

# Suffering as a Christian and for Being One

## 1 Peter 4:12-16

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Suffering is not a topic we like to think about. That is, until life hurts. Then suddenly we search frantically for answers and solutions and escape from the pain.

This was brought home to my family most powerfully a week ago. I shared briefly with the church family that a week ago we were suddenly in an emergency health situation with our two-month-old daughter Madeline. This caught us very much by surprise. We were on a fun day trip to Grand Rapids. We visited my alma mater. Saw a few friends. We were enjoying a meal with a very hospitable family. All of a sudden, everything changed when the medical doctor wife who was hosting us said with emotion, *you must get your child to urgent care right now.*

Ever have a moment like that? Why do they seem to interrupt happy times? The family vacation. The beautiful day. I'd prefer trials show up when things are bad anyway. Honestly, I was uneasy coming into that week because I knew the next section in 1 Peter was on suffering. It seems uncanny how life parallels whatever I'm set to preach on. I've decided from now on only to preach happy verses.

Let's be honest, all too often, life hurts. This is true for human beings in general and true for Christians as well. If this room could talk, it would tell the story of many of us here who are hurting. The apostle Peter wrote to a group of Christians who were suffering. They had all the normal aches and pains of life in this broken world. In addition, they were suffering persecution for their faith. We have seen this theme before in 1 Peter; in fact, he begins with it.

*"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 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." (1 Peter 1:6–7 ESV)*

Hear the theme? Trials. Fire. Testing. Result? *"Praise and glory to Jesus."* Peter is a good pastor. He knows repetition is how truth sticks in our brains. So he picks up this theme again and says it a little differently. He has something to say about suffering as a Christian and suffering *because* I am a Christian.

*"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." (1 Peter 4:12–13)*

### Suffering as a Christian (1 Peter 4:12-13)

#### Don't be surprised

*"Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you." (1 Peter 4:12)*

Peter hits on our first response to trials. Shock. *What? This isn't what I was expecting. This wasn't part of my plan.* The Greek word here for surprise is used for the unexpected guest who shows up on our doorstep. What do we say when an old out-of-town friend suddenly shows up at the house? *What are you doing here?* Isn't that how we easily feel when we enter a trial? *Trial, what are you doing here? Pain, what are you doing on my doorstep?*

None of us plan for suffering. We make our plans for success, happiness, pleasure, etc. So when trials show up on our doorstep, we think they must have the wrong address. *Pain, you probably meant to go to my neighbor's house.* We want to slam the door. Why are we surprised? We imagine we are still living in the Garden of Eden or we mistakenly think this is the new heaven and new earth.



Everything between the Garden of Eden and the new heaven and new earth, we should expect hardship. Why? Sin. Not all suffering is the result of our sin, but all suffering is the result of sin in the world. Live in the Midwest, it's going to snow. Live in Chicago, it's going to be windy. Live in a sinful world, it's going to hurt. Peter says, *"Don't be surprised."*

### **Suffering, like a refiner's fire, tests us**

*"Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you."* (1 Peter 4:12)

Fire is an often-used metaphor in Scripture to describe our trials. Not in the sense of destroying us, but refining and purifying us. The fiery *trial*. It's the same word used in Luke 4 to describe Jesus' three fiery trials/temptations in the wilderness. The temptation to not trust God to meet his needs (turn stone to bread), the temptation to dethrone God (bow to Satan), and the temptation to test God (throw himself from the temple wall). How were these fiery and testing? They revealed Jesus' character and absolute commitment to the Father's will. Our trials do the same for us; they reveal what's in our hearts.

If you could have seen in my heart during Madeline's struggle, you would have seen faith alongside confusion, worry, and fear. I remember going out to get us some food and seeing people at the restaurant relaxed and laughing. So carefree. I thought, *don't they realize what's going on with my daughter?* Have you ever felt that way? I kind of resented their happiness.

Where did all that come from? Inside me. Did the trial produce it? No. The trial revealed it. We are tested in our trials. The testing reveals the realities and the impurities. These are things we have to confess and repent. I remember one thing I said in particular last week

out of angry frustration. I wish I hadn't said that. Where did it come from? The trial? No. Me.

