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MINISTRIES

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Life in Exile: Perseverance in Suffering (1 Peter 4)

Welcome back to our verse-by-verse study through 1 Peter. Today we’re going to cover 1 Peter chapter 4. In this section, Peter admonishes his readers to exercise self-control and to not give in to the pressures of the world to engage in sinful behavior. He also encourages his readers to persevere in the midst of suffering.

Before we get started, here’s a quick summary of what we discussed last time:

1. Like the Messiah, Peter teaches us not to retaliate when slandered but to repay evil with blessing. Standing firm in the faith and doing good, even to those who persecute us, is part of our “apologetic” as believers.
2. Speaking of apologetics, Peter says that all believers must be prepared to offer an intellectual defense of their hope in the Messiah. This means we must know what we believe and be able to explain it and even answer criticisms. Our intellectual defense of the faith must be accompanied by “gentleness and respect.”
3. We also discussed the various interpretations of Peter’s enigmatic statement about the Messiah preaching to “the spirits in prison.”

Chapter 4 begins with a continuation of Peter’s teaching on suffering. Peter had just taught that believers might have to suffer for righteousness’ sake, just like the Messiah also suffered. After describing the Messiah’s work of redemption, which was accomplished through his suffering to death followed by his resurrection, Peter goes on to say this:

1 Peter 4:1-2

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

Peter continues his thoughts from the previous chapter, saying that, since the Messiah suffered, believers must “[arm \[themselves\] with the same way of thinking.](#)” That is, believers must adopt Yeshua’s attitude toward suffering. They must be prepared to suffer, just as the Messiah was prepared to suffer. The Greek term translated as “[arm yourselves](#)” (*hoplizo*) is often used in military contexts in ancient Greek literature (Craig Keener, *1 Peter* [Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2021], p. 290), and it seems to parallel Paul’s metaphors of putting on spiritual armor (2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:10-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). Peter goes on to say, “[for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.](#)” That is, those who are prepared to suffer for their faith in the Messiah show that they are no longer slaves to sin. They are free to live “[no longer for human passions but for the will of God.](#)” Instead of going back to their former sinful lifestyles, believers who endure suffering for their faith demonstrate that they truly have been changed.

Peter goes on to describe the types of sins his readers used to engage in before they confessed Messiah as Lord. Here is what he says:

1 Peter 4:3-6

[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; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.](#)

Here, Peter basically says that his readers, during their former lives as unbelievers, have already spent more than enough time “[doing what the Gentiles want to do.](#)” The way they used to live is not who they are anymore. That’s all in the past. They no longer engage in things like sexual immorality, drunkenness, and idolatry. They’ve been “born again” into God’s family (1 Peter 1:3, 23). The “Gentiles”—that is, the unbelievers—are “surprised” that Peter’s audience will not join them in these sinful activities anymore, which demonstrates the transformation that has taken part in the believers’ lives. Because they live so differently now, these unbelievers “malign” them—that is, they curse and slander them (1 Peter 3:16). The believers’ refusal to engage in these activities brought not only social scorn but also possibly legal persecution. As Duane Watson writes:

[N]onparticipation in cultural activities was frowned upon at this time. Nonparticipation in the emperor cult could be considered treasonous, and forsaking observances to the gods was counted as exposing the population to divine wrath.

-Duane Watson & Terrance Callan, *First and Second Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2012), p. 98

There is a cost to living like Messiah. Such a life will invite persecution. However, God will judge our actions in the end. Peter says that the unbelievers “[will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.](#)” Thus, believers should not agonize over the unbelievers’ criticisms of them. One day, God will judge the living and the dead—that is, all humanity throughout all history. Nobody will escape Judgment Day. And those who faithfully served the Lord, despite persecution in this life, will be vindicated on that day.

Peter goes on to say that “[this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.](#)” Some believe

that this verse is saying that Yeshua preached to human souls in Hades—the abode of the dead—after his crucifixion and before his resurrection. They connect this verse back to 1 Peter 3:19, which says that Yeshua preached “to the spirits in prison.” However, as we discussed last time, this interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 is unlikely. Craig Keener provides a summary of what Peter likely means here:

Traditionally, many believed that the point was that Jesus preached to the dead in Hades. This approach fits the traditional view of 3:19-20, which does appear in the fairly near context. A majority of scholars today, however, understand the verse as referring to the gospel being preached to those who are now dead (but were alive when the gospel was preached to them; cf. 1:25). On this latter interpretation, those who have been martyred by human judges will ultimately be vindicated and raised from the dead, because God is the one who will judge ultimately (cf. 4:5).

