

TESTING AND TRUSTING

1 Peter 4: 12-19

Peter probably starts a new section of his letter in verse 12 of our reading:

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12 NIV)

Clearly Christians in Asia Minor were suffering persecution and Peter is telling them not to be surprised at this as if it were something strange. Jesus taught that persecution was normal for Christians believers and to be expected. Mathew 10 verse 22 says:

“All men will hate you because of me,” (Matthew 10:22 NIV) and Mark in chapter 13 and verse 13 says the same thing. Luke goes even further in chapter 6 and verse 22 of his gospel:

“Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.” (Luke 6:22 NIV)

and repeats this thought in chapter 21 and verse 17:

“All men will hate you because of me.” (Luke 21:17 NIV)

John says much the same thing in chapter 3 and verse 13 of his first epistle:

“Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.” (1 John 3:13 NIV)

Peter is saying don't think of persecution as foreign to you as Christians, don't think it's something that shouldn't happen. Christ said that they had persecuted him and ordinary Christians would suffer the same fate. In chapter 24 and verse 9 of Matthew's gospel we read:

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” (Matthew 24:9 NIV).

So Christians are not to think of persecution as something strange which should not happen to them because Christ himself was

persecuted and in our persecution we find identity with Christ – we share with him. In some way sharing in Christ’s suffering enables us to share in his glory. We see this in verse 13 of our reading today: “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:13 NIV)

Paul expresses this idea more directly in Romans chapter 8 and verse 17:

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” (Romans 8:17 NIV)

This idea of sharing in Christ’s suffering in order that we might share in his glory enables us to rejoice in suffering for our faith. Matthew expresses this in chapter 5 and verses 11 and 12 of his gospel:

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12 NIV)

Luke also expresses this idea in chapter 6 and verses 22 and 23 of his gospel:

“Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.” (Luke 6:22-23 NIV)

We see similar sentiments in verse 14 of our reading:

“If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” (1 Peter 4:14 NIV)

This is very much the same as the concepts expressed by Matthew and Luke. The persecution which they undergo is a sign of their blessing. It’s not completely clear from the text whether the blessing begins now or whether it’s solely a heavenly blessing. I think the text does imply a blessing now as well as in the age to come, but clearly it’s the heavenly blessing which is really important and the text leaves no doubt that we will receive that. Note that the blessing results from

being insulted in the name of Christ, so if you're persecuted because of crime or wrongdoing, you are not promised a blessing and indeed are unlikely to receive it! We're blessed only when we suffer because of our Christian faith.

Peter takes up this caveat in verses 15 and 16 of our reading: "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (1 Peter 4:15-16 NIV)

Of course, Christians living in totalitarian regimes, might well be accused of a crime as a 'cover up' for the fact that the real reason for them being persecuted is their Christian faith. But God our Father will see straight through such injustice and will ensure that these Christians receive their reward in full! Peter states two specific kinds of criminal that cannot call suffering for their actions persecution for their Christian faith – if indeed they have a true faith. He then widens the scope of those who are persecuted for their crimes to the summary term 'criminals'. Lastly, Peter adds another rather puzzling category 'a meddler'. It's an unusual word in the original Greek, appearing here for the first time. Perhaps it's a term coined by Peter himself. The meanings generally ascribed to the Greek words used are "one who has an eye on others' possessions," "the unfaithful guardian of goods committed to him," "one who meddles in things that do not concern him," and an "informer." The Christian writers who later use this term (probably picking it up from 1 Peter) appear to prefer the third of these meanings, "one who interferes in someone else's business." That also seems the most likely meaning considering the roots from which the word is formed. Thus it is probable that Peter is concerned that Christians in their rejection of idolatry and pagan morality or their zeal for the gospel not put their noses (or worse) into situations in which they ought not to be involved and thus justly earn the censure of pagans for transgressing culturally approved limits. Gentle persuasion is one thing; denouncing idolatry in a temple courtyard is another, as might also be interfering in the affairs of

another family, however well meaning such interference might be. No Christian should disgrace Christ by being guilty of such things.

On the other hand no believer should be ashamed of being charged with being a Christian. Indeed the very word Christian was coined by Gentiles, probably as a term of abuse for those committed to a person called Christ. By AD 50 believers in Christ were called Christians and were certainly being persecuted by Caesar Nero for being Christians by AD 64. Peter is saying in verse 16 that ‘Christians should not be ashamed of being called Christians, but can hold their heads high, because as believers in and followers of God’s son they bring honour to the Father. Believers glorify God simply by bearing the name Christian and living a life that Christ would have approved.

Let’s move on to look at verses 17 and 18:

“For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"” (1 Peter 4:17-18 NIV)

As we’ve seen, suffering has a good purpose in identifying us with Christ and bringing honour to the Father. But, there are further reasons why suffering is happening. Peter says it is time for the judgement to begin with the family of God. This judgement is the final judgement on the last day. According to the OT prophets this judgement will begin with God’s people at the sanctuary – the Jerusalem Temple. In chapter 11 and verses 31 and 32 of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that this judgement is to purify the church:

“But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.” (1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NIV).

Yet, I don’t believe that Christians, those who have accepted Christ’s sacrificial death and Lordship with a true saving faith, need fear this

judgement as regards their place in the Kingdom of God, because we are forgiven through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Indeed the word used here for judgement *krima* can mean both judgement which results in punishment and also judgement which can result in approval. Nevertheless, I believe that the sins we commit in this life can result in our losing our rewards in heaven. In chapter 17 and verse 10 of Jeremiah, the prophet Jeremiah says:

"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." (Jeremiah 17:10 NIV)

and in chapter 16 and verse 27 of Matthew's gospel we read:

"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:27 NIV)

If Christians are judged and are only saved by the Blood of Christ and will be judged so that their rewards in heaven may be lost; how difficult it will be for unbelievers. As chapter 10 and verse 31 of the book of Hebrews says:

"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:31 NIV)

Let's move on again to look at the final verse of our reading, verse 19: "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit [entrust] themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4:19 NIV)

So, how should the Christian live, how should we live, in the light of the above? Concluding the whole section 4:12–19 ("so then"), Peter says simply: "those suffering according to the will of God should by doing good entrust themselves to a faithful Creator." "Those suffering according to the will of God" are clearly the Christians who are suffering because they are Christians, not because they have committed a crime.

The persecution of Christians does not mean that the world is out of control, but that God is working out His plan in our lives. It means

simply doing those things which God views as good, for example spreading the gospel message and following God's righteous laws. Doing good despite the consequences is how one lives out the entrusting of oneself to God.

We are to commit ourselves to God, for he is "a faithful Creator." The idea of God's faithfulness is found not only in the OT, but also in many places in the NT, for example in chapter 10 and verse 23 of the book of Hebrews:

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23 NIV)

That God is faithful indicates that he has not changed nor will change and can therefore be trusted. This is the God in whom we are to rest, although physically threatened, for as Peter said:

"Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68 NIV)

Our God has promised us the forgiveness of our sins which enables us to enter into eternal life with Him. In spite of this promise of forgiveness, let us live our lives according to Christian values. Let us give God honour and glory and let us be faithful to Him, because He has promised that he will be faithful to us.