



A Suffering People

November 15, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

1 PETER 4

PRINTED TEXT:

1 PETER 4:12–19

Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

—1 Peter 4:19

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

1 PETER 4:12-19 (NIV)

4¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

INTRODUCTION**A. HATRED OF ALL THINGS CHRISTIAN**

In the last few years, we have received many news reports that trumpet radical opposition to Christianity in the Islamic (Muslim) world. It is illegal for a Muslim to convert to Christianity in some countries. Such a conversion may be punishable by death. It is easy for Westerners to condemn such intolerance.

However, there seems to be a creeping intolerance of Christianity in nations that have been historically identified as majority Christian. Christian symbols are banned from public places. Not long ago, Christmas trees (a marginal Christian symbol at best) were banned for a time from the airport in Seattle. Some schoolteachers feel free to discuss any religion in the classroom except Christianity.

We all have seen the headlines about huge monetary settlements for clergy abuse class-action suits. Yet those stories as reported seem to be heralded more for the damage they inflict on the church than the justice received by victims. Publicly funded art displays often include works that are intentionally offensive to Christians. But criticisms of such presentations are themselves attacked viciously. While there are exceptions, media portrayals of people of faith are often harsh and mean-spirited.

Why all this hostility toward the church and the Christian faith? Why are we belittled for wanting to be good moral people who seek to follow Jesus? First, we should understand that this is nothing new. From its earliest days, the church in Jerusalem was opposed by the Jewish authorities (Acts 7:54–60; 12:1–3; etc.). Jesus told his disciples to expect this treatment (see Luke 6:22; 12:11, 12).

Second, we should understand that these persecutions are directed primarily at our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 22:7, 8). Jesus knew that the world would hate him and his message (see John 7:7; 15:18, 19), for he cut away religious hypocrisy and self-righteousness. It should not surprise us, then, if this hate is now directed toward Jesus' followers, his disciples in the current day (see 1 John 3:13). As we understand how this persecution affected those in the first century, we will be better prepared to understand our own situation.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

At the beginning, Christianity was viewed as a sect of the Jewish faith (see Acts 24:5). Almost all the earliest Christians came out of Judaism. As Paul and others began to preach the gospel to Gentiles, the church faced its first great hurdle: the circumcision controversy.

Some proposed that Gentile men had to submit to circumcision in order to be considered Christians (Acts 15:1). What this really meant was that only Jews could become Christians, since being circumcised indicated conversion to Judaism. In a historic move, the Jerusalem Council affirmed that circumcision would not be required of Gentiles (Acts 15). The Christian faith was open to all.

However, the fallout from this (among other things) was that Christianity ceased to be viewed as a subset of Judaism; Christianity therefore lost certain protections under Roman law. The Romans were somewhat inclusive in their religions, absorbing aspects of the religious traditions from the peoples they conquered. Judaism, although not conforming to official Roman religion, was afforded a degree of protection due to its great antiquity and moral values. Jews were allowed to become full Roman citizens. When it became apparent that the church put forth a faith different from that found in the synagogue and was heavily populated by non-Jews, this protection no longer applied to Christians.

This opened the door for official persecution of Christians in Rome during the latter days of Nero's reign, in the mid- to late-60s AD. The Roman historian Tacitus records that Nero used the Christians of Rome as a scapegoat for the great fire that consumed much of the city in AD 64. There is no direct explanation for this horrible choice, except that those Christians were largely poor, powerless, and despised. So Nero picked a group that was already unpopular and had no ability to defend itself.

These persecutions included arrest and various types of inhumane torture and execution. This is the probable backdrop for Peter's two letters. As we read this week's lesson, we should remember that the church of Rome was either in the midst of these horrors, or the horrors were recent and fresh in the community's memory.

I. TRIAL OF FIRE (1 PETER 4:12–14)

A. EXPECT IT (v. 12)

12. Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

Peter characterizes the persecutions his readers have faced as *painful*. And there is more pain ahead.

As we noted in the Lesson Background, the Roman historian Tacitus records the cruelties of Emperor Nero. These cruelties included tying Christians on poles, dousing them with oil, and then setting them afire to serve as human torches for his parties. Whether Peter speaks of *the painful trial* with this in mind we do not know. At any rate, Peter speaks with over 30 years' experience in being a disciple of Jesus. He knows that believers will be confronted by those who hate the church and are in a position to inflict *suffering*.

The Old Testament records the suffering of the righteous (example: Ecclesiastes 7:15; 8:14). The New Testament presumes that this will continue (Matthew 5:10). As long as evil persists in our world, evil people will hate the good and either take advantage or try to eliminate it. Righteous people following Christ as Lord should *not be surprised*.

