

Suffering Well (1 Peter 4:1-11)

Expository Lessons from the First Letter of Peter

I. Suffering: A Theme that Runs Throughout First Peter

a. Read 1 Peter 4:1-6.

- i. “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...” (1 Peter 4:1, NKJV)

b. The word ‘suffer’ in its various forms (including *suffers*, *suffered*, *suffering*, etc.) occurs about 16 times in 1 Peter, in the NKJV. (That number may vary slightly depending on the translation.)

- i. Plus, the idea of suffering (being grieved by trials, being rejected, etc.) occurs throughout the book as well.

ii. From chapter 1:

1. “[*regarding the prophets*]...the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.” (1 Peter 1:11, NKJV)

iii. From chapter 2:

1. “[*addressing servants*] For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.” (1 Peter 2:19, NKJV)
2. “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (1 Peter 2:21-23, NKJV)

iv. From chapter 3:

1. “And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.” (1 Peter 3:13-14, NKJV)

2. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,” (**1 Peter 3:18**, NKJV)
 - v. Now in chapter 4, we see this word 5-6 times.
- c. We focus on expository teaching and preaching for many reasons. One is with the old adage in mind, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”
 - i. May we all become *better and better readers* of the Scriptures (not only reading more frequently, but also mining out the meaning and significance of the text more accurately).
 - ii. In approaching any book of the Bible, it is always good to consider some important questions to ask of the text.
 1. Excellent questions for a reader to ask include:
 - a. What is the *over-arching theme* of the letter or book?
 - b. *How* does the author support the main point he is making?
 - c. *Who is the primary intended audience*, and why did the author write the letter or book?
 - d. What are *key words or phrases* in the book?
 2. Based on what we have looked at thus far in **1 Peter**, we can already see that in this letter:
 - a. The main theme (and key word): suffering.
 - i. Peter addresses why Christians should expect to suffer, and how they should approach suffering when they face it.
 - b. Peter is addressing people who are already Christians, most of whom have come from Gentile backgrounds.
 - i. “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.” (**1 Peter 4:3**, NKJV)
 - c. Peter makes all of his main points by:
 - i. Pointing to the example of Jesus’ life

1. Jesus suffered and then entered his glory
2. He did not revile or complain when suffering
3. He was rejected by men

ii. Using the Old Testament

1. Peter backs up essentially every point he makes by citing some principle from the Old Testament.
2. He draws broadly from a wide range of books.
3. He also uses 'Western' style prophecies like **Isaiah 53**. "Who committed no sin nor was deceit found in His mouth".
4. Peter also draws from 'Eastern' style, or allegorical style prophecies (examples: rocks; lamb without blemish; 'holy nation' description of Israel at Mt. Sinai).
5. He uses **Psalms** and **Proverbs** to back up the idea that we need to live righteous lives and be humble if we want God to hear us and answer our prayers.
6. Peter also uses examples of a heroine of faith to follow from the Old Testament, Sarah, who is an example for wives.

d. Why this subject of *Christians suffering* is so important for us today.

i. **Question:** Why would we want to focus on a book that addresses suffering so much? That sounds neither fun nor encouraging!

1. There are *some people* in this world (maybe 10%?) who voluntarily participate in activities that involve great suffering (for example, running in the Boston Marathon or other endurance sports).
2. However, the vast majority of people I know (maybe 90%) are repelled by the idea of suffering in any way, and do whatever they can to avoid pain and suffering!

