



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for November 15, 2009**  
**Released on Wednesday, November 11, 2009**

**“A Suffering People”**

**Lesson Text:** 1 Peter 4:12-19

**Background Scripture:** 1 Peter 4:1-19

**Devotional Reading:** 1 Corinthians 12:20–26

**1 Peter 4:12–19**

12 Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

13 But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

14 If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.

15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters.

16 Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

17 For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?

18 And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?

19 Wherefore, let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.

**LESSON AIM**

**Facts:** to show that to be a part of the covenant community, Christians must be prepared to suffer.

**Principle:** to explain that suffering is an active part of the Christian life.

**Application:** to demonstrate that when we invite Jesus into our lives, we also accept the call to suffer with Him.

**INTRODUCTION**

As hard as we may try, we cannot escape from suffering. Physical, mental, and emotional distress are by-products of sin. The wealthy and powerful can sometimes insulate themselves from suffering for a time, but even their efforts will not be completely successful.

Sin not only causes man to suffer; it also causes many people to desire inflicting suffering on others, especially on those whose lives and witness convict them of their sin.

So why is the church and the Christian faith being belittled for wanting to be good moral people who seek to follow Jesus? First, we should understand that this is

nothing new. From its earliest days, the church in Jerusalem was opposed by the Jewish authorities (Acts 7:54–60; 12:1–3; etc.). Jesus told His disciples to expect this treatment (see Luke 6:22; 12:11, 12).

Second, we should understand that these persecutions are directed primarily at our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 22:7, 8). Jesus knew that the world would hate Him and His message (see John 7:7; 15:18, 19), for He cut away religious hypocrisy and self-righteousness. It should not surprise us, then, if this hate is now directed toward Jesus' followers, His disciples in the current day (see 1 John 3:13). As we understand how this persecution affected those in the first century, we will be better prepared to understand our own situation.

Scripture does not say we are to seek out suffering or enjoy it somehow for its own sake, but it does open some unexpected vistas on the subject. For example, the Apostle Paul spoke of seeking to experience "the fellowship of [Christ's] sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). One of the most valuable functions of suffering is that it keeps us from feeling too at home with this world and its ways. It points us to God for relief with the promise of hope that we will one day be free from suffering and rejoice in His presence for all eternity. Our present burdens grow lighter as we fix our minds on this.

### **LESSON BACKGROUND**

Time: A.D. 63

Place: from "Babylon" (most likely Rome)

At the beginning, Christianity was viewed as a sect of the Jewish faith (see Acts 24:5). Almost all the earliest Christians came out of Judaism. As Paul and others began to preach the gospel to Gentiles, the church faced its first great hurdle: the circumcision controversy.

Some proposed that Gentile men had to submit to circumcision in order to be considered Christians (Acts 15:1). What this really meant was that only Jews could become Christians, since being circumcised indicated conversion to Judaism. In a historic move, the Jerusalem Council affirmed that circumcision would not be required of Gentiles (Acts 15). The Christian faith was open to all.

However, the fallout from this (among other things) was that Christianity ceased to be viewed as a subset of Judaism; Christianity therefore lost certain protections under Roman law. The Romans were somewhat inclusive in their religions, absorbing aspects of the religious traditions from the peoples they conquered. Judaism, although not conforming to official Roman religion, was afforded a degree of protection due to its great antiquity and moral values. Jews were allowed to become full Roman citizens. When it became apparent that the church put forth a faith different from that found in the synagogue and was heavily populated by non-Jews, this protection no longer applied to Christians.

This opened the door for official persecution of Christians in Rome during the latter days of Nero's reign, in the mid- to late-60s A.D. The Roman historian Tacitus records that Nero used the Christians of Rome as a scapegoat for the great fire that consumed much of the city in A.D. 64. There is no direct explanation for this horrible choice, except that those Christians were largely poor, powerless, and despised. So Nero picked a group that was already unpopular and had no ability to defend itself.

These persecutions included arrest and various types of inhumane torture and execution. This is the probable backdrop for Peter's two letters. As we read this week's lesson, we should remember that the Church of Rome was either in the midst of these horrors, or the horrors were recent and fresh in the community's memory.

