

# Keep Calm and Carry On

1 Peter: Hope Away from Home

1 Peter 4:12-19

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Over the past couple months, we've been studying Psalms for Uncertain Times. Book IV of the Psalms showed us how God's people should pray in exile. It's good to have those lessons on our mind as we return to 1 Peter today. Because as Peter has made clear in this letter, we too are in exile. We haven't been kicked out of the Promised Land of Israel, but we're waiting for our promised inheritance in heaven. Right now we're in this place that's mired in sin and death and suffering. We know that we belong somewhere else, and we're waiting for God to bring us there. We know that we're not yet home.

But in the meantime, we need to know how to live in exile. How do we live in this broken and painful world? In these uncertain times, some of us are feeling the pain of waiting for our heavenly home more than ever. But Peter's dealing with something more specific than the sickness and job loss and grief that usually comes to mind when we think of suffering. He's not talking about just any suffering, but persecution.

The question that this passage addresses is, "How should a Christian respond to persecution?" Now, you may think that because of where you live and when you live, persecution shouldn't be an issue for you. But as we'll see shortly, that mindset is an issue all its own. We *all* need to know how to respond to persecution. So, what should we do when we're under attack?

The answer Peter gives reminds me of a familiar slogan. It was printed on posters by the British government before World War II in hopes that it would boost morale when German bombs started dropping on cities across Britain. Five simple words: "Keep Calm and Carry On." The difference between Peter's message and this slogan (besides the fact that the poster was barely used) is that Peter gives reasons. It's not just propaganda. It's not just a slogan. Please turn with me to 1 Peter 4:12-19, and we'll see what Peter has to say. We'll see that Christians actually have good reason to keep calm and carry on when they're under attack.

## **1 Peter 4:12-19<sup>1</sup>**

*<sup>12</sup>Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup>But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup>If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. <sup>15</sup>But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. <sup>16</sup>Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. <sup>17</sup>For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? <sup>18</sup>And*

*"If the righteous is scarcely saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"*

*<sup>19</sup>Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

We can divide our passage today into two parts. Peter tells us how to respond to persecution in two steps: keep calm and carry on. And it's not just propaganda. We're given a solid reason why to do each of those things.

### **KEEP CALM: DON'T BE SURPRISED. REJOICE. (V. 12-14)**

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Peter's first step to dealing with persecution is to keep calm. This comes in verses 12-14. It's about having the right mindset. And there are two sides to this mindset: a "don't" and a "do." Don't be surprised. Do rejoice. Keeping calm in the face of persecution means responding not with surprise but joy.

Peter starts with what *not* to do. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Don't be surprised. Don't be flustered. Don't be thrown off balance. Persecution is a normal experience for a believer, so don't treat it as something strange.

Here, Peter is just recalling what Jesus told him. In John 15:20, Jesus said, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." If you follow Jesus, expect that some people will hate you, just like some hated Jesus. Don't expect to get off easy. The apostle Paul is even more explicit in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Expect it, so that you're ready.

Think of it in military terms. A surprise attack gives one army a huge advantage in battle. Unless, of course, the opposing army is expecting it. Then the tables are turned. Experiences that would normally shake us lose some of their power when we expect them. Peter wants these churches to be prepared for attacks.

We need to be prepared too. We need to get our minds right, because we typically think persecution won't happen to us. If we're aware of the persecution of Christians at all, we tend to think of it as something that only happens overseas. Certainly, it's more life-threatening to be a Christian in North Korea or the Middle East or North Africa than in Wichita, Kansas. But Peter doesn't have the most extreme cases in mind. The fiery trial he's referring to here isn't being burned at the stake, it's the social ostracism and slander and hatred his churches were experiencing because of their faith. It's what Peter describes in verse 14, being "insulted for the name of Christ." And that happens in Wichita, Kansas. It almost feels bad to call it persecution when there are Christians being murdered for their faith around the world, but it is persecution. Peter tells us to be prepared for it so we can react to it rightly.

Now, this doesn't mean being cynical or paranoid. It doesn't mean expecting persecution to be lurking around every corner or having a pessimistic outlook on life. We know that because of Peter's other instruction in this first section. If you shouldn't be surprised, what should you do? Rejoice. "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings" (v. 13). How can he say that? What reason is there to rejoice? Verse 14 says, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed."

