

Hope When Life is Hard...



A VERSE BY VERSE
EXPOSITION OF
THE EPISTLE OF
FIRST PETER

Against the Current 1 Peter 4:1-6

What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. This first letter of Peter is written to encourage us to live our lives for the glory of God. True Christians ought to have as our goal the desire to follow Christ wherever he leads, to honor Christ in everything we do, and to give loving obedience to our Master all the days of our lives. But living for God is not as easy as it might sound at first (see Bentley, p. 140-141). Indeed, **careful obedience to the will of God will draw opposition from the prevailing culture.**

Years ago our family spent a week in Destin, Florida. One evening we were just walking around and I stepped inside a t-shirt shop. One shirt in particular caught my eye. On the front was printed a school of brilliantly colored tropical fish all swimming in the same direction. In the middle of this school was a single fish swimming in the opposite direction. The caption was **Romans 12:2**, *Do not be conformed to this world*. That one picture was a great way to communicate the point that obedience often demands that we swim against the flow of the culture around us. Like a salmon fighting her way upstream through rapids and over waterfalls, we are called to swim against the current of the sinful values, practices, and expectations of the culture in which we live.

Last week in **3:18-22** we learned that Christ has triumphed over suffering and over the demonic forces that opposed Him, and is now at the right hand of God (**3:22**). We learn from Christ's example what it is to suffer for righteousness sake. He is also our sure hope that it will not be us but our persecutors who will face the final, divine rejection. In this our hope and joy are grounded, despite our inevitable conflict with a culture out of step with the will of God. The treatment of Christians throughout the centuries by cultures that embrace values counter to the will of God have shown that what Peter is discussing is not a problem unique to the confrontation experienced by this Christian community in the days of the Roman Empire. It is a problem that will recur whenever Christians are forced by our faith to oppose cultural values widely held in the secular world within which we live (see Achtemeier, p. 276-277).

Tossed about by winds of doctrinal uncertainty and error, thrown off course by frowning providences, intimidated by opposition, silenced by fear of rejection or reprisal not a few Christians struggle with how to live within our contemporary culture. **I Peter 4:1-6** points the way.

1 Peter 4:1-6 *Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³ For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. ⁴ And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; ⁵ but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For the gospel has for this*

purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

I have structured this sermon around nine principles that will steady and guide you as you find yourselves increasingly out of step with the culture around you. My point is this: **Careful obedience to the will of God will draw opposition from the prevailing culture.** Jesus said this. **John 15:20**, *“If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”* Paul said this. **II Timothy 3:12**, *and indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* Now Peter says it in **verse 4**: *And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you.* **Careful obedience to the will of God will draw opposition from the prevailing culture.**

1 Peter 4:1. **Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh.** The term *in the flesh* refers to the humanity of Jesus Christ. He suffered physically in a human body. And, of course, we are called to follow in His steps. This brings us to **Principle #1: Our expectations in this life are shaped by the life of Christ.** We too often base our expectations upon wrong criteria. What we wish. How we see others live. How we would treat others. But Christ is the pattern, the example, the paradigm, the model of the fortunes of a Christian in a culture opposed to the will of God. And so Peter says ...

Arm yourselves also. *“The figure of arming oneself for battle uses a military metaphor familiar in the New Testament, and implies the warlike conditions under which we are to live within the surrounding culture”* (Achte-meier, p. 277).

Principle #2: In an ungodly age, close obedience to God is a dangerous profession. It’s dangerous and we need to be properly armed.