- ii. Peter uses the language of warfare: “arm yourselves with the same mind”.
 - 1. Christians are called to be spiritual warriors, engaged in a spiritual war.
 - a. Christians from the beginning took Jesus’ teaching at face value. We do not participate in the military battles of the governments of this world.
 - b. However, we are not exactly “pacifists”, either. We are called to fight in a different war, against a different enemy, fighting with different weapons (than those who fight in the wars of this world).
 - 2. The armaments we need are spiritual: involving our hearts and minds.
 - 3. We need to have a mental attitude of toughness, that we are prepared to suffer in the flesh to be done with sin, so that sin (and Satan) will not master us.
 - 4. This involves suffering, saying no, forsaking pleasures of the flesh.
- iii. Many people have been sold a ‘false bill of goods’ by modern ‘Christian’ churches in the U.S. They are told that God loves them *so much* that He wants to bless them and to give them *a happy, comfortable life here on earth*.
- iv. Church leaders want to reach more people with the gospel in their communities, so they tend to:
 - 1. Copy the strategy of ‘successful’ institutions they see around them, in the world. In the case of U.S. culture, the dominant institutions are large corporate businesses.
 - a. Corporations use market research to find out what people today are seeking. Then they pitch the products they are selling to match the ‘felt needs’ uncovered through their marketing research.
 - b. Many modern churches take a similar marketing approach.
 - 2. **Question:** When they take a look at their prospective ‘customers’ in their communities, what do they find that the ‘unchurched’ people out there are seeking?

- a. People today are alienated and isolated, so they are seeking friends, community, love, and a sense of fulfillment.
- b. People want programs to help them with their health, exercise, finances, marriage and parenting, friends for their children, etc.
3. Also, churches will look around to see which churches around them are growing and will tend to copy whatever the most 'successful' models are that they find around them.
 - a. This is how you end up with mega-churches, program-oriented ministries, and all manner of 'prosperity gospel'.
4. The message of **1 Peter**, on suffering, is typically about *the last thing* that most people in the U.S. want to hear. After all, who wants to suffer?
 - a. The only logical reason anyone would want to suffer is to do so for a limited time, to achieve something greater than what you are giving up!
 - b. Christians are not masochists. We are looking for *something much better* than anything we are giving up!
5. Let us not forget that in *about half of the world* (think of China, India, and countries with large Muslim populations like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia) your life is likely to become *worse* if you convert to the Christian faith, due to persecution.
 - a. For the first 300 years of the Christian faith, there was more persecution in the West (Roman Empire) than in the East (Parthian empire and further east). Then after Constantine that switched, with Christians in the East facing greater persecution.
 - b. Similarly, the area formerly controlled by the Soviet Union was largely Christian in the year 1900. However, things changed rapidly and radically in the aftermath of the Communist Revolution (1917). After that, the Christian faith was heavily suppressed for many decades, until the fall of the USSR communist system in 1991. Today Russia is friendly to the Christian faith once again.

- c. We see from history that things can change rapidly, going from persecution to toleration of the Christian faith (or vice versa).
- d. **Open Question:** With recent changes in the U.S., could we face a time in the near future where Bible-believing Christians are persecuted here as well?
 - i. If persecution does come here, that likely would bring about a swift end to the 'prosperity gospel' here, in all its variant forms.
 - ii. That might make **1 Peter** a *much more relevant* part of the Bible for many American Christians!
- e. Peter says we need to follow the example of Jesus and be willing to suffer in several ways, including:
 - i. Being rejected by people
 - ii. Suffering by submitting to those with authority over us, even if they are unjust (subjects to the king, servants to masters, wives to husbands; and later, younger people to elders in the church).
 - 1. Being righteous in the face of challenges; and
 - 2. Not retaliating, reviling nor complaining, even when we are badly treated.
 - iii. Now, Peter adds to that, saying we must suffer in the flesh by denying the immoral pleasures of the flesh that all the Gentiles go after (and that many of the Christians in their past had been involved in).
 - 1. Peter starts by mentioning sexual immorality.
 - a. "lusts of the flesh...lewdness, lusts"
 - b. Today internet pornography is a clear and present danger to Christians; especially since it is so pervasive and easily accessible.
 - i. This is something that scares me, like a poisonous snake or high-voltage electricity. This enslaving sin presents a great danger today, especially to men.
 - ii. The recent Covid pandemic, where people are more isolated and online more, has made it even worse than during 'normal' times.

