesn't want his good name associated with such things. And you who bear his name before the world ought not to profane his name with evil behavior.

Nor do we need to seek out suffering for the name of Jesus. If you believe and live as a Christian according to the will of God, it will find you. And it will come in many forms. There is, for example, a growing anti-Christian attitude sweeping through our society that seems to want to blame all the world's ills on the Christian Church. It takes a few admittedly dark chapters from the Church's history like the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the pedophile priest scandal, and paints them as the Church's standard operating procedure as opposed to what they were: comparatively brief episodes in which sinful people did sinful things – and we deeply regret it. But this anti-Christian attitude extends also to what we regard as good. Because we stand for the sanctity of human life and oppose murdering babies in the womb, we are accused of hating women and denying them of basic human rights. Because we uphold the goodness of God's design of being made men and women in his image, because we regard marriage as a sacred, lifelong commitment, because we oppose perversions of God's design for human sexuality and the family, we are called hateful, repressive, prudish, backward, social Nazis. Because we believe that Jesus alone is the way the truth and the life, we are accused of being intolerant, narrow-minded, fundamentalist fanatics. Laws are being drafted that reflect these growing attitudes in our society. And when they are implemented they will lead to law suits, to loss of jobs and income, to slander and to other forms of persecution. It's already begun.

It comes from the world in other ways too. Because as a Christian you won't lie, cheat, or steal to get ahead, you'll be taken advantage of by those who will. Because you won't join your friends' or coworkers' gossip sessions or participate in their character assassinations of others, because you stand up for those being attacked and try to defend them, you'll be excluded, made an outcast, and become yourself the subject of their criticism. When you are kind, caring, and trying to serve others, they'll hate you all the more because the contrast between your behavior and theirs makes them feel bad about themselves; and they'll write you off as being a hypocritical goody two-shoes.

But the world is only one of the enemies we face. There are also the devil and our sinful natures. And these two often work in concert to cause Christians to suffer. Take, for example, a young Christian man who finds himself sexually attracted to other men. He knows what God's Word says about it. And he recognizes it as a distortion of God's good design. He doesn't want the feelings he has. But they are very real. And Satan is right there telling him it's not a problem. It's perfectly natural. And we know so much more about it now than when those frumpy old men in ancient times wrote what they did. And look, it could be anything: alcoholism, drug addiction, pornography, even the sins of pride and self-righteousness; we all have our vulnerabilities, sins to which we are especially susceptible. And dealing with them as we ought, causes us to suffer. It's hard to deny the flesh. It's a struggle to resist temptation. But this is what we are called to: to fight the good fight of faith even against ourselves. We fight by confessing our sinful thoughts and feelings, by turning from them, certainly not permitting ourselves to act upon them, and by receiving the strength and comfort of Christ's forgiveness.

And Peter tells us why: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." In light of the viral video clip that came out this past week, we might modify Peter's description of the devil from a lion to a sea lion. If you didn't see it, the clip shows a group of people on a wharf in some harbor out on the west coast. There's a sea lion in the water very close to them, and they're dropping morsels of food to it. They're all oohing and

ahhing about how cute and friendly he seems to be. Anyway, a little girl, maybe six or seven years old, sits down on the side of the dock right next the seal. She's close enough to reach out and pet him if she wants. It almost looks like she's about to when all of a sudden it lurches up and grabs her with its teeth by the dress she's wearing and snatches her away into the water. It's like *whoosh*, she's gone. Fortunately, she was rescued right away.

But it doesn't always end happily like that when a Christian falls for temptation. Like the sea lion, Satan comes on appearing to be all cute and innocent. He's not. And neither was the sea lion. In fact, one of the animal experts on the news report I saw said that if a wild animal is paying attention to you and seems to be friendly, he's actually considering whether you might be his next meal. So, it is with Satan. Through his deceptions he would have you believe that your sinful thoughts and feelings aren't sinful at all. Or that you are unable to resist them. Or that you needn't worry about falling this once, because you can always repent and be forgiven afterward. It's a dangerous game to play because with each repeat resistance gets weaker, falling comes more easily, and repentance gets harder and less sincere. Before you know it, you're not repentant at all. And at that point, Satan has swallowed you whole.

For this reason, Peter tells you to resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kind of suffering is being experienced by every other Christian throughout the world. You are no exception, nor is your suffering any worse. Instead, you are to recognize that it is good and necessary to suffer as a Christian. It's cause to rejoice, as Peter gives us God's promise: "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." He means the little bit of suffering we endure now for our good will pale in comparison to the glories that will be revealed. And here again we have Jesus himself to show us the way. In the same way that he suffered for our sin and has since been exalted, so too we are to suffer before we are exalted – suffer not for sin, but rather for the righteousness we receive through faith in Jesus. God sends it for our benefit and so it really is good grief. Therefore, in trial, in temptation, when we suffer persecution, let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, trusting that he who made us will also sustain us and bring us to glory and to eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. To him be our thanks and praise, and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!