

Chapter 6: Suffering According to God's Will

1 Peter 4:1–19

In the previous section, Peter called us to suffer for righteousness' sake, promising that we will be blessed for doing so (1 Pet. 3:14). How, though, does this work? Although the Apostle began expounding the glory of Christ, who was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit (1 Pet. 3:18), he has much more to explain about the practical implications of Christ's death and resurrection. Specifically, he tells us that we stand not only to adjust our personal, private thinking about religious things, but that we must be transformed entirely, from the inside-out, as the whole glorious power of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is applied to our lives. Within this, Peter holds out Christ's paradoxical promise: *endure short-term suffering to gain eternal glory*.

Dying to Sin (1 Pet. 4:1–6)

The ESV includes two transitional words into this passage: “since, therefore.” The word *since*, however, does not reflect a specific word in the text, being only a translational inference to smooth out into English the Greek that might be literally translated as, “Christ, therefore, having suffered in the flesh, you also must arm yourselves with the same thinking.” The word Peter does use to transition into this next section is “therefore” (v. 1), which suggests a logical conclusion from the previous section (specifically, 1 Pet. 3:18–22).¹ In particular, Peter seems to be connecting back to 1 Peter 3:18, which shares a number of words with v. 1 (marked in italics): “For *Christ* also *suffered* once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteousness, that he might bring us to God, being put to death *in the flesh* but made alive in the spirit.”² Why might Paul be restating and resuming that point?

As we argued in the previous study, the phrase in that verse about Christ's being made alive “in the spirit” does not refer to an aspect of Christ's humanity (i.e., his *human* spirit), but to the idea that he has been raised as a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45)—that is, into “a sphere in which the Spirit and power of God are displayed without hindrance or human limitation.”³ Here, Peter is moving beyond the simple fact of progression from suffering to glory and into something more profound: “he now ascends higher; for he speaks of the reformation of the whole man.”⁴ Peter is saying that we should “arm ourselves” with “the same way of thinking.” In this context, the word *thinking* does not refer to something that *Christ* thought, as though he needed to cease from his own sin. Rather, this refers to *our* thinking, according to the necessity of applying an appreciation for what Christ has done in order to cease from our *own* sin. How, then, does this work?

¹ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 198.

² Michaels, *1 Peter*, 225.

³ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 205.

⁴ Calvin, “Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter,” 120.

What Peter is saying is that the Lord uses our suffering in order to put to death our sin. Specifically, through our suffering in human flesh, he teaches us not to crave the pleasures of the flesh in this world: “so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God” (v. 2). In this context, “in the flesh” does not describe the sinful, unregenerate aspects of our human nature, as Paul means when he speaks of the flesh (e.g., in Rom. 7–8), but simply to “human existence” in this life.⁵ Within ordinary human existence, however, our *human* passions wage war against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11) by leading us to crave short-term, earthly pleasures in a way that hinders (or eliminates) our capacity for embracing eternal, heavenly pleasures. Since these human passions hold powerful sway to the flesh, it is only through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ that “we are really and effectually supplied with invincible weapons to subdue the flesh.”⁶

Peter makes the inconsistency of our appetites according to human passions and according to God's pleasure clear by his contrast between living for “the will of God” (v. 2b) and what “the Gentiles want to do” (v. 3a).⁷ Peter states that “the time is past” for us to enjoy the worst excesses of hedonism: “living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry” (v. 3b). The phrase “the time is past” does not mean simply that our time run out, or that we have drunk our fill of these things, but that “the memory of our past life ought to stimulate us to repentance.”⁸

Given the pleasure that we might find in such pursuits, it is shocking to the world that we would abandon them (v. 4a). Moreover, beyond mere surprise, our withdrawal from worldly hedonism may lead the world to “malign” us (v. 4b). Yet, Peter urges us to persevere in steadfast obedience to the Lord by an eternal perspective on the matter. We may be judged here and now “in the flesh” (i.e., according to the standards of lives oriented only to the pleasures of the flesh), but we remember that there is an eternal judge who will pronounce his judgment (vv. 5–6). Thus, while Peter's statement about “why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead” is difficult to understand at first, the best explanation is that he is speaking about those who heard (and believed) the gospel during their lifetimes, but have subsequently died.⁹ On this view, Peter is simply pointing out that, while believers who died without living for the pleasures of this world seem to have missed out on their only opportunity for true life (“you only live once!”), the gospel that they believed held out hope to them that extended beyond the grave.¹⁰

Living for Christ (1 Pet. 4:7–11)

The hope for which believers live looks forward to the final judgment of Christ, to which Peter calls our attention: “The end of all things is at hand” (v. 7a). Peter does not hold out this eschatological hope with a view toward providing details that might satisfy our idle curiosity.

⁵ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 150.

⁶ Calvin, “Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter,” 121.

⁷ Lenski, “The First Epistle of St. Peter,” 181.

⁸ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 122–23.

⁹ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 208.

¹⁰ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 150.

Instead, as in the rest of the Bible, this eschatological statement “should function as a stimulus to action in this world. The knowledge that believers are sojourners and exiles, whose time is short, should galvanize them to make their lives count now.”¹¹ So, as he did earlier, Peter contrasts living according to human passions with living according to sober-minded obedience (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:13, 14; 2:11, 12): “therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers” (v. 7b). Whereas the passions are characterized by irrationality and impulsivity, obedience to the Lord is fundamentally characterized by rationality and self-control.

