

1 Peter 4 • What's the Point of Suffering?

Introduction

It is believed that Peter wrote this letter in 64 A.D., one of the most notable periods of escalating persecution of Christians ever recorded as initiated by Nero, who actually burned Christians alive to illuminate his gardens at night. Peter clearly saw this "fiery ordeal" (v.12) coming upon all Christians throughout the Roman Empire, not just to those in Rome, and so the Spirit addresses through Peter what the true Christian is supposed to do when faced with persecution and suffering. It's important to note that Peter is not talking about "suffering" as in having an illness or experiencing the consequences of sin, but being persecuted simply for one's faith in Christ, for being a Christian. Although most believers of his day had faced local and personal persecution, Peter wanted them to be ready for the severe trials about to come upon the whole church, much in the same way they are now coming upon us in these Last Days.

¹Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ²so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. ⁴In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; ⁵but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

[Read v.1-6]

Q: What does suffering have to do with our personal relationship with Christ?

A: According to v.1, it identifies the true Christian with Christ.

Q: How does this mutual identification come about?

A: Just as His suffering was intended to save us from sin, so our own suffering is intended to cause us to hate sin and love Him all the more.

Point: This is what Peter refers to as arming one's self "with the same purpose", of having the same mind as Christ when it comes to the issue of suffering. It has more to do with the issue of sin than almost anything else.

Q: In v.2-3 we find a second characteristic. What are the key words/phrases describing this characteristic?

A: They're "the rest of the time" and "the time already past". They describe how suffering reminds us that life is short.

Q: What is contrasted as a waste of our time versus being worthy of our time?

A: "The lusts of men" are examples of suffering that is a waste of time because all those things listed in v.3 are earthly pleasures which ultimately result in spiritual death and poverty. Instead, it's worthy of our time to suffer "for the will of God", those things that come about as a result of our pursuing a faithful relationship according to His Word which rejects the lusts of this world.

Q: So according to v.4-6, what is the inevitable result of pursuing the "lusts of men"?

A: Judgment.

Point: A Christian either lives according to the judgment of men or by the judgment of God. There's no middle ground of compromise between them.

Q: What is revealing about how a true Christian is viewed by the world?

A: The worldly – those who by definition are pursuing the lusts of the flesh as specifically identified here – are perplexed as to why true Christians don't join with them in these activities.

Point: TRUE Christians are examples of righteousness – that is, they live NOT according to the world's ways but God's alone and are distinctly recognized as being different because of it.

Q: So how would you summarize Peter's point in v.4-6?

A: It's better to suffer for Christ for the right reasons and ultimately go to be with God than to follow the world for the wrong reasons and ultimately wind up lost.

Q: In this first mini-sermon on suffering, what is the cumulative effect of suffering which identifies us with Christ, that reminds us life is short and points ahead to God's judgment?

A: Suffering purifies the true Christian. It's the work of sanctification which continually seeks to reject the lusts of this world in favor of clinging to His Word and ways alone.

Application: How can the kind of suffering for the kingdom described here parallel the work of sanctification in our life? To what degree do you do what Peter suggests to "arm" yourself "with the same purpose" as Christ?

[Read v.7-11]

⁷The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. ⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Be hospitable to one another without complaint. ¹⁰As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ¹¹Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Q: Even though Peter has been speaking of how to act in the midst of suffering, what is surprising about the things in these verses? What might be the greater concern we're to have even in the midst of suffering?

A: Peter doesn't see spiritual, biblical suffering as something that excuses us from our greater responsibilities to each other. All of the characteristics Peter mentions here are aspects of our continuing to pursue love for one another.

Q: What are we responsible for maintaining on each other's behalf even in the midst of suffering?

1. Prayer. (v.7)
2. "Fervent" love. (v.8) "Fervent" literally means "stretched out", a picture of love never reaching the breaking point.
3. Being "hospitable" (v.9); that is, literally opening not just our hearts but our very homes. It's a picture of sharing our earthly resources.
4. Employing our spiritual gifts as "good stewards" of God's grace (v.10), a picture of service not hinging on merit but out of love and of sharing our spiritual resources.

Point: It's very interesting that although Peter is speaking to the church, that all these things are accomplished without the need for a physical church structure. They all reflect areas of our personal relationships with others which extend well beyond merely "meeting" for church. You can't accomplish these things by going to church once a week, but only in the course of pursuing a personal relationship with the members of the church.

