

Study 5: 1st Peter Chapter 4

Introduction

The suffering of Christ is held as the example throughout this chapter. The Christians were facing trials and persecutions when they didn't deserve it. They only had to look to Jesus to see that He suffered in the same way. Peter gives some specific instructions to ensure that they bonded with each other and supported each other in the face of the trials, rather than ending up attacking each other.

Body of the Study

New Life in Christ

Putting our Faith into Practice

Consolation in the Face of Suffering

God's Judgement is Coming

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 5 in preparation for the next study

Peter instructs us to be hospitable without grumbling. How are you fulfilling this command? When was the last time you invited your fellow brethren over for a meal?

We might not face the same kind of persecution that the first century Christians faced, but what kinds of trials do we face in our lives? How does the world attack us because we are Christians? What response should we have to these attacks?

Notes for study 5: 1st Peter Chapter 4

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New Life in Christ

Peter links the thoughts of chapter 4 to the previous discussion on Christ's triumph over sin and death, with "therefore". "...*Therefore since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind...*" (1:4:1 NJKV). Once again he draws the readers back to the example of Christ. Trials and tribulations were (or were likely to) happen to the Christians. The approach that needs to be taken under such circumstances is the approach that Christ made to the trials and struggles that He had. He has already noted His attitude in 1:2:21-24. Enduring the trials and temptations comes from the inward strength to endure – *the same mind* – as Christ had.

The verse continues "...*for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin...*" (1:4:1 NJKV) although it is not clear exactly who it is that Peter has in mind. A cursory reading of *he who suffered in the flesh* would suggest that he is referring to Christ – as a continuation of the earlier thoughts in the verse. However, Peter makes the application that this person *has ceased from sin*. Jesus lived a perfect life, and had no sin to cease from, although it could be understood to be that Christ no longer has *the temptation to sin* as a result of His perfect sacrifice overcoming the power of sin. Alternately, Peter may be referring to the Christians *who suffered in the flesh*. If they paid the ultimate price and were put to death, then there is no longer the temptation and dominion of sin to rule over us. However, it is more likely that Peter is taking them back to the new birth. We have died (to sin) with Christ, and whilst we still may be tempted, the power of sin (ie the consequences of sin, being eternal death) has been taken away. This position is validated by the next verse "...*that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God...*" (1:4:2 NJKV). So, Peter is calling the Christians to live their lives with respect to the Lord, and in the transforming power of Christ's life of example.

The transformation of the new birth is highlighted by Peter's reference to their past lives "...*For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles...*" (1:4:3 NJKV). Peter gives a strong clue here that the audience have come from a Gentile / pagan background, although some of the previous clues have suggested Jewish leanings. In reality, in the northern parts of Galatia (as in other places that we read about in the New Testament), the church would almost certainly be made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The point that Peter makes is the same one that Paul makes in Ephesians chapter 2 – *look at where you've come from: why would you want to go back there?* Such behaviour is typical of many of the things that we see going on in the world, but it's not a pretty picture "...*living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry...*" (1:4:3 NIV).

The "detestable idolatry" (or "illicit idolatries") distinguished the Jews from their pagan neighbors. The other items listed (cf. comment on 2:1) are the common excesses of drink, sex, and wild parties found among the non-Christians then (and now). (NIVBC)

These detestable behaviours may be practised and enjoyed by worldly people, but Christians are to refrain (and distance themselves) from such. The worldly people cannot understand why Christians do not participate "...*In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you...*" (1:4:4 NIV). Peter deals with reproach for the name of Christ a little later in the chapter (1:4:14), however as Christians we know why we don't behave that way. We fully understand that Christ came *to bring us out of darkness and into His marvellous light*. If there is any doubt about those who seem to be having a "good time" whilst we "seem to be missing out", it should be remembered that God will hold everyone accountable. "...*They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and*

the dead...” (1:4:5 NJKV). The surety of God’s judgement can be seen from how He dealt with the Israelites when they sinned and turned away from Him. Whilst the worldly people think that they are having a good time, they will not be able to give an account that will withstand the scrutiny of the righteous judge!

Peter has in mind Christians who have already died when he says “...*For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit...*” (1:4:6 NIV). They might have once lived in the depraved way (as some of the Christians whom Peter is addressing had), but they had heard and obeyed the gospel (as the Christians whom Peter is addressing had). In the face of trials and persecution that may very well result in death, there is still the assurance of justification (having been made right before God) through Jesus.

Peter warns that the time is soon approaching when God’s judgement against all people will come “...*But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers...*” (1:4:7 NJKV). There is an obvious difficulty in taking what Peter said “literally”, as Christ has not yet returned to bring about the judgement. However these brethren were about to face great trials and persecution. We are assured that God will bring about justice in His own time, and that He will right the wrongs that have been done to His people. Our life on earth is short – and for the recipients of the letter it could well be shortened by the persecution. In the end, we should not be driven by concerns over when Christ will return, but we should make the most of the short time that we have on the earth, but practice self-control in our lives, and be active in our prayers.

