

Persecution Has a Path
I Peter 4:12-19

This morning we are finishing up Peter's discussion on how to respond in times of suffering when non-Christians persecute the church. He also gave us advice on how we should treat other Christians during persecution showing love and hospitality. We find his closing remarks on persecution in I Peter 4:12-19.

First, he notes that persecution is a painful path. Second, he says that persecution is a praiseworthy path. Thirdly, he tells us that persecution is a purposeful path.

I. PERSECUTION IS A PAINFUL PATH –
v. 12

Peter address his audience as “dear friends” or “beloved”. It's a term of affection that emphasizes the unity of all believers.

He is not referring to their unity in terms of something geographical where they all live in the same zip code or city. These believers were scattered throughout Asia Minor.

He is not referring to their unity in terms of something cultural where they come from the same socio-economic status or class. These believers were Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, slaves and free.

Peter is speaking about a spiritual unity that comes as a result of being part of the same body of Christ through their personal faith in Christ for salvation. Peter identifies with them because he was part of this body of Christ through faith. He also completely understands what they are going through. Like them he also suffered persecution and so expresses care, tenderness, compassion and affection calling them “dear friends”. He uses a term that conveys a heart that hurts with them. He is like the mother who scoops up the little child who

has just come through the door in tears with a scraped knee needing to be comforted and cared for.

A casual glance of this verse leaves the reader with the impression that Peter's words are somewhat calloused even a bit unsympathetic. “do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you.”

Poignantly Peter tells them to expect persecution.

A. Expect Persecution

For anyone going through a difficult time right now, those words may seem unwelcome. They appear to be insensitive. In today's vernacular we may conclude that he is telling them to “man up” or “put your big boy pants on” because hard times of persecution are going to happen.

Let's be honest, we expect in some way to wake up each morning and receive blessings from God, not persecution and yet we see here the opposite. We've all heard of preachers who spin the gospel in a way that once you get saved, life will be a bed of roses for you that your problems will be over. That's a bit different from what John writes in Revelation 21 where he says that only when Christ returns will suffering of every kind be over for the Christian.

In our passage Peter tells them not to be surprised at “fiery trials”. The word “surprise” means bewildering astonishment.

Essentially he is saying that instead of being caught off guard we should expect persecution.

Decades before Peter wrote these words Jesus said the same thing.

Matthew 10:22 “All men will hate you because of Me.”

John 15:18-21 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of

the world. That is why the worlds hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of My name. for they do not know the One who sent Me.” (Emphasis added)

In John 16:33 Jesus said we would have tribulation, but in spite of that be of good cheer because He has overcome the world.

So when you encounter persecution of some kind don’t be shocked, expect it and then embrace it.

B. Embrace Persecution

Now I don’t mean go out looking for it as if you had some warped sense of pleasure from pain. Don’t go out looking to be picked on for your faith. But on the other hand if it happens don’t shy away from it either. Accept it because being persecuted for your faith is a validation of your faith. Just remember that Jesus said if they persecuted Him, they would persecute us. He further went on to say, if they persecuted the Old Testament prophets we should expect the same kind of treatment.

Charles Spurgeon once said that those “who dive in the sea of affliction, bring up the rarest of pearls.”

We can look at fiery trials or persecution in a negative sense. After all, those who inflict us with that kind of treatment intend to impose pain, torture, and injury on us. Webster’s dictionary defines persecution as something that is done constantly to another person to afflict or harass to cause injury or distress; to cruelly oppress, especially for reasons of religion, politics, or race.

Throughout this section Peter has referred to Christ as our ultimate example of how to respond to persecution. When I look through Scripture someone else besides Christ who understood

persecution of this magnitude it was Joseph. Genesis 37:1-4

Here’s the picture so far. Joseph is a teenager. He was favored above the other 10 brothers (Benjamin is still quite young) and they hated him because of it. They hated him so much they couldn’t even speak a kind word about him. I believe it was a deep seated resentment and bitterness with an intent on revenge and retaliation. To them Joseph was the golden child, a goody two shoe.

In verses 5-11 we see that Joseph had a couple of dreams that were interpreted to mean that they would all bow down before him. Verse 8 says they hated him all the more.

The scene shifts in verse 12 where we read that they had taken the sheep to another region to graze. Jacob told Joseph to go find them and bring back a report on their welfare. After some searching and asking he eventually found them, but his brothers saw him first so they laid a plot for him. We pick it up in verse 18: “they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.”

