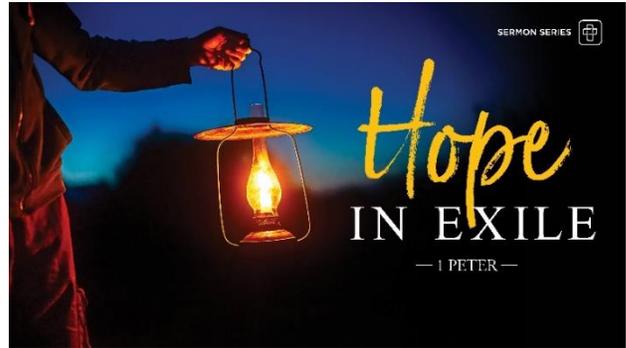


# Suffering As A Christian

## 1 Peter 4:12-19

Dan Leeper August 2, 2020



Twelve days ago at a press conference, President Trump said these words: “It will probably unfortunately get worse before it gets better. It’s something I don’t like to say about things, but that’s the way it is.” Like many other government officials and health officials, he was attempting in that moment to help people endure well through the difficult days, acknowledging that this is hard. This is difficult and stressful. It’s causing a lot of personal sacrifice, discomfort and annoyance, sometime unease and anxiety—and it’s going to get worse. But he didn’t stop there. He also said it’s going to get better. So he was reminding people that we are resilient, we will come through this and this is temporary. These difficult days we have to endure will pass and one day things will be better.

In a similar way, a good oncologist who is recommending treatment to a young mom with cancer will sit down with her, look at her and say, “What you’re about to go through is a difficult journey. The painful side effects of the chemo and radiation will at times be unbearable. They will feel hellish. You will want to give up. But in your case, if you fight and persevere through this, it will be worth it. You will beat this and have many more years with your kids.”

Jesus did something similar to this with Peter and the other disciples. Shortly before He was arrested, He said to them, *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first....If they persecute me, they will persecute you also.... I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”* (John 15:18,20, 16:33 NIV).

Peter didn’t fully understand in that moment how Jesus was preparing him and what Jesus was preparing him for. Initially, Peter didn’t respond with great faith and boldness, but eventually he did. Jesus prepared him well and Peter went on to be an example for us of what it looks like to suffer well through difficult days—in his case, even to the point of death.

One of the things Peter is doing in this epistle is encouraging these scattered believers, these young Christians, that when they experience suffering because they are following Jesus, they can hang on. They can endure. They can persevere, and it will be worth.

We're going to look at four different things Peter is encouraging them with as they think about how to respond to suffering—and these same lessons apply to us as well. We have, in the past and in the present, experienced some kind of insults, mockery or persecution, suffering of some sort, and it's likely that in the future there could be even more and with greater intensity. So we want to see what God has for us in His Word in this passage. Let's read through 1 Peter 4:12-19:

*<sup>12</sup> Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. <sup>15</sup> Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. <sup>16</sup> But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name. <sup>17</sup> For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? <sup>18</sup> And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? <sup>19</sup> So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good.*

Let's pray.

Lord, we come to Your Word today, submitting ourselves to it. This is a difficult word for us, but we know it is a good word. Help us to be built up by it, to be strengthened in our faith and to know how to respond rightly when suffering comes. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **1. Don't be surprised when you suffer for Jesus.**

Peter begins by saying, "Don't be surprised when you suffer for Jesus." Put yourself in the position of these exiled believers. Some of them are new believers who are listening to this letter. They're hearing that God is our King, He is holy, sovereign and victorious. The letter opens with saying we have a living hope in Jesus Christ because of the resurrection in which He conquered death. Peter then talks about the specific calling He places on Christians, that we are a holy nation, a royal priesthood. This reminds us of what God intends us to be. We were created in His image to be kings and priests here on this earth.

As they're hearing this, they're thinking, "If I am following the One Who is victorious, if I am following the One Who is sovereign over all things, then it makes sense that if I'm living in a

way that pleases Him, life should be good and I'll be on the winning side. I might even be healthy and wealthy and prosperous." Yet they were experiencing things that seemed to be opposite these thoughts, so it was probably confusing to them.

Remember, Peter had encountered these things before. He had seen people pick up stones to throw at Jesus. He saw Jesus be arrested and crucified. He remembered what Jesus had told the disciples: "If they persecute Me, they will persecute you also." Peter understood that this world is not easy and that in fact we should expect suffering for following Jesus, which would not be unusual. One of the reasons he said this is because we are called to follow Jesus. He is our example and His life was a pattern for us to follow.

Peter adds in verse 13 that when we suffer, we're sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Watching Jesus endure suffering as our example tells us this is something we should expect as well.