### **THE RIGHT ATTITUDE (SEEING GOD) IN SUFFERING (1 Peter 4:12-13)**

### **1. Why did Peter not want the believers to think what they were going through was surprising? (1 Peter 4:12)**

Christians were facing persecution in Peter's day. Helping the believers deal with it was one of his chief aims in this epistle (letter). One way he did this was to more fully explain the existence and role of suffering in the believer's life so that they would not think they were off course or in disfavor with God because of it. Satan would like nothing better than to throw us off stride so that we lose our confidence in our relationship with the Lord.

Peter made it clear that the suffering they were experiencing did not mean that God did not love them. Note that he addressed them as "beloved" (1 Peter 4:12). They were cherished members of God's family. Peter did not say this because he underestimated the hardships the people were facing. He referred to their sufferings as "fiery."

The surprise that comes from suffering can be quite harmful. We wonder how God can love us and allow such hurtful things to afflict us. We may begin to feel abandoned. Or we might also feel that we have done something wrong when we have not, or we might think that God is angry with us. Yet, Peter says "think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you."

Scripture makes it clear that there is a refining and cleansing function that trials can achieve (cf. James 1:2-4). Trials can help us stop looking to the world for satisfaction. Even more important, they can help us draw closer to Christ and come to know Him better (cf. Phil. 3:10-11).

### **2. How is it that believers can rejoice in sufferings? (v. 13)**

Taken only on the surface, Peter's exhortation here sounds almost crazy. Derive joy from pain? Peter is no masochist, though. It is not the suffering that he glories in, but the privilege of sharing with Christ (compare Acts 5:41). In this we see the great humility of the apostle. He is not puffed up by his legendary stature in the Christian community, but is willing to suffer alongside other believers. Peter points to a way of being more like Jesus: being a partaker in His *sufferings*.

It is the person who enjoys this deep fellowship with Jesus who will be overjoyed when He is *revealed*, when He returns. When Christ comes again, He will come with judgment. His followers will share in this judging (see Matthew 19:28; 1 Corinthians 6:2,3).

Peter wants his readers to know beyond any shadow of doubt that living for Christ will entail suffering in some form, for Christ himself "suffered for us in the flesh" (1 Peter 4:1). Yet, for those who truly, passionately love Jesus, joy will overshadow the pain. What is needed to experience this joy is a firm faith in what has been promised by God. The believer is not to judge ultimate reality by outward circumstances. As we walk in the light of what is invisible yet true (cf. 2 Cor. 4:18), we can experience a joy that will both baffle unbelievers and in some cases draw them to the truth.

The joy that the believer will one day know goes beyond what we can imagine (cf. Eph. 3:20). As Peter said, it will be an "exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:13). We will one day rule with Christ in a kingdom where all trace of sin has been wiped out, both in ourselves and in all our surroundings. No wonder Scripture says that one day "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev. 21:4). The promise is that "he that overcometh shall inherit all things" (v. 7).

### **3. How do you rejoice in times of trials and sufferings without appearing to be in denial about the reality of those trials and sufferings?**

If you are watching a recording of your team play a game and you already know they won, it is easier to make it through some of the times when it seems they are going to lose. It is the same thing for Christians. We know the end of the story by reading the book of Revelation. Christians win! It is assurance of this fact that helps us in this life.

Also, we do not face the trials on our own. God has given His Holy Spirit as comforter, encourager, and counselor. Christians also have the encouragement of fellow Christians, many of whom have endured the same trials we face. In facing trials Christians can continue "rejoicing in hope" and being "patient in tribulation" (Romans 12:12). Christians demonstrate this joy not by complaining about the trials, but by serving others through the trials.

## **THE RIGHT REASON FOR SUFFERING (1 Peter 4:14-16)**

### **4. What does it mean that the "spirit of glory" rested upon the believers? (v. 14)**

To be *reproached* is to be insulted deliberately. No one enjoys such abuse, but Peter sees a blessing in this: our suffering from persecution is a validation of our faith.

No enemy of Christ wastes time with false believers. Such an enemy, if he is perceptive, realizes that false disciples are supporting his cause, for they destroy the church from within. If we truly display the righteous characteristics of Christ in our lives, we will be offensive to the sinful world. Suffering inevitably will follow.

