

1PETER 4:12-19 CBC 16.8.2020am

We're studying 1Peter, and today we're rejoining this letter at ch.4:12. Peter has just come to the end of a section as v.11 indicates ("Amen"). He's beginning to draw the letter to a close. And now he sums up what he has been teaching us throughout the letter about living for Christ in a hostile world, and especially about how to respond when we suffer for Christ.

We may wonder why Peter makes so much of suffering for Christ. Partly he's responding to the situation his readers were facing. But also it's because this was the great sticking point for him in his early days of discipleship. It was when Jesus began to speak about suffering that Peter said, "That's enough Lord! I don't want to hear about that." His fear of suffering was perhaps the greatest obstacle to Peter's own growth as a Christian.

So here's something Peter learned the hard way and now he wants to protect the flock of God by sharing what God has taught Him: how it's possible for Christians to stand firm in the face of persecution and pressure. That's of vital importance for all of us. None of us likes to be alienated. We all know that simply to name the name of Jesus will often cause a degree of coolness, and so we think twice. But Peter shows us how to draw on God's grace.

Read 1Peter 4:12-19 ...

What we've just read is a miniature textbook on what to think and how to respond in moments of suffering for Christ. Peter gives us four principles:

1. DON'T BE SURPRISED IF YOU SUFFER AS A CHRISTIAN, BUT REJOICE vv.12-14

v.12: "*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*" From the way some people react, you'd think it's astonishing that Christians would ever have pain in their lives. But Jesus said in this world we'll have trouble. Specifically He said that "If they persecuted me, they'll persecute you" (Jn 15:20). We don't go out of our way to annoy people, but if we're faithful to Christ it would be very strange if we never at any time face hostility or rejection. You don't even have to be preachy – your very way of living makes people uncomfortable.

So I need to get it into my mind that the normal Christian life includes opposition. Peter doesn't sugar-coat it: he speaks of "the fiery ordeal." It burns us. That hasn't really been our experience in Britain recently, but Peter is saying that what we consider normal is NOT normal at all. Our comfortable Christian lives are a strange abnormality – a temporary blip. But standing for Christ is becoming more difficult. If you want to be faithful to Christ as a doctor, nurse, teacher, in many other careers – even as a pastor in a mainstream denomination – expect to face increasing difficulties. If you're surprised that you suffer, you're not thinking in a biblical way about who you are and what God is doing in your life now.

Because God hasn't lost control of the situation. He's testing us (v.12), proving the reality of His work of grace in us, and refining us (compare 1:6-7). So when you face opposition, be encouraged! The *agents* of testing are people and forces opposed to God; but behind them is the loving hand of our Father. His purpose is to clean up our rebellious hearts, and to make us shine more brightly.

So don't be surprised – rather, *rejoice* (v.13)! Peter's not saying persecution is fun. But he says there IS a reason to rejoice. And if you grasp the suffering but not the rejoicing then you're missing something that God is doing. Here's why we rejoice: because in our suffering we're close to Jesus.

We “*participate in the sufferings of Christ*” (v.13) because when people persecute us they’re really persecuting our Lord Himself (compare Acts 9:4).

And here’s the promise: if you’re suffering for Christ now, you’ve got assurance of sharing in His glory. We’re united to Him in both! v.13: “*But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*” A day is coming when we’ll be experiencing such glory we’ll find it hard, if not impossible, to remember how great our present pain feels.

I’m sure that as Peter wrote these words he remembered what he’d heard Jesus say (Mt 5:11-12): “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven!*”

Maybe that sounded strange to Peter at the time, but he learned to live it: Acts 5:41 “*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*” That little group included Peter. They’d just been flogged, but their desire to be like Jesus was stronger than their desire to save their skins. That’s what Peter is calling to: to love Jesus more than our job, our comfort, our family, even our skins. This isn’t masochism, it’s living with eternity in view.

So Peter says (v.14) when you suffer for the name of Christ, don’t worry. He hasn’t abandoned you. His Spirit rests on you, and His Spirit is the Spirit of glory. Do we really get that? Then why are we so afraid of opening our mouths in case we’re insulted? Think of all the blessing we’re not getting! God draws especially close to His persecuted children.

Let me show you something striking. Throughout this letter Peter uses the language of exile – Christians are strangers and aliens. Any Jew hearing of exile would think of Babylon, where the Jewish nation had endured exile for seventy years. In fact, in 5:13 Peter actually writes: “*She who is in Babylon ... sends you her greetings*” - “Babylon” there is code for the church being in exile in a hostile land. And alongside the language of exile and Babylon, Peter now writes of a fiery ordeal facing his readers. It all points to Daniel 3 – the story of three faithful Jews thrown into a fiery furnace because they wouldn’t worship Nebuchadnezzar’s image. And when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fire, he could see a fourth figure (Daniel 3:25). The Son of God was with those saints in Babylon. And He’s with us too in the furnace, and invites us to have fellowship with Him in the flames. That’s where we’ll meet Him.

