

Hope When Life is Hard...



A VERSE BY VERSE
EXPOSITION OF
THE EPISTLE OF
FIRST PETER

Hardship in the Path of Obedience *The Theme of Suffering in I Peter*

Life is hard for the great mass of humanity. God said to the fallen Adam, *“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life ... thorns and thistles it shall grow for you ... by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”* (**Gen. 3:17-19**). To the question, *Into what estate did the fall bring mankind*, our catechism answers, *The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery* (**SC Q.17**). Some feel and experience this misery more intensely than others.

In the September 2003 issue of *National Geographic* I read an article entitled “21st Century Slaves.” The author (Andrew Cockburn) says, “This story is about slaves. Not people living *like* slaves, working hard for lousy pay. Not people 200 years ago. It’s about 27 million people worldwide who are bought and sold, held captive, brutalized, exploited for profit.” Young children, traded by their parents to workshop owners for cash, toil long hours. Young women and girls are sold into prostitution. Crushing debt traps entire families in desperate bondage for generations. Life is hard for millions of others - victims of natural disasters, grinding poverty, disease, hunger, war, political repression, racism, and on it goes. The world is rife with suffering and hardship the depths of which those of us in this room can scarcely imagine. Such is the lot of the descendants of Adam.

But there are those in the world who suffer, not just because they are the sons of Adam ... not on account of the circumstances just mentioned, but purely on account of their Christian faith ... purely on account of their identification with Jesus Christ. Such was the situation of those in Asia Minor to whom Peter wrote this letter. Peter expresses this single fact in a number of ways. **I Peter 3:14**, *But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed.* **I Peter 3:17**, *For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.* **I Peter 4:13**, *but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.* **I Peter 4:14**, *If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed.* **I Peter 4:16**, *but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.* **I Peter 4:19**, *Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.* So these people, on account of their identification with Christ, were suffering for Christ

What exactly does it mean to suffer with Christ and for Christ? John Piper explains it this way. We suffer “*with him in the sense that the suffering comes to us as we are walking with him by faith, and in the sense that it is endured in the strength that he supplies through his sympathizing high-priestly ministry (Heb. 4:15). [We suffer] for him in the sense that the suffering tests and proves our allegiance to his goodness and power, and in the sense that it reveals his worth as our all-sufficient compensation and prize*” (*Desiring God*, p. 216).

Now, to what kinds of hardship were these saints exposed? I Peter doesn't reflect a situation of official, empire-wide persecution of Christians. Terrible persecution under Nero was certainly on the horizon. The recipients of this letter, however, were being harassed by the people around them. **I Peter 2:12**,

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers. I Peter 2:20, For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? I Peter 3:14b, and do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled. I Peter 3:16, and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 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. I Peter 4:14, If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed.

Given the term *harshly treated* in 2:20, I suspect that this harassment spilled over into sporadic persecution. Fred Craddock says, “We do know they were identified in the society by a name, *Christian* (4:16), and wearing that name brought social ostracism and various kinds of abuse” (*First and Second Peter and Jude*, p. 14). So these people were suffering clearly on account of their identification with Jesus Christ.

We recognize and have a measure of appreciation for the distinction between the hardships of humanity in general and the sufferings of the saints for Christ’s sake. But can the sufferings of those within the household of faith itself be so clearly distinguished? Let me illustrate the tension for you by comparing two Christian sufferers.

The first is John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. John Bunyan was born into a poor family in 1628 near Bedford, England. In 1649 Oliver Cromwell and his army defeated the forces of King Charles I. During the subsequent “Puritan period” Bunyan was saved, baptized, and began to preach and write. In 1660 Charles II returned from exile and so began the restoration of Anglicanism and a

period of religious repression. Religious meetings not following the forms of the established church were forbidden. Non-conformists (Dissenters), Bunyan among them, were imprisoned for unlicensed preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Bunyan spent twelve years (1660 – 1672) in the Bedford jail. His poor family suffered. His wife and six children survived through the charity of friends and what meager support Bunyan could supply from making shoelaces while incarcerated. He suffered physically. He suffered intense anxiety over his wife and precious children especially his little blind daughter, Mary, who died in 1663.

The second sufferer is Joni Eareckson Tada, Christian speaker, author, advocate for the disabled, and ministry leader. Joni was born on October 15, 1949. She's eight months older than I am. She was saved in November 1964 at a Young Life camp in Virginia. On July 30, 1967 as a seventeen-year-old girl she suffered a broken neck in a diving accident. She endured two years of rehabilitation. Since that time she has lived as a quadriplegic. Joni has endured physical suffering, practical hardships and difficulties, and deep internal struggles. These were not occasioned by the hostility of others but on account of a diving accident.

