

Suffering for the Faith

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1 Peter 4:12–19

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. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. – 1 Peter 4:12-13

Suffering. We'd rather avoid the topic, I think, just as we'd rather avoid suffering. And yet suffering is the crucible of faith, the refining fire that burns away the silliness, the superficiality, the sugar-coated spirituality, and leaves behind the pure gold of Word and Spirit-created faith.

Suffering is the way of Christ. Jesus came to suffer as the "Man of Sorrows, acquainted with suffering." His suffering was our suffering. Indeed, no man has ever suffered to the degree Jesus suffered. We suffer for ourselves. He suffers for us. We suffer for our own sins. He suffers for the sins of the world. We suffer as one man, one woman. He suffers as collective humanity, Everyman, all of humanity as one suffering Man. His suffering was the great necessity of His mission – it was the will of God, it was prophesied in the Scripture, it was necessary the Christ must suffer and enter into His glory. The way to the right hand of the Father was the way of the cross, of death, of the tomb, of suffering.

Jesus knows what it's like to suffer. He understands human pain to His own bones. He experienced the anguish of God's silence. He knows the darkness of facing one's death alone. He knows our pain; He identifies with our suffering. He is one with our suffering and He is one with us when we suffer.

Christians have no special exemption from suffering. They are not spared the "great tribulation" of this life. Contrary to what you might hear from prosperity preachers with their pie-eyed optimism and their empty promises, to be in God's favor does not mean that you are exempted from suffering. Baptism affords you no "get out of jail free" card, no easy detour around the valley of the shadow of death, no way to avoid the cross. It is a fundamental error of thinking and piety to believe that because Jesus suffered for us, we are not going to suffer.

Jesus' beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount tell us otherwise. It is mourning, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the persecuted are called "blessed."

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it come upon you to test you." Peter is writing to scattered, suffering Christians. His first letter is addressed to the "exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithinia." We don't know where they began but they were suddenly scattered all over Asia Minor, presumably by persecution. They were forced to leave their homes, their livelihoods, even their families. And even in exile they weren't safe, but were easy targets as the outsiders, the refugees, those "Christians." They literally had bulls-eyes on their backs.

The suffering that Peter is speaking of is not the general kind of suffering that humanity in general experiences as the result of living in a fallen world and our own inherent sinfulness. St. Paul talks about that kind of suffering in the book of Romans when he says we rejoice in our sufferings as Christians because suffering produces patient endurance and character and hope. As believers in a crucified and risen Savior, we know that suffering and death are not the last word, but our present sufferings do not compare with the glory that will be revealed in us on the day we rise from the dead and are seen in the glory of Jesus.

The kind of suffering that Peter is speaking of here is suffering for the faith. Suffering for being a Christian. It certainly meant the loss of their home and a hasty trip as refugees to another place. It meant inconvenience and hardship, living off the good graces of others. It may have meant arrest and imprisonment, torture, perhaps even death. Of that list of the first apostles we heard in the book of Acts, only John died a natural death at an old age.

They could have spared themselves all this trouble by simply going quiet. Publicly renounce the faith while having two fingers crossed behind their backs. Just kind of treasure Jesus in their hearts while publicly going with the pagan flow. But they really could not do that. And they would not do that. Their baptisms marked them as soldiers of the Crucified One, they would not betray their commander in chief, they would not go AWOL. They would not betray their Lord who had died for them. They would not betray their heavenly birth in Baptism that made them priests to God, holy, elect, chosen to declare the praises of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light.

With his letter Peter was preparing them for what lay ahead. There was a fiery ordeal coming to test them. They should not be surprised when it happens. Nor should you when your time

comes to endure suffering, hardship, or loss because of the Name of Jesus. And it will come to us too, as crazy as that may sound today. We live in relative peace and liberty. We have the freedom to assemble here this morning. We have the freedom to express our views and beliefs in the marketplace of ideas. We have the freedom to practice the faith we hold. We don't have to scurry off to church in fearful silence and hide behind closed, locked doors as they do in many countries around the world today. We don't cast an anxious look at the stranger sitting next to us, wondering if he has a bomb or a weapon. In many parts of the world, the greeter at the door of the church is not there to make sure you have a bulletin and are greeted with a warm smile and a friendly handshake. He's there to make sure that you aren't armed and dangerous.

