

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 21: 1 Peter**

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1 Peter: Suffering in the Kingdom

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Matthew 16:24). These words must have had a shocking effect on the crowd. Remember, these were Roman times. The cross Jesus was calling them to bear was not the nice spiritual symbol that we, in our day and age, see hanging from the necks, and tattooed on the biceps, of pop musicians or professional athletes, Christians and non-Christians alike.

No, the cross in Jesus’ time was a cruel instrument of state execution, a place where people suffered and bled and died. Here in this verse, Jesus was alerting his followers to a fundamental reality about the Christian life—namely, that it involves suffering. Jesus, in this verse was making clear that he was on his way to the cross and that if we would be his followers, we must go that way as well.

This is not to say that Christians are called to go out and court hostility through needless and unwise provocations. But in a world that is hostile towards God, it only follows that God’s people will face persecution as they seek to glorify him. Paul even says it point blank in 2 Timothy 3:12: *“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*

Paul’s words accurately describe the experience of countless saints throughout church history, and if we would endeavor to pursue a godly life, then they will describe ours, as well.

So, why do Christians suffer and how should Christians, in the midst of suffering, respond?

To answer these questions and others, we turn this morning to the book of 1 Peter. As much as any book in the New Testament, 1 Peter deals with suffering, why it occurs, what it’s for, and what we’re supposed to do when it comes our way.

So, in typical Core-seminar fashion, we’ll begin our study by considering some background information about 1 Peter before turning to the outline of the book [which you’ll see on the second page of the handout], then the major themes, and some practical application.

**I. Purpose**

1 Peter has been described as a model of the “pastoral letter.” The writer, the apostle Peter, clearly intends in this book to refresh believers who are suffering for Christ with line after line of comforting truth. This comforting takes two forms.

**First**, it comes in the form of encouragement. We can see this in passages such as 1 Peter 1:3-6:

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! [pause there] According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.

The tone of these verses is incredibly optimistic—ecstatic, you might even say. Peter’s optimism might seem ironic or even delusional at first, given the difficult circumstances these Christians find themselves in, but unlike the baseless morale boosting so commonly incanted in our culture—the clichéd “everything is going to be alright” or “just positive thinking will get you through!”—the comfort offered in these verses is rooted in a historical fact of monumental significance: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Jesus’ resurrection—the fact that he defeated death and is alive and reigns now as King—gives Christians a “Living hope” and an “inheritance,” as verse 4 says, “that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” The hope and inheritance that we have in Christ helps put our sufferings in this world in much-needed perspective. Indeed, in light of the riches we have in Christ and which we will enjoy for all **eternity**, this life and its hardships seem only like **“a little while,”** as it says in verse 6. We’ll come back to this perspective in more depth later in the class,.

**The second type** of comfort the author gives in 1 Peter comes in the form of imperatives, or commands. Any of you who have run a marathon, taken the bar exam, or even experienced something as minor as a flat tire know something of the comfort that comes from being prepared, from having been instructed in how to respond.

We see this kind of comfort offered in passages such as 1 Peter 3:9, which commands suffering Christians, *“Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”* When people insult us for loving Christ, we are to bless them, pray for them, and love them, taking queues from how Christ has loved us, we who were once his enemies. Following Christ, in other words, does not just mean that we suffer in the way Christ suffered, but also that we must respond to suffering as Christ did.

So, How did Jesus respond to persecution? 1 Peter 2:23 reminds us. It says:

*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

By blending Christ-centered imperatives like this with profound words of encouragement, 1 Peter offers an amazing arsenal of comfort for Christians who are suffering for the kingdom.

**II. Date & Audience**

And suffering for the kingdom is exactly what Peter’s audience was doing: From Peter’s continued references to insults, slander, and malicious speech—he calls their troubles a “fiery trial” in 4:12—it seems that the Christians to whom he is writing are facing abuse, and verbal abuse in particular. Perhaps their devotion to Christ has made them the butt of jokes or the subjects of nasty diatribes in the town square. If you have ever had an unbelieving family member upbraid you for sharing your faith or worked under a boss who makes jokes about Christians, then you know the sting of such persecution, how it can lead to tears, even despair.

Peter pens his letter for such an audience feeling the bitter sting of social ostracism because of their allegiance to Christ.

We know a bit about the location of the original audience as well: Look at verse 1: “*To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.”* -- he is writing to Christians in what is now modern day Turkey.

And we have a good idea of where Peter was when he wrote this: he gives us some clues in 5:13, as he concludes the book. In that verse, he makes reference to writing from Babylon. Here, as in Revelation, Babylon is likely a symbolic reference to the city of Rome.