It didn’t take them very long to come up with a plan. As the account unfolds, the oldest brother, Reuben, convinced them to throw him in a pit. He intended to rescue him and send him on his way back home before something ill-fated happened to him. While he was tending to some other chores, the other nine brothers sold him to some slave traders headed to Egypt where he was sold to a high ranking government official who had a shameless wife who tried to seduce Joseph but who wouldn’t comply with her immoral intentions. Joseph was falsely accused of attempting to commit an indiscretion and was thrown into prison – all because he chose to do the right thing. While he may not have expected such ill treatment for doing what was right, he did embrace it and not allow it to diminish his faith or doubt God. If Romans 8:28ff had been written then, it would have been his go to

passage every day. “And we know that all things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.”

A few verses later Paul writes: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or *persecution* or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” (v. 35) The obvious answer or I should say the only answer for the believer is that no matter how hard others try, no one can separate us from God and His love.

Fast forward a couple thousand years to Peter’s day where Peter advises to expect persecution. Fast forward a couple thousand years to our day and we see the same kind of oppressive treatment. Consider Joseph as typifying Christians and everyone else in the story as non-Christians. They don’t like that we bring a bad report on their behavior. They don’t like our moral compass or call to godly character. So they harass and insult and injure for our faith.

So from a negative perspective persecution or what is termed as “fiery trials” in our text is meant to insult and injure us, but from Peter’s perspective or from the perspective of the believer what is meant to harm is actually what purifies. Peter doesn’t mean that the fiery trials judge us but instead refine us. This isn’t in some way to minimize the pain of the persecution you are going through, but bear in mind the purpose or end result of the suffering is to purify your faith. To take a modern cliché and spiritualize it “no pain, no gain” is absolutely true. Persecution is the means of purification.

A line in a song by David Crowder says “the cross meant to kill is my victory”.

Without the pain of the cross there would be no remedy for my sin, there would be no salvation available. Christ endured the shame of the cross to provide the essential sacrifice for the debt owed to a holy God that we could not offer. His pain was our gain. Our pain in persecution is gain in helping to

remove the impurities in our life.

Now when we consider a little more carefully verse 12 we see the purpose of such persecution or fiery trial. The purpose is better understood I think in the KJV rather than the NIV. The sense of its purpose is in the word “test”. This is again in reference to a term used in the process of refining metal. If the metal doesn’t go through the fire it won’t be purified or tempered.

Zechariah 13:8-9 “In the whole land, declares the Lord, ‘two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on My name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’”

Isaiah 48:10 “See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.” As painful as it is God uses our trials as a path for a specific purpose in our life. Expect that they will come and learn to embrace it by knowing that God’s purpose will be rewarded.

II. PERSECUTION IS A PRAISEWORTHY PATH – vs. 13-18

So if we are to expect persecution what should our response be in it? Peter gives us four ways to respond.

A. Be Joyful – v. 13

That’s hard. I want to complain and moan about it. The present imperative tense indicates that being joyful is something we habitually keep on doing. John Piper writes “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.” When you are thrown in the cellars of suffering, keep on rejoicing. When you dive in the sea of affliction, keep on rejoicing. In fact, keep on rejoicing not in spite of the affliction but even because of it. This is not a little piece of advice about the power of

positive thinking. This is an utterly radical, abnormal, supernatural way to respond to suffering. It is not in our power. It is not for the sake of our honor. It is the way spiritual aliens and exiles live on the earth for the glory of the great King.”

The Apostle Paul is sitting in prison when he writes to the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again, I say, Rejoice.” (4:4) To the Thessalonians he says “Rejoice evermore.” (I Thessalonians 5:16)

The key Paul says to rejoicing during times of suffering and persecution is doing so “in the Lord.” That’s something the world doesn’t understand. It doesn’t make any sense to them why Christians facing persecution could be joyful. But “in the Lord” they were able to stand strong when facing lions or gladiators in the arena or when facing the flames when being burned alive during the days of the reformation. This joy is not a feeling or euphoria that comes only when circumstances are pleasant but a deep seated confidence in God whose plan it is to refine us through our trial. It’s a firm belief in the sovereignty of God who is in control of all things. It is the assurance that this suffering is only temporary and is nothing compared to the eternal glory that waits for us when the curtain of this life draws closed and we enter our eternal home. We understand that this time of persecution is for our good and God’s glory. We rejoice in spite of our circumstances. It’s why Paul and Silas could sing in prison after having been beaten and put in stocks.