Q: What are all of our activities, even in the midst of suffering and persecution, supposed to ultimately result in?

A: "So that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ". (v.11)

Q: But what do all the things Peter lists that bring Christ glory have in common?

A: They're all things attached to the quality of our love for others, for the quality of our personal relationships.

Q: The word is never used in this passage, but what is a major benefit of suffering described in these verses?

A: Suffering **unifies** the church.

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; ¹³but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. ¹⁴If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; ¹⁶but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. ¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? ¹⁹Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Application: Peter first opens with suffering as a work of personal sanctification which purifies us individually, then he expands to show it as a work of corporate sanctification to purify and unite the whole body of Christ.

[Read v.12-19]

Q: What is the key benefit of suffering as revealed in v.13-14?

A: Suffering glorifies the Lord.

Point: Suffering for the sake of being a King's Kid is something God turns around and ultimately uses to glorify Himself through Christ.

Q: So what should we recognize when it comes to the issue of persecution and suffering?

A: According to v.10, it should come as no surprise to us; in fact, it should be expected.

Point: Trials are a part of God's will and not some kind of warning that we're somehow disobeying Him. They are God's tool for perfecting His own. It's hard to find a biblical example of a man or woman of God who does **NOT** undergo spiritual purification by means of trials and suffering.

Q: According to v.13-14, what should our attitude be when it comes to suffering?

A: To actually rejoice in trials.

*For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,
Philippians 1:29*

Point: The suffering we now endure is actually nothing more than a prelude to the glory we will share in at His return. The "payback", so to speak, is not guaranteed for this life, but the one to come.

Q: What does it mean that "the Spirit of glory and of God RESTS on you"?

A: This could literally be translated, "the Spirit of God rests with refreshing power". It's the image of what happened to Daniel's companions when they were thrown into the fiery furnace – God not only delivered them, but walked with them in the midst of it all.

Q: How do v.15-16 address the wrong attitude Christians sometimes take towards trials?

A: Christians sometimes are incorrectly ashamed to undergo trials, falsely believing they've come about as punishment or judgment.

Point: There's a big difference between suffering because you've sinned and are experiencing the consequences of that sin, and suffering solely for the sake of being a Christian.

Q: In Peter's day of his originally writing this letter, what happened annually to test every Christian's loyalty to Christ?

A: Roman law required every citizen to pledge loyalty to the emperor by presenting an incense offering at an authorized altar and proclaiming, "Caesar is Lord". Real-life persecution came to thousands if not millions of Christians in those days who refused to bow before Caesar and who were, at the least, publicly humiliated for bearing the name of Christ.

Q: So what actually results from suffering, even in the midst of the worst persecution according to v.17-18?

A: The true Christian is a witness. They have the opportunity to preach and be an example of the Gospel.

Point: *The prophets and apostles never interpreted persecution – even to the point of being thrown into prison – as an excuse to focus on themselves, but always saw it as merely another opportunity to preach and witness to the Gospel. Our personal suffering never absolves us from the duty to minister to others.*

Q: So what is one of the greater messages God is sending when suffering is allowed to take place in the true Christian's life?

A: It's evidence that God will someday judge the lost.

Point: *Christians have trials now and glory later; the lost have their glory now and their suffering later. The only "heaven" the lost sinner will know is on earth today!*

Q: What is another unique, greater work of suffering?

A: According to v.17, God begins judgment at His own house. Persecution in the name of Christ is but the beginning of a greater judgment coming upon the lost. It has eternal overtones for everyone.

"Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary." So they started with the elders who were before the temple.

Ezekiel 9:6

Q: The old saying is whenever you come across the word "therefore" as in v.19, look to see what's it's "there for". What is Peter's overall conclusion of what to do about suffering and trials?

A: Entrust yourself to God.

Q: What is unique about the Greek word here translated "entrust"?

A: It's actually a banking term describing the act of leaving an amount on deposit for safekeeping.

Point: *God sends the fiery trial to burn away the dross and we commit ourselves to Him for safekeeping, knowing He will not fail us.*

Overall Application

- *Christians will go through fiery trials before Christ returns.*
- *The world will not get better.*
- *Attitudes towards Christians will not improve, but only worsen.*
- *The world has always hated Christ and will continue to hate His name.*
- *If we identify ourselves with the name of Christ, the world will hate us.*
(See John 14:18-21)

So although it's true we can escape persecution by compromising, it's also true that by doing so we'll miss the blessing and glory that comes with sharing in Christ's sufferings.