Also, In that same verse, Peter refers to Mark, but not to Paul. This is telling because we know that Paul was with Mark in Rome until 62 AD, the year that Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment. For this reason, most scholars believe that 1 Peter was written around AD 63, after Paul’s release but before the Roman Emperor Nero’s intense persecution of Christians begins. So this letter was not penned to Christians experiencing the threat of imprisonment and death; that was to come later. Instead, the persecution these believers were facing was of a type that we would more commonly face here, today, in Washington DC as family, friends, and even strangers mock us for our hope in Christ.

The date of the book is important to understand because it means that the letter was not only a comfort to Christians already in the midst of suffering, whether social or economic, but that it was also helping to prepare its readers for harsher forms of persecution that were to come – (We might also consider that we, in studying this book now, may be doing the same thing …).

**III. Structure & Outline**

Let’s now take a look at the structure of the book, which will introduce us to some of the themes that we will discuss in more detail in a few minutes.

So, how does Peter organize his encouragements and commands? Unlike Paul’s letters, which often divide nicely into sections of theological argument and then sections of application, 1 Peter fuses the two, tethering imperatives to theology and vice versa, often in the space of a single verse. You will find that Peter reprises similar themes again and again, adding layers and nuances as he moves along.

Throughout, Christ is presented as the unique and blameless savior who rescues his people from the eternal suffering that they deserve. He is also presented as an example of how God’s people are to face up to suffering this side of heaven.

Chapter 1:1-2

Peter begins the letter by describing Christians in two ways. First off, he calls them “*God’s elect*,” God’s chosen people, his representatives in the world. Then, in the very next phrase, he refers to them as “*exiles of the Dispersion*.” This juxtaposition—that Christians are both God’s elect and strangers in the world—helps order Peter’s commands and encouragements throughout the letter. First, he will focus on what it means to be “*elect*,” and then move to what it means to be “*strangers in the world*.”

Chapter 1:3—2:10

And then we jump into the letter with verse 3 of chapter 1. The benefits and demands of being God’s elect, God’s chosen people, are the focus of this section, through 2:10. Peter reminds us of the living hope and inheritance we have in Christ. As we read in verses 10-12 of chapter 1, our salvation is made all the more glorious because of how it was prophesied in the Old Testament. So glorious is our salvation, in fact, that, they are “*Things into which angels long to look.*” Peter writes in verse 12, before shifting to the responsibilities that come with being identified as God’s people. This section is perhaps best summed up in verses 15 and 16, in which Peter demands of Christians what God demanded of his people in the Old Testament. He writes:

*But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”*

Chapter 2:11—4:11

In the next section, the longest in the letter, Peter elaborates on the fact that God’s holy people are also, quote, “sojourners and exiles.” To this end, he implores them, in the words of a couple New Testament scholars, to exhibit “*a lifestyle different from, yet attractive to, the hostile world in which they live.*” Being saved from the fate of this world does not exempt us from our responsibilities as workers and citizens and spouses. No, in fact our salvation frees us to be faithful in our sundry roles. The lifestyle Peter has in mind is characterized supremely by Christ-like submission—along with good and peaceful relationships with other Christians, and wherever possible, with non-Christians, too.

Chapter 4:12—5:14

In this final section, in many ways the crescendo of the book, Peter launches into appropriate responses to suffering. He is emphatic that Christians endure suffering “according to God’s will” by 1) entrusting their lives and circumstances to God and 2) by continuing to live righteously. Peter begins in 4:12, “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you . . . But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.”* Also, chapter 5 calls on church leaders to care for the flock for the right reasons and on church members, “young men” especially, to submit to their overseers. And the book closes with Peter urging his audience once more to “Stand firm.”

You might summarize the book, then, in this way: The topic is persecution, and our confidence is the living hope and inheritance we have in Christ. But what is our goal? What are we to work toward given that confidence? IT IS NOT simply to survive persecution, BUT to turn it into a witness. 2:12, *“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”*

Now, what primarily will accomplish that? What aspects of life should we focus on to put forward a positive witness in the mist of persecution? The answer is surprising. Submit to the State. Submit to your boss. Submit to your husband. Submit to the church. Submission. To authority. A good thing to think through the next time you struggle in this area: right behavior toward authority is a primary way in which we witness to the truth of the gospel, even in times of suffering.

Now that we have got our bearings in 1 Peter, having covered some of the background and structure of the book, let’s turn to some major themes.

