

How Pilgrims Persevere in Suffering

Scripture Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; 1 Peter 4:12-19 • Text: 1 Peter 4:12-19

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Introduction

Pastor Salim Sadiq of Holy Spirit Church in Karachi told Christian Today that Christian homes were pounded by Islamic extremists who have vowed to avenge for the suffering of Muslims in their area.

"They barged into our homes shouting 'death to infidels' and beat us, hurling murderous threats if we don't convert to Islam," Sadiq recalled. He lamented, "Christians have no voice here. We have been suffering from ages like this under the staunch Muslim militants who rape our daughters, burn our churches and raze down our homes."

In April 1995, the Muslim extremist Abu Sayyaf group raided the Christian town of Ipil in Zamboanga del Norte province and burned all its houses and establishments. The group also shot dead at least 54 residents of the town. No doubt that there were Christians who were killed or wounded in those attacks. And these events are often repeated throughout the world, particularly in Asia and Africa.

It's very different in the U. S. and Europe and here in the Philippines, a Catholic majority country – there is hardly any persecution or violence against Christians. In fact, many Filipino Christians have been deceived by the prosperity gospel teachings from the West that being a Christian will bring countless blessings and material prosperity.

Today's prosperity gospel has no place in Scriptures, especially in Peter's first epistle, where he repeatedly prepares and encourages Christians in his own time about sufferings that are sure to come. In fact, all of the New Testament writers tell us that all believers in all of history, from creation to the end of the world, will suffer because of sin.

And sometimes, we read of the sufferings of believers that we ourselves cannot fathom. In Hebrews 11:35-38, we read this catalog of sufferings that is unimaginable for much of Western Christianity today:

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

How could Christians in the Bible, and in many parts of the world today bear such terrible sufferings? Peter tells us how their faith in Christ enables them to persevere to the end.

In our text today, Peter reminds his readers again that they should not be surprised when they suffer. Suffering is part of the Christian's calling. They should not be ashamed when they suffer, since it is not for doing evil or because of lack of faith. And they should not doubt God's faithfulness in caring for our souls when sufferings come. We must understand that God uses our sufferings to purify us.

Once we understand this, we will not be surprised, we will not be ashamed, and we will not doubt when sufferings come. This was how believers throughout history endured sufferings. This afternoon, we will dwell on the theme, **"HOW PILGRIMS PERSEVERE IN SUFFERING"**

1. **Do not be Surprised**
2. **Do not be Ashamed**
3. **Do not Doubt**

Do not be Surprised

"Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Peter comes back again and again to his topic of suffering as the Christian's calling. He says that suffering for Christ is not abnormal, and therefore he should not be surprised.

If we accept this, suffering will be bearable and will even bring joy to us. Not that we rejoice when our loved one dies, or when we lose our jobs, or when our relationships are broken. We grieve, but we also have hope knowing that God is always in control and works all things for our good. Those who suffer "suffer according to God's will," (v 19) because God is sovereign not only over good things that happen to us, but also over "unexpected" trials and temptations. We may never even see God's purpose in our suffering until we are in glory. But even so, our sufferings are under God's sovereignty.

When we suffer for Christ, we actually share in his sufferings. Not that we could add to his sufferings so we can be saved. But we share in his sufferings because of our union with him through faith. We know that Christ suffered in his life and on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. So when we suffer, we are sure that we are united to him who suffered for us.

This is the reason why the reality of salvation for those who teach the heresy of the prosperity gospel is suspect. This gospel is not the gospel of Christ, because it does not teach the gospel of the cross. It is only concerned about the gospel of health and wealth, a gospel that is foreign to the Bible.

But if we believe in the gospel of the cross, we are securely and permanently linked to Christ. We share not only in his sufferings in this age, but also in his glory in the age to come. This is what gives us hope: because Christ had victory over sin and death, we too will be victorious over sin and death. Because Christ received back his glories in heaven, we too will receive all spiritual blessings and an inheritance in the heavenly places.

Peter's words assures us, *"But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed"* (v 13). This is why we have hope and we can rejoice in our suffering. We know that all our sufferings would end when Christ returns in power and great glory. Then our joy will be complete.