Do both experiences fit the Biblical definition of suffering? Is Bunyan's legitimate suffering with Christ and for Christ and Joni's a type of illness or disability that does not qualify as such? We must wrestle with this question if we are to make a correct application of I Peter to our own lives.

Let's bring this issue even closer to home? Let's bring it down to ground level. Do you remember the story Tom Browning shared about Woody and Mary McClendon, the Wycliffe missionaries in Niger, Africa? Woody and Mary were a

young couple at the end of their first term and at the end of their rope. They were lonely, sick, tired, hot and discouraged. Mary had injured her back in a car accident and had been confined to her bed for over a month. Woody worked hard to take care of her but the relentless pain in her back and the unrelenting heat made that difficult. Even though it was December it was 125 degrees in the shade outside and only a few degrees cooler inside the little, un-air conditioned concrete block house where they lived with their two children. Mary's injury caused even the slightest movement to send sharp pains radiating down her legs. Everything hurt and hurt terribly. Woody tenderly fed her, bathed her, changed her sheets, administered medication, sat and talked to her, read to her, swabbed her with wet washrags trying to distract her from the pain and from the unrelenting heat. Then the week before Christmas, as if things could not get any worse, Woody and both kids contracted malaria. Fevered and desperately sick himself, Woody dragged three small beds into the same room where Mary was and set up their own hospital in which he was doctor, patient, chaplain, nurse, cook, and orderly. On Christmas Eve, they hit rock bottom. Just as darkness began to settle on Niamey, they could hear a Muslim cleric over the loudspeaker of a distant minaret calling Muslims to evening prayer. The woeful sound of his voice and the darkness associated with it just about did them in. Ten thousand miles away from their families they were sick, lonely, hot, and discouraged. They were not being persecuted but were certainly suffering in the pursuit of God's call upon their lives.

Now what about us? Among us this day are mothers who have lost infant children as well as mothers who have lost grown children. Among us are some who are unemployed. Others among us are seriously underemployed facing financial hardship and uncertainty. Sitting next to you may be a lady who has

recently received word that she has cancer. There are among us those locked in difficult marriages, those dealing with all the issues of aging, those whose hearts are broken, ripped apart by the bad choices and ungodly behavior of their children, those charged with difficult and exhausting care-giving responsibilities.

Can the adversities experienced by Woody and Mary McClendon in Niger, Africa and the difficulties you experience in these days equally be considered as sufferings with and for Christ? Is Peter's encouragement to sufferers to be applied to Woody and Mary but not to us?

There are those who draw a rather sharp distinction between illness and suffering. Such is the position of Peter Davids in his commentary on I Peter (*The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT). He argues, "that the New Testament takes a different approach to illness than to suffering" (p. 39); that "in the New Testament suffering is persecution and does not appear to include illness" (p. 40). He discourages us from "collapsing illness into suffering" (p. 40). He says, "[we tend] to include too much as suffering and to read into the New Testament ideas that are not there" (p. 41).

Davids' strongest argument is his appeal to the vocabulary of the New Testament. He points out that the New Testament teaching on suffering is based on two word groups – *pascho* (suffer) and *thlipsis* (oppression, affliction). He observes that together those two word groups appear 120 times in the New Testament and in only two verses do they come close to indicating human illness (see pp. 37-38). If language is our only consideration it certainly appears that Davids has a point. I Peter has little to say to those of us who sit in this room in Arlington, Texas on February 8, 2004.

John Piper has been very useful in helping me resolve this in my own mind. He says, "The most significant difference between sickness and persecution is that persecution is an intentional hostility from someone because we are known to be Christians, but sickness is not. Therefore, in some situations, to choose to be public Christians is to choose a way of life that accepts suffering if God wills (**I Peter 4:19**). But suffering may result from living as a Christian even when there is no intentional hostility from unbelievers. For example, a Christian may go to a disease-ridden village to minister, and contract the disease. This is suffering as a Christian, but it is not 'persecution.' It is a *choice* to suffer, if God wills, but not from the hostility of others.