I don't know if I will experience such things in my lifetime. The Christians of the next generation may. The looming clouds are on the horizon. But for the moment, the suffering we endure is more the suffering of insult, ridicule, loss of friendships, maybe discrimination, certainly loss of credibility. Even such light and momentary "sufferings" as those, if I can even call those suffering, have caused many to wilt and fall away. Jesus warned of the seed that falls on shallow soil, the Word that is heard in a shallow, emotional way, where initial joy and enthusiasm wilts under the noonday heat of persecution. Superficial Christianity cannot survive. Peter reminds us all that the devil is still a prowling lion, looking for someone to devour. The predators always go for the weak ones in the herd. The isolated ones who are separated from the pack.

The devil is resistible and the time of testing is survivable. Peter says, "Resist him, standing firm in the faith." Not "your faith" as you have in the ESV translation. The Faith as in the faith once delivered to the saints. The objective and certain confession of our trust in Jesus Christ as Son of God and Savior. The Faith as in the creed we confess. The devil would use those times of testing as times of temptation to cause you to doubt and fear and waver and wonder if God is really in charge here or even if God actually exists. He will cause you to doubt God's verdict in Christ, that you stand justified before Him on account of Jesus' righteousness. He will cause you to doubt your Baptism, that it saves you through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He will tempt you to look inward instead of outward, to look to self instead of Christ, to fix your eyes on what you do instead of what Christ has done.

To suffer for being a Christian is a great gift. In the military, we give medals and ribbons to those who are valiant in battle. Peter says if you suffer for being a Christian, don't be ashamed,

glorify God in the Name of Jesus and entrust your lives to your faithful Maker and Redeemer. He will see you through your time of trial and testing.

Judgment begins with the household of God, Peter reminds us. Oh, we didn't want to hear that, did we? We want to hear about how all the heathen, unbelieving masses are going to be judged and finally get what's coming to them. We want to hear about God's justice and how He is going to set everything square in the end and like the old western movies, the bad guys always get it and never live to the end of the movie. We don't want to hear that judgment begins with us, the family of God.

God uses persecution and suffering. They are tools in His hand. He doesn't cause it in the sense of stirring it up. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh do that. But God uses it. He uses the heat of persecution as a refining fire to burn away the junk, the superficiality, the trite and trivial, and go for the gold, the nuggets of genuine faith in Christ. In the book of Acts, persecution energized the church. When they were imprisoned and beaten for preaching the name of Jesus, the Peter and John rejoiced and gave thanks that they were considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. When Paul was plucked on the road to Damascus and made an apostle, the Lord said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

In the book of Acts, persecution is the engine that drives the spread of the Gospel. The apostles and the believers are scattered and the Word of the Lord spreads like seed blowing in the wind. The Russian dictator Vladimir Lenin tried to get rid of Christianity and purge it from Russia. But he finally concluded that Christianity is like a nail. The harder you drive it, the deeper it goes. Suffering for Jesus' sake drives faith even deeper. It galvanizes and tempers faith. It refines and purifies faith.

You will suffer for Jesus' sake. You can expect it. Jesus suffered for you first. His suffering saves you; your suffering honors Him. His suffering is gold of your faith. Your suffering brings that gold to 24 karat purity. His suffering was for your sins; your suffering is for His name. His suffering sanctifies your suffering.

You will be humbled, you can expect it. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." You will be humbled. Jesus was humbled to death on a cross to save you. He humbled Himself for you, reaching down to you, joining His suffering life to you. He was humbled in order to exalt you to the right hand of God. And in your humbling, you will be exalted. He will

lift you up. He will raise you from death. He will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

To Him be the dominion forever and ever.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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