Thus, when we understand the gospel of the cross of Christ, we will not be surprised when sufferings and persecution come to our lives. We will be able not only to endure, but to have joy and hope in this vale of tears.

Do not be Ashamed

Not only do we persevere in our afflictions when we are not surprised by them. But we also endure because we are not ashamed when we suffer.

The prosperity gospel teachers shame those who suffer. They tell their flock that if they suffer, it is because they do not have enough faith. And because of this false gospel, they do not persevere, because they have no assurance, and they get easily discouraged, offended. And in many cases, they then fall away.

Peter tells us one form of suffering or persecution is when Christians are insulted or reviled because of their faith. But isn't it unusual when he says, "*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed*" (v 14). This is the opposite of man's thinking. Everyone knows that when insults are almost like curses, not blessings.

Peter doesn't think so. He remembers Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt 5:11-12).

Jesus himself taught this paradox to Peter and his other disciples: insults and persecution for blessing. Why would he say that when insults are hurled against us, we are blessed? He answers this in the same verse, "*Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.*" During times when we are insulted and persecuted, the Spirit gives us more endurance so we can go through those times. He comforts us even more. During difficult times, the Holy Spirit gives us peace in our hearts that we cannot understand.

This same Spirit that rested on Jesus at his baptism (Matt. 3:16) now rests upon us. Jesus promised that same Spirit to us—to comfort, help, and assure us in our time of great need:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I (John 14:26-28).

This comforter not only gives us peace, but also joy.

Suffering for Doing Evil

But there is another kind of suffering that does not bring peace and joy to us, and does not give glory to God. And that suffering is when a Christian suffers because of being a murderer, or a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler (v 15). Murderer? No, never. Thief? Absolutely not me. Evildoer? No, not even close.

Meddler? Peter gets everyone with this; no one can ignore this accusation. We all do this: meddle in things that don't concern us. We all are guilty of sending and receiving email, text, and gossip about other people's affairs or troubles. These do not give glory to God, especially when unbelievers see troubles in the church because of this.

We should meddle, but in prayer. Pray for brethren who are sick, who are looking for work, who have family problems. We should meddle, but to help not only in prayer, but also in action. Give to those in need. Help in whatever way you can, especially the widow and the orphan. Encourage with spiritual words. This is godly “meddling.”

In this way, we give glory to God. Unbelievers will be amazed at our brotherly love for one another, *“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”* (1 Pet 2:12).

Because as “Christians,” we carry the name of “Christ,” so we are to take care as to our word and deed before unbelievers, *“Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name”* (v 16). Throughout history, the name of Christ has been blasphemed because those who carry his name acted contrary to his gospel of truth, righteousness and justice.

In the medieval ages, for example, the crusades and the corrupt Roman church gave occasion for others to fall away and for Islam to conquer lands like Turkey and North Africa which used to be bastions of Christianity. And today, the teachings and deeds of televangelists, prosperity gospel teachers, and even megachurches are giving unbelievers occasion to revile the name of Christ.

We are to do good so we could bring honor and praise to God, instead of causing foolish unbelievers to blaspheme his name.

Suffering for Doing Good

Peter also tells us that if we suffer for doing good as a Christian, we are not to be ashamed, *“Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed”* (v 16). Instead, we should remember we are blessed because we share in Christ’s sufferings. We should be joyful because of the blessings now and hereafter.

This is how our brethren today and in ages past have persevered in their faith in Christ during times of extreme sufferings. They were not ashamed of their sufferings. Instead they rejoiced and gave glory to God.

Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were two English Reformers who were executed by Queen Mary (“Bloody Mary”) in 1555. They were put to death by burning at the stake. As the fire was lit under them, Latimer spoke these witty words to his friend who was in anguish, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle. By God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”

As the fire started to consume them, both men prayed aloud in the hearing of the watching crowd. Latimer prayed, “Father of heaven, receive my soul!” and Ridley prayed similarly, “Lord into Thy hands I commend my spirit: Lord, receive my spirit!”

Latimer, Ridley and countless other martyrs throughout church history persevered because they were not surprised at their persecution and sufferings. They were also not ashamed.

Lastly, they endured because they did not doubt God’s faithfulness to them.