## **2. Don't be discouraged when you suffer for Jesus.**

Peter continues by saying not only should we expect suffering and not be surprised by it, but we also should not be discouraged when we suffer for Jesus. Look at his wording in verse 13: *"instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ..."* He says it again, *"...so that you may also rejoice..."* Then he intensifies it, *"...with great joy when his glory is revealed."*

If you aren't familiar with the Bible, this sounds strange. There are many places in the New Testament where we're taught that there is cause for joy and rejoicing, even through pain and suffering. This isn't just a command to simply put on a smile and pretend it's fun. This isn't Peter saying you should go out looking for suffering or try to provoke people to persecute you because it's a fun thing to enjoy.

No, there will be grief, mourning, sorrow and tears. Peter isn't saying, "Even though that's what you want to feel, God says to be happy anyway, so somehow you've got to rejoice." What Peter is actually going to do is teach some deep theological truths that help us understand why, when we suffer for Christ in this way, it does actually produce in us a cause for joy.

First, Peter tells us there is a promised future glory. He calls us to look out into the future, realizing the pattern of Jesus that we're following is suffering now and then future glory. We read about that in 1 Peter 1:11, where Peter spoke of how through the Spirit the prophets *"testified in advance to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow."* The example of Jesus is one of suffering and then glory.

In Romans 8:17-18 Paul talks about a similar thing. Because we are God's children, we are fellow heirs with Christ, *"if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us."*

Peter is echoing the words he heard Jesus preach in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:10-12:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven.*

There is a promised future glory, so what you're enduring right now should serve as a reminder to you that you're on the right path. You're on the path Jesus taught about, that the suffering now will one day lead to a future glory. But Peter doesn't only tell us to hold out because there's something better coming in the future. He also reminds us of another reason why we can rejoice and not be discouraged when we suffer. It's because there's something present right now—or more accurately, Someone present with us right now, the Holy Spirit. Look at what he says in 1 Peter 4:14: *"If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."* He's calling to mind the image of God—His glory and His presence—resting in the midst of His people.

Now the New Testament theological truth is that this same Spirit of God rests on us as followers of Jesus. When we suffer, we need to be reminded that the Holy Spirit is with us. In other places the Holy Spirit is called an Advocate, a Comforter and a Helper. He will bring to our minds the truths that will sustain us. Even when it feels as though everyone in the world has turned against us, we can know that the One Who matters—the God of this universe—is looking on us with favor and love. The Holy Spirit's presence sustains us in this way.

So when you suffer as a believer because you're following Jesus, you should not be sad. When you're accused falsely, mocked, insulted or ridiculed, be reminded by this that there is a future glory and that the Holy Spirit of God is resting on you in this moment to sustain you through it.

Now we need a point of clarity. Peter steps back and adds a sentence to help us understand that he's not talking about all kinds of persecution or suffering. Christians aren't the only ones who are persecuted or insulted or mocked, nor is all persecution or suffering we

experience as Christians because we're following Jesus. Sometimes there are other reasons. He says in 1 Peter 4: 15, *"Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler."*

Perhaps someone was reading Peter's letter and identified with what he wrote by thinking, "Yes, I am being mocked. People are being mean to me and the government seems to be against me because of the murders I've committed. But Peter is telling me I can rejoice in that, because I'm going through what Jesus went through." Peter says, "No." I think he used the strong example of murder to make his point more obvious. Then he moves to thieves, then evildoers and meddlers. The last description seems pretty tame to us. Meddlers refers to a person who wants to oversee everyone else's business, perhaps prying in a judgmental way. His point in all these examples was to say that sometimes our own sinful actions and attitudes bring on ridicule or suffering.

The world may hate us because we're selfish, proud, abrasive, obnoxious or self-protective, always wanting our own way. We might be prejudiced against other people. There are lots of ways we can cause others to hate us, but these are not what Peter is talking about when he says to rejoice in suffering. Quite specifically, he's referring to the suffering that comes because we are following Jesus. For those other causes, he says, we should actually be ashamed of that kind of suffering.

### **3. Don't be ashamed when you suffer for Jesus.**

Peter goes on in the next sentence to tell us we should not be ashamed when we suffer for Jesus: *"But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name"* (4:16). So we're not to be surprised, we're not to be discouraged, and now we are not to be ashamed when we suffer for Jesus. He then explains why.

In our world, the name of Christ and the name Christian are not very popular, so it can feel at times like we're on the losing side. Maybe when this suffering comes, I can be tempted to be embarrassed; maybe I'll hide the fact that I'm a follower of Jesus. Peter knows what that's like. He did that. But now he is helping us see why we should not be ashamed of being a follower of Jesus. The way he tells us that this kind of suffering for following Jesus is not a cause for shame is by going to a big-picture-theology truth to remind us that what we're feeling and experiencing doesn't mesh with what is reality in this universe.