- iii. **Challenge:** *How have you been doing* in this area of personal righteousness?
 - 2. Then he adds “drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties”
 - a. Alcohol and drug abuse, getting high, slipping back into old sins.
 - b. During the Covid-related lockdowns, more people are tempted to go back to the old patterns of excessive use of alcohol or other enslaving drugs.
- iv. Peter adds that those in the world think it strange that they no longer participate in these things.
 - 1. However, they will have to give an account “to Him who is *ready to judge the living and the dead*”!
- v. Question: When Peter says that this is the gospel that was preached to “*those who are dead*”, who and what is he referring to? Here are four possibilities regarding what Peter might have had in view here:
 - 1. Those who had died (physical death) since the time of Pentecost (when the gospel message was first preached by the apostles); OR
 - 2. Those who died (physical death) before Christ, possibly referring also to when Jesus “preached to the spirits in prison” when He descended to Hades (**1 Peter 3:19-20**); OR
 - 3. Referring to those who are spiritually (figuratively) dead, for example:
 - a. “But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’” (**Matthew 8:22**, NKJV)
 - i. Note that Jesus is using the same word “dead” in two different senses here: the first “dead” referring to those *spiritually* dead, and the second “dead” referring to those *physically* dead (whose bodies needed to be buried).
 - b. “For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (**Romans 11:15**, NKJV)
 - c. “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins...” (**Ephesians 2:1**, NKJV); OR

4. Possibly this statement may (figuratively) refer to those who had voluntarily *died to sin*.
 - a. “This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him.” (**2 Timothy 2:11**, NKJV)
 - b. “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him,” (**Romans 6:4-8**, NKJV)

II. Be Watchful in Prayer, Loving and Serving Others

- a. Read **1 Peter 4:7-11**.
- b. Peter calls those who are living the Christian life to devote themselves to *four things*:
 - i. Be serious and watchful in prayer.
 - ii. Have a fervent love for one another.
 - iii. Be hospitable to one another, without grumbling.
 - iv. Use whatever gifts you have been given to minister to one another, as good stewards of what God has given us.
- c. “Be serious and watchful in prayer.”
 - i. **Question:** What does Peter mean by calling us to be “watchful”?
 1. We can learn more about “watching” by reviewing other places in the Scripture where the word is mentioned in connection with prayer.
 - ii. Read **Psalm 5:1-4**.
 1. David discusses his own prayer life.
 2. He will stand before the Lord praying and says, “...and I will *watch*”.
 - iii. Read **Matthew 24:36-44**.

1. Jesus speaks of His return, and calls His disciples to “watch” and be prepared for His return at any time.
- iv. Read **Matthew 25:13**, the warning at the end of the Parable of Ten Virgins.
 1. The take-away Jesus gives: “Watch!” We must be vigilant and prepared for His return.
- v. Read **Matthew 26:36-41**, in the Garden of Gethsemane.
 1. Jesus says, “Watch and pray, lest you fall into temptation.”
- vi. Read **Mark 13:32-37**.
 1. Jesus concludes, “And what I say to you, *I say to all: Watch!*” (**Mark 13:37**, NKJV)
 2. Jesus issues this challenge *to all who would follow Him*.
- vii. Read **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**.
 1. Here Paul is addressing the same subject (being diligent, prepared for the return of Jesus, which can happen at any time).
 2. Let us not sleep (do not be lazy or complacent); rather, we must watch and be sober.
 3. We are in a spiritual war and need to employ spiritual weapons.
- viii. Watching in prayer conveys to me the idea of:
 1. Anticipating Jesus’ return at any time.
 2. Staying very serious, focused; the opposite of being lazy.
 3. Having the attitude of a watchman who is guarding his city against enemy assault.
- d. Have a *fervent love for one another*; love covers over a multitude of sins.
 - i. “And above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’” (**1 Peter 4:8**, NKJV)
 1. Here Peter is quoting from **Proverbs 10:12** (designated **Proverbs 10:13** in the LXX)

