

SUFFERING FOR JESUS

1 PETER 4:12-19

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I grew up in a Methodist church, and one of the things that I appreciate about that part of my religious heritage is the man largely credited with beginning this church movement, John Wesley. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN WESLEY) He was truly a committed Christian. He was an evangelist and a preacher in England in the 1700s. The historians figure that he preached about 42,000 sermons during his 53 years of ministry. He often spoke four or five times in a day with as many as 30,000 people listening to him at one time. This was, of course, before there were any electronic means of voice amplification.

What many people do not realize is that Wesley faced a considerable amount of opposition. In his first ten years of ministry he was attacked by a mob about once month. Often people were throwing sticks, dirt, and stones at him. Frequently he was threatened with death. On a few occasions he preached with blood running down his face as a result of stones or other objects that struck him.

On one occasion Wesley, who was sometimes called the horseback preacher (JOHN WESLEY HORSEBACK), was riding along on his horse between meetings when he suddenly realized that it had been three days since anyone had thrown anything at him. As he recorded in his diary, he stopped his horse and thought, **“Can it be that I have sinned and am backslidden?”** He got down off of his horse, fell to his knees, and started praying that God would show him if there was something wrong with his life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

At that moment there was a farmer working nearby in a field on the other side of the hedge. He heard John Wesley praying out loud and looked over the hedge to see what was going on. He recognized the famous preacher, and, being an ungodly guy, he grabbed a stone and lobbed it at him. He missed, but Wesley later wrote that he jumped to his feet and shouted, **“Thank God, it’s all right. I still have [God’s] presence!”**

It may not be very often that somebody throws a stone at us because we believe in Jesus. But if we are truly following Christ, chances are good that somebody is not too happy with us. It may be a family member who harasses us for not doing what we used to do. It may be a friend who doesn't like it that we don't party like we once did. It may be a fellow worker who is ticked off that we will not lie for him. It may be a boss who thinks that church is a waste of time and who schedules us to work on Sunday morning just to be spiteful.

The Apostle Peter knew about these kinds of challenges. In his first letter he was writing to Christians in the first century living in what we know today as Turkey. They were faced with suffering, most of it due to persecution for their decision to become part of this new movement called Christianity. Peter wanted to help them to know how to handle this suffering. In our passage today he focuses upon a proper response to persecution.

If we truly follow Jesus, we are going to meet opposition at times, too. So we also need to know how to respond to persecution. What should be our perspective when we are suffering for Jesus?

I.

The author tells us first in v. 12 of 1 Peter #4, p. 1016 in the black Bibles, that we should EXPECT SUFFERING. (PROJECTOR ON--- EXPECT SUFFERING) **“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.”**

There are some Christians who have given a false picture that the gospel of Christ says that if we only trust in Jesus as our Savior, God will solve all of our problems. There are some who preach that if we just have enough faith, God is bound to make us healthy and wealthy.

If that is true, then the apostles and Jesus really messed up. For most of them were killed because of their faith. None of them seemed to have much in terms of the world's earthly goods. Jesus Himself rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He stayed in borrowed homes. He died on a borrowed cross, and He was buried in a borrowed tomb.

The Lord has promised us an abundant and meaningful life. But He has not promised us a problem-free life. His primary concern is not to give us a comfortable life. He is much more interested in making us holy, and He will use problems and trials and persecutions to pull that off.

All of the leaders of the New Testament testify to that proposition. Jesus told His disciples (JOHN 15:20) in John #15 v. 20, **“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”** If you are serious about following Me, count on some opposition.

James (JAMES 1:2) said in his little epistle, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when--- not if, but when--- you meet trials of various kinds...”** Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12 (2 TIMOTHY 3:12), **“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”**

Now Peter says the same thing. Don't be surprised at the fiery trial that comes to you. Expect some suffering. It comes with the territory. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Keep in mind that the apostle was writing to churches that were composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Persecution would probably not have come as a big surprise to the Jewish believers. Jews already had a long history of being persecuted for their Jewishness. They were living in Gentile territory, and their worship of one God was markedly different from the pagan idolatry of everyone else. But now these Jewish Christians were going to have opposition not only from the Gentiles but also from their fellow Jews.

The Gentile Christians were probably not accustomed to religious persecution. There were about a thousand different religious systems in the Roman Empire at this time. The government tolerated most of them. The only thing that many of the emperors required was that there be an occasional expression of worship directed toward the emperor and the Roman gods.

To people who worshipped many gods that was no big deal. Just add one or two more to the list. But to Gentiles who had decided to follow Jesus, that was an issue. For Christianity meant that there was only one God who could be worshipped, and faithful Christians could not worship the emperor or the Roman gods. As the end of the first century approached, that became more of a problem. The Romans began to regard these Christians as disloyal subjects. They began to persecute the followers of Jesus.