-Craig Keener, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2021), p. 309

So, this verse isn't saying that the gospel was preached to people while those people were dead. What it's saying is that there are people who had the gospel preached to them, and because they believed in the gospel, they were persecuted, and they died. However, the same gospel that caused them to be “judged in the flesh” will also cause them to “live in the spirit”—they will be raised from the dead.

The ESV rendering of this verse is a little strange. It says, “they might live in the spirit the way God does.” Most other translations say something like “live in the spirit according to the will of God” (1 Peter 4:6, NASB). Likely, what Peter is saying here is similar to what he said in chapter 3, verse 18. The Messiah was put to death by the flesh—by humans—but made alive by the Holy Spirit. In the same way, even though believers will die physically, they will one day be raised by God's Spirit just as Messiah was. As Thomas Schreiner writes:

The contrast between “flesh” and “spirit” here is parallel to 1 Pet 3:18 since Christ also died in terms of his flesh but was raised to life by the Holy Spirit. A similar destiny awaits believers. They die physically but will be raised to life by the Holy Spirit. I am suggesting, therefore, that Peter does not consider the intermediate state here but the resurrection of the dead. He uses the present tense because the future will certainly come to pass. Peter reminds his readers that even if they die physically, death is not ultimate. The resurrection awaits them.

-Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude* (Homan, 2020), p. 209

So, Peter admonishes us to prepare to suffer for our faith in Yeshua. As we suffer and face persecution, though, we have hope. Just as Yeshua suffered and was vindicated in his resurrection, so too will we be vindicated on the day of judgment if we remain steadfast in our faith instead of turning back to our former way of life.

Peter goes on to instruct his readers on how they should live as they anticipate suffering and persecution. Let's continue:

1 Peter 4:7-11

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: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles

of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ [Yeshua Messiah]. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Peter says that “[the end of all things is at hand](#).” Like Yeshua, James, Paul, and others, Peter spoke of the end of the age as though it would arrive very soon (e.g., Luke 21:36; James 5:8; Philippians 4:5). The perspective of the New Testament authors was that Yeshua’s first coming initiated the beginning of the eschatological era, or “last days,” which will reach its final conclusion at Yeshua’s return. So, technically, we’ve been in the “last days” for the last 2,000 years. Now, that might seem like a long time from our perspective, but in his second epistle, Peter reminds his readers that a day to the Lord is like a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8-9).

In light of the end being “at hand,” Peter admonishes his readers to be self-controlled and sober-minded. These instructions echo Peter’s instructions from earlier in his letter (1 Peter 1:13). To be sober-minded is to have mental self-control. Don’t allow worldly distractions to throw your mind off balance—stay focused on what you should be doing as a disciple of Yeshua.

Peter’s instructions to be self-controlled and sober-minded are “[for the sake of your prayers](#).” In the last chapter, Peter mentioned that the believers’ conduct has an impact on whether their prayers are heard (1 Peter 3:7, 12). This idea is also taught in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 7:16; 14:12; Ezekiel 8:18; Zechariah 7:13; Proverbs 15:8; 28:9). Therefore, in light of the “end of all things,” as Peter says, Peter admonishes good conduct so that his readers’ prayers will not be hindered.

Peter instructs his readers to love one another earnestly “[since love covers a multitude of sins](#).” Here, Peter quotes Proverbs 10:12:

Proverbs 10:12

[Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.](#)

Peter’s point appears to be that one who loves will be quick to forgive, to “cover” the offenses of other people. This is also the point of Proverbs 10:12. Such willingness to forgive and cover offenses is essential if the believing community hopes to bring glory to God (1 Peter 4:11). Also important is showing “[hospitality to one another without grumbling](#).” Peter’s hope is that his readers will have a genuine concern for one another and want to help each other out of a heart of love. It’s easy to get frustrated when times are tough and resources are limited, which might be why Peter adds “[without grumbling](#).” Christians must be willing to help each other in times of trouble, to not see each other as an inconvenience.

