

ELECT EXILES

“How to Endure Persecution”

1 Peter 4:12-19

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Scripture Reading

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Peter 4:12–19, ESV).

Introduction

In 2015, a public policy poll was released that stated 30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats were in favor of the U.S. military bombing the city of Agrabah.¹ Now, the most fascinating thing about this poll is that the city of Agrabah doesn’t exist. Instead [show image of Agrabah], it is the fictional city portrayed in the Walt Disney animated film *Aladdin*.

But this should also cause us to reflect. Why did a significant percentage of Americans want to bomb Aladdin’s city? The answer is we were angry, and we were afraid.

In fact, the same month that the “Should we bomb Agrabah?” poll was conducted, the Islamic State released a video on the Internet in which three Christian men in orange jumpsuits were forced to kneel on the desert sands, while a masked executioner stood behind them. The men were asked to state their religion. One by one, each man proclaimed his allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. And one by one, each man was

¹ Edwards-Levy, Ariel and Natalie Jackson. “People want to bomb the fictional kingdom in Aladdin, but don’t panic yet.” *The Huffington Post*. 18 Dec. 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bomb-agrabah-poll_56746d70e4b06fa6887d5612

mercilessly executed.² Now, a few decades ago, such an act would have been unimaginable. But because this type of thing has become common, tragedies like these barely even make the news anymore. I can understand why we were angry and afraid.

For Christians, if we believe that God is both powerful and good, it perfectly natural and reasonable to ask the question, “*why?*” Why would God allow this to happen? Hasn’t Jesus defeated the powers of sin and death? If Christ is the victorious, resurrected Lord, then why do Christians suffer?³

The passage that we are examining today answers that question. The Apostle Peter is writing a letter from the city of Rome to various churches in the region of Asia Minor, which is the land of the modern-day nation of Turkey. The Christians belonging to these churches are beginning to be mocked, criticized, and discriminated against because of their belief in Jesus Christ.⁴ And Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is writing this letter to these Christians to equip them to faithfully live out their identity as the people of God in a culture that is increasingly hostile toward the Christian gospel.

Here in chapter 4, Peter directly confronts *the question of suffering*. However, Peter is not just talking about any type of suffering. He wants to address those who are sharing in “*Christ’s sufferings*” (1 Pt. 4:13); those who are “*insulted for the name of Christ*” (1 Pt. 4:14); those who are suffering “*as...Christian[s]*” (1 Pt. 4:16). In other words, Peter is talking specifically to Christians who are suffering because they are Christians.⁵ There is a word for this type of suffering, and it is called “*persecution*.”

Now “persecution” is an important word that we don’t want to empty of its meaning. So, we need to be clear of what it is *not*. Persecution is not someone saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” Persecution is not someone disagreeing with your opinion. Persecution is not when a Christian receives the consequences for doing something sinful or stupid. Peter says very plainly, “*But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler*” (1 Pt 4:15). If you commit a crime and go to jail, that is not persecution. If you “meddle” (ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος)⁶ into someone else’s business or pick a fight on social media because you are mean; that is not persecution.

So, what is persecution? *Religious persecution is a state of lacking provision, power, position, protection, and a sense of permanence due to one’s sincerely held faith. It is*

² Nicholas Kristof. “For Many, Faith Comes at a High Cost.” *The New York Times*. 19 Dec. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/opinion/sunday/for-many-faith-comes-at-a-high-price.html?_r=0

³ N.T Wright. *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John, and Judah*. (Louisville: WJK, 2011), 89.

⁴ D.A. Carson and Douglass J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 2005), 639.

⁵ Edmund Clowney. *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross*. The Bible Speaks Today commentary series. Ed. John R. W. Stott. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 190

⁶ The word “meddler” is a rare word can also be translated as “mischief maker,” or “one who carefully looks on others affairs.” Wayne A. Grudem. *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Vol. 17). Ed. Leon Morris. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 187.

receiving verbal abuse, physical abuse, or discrimination because of your religion and nothing else.⁷ This type of persecution has always been and will continue to be a real challenge for people who follow Jesus. And for the rest of our time today, I want to unfold from this passage of Scripture, “How to Endure Persecution.”

Exposition

The Apostle Peter wants Christians to be well equipped to endure persecution by recognizing three truths: 1.) *The Reality of Persecution*, 2.) *The Reasons to Rejoice in Persecution*, and 3.) *The Rewards for Enduring Persecution*.

1.) The Reality of Persecution.

