

## *How to Thrive in Suffering*

1 Peter 4:12-19

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I do not like “how-to” sermons. I am actually going against my principle by giving this sermon the title, “*How to Thrive in Suffering*.” Yet, what I keep discovering in 1 Peter is not only the reminder that Christians suffer but how they can rejoice in their suffering. The fact is, as Christians, we are called to not suffer like the rest of the world. We are not called to moan, groan, complain, and shake our fists at God as if we do not trust God.

Peter is very clear that if you belong to Jesus, as Christians, we will suffer. Our Savior suffered, and so we should expect nothing less than what He experienced in life.

Peter reminds us that Jesus suffered and died to purchase for us a *living hope*. *The living hope He died to secure for us enables us to rejoice in our suffering because we understand that we will ultimately spend eternity with Him in Heaven.*

In chapter 1, v. 3, Peter said, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*” Then in 1:6-7, Peter said, “*In this, you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*”

We will suffer as Christians, and we will suffer for being Christians, but our suffering should be different than the rest of the world’s suffering. We suffer with a living hope in Jesus. The exhortations Peter gives in vv. 12-17 are the reason for the title, “*How to Thrive in Suffering*.” Peter gives us six exhortations in these verses to teach us how to thrive in our suffering. Let’s walk through these verses and consider these six exhortations.

### 1. Expect to Suffer for being a Christian (v. 12)

*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.*

We are getting close to the end of Peter’s letter. Peter is still doing what he did at the opening of the letter, and he reminded the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia that they will go through suffering, trials, and afflictions. He exhorted these new believers in Christ not to be surprised by the *fiery trial of suffering when it comes upon them*.

The Greek verb *surprised* is a present tense imperative. The use of this Greek word in its particular tense suggests that these Christians were taken by surprise by their suffering. Contrary to popular belief, Christians are often surprised by their suffering and their response to it. We are all surprised by this season of pandemic, economic downturn, uncertainty, extended isolation, and Derechos. We are probably even more surprised by our response to our suffering.

Think about these churches in Asia Minor, until recently, these people had not undergone suffering. Before they trusted Jesus, they were accepted by their friends and all of society. Then after they placed their faith in Jesus all of the sudden, they were now on the outside of society. They were viewed less favorably for their new religion that called all people to repent of their sin against a Holy God who had sent His only Son to suffer and die for their sin. To top it off, now they were telling their friends and family that they must follow Jesus, the Son of God, the very God Himself who had risen from the dead and was in Heaven and would return to take His people to heaven. To top it off, their new religion left no wiggle room to practice other religions. It proclaimed that Jesus was the *ONLY* way to God, and outside of Jesus, there was no hope for life after death. In addition to that, those who reject Jesus would spend eternity in Hell, paying for their sin against this Holy God.

Needless to say, their message was not popular. It confronted every worldview in their society. It called people’s lives into account before God. As a result, they were being persecuted and suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ.

The fact is, even today, if you share the whole gospel with people, it always confronts people’s worldviews. Yet, outside of the gospel, there is no hope. Whether they know it or not, people need the life-giving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Peter’s goal, in vv. 12-19, was to prepare these churches for the suffering they were enduring and for the massive *fiery trial* that was coming.

Here is what would eventually happen in Rome. The Roman emperor Nero would eventually arrest Christians cover them in tar, tie them on poles along Roman roads, set them on fire as street lights for the Roman roads. Finally, Nero set the city of Rome on fire, and then he blamed Christians for the fire. What followed was empire-wide persecution of Christians.

We, Christians in the West, do not face this kind of persecution and suffering today. The most we face is rejection by people, a bit of scorn, some mild mocking in public, some rejection by friends and family, or perhaps not being taken seriously for our faith in Jesus. However, current trends indicate that this may be changing.

The fact is, in other parts of the world like Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Christians suffer for their faith in Christ on a daily basis. They are living in the context that Christians in Peter's day did.