This ability to rejoice in persecution is directly related to how much we know about God, His great love for us and His unlimited grace that sustains us even in our deepest trials.

We are going to come to I Peter 5:10 in a few weeks but consider its message.

“But the God of all grace, who has called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that you have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you.”

The NIV says God’s grace will “restore you, make you strong, firm and steadfast.”

Paul explains to the Corinthian believers that he was going through an intense personal time of trial. He had earnestly prayed for it to be removed but we read in II Corinthians 12:9-10 “But He (God) said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

When we know the Lord we can experience His grace that provides the ability to be joyful. “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.”

Your persecution is an evidence of your union with Christ. It confirms your faith and someday you will experience His glory when you arrive in heaven.

Joseph Tson, a Romanian pastor who lived through persecution wrote “This union with Christ is the most beautiful subject in the Christian life. It means that I am not a lone fighter here: I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering: I only had the honor to share His sufferings.”

Now please understand that our suffering is not of any saving merit like Christ’s. When it says we participate in the sufferings of Christ it merely means that we are suffering the same kinds of things as Christ.

In our rejoicing now, we are preparing ourselves for

our time of rejoicing in glory.
Be joyful.

B. Be Blessed – v. 14

“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”

Matthew 5:11-12

Acts 5:41

Romans 5:3-5

Romans 8:17

Those who rejoice in suffering persecution for the name of Christ will not experience a weakening of their blessedness. Peter is also saying that they will actually be more blessed for their suffering because the Spirit of glory rests on them. Now every believer has the indwelling Holy Spirit. Peter is saying that those who are persecuted receive extra strength from the Holy Spirit to endure the suffering.

Harriet Beecher Stowe helped to bring an end to slavery through her fictional story *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She unfolded the story of Uncle Tom who was a poor old slave bought for the purpose of managing the estate of his owner. He heard Tom was a Christian and was set on breaking him of his will and spirit. Beaten mercilessly multiple times at the command of his master Legree, Tom continued steadfastly to hold onto his faith.

One day the master heard Tom singing a hymn:
When I can read my title clear
To mansions in the skies,
I'll bid farewell to every fear,
And wipe my weeping eyes.

Should earth against my soul engage,
And hellish darts be hurled,
Then I can smile at Satan's rage,
And face a frowning world.

Let cares like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall,
May I but safely reach my home,
My God, my Heaven, my All.

Be blessed in your suffering because the Spirit of God rests upon you. “Rest” here means to give relief, intermission from toil. Refreshment from the Spirit comes by the grace He gives to sustain during persecution, endurance to go the distance and His fruit that enables the one persecuted to respond with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Stephen experienced that kind of refreshment from the Spirit when those stoning him noticed his face to be like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15). As Stephen looked up into heaven gazing at the glory he was about to be received, only a Spirit filled believer could respond as he did asking the Lord not to lay this sin on his persecutors.

In your great trial there is great comfort.
Be blessed in your persecution.

C. Be Unashamed – vs. 15-16

We touched on this back in 1:20-21, but just to again affirm Peter says it's better to suffer for doing what is right than doing what is wrong. God approves of the one, but not the other. It's interesting in our passage that he includes something seemingly benign compared to being a murderer, a thief or a criminal. A meddler doesn't seem to fit in with the rest. The word means to be a busy body, someone who gets involved in the lives of others with the intent of imposing their standards or opinions where they shouldn't stick their nose. In this case here, it speaks more to public activism and civil agitation. It is one thing to speak out against social issues and as citizens of this great country we have that right guaranteed by the first amendment. But here it is referring to activity that is both disruptive and illegal. When we attempt to

get our political point across because we disagree with some policy or a perceived inequity and we engage in rioting or other types of behavior, there should be consequences for such actions. ANTIFA is a prime example. Even in causes that are worthwhile, like opposing abortion, can get us holding hands with others who take their activism to an illegal level like slashing tires, stalking doctors or burning abortion centers. Peter says that no Christian should be involved in such activity. Instead our actions should be such that there is nothing to be ashamed about.

Philippians 1:27 “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

So, if you suffer, let it be because you are doing what is right and bearing the name of Christ. Be unashamed.

