

Prayer

Thank You God our Father for the many gifts you give us even though we do not always recognise them. Accept our thanks for all Your sustenance, each word of help, each surprise and encouragement, and each miracle of grace. May we hold on firmly to the truth of our faith and to the constancy of Your love, and may we praise You every day of our lives. Thank You, Lord God, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray for the countries of Eastern Europe, many of them emerging from decades of decline with much hope for the future. Pray for their leaders and the enlarging European Union.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the technologies which aid communication
- Pray about scientific work on the very edges of knowledge
- Pray for people who live on the streets within your country

Meditation

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The joy on the face of a mother with her child,
And the purity of love in a family committed to Christ.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The delight of those who have overcome their fears,
And the beautiful fruit of forgiveness and peace.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The joy of new birth through the waters of baptism,
And the glorious work of the Gospel, saving souls.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The real presence of Christ in the heart and soul
And the awesome difference He makes to real life.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The beauty and grace of true friendship in the church,
And the powerful message of God's love for His world.

Bible Study - 1 Peter 4:12-19

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which is coming to you, as if something unusual were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice in as much as you are taking part in Christ's sufferings, so that you will rejoice with great gladness when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ You are blessed if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, because the glory and the Spirit of God gives you relief. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or any sort of trouble maker. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed but give thanks to God because of that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for the judgment of the household of God to begin; and if it begins with us, what will be the end result for those who disobey the Gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

*'If the righteous are to be saved with difficulty,
what will happen to the ungodly and the sinners?'*

¹⁹ So those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to the Faithful Creator, and continue to do good.

Review

Peter concluded his sermon to converts in yesterday's magnificent passage of scripture, and now we pick up his concluding comments written to those who received this version of his sermon in a letter. The general theme of Peter's advice is the encouragement of the Christian community to stand firm and bear the sufferings which come its way. Jesus had predicted these sufferings, but more than that, Peter emphasised that it was by these sufferings that the world would be saved, and so when the church suffered, it joined in Christ's on-going redemptive suffering for the world, working with Christ for salvation!

In recent passages of this letter, some of which have been controversial, suffering has been a key theme. Peter was at pains to explain that the submission of slaves and servants to their masters might require them to accept considerable suffering (2:18f.), as could the submission of wives to husbands (3:1f.). Even the general good witness of godly people within a pagan world brought suffering (3:13f.) as with the efforts of ordinary Christians to live a life pleasing to God (4:1f.). Because of this general recurring theme of suffering, Peter seems to have felt it necessary to say some more about it and justify what he had said about suffering, and our passage today reads like an addendum to the sermon, explaining to the reader of the letter that suffering is a positive sign of the Kingdom of God at work in the world, and a sign of the effectiveness of the Gospel.

Peter calls on His readers not to be surprised at the talk of suffering as if it was 'unusual (4:12); rather, when viewed as the evidence of the work of God in the world and the presence of God's glory, it becomes a reason for great joy, even rejoicing (4:13,14), and in addition, when we suffer for the Gospel, we are given relief by the Holy Spirit (4:14). This is an amazing promise, the truth of which has been borne out by testimonies, and it can lift our hearts to know that God will bless our sufferings not just through personal sustenance and help, but by inspiring our faith that the sufferings we experience are not in vain, they are worthwhile because they are part of what God is doing in the world in order to bring about its salvation!

Peter draws a contrast between sufferings endured for doing what is wrong (4:15) and suffering for doing what is right (4:16), as he had done before (3:13f.). However, in doing this, he uses the term 'Christian', which is only found in three places in the New Testament (see also Acts 11:26 and Acts 26:28). We are used to using this word to describe someone who follows Jesus, so it does not strike us as surprising, but it's almost unique use here in the letter gives this passage a special sense of connection between the experiences of the early church and the experience of Christian people now.

Clearly, in the days of the church immediately after the ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, people expected Jesus to come again soon, and Jesus had told everyone that at that time there would be great suffering (see Matt 24, for example). However, as the decades went by, the sufferings of God's people continued but Jesus did not come again, and has still not yet come. We are therefore still living in the same era of the end times in which the early church expected Jesus' return, just as we do now. For this reason, the experience of the early church is very similar to ours today and so the advice of Peter is still as relevant to us as it was to them. 'It is time for the judgement of the household of God to begin' (4:17), and our sufferings for Christ will come before God Himself. What will our sufferings say about us and about our faith?

Going Deeper

Although this passage is relatively simple to explain, some of the phrases used within it are not straightforward, and they give us some interesting insight into the world of the early church and the background from which Peter wrote. We will now study the passage verse by verse to see what else it has to say to us.

