

A Godly Response to Suffering

Scripture Readings: Genesis 6:5-8; 1 Peter 4:1-11 • Text: 1 Peter 4:1-11

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My wife recently had a conversation with a Filipino lay pastor who is relatively well off compared with most Filipino pastors. He was very thankful for all the blessings he has received from God, but he added, "There are no poor Christians, because if you just have enough faith, God will prosper you.

In contrast to this Filipino pastor, an American pastor tells of the story of one of his parishioners who talked to him after a Lord's Day worship service. After being greeted by the pastor, the man started his tirade against God and the church, "_____ your _____ God! I'm done. Your Jesus hasn't done me a bit of good. I've tried to clean up my act. I even tried your _____ tithing thing. It doesn't work. I just lost my job. My wife needs surgery, and now I don't have any insurance. Where's your _____ God when we need him?"

One person endlessly praises God for his material blessings, while the other is bitter and disenchanted about God and the church for his problems. These are the most prevalent fruits of prosperity gospel preachers who teach health, wealth and other material blessings if you have enough faith. For them, there is no such thing as a suffering Christian.

The problem with this teaching is that those who do not get what they want—not what they need—from a genie they conveniently call God are often disillusioned and reject the Christian faith. This is one of the worst consequences of the prosperity gospel as preached by Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn and others of their kind.

This prosperity gospel is completely alien from the gospel that the apostle Peter preached in his first epistle. In our study of 1 Peter, we have learned that Christians are pilgrims in a world hostile to them, and because of this, they suffer ridicule, persecution, and at times, even violent death.

As Christians, we are united to Christ in his suffering and victory. Peter exhorts us to endure hardship, assuring us that we will receive our final reward (3:13-17). Christ suffered all throughout his earthly life until his death on the cross, but God raised him from the dead, and thus he triumphed over Satan, sin and death itself (3:18-22).

In our text today, Peter enjoins us to cease from sin and abstain from human passions, being willing to be maligned by a hostile world (4:1-6). But suffering comes not only from the world, but even from within the church through jealousy, envy, backbiting, divisions, false teachings, and sexual immorality. Instead of having these destructive attitudes, Peter exhorts us to use our spiritual gifts to build up the church and so glorify God through Christ (4:7-11).

This afternoon, we will consider the theme, "**A GODLY RESPONSE TO SUFFERING**"

- 1. In a Hostile World**
- 2. In an Imperfect Church**

In a Hostile World

Christians suffer in this life because they live in a world at enmity with God. Peter begins Chapter 4 saying that since Christ "*suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.*" In our union with Christ, we are

to emulate the mind of Christ and so be willing to suffer in this life. And when we willingly subject ourselves to suffering, we evidence our commitment to abstain from sin.

But what does Peter mean when he says, *“whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin”*? Three different interpretations are offered by Biblical scholars:

First, the one who “has suffered in the flesh” is Christ himself – who, through his suffering and death, has blotted out sin from the lives of believers. However, the pronoun “whoever” is too general to be a clear reference to Christ. The second view is that the believer is the one who has suffered because in his dying with Christ, he is also dead to the power of sin, a point similar to Paul's teaching in Romans 6:1–4.

But the most convincing interpretation is that in his willingness to suffer, the believer shows that he is not enslaved to sin anymore, and is now committed to a life of obedience to God, as Christ was in his redemptive mission to the world. In his union with Christ, the believer now strives to avoid the pleasures of his sinful will, but instead seeks to live according to God’s will and for God’s glory.

The believer suffering “in the flesh” should not be taken to mean that he only suffers bodily, or in the same way as Paul uses “flesh” in his epistles. For example, in Galatians 5:19-21, Paul calls the fruits of the fallen, sinful human nature as “the works of the flesh.” When compared to 1 Peter 3:18, *“For Christ also suffered once for sins... being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,”* “in the flesh” refers to the believer’s earthly life before death in contrast to his heavenly life after his resurrection from the dead.

Peter also contrasts the believer’s commitment to “cease from sin” from his former life of satisfying his “human passions” of *“sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry... [and] debauchery”* (verses 2-4). These passions marked the lives of first-century pagans, who viewed Christians as killjoys having no fun or pleasure. Christians did not participate in Roman entertainment such as the theater, chariot races, and gladiator wars. They did not offer incense to the emperor and other Roman gods, so they were accused of having no religion and disobeying Roman laws. Drunkenness and sexual immorality were rampant among pagans, especially in their pagan worship. In contrast, believers had nothing to do with such behavior, even when their abstinence from pagan practices meant ridicule and persecution.