"But then, when you stop to think about it, all of life, if it is lived earnestly by faith in pursuit of God's glory and the salvation of others, is like the Christian who goes to the disease-ridden village. The suffering that comes is part of the price of living where you are in obedience to the call of God. In choosing to follow Christ in the way he directs, we choose all that this path includes under his sovereign providence. **Thus all suffering that comes in the path of obedience is suffering with Christ and for Christ – whether it is cancer or conflict.** And it is chosen – that is, we willingly take the path of obedience where the suffering befalls us, and we do not murmur against God. We may pray – as Paul did – that the suffering be removed (2 Corinthians 12:8); but if God wills, we embrace it in the end, as part of the cost of discipleship in the path of obedience on the way to heaven" (*Desiring God*, pp. 215-216).

So we may say that our hardship and suffering approximates that suffering with and for Christ envisioned in I Peter as we more and more (1) freely choose the path of obedience, (2) as we search out and earnestly pursue God's call upon our

lives, and (3) as we expend our lives for the salvation of others. This one statement should be a great encouragement to some.

At the same time, however, the theme of suffering in I Peter represents a scathing rebuke to others. It rebukes those who, with eyes wide open, have elected not to put themselves on the stretch in ministry. It rebukes those who prefer and have deliberately chosen the path of ease, abundance, and comfort. It rebukes those who have neglected to search out God's call upon their lives and commit themselves to the pursuit of that call whatever impediments they may encounter in the way. It rebukes those who complain although they "are acquainted with nothing more trying than the milder irritations of life" (A. W. Pink, *Sufferings Compensated*).

Now what does the Spirit of God through Peter have to say to those today who struggle with and for Jesus; to those who are plodding this day in the path of obedience to Christ? Let's look at the text itself. My aim this morning has been to simply familiarize you with the verses on suffering in I Peter.

In **I Peter 1:5** the Holy Spirit assures us that we *are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*. In our difficulties the real aim of Satan is not the dissolution of our bodies but the destruction of our faith. Satan would extinguish our hope. He would tempt us to totally abandon the good fight of faith (see Pink, *The Problem of a Suffering Christian*). As those *chosen by God (1:1)*, beloved, we are not shielded from hardship and suffering as if we lived out our faith in some kind of bubble. This protection is God's merciful preserving of His people in faith in such a way that our faith does not give way at last.

In **I Peter 1:6** the Holy Spirit reminds us that our great joy is in the gospel and that this joy is real and vital even in the midst of hardship. *In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials.*

In **2:19** the Holy Spirit reminds us that life will not always seem to be fair. *For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.* We are not innocent in the sense of sinless or blameless. The only truly innocent sufferer was Jesus. *Suffering unjustly* means we may be treated harshly even though we have given no legitimate cause for the severe treatment that may be dished out to us.

How are we to respond to hardship and affliction? In the next verse, **I Peter 2:20**, the Spirit reminds us that we are called to patient endurance. *For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.* In **2:19** Peter speaks of *bearing up under sorrows*. Patient endurance is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament concept of *waiting* on God. Patient endurance is not a passive thing but an active, hearty, gutsy, courageous reliance upon the living God.

I Peter 4:12, *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.* Here the Holy Spirit tenderly reminds us that suffering is to be expected and that there are divine purposes behind hardships.

I Peter 5:9, *But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.* My brother

and sister, you are not the only one who has ever lost his job, property, child, health, or money. As Christians we enjoy a camaraderie, a fellowship in trial and difficulty. We are called to the same steadfastness manifested by the faithful saints who have gone before us.

I Peter 5:10, *And after you have **suffered for a little while**, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.* Here the Spirit of God reminds us that difficulty is but of brief duration. All will be relieved at last.

Lastly, the Holy Spirit reminds us that our own suffering and the eternal joys to follow are a function of our union with Jesus Christ. **I Peter 1:11**, *seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted **the sufferings of Christ** and the glories to follow.* **I Peter 2:23**, *and while **being reviled**, He did not revile in return; while **suffering**, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.* **I Peter 3:9**, *not returning evil for **evil**, or insult for **insult**, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.* **I Peter 4:1**, *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.*

And finally, **Peter 4:13**, *but to the degree that you **share the sufferings of Christ**, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.* Pink says, "There is no comparison between the sufferings of earth and the glory of heaven. One second of glory will outweigh a lifetime of suffering. What were the years of toil, of sickness, of battling with poverty, of sorrow in any or every form, when compared with the glory of Immanuel's land! One drink of the river

of pleasure at God's right hand, one breath of Paradise, one hour amid the blood-washed around the throne, shall more than compensate for all the tears and groans of earth ... May the Holy Spirit enable [each of us] to lay hold of this with appropriating faith and live in the present possession and enjoyment of it to the praise of the glory of the Divine grace" (*Sufferings Compensated*). Amen.