Do not Doubt

Many Christians have the mistaken idea that whenever they suffer, God is punishing their sins. Already during the Old Testament times, this was already common. Job's friends thought that he was suffering because of his sin, so he should repent to appease God's displeasure. Pagans also have this same idea. This is why they sacrifice animals and even their children when disasters and sickness come.

To be sure, sometimes Christians suffer and even die because of sin in their lives. Israel in the wilderness, David, Solomon, Ananias and Sapphira are some examples. When we are addicted to alcohol, cigarettes, or even to our jobs, we suffer the consequences. When we make mistakes, bad things are sure to come.

But in our text, Peter is not talking about this kind of suffering. He's talking about suffering for doing good. In verse 12, he calls sufferings as a "fiery trial" to test us. And these trials also come to the household of God. This verse calls to mind Malachi 3:1-4, where the Lord purifies his people, as a goldsmith or silversmith purifies gold and silver with fire. Impurities mixed with gold and silver are unacceptable to those who want to buy them.

In the same way, sin in our lives is purified by God when he sends persecution and suffering our way. We become more mature, our faith is strengthened. In Chapter 2, Peter calls the church a spiritual house, the household of God. When the church goes through sufferings and persecution, the church also becomes more mature and is built up and strengthened.

Here in our text, he says that "judgment" begins with the "household of God." Are Christians therefore to be punished just like evildoers on Judgment Day? No, judgment here is not punishment, but purification and strengthening. Your suffering is a test of the *"genuineness of faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire."* And the result of this testing? We will *"be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ"* (1 Pet. 1:7).

So when you come down with a serious illness; when you lose your jobs or possessions; when your relationships are broken – do not immediately think that God is punishing you. He may actually be testing you. But if your sufferings are from sinful actions, God is disciplining you because you are his children, *"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?"* (Heb 12:7) In this case, be ready to repent of your sin. When the discipline is over, you are strengthened in your faith so you can endure even greater sufferings and persecution than before.

And when Judgment Day comes, all of us will appear before the throne of Christ. We who are believers will be first to give an account of our faith and works before our Great Judge, *"For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God"* (v17).

Remember the judgment of the sheep and the goats? The sheep will be judged first, and receive their reward, *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"* (Matt 25:34). But to the unbelieving goats, Christ will say, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness"* (Matt 7:23). They will receive eternal punishment.

This is why Peter asks, *"What will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"* (v 17). If the people of God themselves undergo fiery trials, how much more will be the punishment of those who reject Christ's gospel and do not repent of their evil ways? Peter reinforces this point by quoting Proverbs 11:31, *"If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* "Scarcely saved" does not mean that the righteous just barely receive salvation. It means that the righteous are saved in the midst of suffering; their salvation is not easy and simple and not without difficulties.

Finally, we find in verse 19 a short summary of what Peter has been telling us in his first epistle: Our sufferings are according to the sovereign will of God. He is not only the Almighty Creator, but he is also our Father who showers us with his lovingkindness and unchanging faithfulness. Because he is such a Father, believers should wholly entrust their lives to him. The more we trust God, the more our lives will bring forth good deeds. And the more good fruit we bear, the more our faith grows. There is this unbreakable relationship between faith and its resulting good fruit.

Therefore, do not doubt God's faithfulness and lovingkindness when sufferings and persecution come.

Conclusion

Dear friends, as pilgrims and strangers in this world, you suffer persecution and ridicule from a world hostile to God. But God promises to us that you will persevere through these fiery trials.

Do not be surprised, for your calling as a Christian involves suffering for doing good as a follower of Christ, who also suffered in his life and death to save you from your sin.

Do not be ashamed of your suffering, for in this you know you are united to Christ. And if you are united to Christ in his suffering, you are also united to him in his victory over sin and death.

Do not doubt God's grace, mercy, love and faithfulness. When you suffer for doing good, do not think he is punishing you for sin. When you suffer because of sin in your life, repent and turn away from it. You become stronger and more mature because of such suffering, whether it is for doing good or for doing evil.

And the reward of persevering through suffering in this life is joy, peace, and blessedness in the Spirit of God. But most importantly, the final reward is the glory that awaits us in the heavenly places.

*"When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."* ("How Firm a Foundation," John Rippon, 1787)