B. REJOICE IN IT (v. 13)

13. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Taken only on the surface, Peter's exhortation here sounds almost crazy. Derive joy from pain? Peter is no masochist, though. It is not the suffering that he glories in, but the privilege of sharing with Christ (compare Acts 5:41). In this we see the great humility of the apostle. He is not puffed up by his legendary stature in the Christian community, but is willing to suffer alongside other believers. Peter points to a way of being more like Jesus: being a partaker in his *sufferings*.

It is the person who enjoys this deep fellowship with Jesus who will be *overjoyed* when he is *revealed*, when he returns. When Christ comes again, he will come with judgment. His followers will share in this judging (see Matthew 19:28; 1 Corinthians 6:3).

We should consider this verse alongside Peter's earlier, perhaps difficult-to-understand statement that "he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." Peter wants his readers to know beyond any shadow of doubt that living for Christ will entail suffering, for Christ himself "suffered in his body" (1 Peter 4:1).

In a life that is patterned after Jesus' life, two "because" converge. First, we suffer

because the world hates righteous people. Second, we suffer because this makes us more like Christ. As he suffered, so shall we. Therefore, for those who truly, passionately love Jesus, joy will overshadow the pain.

C. GLORY IN IT (v. 14)

14. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

To be *insulted* is to be deliberately maligned. No one enjoys such abuse, but Peter sees a blessing in this: our suffering from persecution is a validation of our faith.

No enemy of Christ wastes time with false believers. Such an enemy, if he is perceptive, realizes that false disciples are supporting his cause, for they destroy the church from within. If we truly display the righteous characteristics of Christ in our lives, we will be offensive to the sinful world. Suffering inevitably will follow.

Peter reminds his readers that God is not absent when they suffer. There is a glorious presence of his *Spirit* despite the pain. To suffer for Christ is to share in his glory (see Romans 8:17, 18). We gain the hardened endurance necessary to be a true, lifelong disciple (Romans 5:3).

II. ORDEAL OF SUFFERING (1 PETER 4:15, 16)

A. SHAMED CRIMINAL (v. 15)

15. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

Even in an ungodly world, criminals deserve to suffer. If civilization is to endure, no one should be able to engage in evil without consequences.

Peter's list here is interesting. He begins with the grossest of evildoers, a *murderer*. He then moves to another despicable criminal, the *thief*. Both murder and thievery are capital offenses under certain circumstances in the first century. They are seen as evil by even the pagans of the day.

Peter follows with the general term *criminal*, which sums up most law-breaking behavior.

The *meddler* is the one who sticks his or her nose into the business of others. Some people love to do this, but they run the risk of being rudely dismissed and having a friendship ruined. For Peter, this would be suffering, for no one wants to be told in angry terms to buzz off. But that would be a type of justified suffering, and therefore like the criminal who is punished.

Peter, therefore, draws a clear distinction between the just suffering of the criminal and the unjust—yet glorious—suffering of the Christian. While Peter teaches that suffering for Jesus has an important role in God's plan for the church, suffering in general is a bad thing. We should not want to suffer. If we do suffer, it should be for no other reason than our stand for righteousness.

B. UNASHAMED CHRISTIAN (v. 16)

16. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

My mother taught me there is no shame in not having nice clothes if you are poor, but there is shame if you do not keep the clothes you have clean. For Peter, there is no shame for us in suffering, but we must keep our lives clean and righteous no matter what the pressures may be.

If sometimes we are at a loss as to what to do, Peter gives us a course of action that never fails: *praise God*. Worship and repentance redirect our attention away from self and toward the Lord (see Revelation 14:7; 16:9).

Paul, who certainly suffered a great deal for serving Jesus, proudly announced "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1:16). Paul's life displayed fearless confidence that he was doing the right thing by giving his all to the service of Christ, no matter what the level of suffering (see Philippians 3:8).

III. JUDGMENT OF GOD (1 PETER 4:17–19)

A. INTERNAL EXAMINATION (VV. 17, 18)

17. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

It is difficult to see past the pain when we are suffering. In this next section of verses, Peter asks the church not only to see beyond their sufferings, but also to use the occasion as an opportunity for self-examination.

Persecution is never fair or consistent, for some will suffer more than others. The *judgment* of God, however, is always fair, always perfect. Therefore, the church has not been granted immunity from God's judgment simply because it is being persecuted. As Peter paints the picture for us, when God begins his universal, spiritual housecleaning, he will begin with his *family*. That is a serious warning: persecution is no excuse for compromise with the world. The warnings to the seven churches in Revelation 2, 3 show us God's intent to "clean house" in certain ways.

For Peter, this threatened judgment within God's household pales in comparison with God's judging activity for those outside. Those on the outside are the stubbornly disobedient, 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 sinner?"

