

Glorifying God Through Suffering

I Peter 4:12-19

This morning I am going to first talk about what I Peter 4:12-19, meant to the followers of Christ who first heard these words over 1900 years ago – and then we will talk about how Peter’s words apply to us, followers of Christ living in the United States in 2019. We will not properly understand I Peter – if we do not keep the historical background of this letter in mind. Peter wrote it sometime around A.D. 62-64 from Babylon [which I believe was Jerusalem]. Peter and the other Apostles knew with certainty that the Jerusalem would be judged and utterly destroyed by the ascended Lord Jesus – using the armies of Rome – before their generation passed away. And by A.D. 70, Jerusalem fell and not one stone of the temple was left upon another – just as Jesus foretold in Matthew 24. But it will also help us to understand I Peter if we are aware of some of the other things Jesus said would happen before Jerusalem fell. For example, Jesus clearly states in **Matthew 24:9**, “Then they [unbelievers] will deliver you [and other followers of Christ] up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.”

We know from Acts 8, that persecution first broke out in Jerusalem against Jewish followers of Christ in the A.D. 30s. But by A.D. 60, when Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was brought to Rome in chains because of his faith in Christ, he was informed by concerned Jews in **Acts 28:22**, “. . . we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect [Christianity] we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

Since I Peter was written two to four years after Paul arrived in Rome, what he writes in verse 12 makes perfect sense,

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you [to prove your faith is real], as though something strange were happening to you.”

I believe the majority of Christians who first heard those words were Gentile followers of Christ – living in Asia Minor, which is now modern day Turkey. Gentile Christians would likely be more surprised by persecution than Jewish followers of Christ. I say that because faithful Jews were used to suffering for their faith in God; Gentiles were not because most Gentiles had never believed in God. They had always been polytheistic, idol worshipers. However, by the time I Peter was written, Gentile believers in Christ outnumbered Jewish believers, even though the Church started out at Jerusalem and was initially all Jewish.

And so Peter urged Gentile Christians not to be surprised by the persecution Jesus had clearly warned was coming. Peter next explains the proper attitude toward persecution for Christ in verse 13,

“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings [since God the Son suffered for us, we should be willing to suffer for Him], that you may also rejoice and be glad **when his glory is revealed.**”

What was the glory of Christ that was to be revealed? Let’s quickly review I Peter for the answer. In chapter 1 verses 6-7, Peter promised that the severity of trials to be suffered by the Christians of his day, would last just a little while – and would serve to prove the genuineness of their faith at the revelation of Jesus. In chapter 2 verse 12, Peter assured persecuted

Christians that their good conduct would cause the unbelievers who were speaking against them – to glorify God on the day of visitation. In chapter 4 verse 5, Peter promised that those maligning his brothers and sisters in Christ would give an account to God who was ready to judge the living and the dead. And as we will shortly discover, this soon coming judgment was going to be experienced by both believers [who were spiritually alive] – but especially by unbelievers [those who were spiritually dead]. And now in verse 13, Peter promises the faithful believers among those he was writing to – that they will rejoice when Christ's glory is revealed. Friends, we will not understand what Peter is saying if we think he was referring to Christ's Second Coming at the end of this New Covenant Age. That will certainly be the ultimate revealing of Christ, but that is not the event being referred to here. Peter is writing about something he had often heard Jesus speak about. In Matthew 10:23, Jesus informed the disciples that they would not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. In Matthew 16:28, Jesus promised His twelve disciples that some of them would not taste death before they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Most of them however, would have already been martyred.

What would characterize this coming or revealing of Christ that was on the horizon when the New Testament was being written? Both in Matthew 24:30 and Matthew 26:64, Jesus said that the generation of Jews who were alive when He was crucified and rose from the dead, would live to see Him **coming on the clouds** – which meant coming in judgment.

We are not thinking Biblically if we do not understand that **Christ's glory**

is on display when His authority and power to judge wickedness is manifested on earth. Peter knew that Christ's glory was soon to be on display.