Putting our Faith into Practice

Carrying on from the last thought of the previous verse – *be serious and watchful in your prayers* – Peter gives some very practical advice about living life as God would have us. “...*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins...*” (1:4: NIV). Already on two occasions in the letter (1:2:1; 1:3:8-9) Peter has criticised the brethren for their behaviour. Rather than backbiting and fighting one another, they should grow together in love for one another deeply. It is when such love develops that the brethren will understand one another, and rather than fault-find they will help each other grow. Peter describes this as *covering a multitude of sins*. The idea is not that it *removes* the sin (that’s what the blood of Jesus does!), or that it is covered over so that God doesn’t find out about it. Rather, it is that the brethren will help one another with their life-struggles, and support each other as they try to put sin out of their life and live their lives in a manner that is pleasing to God. Further, they will not go around making nasty statements about their brethren and pointing out their faults to others!

The second behaviour that Peter mentions is hospitality “...*Be hospitable to one another without grumbling...*” (1:4:9 NKJV). In the society of the time, hospitality towards travellers was almost a necessity (they didn’t have “Holiday Inn’s” in those days, although we do find some examples of accommodation for travellers in the NT – eg Lk 10:35). Having guests may not always be convenient, and may sometimes disturb the family arrangements. To some people the idea of inviting strangers into your house may feel uncomfortable. Yet God’s expectation is that Christians should do this and go out of their way to help other Christians *without grumbling*.

The idea is that Christians should share with one another and serve one another. Showing hospitality is one thing, but there are other ways to serve our brethren “...*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms...*” (1:4:10 NIV). Paul discusses our gifts (both natural gifts in Rom 12 and the miraculous gifts in 1 Cor 12). Therefore we need to understand how we can use our gifts – *our talents* – for serving the Lord, and serving one another. Peter sums this up in the latter part of verse 11 “...*If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ...*” (1:4:11 NJKV). The word *ministers* (NKJV) literally means to serve, and is rendered so in the NIV.

The fourth idea that Peter discusses is what we say. “...*If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God...*” (1:4:11 NJKV). Or as the NIV has it “...*he should do it as one speaking the very words of God...*”. We do not have the authority to speak on our own account – ie to “invent: the things that we say. Of course, Peter is discussing what we say in the church and in preaching the gospel. He is not talking about what we might say in the context of a workplace situation, or in our own private conversations at home (although our conversations in those places should be pure and governed by scriptural principles generally). When we preach and teach the gospel, we have to teach the things that God has revealed. So, what we say must be as God says it, and not our opinions!

Consolation in the Face of Suffering

With the trials and sufferings that were happening in the world at that time, they were most likely to catch up with the brethren. So, how should they react? The natural reaction is “Why is this happening to me?” and some would even say “This is God’s retribution against us!” or “If God is in control, then why does He allow His people to suffer?” They are all good questions, and an understanding of the book of Job can help provide the answer. Peter gives the brethren an assurance in the face of their trials “...*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed...*” (1:4:12-13 NIV). He builds on the comments from earlier in the chapter (1:4:6-7), and also from earlier in the letter (1:1:6-7). Suffering helps refine us as christians, and we should not think it as a strange thing. In the end, we are assured that God will bring justice, both to us as we serve Him, and to those who mis-treat His people.

Peter has already discussed the idea of unjust suffering (1:3:14), which is exactly what happened to Christ (1:3:18). He reinforces it again “...*If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you...*” (1:4:14 NJKV).

The Spirit of the Father and of the Son now rests on and in every believer. The martyrdom of Stephen illustrates this. He is described as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Ac 6:5; cf. v. 8). In his defense his face was like that of an angel (Ac 6:15), and he saw the "glory of God" (7:55). (NIVBC)

Those who are tormenting the christians think they are “*smart*” because of their actions “...*On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified...*” (1:4:14 NJKV). Rather than retaliate, we need to understand that when such things happen, we should glorify God that we have been allowed to suffer because of Him (c/f Acts 5:41). Our behaviour as God’s people must be beyond reproach, and we should do nothing that would justify people criticising us. “...*But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters...*” (1:4:15 NJKV).

On the contrary, we should rejoice if we are persecuted because we are His people “...*However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name...*” (1:4:16 NIV). This is one of only three places that the word christian appears in the scriptures to describe God’s people – the others are Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28.

God’s Judgement is Coming

Peter has prepared the readers to recognise that the time was soon coming when they would suffer many things. He has pre-positioned them that there was nothing that they could be realistically be found guilty of, and that if they were persecuted because of their christian belief and practices, then the Lord would bless them spiritually, and glorify them – for that was exactly what happened to Him. But the time would be near “...*For the time has come for judgement to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?...*” (1:4:17 NJKV). Whilst God allows His people to suffer wrongfully, in the end, He will bring justice. The righteous God will bring justice to evil men – and the christians

should have no doubt about what God will do with them. Of course, Peter is not referring to physical retribution, but to the final justice that will be brought about on the day of judgement.

As a support to this argument, Peter quotes from Pr 11:31 “...*If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?...*” (1:4:18 NIV). The righteous are barely saved. The rest come far short, and only a great disaster awaits them.

The chapter concludes with a compelling statement of encouragement “...*Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator...*” (1:4:19 NJKV). Just as Jesus *committed Himself to God* (1:2:23), so christians are to follow in Christ’s example. We should have no doubt about God’s response – as He created us – the faithful Creator!