They’re challenging words for those who live in comfort, aren’t they? But they’re deeply comforting words for those who are really suffering for Jesus. I wonder if there’s anyone listening on the internet who is suffering terrible persecution. What would Jesus say to you? Come, my dear friend, and have fellowship with me in the fire. That’s where you can be closest to me.

2. BUT BE SURE YOU’RE REALLY SUFFERING FOR CHRIST, NOT SIMPLY AS A NUISANCE! vv.15-16

v.15: “*If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.*” Peter is saying, “Be sure you’re suffering for your faith, not for your failings.” Suffering for your failings doesn’t prove your loyalty to Christ. It shows only that you haven’t left your former sins behind. Peter doesn’t want people simply being nuisances and saying “I’m suffering for Christ!” We’re not called to be spiritual bulls in this world’s china shop.

v.15 is an interesting list. Don’t be a murder, thief, any other kind of criminal ... or even a meddler! Churches don’t have many murderers – but how about meddlers?

And then he adds (v.16), “*However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*” Peter has a special feeling for us here. He knew what it was to be ashamed of Christ, and he denied Him. Peter is saying, “I know what that’s like, I’ve been there and I’ve failed. And I want to say to *you*, Don’t be ashamed of Christ.”

There’s an amazing statement in Hebrews 2:11: Jesus is not ashamed of us – though many times we give Him reason! On the cross He despised the shame for us, so surely we can bear reproach for Him and not be ashamed. I am a Christian – I glory in that name. All the ego-boosting approval this world could give me cannot compare with the joy I have in belonging to Christ.

Peter’s first readers were on their way to being treated as the scum of society, fit only to be put to death. And his message is: Don’t be a murderer or a criminal, BUT when you are ranked alongside murderers and criminals as social pariahs, do not be ashamed, for then you are like Christ who was Himself crucified between murderers and criminals – that’s Peter’s message. So rather than being ashamed of the name “Christian”, see that you live up to it! BECAUSE:

3. REMEMBER THE END TO WHICH HISTORY IS LEADING vv.17-18

vv.17-18: “*For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, (quoting Proverbs 11:31), ‘If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’*” What Peter is saying is, “I want you to put your sufferings for Christ in context.” God has come into the world in Christ, and nobody can escape the consequences. God has determined to have a holy people for Himself, and to destroy sin. And He will do both. So Peter picks up an Old Testament principle (e.g., Jeremiah 25; Ezekiel 9) that the Lord deals with the sins of His people first, before turning to deal with the sins of the rest of the world.

So He comes to refine His people, burning away the dross – and that’s painful enough (v.18). But then He sweeps on, beyond the walls of the church. And there, the fire is pure judgement, for the Lord will destroy all sin so that it can’t enter His New Creation. He’s begun that work in us, and He will carry it through the world.

So the fire of judgement leaves no-one untouched. But where it refines God’s children, it devastates His enemies. And how terrible that must be. If the cost of *following* Christ is great, the cost of *rejecting* Christ is greater – and without any reward.

And that makes this difference: when people are hostile to you, you can see them in the light of what awaits them. And instead of responding with similar hostility, you can respond with pity as Jesus did when He wept over Jerusalem. And you can pray, “Lord, have mercy on these people. They don’t really know what they’re doing.”

4. COMMIT YOURSELF TO GOD AND GO ON DOING GOOD v.19

v.19: “*So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*” That’s the punchline! We can’t always understand what God allows to happen, but we can trust Him. Peter says our hope isn’t in being able to figure everything out! Our hope is in our faithful Creator who has promised to supply everything we need.

So do what Jesus did. Say, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). “Commit” is a banking term: to deposit for safe keeping (see 2Timothy 1:12). And here’s a wonderful thing: When you deposit your life in God’s bank, you always receive amazing interest on your investment!

So rest in that and get busy. Don't waste your time trying to figure out things you can't figure out, and don't be paralysed by anxiety, because our Father is the faithful Creator who rules over everything Peter has talked about, so you can give yourself to the work He's called you to do. With that kind of Father, we have no need to worry!

CONCLUSION

Let me close with this. What we've studied today could seem inward looking – but it's not! What God does in our lives is never just about us. Think of this: when we suffer now, it is for our refining so that we shine more brightly. But that attracts more people to Christ! The church grows! In other words: When we follow the Son of God into the fire, we do what He did: we bring many others with us to glory.

PRAYER: Father God, if we suffer for Christ, help us by Your Spirit so to rejoice in Him, that even our tormentors may realise their thirst, and turn to Jesus for living water. For Your glory's sake, Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- When are you most tempted to be ashamed of Christ?
- How might the principles found in this passage embolden you to be a faithful witness?