

1 Peter 4:12-19

Hope in the storm

Blessed are the Persecuted



No one wants to talk about suffering or even think about it! We live in a society where suffering is abhorred. Two weeks ago I hurt my hip. It was quite painful, causing me to use a cane for a couple of days. Then, I finally caved to the pain and took a couple of pain pills – an Advil and a Tylenol together, and, **WAH-LAH** – within 45 minutes the pain went away, *and actually stayed away* – thank goodness! I was amazed at how effective that was! But the truth is that we have these amazing **pain** pills for physical pain, **depression** pills when we are chronically sad, **anxiety** pills for when we are stressed and fearful, **sleeping** pills when we are suffering from insomnia. Although, since creation, billions have suffered excruciatingly pain through the barbarically primitive work done on bad teeth by untrained “dentists”. But now we have **Novocain** or “**sleep**” **medication** for when our teeth are being repaired by a highly trained professional and it doesn’t hurt a bit! Of course there is the wonderful miracle of **anesthesia** for our surgeries. We go to sleep, surgeons do amazing work inside of us, and we wake up fixed! It really is quite amazing! Switching gears a bit, there are other kinds of pain suppressants in our lives. For instance, we also have the **U.S. Constitution, and Bill of Rights** - beautiful documents that, as long as we adhere to them, will guard against the pain of governmental tyranny and oppression. Is it any wonder that we, the American people, are not used to pain? I am not downplaying the fact that people still suffer here, and some, a lot,.. but our pain is child’s play compared to the way people throughout history have suffered.



But the people in the early church were used to suffering. Life was full of suffering. People have had none of these pain aids until rather recently – most of it has been developed within the last 100 years in increasing measure! So for thousands of years, suffering has been a normal part of life. The worst suffering for the early Christians at this time, however, was governmental oppression. Their religious liberties were not protected. If a person wanted to become a Christian they had to expect that they would be oppressed. Yet,.. and it is hard to believe but true,.. the church continued to grow exponentially under these circumstances! The gospel was still going forth undeterred, as the Christians responded to the message of Jesus delivered to them by the apostles – those that had sat under the teaching of Jesus Himself!

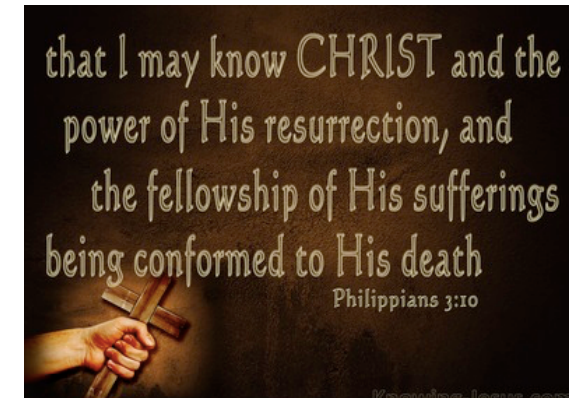
Vs. 12 – “*Do not be surprised,..*”

When you gave your heart to Jesus, did you think it was going to make life easier? Did you think God would fix all the problems you had created for yourself before you gave your heart to Him? Did you think that if you gave yourself to Him that He would miraculously provide money for all the bills you’ve run up? Did you think that He would take away your physical problems or the pain in your body that modern medicine still cannot reach?! Did you think that if you committed your life to Jesus that your marriage was guaranteed to be restored even after years of estrangement? A lot of new Christians are under these false impressions! But time will disabuse them of it. It just doesn’t work that way!



Peter puts that notion to rest here. He says, “*Don’t be surprised when life becomes HARDER for you because you are a Christ-follower*” Now, don’t get me wrong! In most ways life is far better *with* Christ than *without* Him. In time, if we live in careful obedience to Him, He simplifies the complications we have made for ourselves in our lives before the rule of Christ over our life. He doesn’t magically make our problems and complications go away. But, when we discontinue our usual practices of lying, conniving, control, of being mean and manipulative, and when we become truthful, upfront, non-controlling, non-manipulative, kind, caring, self-controlled, etc.... well, in time, things that were out of control in our lives begin to stabilize. They do usually get better. The disclaimer to that is if some of the people around us vehemently oppose Christ, then they will respond to the changes in us negatively. They will tell that they liked us better the way we were before, no matter how miserable we were as people! But only the most ruined and obstinate people react like that! That’s on them, anyway, not us!

But that is not even what Peter is talking about here. He is specifically referring to cultural and governmental persecution leveled in most places against Christians! As you can imagine, that fact of life made life very stressful for them. Peter tells them straight up to not expect any relief from that pressure, but to actually embrace it instead and to feel proud that they were counted worthy of that kind of suffering! Christ suffered the persecution of the authorities. It was relentless and it was intense. It ultimately took His life in the most horrible way imaginable! Through Christ's death in this particularly heinous manner, we are saved – reconciled to God, because through Christ's sufferings on the cross, sins were atoned for as God turned his great wrath against sin,.. inward! What incredible love! Now - we who put our faith in Christ – we who ask for His work on the cross to pay for OUR sins - we get them paid for. They will not come between us and God any longer! Then, free of that ugly encumbrance, we get to have a love relationship, an unbreakable bond of love-relationship that will endure far beyond this little blip of time and stretch into and beyond eternity!! That moment of faith and of surrender is the benchmark moment of our lives! Life began in that moment! We owe Him everything. To suffer for Him, says Peter, is a thing of privilege for the Christ-follower – a tender connection with how Christ suffered for us! We should be proud to be ridiculed and reviled, because that is what they did to Jesus! So, part of following Jesus is to accept the part about following in His footsteps even if it were to the cross! Can we grasp that – we who have never or rarely suffered at all! One day, on the great day that Jesus is “glorified” we will see *every* knee bow and every tongue confess - even if it is through bitter, sulphurously resentful mouths - that Jesus is Lord! And if we have suffered for believing in Him – we will be made all the happier – and that happy satisfaction will be our own badge of honor for all eternity!