Peter reminds his readers that God is not absent when they suffer. There is a glorious presence of His *Spirit* despite the pain. To suffer for Christ is to share in His glory (see Romans 8:17, 18). We gain the hardened endurance necessary to be a true, lifelong disciple (Romans 5:3).

### **5. For what things should a believer not suffer? (v. 15)**

Even in an ungodly world, criminals deserve to suffer. If civilization is to endure, no one should be able to engage in evil without consequences.

Peter's list here is interesting. He begins with the grossest of evildoers, a *murderer*. He then moves to another despicable criminal, the *thief*. Both murder and thievery are capital offenses under certain circumstances in the first century. They are seen as evil by even the pagans of the day. Peter follows with the general term *evildoer*, which sums up most criminal behavior.

The *busybody in other men's matters* is the meddler. This is the one who sticks his or her nose into the business of others.

Peter, therefore, draws a clear distinction between the just suffering of the criminal and the unjust—yet glorious—suffering of the Christian. While Peter teaches that suffering for Jesus has an important role in God's plan for the church, suffering in general is a bad thing. We should not want to suffer. If we do suffer, it should be for no other reason than our stand for righteousness.

### **6. How do you normally react when a fellow believer suffers justly for wrong things he or she has committed? How should you react?**

Galatians 6:1 says that when someone is "overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness." This means that there is to be no gloating, I-told-you-so attitude. But at the same time we must help the one who has done wrong to realize that he or she still may have to suffer the consequences of wrong actions (making restitution, etc.). That is part of the restoring process. Also see James 5:19,20.

## **7. Why should a believer not feel ashamed in his suffering? (v. 16)**

Our suffering should be part of our witness for Christ. When we suffer for the wrong reasons, our testimony is compromised.

Part of the way that the world tries to squeeze us into its mold (cf. Rom. 12:2) is by twisting our sense of shame. It is appropriate to feel shame when we have sinned, thus violating the reason God has created us. True shame results from living foolishly, trusting in things that have no value. But if we suffer for Christ, Peter says, we have no cause to be ashamed. It is, in fact, dishonoring to God to feel shame when we stand with Him. The world may heap ridicule and oppression on us, but by faith we recognize that we have been greatly honored to bear the name "Christian." We should praise God for His gracious favor. Our goal should be to bear up under our suffering in a way that brings glory to Him.

Paul, who certainly suffered a great deal for serving Jesus, proudly announced "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" (Romans 1:16). Paul's life displayed fearless confidence that he was doing the right thing by giving his all to the service of Christ, no matter what the level of suffering (see Philippians 3:8).

## **THE INEVITABILITY OF SUFFERING (1 Peter 4:17-18)**

### **8. What does it mean that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (v. 17)?**

It is difficult to see past the pain when we are suffering. In this next section of verses, Peter asks the church not only to see beyond their sufferings, but also to use the occasion as an opportunity for self-examination.

Persecution is never fair or consistent, for some will suffer more than others. The judgment of God, however, is always fair, always perfect. Therefore, the church has not been granted immunity from God's judgment simply because it is being persecuted. As Peter paints the picture for us, when God begins His universal, spiritual housecleaning, He will *begin* with His *house*. That is a serious warning: persecution is no excuse for compromise with the world. The warnings to the seven churches in Revelation 2, 3 show us God's intent to "clean house" in certain ways.

For Peter, this threatened judgment within God's household pales in comparison with God's judging activity for those outside. Those on the outside are the stubbornly disobedient, who "obey not the gospel of God."

### **9. In what sense will "the righteous scarcely be saved" (v. 18)?**

Peter is attempting to encourage the believers to gladly face any dangers or suffering for Christ by appealing to the apocalyptic comfort that God will punish the ungodly in that day. He draws support from his deep knowledge of the Old Testament and paraphrases Proverbs 11:31, "if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"

Those who are *saved* because of their faith in Christ have no claim to boast. Their salvation is not due to their own merit, but to the work of Christ and the mercy of God. In this, Peter can say that they are *scarcely* saved. If their ultimate salvation hangs only on the mighty lifeline of God's grace, what is the fate of unbelievers? Peter seems to have in mind both the sinners outside the church and those false disciples within the body. Judgment will come upon all the *ungodly*, whether they call themselves Christians or not, for God truly knows the hearts of all.