Let's go now to I Peter 4:14, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

When I Peter was being written, there were two kinds of professing Christians living in Asia Minor [modern day Turkey] – (1) worldly "Christians" and (2) committed Christians. Worldly "Christians" do not suffer persecution because they cower before their persecutors. They choose to be safe and comfortable – rather than faithful. The only Christians who suffer persecution are those who are willing to stand strong and even die for their faith in Christ. These are the people the Bible calls blessed. Jesus refers to both of these groups in **Matthew 16:24-25**,

"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross [an implement of suffering and death] and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life [choose to remain safe and comfortable] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'"

Martin Luther said, "**If you've got nothing worth dying for, you've got nothing worth living for.**" Peter goes on to say in verse 15-16,

"But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."

Do any of you find it surprising that Peter needed to exhort the professing Christians of his day not to murder, steal, be evildoers, or meddlers? We shouldn't be surprised because when Jesus warned the

twelve disciples about the persecution coming against them and Christians of their day, He also foretold the following in **Matthew 24:10-13**,

“And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

In the context of Matthew 24, the end that Jesus is referring to – is the destruction of the Old Covenant temple in A.D. 70, which marked the official end of Old Covenant Israel and the Old Covenant Age. It is important to understand that when Jesus became our perfect sacrifice for sin, He made the stone temple at Jerusalem – immediately obsolete. Never again would there be a need for animal sacrifices offered by Levitical priests. This reality was demonstrated when God tore the veil in the temple from top to bottom. However, the Jewish religious leaders quickly repaired the temple and kept on offering animal sacrifices for sin – and that did not stop until Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed.

The great falling away spoken of in Matthew 24:10, came about because of (1) false teachers, (2) lawlessness and (3) lack of love. And all we need to do to verify that this happened before Jerusalem fell – is to pay attention to the problems the New Testament writers had to deal with. In the Church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul had to rebuke the congregation concerning a member who was sleeping with his father’s wife. The congregation prided themselves in how lovingly they handled that situation – which was to do nothing at all. Paul then went on to teach them not to fellowship with any professing Christian – who without

repentance was sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater, or a slanderer, or a drunkard, or a swindler. The early Church was far from perfect.

One of the commentators I read was surprised that Peter mentioned meddlers in verse 15. He shouldn't have been surprised because years earlier the Apostle Paul had to deal with some church members at Thessalonica **who were not working**. Instead, they were being busybodies. Paul told them to do their work quietly [without complaining] and earn their own bread.

During my 60 years as a Christian, I heard a few people complain to me that they were being persecuted at their jobs because of their faith in Christ. It so happened that on one of my summer jobs, I worked with one of those complainers. It didn't take me long to conclude that he wasn't reviled because he was a Christian, but because he was lazy. I also believe there are times when Christianity is mocked and belittled because Christians boldly teach some things that make the Bible contradict itself. Many unbelievers can spot contradictions from miles away. It is a burden for me to hear prominent Bible teachers saying wrong and contradictory things about the Bible. I have to conclude that they are either unaware of it, or they just don't care. Both of those reasons scare me.

And this brings us to the most sobering part of our passage for this morning. Listen to I Peter 4:17-18,

“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ [Peter now quotes Proverbs 11:31] And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’”

Many Christians do not believe the wicked will be judged until Christ's Second Coming. I hope we can all agree that Peter was not speaking about a judgment that was thousands of years into his future. Peter was speaking about judgment that was coming upon the people of his day and it was coming soon. And notice where that judgment was to begin – at the household of God. And it isn't a coincidence that the Apostle John also speaks about great judgment that was soon to take place when he was writing the book of Revelation [see 1:1-3] – and then he too begins by describing Christ's judgment upon the household of God. The seven churches in Revelation 2-3, were all located in modern day Turkey, just like Peter's original audience. In Revelation 2, Jesus told the Church at Ephesus – to keep standing against evil and enduring trials. But He then rebukes them for leaving the love they once possessed – probably referring to their love for the lost – which had grown cold. Jesus exhorts them to repent or He would come and remove their lampstand from its place – meaning their witness at Ephesus would be lost.

