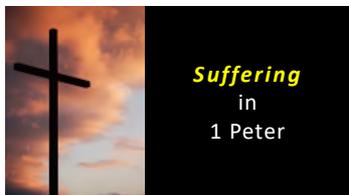


Suffering 1 Peter **2: 18-25** & **3: 8-22**
 St George's, Battery Point, 21 August, 2022
 Noel Bowditch

- Opening Prayer



In Victor's absence this morning,
 he's asked me to continue your current preaching series
 on *The First Letter of Peter*,
 focussing today on the theme of **suffering**.

In our context we most readily associate suffering with things like

- the pain in our bodies brought about through disease or injury, or
- the traumas we've been through which have left their scars on our minds.

Not for a moment do I want to minimise the pain of such experiences, but this sort of suffering was not really what Peter had in mind when he wrote what we today call *The First Letter of Peter*. He was writing to people who were already beginning to experience active persecution because of their Christian faith – and suffering for those who were followers of Jesus was about to get a whole lot more serious. Peter, located in Rome at the time of writing, could see the direction the Empire was heading under Emperor Nero's leadership.

1 Peter 2

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. (vv13-14)

Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor. (v17)

But the fact that we find words in *1 Peter* calling on believers to submit to and honour the emperor is evidence that at the time of writing Nero had not yet unleashed his full fury on the Christians in

Rome, suggesting that the letter is probably written around 62 or 63AD.

The NT doesn't tell us how Peter died, but there is early Christian evidence that he (along with Paul) was martyred in Rome towards the end of the reign of the emperor Nero – who beginning in the year 64AD began a four-year period of actively persecuting Christians, blaming them for the great fire of Rome.

The reality was that Nero himself had started the fire and was looking for a scapegoat to turn attention away from himself. And in his mind, who better to pick on than the Christians! The Roman historian Tacitus records graphic detail of the extremely brutal manner in which many Christians in Rome were put to death during Nero's reign.

The possibility of being actively discriminated against, attacked or killed for no other reason than the fact that a person professes to be a Christian is still very real in the world today.

The Current Situation

1 in 7 Christians being persecuted
360 million people

Examples:

- denied access access to jobs, medical care or education
- attacked, arrested, or put to death

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Christian organisations like *Barnabas Fund* or *Open Doors International* are reliable sources of information. What they tell us is that currently:

- **1 in 7 Christians worldwide** are being persecuted for being followers Jesus. That's about 360 million people who are denied access to jobs, medical care or education, or who are being arrested, attacked or even killed for following Jesus.

Before launching into the text of 1 Peter, I think it's helpful to remember a few things about Peter:

- This is the Galilean fisherman who some 30 years earlier had responded to the call of Jesus to leave his nets and follow him;

- Peter who'd been with Jesus constantly in his 3 years of public ministry but in the end denied Jesus 3 times.
- While there's no evidence of him witnessing the crucifixion, his close friend John would no doubt have spoken to him in some detail about the closing hours of Jesus' earthly life.
- Peter had seen empty tomb, met the risen Jesus & experienced the power of the Holy Spirit's to overcome his fear and empower him for ministry.
- In the book Acts we see that he knew the reality of suffering for his faith, having on multiple occasions to deal with fierce opposition, even spending nights in prison.

So Peter writes as one who knew the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus and powerfully experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit to overcome his fears and empower him for ministry. And Peter writes as someone who had already been persecuted as a follower of Jesus.

He begins this letter by reminding the Christians he was writing to of the blessings that were theirs in Christ and immediately after this we read in 1. 6-7:

1 Peter 1: 6-7

In all this you greatly rejoice,
though now for a little while
you may have had to **suffer grief in all kinds of trials.**
These have come
so that the proven genuineness of your faith
– of greater worth than gold,
which perishes even though refined by fire
– may result in praise, glory and honour
when Jesus Christ is revealed.

*In all this you greatly rejoice,
though now for a little while
you may have had to **suffer grief in all kinds of trials.**
These have come so that the proven genuineness of
your faith – of greater worth than gold,
which perishes even though refined by fire
– may result in praise, glory and honour
when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

So, the first thing we learn about suffering in 1 Peter is that **it tests the genuineness of our faith.** That I would suggest is true whether the test comes

by way of way of being persecuted for our faith or having to deal with the pains of mind and body that are part of living in this fallen world in which we are like ‘foreigners and exiles’. It’s when life gets tough that we see whether or not our faith is real. For the Christian, their deepest sense of belonging comes not from family or nation, but being known by God.

If tomorrow our personal world is shattered, we can still find hope and comfort in knowing the certainty of God’s love for us.

Paul writes in Romans 8. 38-39:

Romans 8: 38-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons,
neither the present nor the future,
nor any powers, neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us
from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons,
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Or in the words of the quote that I once saw:

- I don’t know what the future may hold, but I know who holds the future.