### **Rejoice...in how this trial will make future glory even more wonderful**

*"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." (1 Peter 4:12-13)*

Is there anything more counterintuitive in a trial than to rejoice? Most Christians scratch their heads at James 1 when it says, *"Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds."* (James 1:2) What? Joy? Here, rejoice? This is especially hard when we suffer because of evil or injustice. How can I be happy about that?

Peter points us to the sufferings of Jesus and makes the extraordinary statement that our sufferings are a way of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. That doesn't mean our sufferings contribute to redemption or that spiritually we are on the cross with Jesus. What it means is that any suffering endured by faith and for God's glory is the same kind of suffering Jesus endured on the cross. We share in his suffering in that God's will takes us down the Calvary road too. We carry our cross. We pray in our Gethsemanes, *not my will, but yours be done*. We share in the experience of suffering. His was far worse and his saved the world.

Yet, we can relate in a small way to him. Here is the greater truth—he can relate to us. I had an experience during Madeline's hospitalization that surprised me. We were at St. Anthony's here in Crown Point. It's a Catholic hospital. I was cruising through the foyer there, and my heart was very heavy. There's a big crucifix there. I'm not a fan of crosses showing Jesus on them (for reasons I'll not get into here). However, that artistic expression of Jesus' suffering reminded me of the truth that Jesus understands what I'm going through. He never had a biological daughter, and he never was in a hospital, but the experience of trusting God in the midst of a trial or hurting for someone you love, he knows that even better than me. My suffering in a small way helped me relate to him. His suffering in a big way helps him relate to me.

So what about this rejoicing? Here is Hebrews 12:2, *"Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross."* Romans 8:18, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*

Peter says the same thing here. These hurts and trials cause us to long even more. For what? A glory yet to be revealed when Jesus returns. We are not in the Garden of Eden. We are not yet on the new earth. All these pains here make us long for there. They make the fullness of our salvation even sweeter when Jesus returns. Today's pains remind us of tomorrow's gain.

Since we know what is coming is so much better, we can rejoice in our trials knowing they whisper to us, *it won't always be like this*. For that, I can rejoice.

### **Suffering for Being a Christian (1 Peter 4:14-16)**

*"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." (1 Peter 4:14-16)*

Peter makes a distinction here between legitimate suffering because of your faith and self-inflicted judgment because of your sin. Let's do the latter first. See the list? He gives four immoral examples. Don't suffer as a murderer or thief. In other words, pain that comes to you because you murder someone is not redemptive suffering. Don't sit in jail and think, *this is because I am a Christian*. No, it's because you are a murderer. Pain that comes because of these choices is the natural consequence of immoral behavior. Don't call sin's consequences trials; they are punishments.

The fourth one is the most interesting. The ESV translates it as "meddler." The translations struggle on this one because it is an extremely rare Greek word. There's only one other use in any Greek text of antiquity. The compound parts mean "one who looks carefully on others' affairs." (Grudem, p. 180). The NIV goes with "troublesome meddler." Why would Peter pull this one in with murderer and thief? Probably because this pesky sin seems fairly prevalent around churches. Obnoxious people who discredit Christian love and testimony by constantly sticking their nose into things beyond any reasonable requirement of love.

I'll give you an easy example. Westboro Baptist Church. Do you know these people? They claim to be a church that stands for truth and they show it by protesting at the funerals of soldiers and policeman. They show up in the tenderest moments in our society to protest whatever their issue is. They are rude and restless meddlers and mischief-makers, all in the name of Christianity. In their church services on Sunday, they may talk about the terrible persecution they are facing because of their "faith." In reality it is their offensive and hateful behavior.

Most churches are forced to deal with a church member or two who have a little Westboro in them. They meddle here and mischief-make there, all justified by their supposedly righteous cause. They will go to war for the sake of their pet issue. Might you have a little Westboro in you? That cold shoulder you feel from others is not persecution or righteous suffering. You're just a bit obnoxious. Jesus was never petty or obnoxious, yet he was always right.

*"If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."* (1 Peter 4:14, 16)

These verses are emphasizing the same point. Insults for the name of Christ or suffering identified as a Christian can be a source of blessing. In verse 14, *"because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."* These are not two Spirits but one. The Holy Spirit. When we suffer insults or disparaging comments for our Christian faith, Christ is made more real and precious to us. The Holy Spirit assures us within.