- ii. “Above all” Peter considers this the most important thing, like Paul in **1 Corinthians 13**.
- iii. From one of the earliest Christian writers after the apostles, Clement of Rome, bishop of the church in Rome, writing c. 96 AD, we have the following moving explanation of the importance of love:
 1. “Let him who has love in Christ keep the commandments of Christ. Who can describe the [blessed] bond of the love of God? What man is able to tell the excellence of its beauty, as it ought to be told? The height to which love exalts is unspeakable. Love unites us to God. Love covers a multitude of sins. Love bears all things, is long-suffering in all things. (**James 5:20, 1 Peter 4:8**)
 2. “There is nothing base, nothing arrogant in love. Love admits of no schisms: love gives rise to no seditions: love does all things in harmony. By love have all the elect of God been made perfect; without love nothing is well-pleasing to God. In love has the Lord taken us to Himself. On account of the Love he bore us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls.
 3. “You see, beloved, how great and wonderful a thing is love, and that there is no declaring its perfection. Who is fit to be found in it, except such as God has vouchsafed to render so? Let us pray, therefore, and implore of His mercy, that we may live blameless in love, free from all human partialities for one above another.
 4. “All the generations from Adam even to this day have passed away; but those who, through the grace of God, have been made perfect in love, now possess a place among the godly, and shall be made manifest at the revelation of the kingdom of Christ.”
 - a. (Source: Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, chapters 49-50; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 18)
- iv. Love is the most important thing for Christians. God is love (**1 John 4:8**). Jesus’ new command was that we love one another as He loved us (**John 13:34-35**), demonstrated by laying down His life for us.
 1. A few years ago, while my wife and I were in the Middle East, we met some refugees who had converted to the Christian faith while they were still in Iran. We asked one of them how and

why he became Christians. He told us that among many Muslims, Jesus was known as “*the prophet of love*”, because he taught so much about love.

2. Our friend mentioned that although he had been brought up in the Muslim faith, he noticed that the Christians (a minority within an overwhelmingly Muslim population) were much kinder, more loving and more honest than the rest of the people he knew. That drew him to explore the Christian faith, and over time he decided to become a Christian.
- e. Offer hospitality without grumbling.
- i. Thankfully, I believe we have many in our fellowship, especially among the sisters, who excel in showing warm hospitality toward others.
 - ii. From another New Testament passage that speaks about offering hospitality:
 1. “Let brotherly love continue. *Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.*” (**Hebrews 13:1-3**, NKJV)
 2. The Hebrews writer calls the Christians to show love and kindness even toward strangers. He says that in doing so, some had “entertained angels” unaware.
 3. Perhaps the writer was referring to, among other examples, the story of Abraham and Sarah providing a meal to two angels (who appeared in the form of humans) in **Genesis 18**; as also Lot did, in **Genesis 19**.
 - iii. Note that Peter calls us not only to offer hospitality, but *specifically to do so without grumbling*.
 1. Many of us may not recognize grumbling (also referred to as murmuring or complaining) as a serious sin. However, as Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, this was one of the four sins that kept the Israelites out of the Promised Land (and can keep us out of heaven).
 - a. The other three sins mentioned, along with grumbling/murmuring/complaining, were sexual immorality, idolatry, and testing/tempting the Lord.

2. We need not only to do what is good, but also to control our hearts and tongues while doing so (and not complain about it)!
3. For many of us, one of the hardest challenges in the New Testament to follow may be:
 - a. “*Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.*” (**Philippians 2:14–16**, NKJV)
 - b. **Challenge:** Go through the next full day without ANY complaining about anything. Then, if you are successful, continue through another day, and see how long you can keep that victorious streak going.
 - c. Based on what Paul said in **Philippians 2**, he was concerned that if the Christians just became a bunch of complainers, all his efforts to share the gospel with them to save them would have been *in vain*!
 - i. Take the sin of complaining as seriously as the Bible does, and root it out of your life if you tend to be a complainer.
 - ii. Since this sin may be so second-nature to many of us, we can be blind to it and not realize how often we are engaged in it.
 - iii. **Suggestion:** Ask your Christian spouse or roommate to point it out to you respectfully, *whenever* they see you falling into complaining. Let us work together to *uproot this sin* from our lives and from the church!
 - f. Use whatever gifts we have been given to minister to others.
 - i. First, take inventory of what God has given you (homes, family, material possessions, wealth, understanding, wisdom, ability to teach, etc.)
 - ii. See what you have been given as a gift entrusted to us by God. We are merely stewards of those gifts, who need to use them to please the One who gave them to us. He wants us to use them to help others and to advance His kingdom.

1. There is never an occasion to compare ourselves against others on the basis of whatever gifts we have (or have not) been given. That could naturally lead to arrogance on the one hand, or envy or resentment on the other.