Those who are *saved* because of their faith in Christ have no claim to boast. Their salvation is not due to their own merit, but to the work of Christ and the mercy of God. In this, Peter can say that *it is hard* for them *to be saved*. If their ultimate salvation hangs only on the mighty lifeline of God's grace, what is the fate of unbelievers?

Peter seems to have in mind both the sinners outside the church and those false disciples within the body. Judgment will come upon all the *ungodly*, whether they call themselves Christians or not, for God truly knows the hearts of all (compare Proverbs 11:31).

B. SUFFERING AND TRUSTING (V. 19)

19. So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Peter's conclusion is like the old hymn "Trust and Obey." We must *commit* ourselves to him in utter, complete faith and trust. We cannot save ourselves. He will come and save us (Isaiah 35:4). We must continue to serve him in obedience, never forsaking the path of righteousness. This is because our *Creator*, God, is *faithful* and will do as he has promised. In the end, "there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

CONCLUSION

A proper sense of right and wrong expects that people should suffer the consequences of their wrong actions. Outrage occurs when people seem to "get away with something"—when they are able to avoid unpleasant outcomes despite unethical or criminal behavior.

But what about those who suffer innocently, having done nothing to deserve the hardships they endure? History tells us that in Peter's last years the church was targeted for persecution by the Roman government. The reasons for this are somewhat murky, but the reality of the sufferings is well documented. We may not experience persecution in the way that the church of Peter's day did, but his words about suffering still have great value for us in the twenty-first century.

Many Jews of the first century believed that suffering was a sign of God's disapproval and punishment (see John 9:2). After all, the Old Testament taught that "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5). The poor and the sick were to be pitied and cared for, but their fate was thought to be the result of some sin and wickedness. As Eliphaz, a "friend" of Job, claimed, sinners reap what they sow and "at the breath of God they are destroyed" (Job 4:9).

All this meant that the one who was suffering had a double whammy—having real pain and believing that God was angry with him or her. By implication, then, those who were well off physically and financially were thought to be in God's favor. Jesus taught, however, that material wealth is a false gauge of God's approval (see Luke 12:16–21). Conversely, poverty is a misleading measure of God's disapproval (see Luke 21:1–4). These ideas are not foreign to the Old Testament either. The psalmist observes that the wicked seem to prosper rather than suffer (Psalm 73:3–5).

What is different is that for the Christian suffering can lead to joy. No one in his or her right mind likes pain. We are not wired that way. But suffering for Christ is a confirmation of our faith. It shows us that what Jesus taught was true: the sinful world is in violent rebellion against our righteous God. "Men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19, 20). Suffering confirms that we are truly his disciples. We have denied our own road to pleasure. We have taken up the cross, and we are following our Lord to glory (Mark 8:34).

Peter's words help us understand that we do not need to suffer for Christ in silence. The church should serve as a place of encouragement and celebration in the midst of suffering. The body of Christ should be a "shelter in the time of storm," an oasis in the desert of worldly, sinful lives. We should share in these sufferings together, bearing the burdens of our fellow believers (Galatians 6:2). It is then that we become the fellowship of the unashamed, those who are confident in their obedience to Christ.

REPROACHED FOR THE NAME

While I was still in Bible college and seminary, I had a couple of brief ministries in rural areas of central Illinois. Most of the members of the congregations were farmers; they were honest, hardworking folk. Over a period of about five years, I served three different churches, and I do not recall that a single member of any of them was a college graduate. This does not mean they were dumb; it simply means they were not sophisticated or used to thinking in logical abstractions. These were industrious, conservative people who lived close to the soil and nature.

Many of them remembered the days of the Great Depression, when agricultural experts came around to tell them how to farm better. The farmers could not see that the "book learning" of the experts was very helpful. They tended to dismiss these agricultural experts as part of "those New Dealers." The term was usually said with a sneer and a shrug, dismissing the experts' advice as unrealistic and worthless.

The phrase *New Dealers* became a synonym for "fancy-pants" scholars who had never perched on the seat of a tractor. Actually, many of the New Dealers had good ideas that would take another generation to become accepted on American farms. Several New Deal agencies were an

immense aid to impoverished farmers. But often it was just easier to dismiss the New Dealers reproachfully, even when they deserved better.

Peter notes that we as Christians often are reproached because of our name, even when we deserve better. We do well to keep in mind that this may be due just to defensiveness or lazy thinking on the part of the critic. Given time, they may come around. God is patient.

OBJECTS OF PERSECUTION?