**IV. Major Themes**

As I mentioned in the introduction, 1 Peter is a book for Christians going through tough times. But let’s be clear, Peter is not talking about the suffering people face when they do evil. This letter is not written to crooks, for instance, offering them pointers about how to endure a prison sentence. Peter writes in 2:20: “For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure” Christians should never face this kind of suffering, the suffering that comes from doing wrong, because Christians should not do such things. And by extension, Peter isn’t writing about suffering that stems from our foolishness, like not managing our money well, refusing good counsel, or harboring ungodly patterns of thinking.

But neither is Peter talking about the suffering that comes, say, from things like natural disasters, wars, or economic turmoil. He is not talking about unemployment or disease or broken hearts. Although we find direction for some of those situations other places in Scripture, and although the pain caused by them is real and can be devastating – Peter has another kind of suffering in mind in 1 Peter: That is, *explicitly* the suffering that comes from following Christ.

His readers were going through rough times because of their faith. Once, these individuals were accepted by everyone as good people. Now that they had become Christians and were doing good, they were suffering “various trials.” (1:6).

Well, a number of questions result. (1) Why is this suffering occurring? (2) When will it end? (3) And how can we endure in the meantime? The answers to those questions, the themes that run through this letter, are our focus for the rest of our time together this morning.

We’ll begin by answering that question, “why is this suffering happening?” by looking first at the relationship between holiness and suffering, and then the relationship between Christ’s suffering and ours. We’ll answer the question, “When will it end” by taking up the third theme, that of vindication. And then finally, we’ll answer “How can we endure?” by examining Peter’s theme of a right response to suffering. We’ll step through each of these four themes in turn.

A. The relationship between holiness and suffering

First, Peter makes it clear that Christians suffer because God is our Creator and Lord, and he has chosen us to be his special people. Think back to chapter one, verse one. God’s elect, strangers in this world. Cause and effect. As God’s elect, we are called out of this world to be holy, to be set apart. Peter writes in chapter 2:

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2:9-10).*

Notice that *God* has done this. We were not his people, and then he *made* us his people. And now that we have been made holy, we are called to live lives of holiness. SO GOD MAKES US NEW, and then we LIVE ANEW. As Peter writes in chapter 1:

*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct;, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1:14-16).*

Our holiness, like God’s holiness, combines the idea of “set-apartness” and the idea of Christ-like purity. God has made us holy. And if God’s people live as a holy people, the world will think they are strange. Why? Because Christians live in reverent fear of God rather than in conformity to the world. The Christian, as Peter writes in chapter 4:2, is the one who will

*Live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; (4:2-4).*

Christians, in a sense, live in two worlds at once. The new world has begun for us because God has given us a new birth. On the other hand, we continue to live within the old world, which is the only world non-Christians see. So our actions and attitudes, comments and commitments, seem strange, even bizarre, to them.

You see, Christianity is not solely an *argument* over doctrine.  It is also a witness borne by the way your new life says to your non-Christian friends, “There is a different way to live.”  And the fact is that people do not like to be confronted with a different way to live. It implies that they might need to change the way they are living.

So what do we do with this first theme? It’s a reminder that some degree of abuse from the world around us is not only normal for Christians, it is a good diagnostic that things are going well for us in our life of love for God. So use this letter both to inform exactly how our lives should be different from the world around us, and as a source of comfort when that holiness results in persecution, as it so often does.

B. The relationship between Christ’s sufferings and ours

But as I mentioned earlier, there is a second reason why we suffer as Christians: we are, in fact, called by God to *participate* in the sufferings of Christ.

The book is replete with references to the suffering of Christ, to his blood, to his rejection, and to his death. In the most importance sense, Christ’s sufferings were unique. He died for our sins. Christ was a substitute, bearing God’s punishment for those who would repent and believe in him. But in a secondary sense, Peter hears a calling and sees an example for the Christian in Christ’s sufferings. They present a model for what we Christians are to do as we continually repent of our sins and follow him.

In 2:20-21, Peter writes, “*For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”*

So with this in mind, we recognize that we suffer because Christ suffered. And just as his sufferings made more glorious his victory over sin, our suffering will result in all the more joy when he and his people are finally vindicated.

C. Future vindication

But suffering is not the only thing promised for those who follow Christ. A third theme of 1 Peter is that one day our suffering will end. Christ may be our example in suffering but he is also our example in vindication. Don’t miss this: Our rejection on earth is a passing human verdict. It is not final, and it is not divine. We will be saved through Christ’s own vindication. Peter presents Noah as an example of one who was vindicated in chapter 3, verse 20-22. In the ark built by Noah, it says:

*Because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt form the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*

Recall how Noah was ostracized by his neighbors for trusting God and building the ark. Recall God’s faithfulness to him, and his small crew, during the flood. So you, Christian, if you struggle in the face of opposition, wondering if something is wrong because of your suffering, look to the example of Christ. Look also to the example of Noah. God *will* vindicate those who truly follow him.