He's picking up on a theme from the Old Testament, specifically in the book of Malachi that speaks of the fiery judgment of God. Peter has described suffering as a "fiery ordeal" in verse 12, but then he moves to the subject of God's judgment. In Malachi 3:2-3 we read:

*But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire and like launderer's bleach. He will be like a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.*

Malachi speaks of God using a refining fire to test and purify His people. Then in Malachi 4:1, he talks about another fire—a consuming fire—or another effect of God's fire:

*"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. (NIV)*

Peter draws on this picture in 1 Peter 4:17-18:

*For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?*

I think Peter is reminding us that when we experience this kind of fire, we who are believers know this fire will not ultimately consume us. Its purpose is to test and purify. When it says the righteous person is saved with difficulty, that doesn't mean God can barely get us saved, that He's doing His best and hopefully it will work. No, it means that His process for saving us is through a road of difficulty. The fires that come are difficult and hard, but they're not as bad as the other fires.

If that's how God saves us, Peter is saying—if that's what the fires do for us—what will be the outcome for those who disobey the gospel of God? In two ways I think he's telling us, "You might feel right now like you're on the losing side, you might be tempted to be embarrassed or ashamed, but that's not reality. One day it will be proven that those who reject God, who rebel against Him and ultimately do not submit to His good gospel, they will experience His consuming wrath."

Another thing I think this statement about God's judgment is doing is reminding us that what we're going through has a purifying and refining effect on us. That's not to our shame. Instead, we should glorify God for that. Verse 16 says, "*But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name.*" This reminds us of what Paul says in Romans 5:3-5:

*And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

#### **4. Don't be thrown off course when you suffer for Jesus.**

We should not be surprised when we suffer for Jesus. We should not be discouraged when we suffer for Jesus. We should not be ashamed when we suffer for Jesus. Then Peter wraps it all up with this: don't be thrown off course when you suffer for Jesus. That's not the language he uses. He says this in verse 19: *"So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good."*

That's the path of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, to be a Christian—that we entrust ourselves to God and do what is good. Let's start with the way he describes God. He says the truth behind why we can respond this way is that the One we are entrusting ourselves to is the "faithful Creator." He's reminding us that God is the Author of everything that exists, the Creator and Ruler of all the galaxies, all the universe, the heavens and the earth, the seas and the skies and all that is in them.

He's the Creator of everything that exists and He is not like us. He is not finite, fickle or faithless. He is the faithful Creator. He is trustworthy. Even when what He's doing in this world does not make sense to us, we can have confidence that He is in charge and that He is faithful. We can then entrust ourselves to Him. You entrust someone with something they're going to take care of for you, like, "I trust this person to take care of this money."

In this passage, Peter is saying, "You can entrust yourself to God." So we can respond, "God, You can have my life. I trust You with it." That means we're not thrown off course when the suffering comes. We're not tempted to doubt God and turn away from Him, thinking maybe He's not there or maybe He doesn't know what He's doing. Jesus said that sometimes suffering will do that to people. It's like rocky ground. When the suffering comes, the plant withers away. But Peter is saying, "Don't wither away. Dig in. Trust God. Entrust yourself to Him in faith."

Then he adds, *"...while doing what is good"* in 4:19. That sounds simple. "Go on doing what is good." It reminds us of what he was talking about back in 1 Peter 2:12 when he says, *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us"* (NIV). Then he goes on to apply that by saying one of the ways we do this—one of the ways we go on doing good and living

good lives so they see our good deeds and glorify God—is by submitting to human authorities like emperors and governors, even harsh and unjust masters.

David preached on this back on June 7<sup>th</sup>. If you haven't listened to that sermon, I encourage you to do so. It's called "The Winsome Witness of Civil Obedience." In it he reminded us that Peter was living during the time of Emperor Nero, who had Christians burned. History tells us that Peter was eventually crucified upside down because of his faith. This isn't just theoretical for Peter. This isn't easy preaching for Peter. Christians were already experiencing ridicule and insults. We know what was coming for them was much more than that, including physical persecution, imprisonment and death.

In some ways and to some degree, we've experienced lesser trials than those Peter had experienced, but in our future we can expect more suffering, possibly with even greater intensity. Thus Peter's word to us prepares us to endure through that and we should not be surprised. It's not unusual. We should not be discouraged, because there is reason for rejoicing in a future glory and the Holy Spirit's presence is with us now.

This is also not to our shame when we go through this. Rather, it's a refining fire God is bringing us through. This reminds us too that for those who do not trust in God, there will be coming a consuming fire. Because of all that, we look to our faithful Creator and entrust ourselves to Him. We're not thrown off course. We continue our faith in Him and continue living for Him, because probably, unfortunately, it will get worse before it gets better. Dear Christian, dear church family, with confidence, know it will definitely get much better.

Let's go to our God in prayer.

Jesus, we thank You that You suffered in our place, bearing the fiery wrath of God we deserve, so that we know now that the fires we go through will not consume us, but will purify us. We know we will have a future glory waiting. So God, please help us to hold fast, to cling to You, believing that You will not let us go. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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