

“So Where’s **My** Cross?”

1 Peter 4:12-19

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1 Peter 4:12-19 “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

Prayer

It is difficult for me to stand before you today and preach from this text.

My experience doesn’t qualify me.

The text speaks of a particular kind of suffering.

- Oh, I’ve lost loved ones but not a child or a spouse, like some of you.
- I’ve been in prolonged excruciating physical pain but I haven’t suffered as many of you have suffered.
- I was not abused or abandoned as a child.
- I have not experienced the betrayal of divorce.

But that is not the inexperience that disqualifies me.

For what I’ve described are **not** the “sufferings” of which our text speaks.

Peter is describing something else:

- V13 “you participate in the sufferings **of Christ**”
- V14 “If you are insulted **because of the name of Christ**”
- V15 “if you suffer **as a Christian**”

Two weeks ago, on January 19, Shabaz Kaka of Lahore, Pakistan was released from prison after serving six years of a life sentence.

In January of 2001 he was arrested.

Shabaz was stopped near a mosque because he was wearing a necklace with a cross, identifying him as a Christian.

His family did not know whether he was dead or alive for a year and a half.

Only after three years in prison, was he finally convicted in 2004 of desecrating the Koran and sentenced to life in prison.

(Voice of the Martyrs at <http://www.persecution.com/news/index.cfm?action=fullstory&newsID=498>)

This past Friday over 100 Hindu extremists attacked and severely beat 30 Christian leaders meeting together in Raipur, (East Central) India. One young Christian man is in critical condition.

(International Christian Concern at <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/index.php>)

My nephew and his Chinese wife live in southern China where they have established and support several underground house churches.

In that rural part of China the local authorities have nearly unlimited power and are often following and interrogating my relatives attempting to catch them in their Christian activities.

In addition to the threat of the communist authorities, they are also threatened by a cult that has already abducted and beaten several of their relatives.

It is often reported that there is more persecution of Christians today than any other time in history.

I have read *Foxes' Book of Martyrs* chronicling such persecution through history.

More recently I read *The Heavenly Man*, the account of one man's years-long ordeal in China for being a Christian.

I have read Hebrews 11:36-38 describing the persecution of God's people in the past: "Some faced jeers and flogging... They were stoned... They went about ... destitute, persecuted and mistreated... They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Peter himself knew much about suffering for Christ.

In Acts chapter 5 we are told of the imprisonment and floggings that he endured because he dared to speak of the resurrection of Jesus.

I know there are other kinds of suffering and there are other passages of Scripture that speak to the believer's response to those other kinds of suffering (*Job, Ecclesiastes, 2 Corinthians*).

But this text is describing the Christian's response to suffering **BECAUSE we are Christians**.

And because of the very real suffering that Christians have experienced through the ages

and especially because of what many are experiencing around the world even today,

what I cannot do is pretend the subject of this text addresses the inconveniences we might "suffer" in that we can't golf on Sunday morning because we go to church, or that we can't own as nice a car as a friend because we give to missions, or that we can't take as many vacations because we give regularly to our church.

No, the suffering Peter is talking about is real suffering for Christ, suffering ridicule or worse, **because** of our relationship with Jesus.

The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12 "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."

Jesus said, John 15:18,20 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Those are strong words.

Now you may understand why I said earlier that I feel unqualified to speak about this text.

I know there are some of you who truly have suffered for your faith in Christ.

- Your family has ostracized you because of your commitment to Jesus.
- You lost your job because you had to obey God rather than man.
- You've been truly abused in the workplace, at school, or home because you are a Christian.

But let's **also** be honest about this: **Most** of us are hard-pressed to describe a time of genuine suffering for Christ.

Oh, maybe we've suffered a little ridicule because we wouldn't do something

or because we stood up for something and got called some unfavorable names.

Yes, it hurt, it was uncomfortable, it was inconvenient, but "suffering?" – not really.

Now if you are like me, you don't like where this line of thought is leading.

Am I suggesting that if someone hasn't suffered for Christ that he/she isn't a Christian or at least not a good Christian?

I don't' like to believe that and so I can put up some fairly quick arguments against it:

And so I think: "Sure the Bible talks about hard times but it also talks about peace and joy and even pleasure and plenty."

And I also think: "Nowhere does the Bible encourage us to seek out persecution.

"In fact the Bible says in Hebrews 12:14 "Make every effort to live in peace with all men..."

Oh, I could go on with my rationalizing arguments but then I keep running into words like these from Jesus in Mark 8:34-38

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it... If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”

When Jesus came he inaugurated a kingdom that is at odds with the world.

Christ calls us to an allegiance to **his** kingdom not our own kingdoms.

When he said we “must deny (ourselves) and take up (our) cross and follow (him)” he was not talking about putting up with minor irritations in life.