Pastor Daniel Doriani tells of his friend, who runs a Christian training center for exiled Eritreans (Ethiopians) living in Sudan. He says that Sudan is one of the most oppressive nations toward Christians on earth. In Sudan, a family can be in mortal danger for simply being a Christian. However, life in the nation of Eritrea is even worse. So much so that that Christians in Eritrea flee to Sudan for refuge. Reports tell us that Christian leader imprisonment in Eritrea and Sudan has never been higher.<sup>1</sup> Most of the Christians in the world live under this kind of sentence of threat and death.

Peter's goal is to remind Christians that no matter how they suffer, they should not be surprised. If we expect to suffer as Christians, then we will be prepared to thrive in our suffering. This leads us to his second exhortation.

## 2. Plan to Rejoice for Being United to Christ (v. 13)

*But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*

Rejoicing in our suffering is evidence we are thriving in our suffering. I want to be clear: our rejoicing is not rejoicing in the fact that we suffer but that we rejoice that as we suffer, we are sharing in Christ's suffering.

How can we rejoice in our suffering? In order to rejoice in our suffering, we must dig into the depths of the gospel. We must draw our strength from the Lord Jesus Christ, who died to purchase Holy Spirit's power and strength for us in our suffering. We must look at His suffering when He paid for our sin on the cross. We must remember He paid our ransom and set us free so that we now belong to God. We must remember that we will never taste one second of judgment in Hell but instead live with Him in Heaven for all eternity.

We must remember that the gospel turns suffering inside out. Suffering does not mean you do not belong to Jesus, but quite the opposite. Suffering for the sake of Christ means you are united to Him. This is our living hope that enables us to see that our suffering, no matter how unfair or horrendous, compared to eternity, is only a blip on the radar screen. The Apostle Paul calls our suffering in this life *light and momentary affliction*. We desperately need to have this eternal perspective.

Faisal Malick, in his book *10 Amazing Muslims Touched by God*, tells the story of one young Muslim who came to faith in Christ. Eventually, the young man went home to visit his family. He was nervous about the visit because his father was angry about his faith in Jesus. When he walked in the door, his father had a Muslim priest waiting on him to pronounce his funeral rite. At that moment, his brothers bound and gagged him and painted his face black. Then he was placed on a donkey where he would be beheaded and the donkey released into the wild. Just before his father chopped off his head, the donkey kicked and ran off with him on its back. The donkey ran so fast, and so far away that his family could not catch him. It eventually stopped at a stream where he was able to get free and escape.

Sometime later, he said he was on a college campus where some Muslim men found out he was a Christian. They captured him and took him out in the country and buried him alive. Almost as soon as he was covered with dirt, it started raining and made the dirt wet, and he was able to get out of the grave. He walked back into the town, cleaned up, and was on campus the next day. When the men saw him, they thought a dead man was on campus. They were shocked and frightened because they thought he was dead.

The young man says because of his faith in Jesus, he has had to keep relocating. He has been asked many times if he was happy living the life of a fugitive? Listen to his answer to that question. He says I am acutely aware of my sin and that Christ died to save me even when I was unworthy and too wicked to be saved. I had learned NOT to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. In all of life's perplexities, temptation, loneliness, weariness, and disappointments, I know that Jesus came to rescue me. Because of the gospel, I am able to say with the Apostle Paul that even though I am beaten, yet I am not killed. Though at times, I am sorrowful, yet I am always rejoicing. I consider everything loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ.

It is the intimate knowledge of the gospel that is the ground of this young man's rejoicing even when he is being persecuted. If you cannot rejoice in your suffering, then there is gospel work to do in your heart and life.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary: 1 Peter*, 189.

### 3. Receive the Blessing of the Spirit of God's Glory (v. 14)

*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.*

Peter tells us that when we are insulted for the name of Christ that we have been blessed with the Holy Spirit and the glory of God. This is a Trinitarian blessing. When you are afflicted for your faith in Jesus, then the blessing of the Holy Spirit and presence of God the Father is with you. When you realize the Holy Trinity is filling you, how can you not be filled with divine joy? God does not leave us empty, but He fills us with Himself.