Peter goes on to say, “[As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace](#).” In Greek, the word “gift” is *charisma*. Peter seems to be referring to the spiritual gifts here, such as prophecy, exhortation, and so forth, which God gives to each believer. Like Paul, Peter instructs his readers to “serve one another” with these gifts for God’s glory. As Craig Keener writes:

The Greek term translated as “gift” here, *charisma*, was still rare in this period, so it is probably no coincidence that Paul uses the term in a similar way (esp. in Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 1:7; 12:4, 9, 28–31; cf. 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; possibly also Rom. 1:11), suggesting a wider early Christian usage. The prophetic element in 1 Pet. 4:11 is another indication that we may read Peter’s use of the term *charisma* in the light of wider early Christian usage; prophecy is one of the few gifts invariably among Paul’s lists of *charismata*. Both Peter and Paul use *charisma* in connection

with *charis*, “grace” (Rom. 12:6; cf. Rom. 5:15; Eph. 4:7); God’s generous benevolence not only rescues us, but equips us to be his agents in gifts for one another. God has graced each of us with different gifts and therefore we can use these to serve one another. We must share these gifts, since God gave them to us for the church as a whole (Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:11–12). The *many-sided* character of the grace reinforces the idea that God uses different individuals in different ways, but it is the same God working through all of them (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-6, 11).

-Craig Keener, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2021), p. 323

As Craig Keener suggests, when Peter mentions “[one who speaks oracles of God](#),” he is likely referring to the gift of prophecy. Once again, believers are to serve one another with these gifts “[in order that in everything God may be glorified through Yeshua Messiah](#).” According to Peter, we are to live and behave for God’s glory. He concludes this section with a liturgical expression of praise: “[To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen](#).”

Let’s continue:

1 Peter 4:12-19

[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. 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. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; 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?” Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.](#)

Here, Peter expands on the topic of suffering, which he has been addressing throughout this letter. He says, “[Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you](#).” Christ suffered, and so we should not be surprised when acting like Christ brings us suffering as well. It’s to be expected (1 Peter 4:1). Peter says that the trials that come upon believers are meant to “[test](#)” us, which echoes what he says in chapter 1 (1 Peter 1:6-9), where he talks about how trials are actually for our good. Trials “[test](#)” the sincerity of our faith, refining our character like fire refines gold. From Peter’s perspective, suffering is a tool that God uses for our spiritual growth. Therefore, we rejoice in the midst of suffering (1 Peter 1:6). When we suffer, we are also sharing in Christ’s sufferings. Again, as we saw in chapter 3, when we suffer for doing good, we are assured that we are set apart from the world and united with the Messiah who also suffered for doing good (1 Peter 3:13-17). We also rejoice in suffering because there is coming a day “[when his glory is revealed](#).” Yeshua will return, and we will finally receive our inheritance (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Peter goes on to encourage his readers that if they are “[insulted for the name of Christ, \[they\] are blessed](#)” (cf. 1 Peter 3:14; Matthew 5:11-12). Basically, if they are reviled for being known as Christians, again, they should rejoice. Why? Peter says, “[because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon \[them\]](#).” That is, they have the experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives, even as they endure suffering, which comforts them and assures them of future glory. As Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 2:9-10

But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

Peter goes on to say that our suffering must not be because of sinful behavior—“as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.” Even as we suffer and face persecution, our conduct as believers must remain holy (1 Peter 1:14-16). He says “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” In Greek, “Christian” is *Christianos*. The last part of the term, *-ianos*, means “follower.” So, the word “Christian” literally means “Christ follower.” This is one of three times in the New Testament where this word is used. The other two places are in the book of Acts, where the word is used by unbelievers (Acts 11:26; 26:28). There was certainly a negative connotation to this term at this time, as unbelievers used the word in a derogatory way. Nevertheless, Peter says the proper response to being identified by that name is not to be ashamed but rather “glorify God in that name.”

Similarly, like the culture surrounding Peter’s original audience, many within own culture might have a negative impression of “Christians”—Christ followers. Rather than be ashamed to be associated with Christ, we ought to, as Peter said, glorify God as Christians.