Is this positive thinking? Fake it 'til you make it? Is it like a propaganda poster? "Keep Calm," no reason given? No, Peter's not just giving us a slogan. He gives us a reason why we can keep calm when we're under attack.

***Persecution is evidence that you're one with Christ.***

The reason is this: Persecution is evidence that you're in Christ. You're one with him. That's why Peter says if you share Christ's sufferings, you'll also share his glory. It's not that your suffering saves you. But your suffering shows that you're saved, that you're in Christ. You are bound to him. You're united to him by faith.

Persecution is a mark of genuine faith. How so? Well, Jesus made it clear that having faith in him means following him, taking up your cross and coming after him, following in his footsteps. If you follow him, expect your life to look something like his. He was hated. You'll be hated. He suffered; you'll suffer. You may even die like he did. But you'll also be resurrected like he was. And when he comes again in glory, you'll share in his glory. You'll "rejoice and be glad," as it says in verse 13.

This isn't just wishful thinking. It's guaranteed. If you're insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed. The reward is still in the future, but you can rejoice right now; you're already blessed. Why? "Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (v. 14). Paul says in Ephesians that the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our heavenly inheritance (1:13-14), and the Spirit seals us for the day of redemption (4:30). If you have the Spirit, then every spiritual blessing in Christ—both now and when he returns—is as good as yours. So rejoice now, because even greater rejoicing is waiting for you, joy you can't even imagine.

***What if I'm not persecuted?***

Peter's expectation of persecution sounds scary to us, but his words are actually meant to bring us comfort. They help us make sense of a disturbing experience. They help us to keep calm. The promise of persecution isn't one we tend to cling to though. First Peter 4:12 probably isn't one of your memory verses.

Maybe that's because you haven't truly experienced persecution for your faith. And you know what? I think I'm right there with you. If we never face persecution, the promises of persecution in the New Testament go from comforting to discomfoting, not only because suffering is scary but also because it means this evidence of faith is lacking in our lives. If you're never persecuted, you should be surprised, as though something strange were happening to you. It should disturb you. Because I don't think Peter, or Paul, or Jesus ever imagined a non-persecuted Christian.

Now, we don't need to go looking for persecution. We're not saved by our suffering, but by Jesus' suffering. But we should question the way we're living. Usually we do the opposite, don't we? If everyone likes us and we're living a successful and untroubled life, we assume we're doing things right. But Jesus said otherwise. He said things like this: "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Lk. 6:26).

If everyone likes you, it's time for a hard look in the mirror. If you look like Jesus, then you won't look like the world. You'll stand out. Remember what Peter said in verse 4 of this chapter? The pagans are "surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you." If you live like Jesus, they'll be surprised at what you don't do. They'll be surprised that you don't worship food, and drink, and entertainment. They'll be surprised that you don't objectify the opposite sex. They'll be surprised that you don't put your own comfort and safety and pleasure above all else. *Don't* be surprised if they hate you for it.

But maybe you're avoiding all those things and you're still not persecuted. Take another look in the mirror. Maybe you just don't do much of anything. In verse 19, Peter says we should be doing good. We don't just stand out by avoiding sin but by doing good.

Or maybe you're unnoticed by the world because you're not really in the world. You're in the Christian bubble. You don't have any meaningful relationships with non-believers. That's a problem too.

If you're living like Jesus, you won't stay off the world's radar. You won't avoid detection by blending in or by isolating. People will know you're not one of them, and some people—not all, but some—will persecute you. When that happens, don't be surprised, but rejoice. If you look like Jesus in suffering, you'll look like him in glory.

### **CARRY ON: DON'T ATTACK OR RETREAT. TRUST GOD. (VV. 15-19)**

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The first half of our passage described the right mindset in the face of persecution: keep calm. The second half (vv. 15-19) describes right conduct: carry on. And once again, there are two parts to Peter's instruction: a "don't" and a "do." Don't attack or retreat. Do trust God. That's what it means to carry on in the face of persecution. Don't attack or retreat. Trust God.