In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas had been preaching in Antioch, and many people came to faith in Jesus. The Jews of the city were angry and incited the leading people of the city to persecute Paul and Barnabas. They kicked them out of Antioch, and as they left the city, they shook the dust of Antioch off the sandals and Acts. 13:52 records, "*And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*"

When we are insulted for the gospel, God does not leave us empty but instead fills us with joy. It is not just any joy but divine Trinitarian joy. It is a joy and rejoicing that comes from God, the Father, and the Holy Spirit who are happy with His people for trusting in the Son of God.

Our God is a Happy God. He does not begrudgingly give us joy—He fills us with His joy. Our Trinitarian God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit sings over His people blessings of comfort and joy. We must look to Him in our struggle and misery because God fills the hungry heart with the Spirit of His glory.

### 4. Suffer for God's Glory and Not for Sin (vv. 15-16)

*But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.<sup>16</sup> Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.*

Peter wants to be clear about reasons for suffering. He reminds us that suffering for sin is not the same as suffering for the name of Christ. He points out three particular sins: *murder, theft, and meddling*.

Jesus teaches us that at the heart of murder is anger. All of us, to some degree, struggle with anger, and Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount to be angry with our brother or sister is no different than murder. Our anger is often displayed in harsh judgment, resentment, scorning, scoffing, despising, or belittling someone. We are to refrain from this kind of anger, and if it shows its ugly head in our lives, we are to repent.<sup>2</sup> Are you suffering because of your anger instead of the gospel?

Likewise, at the heart of theft is envy, greed, manipulating relationships to our advantage, abuse of finances, unpaid debts, wasted wealth, and all of this is the idolatry wealth. Again, we must peel back the heart and look inside to see what is causing our suffering. Are you suffering because of your envy and greed or because of your faith in Christ?

Finally, Peter exhorts us to not suffer for meddling. Meddling is a rare Greek word. It combines the Greek word for *elder/overseer* and the Greek word *allotri*, which means *not belonging to you*. This is the only place it is used in the New Testament and basically means *to involve yourself in things that are outside of your calling*<sup>3</sup>. Meddlers are busybodies that create division. They are "*know-it-alls*" who stick their noses in others' business.

A Christian meddler might be a person who takes up company time sharing his/her faith; then, when management reprimands them for wasting company time, they proclaim they are being persecuted for their faith. They will say that management is unfair, unjust, and perhaps anti-Christian. In reality, they are being reprimanded for not doing their job.

Peter wraps up this exhortation in v. 16 when he exhorts us not to be ashamed for suffering for Christ's sake. In other words, a Christian who suffers for their sin should be ashamed, but the Christian who is suffering for trusting Christ should not be ashamed.

There is no shame for suffering for the gospel. Not only is there no shame, but suffering for the sake of the gospel is where the glory of God dwells.

Again, we see how the gospel turns suffering inside out. You see, suffering from sin and foolishness is something to be ashamed of in life. We have all probably experienced this kind of shame. You do something stupid, and you suffer for it. When you tell the story of your suffering, and your countenance drops, and shame is evident in your expression.

However, when you suffer for identifying with Christ and His gospel, it is not a neutral experience. You do not tell this story with shame, gloom, and doom. Instead, you tell it filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit, and as you share it, God is glorified. You now know what it means to stand firm in your faith.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>3</sup> Literally it means: *the calling of elder or overseer is not your calling*.

## 5. Obey the Gospel When You Suffer (vv. 17-18)

*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? <sup>18</sup> And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"*

Peter's fifth exhortation to help us thrive in suffering is for us to obey the gospel when we are suffering. Verse 17 is one of those verses that is an attention-getter, "*For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.*"

Judgment in this verse does not mean punitive or penal judgment. It means disciplinary judgment. This kind of judgment is God's refining fiery trial that purifies our faith in Christ. The judgment of the Refiners fire burns away the filth of sin and leaves the pure gold of the glory of Christ Jesus shining through in our lives.

Verse 17 ends by talking about obedience to the gospel. "Judgment of the house of God" means we are living a life of repentance. The gospel calls us to repent of sin. Life lived in light of the gospel is a life lived in the joy and kindness of repentance. It is confessing our sin to God and to one another. It is to press into the grace of the gospel by asking for others to pray for us when we struggle with sin.