Another reason that believers should be prepared to suffer as Christians is because “it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.” God uses suffering, including persecution, as a form of discipline (Hebrews 12:7) to refine our faith (1 Peter 1:6-7). Peter then implies that those who disobey the Gospel can expect far worse at the time of the end. If we, his children, must endure judgment, then surely those who are not his children will endure even greater judgment. In support of this point, Peter references Proverbs 11:31 and says, “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” Once again, if believers suffer in this life, how much worse will the condemnation be for unbelievers on the day of judgment?

Peter concludes with an exhortation, summing up his teaching throughout this chapter: “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” Sometimes “God’s will” is that we suffer. Peter has already explained how our suffering can be used to glorify God: it is a type of apologetic for our hope in Messiah (1 Peter 3:14-16). He said it can also be used as a form of discipline that refines our character (1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:17). Thus, believers should be prepared to suffer. And as we do, we should entrust our souls to God and continue to do good. We must not return to the sinful ways of our past (1 Peter 4:3-4). And we do not wait for our circumstances to improve before we live righteously and testify to God’s goodness. Our faith is not dependent on our circumstances. We trust in God and live for him despite our suffering.

Let’s talk a little bit more about the benefits of suffering.

The Benefits of Suffering

If prosperity preachers are correct—that the purpose of this life is to be successful and have abundant health, wealth, and prosperity—then suffering is meaningless. It’s counter-productive to the nice, comfortable life that God wants for us, right? However, as we’ve seen, Peter does not teach the prosperity gospel. In fact, if we’re living righteously, according to Peter, our suffering is in accordance with “God’s will” (1 Peter 4:19). The goal of this life is not health, wealth, and prosperity. The goal of this life, as it says in Ecclesiastes, is to fear God and keep his commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). It’s all about knowing him and bringing him glory in our lives. So, in light of that, suffering is not meaningless. God uses suffering as a tool to help us fulfill our purpose in this life.

How does suffering help us fulfill our purpose? What good comes out of suffering? Well, let's unpack the Bible's teaching on suffering a bit more.

As we've learned from Peter, suffering produces fruit. We often grow spiritually through suffering; we learn obedience and gain wisdom. James teaches that our suffering produces steadfastness, which results in our becoming "[perfect and complete, lacking in nothing](#)" (James 1:4). Sometimes suffering helps us stop sinning. We get a clear picture of the foolishness of sin and are less tempted to return to old patterns of behavior. As the psalmist said, "[Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word](#)" (Psalm 119:67). Thus, suffering often helps us grow in wisdom and maturity. That doesn't mean we'll always know the purpose of our suffering in the moment, but we can trust that "[God works all things together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose](#)" (Romans 8:28).

Another benefit of suffering is that it strengthens community. When people have shared experiences of suffering, there is a kinship that is developed. That is the point of support groups for people who have gone through suffering—for instance, support groups for people who have lost their spouse or who are battling cancer. There is a strong connection formed between people who share suffering. So, when believers have shared experiences of suffering for their faith, it brings out a stronger connection, unity, and love between them. Peter also describes our suffering for our faith as sharing in Christ's sufferings (1 Peter 4:13). So, in the same way that we feel closer to each other as we experience suffering, we also feel closer to Christ. Suffering brings out a stronger sense of connection and relationship with him. The psalmist says that God is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18).

Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian holocaust survivor, said it well. This is what she said:

There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still.

-Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), p. 8

As we can see, in our deepest pit of heartache and pain, we can experience God's love in a profound way.

However, even as we recognize these benefits of suffering, we also remember that we've been born again to a living hope (1 Peter 1:3). Suffering is temporary. One day, Yeshua will return, and all death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more (Revelation 21:4). The inheritance that God's children will receive in the world to come is so wonderful that Paul calls the sufferings of this life "a light momentary affliction" in comparison (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Even if you suffer your entire life, you will be able to look back someday and say the same thing. When we've experienced a million years of joy in God's eternal kingdom, the 75 years that we had to suffer in this life will seem like nothing.

Therefore, stay faithful even in the midst of suffering because of the everlasting joy that awaits you.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

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Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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