

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF FIRST PETER

UNDERSTANDING YOUR TIME OF TRIAL!

Read 1 Peter 4:12-19

Introduction.

Suffering is something we try to avoid at all costs. But Christian suffering should be different for us. We should welcome it. We should rejoice. And we should not let suffering deter us from doing good wherever we can. Strange teaching, isn't it? But this is exactly what Apostle Peter is telling us in this passage to help us mature in the Christian faith. Stretch your spirit a bit and take this spiritual meat as your diet as you seek to grow in Christ.

Suffering for Christ Is Our Common Lot

"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial, which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (vv12-13)

Instead of thinking of trials (even fiery trials) as strange occurrences, we see them as ways to partake of Christ's sufferings. And if we partake of His sufferings, we will also partake of His glory and joy. In Peter's day, people expressed surprise that they should suffer. Does that sound familiar? "Think it ... strange" is the Greek verb *xenizō*, "to cause a strong psychological reaction through introduction of something new or strange, astonish, surprise." If you're fairly new to the faith, Christian suffering may seem like something strange (Greek *xenos*, "strange, foreign") to you. It's not. It comes with the package. Paul reminded Timothy of a similar truth:

"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." (2 Timothy 3:12)

But persecution is no picnic. It is painful, sometimes searing pain. The other word Peter uses to describe our sufferings is "trial" (NIV, KJV) or "ordeal" (NRSV). The Greek noun *peirasmos* can mean (1) "an attempt to learn the nature or character of something, test, trial," or (2) "an attempt to make one do something wrong, temptation, enticement to sin." Of course, God does not tempt us with sin (James 1:13-15). But Satan works on our sinful nature to tempt us. The enemy is hard at work to induce us to give in and stop serving Christ (Matthew 13:18-21). In this process our faith is strengthened, and our true heart exposed to God (who knew it all along) -- and more importantly, to us.

You've probably experienced some fiery ordeals after becoming a Christian. But if we're going to live godly lives, we cannot avoid the fiery ordeals. We must not try to sidestep them. With Christ's help we must move through them.

We can only partake of Jesus' sufferings because He partook of our humanity and sufferings. He became a man and suffered so that our suffering wouldn't be meaningless. It is good to share anything with Jesus, even His suffering.

Rejoicing in Our Sufferings for Christ

Our tendency is to embrace the glory and the joy and to avoid any sharing of Jesus' suffering. Or we morbidly fixate on the suffering and forget that it is but a necessary prelude to the glory and joy. We should never deny the place of suffering in building godliness in the Christian life. Though there is much needless pain we bear through lack of knowledge or faith, there is also necessary suffering. If suffering was a suitable tool to teach Jesus (Hebrews 5:8), it is a suitable tool to teach His servants.

“**To the extent**” implies a measure. Those who have suffered more in Jesus will rejoice more at His coming in glory.

James, Jesus' brother, shares a similar perspective on suffering persecution.

"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials." (James 1:2)

Why should we rejoice in suffering for Christ? Peter gives several reasons.

1. We Participate in Christ's Sufferings

"But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (v13)

First, we rejoice because we are privileged to share in Christ's sufferings. "Participate" (NIV), "sharing" (NRSV), "are partakers" (KJV) is the Greek verb *koinōneō*, "share, have a share," from the adjective *koinos*, pertaining to being of mutual interest or shared collectively, communal, common" and the noun *koinōnia*, "communion, fellowship, participation, sharing." If you buy a share of stock, you become a shareholder in the company. When the company has hard times, it's tough for everyone. But when that company prospers, you receive a dividend, you share in the rewards. We are sharers, participants in Christ's sufferings, so we are joined to him in his blessings, too.

Paul comments on the privilege of suffering for Christ.

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." (Philippians 1:29)

Of course, there is a sense in which Christ's sacrifice and suffering for sins is completed once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). But there is also a sense in which you and I are sharers in Christ's own sufferings as we suffer for the faith. If we suffer with humility and gentleness towards our enemies, there is the additional opportunity that our suffering might be redemptive, that is, help bring about their salvation as they see Christ in us. What an honour to stand alongside Christ in suffering.

2. We Anticipate Eternal Rewards for Suffering in Christ's Name

A second reason to rejoice is that we know that when we stand before him at his return ("when his glory is revealed"), we will be greatly rewarded for our suffering. Sometimes I find it difficult to understand the concept of rewards for faithful service. I'm trying to serve Jesus out of love, not out of thought of reward. But lest in my piety I distort the scripture, it's important to notice that the idea of reward at Jesus' coming is woven through and through the New Testament, in both Jesus' teaching and that of the apostles.