Peter begins this passage, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pt 4:12). The matter of fiery trials is not an issue of “if,” but rather “when.” It is to be an *expectation* of reality, not an *exception* to reality. For Peter, this not a hypothetical consideration. He has been imprisoned for his faith; he has seen close friends lose their lives because of their faith (Acts 12:1-3). And very soon [show image of “The Crucifixion of St. Peter” by Caravaggio (1601)], Peter himself will soon be martyred in the city of Rome for his faith.

But Peter is not surprised at this persecution, nor should we be. For *the gospel of Jesus Christ is a challenge to the-powers-that-be in a world that is fractured and broken by sin. The gospel is a challenge to our religious systems, our economic systems, and our political systems.*⁸

I’ll give you a few examples from the Ancient Church that the readers of 1 Peter would have known all too well. The first churches of Asia Minor were planted by Christian leaders named Paul and Barnabas. Initially, Paul and Barnabas’s would find a local Jewish synagogue, where they would share the gospel of Jesus by appealing to Old Testament scripture (Acts 13-14). But many of Paul and Barnabas’s fellow Jews didn’t like what Paul and Barnabas had to say. They wouldn’t believe that Jesus was Israel’s promised Messiah. And even more, they refused to believe that, through Jesus, the God of Israel would want to include Gentiles into his chosen people too. The gospel was a challenge to their religion, their sense of cultural identity, and their social comfort zone. So, do you know what they did? They took Paul out of the city and threw rocks at him until they thought he was dead (Acts 14:19).

Another story from the book of Acts that the readers of 1 Peter would have known very well was the story of how the gospel came to the great city of Ephesus, which was the most important city in Asia Minor. Paul, the same guy who was pelted with rocks in the last story, kept preaching the gospel. Eventually, he landed in the city of Ephesus for a

⁷ Helm, David R. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing in Christ’s Sufferings*. Preaching the Word commentary series. Ed. R. Kent Hughes. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 149-150

⁸ Grudem, Wayne A. *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Ed. Leon Morris. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 184.

few years, where he planted another church. And the thing about this church at Ephesus that it became so influential that it turned the local economy upside-down. You see [show Temple of Artemis], Ephesus was a tourist destination because it housed one of the seven great architectural wonders of the ancient world – the great temple of Artemis. But once the gospel came to Ephesus, people stopped worshipping Artemis and started worshipping Jesus. Eventually, a silversmith named Demetrius instigated a riot with his fellow silversmiths, which forced Paul to leave, because people were no longer buying their idols (Acts 19: 21-20:1). Now, *can you imagine what it would look like for our city's economy to shift because of a move of God?* Can you imagine certain industries disappearing, not because of a law or city ordinance, but because of sheer lack of demand? But if it did, you can imagine there would be some people upset about it.

Later into the second and third centuries, Christianity became so powerful that it became a political threat to the Roman Empire. Christians were brought before local officials and asked to declare that “Caesar was Lord.” If they refused and, instead, announced “Jesus was Lord,” they lost their citizenship, their property, and their ability to do business. Eventually, they even lost their lives.

Fast-forward 2000 years, it is now estimated that numerically there are more Christians being martyred today than there were at the time of the ancient church.⁹ Recently, there were churches in the Middle East that had been there since the days of Acts that no longer exist due to ISIS. In fact, 100 years ago, 14% of people in the Middle East were Christian; today, that number is only 4% and is quickly decreasing due to persecution.¹⁰ We need to face this reality and respond to this reality. It is good and godly to write to our State Department and our congressional representatives, petitioning them to relieve global persecution. It is good and godly to consistently pray for members of the persecuted church, which is why we do so on a monthly basis.

And while Christians in the states do not face the same level of violence as many of our global brothers and sisters in Christ, religious liberty in the U.S. is a highly contested matter. Christians who openly identify their faith are often openly mocked and excluded from institutions like academia, the media, government agencies, and the entertainment industry. Religious schools are under federal pressure to renounce their moral codes of conduct for student and faculty or else risk litigation.¹¹

This may be discouraging and scary at times. But what it should not be is *strange*. A religion should never want or need a state to enforce it.¹² The church was born in persecution, and it will continue to know persecution until Jesus returns. We should not

⁹ Marco Rubio and Russell Moore. “Marco Rubio and Russell Moore: This Christmas, we must remember slaughtered Christians in the Middle East.” *The Washington Post*. 24 Dec. 2015.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/24/marco-rubio-and-russell-moore-this-christmas-we-must-remember-slaughtered-christians-in-the-middle-east/>

¹⁰ Kristof.

¹¹ Michael Schramm. “Judge’s ruling against Pepperdine a win for LGBT community.” *USA Today College*. 22 Dec. 2015. <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/12/22/judges-ruling-against-pepperdine/>

¹² Moore, 167.

be surprised by persecution. Nor should we lose hope when we see it or encounter it. But we should “rejoice” (χαίρετε).

