

Suffering for Christ and Righteousness

1 Peter 4:1-6

1 Peter 4:1-6: *“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,² that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.³ For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.⁴ In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.⁵ They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.⁶ For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.”*

Background Notes

Remember, the recipients of Peter’s letter were primarily Jewish believers of the 1st century who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. From the description of what these folks were like before they became Christians, we might get the idea that they were Gentiles. Verse 3: *“For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.”* That description certainly doesn’t sound like religious Jews, does it?

The answer is that these Jews were surrounded by the pagan Roman culture, and they had absorbed many of its pagan practices. Scattered throughout the Roman Empire, they were far from Jerusalem and their religious roots, and many of them had become enculturated by Roman thought and practice.

In this letter Peter addressed saved Gentiles as well as saved Jews, but he was primarily thinking of the scattered Jews who had become Christians, who were now suffering for the sake of Christ. However, this letter has great and encouraging application for any and all Christians who are suffering for the cause of Christ.

“He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (v1). What does this mean? Does this mean that if you suffer for Christ, you can reach a state of perfection in this life? No, it doesn’t mean that. However, if you endure suffering for the sake of Christ, you will almost certainly sin less!

In this verse, the word *sin* is singular, and thus the idea is “ceasing to live your life in line with your sinful nature.” The more we identify with Christ in His death, and the more we die to self, and the more we are willing to suffer the reproach of Christ - the less sin will be a problem in our lives.

Romans 6:14 says that *“sin shall not have dominion over you.”* But notice the context – the verses that precede verse 14: *“Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace”* (Romans 6:11-14).

So if you are willing not only to become a Christian - but to be a **committed** Christian, and to present yourself to the Lord as an instrument of righteousness – one result is that you will have increasing victory over sin in your life. If you commit yourself to Him, even to the point of suffering because you’re willing to be known as a Christian, and speak out as a Christian, and suffer as a Christian – will result in more victory over sin in your life. Sin will not have dominion or rule over you.

Here’s an illustration. There’s no doubt that the early Christians who were being thrown to the lions in the arena did not have a problem with a lot of sin (v3) in their lives. Do you see the principle?

Notice that our commitment to suffer for the sake of Christ starts with the **mind** (v1). It’s a matter of the **will**. Only if we determine to **“arm ourselves”** with the same mind as Christ will verse 2 follow: *“that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”*

“Arm yourselves” means spiritual warfare - and victory over sin is not automatic. But in the first two verses of 1 Peter 4, we see one principle for overcoming sin: stay actively committed to having the mind of Christ. Whatever the cost, and wherever you are - where you live, on the job, in the classroom - be a committed Christian!

For the Jewish believers that Peter was addressing, suffering for the sake of Christ needed to be emphasized and explained. After all, they were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures that promised material blessings and long life if you followed the Lord. Thus to Jews, suffering was a sign of divine **disfavor**. But now that the Messiah has come and been rejected, **suffering for Christ would be the norm** for the committed Christian who is living in a world that rejects Christ.

This was true then, and it is still true today. Many believers today have imbibed the idea that if a Christian is suffering, then he or she has fallen out of God’s favor. Illness, job loss, poverty, the death of a loved one - suffering is a sign that the Christian has sinned, or they lack sufficient faith, or they have fallen short of God’s favor in some way. The teaching in 1 Peter shows that the “prosperity gospel” idea is unbiblical and false.

Doctrinal Points

1. Unbelievers will give an account to the Lord.

Verse 5: *“They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”*

The “they” in verse 5 are unbelievers, as we see from verse 4. The Judge is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Judge of the living and the dead. When Peter preached the gospel to the people who were gathered in the house of Cornelius, he used this same title for the Lord. Acts 10:42: *“And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.”* No one will escape the judgment of God.

When the Lord returns to this earth, there will be a judgment of the living. Joel 3 and Matthew 25 speak of the judgment of the living of all nations. Then, at the end of our Lord’s 1000-year kingdom reign on this earth, there will be a judgment of the unbelieving dead. This is known as the Great White Throne Judgment.

The Great White Throne Judgment is described in Revelation 20:11-13: *“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.”* Unbelievers will give an account to the Lord.

2. Believers will receive a reward from the Lord.

Verse 6: *“For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.”*

Here’s another verse that is difficult to interpret. Some commentators link this verse with 1 Peter 3:18 to build their case that, between His death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus went to Hades and preached to the dead - either to give them a second chance or to announce His victory. But there is no support for such a doctrine in the rest of Scripture. If it were true, you would certainly expect to find support in the book of Romans - but you don’t find it there. There is no support anywhere in Scripture that the dead had – or will have - the gospel preached to them, then or today.

We believe this verse is referring to those who are now dead, who had the gospel preached to them when they were living. The question is, Did they believe the gospel that was preached to them? In contrast to the unbelievers of verse 5, the people of verse 6 **did** believe the gospel, because it says that those who are dead now *“live according to God and the Spirit.”*

Clearly they are believers who have gone on to their reward. During their lifetime, they were *“judged according to men in the flesh.”* They were judged by the world, and many of them were condemned to martyrdom. But now they are no longer suffering persecution. They are alive and with the Lord, and they will live in God’s presence forever. They are rewarded for their willingness to suffer for Christ and to suffer for the sake of righteousness.

If we’re willing to suffer for Christ, this is true for us as well. Whether your suffering is physical persecution, or verbal abuse, or humiliation - if you’re willing to stand up and speak for the Lord, you will be rewarded. Romans 8:17 says “if we suffer with Him, we will also be glorified with Him.” Believers will receive a reward from the Lord.

Will all believers receive a reward from the Lord? Yes, we will all live in God’s presence forever. But your level of commitment now makes a difference for your future. You may have heard this expression before: “In Heaven, everyone’s cup of joy will be full - but there will be different sized cups!” The size of your cup then is determined by the amount of your commitment now.

Do you want more than a thimble-sized cup? Be a committed Christian! Believers will receive a reward from the Lord.

Practical Application

It’s a good sign when you are maligned for doing right!

Verse 4: “In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.”

Have you ever been maligned for “doing the right thing” as a Christian? Unbelievers may accuse you of having a “holier than thou” attitude. They may try to find fault with you, or falsely speak evil of you. 1 John 3:13 says, “Don’t be surprised if the world hates you!” And in John 15:18 the Lord Jesus said, *“The world hated Me. It will hate you.”*

Being hated for following Jesus and doing what is right is not a pleasant experience, but it’s to be expected. And it’s a good sign when you are maligned for doing right! It’s evidence that you are more than just a secret believer. You are a committed Christian.

Back in my college years I worked a summer job in a factory. Talk about a rough crowd! As a Christian, I tried do a little witnessing, and from that point on I became the target for criticism and scorn by certain unbelievers.

It’s not easy to take, but the Lord will bless you for it. It’s a good sign when you are maligned for doing what is right!