## **THE REFUGE AMIDST SUFFERING (1 Peter 4:19)**

### **10. What should comfort the believer as he faces suffering (v. 19)?**

Peter completed his discussion of suffering by calling on his readers to trust God. To clinch his point, Peter reminded them again that their suffering is according to the will of God. Their life is not out of control; in fact, they are in God's hands. They can safely put their lives in the keeping of the good Shepherd, and they will demonstrate

their faith in His care by continuing to live a godly life that pleases Him. After all, He knows them better than they know themselves. As their Creator, He is all-powerful and all-knowing. And He is faithful, always acting in love toward His people.

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

1. If we follow Christ, we can expect trials (1 Peter 4:12).
2. Trials are not to be bemoaned but seen as opportunities for us to glorify God (vs. 13-14).
3. We have no right to complain about suffering we bring upon ourselves (v. 15).
4. Suffering for our faith is a privilege, not a shame, if we use it to point others to the Lord (v. 16).
5. We can face hardship knowing that ultimately we will benefit from it (vs. 17-18).
6. In our suffering there is always comfort if we commit ourselves to the Lord (v. 19).

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Taking Joy from Sufferings**

A proper sense of right and wrong expects that people should suffer the consequences of their wrong actions. Outrage occurs when people seem to “get away with something”- when they are able to avoid unpleasant outcomes despite unethical or criminal behavior.

But what about those who suffer innocently, having done nothing to deserve the hardships they endure? History tells us that in Peter’s last years the church was targeted for persecution by the Roman government. The reasons for this are somewhat murky, but the reality of the sufferings is well documented. We may not experience persecution in the way that the church of Peter’s day did, but his words about suffering still have great value for us in the twenty-first century.

Many Jews of the first century believed that suffering was a sign of God’s disapproval and punishment (see John 9:2). After all, the Old Testament taught that “I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5). The poor and the sick were to be pitied and cared for, but their fate was thought to be the result of some sin and wickedness. As Eliphaz, a “friend” of Job, claimed, sinners reap what they sow and “by the blast of God they perish” (Job 4:9).

All this meant that the one who was suffering had a double whammy - having real pain and believing that God was angry with him or her. By implication, then, those who were well off physically and financially were thought to be in God’s favor.

Jesus taught, however, that material wealth is a false gauge of God’s approval (see Luke 12:16–21). Conversely, poverty is a misleading measure of God’s disapproval (see Luke 21:1–4). These ideas are not foreign to the Old Testament either. The psalmist observes that the wicked seem to prosper rather than suffer (Psalm 73:3–5).

What is different is that for the Christian suffering can lead to joy. No one in his or her right mind likes pain. We are not wired that way. But suffering for Christ in this present life is a confirmation of our faith. It shows us that what Jesus taught was true: the sinful world is in violent rebellion against our righteous God. “Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (John 3:19, 20). Suffering confirms that we are truly His disciples. We have denied our own road to pleasure. We have taken up the cross, and we are following our Lord to glory (Mark 8:34).

Peter’s words help us understand that we do not need to suffer for Christ in silence. The church, the household of God, should serve as a place of encouragement

and celebration in the midst of suffering. The body of Christ should be a "shelter in the time of storm," an oasis in the desert of worldly, sinful lives. We should share in these sufferings together, bearing the burdens of our fellow believers (Galatians 6:2). It is then that we become the fellowship of the unashamed, those who are confident in their obedience to Christ.

### **PRAYER**

Holy Father, we can only imagine the pain You felt as Your Son suffered on the cross for the sins of the world. When we suffer for our faith, whether it is small indignities or violent hostility, may we take comfort in our sharing of the sufferings of Your Son. May we always trust and obey You. We pray this in the name of the one who suffered for us, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

### **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Treat suffering for Jesus as an honor.

### **ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week's lesson is "A Faithful People." We will see how to be faithful by holding on to the promises in God's Word during the tough times we face. Study 2 Peter 1:3-15.

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### **WORKS CITED:**

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