

Suffering *for* Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Pet. 1:6, 3:13–22, 2 Tim. 3:12, 1 Pet. 4:12–14, Rev. 12:17, 1 Pet. 4:17–19.*

Memory Text: “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (*1 Peter 2:21, NKJV*).

The history of persecution in the first few centuries of Christianity is well known. The Bible itself, especially the book of Acts, gives glimpses into what awaited the church. Persecution, with the suffering it brings, is also clearly a present reality in the life of the Christians to whom Peter is writing.

In the first chapter, Peter comments that “now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (*1 Pet. 1:6, 7, NKJV*). Almost the last comment in the letter also deals with the same idea: “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to [H]is eternal glory in Christ, will [H]imself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you” (*1 Pet. 5:10, NRSV*).

Within the short epistle, there are no fewer than three extended passages that deal with his readers' suffering for Christ (*1 Pet. 2:18–25, 3:13–21, 4:12–19*). By any reckoning, then, the suffering caused by persecution is a major theme of 1 Peter, and to that we turn.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 6.

Persecution of Early Christians

Read 1 Peter 1:6, 5:10. What is Peter talking about, and how did he tell his readers to respond to what they were facing?

For the first few centuries, just being a Christian could result in a horrible death. A letter written to the Roman Emperor Trajan illustrates how precarious the safety of the early Christians was. The letter was from Pliny, who at the time of writing was governor of Pontus and Bithynia (A.D. 111–113), two of the regions mentioned in 1 Peter 1:1.

Pliny had written to Trajan asking for guidance regarding what to do about people who were accused of being Christians. He explained that those who insisted that they were Christians he had executed. Others said that although they had earlier been Christians, they no longer were. Pliny allowed them to prove their innocence by telling them to offer incense to statues of Trajan and other gods and to curse Jesus.

Worshiping a living emperor was rarely practiced in Rome, although in the eastern part of the Roman Empire to which 1 Peter is sent, the emperors allowed and sometimes encouraged the setting up of temples to themselves. Some of these temples had their own priests and altars on which sacrifices were made. When Pliny got Christians to show their loyalty to the Empire by offering incense and worship to a statue of the emperor, he was following a long-standing practice in Asia Minor.

There were times in the first century that Christians faced serious jeopardy for just being Christians. This was particularly true under emperors Nero (A.D. 54–68) and Domitian (A.D. 81–96).

Yet, the persecution pictured in 1 Peter is of a more local kind. Specific examples of the persecution Peter speaks of are few in the letter, but perhaps they include false accusations (*1 Pet. 2:12*) and reviling and reproach (*1 Pet. 3:9, 4:14*). While the trials were severe, they do not appear to have resulted in widespread imprisonment or death, at least at that time. Even so, living as a Christian would put believers at odds with significant elements of wider first-century society, and they could suffer because of their beliefs. Thus, Peter was addressing a serious concern when he wrote this first epistle.

Suffering and the Example of Christ

Read through 1 Peter 3:13–22. How should Christians respond to those who would bring them suffering because of their faith? What is the connection between the sufferings of Jesus and the sufferings experienced by the believers because of their faith?

When Peter says, “if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed” (*1 Pet. 3:14, NKJV*), he is but echoing the words of Jesus: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (*Matt. 5:10, NKJV*). He then says that Christians should not fear those who are attacking them, but they should sanctify (revere) Christ as Lord in their hearts (*1 Pet. 3:15*). This affirmation of Jesus in their own hearts will help to stanch the fear that they face from those opposing them.

He then suggests that Christians always should be able to explain the hope that they have, but to do so in an appealing way—with meekness and fear (“fear” is sometimes translated “reverence”; see *1 Pet. 3:15, 16*).

Peter insists that Christians should make sure that they do not provide others with a reason to accuse them. They must keep their consciences clear (*1 Pet. 3:16*). This is important, because then those who accuse a Christian will be put to shame by the blameless life of the Christian who is being accused.

Clearly, there is no merit in suffering for being a wrongdoer (*1 Pet. 3:17*). It is suffering for doing good, for doing the right thing, that makes the crucial difference. “For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (*1 Pet. 3:17, NKJV*).

Peter then used the example of Jesus. Christ Himself suffered for His righteousness; the holiness and purity of His life stood as a constant rebuke to those who hated Him. If anyone suffered for doing right and not wrong, it was Jesus.

But His suffering also brought about the only means of salvation. He died in the place of sinners (“the just for the unjust,” *1 Pet. 3:18*), so that those who believe in Him will have the promise of eternal life.

Have you ever suffered, not because you had done wrong but because you had done right? What was the experience, and what did you learn about what it means to be a Christian and to reflect the character of Christ?

The Fiery Trial

Read 1 Peter 4:12–14. Why does Peter say that they shouldn't be surprised at their suffering? See also 2 Tim. 3:12, John 15:18.

Peter makes it clear that to suffer persecution for being a Christian is to partake of Christ's suffering. It is not something to be unexpected. On the contrary, as Paul would write: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12, NKJV). Jesus Himself warned His followers about what they would face: "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another" (Matt. 24:9, 10, NKJV).