Peter focuses first on love: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (v. 8). The idea that “love covers a multitude of sins” does not mean that love ignores sin or that love hides egregious sins for the sake of appearances. Rather, the idea describes the way that genuine love for another person leads us to look past their flaws and faults to see the person underneath. Lenski rightly notes that “hate does the opposite; it prys about in order to discover some sin or some semblance of sin in a brother and then broadcasts it, even exaggerates it, gloats over it.”¹² Relatedly, Peter next advocates for pure-hearted hospitality: “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (v. 9). It is one thing to extend hospitality for the sake of appearances and reputation; it is quite another thing to love other people to the point of offering hospitality that does not focus on the imposition of another person, but only delights in their good.

In addition to these two virtues (love and hospitality), Peter then urges generosity with the gifts that God has entrusted to us: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies” (vv. 10–11a). The significant term in this instruction is when Peter describes us as “stewards”; i.e., those charged with dispensing to *others* what belongs exclusively to a *master*. Thus, the steward is called to receive *for the sake of* giving. Clowney explains this well: “The steward’s office has two doors. On the one hand, stewards are accountable to their master. They administer the goods and affairs of another. All that they have, they have received. On the other hand, they are administrators, put in charge of their master’s affairs and exercising authority in their master’s name.”¹³ Our spiritual gifts, therefore, do not exist for our own sake, but for the sake of serving others.¹⁴ We abuse our gifts by their neglect as well as by using them only for our own purposes and promotion.

Even so, when we serve others through the gifts that God has supplied to us, we do so for God’s glory alone: “in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (v. 11b). In serving others with *his* gifts, we glorify the Giver rather than ourselves. Moreover, we glorify him by showing how lavish and powerful his gifts to us truly are.

Suffering According to God’s Will (1 Pet. 4:12–19)

In the next section, Peter gives practical instructions for living out the rest of our days “in the flesh” (v. 2)

¹¹ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 211.

¹² Lenski, “The First Epistle of St. Peter,” 195.

¹³ Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 147.

¹⁴ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 130–31.

while keeping an eye on our eternal reward. Once again, he speaks of trials in this world as a fire (cf. 1 Pet. 1:7): “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” (vv. 12–13). The connection between what we endure now and our eternal reward is important. Peter is reminding us that God actually uses and works through these trials to prepare us for the coming of Christ, “when his glory is revealed.” Again, as he noted earlier, we do not see Christ now, but these trials teach us to love him more and more as we await the day when his glory is revealed, so that our faith becomes sight (cf. 1 Pet. 1:8–9).

Yet, this encouragement is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Peter insists that suffering for Christ’s sake will bring blessing and joy to us at Christ’s revelation: “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (v. 14). Again, the resurrection of Christ “in the spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18) raised him up so that he now “gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34). Thus, even the most grievous, painful trials in this world become the medium through which he imparts to us the sanctifying presence of his Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, Peter also warns us that we should not suffer for wrongdoing: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler” (v. 15). Then, he again repeats the promise, that to suffer “as a Christian” is nothing shameful, but should lead us to glorify God (v. 16). Again, through all of this, Peter has an eternal perspective in mind, dealing with the final judgment of Christ. The reason we should rejoice in our sufferings for doing good, and the reason we should avoid any kind of sin that would bring the suffering of reproach upon us, is that we are mindful of the *final* judgment of God: “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God” (v. 17a). We take special care to pursue God’s commendation and to avoid God’s censure because his judgment will begin with his people.

On the other hand, Peter offers a sobering warning to those who do not believe: “and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’” (vv. 17b–18). This is one more warning for believers not to look back like Lot’s wife at the pleasures of the world that we are leaving behind as we pursue the blessings of Christ. As Calvin writes, “When the faithful see that it is well with the wicked, they are necessarily tempted to be envious; and this is a very dangerous trial; for present happiness is what all desire” (e.g., Pss. 37; 73).¹⁵ The warning about the righteous being “scarcely saved” does not mean that we can lose salvation; however, it does mean that we may “suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15).

Peter concludes this section with a general exhortation: “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (v. 19). This exhortation closely echoes the positive description of Christ’s own example, who “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” when he unjustly suffered (1 Pet. 2:23). Christ endured the shame of the cross “for the joy set before him” (Heb. 12:2), and we should as well. What we stand to gain surpasses infinitely beyond what we lose in the short-term, both in the pleasures of this world that we might miss out on, and in the sufferings that we must endure as the world rages against our failure to participate in their hedonistic pursuits.

¹⁵ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 140.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the language of v. 1 echo 1 Peter 3:18? Why do you think Peter resumes his point from earlier in this way? How does Peter use the phrase “in the flesh” (vv. 1, 2)? What would it mean to live “for human passions” (v. 2b)? Why should we instead live for the “will of God” (v. 2c)? How will the world respond to our abstaining from their debauchery (v. 4)? What are the short-term and the long-term promises that we can cling to while being maligned (vv. 5–6)?
2. What is “the end of all things” which is “at hand” (v. 7a)? What does it mean to “be self-controlled and sober-minded” (v. 7b)? How does that approach contrast with living according to the passions of the world? Why should we worry about “the sake of [our] prayers” (v. 7c)? How do the virtues of love and hospitality connect with God’s will (vv. 8–9)? What does it mean to be a steward of “God’s varied grace” (v. 10)? How well are you stewarding the gifts God has given to you?
3. Why should we not be surprised when the fiery trial tests us (v. 12)? How can we rejoice in the midst of the fiery trials (v. 13)? Why are we waiting for “when [Christ’s] glory is revealed” (v.13)? How do vv. 12–13 both echo and advance what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:6–9? What does Peter mean when he says that “the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (v. 14)? Why should the coming judgment encourage us to live well today (vv. 17–19)?
4. What is most enticing and alluring to you personally about the passions of the world? What pressure from the world affects you the most (disappointment, maligning, suffering, the fear of missing out)? What promise from this passage resonates with you the most right now, as you seek to be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers? What is one area where you need to repent and to entrust your soul to your faithful Creator while doing good?