

Title: The Little Christs

1 Peter 4:12-19 NRSV

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. 16 Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. 17 For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And
 "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
 what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?"
19 Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.

Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.

For us, it may come as a surprise that the term "Christian" only appears three times in the New Testament – twice in the Book of Acts and here in 1 Peter 4:16. It was not a term believers made up to describe themselves. It was a slur coined by others and used to demean and degrade them. When it was used, it was probably spoken as such words are expressed today – spit out of the mouth, full of contempt and derision. Following Peter's example, we call each other *beloved, sisters, brothers, even holy ones*. But our neighbors call us *Christians*. They call us "little Christs."

Two thousand years on, this seems like the opposite of a big deal or a bad thing to us. We are too far removed. A more recent example would be how members of the Jesus People Movement of the 1960's and 1970's were called *Jesus freaks*. Even if you weren't ever called a *Jesus freak*, you can imagine the intentions someone would have for using it. My dad called me a Jesus freak when he found out I was trying to organize a bible study at school. It felt very different from what it would have felt like if he had called me a Christian.

What we see Peter doing here provides a great case study in reclamation – that is, transforming language intended to do harm into a source of pride. Some people tried to do that with Jesus freak, with limited success. A better example would be the way that LGBTQ community embraced the term "*queer*," robbing it of its power to humiliate and intimidate. An elder would have read Peter's letter aloud to the congregation, so we can imagine that when they got this sentence some people in the room winced... just as you would if I uttered the N-word right now. Since Peter is concluding a letter of encouragement to those who have been mistreated

and abused physically as well as verbally, it makes sense he would actually *utter the word* and, in so doing, begin to rob it of its destructive power.

Here, as in all things, Peter is taking his cue from Jesus himself. Jesus regularly takes conventional values and conventional thinking and flips them on their head. The beatitudes – the “consider yourself blessed and fortunate if...!” statements that open the Sermon on the Mount do exactly this.

“Blessed are you when people 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...” (Matt 5:11-12)

To call these little Christs back to the words of their Master Peter now says: “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” (vs 14).

Core

It is a high privilege and great responsibility to bear the name of Christ.

Let’s look at the privilege, and then the responsibility.

The High Privilege: Refined & Anointed

For Peter, there are three ways in which we get to experience a privileged position even though it certainly doesn’t feel that way! We get to be refined, we get to share in Christ’s sufferings, and we get to be anointed.

We get to be refined – the fiery ordeal

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

When we are put through the fires of testing, we are refined like precious metal. Peter has used this image already, but because he didn’t have bold, italics, or bullet points at his disposal, Peter uses the only tool at his disposal for emphasis: repetition. He doesn’t deny or sugar coat things. Yes, it really is as hard as you think it is. And yes, others may tell you that you are going through difficulties because you did something wrong and God is angry with you. But no, Peter says, it is a special kind of privilege to suffer for doing the right thing. It happened to our Master, so we should count it a privilege when it happens to us.

We get to share in Christ’s sufferings – which means we will also share in Christ’s glory

... But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

Rejoice when you share in Christ's suffering. James says the same at the beginning of his letter.

If we get to experience what Christ went through in the present world order, then we can be confident that we will also experience what union with Christ has in store for us in the next world order, when things on earth are as they are in heaven.

We share Christ's anointing marked by God's Spirit resting upon us.

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Peter does not make much mention of the Holy Spirit in this letter but it's presence with the believer is a source of comfort. Peter describing the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of glory and of God" may be a reference to Isaiah 11, which is the one of Messianic prophecy texts in Isaiah that we often read during Advent. It's the one that begins, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Peter is making the closest connection between Christ mission and our identity that he can make. Anointing is the investment of power and authority to rule.

The refining, the suffering, the anointing... it all points to the privilege of co-ruling with Christ. It is preparation. It is, as Dallas Willard liked to say, "training for reigning"!

With such privilege comes responsibility. What is our great responsibility?

The Great Responsibility: We get judged first.

Vs 17 - For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Judgment begins with the household of God. Judgement does not necessarily mean condemnation. But it does mean that there is a final and complete reckoning. "Time has come" = Kairos. The appointed time for God's redemptive acts has begun. The suffering Christians face is part of that redemptive plan. It all comes out in the wash. This shouldn't make us scared. But it should make us humble. We who are being refined are also being reckoned.

What does this privilege and responsibility look like for Christians elsewhere in the world?
A glimpse from Voice of the Martyrs Ministry

Voice of the Martyrs: One Refined, Anointed Pastor's Story

Every time I preach and teach about persecution I feel both a need to connect this to our real world AND acknowledge that we in the west really don't get it because almost none of us have truly experienced it. So in order to find an example of someone who really does know what it is like to be persecuted for being a Christian, I went to the Voice of the Martyrs website. If you download the app, you can not only hear the real-life, current experiences of Christians around the world but you can also get a daily reminder to pray specifically for a particular family in a particular country. When I downloaded the app, this is the story that was posted for the day by a pastor who had been imprisoned for his faith. As a matter of safety, his identity and location weren't shared.

"It is amazing how you can see Jesus in the face of other believers. Their faces shine, and it was quite an achievement for the glory of God to shine on the face of a Christian in Communist jails. We did not wash - I had not washed for three years - but the glory of God shone even from behind the crust of dirt. And they always had triumphant smiles on their faces," wrote an imprisoned pastor.

"I know of other Christians who were released from Communist prisons, such as I was. Like them, I was stopped several times on the street by passersby asking, 'Sir, what is it in you? You look like such a happy man. What is the source of your happiness?' I told them that it came from many years in Communist jails suffering for my Savior.

"They could not understand this because they could not think beyond the difficulties of their own lives. They had not learned to walk in the Spirit and to experience the presence of God. Many would think, 'If only you knew what a life I have - a husband who batters me, a wife who nags, and children who break my heart.' There are many material difficulties and tempests in your soul. But what of them? How are they to compare with the joy of knowing Jesus?"

What Jesus gives, no one can take away. He gives us joy in the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. And though our circumstances may grow dim and dark, our joy still shines. Even the darkest dirt from three years in a Communist prison cannot disguise Christian joy. We are not necessarily happy for our affliction. We are not glad for our sorrow. Yet we remain joyful because of Christ's presence within our sorrow. Have you lost your sense of joy? You realize no one can take your joy from you. If it is missing from your life, it is because you willingly gave it up on account of your circumstances. Ask God to restore your joy in him today.

This is what a Christian, refined by fire, looks like.

Call

Pray for sisters and brothers around the world who are reviled for the name of Christ.