2.) The Reasons to Rejoice in Persecution.

Verse 12 describes persecution from a distinctly Christian angle. Suffering is described as a “fiery trial” (πυρώσει) that “tests” (πειρασμός) Christians. Then, in verse 13, Peter commands Christians to rejoice. The book of James conveys a similar idea with similar language: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1:2-3). What both Peter and James are saying is that Christians can rejoice in persecution is because of what God can accomplish through it.

God is never the author of evil, but he is so powerful that he can cause a redemptive effect to come from an evil cause (cf. Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:28). Through our suffering, God may be cleansing us of harmful desires. He may be helping us to cultivate dependence upon him and him alone. He may be giving us the perspective to see what really matters in life. But rest assured, he is *always* working in the midst of our pain.

Another reason to rejoice in suffering is that suffering for Christ is a way to know that we are really following Christ. In this way, persecution is an encouraging road sign that we are going in the right direction.¹³ Jesus himself predicted this: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Mt 10:24-25). If we follow Jesus, we will be maligned and marginalized in some way. This why Dr. Edmund Clowney encourages us by saying, “The reality of our suffering for Christ becomes a pledge to us of the reality of our belonging to Christ.”¹⁴

Lastly, Christian suffering is an opportunity to glorify God before the watching world. As verse 16 says, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Pt 4:16). Verse 19 says we are to entrust our souls to our faithful Creator “while doing good” (1 Pt 4:19). This, I believe, is the missional end of persecution. This means we are to serve our cities, even when some in the surrounding culture want to exclude us. We are to love our neighbors, even if our neighbors wish us harm. And, historically, this strategy was so effective that Christianity eventually overtook the very empire that was persecuting it.

3.) The Reward for Enduring Persecution.

Look at verse 14 again, “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pt 4:14). This is such profound reward. The same Spirit that filled the Temple of Israel and raised Jesus from the dead rests upon those who suffer for the name of Jesus. That Holy Spirit is gloriously near

¹³ Wright, 89.

¹⁴ Clowney, 191.

you, *especially when you suffer for Christ sake*. We don't worship God to get something from God. We worship God so that we get God. This is a *present* reality in our time of need.

But there is also a *future* reward that awaits those who suffer. As verses 17 and 18 show us, that reward is justice. The same fire of justice that purifies our hearts will one day purify all of creation. Christ will come in glory, and final justice will come for all who have been wronged.

The book of Revelation portrays this encouragement of those who have suffered and will suffer persecution: *"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been" (Rev 6:9-11).*

So, if you are afraid because of global persecution, rest a little longer. If you are afraid because you have suffered for Christ, rest a little longer.

The current suffering of Christians is a signal that the days of persecution have a finite number. The blood of martyrs has a defined limit. Eternal justice is coming, for our King is coming soon. Though it may be dark, day is dawning.

Conclusion

But we should also draw profound comfort from the fact that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we walk behind our faithful Shepherd, who has gone before us (Ps 23). Our Messiah King also happens to be a Suffering Servant. "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, [well]-acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3a).

As our Savior stretched out his hands on the cross, as he suffered crucifixion at the hand of those he came to save, as he took upon himself the penalty of our rebellion against God, Jesus Christ of Nazareth cried unto God, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"* (Lk 23:46). He is the ultimate example of entrusting his soul unto God while doing good (cf. 1 Pt 4:19).

But even more, in the Cross of Jesus, we can see that God can take the worst evil event in history and turn it toward the good of his people. This can give us hope when we see and experience suffering. As N.T. Wright has written, *"...just as the crucifixion of the Messiah was at the same time the most wicked thing humans ever did and the most powerfully loving thing God ever did, so the wickedness of those who persecute God's*

people forms the strange frame within which the power of God's transforming love can shine through all the more strongly."¹⁵

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we remember those Christian brothers and sisters who have suffered before us and continue to suffer in our own day in age. If we should find ourselves experiencing persecution, may we rejoice and glorify our God with our lives. And may we do good and entrust ourselves to the one who suffered for our sake and rose again for our victory!

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1. Read 1 Pt 4:12-19. Summarize the big ideas of this passage in your own words.*
- 2. What are some examples of modern-day Christian persecution? What is the difference between legitimate Christian persecution and the type of suffering that comes from the activities listed in 1 Peter 4:15?*
- 3. What are some of the reasons that Peter gives his readers to rejoice in their sufferings?*
- 4. What are some practical ways to obey the command in 1 Peter 4:19?*

¹⁵ Wright, 87.

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