Peter knows that if we don't have the right mindset about persecution, then we're likely to react in all sorts of unhelpful and sinful ways. First, we might attack. We might try to stop persecution by fighting back somehow. He says in verse 15, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler." Peter just told us that there's a kind of suffering we should rejoice in: suffering for the name of Christ. It's suffering that's undeserved. But there are lots of bad reasons you might suffer as well. It doesn't count as Christian persecution if you've actually done something wrong and you deserve it.

Peter gives four examples, from the most to the least serious: murder, theft, evildoing, and meddling. The first three all describe criminal offenses or actions that everyone would consider wrong. It's pretty obvious, if you broke the law and got punished, you're not suffering like Christ. If you commit evil, you deserve to suffer. But Peter takes it a step further: don't even be a meddler—someone who gets into other people's business, a busybody, someone who stirs up animosity between people. You won't get thrown in jail for that, but you might suffer some social consequences. People won't like you—for good reason! That's not suffering for being a Christian; it's suffering for being a pest.

This fourth example—meddling—includes things that don't seem so bad; they might even seem justified when you feel like you're under attack. If, say, your boss dislikes you because of your beliefs. Or if the neighbors start talking about you behind your back. Or if it feels like Christian values are being marginalized in society . . . if it feels like you're in exile. It's tempting to subtly tear down your attacker's reputation, or complain and make sarcastic comments to anyone who will listen, or warn everyone about how terrible this person, or this company, or this political party is. Take a look at your Facebook activity and you might find some of that. If people dislike you for it, it's not because you're a Christian. It's because you're annoying.

When we feel threatened, it's tempting to attack. But Peter says, don't become like your attackers. Otherwise, you've blended into the world. And what's worse, you might mistake the suffering it brings for real Christian persecution.

The other temptation we have when we face persecution is to retreat—to flee or hide or shrink back. But Peter says not to do that either: “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (v. 16).

The opposite of suffering for those four things is suffering as a Christian. Now, the term “Christian” is so familiar in our context that it’s lost some of its meaning. Some people are happy to call themselves Christians even though they have little interest in Christ. That wouldn’t have happened in Peter’s day. The term “Christian” was probably coined by outsiders, not the believers themselves. It was more of a slur than a complement. In the eyes of their persecutors, it *was* a cause for shame. Their insults, slander, and name-calling were meant to shame believers into conforming to a respectable Roman way of life and abandoning their radical religion—or at least hiding it a little better.

If you’re like me, you’ve been in a situation before where it would have been easy, natural even, to out yourself as a Christian. But it was just as easy to hide your faith, and you had an inkling that this person might think less of you if they knew. So you hid. But Peter says to do just the opposite. Don’t be ashamed of that name. Embrace it. Don’t let their attacks have the desired effect. Don’t retreat. Don’t renounce or hide your faith in God. Glorify him.

By the way, it’s possible to attack and retreat at the same time. Most of us do this. We’re undercover with our faith, but we’re outspoken about everyone and everything we disagree with. But that’s not how we glorify God. We glorify him by being unashamed. Not unkind or obnoxious, but unashamed.

When we come under attack, our most basic instinct is to protect ourselves. So it seems like our options are fight or flight. But Peter says you can follow Jesus into a third way. Not fight or flight. Not attacking or retreating, but trusting God. That’s the final instruction he gives, in verse 19: “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” The third way is entrusting your soul to your Creator. But what does that look like? How do you trust God? By doing good. You could translate the end of verse 19 “*by* doing good.” The way to trust God is to carry on doing good. It’s what Peter has been talking about for three chapters now: do good to others, even if they hate you, even if they attack you. Show them what it means to be a Christian—someone who loves their enemies and won’t compromise in their obedience to Christ, either with their words or with their actions.

Do you see why this third way—trusting God—is the opposite of the other two? Fight and flight both boil down to the same thing: taking matters into your own hands rather than trusting God. Attacking and retreating are all about looking out for me and my safety, my comfort, my ego. This third way is all about the glory of God and the good of others.

