

Trust God and Do Good When You Suffer
1 Peter 4:12-19

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Ajith Fernando, a Christian leader from Sri Lanka who ministers to the urban poor, writes: *The church in each culture has its own special challenges—theological blind spots that hinder Christians from growing to full maturity in Christ I think one of the most serious theological blind spots in the western church is a defective understanding of suffering. There seems to be a lot of reflection on how to avoid suffering and on what to do when we hurt. We have a lot of teaching about escape from suffering and therapy for suffering, but there is inadequate teaching about the theology of suffering*

You may be thinking “what place does a sermon on suffering have in a series dealing with life on mission?” Good question. Thanks for asking it. Here is the connection. You will remember in our last passage, 3:13-17, Peter said that we sometimes suffer because of our faith in Christ. He went on to say that we should always be ready to give an answer for the hope we have in Christ. Think about it. When we respond to suffering with hope in Jesus Christ, our lives become sermons. People see something different in us when suffering doesn’t reduce us to bitterness and despair. It makes them curious. They want to know how we can have hope in the middle of hurt.

Throughout this letter, Peter has been building a theology of suffering for the Christian. Well over a dozen times he addresses the issue of suffering. Our text today distills much of what he has said previously. It provides a posture toward suffering that sustains our witness to the world.

First of all, notice that Peter tells us

I. Rejoice when you suffer as a Christian (vv. 12-16).

A. Expect to suffer as a Christian.

1. Do not be surprised when you suffer.

- a. Suffering is described as a “fiery trial.” In 1:6-7 Peter referred to our suffering as the testing of our faith by fire.
- b. But the fiery trial of suffering is not unexpected. We should not be surprised. Jesus told his disciples the same thing in John 15:18. If the world hates you, understand that it hated me first. You will be hated and persecuted.

Friends, we must learn to view suffering as normal and not exceptional. Part of the reason we struggle to deal with persecution is we don’t expect it. We are taken by surprise when it happens. We need to adjust our expectations.

2. Rejoice that you share Christ’s sufferings.

- a. Rejoice because your suffering is a result of your allegiance to Christ.
- b. Your present suffering as a Christian is the evidence of genuine faith that will end in glory when Christ comes again. The joy we have now when we suffer will be even greater when the glory is revealed.

B. Recognize the blessings associated with suffering as a Christian.

1. Suffering for Christ is a blessing.

- a. You are blessed when you suffer for the name of Christ. The blessing is not in the suffering per se. That is hard and often painful. The blessing is the experience of God's presence. The Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. Far from being abandoned by God, he is powerfully present when you suffer.

George Whitefield was on a preaching tour in Scotland in 1750. One biographer describes the results of this trip as "alternations of insult and success." His schedule was grueling and physically demanding. Whitefield writes, "By preaching always twice and once three times and once four times in a day, I am quite weakened...I am burning with a fever, and have a violent cold: but Christ's presence makes me smile at pain, and the fire of His love burns up all fevers whatsoever."

- b. Don't suffer as an evildoer. Make sure that your suffering is not because you have done wrong. It should be because of your faith in Christ.

2. Suffering as a Christian glorifies the name of Christ.

- a. Don't be ashamed of being labeled a Christian. The term Christian was a put-down in the first century. It was an insult. Peter says that if you are insulted with this label because of your life is consistent with the gospel, don't be ashamed. People may use that title to shame you. But it is no shame to be identified with Jesus Christ. It is an honor.
- b. Glorify God in the name of Christ. Give glory to God that you are known by the name Christian.

In the town of Stepanavan, Armenia, I met a woman whom everyone called "Palasan's wife." She had her own name, of course, but townspeople called her by her husband's name to show her great honor. When the devastating 1988 earthquake struck Armenia, it was nearly noon, and Palasan was at work. He rushed to the elementary school where his son was a student. The facade was already crumbling, but he entered the building and began pushing children outside to safety. After Palasan had managed to help twenty-eight children out, an aftershock hit that completely collapsed the school building and killed him.

So the people of Stepanavan honor his memory and his young widow by calling her Palasan's wife. Sometimes a person's greatest honor is not who they are but to whom they are related. The highest honor of any believer is to be known as a Christian, one who follows Christ, the one who gave his life so we could be saved.