Since God brought to our ancestors Adam and Eve the bad news of continuous, spiraling enmity between his kingdom and Satan’s kingdom until the last day of this age, no generation of believers has an exclusive claim on suffering for Christ. This is why it seems that each generation of believers suffers more and more at the hands of the enemies of God.

In my first couple of jobs, both in the Philippines, I had many unpleasant experiences trying to live out my Christian faith. My colleagues went on drinking binges and committed all kinds of sexual improprieties every weekend. They continually enticed me into joining them, with the accompanying ridicule and harassment whenever I refused. Persecution is not only done through violence and destruction, but also through harassment, ridicule, and being an outcast.

But as Christians, you are called to be a chosen race, holy and separate to the Lord, and “in the world, but not **of** the world.” Paul calls you to be aliens and strangers who “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” He exhorts you, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:1-2). As pilgrims in

this world, we are not to practice what the citizens of this world do. We are to do what citizens of the kingdom of heaven are supposed to do.

But we all have experienced persecution and ridicule when we do not do what the world does. Refusing to be like the world by not participating in ungodly practices has caused us to be alienated from family, friends, and co-workers. They are even surprised that we are not like them. And they not only do these things themselves, but openly advocate and teach their sexual immorality, corruption and rebellion to others.

Are you surprised when celebrities and politicians openly practice sexual immorality and corruption in high places in the government? Do not be shocked, for Paul saw these things even in his day, *“they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them”* (Rom 1:32). They are teaching the whole society to do the same. This is why there is so much corruption and sexual immorality in the Philippines today.

But God is not sleeping. He sees all of these rebellious acts by unbelievers. He sees believers suffering in the hands of unbelievers. Thus, those who suffer unjustly because of their faith in Christ have shown that they are willing to be done with sin by living in obedience to God, to be different, and to be set apart—even if it means persecution and ridicule.

But take comfort, Christian, unbelievers do not have the last word, for they will give account and face God's judgment (v 5). They will face God's severe judgment, especially those who have heard the gospel of Christ preached to them but rejected it. Preaching the gospel condemns unbelievers. Showing them our godly, obedient lives also make them see their ungodly, rebellious lives.

This is why John says in the book of Revelation that when the people of the earth see the two witnesses—symbolizing the church—dead, they rejoice. They give gifts to one another. Because *“these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth”* (Rev 11:10). How are unbelievers “tormented” by believers? When they hear Christians tell them, “Repent and believe in the gospel of Christ!” and when they see Christians practicing a completely different life from them as “salt” and “light” to the world, they know in their hearts that they are sinners bound to eternal hell.

Unbelievers often say that there is no life after death, and so they live a life of worldly passions and desires. They do not care about hell because they do not believe in heaven or hell in the afterlife. But Peter says that when Judgment Day comes, both “the living and the dead” will give account of themselves to God. No one is excepted. **All** unbelievers will be judged. **All** believers will get their reward.

Concerning the dead, verse 6 says that the gospel was preached even to those who are dead. Does this mean that God offers a second chance after death for those who rejected Christ? No, not at all; there will be no second offer of salvation to those who have died (Luke 16:26; Heb 9:27). The immediate context of this verse is about the perseverance of believers (4:1–6) and the coming judgment of “the living and the dead” (v. 5). Thus, verse 6 must mean that the gospel was preached to people who were living, but were *now* dead. “Those who are dead” may also refer to the unbelieving dead. There is no exception to the judgment that is coming, whether dead or living.

In an Imperfect Church

The next few verses, 7-11, deal with believers living as members of the church, the covenant community. We see this in words like “prayers,” “keep loving one another,” “show hospitality to one another,” and being “good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

Peter begins with verse 7: *“The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.”* This is very similar to 1 Peter 2:11: *“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”*

In saying, “The end of all things is at hand,” Peter was not really expecting Christ to return in a few days or weeks. But he knows that all the major Old Testament prophecies about Christ and all the major events in God's great salvation plan – culminating in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost – had already been fulfilled. Peter remembers Jesus’ words, “I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them” (Matt 5:17). After Jesus ascended into heaven, the only event in God’s redemptive plan waiting completion is the return of Christ to judge the whole world.