D. Right responses to suffering

So we’ve established that suffering for us as Christians is a given – for at time – but that it too will pass, as God vindicates us in his glory. But let’s zero-in a bit more on this theme of suffering. Peter has much to say on how we ought to respond:

So first, we are to be Witnesses …

1. Witness

Peter calls on us, in the midst of suffering, to be witnesses to non-Christians and even to desire the good of those who persecute us. Peter, the disciple who denied Jesus three times and then watched Jesus suffer for him, learned this from Jesus’ example. He writes,

*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.* (2:23-24).

Peter knew firsthand the forgiveness of Christ. He knew firsthand how good Christ could be even toward one who had denied him. We must also remember how good God has been to us. We deserted him, yet he responded with incredible love toward us. How then can we treat those who mock us in any other way?

2. Love

Peter also calls us to show love to one another. This is particularly difficult and important when the church is suffering through strife and persecution. You know how when the going gets tough, we can grow short with one another or withdraw from one another completely [this is something I struggle with personally – I am inclined to withdraw when in tense situations]. When stress afflicts the church from the outside, stress on the inside follows. Just as pressure causes cracks to appear in a building, so it will cause fissures in churches. So Peter writes very clearly in 4:7-10:

*The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace*

In times of strife and spiritual attack, Christians should band together, uphold one another—in short, love one another with the very love of Christ.

3. Submit

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly in a book concerned with suffering, we have Peter’s extended imperative that Christians submit to authority. He keeps this theme up beginning in chapter 2:13, and running through much of chapter 3. In chapter 2:13: “*Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”*

He goes on to command servants to submit to and respect their masters, wives to be subject to their husbands, and, later, he calls on the church to submit to and serve each other. Why so important?

Submission—to authorities, to husbands, to masters, to elders, to one another—is befitting of Christians because it displays our hope and trust in a higher authority – it enhances our witness about God. Paul, in Romans 13, confirms that God has instituted and ordered authority in the world:

*For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (13:1b-2).*

Christians should respect authority because it comes from God, and this bolsters our witness as those who follow God.

But what about when this authority is abused, and even used to ridicule us for doing good? Should Christians respect authority then? Well, though we should never submit to authority to the point that we disobey God, Peter—like Paul in Romans—makes it clear that the normal pattern is for Christians to submit to authority, in good times and in bad.

This brings us to the second reason why submission is befitting for Christians: because it evidences our eternal freedom in Christ. Peter’s admonition in 2:13, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” is paired in verse 16, with the admonition “*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil*.” As Christians we can submit, even if we are persecuted for our faith by the people in authority over us, because we know that Christ, the ultimate authority, who was raised from the dead and now sits at the right hand of God, will have the final word.

So we have nothing, ultimately, to fear. We are free. And we can submit, and even do it with joy, knowing that we are living in a way that commends Christ.

So Peter instructs slaves or servants in 2:18-19, to “*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.”*

[Passages like this are particularly meaningful to me when I contemplate the various injustices that each of us may see or experience at work – if we have a boss who manages selfishly, or even acts cruelly or mockingly once he or she understands your faith.]

Likewise, Peter commands wives in the beginning of chapter 3 to “*Wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives”*

In both of these instances – submitting to your master, or submitting to your husband – submission is presented as a way to witness to the lost and share in Christ’s sufferings. Peter again reminds us that we have the greatest example of submission in Christ himself: 1 Peter 2:23, tells us, Christ “*did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly*.”

**V. Conclusion**

Well then, it’s time to conclude. Peter punctuates his letter with marshalling words of encouragement. Read with me just a few of these strung together:

*“Prepare your minds for action … Arm yourselves with the same way of thinking (as Christ) … Be self controlled and alert … commit [yourself] to [your] faithful Creator and continue to do good … Stand firm.” (1:13, 4:1, 4:19, 5:8, 5:12).*

Peter himself did that. Early historical sources inform us that Peter died being crucified in Rome as a martyr, because he was living for Christ. Commit yourself to your faithful Creator and continue. Stand fast.

Consider what God is calling *you* to. Are you being called to an initial commitment to Christ? To give up a particular sin? To be a witness? To *go* for him? To *stay* for him? What is holding you back? “Commit [yourself] to [your] faithful Creator and continue …” Continue to do good.