God wants us to learn that the discipline of suffering is like being pruned so that the dead branches of sin are cut away. When the Master Gardener prunes us, then we will begin to produce more fruit. It will begin with the fruit of repentance, and then more fruit of the Spirit will begin to blossom. The fruit of holiness, love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, and patience. Your life will become a plant that feeds those who are around you.

Peter helps us make the connection between suffering and judgment in v. 18. He is NOT saying it is difficult for the righteous to be saved. The atoning work of Christ is more than sufficient to save sinners.

What Peter is doing is helping us make the connection between judgment or discipline for the purpose of holiness. In other words, if the straight and narrow of the gospel is filled with *the discipline of trials and tribulations*, then what will it be like for those who reject the gospel?

Those who refuse to obey the gospel are those who refuse to repent. If they *disobey* the gospel, then the *ungodly and the sinner* will be under the full judgment of God in the form of penal judgment and punishment.

The sad truth is the unrepentant sinner will be crushed by the weight of the judgment of their sin. I have no words that can adequately express how horrible this judgment will be. Revelation calls this judgment, spending eternity in a bottomless pit. It also calls it burning for eternity in a lake of fire.

Peter's exhortation for Christians to apply the gospel by living a life of repentance. Peter's exhortation for those who are not Christians is to repent of your sin and obey the gospel.

## 6. Trust in God and Do Good When You Suffer (v. 19)

*Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

The sixth and final exhortation is for God's people to entrust their souls to God when they are going through suffering. Peter calls God *our Faithful Creator* in v. 19. When he calls God *our Faithful Creator*, he is saying is the God is the *Author and Creator of our circumstances of suffering*. Peter calls us to trust the One who is Sovereign over our suffering because He created these circumstances.

When we are suffering, we are tempted not to see God as the Faithful Creator of our suffering. We are tempted to become bitter and angry with God. When we give in to this temptation, we not only sin, but we stop obeying God. We stop doing the good He has planned in advance for us to do.<sup>4</sup> *What we do is we turn our eyes inward and look at ourselves.*

I don't know if you are like me, but I am really good at throwing pity parties. When I throw a pity party, I invite everyone to the party. When I throw a pity party, everyone wallows in my pity. Everyone has a sad time and leaves the party depressed because I have sucked the joy out of their lives.

I love my pity parties because I am the faithful creator of me being the center of attention. As the old song says, "*It's my party, and I will cry if I want to.*" At my pity parties, I make sure no one sees *God as my Faithful Creator*. Instead, they see Him as my *unfaithful adversary*. At my pity parties, we all forget the gospel, and we sing sad songs. Have you ever thrown a pity party like mine? I hope not.

Brothers and sisters, when you are suffering for the sake of the gospel, let me encourage you to entrust your soul to God, who is the Faithful Creator of your suffering.

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<sup>4</sup> Eph. 2:10.

*You see, when we are suffering, we can turn our eyes inward, or we can turn our eyes upward. There is a complaint that turns the eyes inward and has a pity party, and there is a complaint that turns the eyes upward and trusts God.*

King David expressed such a complaint of faith in Psalm 10 when he says:

*Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?*

*Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*

<sup>2</sup> *In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor;  
let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised.*

<sup>3</sup> *For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul,  
and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> *The helpless are crushed, sink down,  
and fall by his might.*

<sup>11</sup> *He says in his heart, "God has forgotten,  
he has hidden his face, he will never see it."<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> *The Lord is king forever and ever;  
the nations perish from his land.*

<sup>17</sup> *O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted;  
you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear*

<sup>18</sup> *to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,  
so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.<sup>7</sup>*

One last exhortation about entrusting your soul to God. When suffering comes into our lives, the temptation is to stop gathering in worship. We say to ourselves, *"My heart is not right. I can't worship. I am angry with God."* In reality, this is the very time you need to gather with God's people and worship Jesus. Come and worship and let God take care of the cares of your heart.

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 10:1–3.

<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 10:10–11.

<sup>7</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 10:16–18.