According to Ellen G. White: "So it will be with all who live godly in Christ Jesus. Persecution and reproach await all who are imbued with the Spirit of Christ. The character of the persecution changes with the times, but the principle—the spirit that underlies it—is the same that has slain the chosen of the Lord ever since the days of Abel."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 576.

Read Revelation 12:17. What does it say about the reality of persecution for Christians in the last days?

No question, for a faithful Christian, persecution can be an ever-present reality, which is what Peter is dealing with here in warning his readers about the "fiery trial" they were facing.

Fire was a good metaphor. Fire can be destructive, but it also can clean away impurities. It depends on what is experiencing the fire. Houses are destroyed by fire; silver and gold are purified by it. Though one should never purposely bring on persecution, God can bring good out of it. Thus, Peter is telling his readers (and us): *Yes, persecution is bad, but don't be discouraged by it as if it were something unexpected. Press on ahead in faith.*

What can we do to uplift, encourage, and even help those who are suffering for their faith?

Judgment and the People of God

Compare 1 Peter 4:17–19 with Isaiah 10:11, 12 and Malachi 3:1–6. What are they saying in common?

In all these passages, the process of judgment is portrayed as starting with the people of God. Peter even links the sufferings of his readers to the judgment of God. For him, the sufferings that his Christian readers are experiencing might be nothing less than the judgment of God, which begins with the household of God. “Therefore let those who suffer *according to the will of God* commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Pet. 4:19, NKJV).

Read Luke 18:1–8. How does this help us understand God’s judgment?

In biblical times, judgment was usually something highly desired. The picture of the poor widow in Luke 18:1–8 captures the wider attitude toward judgment. The widow knows that she will prevail in her case if only she can find a judge who will take her case. She has insufficient money and status to get her case heard, but she finally persuades the judge to hear it and to give her what she deserves. As Jesus says, “‘And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him?’” (Luke 18:7, NKJV). Sin has brought evil into the world, and God’s people throughout the ages have long waited for God to make things right again.

“‘Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested’” (Rev. 15:4, NKJV).

Think of all the evil in the world that has gone, and still goes, unpunished. Why, then, is the concept of justice and God’s righteous judgment so crucial for us as Christians? What hope do you get from the promise that justice will be done?

Faith Amid Trials

As we have seen, Peter was writing to believers who were suffering for their faith. And as Christian history has shown, things only got worse, at least for a while. Surely many Christians in the ensuing years found solace and comfort in what Peter wrote. No doubt, many do today, too.

Why the suffering? That, of course, is an age-old question. The book of Job, one of the first books of the Bible to be written, has suffering as a key theme. Indeed, if there was anyone (besides Jesus) who suffered not as “a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters” (*1 Pet. 4:15, NKJV*), it was Job. After all, even God said of Job: “ ‘Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?’ ” (*Job 1:8, NKJV*). And yet, look at what poor Job had endured, not because he was evil but because he was good!

How do these texts help answer the question of the origin of suffering?

1 Pet. 5:8, Rev. 12:9, Rev. 2:10.

The short answer is that we suffer because we are in the midst of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. This is not a mere metaphor, a mere symbol for the good and evil in our natures. There is a real devil and a real Jesus fighting a real battle for human beings.

Read 1 Peter 4:19. How can what Peter wrote here help us in whatever we are struggling with now?

When we suffer, especially when that suffering does *not* come directly as a result of our own evildoing, we naturally ask the question that Job had asked, again and again: *Why?* And, as is so often the case, we don’t have an answer. As Peter says, all we can do, even amid our suffering, is to commit our souls to God, trusting in Him, our “faithful Creator,” and continue in “doing good” (*1 Pet. 4:19, NKJV*).

Why is knowing the character of God for yourself, knowing of His goodness and His love for you personally, such a crucial component for a Christian, especially one who is suffering? How can we all learn to come to know God and the reality of His love better?

Further Thought: Sunday’s study talked about the persecution Christians faced. Here is a fuller excerpt from the letter written to the emperor about what Christians suffered in those early centuries: “The method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement.

“Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the Gods, and who finally cursed Christ—none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing—these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the Gods, and cursed Christ.”—*Pliny Letters* (London: William Heinemann, 1915), book 10:96 (vol. 2, pp. 401–403).

Discussion Questions:

- ① What was the main issue that Christians faced, as revealed in the Pliny letter quoted above? What parallels can we see here with what will come in the last days, as revealed in the third angel’s message of Revelation 14:9–12? What does this tell us about some of the underlying issues in the great controversy itself?
- ② “Those who honor the law of God have been accused of bringing judgments upon the world, and they will be regarded as the cause of the fearful convulsions of nature and the strife and bloodshed among men that are filling the earth with woe. The power attending the last warning has enraged the wicked; their anger is kindled against all who have received the message, and Satan will excite to still greater intensity the spirit of hatred and persecution.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 614, 615. Though we don’t know when all this will happen, how can we always be ready to face opposition for our faith, in whatever form that opposition comes? What is the key to being prepared?