

In Christ's Crucible

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Introduction:

Today, much of the religious world recalls the great suffering of our Savior as He died on the cross and was resurrected victoriously on the third day. Peter, in his first letter, repeatedly speaks of our Savior's suffering. According to **I Peter 3:18**, Jesus suffered for our sins to bring us to God. According to **I Peter 1:18-21**, Jesus suffered, died and was resurrected to redeem us from our futile ways so our hope and faith would be in God. We need to remember the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus and we do that not by an annual celebration but a weekly one, participating in the supper of the Lord that we might continually remember what Jesus has done for us. However, Peter demonstrates that Jesus' suffering was not just for our salvation but also for our example. In **I Peter 2:21-25**, Peter explains Jesus' suffering was an example for us because we too will suffer. In fact, the entire letter is about our suffering and how to deal with it. According to **II Timothy 3:12**, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (ESV). How should we deal with that? Peter provides the answers. Examine with me the suffering they endured, the reasons for Christian suffering and how we should respond.

Discussion:

- I. The suffering described in **I Peter**.
 - A. I imagine you are like me when you read New Testament writings about suffering as a Christian. You immediately read into the word beatings, stoning, martyrdom, etc. Certainly, our early brethren faced a great deal of that. However, recently, I was able to sit at the feet of Johnny Felker (a brother who preaches up in Nashville). He carefully led me and a few other men through the terms used in **I Peter** to describe their suffering surrounding this letter and I was amazed that it was very much the same kind of suffering we endure today.
 - B. According to **I Peter 2:12**, the Christians were spoken against as evildoers. According to **I Peter 3:9**, they were reviled. In **I Peter 3:16**, they were slandered and reviled for their good deeds. According to **I Peter 4:4**, they were maligned because they were different. The only mention of actual physical violence in this book is when Peter spoke about the master/slave relationship in **I Peter 2:18-20**. Peter is not talking about one of the political persecutions such as Nero's persecution in Rome. He is talking about the exact same kind of suffering we go through today. Almost all of this is a verbal abuse, just as we face. Historically, we know the Christians were accused of cannibalism (because they spoke of eating the body and blood of the Lord). Because they talked about the love of the brethren, they were accused of incest. Because they wouldn't honor the Roman gods, they were called atheists. Because they taught that those who didn't submit to Jesus would be eternally punished, they were called haters of mankind.
 - C. Personally, I have always felt like a second class Christian because nobody has ever beaten me for my faith. However, Peter has written an entire letter about how to deal with suffering that is, in the main, verbal. Nothing in this letter leads us to believe he was dealing with a political persecution that was empire wide resulting in numerous deaths. He is talking about those situations when people say, "You guys believe you are the only ones going to heaven." When someone says, "What, are you too good to drink with me?" they are doing what Peter is talking about. We should read this book all the more closely because it strikes so close to home, dealing with the very kinds of suffering we face today.
- II. The reasons for Christian suffering.
 - A. Why do men malign, reject and persecute us?
 1. According to **I Peter 2:15**, men speak against Christians because of their ignorance. They don't understand the true God or His will, therefore they do not understand those who follow Him. Instead of investigating, they often just lash out. After all, if we can castigate and ridicule something, we don't have to think about it or even be changed by it. Consider the ancient slander I mentioned moments ago or more recent slanders such as "Campbellites", statements like "Oh, you're the ones who don't like music" or "You all don't believe in the Holy Spirit." People simply don't know the truth about what we believe and teach. When people are ignorant, they will persecute, slander and malign.

2. Additionally, **I Peter 4:4** says they will slander and malign us because they are surprised that we don't do what they do. Let's face it, everyone thinks their action is normal. If we won't do what they do, they think we are weird. When we refuse to drink, gamble, be involved in lascivious dancing, reject homosexuality, refrain from premarital and extra marital sexuality, walk away when they are telling dirty jokes, etc. they will be shocked. They might even be offended. No doubt the shock of our difference will cause them to be upset. We won't even have to say anything. They will see our difference as judgmental. To be frank, their persecution will be a self-defense mechanism. Wanting to show themselves to be al-right, they will castigate, ridicule and malign us in order to feel better about themselves. Interestingly, while the text shows that they will be surprised at our behavior, **I Peter 4:12** demonstrates we should not be surprised by theirs.
- B. Why does God allow our suffering?
1. **I Peter 1:6-7** says our suffering is a testing of our faith. We must not misunderstand this concept of testing. Remember, God already knows our hearts (**Acts 1:24**). He doesn't have to test us to see what kind of faith we have. This is not a test to prove to God that we really have faith. Rather Peter illustrates this test with the gold refiner's fire. When gold is melted in the crucible, the hidden impurities and slag float to the top. The refiner can then skim the impurity off. When we suffer, God is not learning what is in our heart, He is showing us what is there. When we are in the crucible with Jesus, the impurities in our heart come to the surface. When life is easy and no one bothers with us, those impurities can lie overlooked by us. But when heat is applied, they rise to the surface. Let's face it, do we not realize that we truly discover the character of a person when they face stress and distress? We actually need suffering, not simply to prove we are Jesus' disciples but because suffering is the means by which we learn of our impurities so we can work on them and remove them. Perhaps that is why both James and Paul both express similar points (**James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5**). Sadly, many Christians don't allow their hard times to be purifying. Instead, they think the hardness of their situation justifies their misconduct. That couldn't be further from the truth. In those moments, the way we respond is not the justifiable exception to the rule of our lives. They are the revealer of what is really in our hearts. If what we see in those situations is not what God wants from us, we have work to do skimming the impurities.
 2. **I Peter 2:12** provides the second answer. As we grow through and bear up under the reviling and persecution from the world, they see our good works and glorify God. I believe this passage specifically refers to the glorifying that the saints will do in the day of judgment at the end of the world (**II Thessalonians 1:9-10**). On that day of visitation, the impenitent will be thrown out in flaming fire, cast out of the presence of God for eternal destruction while the saints will glorify God. The only way those who slander us can glorify God in that day is if they have become one of us. God allows us to suffer because our example in suffering will cause many to turn. Consider the thief on the cross in **Luke 23:39-40**. He had earlier cast dispersions at Jesus (cf. **Matthew 27:44**), but apparently watching Jesus suffer he recanted and now glorified God and will do so in the day of visitation along with us. We suffer righteously so that those who cause our suffering may be led to penitence and salvation.
- III. How must we respond to suffering?
- A. *Look to eternity* and don't get bogged down by the moment. Peter begins his letter reminding us that we didn't become Christians to gain an easy life (**I Peter 1:3-5, 8-9**). We became Christians to glorify God so we can go to heaven. As Paul explained in **Romans 8:18** there is no suffering so bad on earth that it is worth missing out on heaven just to avoid present suffering.
 - B. *Remember who we are*. In **I Peter 1:17-19**, Peter reminds us we are the redeemed. We are who we are now because Jesus' blood saved us. According to **I Peter 2:4-5**, we are living stones being built up into a spiritual house to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. According to **I Peter 2:9**, we are a chosen people set apart to proclaim the excellencies of God. No matter what anyone does to us, we need to remember who we are. We are no longer the world; we are the set apart.
 - C. *Keep our behavior honorable*. In **I Peter 2:12**, we are told to keep our behavior honorable. In the following verses he explains that means submitting to the governing authorities. It means servants should submit to their masters, even when they are unjust. Wives should be subject to