We live in a culture that is becoming ever more secular. In that light, it is easy for Christians to think they are objects of persecution, even though that may not be the case. It is all too easy to take comfort in the belief that we are being “persecuted because of righteousness,” when actually we are being called on the carpet justly because of our own failings.

I knew a man a few years ago who thought he was being harassed by the management of his factory because he witnessed about his faith to others at work. He claimed he was being persecuted because he was a Christian. Actually, that was not true. Yes, he was a Christian; and yes, he did witness about his faith while he was at work. The problem was that he often would leave his machine and go over to other employees to talk about his faith. It was not his Christian conversation that was the problem. In fact, he was stealing production time from his employer. He also was interfering with the work of other employees so they were not giving their full time to the employer either.

Rather than being persecuted for his faith, he actually was being reprimanded for being a busybody. Other workers resented his interference, and the management disliked it as well. Rather than exemplifying the innocent persecuted Christian of verse 16 (which we will study next), he represented the negative behavior of verse 15. Are you guilty of this?

LET’S TALK IT OVER

1. Why do some Christians continue to think it strange when they face trials, even though Peter says not to be surprised in this regard? How do we help those Christians?

2. How do you rejoice in times of trials and sufferings without appearing to be in denial about the reality of those trials and sufferings?

3. How do you normally react when a fellow believer suffers justly for wrong things he or she has committed? How should you react?

4. What methods have you seen God use to judge His house, the church? How do we know this is actually God’s judgment happening and not something else?

5. How does (or should) the eternal fate of “the ungodly and the sinner” affect your attitude toward them?

LET’S TALK IT OVER

1. Why do some Christians continue to think it strange when they face trials, even though Peter says not to be surprised in this regard? How do we help those Christians?

There is a false teaching that states that wealth, health, and happiness should be the automatic results when one surrenders to Christ. When those good things do not come about, the Christian can be accused of “a lack of faith.” But a quick study of the apostles and their sufferings should quell this view.

At least part of the problem is a confusion regarding what Christians are *saved from* and *saved to*. We are not saved from the troubles of this life; Jesus predicted the opposite. The reality is that we are saved from our sins. We are not saved to a life free from pain in this world. Rather, we are saved to a life of peace in the midst of pain and a glorious hope for eternity. God permits trials to come to prove our faith. A trip to the book of Job makes this clear.

2. How do you rejoice in times of trials and sufferings without appearing to be in denial about the reality of those trials and sufferings?

If you are watching a recording of your team play a game and you already know they won, it is easier to make it through some of the times when it seems they are going to lose. It is the same thing for Christians. We know the end of the story by reading the book of Revelation. Christians win! It is assurance of this fact that helps us in this life.

Also, we do not face the trials on our own. God has given His Holy Spirit as comforter, encourager, and counselor. Christians also have the encouragement of fellow Christians, many of whom have endured the same trials we face. In facing trials Christians can continue “rejoicing in hope” and being “patient in tribulation” (Romans 12:12). Christians demonstrate this joy not by complaining about the trials, but by serving others through the trials.

3. How do you normally react when a fellow believer suffers justly for wrong things he or she has committed? How should you react?

Galatians 6:1 says that when someone is “overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness.” This means that there is to be no gloating, I-told-you-so attitude. But at the same time we must help the one who has done wrong to realize that he or she still may have to suffer the consequences of wrong actions (making restitution, etc.). That is part of the restoring process.

4. What methods have you seen God use to judge His house, the church? How do we know this is actually God’s judgment happening and not something else?

God desires a pure church, a pure people. In about 10 places, Scripture speaks of the purity of God’s people being proved by a refining fire. When the end result of a difficult time is a holier, purer church, this may indeed have been God’s judgment at work.

God’s refining methods may present themselves in two general ways: from those outside the church and from those inside. God may allow His people to face persecutions from unbelievers in order to remove impurities. Remember that God sent the pagan Babylonians to refine Old Testament Judah (Jeremiah 9:7–9).

Judgment and refining from the inside can take place through the process of church discipline (Matthew 18:15–17; Luke 17:3; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5; 1 Timothy 5:20; 6:3, 4; Titus 1:10–16). All this can be part of discipline from the Father (Hebrews 12:5–11).

5. How does (or should) the eternal fate of “the ungodly and the sinner” affect your attitude toward them?

Too often Christians see “those sinners” as getting what they deserve. What we fail to realize is that we deserve that fate as well. Only by God’s grace in Jesus do we not face it.

PRAYER

Holy Father, we can only imagine the pain you felt as you watched your Son suffer on the cross for the sins of the world. When we suffer for our faith, whether it be small indignities or violent hostility, may we take comfort in our sharing of the sufferings of your Son. May we always trust you and always obey you. We pray this in the name of the one who suffered for us, Jesus the Lord. Amen.