Next Jesus turns to the Church at Smyrna, which was undergoing heavy persecution from unbelieving Jews. That problem would soon go away when Israel revolted against Rome in A.D. 66, which forced all the Jews in the Roman Empire to flee to places of refuge. The greatest place of refuge was Jerusalem – and we all know what happened to the unbelieving Jews who fled there. They were either killed or carried off to the salt mines. By the way, the internal evidence of the book of Revelation strongly indicates it was written around A.D. 65 – a few years after I Peter. Jesus then tells

the believers at Smyrna to be faithful unto death. Nero began his great slaughter of Christians around A.D. 65.

The Church at Pergamum was located in a city that was a center for Caesar worship. Antipas, a member of that church, had been put to death for opposing it. He was a hero. But the congregation at Pergamum became infiltrated by false teachers who were advocating antinomianism, or lawlessness. Let me explain. There was a common practice among the trade guilds of that time to adopt and worship a particular false god – and to make animal sacrifices to that god and then eat the meat at pagan temple restaurants and have sex with the temple prostitutes. The false teachers taught that all of this was permissible because Christians are not under God's law. Jesus commanded them to repent or He would come and make war against those who followed that lie.

The Church at Thyatira was also plagued by that same teaching. Jesus told those who rejected it to hold fast to truth and they would prevail over the nations.

In Revelation 3, Jesus said to the Church at Sardis, that even though they had a reputation for being alive, they were dead. They needed to wake up and strengthen what they had. If not, Jesus would come like a thief in the night upon them.

The Church at Philadelphia was also suffering under persecution from unbelieving Jews. Jesus told them to remain steadfast because He was **coming soon** to deal with their persecutors on an empire wide scale.

And finally Jesus characterized the members of the Church at Laodicea,

as wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Jesus asked to be let back into that church. Can you see why Peter taught that judgment was to begin at the household of God? And did it take the bodily return of Christ to deal with those churches? No. Nor was it going to require Christ's Second Coming to deal with apostate Israel and Nero Caesar. Both of those great persecutors of the Church were judged shortly after I Peter was written.

Let me summarize by saying that most of the things in Matthew 24, that Jesus said would happen before the temple was destroyed – **had happened** by the time I Peter was penned. This is why Peter correctly stated back in I Peter 4:7, “The end of all things is near.” The Old Covenant Age, into which Peter and all the Apostles were born into, was just about to end – very badly for the wicked. If I Peter 4:7 is speaking about Christ's Second Coming, then either Peter was wrong, or we need to throw the word “near” out of the Bible – because if “near” can mean thousands of years away, then it doesn't mean anything.

This brings us to Peter's exhortation in verse 19, “Therefore [in light of this soon coming judgment by the ascended Lord Jesus] let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” When Peter refers to God as the faithful Creator, he is reminding his original audience **and all of us**, that the God who created and sustains the universe, is ultimately in charge of everything that goes on in the universe. Christians, nothing that happens to us, takes God by surprise. God must give His nod of approval to what comes our way.

What else can Christians today carry away from this passage? (2) We can say with certainty, that no matter what happens in the days ahead of us, Christians need to rejoice whenever we are called to suffer for Christ's name. Why? Because when we suffer for the right reasons, Christ's Kingdom and glory is advanced. There may not be anyone in this room who will be called upon to die for our faith in Christ. But all of us must daily be willing to die to our self-centeredness and to whatever forms of worldliness – that may be keeping us from being effective witnesses for Christ.

(3) We are not to fear those who revile us. Far too many Christians are looking at our adversaries and wringing our hands in fear. We need to stop doing that. Do we really believe what the Bible says – that God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble? Then let's humbly serve God and others, and believe that God and the gospel are greater than our foes.

(4) We must not suffer as evildoers. As Christians, we are called to do what the Bible says is good and to shun what the Bible says is evil. We must not let our culture define those words. Only God gets to do that! Let's pray.