With what are we to arm ourselves? Are Christians encouraged to have a stash of guns and ammunition in our homes in order to defend ourselves in the event of an outbreak of persecution? Peter says we arm ourselves **with the same purpose**. What Peter means is this. When we so arm ourselves we “think as Christ did about obedience and suffering” (Grudem, p. 166). Christ’s purpose was summed up in His own words. **Luke 22:42**, *“Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done.”* Christ in His suffering acted in accordance with God’s will. We arm ourselves with the same intention, disposition, or attitude that Jesus possessed. **Principle #3: We brace ourselves for hardship by thinking rightly about obedience and suffering.**

Because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. This can be interpreted three ways. The first is this. That suffering has an inherent atoning value; that suffering purges sin from us. Kelly puts it like this. “[Christians] by putting up cheerfully with brutal physical maltreatment, even when it is undeserved, and striving to do good, [are] secure in the knowledge that it will eradicate their sinful tendencies” (Kelly, p. 167). Now we admit that God uses suffering as a means of sanctifying His children. He uses trials to wean us from sin. However, it is the blood of Christ, not suffering in and of itself, that cleanses from sin.

The second view is this. Suffering for obedience to the will of God shows that the individual has made a clear break with sin. And this encourages him or her to further obedience in the face of hardship. So endurance of hardship is an evidence of the genuineness of one’s desire for obedience.

The third view is that this phrase has a representative meaning. Christ dealt once and for all with our sin when He took it upon himself on the cross (**2:24**).

The problem of dealing with sin is now over and done with. We are to recognize that because we have been born again we partake in the risen life of Christ. We are to reckon ourselves selves dead to the allurements and promptings of sin but alive to urgings and promptings of the Spirit of God to live a life of obedience. It is the same thought that Paul puts forward in Romans 6:11-12: *Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires* (see Hillyer, p. 120). **Principle #4: Our essential problem (sin) has been dealt with.** Life's ultimate issue has been settled. Life's ultimate problem solved. Life itself has been answered. Now, how does this profound spiritual reality impact our lives? It means that we are free to live for God even in the face of hardship.

I Peter 4:2. The purpose of arming ourselves is **so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.** "For the Christian the rest of your life began the day you placed your trust in Christ to save you. Your pre-Christian life was shaped by the selfish desires of sin. The rest of your life is to be shaped by the will of God. **Principle #5: The rule of behavior in this life is the will of God ... period.**

I Peter 4:3. **For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.** Hebrews tells us that *every transgression and every disobedience receives a just recompense (2:2).* In other words, the just penalty for even a single sin is death. Peter is saying, you have already sinned enough to condemn yourselves to hell a million times over. He cites six specific vices, given in the plural to indicate categories of activities rather than individual acts. The first is sensuality or lasciviousness – open

vileness and wantonness in sin. The second he calls lusts – strong and burning desires for sinful pleasures and wickedness. The third, fourth, and fifth vices all have to do with the consumption of alcohol and the sinful excesses that so often attend it. Finally he cites idolatry or misguided worship.

Peter is saying that enough is enough. He is saying you have gone too far already in regard to sin. You have wasted too much time engaged in that which destroys and condemns. You have served sin long enough. Your participation in sin is already sufficient to satisfy any curiosity about sin, any appetite for sin, any return to sin. **Principle #6: Any sin is too much sin.** This will help steady you as you navigate through a fallen world.

The thrust of the verse is to describe life in those days as morally out of control. This gives us, as Christians, encouragement to abandon that kind of activity in which we once shared, common in secular culture but contrary to God's will. Such encouragement is necessary because of our secular compatriots' negative reaction to such abandonment, as described in the following verse (see Achtemeier, p. 283).

I Peter 4:4. And in *all* this, they are surprised that you do not run with *them* into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign *you*. In this verse Peter makes clear the fundamental reason Christians suffer abuse at the hands of their non-believing contemporaries (4:3-4). In I Peter it doesn't have anything to do with official governmental attempt to suppress the Christian religion. It has everything to do with the fact that people who have become Christians once took part in the lifestyle of their times; in the sinful stuff everybody else did and that nobody thought anything about. Social events, civic events, and entertainment

events in those days were shot through with pagan religious rituals and trappings. And when folks got saved they found these practices offensive. And it is on account of their refusal to continue to participate in them that abuse is heaped upon them. Beloved, by your non-participation in sin you deny the validity, you disapprove, you condemn the godless culture around you. **Principle #7: Because you don't continue in sin you reap the scorn of those who do.** Righteousness irritates and infuriates non-believing friends and family. This is exactly what Jesus forecasted. **John 3:20**, *"For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.* **Careful obedience to the will of God will draw opposition from the prevailing culture.**