*"Don't be ashamed."* That's our natural reflex. We may be tempted to hide it or deny it. At least be ashamed of the name. Peter says, the Holy Spirit turns that external insult into an internal blessing. So don't hang your head in shame (verse 16). Rather, *"glorify God in that name."* What name? Christian.

It's interesting that there are only three places in the New Testament where people who follow Jesus are called "Christians." The first was at Antioch in Acts 11:26. Second, King Agrippa refers to it in Acts 26. There's only one more. Right here in 1 Peter 4. "Christian" was probably a term of derision that the followers of Jesus eventually embraced. It meant you identified with Jesus.

It could have been Jesustians. Christian is easier to say. To be a Christian is to identify with Jesus as a follower or disciple of Jesus. To be a Christian is to personally believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross bearing the moral guilt of our sin. It is to repent of sin and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. It is receiving, by faith, God's gift to all who believe—eternal life.

Peter says, when the society puts you down, don't wallow in shame. Rather, glory in the name.

- *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matthew 5:11-12)
- *"Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."* (Acts 5:41)

How? The same way all suffering endured by faith can be rejoiced in. Not the evil. Not the pain. Not the suffering itself. Rather, what the pain is leading to. For the suffering Christian, this is the worst it will be forever. Ahead lay glory and physical presence with Jesus. The more I experience the pains in this life with a view toward the glory that will come, the sweeter that future day will be. In fact, these pains we experience will be the very things we rejoice in forever.

I don't know if you know the name George Mathison. Probably not. He was a pastor in England around 150 years ago or so. He was a brilliant and talented guy who was called to pastoral ministry. He was born with weak eyes and by the time he reached his 20s, he was totally blind. Going blind, would you call that a trial? One story from his life was his fiancé deciding to not marry him because of his blindness. Yet he had a powerful and fruitful ministry as a blind pastor. I suspect people listened when he spoke on suffering. Christian, take a moment and think about the worst pain of your life. The greatest trial. Got it? Now listen to the blind pastor George Mathison on what these will be in eternity.

*"There is a time coming in which your glory shall consist in the very thing which now constitutes your pain.... Ask the great ones of the past what has been the spot of their prosperity; they will say, 'It was the cold ground on which I was lying.'*  
*Ask Abraham; he will point you to the sacrifice of Moriah.*  
*Ask Joseph; he will direct you to his dungeon.*  
*Ask Moses; he will date his fortune from his danger in the Nile.*  
*Ask Ruth; she will bid you build her monument in the field of her toil.*  
*Ask David; he will tell you that his songs came from the night.*  
*Ask Job; he will remind you that God answered him out of the whirlwind.*  
*Ask Peter; he will extol his submersion in the sea.*  
*Ask John; he will give the path to Patmos.*  
*Ask Paul; he will attribute his inspiration to the light which struck him blind.*  
*Ask one more!—the Son of Man;*  
*Ask Him whence has come His rule over the world:*  
*He will answer, 'From the cold ground on which I was lying—the Gethsemane ground—I received my sceptre there.' Thou too, my soul, shalt be garlanded by Gethsemane.*  
*The cup thou fain wouldst pass from thee will be thy coronet in the sweet by-and-by.*  
*'The hour of thy loneliness will crown thee. The day of thy depression will regale thee. It is thy desert that will break forth into singing; it is the trees of thy silent forest that will clap their hands. The last things will be first in the sweet by-and-by.*

*The thorns will be roses;  
The vales will be hills;  
The crooks will be straight lines; the ruts will be level;  
the shadows will be shining;  
The losses will be promotions;  
The tears will be tracks of gold.  
The voice of God to thine evening will be this,  
'Thy treasure is hid in the ground, where thou wert lying.'*<sup>1</sup>

Trust the Lord for your day...today.

Might Jennifer and I have something on this side of our trial that we didn't have before it? Have we been refined a little? Did the experience change us? What about those prayers we whispered trying to have faith in spite of our fears? What does that trial give us that we didn't have before?

We have a bit more assurance in God. A fresh experience of gospel hope. An opportunity for thanksgiving to God and the church. And another reason to anticipate the day when babies don't get sick and we won't go through things like this anymore. Might we look back from the eternal perspective on last week as a time God was pleased to do some of his finest work in us? Won't we glorify God for the result? Even rejoice in it? Indeed, this is how God works.

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<sup>1</sup> George Mathison, *Thoughts for Life's Journey*, pp. 264-267.