***Greater suffering awaits unbelievers.***

If we have our minds right, if we’re living with the end in mind, then we know that carrying on by trusting God is for our good as well. That’s what Peter wants to show us. He gives a reason why to face persecution in this way. Carry on, because greater suffering awaits unbelievers. The alternative to suffering now is suffering much worse later. We see this in verses 17-18: “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’”

The reason to carry on is that the suffering of God's final judgment for sin will be far worse than anything these believers are experiencing now. In other words, don't worry about those people who are persecuting you—and certainly don't live like them—because they'll get what's coming to them. And it'll make this suffering of yours look like a cake-walk. We should not relish in their suffering, but there is comfort in the fact that God is just. It may seem like the wicked are prospering while God's people suffer, but in the end he will set all things right.

But Peter's point is a little more nuanced than that. He puts it in language that might sound foreign to us though. What does he mean when he says it's time for judgment to begin at the household of God, that is, *with us*? Here Peter's alluding to a bunch of Old Testament prophecies about God's judgment of the world in the end times. God revealed to the prophets that he would start by judging his own people and then judge the nations.

Peter says the time for that judgment is now. Somehow the suffering they're experiencing at the hands of their pagan persecutors is part of God's process of judging the world. How can that be? That should puzzle us a little bit. After all, there's "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). If you have trusted in Christ, then there's no punishment left for you. Your sins were judged at the cross. It is finished. So how can God's household be judged?

Well, judgment doesn't always mean punishment. Sometimes it simply refers to the decision of a judge. Some people are judged innocent, some are judged guilty. When God judges the world, he will have one criterion. The difference between innocent and guilty is whether or not you're in Christ, whether you're united to him by faith. But remember *how* we can tell someone is one with Christ! How do you know his Spirit is upon them? When they suffer for the name of Christ. This suffering, this judgment on God's household, is exactly what Peter described in verse 12. It's a test. It's a fiery trial. It's painful, but it's a lot better than the alternative. If you stand the test, if you carry on, then suffering will be replaced by glory. But if you avoid persecution now, if you want nothing to do with suffering like Christ, then your outcome will be something far, far worse.

Tragically, many will make the wrong choice; even some who appear to be members of God's household. That's why "the righteous is scarcely saved" (v.18), because few will stand the test. Few will accept the path of suffering when there are other options available. Attacking or retreating seem a lot more attractive than suffering. Jesus said it would be this way: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Mt. 7:13-14).

The third way—the way of suffering, the way of Jesus—is the least traveled because it's the hardest. It's the narrowest. It takes you places you do not want to go. It wars against every instinct you have for self-preservation. But it's the only way that leads to life.

Peter knows firsthand how difficult and unnatural the way of Jesus feels. He's warning these believers—and us—not to take the path he nearly did. See, when Peter started following Jesus, he didn't quite understand how hard this journey would be. He didn't know how much suffering was in store for him, or even for Jesus. When Jesus started describing his own crucifixion, Peter was surprised. He gave Jesus a talking-to: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Mt. 16:22). When they came to arrest Jesus, Peter attacked and cut off a man's ear. When Jesus was on trial and people accused Peter of being his follower, Peter retreated. Three times he said, "I do not know the man." And he went out and wept bitterly, because he had failed the test.

But the Peter who wrote this letter was a changed man. He had walked a few steps on the way that leads to destruction. He had seen how much easier the path was. But he had also seen the resurrected Lord. He knew that the hard way, the way of suffering, the way of Jesus, led to glory. So he decided to walk that hard path to its end. When the fiery trial came upon him again, he was not surprised. He did not attack. He did not retreat. He rejoiced and entrusted his soul to God. He was willing to bear the name of Christ, even though it led to his own death on a Roman cross.

Jesus said it would be this way in John 21, and I want to end with his words there. Because in Peter's coming-of-age story, there's hope for all of us who have failed to follow Jesus on the path of suffering. Failure doesn't have to be the end of our story. John 21:18-19 is Peter's life story, in the words of Jesus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)"

After this Jesus said two words to Peter. And he says the same thing to us, no matter what path we've taken up until now: "Follow me." Will you follow Jesus? Will you choose his way, will you carry on, even if it leads you where you do not want to go?