The persecution of Christians will arise wherever those Christians deny the validity of the social practices their contemporaries engage in. Thus persecution, while sporadic, depending on the mood of the people, is nevertheless inevitable, since there is finally nothing Christians can do to appease those whose lifestyle the Christians have abandoned and hence indirectly, at least, condemned. We, as followers of Christ, are necessarily nonconformists in an age that prizes political correctness and conformity to prevailing social standards. The sufferings imposed on Christians by non-believing contemporaries are therefore as unavoidable and inevitable as the sufferings visited upon Christ himself. To be a Christian means to adopt values and a way of life that inevitably meet cultural disapproval (see Achtemeier, p. 276). **Careful obedience to the will of God will draw opposition from the prevailing culture.**

I Peter 4:5. But they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. Those who give you grief shall know grief. Those who give you trouble shall know trouble. Indeed, they cannot escape responsibility for their

actions for God Himself will one day hold them accountable ... It is not only the living who will be judged, but also the dead. Death will not enable anyone to escape judgment, but all people will consciously stand before God on that day(see Grudem, p. 170). “God will hold those who ridicule the faith of Christians accountable at the last judgment” (Michaels, p. 236). Do not be disturbed by the ridicule dished out by unbelievers. **Principle #8: Their word is not the last word.** Indeed, God always has the final say.

“Because there will be a final judgment, what the world thinks of Christians does not matter. What matters is the twofold fact that the pagans will have to answer to God for their refusal to obey him (that’s **verse 5**), and that those who heard and believed the gospel will be vindicated by God and enjoy eternal life (that’s **verse 6**).

I Peter 4:6. Let’s break this verse down. **For the gospel has ... been preached.** In this case it is not Christ who does the preaching but rather it is Christ who is preached. **Even to those who are dead.** It seems best to understand *dead* to refer to those Christians who are now dead but who, during their lifetime, had heard and embraced the gospel. **For this purpose.** Here’s the reason the gospel was preached to them. **That though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to *the will of God*.** You see the phrases *as men* and *according to God*? Literally these would read *according to men* and *according to God*. The best way to interpret them is this: according to human/according to divine standards, or in the eyes of human beings/in the eyes of God.

The problem of the fate of those Christians who had died prior to the return of Christ had arisen within the community at Thessalonica and that can’t be ruled

out here although there is no indication ... that this had been a problem for the Christians in Asia Minor. What has been the problem in this letter is the fact that Christians suffer the rejection of their non-Christian counterparts for their belief. That's what judged in the flesh by men means. Sinful men had passed judgment upon the lives and faith of Christians. Some Christians suffer not only the ridicule and scorn of those opposed to God and His people but they also must experience physical death itself. Taken together these seem to make the hard life of obedience appear to be something of a waste. But they may nevertheless look forward to vindication in the final judgment. It was for such vindication, Peter says, that the gospel had been preached to Christians who have subsequently died, so that although undergoing what amounts to divine judgment on sin, they will nevertheless finally be awakened to live in heaven with God" (Achteimeier, p. 290). **Principle #9: Life and death hinge on the gospel.**

The most important question for everyone concerns Jesus Christ and their relationship with Him. John Newton put it like this:

What think you of Christ? Is the test,
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of Him.
As Jesus appears in your view
As He is beloved or not;
So God is disposed to you,
And mercy or wrath are your lot.

There is a very solemn verse in **Hebrews 9:27**, *It is appointed for men to die once and after that comes judgment.* The Bible knows nothing of a second chance after

death. Rather it says, *the gospel was preached to those who are now dead*. In other words Peter is saying that people who heard the gospel while they were alive are going to be judged after death. They were called to repentance while they were on earth but now they are dead. It is too late to return to Christ. The only ones who are at peace after death are those who came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ before they departed from this life. The urgent thing for us all to realize is that *Now is the day of salvation* (II Cor. 6:2). Tomorrow might be too late. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved (see M. Bentley).