When we anticipate Christ's coming, we can scarcely contain our overflowing joy. Peter uses two Greek verbs together, *chairō*, "rejoice" (which we examined above) and *agalliaō*, "be exceedingly joyful, exult, be glad, overjoyed." It is translated variously as "be overjoyed" (NIV), "with exceeding joy" (KJV), "shout for joy" (NRSV). Suffering makes us "long for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

3. They Persecute the Christ in You

"If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified." (v14)

A third reason for rejoicing in suffering is that your persecutors have noticed something about you worth persecuting.

It's one thing to be persecuted as a member of a despised cult. It's another to be persecuted because people see Christ shining forth from you. Persecution is a sign that others have seen Christ in us; that should give us joy. In the Beatitudes Jesus said:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

If you are counted worthy in the same breath as the prophets, you are indeed blessed!

4. The Spirit of God Helps Us

A fourth reason for rejoicing is that we are not alone in our persecutions. The Spirit comes to help us as seen in verse 14.

In the earliest days of the Jerusalem church, John and Peter were interrogated after healing a lame man in Jesus' name. In his response to the questioning Peter was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:8). When the church was persecuted, they saw it as an occasion to pray for boldness:

"And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." (Acts 4:31)

Notice the presence of the Spirit. When Stephen testified before being stoned, the scripture says:

"But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55)

Jesus promised his disciples:

"But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit." (Mark 13:11)

The difference between suffering as a Christian and suffering as an evildoer.

“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” (vv15-16)

Suffering as an evildoer is deserved and brings shame to the name of Jesus. Peter recognized that not all suffering that Christians experience is suffering in the name of Jesus. We understand when Peter writes about the suffering that might come to the murderer, the thief, or the evildoer. Yet we shouldn't be surprised that he also includes the busybody in other people's matters. Such people do suffer a lot of grief and pain, but not for the sake of Jesus.

Suffering as a Christian is nothing to be ashamed about, even though the world may despise the suffering Christian. Instead, we should **glorify God in** these matters. We don't glorify God **for** suffering. But we do glorify Him **in** suffering, and we glorify Him for what He will accomplish in us and through us with the suffering.

Judgment Begins with the Family of God

“For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will

the ungodly and the sinner appear?" Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator." (vv17-19)

After talking about the suffering Christians are going through in persecutions, Peter steps back to look at the larger picture. Right now, Christians are suffering God's refining fire in persecutions. To the outsider, it may even seem that God is judging them. "Judgment" here is the Greek noun *krima*, "action or function of a judge, judging, judgment."

In the context of suffering, Peter tells us that judgment begins at the house of God. Right now, God uses suffering as a judgment (in a positive, purifying sense) for Christians (the house of God). Now is our time of fiery trial (1 Peter 4:12); the ungodly will have their fire later. The fire we endure now purifies us; the fire the ungodly will endure will punish them. Yet we always remember that there is never any punishment from God for us in our sufferings, only purification. For the Christian, the issue of punishment was settled once and for all at the cross, where Jesus endured all the punishment the Christian could ever face from God.

The same fire that consumes straw will purify gold. The fire is the same, but its purpose in application is different, and its effect is different upon the straw and the gold. Even so, Christians do suffer some of the same things the ungodly do, yet the purpose of God is different, and the effect is different.

Peter's sobering application is clear. If this is what God's children experience, what will become of those who have made themselves His enemies? How can they ever hope to stand before the judgment and wrath of God? Christians can rejoice that the sufferings they face in this life are the worst they will ever face throughout all eternity. We have seen the worst; those who reject Jesus Christ have seen the best of life their eternal existence will ever see.

If the righteous one is scarcely saved: Since this is true — that the salvation of the righteous does not come without difficulty — then it should make us pause if we ourselves or others seem to have an easy salvation. It isn't that our salvation is difficult in the sense of earning it or finding a way to deserve it; it is all the free gift of Jesus Christ. Yet our salvation is hard in the sense that the claims of discipleship challenge us and demand that we cast away our idols and our sins. Real discipleship and genuine following after Jesus Christ are sometimes a hard thing, so we understand why Peter quoted the passage from Proverbs 11:31, "the righteous one is scarcely saved."

Commit their souls to Him: The ancient Greek word translated "commit" is a technical one, used for leaving money on deposit with a trusted friend. Such a trust was regarded as one of the most sacred things in life, and the friend was bound by honor to return the money intact. It is the very word Jesus used when He said, "*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit*" (Luke 23:46). So when Christians commit their souls to Him, they leave their souls in a safe place. God is a faithful Creator, and we can give ourselves to Him as pliable clay in His hands.

Conclusion

Persecution is designed to refine us and teach us what is really important in life, not to debilitate us. Jesus said, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*" (Luke 9:23). The cross is important. We must be willing to die every day, so instead of protecting ourselves, we can instead concentrate on our mission -- to follow Jesus and do his works.