their husbands, even if they are unbelievers. Husbands should live in an understanding way with their wives. He summed up our honorable behavior in **I Peter 2:17** saying we should “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” As we consider how honorable our behavior is to be, we should remember **I Peter 1:15-16** remembering that our example for excellent behavior is not the world or the way we lived while in the world. Our example is God and we are to be holy as He is.

- D. *Repay evil with good, reviling with blessing.* The natural and worldly response to persecution is to give it back to them in kind. If they are going to cause me trouble, I will cause them trouble. If they are going to revile and malign me, I will revile and malign them. **I Peter 3:9** says we should do the exact opposite. We are to bless those who revile us. We must do good to them.
- E. *Be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in us.* As we said, persecution comes because of ignorance. But every once in a while, the ignorant may be intrigued and ask us why we live the way we do. What hope do we have that causes us to be so different? As **I Peter 3:15** says, we need to be ready to give a defense for the gospel and its place in our lives. That means we need to be busy studying and understanding all we can about God’s gospel so we can defend it when the opportunities arise as they will if we bear up under reviling.
- F. *Love one another.* **I Peter 4:8-11** demonstrates we need to love one another earnestly. We do this by offering each other hospitality and using the gifts God has given us to serve one another. Think about it. From the world, we are going to receive slander, reviling and hatred. We need to have someone we can turn to for support, help and encouragement. Here we are. That is what we must provide for one another. I can imagine that if someone is facing suffering in the world and then they come to their brethren and find more of the same, they will readily fall prey to Satan’s trap. We need to be a people that provides love and care for one another in order to preserve one another in Jesus.
- G. *Submit to our elders.* In **I Peter 5:1-5**, Peter wrote about the role of shepherds who exercise oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly. They do so not for shameful gain but because they are eager to help. They do not do so with dominance or domineering attitudes but by being examples. That is, they do not push people where they are unwilling to go but lead people down paths they have already trod. Then Peter says that we ought to submit to these men. I’ve always found this passage odd in the context of the suffering and persecution Peter was talking about. We need to see this passage for what it is. It is not some kind of parenthesis wholly unrelated to the rest of the book. Rather, Peter is explaining that this is an integral part of bearing up when we suffer persecution. We need to go to our shepherds with our struggles and follow their lead, submitting to their guidance, deferring to their wisdom. Realize, that means listening to them, even when what they encourage is not our first choice or even what we want to do. God gave us shepherds to help guide us through this life, if we wish to bear up, we need to submit to them, listening and learning from them, following their example. Of course, that means shepherds need to be living exemplary lives.
- H. *Cast our anxieties upon God.* In **I Peter 5:6-7**, Peter says we should also humble ourselves before God, casting our cares upon Him because He cares for us. This is humility before God because it admits we cannot resolve our struggles. We cannot overcome them apart from His help. But we need to understand what it means to cast our anxieties upon God. It doesn’t merely mean to pray about it. It means to pray about it and then trust God to deal with it. That trust is demonstrated as we merely do what God says is right. Too many of us Christians think we are smarter than God. We think we can come up with a plan to overcome sin, Satan, suffering that is better than God’s. We may not like His directive. So we figure out how we are an exception to His rules. Instead, we just need to do what He says. That is trusting God. That is casting our anxieties upon Him. That is letting Him deal with our lives His way. God cares for us. When we suffer and cast it on Him, He will provide.

Conclusion:

Christians suffer. It has always happened and will always happen. Just as Jesus was placed in the crucible, so will we be. But let the suffering have its perfect work. We must respond to it God’s way and allow it to purify us and reach out to even those who cause us to suffer that they might repent and be saved along with us. Whatever we face, let us proclaim the excellencies of our God.