Notes on the text and translation

V14 *'the glory and the Spirit of God ...'* This is a strange expression. Firstly, many translations have *'the Spirit of the glory and of God'*, but the Greek does not necessarily imply that the Spirit is attached to both the word *'glory'* and the word *'God'*. I prefer to believe that Peter refers here to the *'Shekinah'* glory. The verse is

complicated further by the fact that some ancient copies of the this text of Peter's letter suggest that the original may have been 'the glory and the power and the Spirit of God ...' I have kept to the traditional reading because the addition does not add to the meaning of the sentence.

- V14 'The Spirit of glory and of God gives you relief.' At the end of the sentence, most translations have 'The Spirit of glory and of God rests on you'. The Greek word used here means 'to give relief' or 'to refresh', and the idea given by the traditional translation is that although welcome, God's presence is rather passive. It is in fact very active, as conveyed in the translation '... gives you relief'.
- V16 'suffer as a Christian ...' Although we use the word Christian regularly, meaning one who follows Christ, these are only three places in the New Testament where the word Christian appears; here, in Acts 11:26 and Acts 26:28.
- V16 '... because of that name.' Most translations end '... because you bear this name', but it is much closer to the Greek to say 'because of that name', and it fits well with the pride Peter implies in being called a Christian.

Rejoicing in God's 'fiery ordeal' (4:12,13)

Peter calls on all Christians to expect a 'fiery ordeal', or at least not be surprised when we face such things. What does he mean by this? Some believe that Peter is talking specifically about the sufferings of God's people at the end times, because this was the general assumption of the people to whom he spoke, as we have just seen. However, there is one other scriptural theme which may explain the term, and arguably, it adds to our understanding of the end times.

The use of the imagery of fire in the Old Testament scriptures is one of judgement; Sodom and Gomorrah were 'judged by fire' (Gen 18:16f.). Fire was also used to signify purification; 'for He is like a refiner's fire' (Mal 3:2, see also Prov 27:21, Psalm 66:10, 1 Cor 3:13 etc.). Someone who was trained for baptism should know that the people of God from Old Testament times regarded fire as a sign of judgement in which God destroyed what was evil and purified what was righteous. The natural response of anyone to such an idea must surely be of caution, because each of us knows that before God, we are unworthy and relatively impure. However, Peter is not cautious; instead he is quite confident in the presence of a 'fiery ordeal' and begs his Christian audience to be the same. As far as Peter was concerned there could be no judgement more fiery than that endured for us by Christ on the Cross, and everyone who followed Jesus, and both sought and accepted baptism should know that they have faced judgement and come through it by the grace of Christ! In this case, says Peter, a Christian can rejoice, because having been baptised, there is no judgement that can separate us from God, indeed, we are united with Jesus in glory (4:13,14)!

Being insulted for Christ (4:14)

You will already have seen that verse 14 is a little complicated, but once we have a reasonable translation, it is a very powerful verse. Read simply, it tells us that we are blessed by the Lord if we are insulted because of the 'name of Christ'. It is not wise of us to seek to draw insults on ourselves or on the Lord, but our attitude towards such attacks should be positive, for when the enemy attacks our witness, then it is because we are doing what is right! The blessing promised in this passage is described in two ways. Firstly, the verse tells us that we are given relief by the Lord Himself, and we can depend on his relief. The word 'glory' is used in a particular way in this sentence (see notes above), and this suggests to us the 'Shekinah' glory of God. The word comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'presence', and is the Old Testament's concept of the presence of God with His people, most powerfully shown in the fire and a cloud which led God's people through the wilderness (Exodus 40:34f.) It is amazing to think that such a presence of Almighty God is available to guide and help us in the midst of what happens to us when people insult us for being Christians!

Secondly, the passage tells us that we will find relief through the 'Spirit of God'. Peter does not say what relief we will receive, but only that we will receive it. All too often we think of the Holy Spirit in terms of power and the exercise of great 'church-building' gifts such as prophecy and evangelism. We do not quickly think of the Spirit as the 'counsellor' who

comforts (as in John 14:26, and sometimes called the 'Advocate'), or the One who brings peace to the human heart (John 20:22). Peter knew the Holy Spirit of power from his experiences on the day of Pentecost, but he also knew the Holy Spirit of love and peace who came after Jesus was raised to help the disciples come to terms with what had happened. The Holy Spirit does far more in our lives than we imagine, and will do far more if we will let Him!

Suffering as a Christian (4:15,16)

The unique and new name of 'Christian' is used by Peter in verse 16, and it is this name which he says we should receive with honour. There is no shame, he says in being called a 'Christian'. Spelt out in this way, there is no excuse for us, a Christian is not someone who hides within society, but one who stands out. That is our call. It may be that some Christians need to hide for fear of their lives, and this passage of scripture is not intended to tell such people that they must expose themselves when in fear of death; as is the case in some Muslim countries even now. But the nature of Christianity is that it is public, and we practice our faith in the form of a religion which is open for all to come and see and criticise, and more hopefully, to find Christ, the Saviour of the World.