The situation is not that different today. We have all kinds of religions and denominations in our country. As far as the cultural leaders are concerned, this is OK as long as you are tolerant and as long as you keep your religion in your churches and in your own homes. But if you try to impose your beliefs on society, then we have a problem. For if you are going to be an American today, you must not only accept alternative lifestyles, you must embrace them.

Thus it is that a Christian high school teacher in West Point, Virginia, was fired last December when he refused to use the male pronoun to refer to a female student who was identifying as a male. The teacher avoided using any pronouns to address pupils in order to accommodate the transgender student. But he was fired. (*World online*, 10/8/2019) A similar thing happened at Shawnee State University in Ohio last year when a Christian philosophy professor refused to use feminine pronouns to refer to a male student who identified as a female. He said that to do so would contradict his Christian convictions. Last month a federal judge recommended that the Christian professor's complaint be dismissed.

Peter also reminds us that suffering has a divine purpose. It is for testing. He calls it a "fiery trial." Back in #1 v. 7 he said that suffering produces testing by fire which results in something more precious than gold. The words that he was using were those that described the ancient method of refining metals. Metal ore was exposed to fire and melted down. The impure junk was poured off. What was left in the end was the pure metal--- gold or silver or other metals.

Peter is saying that suffering and persecution in the Christian life are like fire. Suffering hurts, but it serves a purpose. It helps us to get rid of the junk in our lives so that we can get down to the real gold. Suffering makes us as a church, and as individuals, more mature Christians. It makes us better.

Thomas a Kempis was a godly man who lived 700 years ago. He wrote a little book called *Imitation of Christ*. In it he wrote these words that are as true today as they were in the first century: **"It is good that we at times endure opposition and that we are evilly and untruly judged, when our actions and intentions are good. Often such experiences promote humility and protect us from [pride]. For then we seek God's witness in the heart."**

II.

Not only should we Christians expect suffering, but we should also REJOICE IN SUFFERING. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. REJOICE IN SUFFERING) That is the message of vv. 13 & 14 and 16-18. Verse 13 says, **"But**

rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." James (JAMES 1:2) says in the second verse of his book, **"Count it all joy, my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds..."**

A.

How can we rejoice in suffering that is somehow caused by our determination to follow Jesus? The first thing that we must do is to remember the future glory that awaits us. (II. A. REJOICE IN SUFFERING BECAUSE OF FUTURE GLORY) Notice what Peter says in the second part of v. 13: **"...rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."** Christ is coming back, and things will be so wonderful at His return that we will not have any cause for regret about suffering that we had on this side of the grave.

Paul says a similar thing in Romans #8 v. 18. (ROMANS 8:18) He writes, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."**

When Christ returns to earth, when we get to participate in ruling in His kingdom here on earth, things are going to be so great, so wonderful, that the problems that we have now will seem like nothing. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Bible is encouraging Christians to endure suffering--- even to rejoice in it--- because of the promise of a future reward, because of the promise of a glorious eternity. Christians are supposed to view trials from the perspective of eternity. There is something out there that is so much better and bigger than we can imagine that it ought to help us to minimize the challenges that we have now. We ought to deny self for the present with the conviction that we will have a long term payoff.

That is a tough message for our society. We are taught in so many ways to expect instant pain relief. There are all of these medications that are advertised that promise to make us feel better. We watch TV programs where the problems of life are solved in half an hour. Commercials promise us that the right deodorant or the right mouthwash or the right perfume or the right brand of sneakers will make us instantly desirable. We hear politicians tell us that if we just elect them, life is sure to be better.

The reality is that the pain does not always go away, our problems are not so easily resolved, we are not all so desirable, and our own economic situations are not so quickly improved. Life is often a struggle. We may face depression and temptations from drugs and alcohol and other addictions. We seldom find instant relief.

But instant relief is not what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus followed a path that involved suffering in this life. He died on a cross so that there might be a future glory--- for Him and for us. He challenged those who would follow Him to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him. There may be some suffering that results from doing that, but there is the promise of a meaningful life now and a wonderful life in the future. In the midst of present suffering we need to keep our eyes on that glorious future.

B.

Not only should we rejoice because of future glory, but also we should rejoice BECAUSE OF PRESENT GLORY. (I. A. B. BECAUSE OF PRESENT GLORY) Such is the message of vv. 14-16. **“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”** A more literal rendering of that last clause would be: **“...because the glory, even the Spirit of God, rests upon you.”**

In order to understand what Peter is saying, we need to have an appreciation for the Biblical background of the term “glory.” “Glory” is often used in the Bible to refer to **“a visible manifestation of God’s character.”** (GLORY DEFINITION) When the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, they were led by a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud by day. When the tabernacle was completed, the cloud settled upon it.

In Exodus 40 v. 35 (EXODUS 40:35) we are told, **“And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”** There was a manifestation of God visible in this central place of worship. Apparently the people saw a bright and shining cloud there.