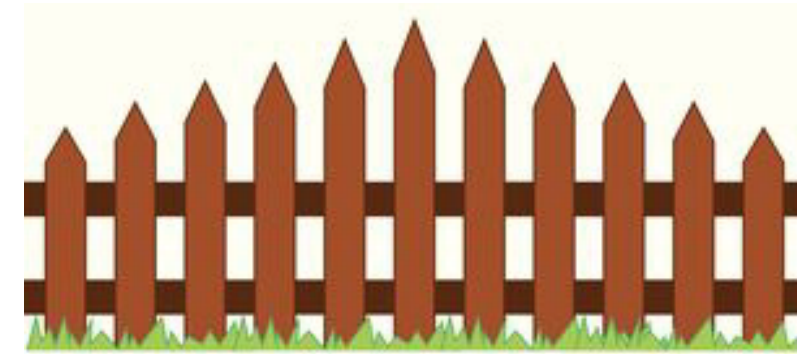
So, when they come for us one day, we can take up arms against them – we can do that – or we can choose to bow our heads and in the Name of Jesus and take whatever it is they have planned! ***You tell me*** which side ***you*** think ***Peter*** would come down on?!

Vs 14-16 – “If you are insulted,.. You are blessed,.. and the Spirit of Glory and of God rests on you.” Peter is saying here that when we are being persecuted, God hears and sees that too! When we willingly offer ourselves up and suffer insult, blows, even death for Jesus we are connected to a spirit of glory and better yet, to God’s Spirit – says this apostle! He is simply relaying the message of His Lord to the church.

[Matthew 5:3-12]

Now folks, this does not say that we are to ***not*** defend the defenseless – that we must stand by and let them be hurt or killed. It does not say we are to waste our own lives by succumbing meekly to a bullet from a madman, or someone who intends a mass killing! It does not say that we cannot protect our homes and families from an intruder with bad intent! But when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ, our only real defense is our unshakable faith in Jesus – not that He will step in and save the day for us. He might, but it is not likely. The world is generally being allowed to judge us and to condemn us unjustly, just as it did to Jesus. In **John 12:32**, Jesus says that at the suffering of the cross He will draw all people to Himself! Soft hearts respond/are drawn in, while hard hearts add another layer of “*I don’t care*”. In the same way the Christ-like suffering of Christians can draw people into His kingdom! Those unaffected by the suffering exclude themselves! It is not just those that overtly oppose God and hate Him, but also those that are neutral, who don’t really care. The statement of Jesus implies that we need to pick a side and invest ourselves in that side. It does not work to anyone’s advantage to try to remain in the middle, or “sit on the fence” as the expression goes! That in itself is a decision to remain unreconciled to God. To not decide for Jesus is a decision against Him. Jesus said that! “***He who is not for me is against me***”, He said. The fact is that there is only one way to effectively stop being an ***enemy*** of God, and that is by becoming a ***friend*** of God! And that, my friends, is done only through placing our faith in His Son Jesus! God Himself provided the **ONLY** means of reconciliation with Himself, and that was through the hard work of Jesus! **[2 Cor. 5:21]** Jesus Himself claimed - “***No one comes to the Father except through me***”. We need Christ’s righteousness! On the other hand, our mockers, our scoffers, our haters, and those that simply hold themselves in reserve, condemn themselves and earn judgment from God which finds its ultimate expression in Hell!

Eternal Hell is something I would not wish on my worst enemy (if I had a worst one)! I don’t even understand it, the necessity of it, and certainly the enormity of it! But I believe it is there whether anyone likes it or not, and I believe that it is real, and it is coming for the enemies of God! Just don’t be one of those great tragedies! Trust Jesus! Give your heart to Him!



Vs. 17, 18 – Persecution as judgement for Christians? Really?!

We are taught, (and correctly, I believe) that there is no judgment for those who are in Christ by faith. But the scriptures actually do not teach that at all.

Romans 8:1 “*Therefore there is no CONDEMNATION for those who are in Christ Jesus!*”

[1 Cor. 3:12,13] The scriptures clearly teach that the works of Christ-followers will be judged, not on the basis of how great or insignificant they are, but purely by the motives with which we accomplished them! The quality of our work is measured. But what we are assured of is that the terrible condemnation of God was directed upon His own Son at the cross, and therefore will never be directed against His own! We really are saved in Jesus, and that salvation will not vacillate back and forth depending upon our good works or lack of them. Our salvation is based in the works of Christ and not our own! ***BUT*** - our own works are the proving ground of our verbal commitment to Jesus! It is easy to say that we gave our heart to Jesus, but it is by our good and godly works that substance is given to those words. I’ve said this before - what we actually ***do*** is certainly more useful in telling/knowing the truth about us than ***anything*** we might ***say!*** **[James 2:14-18** would agree!



I think the chapter ends with a reminder that certain aspects of life can be hard for the Christ-follower. Being persecuted is obviously a miserable and painful thing! But persecution tests our faith and can be useful to God in building a strong ethic of service to Christ.

[James 1:2; Rom. 5:3-5; Heb. 12:7-12]].

A church made of of “proven” Christ-followers is a strong church indeed! Peter was not unhappy about the situation. The church was strong – stronger that it would otherwise have been if it was fat and prosperous and well accepted in society! But one thing he reminds them of - after all that - is that the work goes on – service to Christ and His purposes never takes a rest for any reason! The chapter concludes with, “***...continue to do good!***”