D. Be Jubilant – v. 17-18

On an initial read of these verses it doesn't appear that there is anything to be jubilant about. Peter talks about judging believers first and then judging non-believers. The word Peter uses comes from the judicial process that makes a decision about someone's sin. We already know from Romans 3:23 that we are all guilty sinners and from Romans 6:23 that the penalty for sin is death. But the good news according to Romans 5:8 is that Christ paid the debt for our sin. Christ was judged by God for the sin He bore on our behalf on the cross. So while our sin has already been judged and by our faith in Christ we are found not guilty, God will still judge us for deeds done that result in rewards or loss of rewards. The persecution they were going through was God's way of purifying the believer. The church won't escape His judgment. If it begins with us how much worse will it be for the unbeliever?

It is first a warning to the believer to have conduct that is worthy of the gospel.

It is then a warning to the non-believer to turn away from sin in repentance and by faith trust Christ for salvation who died for sin. If the warning is not heeded then serious consequences will result. For the believer who suffers persecution, he or she can be jubilant that what they are encountering is not going unnoticed by God who will in time, whether in this life but certainly at the Great White throne judgment will receive the punishment God has planned for them. You may receive some judgment from God, but be jubilant because it is not eternal condemnation or loss of salvation. Your salvation isn't at stake here, but rewards are. In the meantime, be jubilant.

Persecution is a painful path.

Persecution is a praiseworthy path.

Persecution is a purposeful path.

III. PERSECUTION IS A PURPOSEFUL PATH – v. 19

“So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

God has a purpose in our persecution. Peter tells us to:

Comply with God's will

Commit to a faithful Creator

Continue to do good works

The degree of suffering each of us will encounter will be different from person to person, but our response should all be the same. Understand that while we may not know the why, we know the Who and He will be with us every step of our journey throughout and including times of suffering. Hebrews 13:5 “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

Matthew 28:20 “I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

Psalm 23:4 “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for You

are with me. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.”

We have said from time to time that *if God brings you to it, He will bring you through it.*

Don't let the persecution you are encountering be a reason for your doubting God's love or His presence or His strength in the suffering. Understand that it is God's will to purify you, to make you more like Him in character.

Let what Peter says in this verse encourage you and commit to your faithful Creator.

In the middle of lamenting the plight of the Israelites continued sin and refusal to obey God, Jeremiah is reminded that we aren't consumed because of God's mercies and unfailing compassion. Why could he say that? Because God's faithfulness is great. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

I knew a gal who had gone on a summer mission's trip to another country. They went for a swim in the ocean and the strong undercurrent grabbed hold of her and pulled her under. She was at the mercy of the current and the more she struggled to regain the surface the more it pulled her under. She said that when she finally gave into the current thinking it was the end and she relaxed that is when the current drove her to the surface.

Sometimes we can struggle against God's plan in persecution and suffering. Our resisting is actually harming and not helping. Only when we relax in the arms of our faithful Creator are we able to get through.

Trust in the One who is the Creator of all things. Stripped of everything he had Job said that even if God were to slay him, he would still trust Him. (Job 13:15)

Notice that instead of referring to God as the Judge as you might expect from the preceding verses he

calls God our faithful Creator. I believe it emphasizes that the grand Designer/Creator of the universe also has a grand design for you. What He is allowing in your life at any moment is achieving His will, His purpose.

When we have such confidence in God, we will, in spite of persecution continue to do good. Matthew 5:16 “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Our path may be painful, but remember that in it there is a purpose and that path leads to praise.

They say sometimes you win some
Sometimes you lose some
And right now
Right now I'm losing bad

I've stood on this stage
Night after night
Reminding the broken
It'll be alright
But right now
Oh right now I just can't

It's easy to sing
When there's nothing to bring me down
But what will I say
When I'm held to the flame
Like I am right now

I know You're able
And I know You can
Save through the fire
With Your mighty hand
But even if You don't
My hope is You alone

They say it only takes a little faith
To move a mountain
Good thing
A little faith is all I have right now

But God when You choose
To leave mountains unmovable
Give me the strength

To be able to sing
It is well with my soul

I know You're able
And I know You can
Save through the fire
With Your mighty hand
But even if You don't
My hope is You alone

I know the sorrow
I know the hurt
Would all go away
If You'd just say the word
But even if You don't
My hope is You alone

You've been faithful
You've been good
All of my days
Jesus, I will cling to You
Come what may
'Cause I know You're able
I know You can

I know You're able
And I know You can
Save through the fire
With Your mighty hand
But even if You don't
My hope is You alone

I know the sorrow
I know the hurt
Would all go away
If You'd just say the word
But even if You don't
My hope is You alone

It is well with my soul
It is well
It is well with my soul