He was calling us, as one man has stated it, to “die to self-interest, declare ourselves dead to the glories and attractions of this world, and be prepared for suffering, even the most ignominious suffering. And in this, we are doing no more than following Jesus for that is the way he went.” (D.A. Caron, *How Long O Lord*, 83)

The alternative is to “gain” the approval of the world and have Jesus “ashamed” of us.

And so again Paul warns in 2 Timothy 3:12 “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”

What has Christianity cost us - one less vacation per year, a cheaper model of car, fewer upgrades to our houses, or less expensive hobbies than desired?

Or has it truly cost us the approval of the world?

This makes me very uncomfortable but then maybe I need to be. Have I been more committed to comfort than to Christ?

What explains years, maybe a lifetime with no real persecution? Are we just lucky or is it that our lifestyle is simply no threat to those around us.

- Our missionaries, David and Mary Shepherd¹ could certainly avoid opposition if they would just leave the “shepherd” people alone.
- I’ll never have any discomfort in conversation if I just never mention Jesus to any non-Christians.
- I’ll never have to risk a relationship or risk being thought less of if I just go along with whatever.
- I can avoid a lot of suffering if I just always “fly under the radar.”
But Jesus said in Luke 6:26 “Woe to you when all men speak well of you...”
Do you too get the uncomfortable impression that maybe we’ve compromised the gospel.

Maybe this text doesn’t **apply** to most of us, not because it shouldn’t but because we are so much like the world around us that our presence disturbs no one.

But to whom the text **does** apply, Peter writes: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”

Is Peter joking? In fact “surprise” is our **first response** to suffering. We can’t imagine why God would let this happen. We very soon question God’s goodness or his greatness.

But Peter is writing from a different perspective. He is writing to Christ-followers – those whose allegiance has radically changed. He says, as Jesus said, when you truly follow Christ persecution will come. And when it does don’t be surprised.

In fact Peter says instead of being surprised and discouraged by it I want you to rejoice in it. And he says that in three different ways:

¹ Not their real names. They have been changed for security reasons.

- Verse 13 “**rejoice** that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...”
- Verse 14 “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are **blessed**.”
- Verse 16 “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but **praise God** that you bear that name

Peter is **not** saying that we should pretend the suffering isn't real or that we are supposed to enjoy the suffering.

He is saying that when we realize **the significance** of the suffering we will rejoice.

So what is it that makes us rejoice in suffering for Jesus?

First of all in verse 13 he says when you suffer for being a Christian, you **participate** in the sufferings of Christ.

The joy is that we are privileged to experience something of what Jesus experienced.

He suffered for doing what is right and we realize that when we suffer for doing what is right we are like him.

The joy is in being identified with him.

What young man wouldn't like to be mistaken for Matthew McConaughey?

For that matter what young woman wouldn't like just being seen with him?

Even if he were being criticized for it, my son would love to be thought a member of the New England Patriots' football team.

When Jesus comes again in all his power and glory, imagine the joy and even pride we would feel if someone said, “Aren't you with him?”

Peter is saying, even now we are so convinced of who he is that we rejoice that others would identify us with him.

But in verse 14 Peter says there's another reason why we would rejoice; “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed **for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.** “

When you suffer persecution and withstand the pressure, you realize that God's Spirit is the one who is empowering you.

That Spirit is, in other places, called God's down payment to us guaranteeing his presence now and for eternity in glory.

In other words, when you suffer for Christ it is only greater affirmation that you belong to God.

And verse 16 adds, "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

In Galatians 6:17 Paul said, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."

I believe he says it with great and proper pride.

Every scar was a reminder that he belongs to Jesus.

We can look on every experience of suffering for Christ as further evidence that we belong to Lord of glory.

Now right in the middle of these stated positive side effects of suffering, Peter expresses this caveat.

1 Peter 4:15 "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 careful.

You can't claim these benefits of suffering if you are suffering because of your own crimes or your own stupidity.

We understand the words "murderer," "thief" and "criminal."

And certainly it is wrong to claim that we are suffering for Jesus when we are truly suffering because we have broken the law.

But Peter adds another reason that disqualifies us from the blessing: He said if you suffer it shouldn't be for being a "meddler."

A meddler is the busybody who sticks his nose into the non-believer's affairs.

It the Christian who thinks he's the morality policeman.

While the Bible says we **are** to **judge each other** as Christians, we are **not** called on to judge non-believers.

The problem is that some Christians think it is their responsibility not only to not **do** what non-Christians do **but also** to openly criticize the non-Christian for doing it.

I think Peter is saying when you do that you **invite** abuse and that is not suffering for Jesus.

A friend of mine had a Christian ministry in the jails of Colorado. One day, frustrated over an unbelieving chaplain's efforts to keep evangelicals out of his prison, my friend lay prostrate on the floor in front of the chaplain and the guards and prayed aloud against the demonic forces that were inhibiting the gospel.

He was promptly kicked out of the prison system.

Commentator Karen Jobes put it this way, "Censuring the behavior of outsiders on the basis of claims to a higher morality, interfering with family relationships...or tactless attempts at conversion" that then result in opposition or persecution don't qualify as suffering for Christ.