The first part of today’s reading was specifically addressed to those who were slaves. In time Christians would lead the movement for the abolition of slavery, but not in the first century when it was so deeply entrenched in the Roman Empire – with an estimated 30% of the population living as slaves. So with no realistic possibility of slavery being abolished, Peter encourages them to live within the limitations of their situation, submitting themselves to their masters – even if that meant them suffering unjustly. And he sets before them the example of Jesus:

1 Peter 2: 21-23

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example,
that you should follow in his steps.
'He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'
When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate;
when he suffered, he made no threats.
Instead, **he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.**

*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example,
that you should follow in his steps.*

***'He committed no sin,**
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'*

*When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate;
when he suffered, he made no threats.*

Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

This is not to say that if we have been falsely accused of something, we should not try to defend ourselves – but sometimes no matter what we do, people can be so determined to achieve their unjust goals that they are willing to make innocent people suffer. If you've ever been in such a situation, you will know what I mean. Christians, and particularly Christian leaders, seem to be one of the favourite targets.

One of the things that stands out to me as I read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering and death is the number of times people witnessed to his innocence:

- Judas, His betrayer, was later filled with remorse for his actions and tried to return the 30 pieces of silver:

I have sinned, 'or I have betrayed innocent blood.'

- Pontius Pilate's wife tried to warn her husband

*Don't have anything to do with that innocent man,
for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.*

- Pontius Pilate himself, immediately before sentencing Jesus to death said the chief priests:

*You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion.
I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your
charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us;
as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.*

- The penitent thief crucified beside Jesus said to the other thief:

We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.

But this man has done nothing wrong.'

If we're suffering unjustly, we do well to remember that so too did Jesus before us!

Back in 1:11 Peter had written of how the sufferings of Christ had been foretold by the OT prophets, and now he shows an example of this in echoing the words of the OT prophet Isaiah:

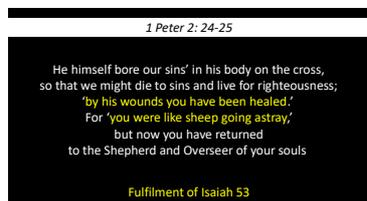
He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate;

when he suffered, he made no threats.

Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

In the sacrificial death of Jesus, we see that God can take unjust suffering and use it for his sovereign and redemptive purposes. Continuing to show how what Isaiah had foretold was now fulfilled in Jesus, Peter writes (2. 24-25):



*He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross,
so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness;*

'by his wounds you have been healed.'

For 'you were like sheep going astray,'

but now you have returned

to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

What Peter is highlighting here is that Jesus was the Suffering Servant foretold by the prophet Isaiah. The salvation in which Christians rejoice is based on the fact that Jesus suffered and died for us. In response, he now calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

Just as Jesus' suffering is central to our salvation, so too it is to be the model for our living as his followers in the world. The theme of righteous living in the face

of unjust suffering is picked up again in chapter 3 – the second part of our reading today. Jesus is held before us as the model of what being righteous looks like in practice:

1 Peter 3:9

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.
On the contrary, repay evil with blessing,
because to this you were called
so that you may inherit a blessing.

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After citing Psalm 34 with its promise that:

... the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,

in 3:13 Peter continues:

1 Peter 3: 13-14

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?
But even **if you should suffer for what is right,**
you are blessed.
'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.'

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even **if you should suffer for what is right,** you are blessed.*

'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.'

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus had taught:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Here, some 30+ years on, we see the application of this principle to the lives of Jesus' followers.

In the face of unjust suffering, opposition and persecution those who profess to be followers of Jesus are called to be faithful witness to him – both by:

- following his example &
- speaking of the hope that they have in him.

Peter writes:

1 Peter 3: 15-16

In your hearts revere Christ as Lord.
Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you
to give the reason for the hope that you have.
But do this with gentleness and respect,
keeping a clear conscience,
so that those who speak maliciously against your good
behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

In your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Peter then encourages perseverance in the face of persecution, with another reminder of what Jesus has done for us in his death & resurrection:

1 Peter 3: 17-18

For it is better, if it is God's will,
to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.
For Christ also suffered once for sins,
the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.
He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

For it is better, if it is God's will,

to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered once for sins,

the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

Peter picks up the theme of suffering as a Christian again in the next chapter –

1 Peter 4: 13-16: (slides will be read)

1 Peter 4: 12-13

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

1 Peter 4: 14-16

If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 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.

The suffering of being persecuted as a follower of Jesus may seem quite distant to us – but it is a very real for many of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

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In Australia I personally know of:

- One man who did not have his employment contract renewed because on the basis of his Christian faith he took a stand on something in his workplace.
- Another person here in Hobart who has come to Christ from a Muslim background. If she were she to disclose that fact she would probably be disowned by her own family and face very real danger if she returned to her home country.

Summary/Application

With the tide of public opinion turning against Christianity in the western world, it seems highly probable that we will see more active discrimination against Christians in the not-too-distant future – and while it may be comparatively easy to profess that we are Christians at the moment, that may not always be the case.

The message of 1 Peter is to:

- Remember who Jesus is and what he had done for us.
- Don't be surprised if suffering comes our way – if it happened to Jesus, it may well happen to us.
- Hold fast to the hope that we have in Christ – no matter what the cost.
- Bear faithful witness to Jesus – both by following his example and being prepared to testify to the hope that we have in him.

Display Slide for Reflection