II. Remember that God is purifying you when you suffer as a Christian (vv. 17-18).

A. The suffering of believers is a purifying judgment.

1. Peter connects our suffering to judgment.

- a. The household of God refers to believers.
- b. Judgment begins with God's people. But the nature of this judgment is purification not punishment. There is no condemnation for those in Christ. Yet Christ is purifying us through our suffering.

- c. Think again of the testing nature of the fire of suffering that Peter refers to in 1:6-7. Our faith is being purified and refined in suffering.
- B. The suffering of unbelievers will be a punishing judgment.
 - 1. What will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel? What will become of the ungodly and the sinner? (from Prov. 11:31).
 - 2. These questions highlight the horror of judgment for the unbeliever. If the people of God suffer as they do in a purifying judgment, how bad will it be for unbelievers who suffer a punishing and eternal judgment?

May I ask you today, which of those groups do you belong to? Are you a Christian who will suffer the purifying judgment of God which is temporary and results in eternal glory? Or are you among those who refuse Christ and disobey the gospel? If so, your judgment will be eternal punishment away from the presence of God in hell. It will be total sorrow and no joy. It will be total darkness and no light.

You don't have to suffer that eternal judgment. Trust in Jesus Christ and be forgiven of your sin. He died and rose again so that we could be born again to a living hope. By faith in Christ you could have eternal glory in the presence of God with the people of God and unending joy.

Christian friend, remember that when you suffer, God is purifying you. He is preparing you for heaven. He is burning away the impurities of your life and refining you like gold. The pain of suffering strengthens your faith, raises your awareness of the presence of Christ, and increases your joy.

Peter has told us to rejoice when we suffer as a Christian. He has told us to remember that we are being purified when we suffer as a Christian. Thirdly, he tells us

III. Rest in the faithfulness of God when you suffer as a Christian (v. 19).

- A. Your suffering is according to God's will.
 - 1. You are suffering as a Christian, not as an evildoer.
 - 2. God is using your suffering to refine you and purify you.
- B. Entrust your soul to your faithful Creator.
 - 1. The term Peter uses is the word Jesus used when he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Lk. 23:46)." Peter refers to this in 2:23 when he says that Jesus "entrusted himself to him who judges justly."
 - 2. This is a call to rest in the providential care of God when suffering for our faith. He is our faithful Creator. He made us. We can trust him. He keeps his word. He fulfills his promise. He never abandons us.
 - 3. Your posture toward God when you suffer must be one of trust.

Friends, the right posture toward suffering is something you must fight for. Peter used a verb form that means entrust yourself, commit yourself. It is a command that you are responsible for. It requires effort on your part. This will not happen by accident. You must fight for it. You must resist the urge to think God has abandoned you when you are hurting. You must resist to the urge to distance yourself from God as though he is not a loving Father. You must tell your soul the

truth about God. He is with me. He loves me. He is shaping me. He has promised that glory awaits me on the other side of suffering.

Think about Job. Satan accused him. His circumstances devastated him. Even his own wife discouraged him. You will also face forces that will tempt you to question whether God is trustworthy. You must fight to entrust your soul to a good and faithful Creator.

C. Continue to do good as you suffer.

1. Your posture toward others when you suffer must be doing good.
2. We cannot allow suffering to turn us into evildoers who return insult for insult, shame for shame, hurt for hurt. No. We keep loving our neighbors. We keep helping those who would despise us. We keep serving those who make fun of us.

Conclusion

God has called us to live as exiles on mission in this world. The traction of your testimony will largely depend on how you respond to suffering as a Christian. When you are rejected, marginalized, shamed, mocked, and hurt; the way you respond will confirm or deny your profession of hope in Jesus Christ. When people see genuine hope shining through the pain of suffering, it is a powerful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

My friends, I believe suffering is going to intensify for us as Christians. I believe we are going to experience an environment more and more like that of Peter's original audience. Are we ready? Or will we be taken by surprise? Will we rejoice that others shame us in the name of Christ? Or will we respond in bitter counter-attacks. Will we trust God and rest in his faithfulness? Or will we fade into nominal religion or even unbelief?

For the sake of the lost and the glory of God we must learn to suffer as Christians.