When Christ entered the world, the Apostle John (JOHN 1:14) declared, **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** Jesus was a visible manifestation of God.

Now Peter says, **“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”** (PROJECTOR OFF) When we Christians are persecuted for the sake of Christ, God’s glory rests upon us. That situation of suffering is an opportunity to show forth the character of God before a watching world. If we respond correctly in that situation, the Holy Spirit fills us

and gives us the opportunity to show forth to the world something about what God is like. People will see God in us. We become a visible manifestation of God.

We saw an example of that a couple of weeks ago when we considered the killing of five missionaries in Ecuador by the Auca Indians in 1956. It was a tragedy on one hand. Yet it became an event that motivated scores of young people to go into missionary service. It also affected the Auca Indians themselves, and most of the tribe eventually became followers of Jesus.

Back in our passage, if we skip ahead to v. 16, we read, **“Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”** The name “Christian” appears only three times in the entire Bible. This is one of them. It appears twice in the Book of Acts. From its usage there it is evident that the term was used in a negative, derogatory sense by unbelievers. Peter seems to reflect that understanding here. He says, “Don’t worry if people make fun of you by calling you ‘Christians.’ Be proud of that label. It does accurately describe you.”

When I was in college at a secular university, I lived in a dormitory. Most of the men on my floor were not Christians, but several of us were known for our Christian commitment. Some of the pagans began calling us “the relahgis.” A couple of us would be walking down the hall, and someone would say, “Here come the relahgis.” They used it as a negative term, but we wore it as a badge of honor. We were glad that they could tell that there was something different about our values and behavior.

A few decades after Peter wrote this letter, Pliny the Younger (PROJECTOR ON--- ASIA MINOR) was the Roman governor of the northern part of Asia Minor, to which Peter had been writing his letter. Pliny was governor of the Roman province of Bithynia. (BITHYNIA MAP) He began hearing bad stories about these Christians. He investigated them but could find no evidence of any crimes that they had committed. So he concluded that they were part of some religious superstition. But he was unsure about what to do with them.

Some of the Bithynians were worked up about these Christians. So Pliny set up courts to try them. Three times Christians who were called into court were asked if they were Christians. If they answered “Yes,” they were executed. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But Pliny had doubts, or perhaps guilt, about this. He wrote to the Emperor Trajan about 112 AD to ask him if the mere name "Christian" was sufficient to justify executing these people. The emperor sent back a reply that it was enough.

So the descendants of the readers of Peter's letter, and perhaps even a few of the readers themselves, came to know in a vivid way what it meant to suffer as a Christian. Peter had written, **"...let him glorify God in that name."**

C.

We should rejoice in suffering because of future glory, because of present glory, and BECAUSE OF GOD'S JUDGMENT. (PROJECTOR ON---II. B. C. BECAUSE OF GOD'S JUDGMENT) In vv. 17 & 18 the apostle makes reference to two aspects of God's judgment--- the judgment of believers and the judgment of unbelievers. **"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'"**

In the Old Testament there are numerous references to the fact that before Christ returns as Messiah and King of Israel, there will be a purification and judgment of the Jews. Here Peter says that this same principle of purification is at work in the church. God is using suffering to make the church become pure and strong and mature.

If we look at the history of the Christian church, we can see many times when this has proved to be true. We have seen it in recent years in mainland China. Not only has the church survived Communism, but it has grown tremendously. Missiologists today say that the country which has the fastest growing church is Iran, where Christianity is strongly opposed by the government and the Islamic culture.

God's judgment for the church as a whole and for us as individual Christians means purification and growth to maturity. Suffering and persecution are part of that process.

But if God does that with Christians, what is going to happen to unbelievers? If God allows us to sometimes experience difficult suffering, what will happen to those who have rejected Christ as their Savior, and to those who persecute Christians? The Bible says that they will suffer eternal punishment. In 2 Thessalonians #1 beginning in v. 6 (2 THESSALONIANS 1:6-7) the Apostle Paul writes, **"...since**

indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels (2 THESSALONIANS 1:8-9) in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction..."

We can rejoice in the face of suffering for Jesus by remembering that a much better fate awaits us in the coming judgment than those who continue in opposition to us and to the gospel of Christ.

III.

As Christians we ought to expect suffering, and we ought to rejoice in suffering, but v. 15 tells us, DON'T ASK FOR SUFFERING. (III. DON'T ASK FOR SUFFERING) **"But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler."** We Christians should not give unbelievers reason for criticizing or persecuting us for anything other than our righteous actions as Christians.