Naturally, Peter does not expect that any Christian should suffer punishment as a thief or a criminal, though what he says in verse 15 reminds us that sometimes, people in the church do go astray and need to be dealt with by the law of the land; an example of this is the subject of child abuse or adultery. In our own generation, we should be deeply concerned about why it is that the devil manages to subvert Christian people in these ways; as Peter says, it should not happen. Peter does use one word, however, which is unique in the New Testament, and is also not found anywhere else in our existing knowledge of Hellenistic Greek (the type of Greek in which the Bible is written). It is the word which means something like 'one who meddles in someone else's affairs' (it is a long word and so we can work this out from the way the word is made up). Translations have used 'trouble-maker', 'busy-body' and even 'revolutionary' and 'spy'! What is important for us to recognise is that Peter mentions here a serious sin within the church, the body of Christ; and it is perhaps best expressed as 'meddling in things which are not one's own business!' I leave you to think of examples of this, you will not find it hard! It is a pernicious evil which itself causes immense suffering amongst God's people, and needs to be rooted out.

The judgement of the household of God (4:17,18,19)

There are many references in scripture to the judgement of God falling firstly on the people of God (Mal. 3:1-5, Jer. 25:29, Ezek. 9:6, Isaiah 10:12, Zech. 13:7-9). It is assumed in the Old Testament that God will come to gather His people to Himself as a first and prior act of judgement when he comes to earth, and this is reflected in the New Testament, in Jesus' prophecies about the end times (see Matthew 24) and in John's appeal to the seven churches to face their sins prior to the coming of the Lord in the Revelation (Rev. 1-3).

Although Peter asks the question about what will be 'the result for those who disobey the Gospel of God' (4:17), he does not appear to be interested in the details of what will happen because the horror of it is enough. He goes on to quote Proverbs 11:31 'if the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more will the ungodly and the sinner'. As elsewhere, Peter quotes the text loosely and in a manner which illustrates his point. Peter does not appear to be as much concerned for the many hoards of people who have yet to hear the Gospel, but the fear he expresses here are for those who know what the Gospel is but have rejected it, and this is typical of the New Testament. In general, ignorance of the Gospel renders a person subject to the judgements of God's natural law, but rejection of the Lord renders a person to what Jesus calls the place of 'weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth' (see Matt 8:12, 13:42,22:13, 24:52, 25:30). We must remember, Peter knew these words from the mouth of the Master who said them!

Peter had made his point well enough, but summarised it for us at the end of the section; 'those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to the Faithful Creator, and continue to do good.' Incidentally, this is the only place in the New Testament where God is called the 'Creator'. There is not much we can conclude from this theologically, but it is nevertheless interesting!

Application

There is no way of avoiding the fact that however many times we may talk about it, and however many times the scriptures give us good explanations of suffering and why it is that Christians suffer for the sake of the Gospel, it remains one of the most difficult things to explain to people, at least in the modern world. In writing about this today from this passage, I have found myself struck by the number of times I have written commentary on passages of scripture recently which mention suffering; and in so doing, I have attempted to write according to the text and to explain the scripture before me. Yet I feel sometimes as if I am repetitive! The point I would like to make is that if people read the Bible regularly for themselves, then they would find that almost all of it reflects real human experience and it deals with human suffering frequently and directly. Ultimately, it describes human suffering as redemptive, and through Christ, our suffering is part of the work of God to save the whole world!

Many people leave the church because they find that they cannot cope with some suffering they experience, and continue to maintain faith. However, I cannot help but wonder if those people had been truly familiar with the Bible and read its many powerful stories about suffering, and been led to understand the deeper truths of the Gospel which are found through suffering, then they might have been enabled to cope with the suffering they experienced rather than respond by rejecting God. I cannot suggest that this would suffice for all, because human nature is complex. But scripture itself says far more about this than people who have not read it will ever understand.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. We all endure suffering, but does the word 'fiery ordeal' bring particular things to your mind? Share these in your group.
2. Unfortunately, there are some who are Christians who continue to do things which are wrong even within society. Can you think of examples of this?
3. Does this passage of scripture make you feel secure or insecure in your faith? Discuss the reasons why.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Although this passage is about suffering, there is much more. I am greatly blessed by the assurance given in verse 14 that the glory of God and His Holy Spirit are there to give me relief when I face suffering or persecution because of my faith. It is a great blessing and a great hope, and something God's people should share.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Do you see judgement coming on the world or on God's people today? If so, talk about it to other people, perhaps those in your house-group, and see whether they share your feelings about what is happening in the world today.*
- *In what ways do people suffer for their faith in your own society. Make a list, and use this for prayer in the coming days.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; You suffered on the Cross for us and overcame all the powers of evil! May we have such faith in You that evil cannot find a foothold in us, and we learn how to repel the attacks of evil we experience. May we grow in confidence in You, and give You glory through everything that happens to us; AMEN