And while we wait for Judgment Day when Christ comes, how are we to live? Peter exhorts us to four things in verses 7-11 which we are to be as Christians waiting for our Lord’s coming:

First, Peter commands us to live self-controlled, sober lives so we can pray. This is in contrast to the “sensuality” and “human passions” of verses 3 and 4. When we have self-control and sober minds, we can be more effective in prayer and in our service in God’s kingdom. Self-control and being sober are in stark contrast to the drunken stupor and sexual orgies common in the Graeco-Roman society.

Self-control and sober minds are also in contrast to the mindless babbling, so-called “speaking in tongues” and disorderly, “Spirit-led” worship services in many Pentecostal churches. The excessive practice of mindless repetitive choruses, rock music, dancing, and other sensual “worship” innovations in most churches today are also antithetical to having self-control and sober minds.

Second, Peter exhorts us to love one another earnestly. He is not talking about love that forgives sins, or love that denies or covers up sin in the church. Rather, he is referring to earnest love that promotes unity and loving relationships in the church. Love that *“covers a multitude of sins”* (v 8). Love that *“put[s] away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander”* (1 Pet 2:1). And love that does not *“repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling”* (1 Pet 3:9). This is in contrast to schisms in churches because of personal and trivial, not even doctrinal, issues. Lack of unity in the church is not just discouraging to believers, but worse, also a bad testimony to unbelievers who will think, “If Christianity is the true religion, why are they always fighting?”

Third, Christians must show hospitality to one another, a much-admired trait in the ancient world. For example, elders are to be hospitable (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8). This involved opening their homes to other brethren who are traveling or needing a place to stay, or even for church worship services or other Christian gatherings, as when a church met in the home of Aquila and Prisca (1 Cor 16:19; see also Acts 20:20; Rom 16:5; Col 4:15, Phm 1:2).

Loving hospitality must also be done cheerfully, not out of compulsion, and without grumbling. For many of their brethren who were being persecuted had to seek refuge in the

homes of their brethren. It was not an easy and safe thing to do, because it was certainly dangerous to be identified with persecuted and hated Christians who were being blamed for every kind of disastrous event in the Roman world.

Fourth, believers must use their spiritual gifts to serve one another as good stewards of God's grace. Every believer receives a spiritual gift from God for the benefit of the church, "to serve one another." But not all believers have the same gifts; each one receives a gift based on God's grace. What's important is that Christians must use their gifts for the church.

As Paul says in Colossians 3:17, there are "speaking" gifts as well as "serving" gifts, "*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*" "Speaking" could be a reference to pastors and elders, while "serving" to deacons. Those who speak must not promote their own ideas but faithfully declare God's words (oracles). Similarly, those who serve must not depend on their own strength but draw strength from God, so that God alone may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

Praying soberly and effectively; loving one another; cheerful hospitality to other believers; using spiritual gifts and serving one another: all of these commands, when acted upon by members of the covenant community, preserves the church during times of persecution and ridicule.

But the church itself could also be a source of persecution and ridicule.

At times, we Reformed believers are not able to find a church home that is faithful to God's Word and where God is worshiped in spirit and in truth. It is difficult to find a church home because of false teachings. At other times, our family and friends pressure us to go to their churches—churches that we may consider false churches—where the gospel is not preached, the sacraments are not administered Biblically, and church discipline is not exercised.

Because of these things, some Reformed believers also travel a long way to go to a true church. I know some of our brethren travel as long as two to three hours to go to one of our churches. Or, if we move because of a job transfer, we might not find a true church close by, so we might find ourselves isolated, or even traveling many hours to go hear the Word of God preached faithfully.

Conclusion

Dear friends, as pilgrims and strangers in this world, you suffer persecution and ridicule from a world hostile to God. This is because you do not participate in their godless passions and activities. You are different from them.

But God promises a day of judgment in which all—living and dead—will give an account of himself. And while you await this Day of Judgment, you are to live as God's obedient and faithful children. You are to be self-controlled and sober-minded, loving, hospitable, and using your spiritual gifts for the building up of the church.

In this way, even when you suffer as Christians and as a church, you glorify God and Christ our Lord and Savior.

"To God belong glory and dominion forever and ever. *Amen.*"