From the categories that Peter mentions in v. 15, it appears that some of these Christians came from pretty rough backgrounds. It is interesting that he even needs to say something to these Christians to warn them against murder and theft. Yet James wrote in #4 (JAMES 4:2) of his epistle in v. 2, **"You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel."** Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne is quoted as once saying (ROBERT MURRAY MCCHEYNE), **"The seed of every sin known to man is in my heart."**

About 25 years ago a seminary friend from India was making a tour of classmates he had known in school. After visiting with us in Connecticut, we dropped him off at a half way point to New York City at a rest stop. There we met James, who was an associate pastor in New Jersey. James was also in our class, although I did not know him well. The three of us chatted, and then they were on their way.

About a year later I was bringing my boys to the Bronx Zoo. As we passed this rest stop, I remembered my meeting with these two classmates. At that exact moment, I heard the announcer on the NYC news station say that Pastor James had just been implicated in the murder of two of his parishioners. It turns out that James had befriended an elderly couple in his church. When they inherited a large amount of money, he convinced them to put his name on their bank account. Money started disappearing. Then one day the elderly couple disappeared. A couple of months later their bodies were discovered in a wooded area in Pennsylvania. James was called in for questioning by the Pennsylvania authorities. After

stopping at a Christian bookstore and getting a bookmark containing the Twenty-third Psalm, he went down the road and rammed his car into a bridge abutment. The *New York Times* the next day contained the sad details. **“The seed of every sin known to man is in my heart.”** We should not underestimate either the power of sin or the power of God.

The term that the apostle uses in v. 15 for “meddler” is a unique word. (PROJECTOR OFF) It is what we call a “hapax,” meaning that it is the only time that it appears in the New Testament. It is a compound word that literally means “one who oversees what belongs to another.” Exactly what that means is a little uncertain. Some scholars have suggested that it may refer to a Christian who unwisely and improperly interferes in a non-Christian’s life and tries to make him or her live as a Christian. We can be guilty of that. We can try to make unbelievers live according to the Bible. But in those situations we lose sight of the basic issue, which is that person’s spiritual lostness. Our goal with that person should not be to make him a better unbeliever but rather to point him or her to Jesus.

Peter’s main concern in this verse is that Christians not fall into the trap of bringing suffering upon themselves for wrong reasons. When a Christian suffers for doing something stupid or sinful or unwise, he or she cannot expect to be blessed by God for any suffering that results from those actions.

IV.

The last point that the author makes is that Christians must TRUST GOD IN SUFFERING. (PROJECTOR ON-- IV. TRUST GOD IN SUFFERING) Verse 19 says, **“Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”** The prerequisite is living according to the will of God and doing what is right. When we Christians experience persecution or suffering, we need to first compare our lives and behavior with the Word of God. If our conduct is out of alignment, then we better not think that we are suffering for the sake of righteousness.

If our conduct is in line with what the Bible says, then we should entrust ourselves to God. The verb here is the same one that Jesus is recorded as using in Luke 23 as He died upon the cross: **“Into your hands I commit (or entrust) my spirit.”** “Entrust” is a word that the Greeks used for depositing something valuable with a friend for safekeeping. Here the object to be deposited is our soul, which represents our life as a whole.

The friend, or person, who becomes the guardian, is God--- the faithful Creator. The one who had the power to create us and who was faithful to save us will sustain us. Even if we lose our earthly lives, He has promised to care for us. He has promised great rewards and future glory for us.

It is easy to live the Christian life when everything is going well. But how do we respond when we encounter suffering? Do we expect it? Do we rejoice in it? Do we trust God? How we handle suffering for Jesus is a measure of the depth and maturity of our commitment to God.

Sullivan Ballou (SULLIVAN BALLOU) was a major in the Union Army. He had been a Republican legislator in Rhode Island and a supporter of Abraham Lincoln. Now he was serving as an officer in the Rhode Island militia.

A week before the first Battle of Bull Run in July of 1861 he wrote a letter to his wife of six years. (BALLOU LETTER) He said, **“My Very Dear Sarah: The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days--- perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more...**

“I have no misgivings about or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing, perfectly willing, to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this Government and to pay that debt...

“Sarah, my love for you is deathless: it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break, and yet my love for country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on, with all these chains to the battle-field...

“If I do not [return], my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle-field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you... Sarah, do not mourn me dead: think I am gone, and wait for me, for we shall meet again... Sullivan” We find a hint here at the last that he had a trusting faith in God.

Major Ballou was killed one week later at the first Battle of Bull Run. (PROJECTOR OFF) I suspect that all of us care about our country and appreciate those who have laid down their lives in defense of it. If we are willing to do that for a country, how much more should we be willing to lay down our lives for the One who died for us that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Seldom are we American Christians really called upon to sacrifice ourselves in this country. But are we at least willing to speak a word of witness at school, at work, in the neighborhood? Are we willing to speak up for what is right and to do what is right before God in the face of wrongdoing? Is it too much to ask that we deny ourselves for the sake of a more lasting glory?

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18)