(Jobes, 289)

Peter's warning is good reminder.

Then in the midst of these words that should encourage those who ARE suffering for Christ, Peter adds some words that are very unsettling to me.

1 Peter 4:17-18 "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Here he suggests the suffering they are experiencing is **God's** judgment.

What's that about?

It does **NOT** seem likely that Peter is saying that the suffering is God's punishment of his people for their sins.

Other passages certainly speak to that issue but in this text the whole premise is that they are suffering for doing what is right, not for doing what is wrong.

No, the suffering is not God's judgment on his people's sins.

So then what is this "judgment" of God that begins with the "family of God?"

The word "judgment" doesn't only mean punishment but can also mean simply the action of a judge: judging.

In this case it would mean God discerning and pointing out who is and who is not a true follower of God.

In Matthew 25 we read of God separating the sheep from the goats, the believers from unbelievers.

Peter wrote, "For **it is time** for judgment to begin..."

We might think that judgment comes at the end of the age.

In that we would be partially correct.

It will come then but God is also judging now.

When Jesus came he ushered in the beginning of what the Bible calls the "last days."

How long the "last days" will last we don't know but God is bringing about the end.

Judgment or discernment is part of that process.

We are taught in Matthew and Revelation that as the end draws closer the persecution will increase.

I believe Peter is saying that the persecution of believers for the sake of Christ is precursor to that end-time persecution and thus also a precursor of that sorting out of true believers from those who are believers only out of convenience.

So the persecution, perpetrated by others, is God's means to separate true Christians from those who are Christian in name only.

As one person put it, “The hostile reaction of unbelievers to Christians is at the same time God’s plumb line, testing the mettle of those who profess faith in Christ, that their faith may be proved as genuine as smelted gold and silver.” (Jobes, 293. See also 1 Peter 1:6-7)

Persecution has the result of separating out those who are not truly trusting in and committed to Jesus.

Now that is good news for true Christ-followers but bad news for those who are merely pretending.

But there is more, listen again to verses:17-18 “And if (judgment) begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

I hear two things in this:

First to you who are true Christians and are suffering because of your relationship with Jesus, realize that what you are experiencing is nothing compared to what those who don’t follow Christ will eventually experience.

“What will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? AND “what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

The answer to those rhetorical questions is obvious:
Obeying Christ now, even if it means suffering is far better than what will happen to unbelievers when the final judgment comes.

But I said I hear two things: I hear also a warning to those very readers who are “Christian” in name only.

“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved...”

What on earth does he mean by that?

I thought Christianity was as easy as just believing.

I contend that is precisely what much of American Christianity has assumed.

If we just believe in Jesus, go to church and act reasonably respectable in life, we've met the requirements of Christianity.

But the Bible says that to believe in Jesus is to trust him enough to follow him.

Yes, Jesus will empower us so that it is all of grace, but it results in obedience and perseverance.

God says in Hebrews 12:14 "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Believing in Jesus is a radical change from the past and a commitment to Jesus as Lord of our lives.

I remind you again, Jesus said in Mark 8:34 "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

As I've said before, Christianity is not an easy religion.

So Peter says consider **yourself**: v18 "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Or as Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 13:5 "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?"

The testing of faith by persecution is a serious test and it separates those who are true believers from those who aren't.

So when you have been tested, what have been the results?

As I said, most of us have never had to stand the kinds of tests that others in the world are facing.

But when we face even mild ridicule or social hostility for being known as a Christian, or even when we anticipate such, how have we responded?

We are called to a Christianity that is real not hollow.

That reality is created by grace and by that same grace it is matured and tested in the fire of opposition.

One man wrote, “I look at my children, and I wish for them enough opposition to make them strong, enough insults to make them choose, enough hard decisions to make them see that following Jesus brings with it a cost – a cost eminently worth it, but still a cost. A church that is merely comfortable, that never evangelizes, never encourages its people to stand on the front line, will never be strong, never be grateful (and) never be able to sort out profoundly Christian priorities.” (Carson, 86)

I would add that an untested faith is an uncertain faith!

But Peter doesn't end on a negative note but on a positive one:
19 “So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

He says remember if you are suffering for doing what is right (that which is according to God's will and not for what is wrong), you can depend on a faithful Creator and keep on doing the right thing.

I find it instructive that he refers to God as Creator.

This is the God who has the power to make something out of nothing; the one who can bring life even out of death.

The Psalmist wrote, Psalm 73:26 “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Again it is perspective – if we see this life as all there is we will misinterpret suffering to corroborate that there is no God who is good and great and conclude that holy living is silly at best.

But if start with God, we will correctly interpret even suffering for Christ as evidence of the presence of God and our relationship to him now and for eternity.

We can even put up with flesh and heart failing, knowing that our Creator is sovereign. (Carson, 143)

So in conclusion, what does this text mean to you?
 Is it encouraging or is it challenging.

Maybe the best way to end is to read the text again:

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”